



RESEARCH PAPER

**Adverse Childhood Experiences and Marital Satisfaction: A
Correlational Study of Emotional Residue in Adult Romantic
Relationships**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the direct relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and marital satisfaction among young married adults, excluding the influence of sibling dynamics. Childhood adversities such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction can significantly affect emotional regulation and adult relationship satisfaction. Despite extensive research on the psychological consequences of ACEs, their direct impact on marital satisfaction remains underexplored. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed, collecting data from 150 married participants using purposive sampling. Standardized instruments, including the ACE Questionnaire and Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI), were utilized. Correlations and regression analyses were performed using SPSS version 25, with reliability analysis confirming tool consistency. Findings revealed a significant negative correlation between ACEs and marital satisfaction ($r = -0.479$, $p < .01$). Regression analysis identified ACEs as a significant predictor of lower marital satisfaction. Marriage counselors should adopt trauma-informed approaches when addressing marital conflicts. Early intervention programs for individuals with ACE histories can enhance relational outcomes in adulthood.

KEYWORDS Adverse Experience, childhood abuse, Marital Satisfaction

Introduction

Marital satisfaction the subjective sense of fulfillment within a marital relationship is foundational to emotional stability, personal wellbeing, and family cohesion. It reflects not only the emotional bond between spouses but also their ability to manage conflict, communicate effectively, and navigate shared responsibilities (Tavakol et al., 2017). Yet, this sense of satisfaction is not formed in isolation; rather, it is shaped by earlier life experiences, notably those from childhood.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to a wide range of stressful or traumatic events experienced before the age of 18, including abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, and exposure to violence (Felitti et al., 1998). These experiences often impair emotional development and can have a cascading effect into adulthood, influencing how individuals relate to romantic partners and respond to relational stressors (Hughes et al., 2017).

In cultures such as in Pakistan where the family set-up, social behavior, and emotional communication are carefully controlled there is more significance in knowing the long-term effects of the ACEs on romantic ties later on in life. This dissatisfaction in marriage may result not only in individual discomfort but also intergenerational effect of the trauma, poor relationships with parents, and psychological problems (Muzaffar,

Yaseen & Ahmad, 2018; Brown et al., 2011). Thus, it is essential to investigate the relationship between ACEs and marital satisfaction to create trauma-informed counseling approaches and policy changes on the level of governmental interventions.

Operational Definitions

- **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs):** Refers to distressing events before age 18 including emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; neglect; and household dysfunction, as measured by the 10-item ACE Questionnaire (Felitti et al., 1998).
- **Marital Satisfaction:** Defined as the individual's overall evaluation of the happiness and quality of their marriage, measured through the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-31) (Funk & Rogge, 2007).

Literature Review

The interrelation of childhood trauma and its significance in adult psychology has been cited repeatedly when studying the psychological functioning of the former. Its direct relationship with adult marital satisfaction is, however, a work that is still in progress of investigation. ACEs are now understood to be associated with a vast number of adverse adult health consequences, such as relational dysfunction, due to the original ACEs study conducted by Felitti et al. (1998), which proved early adversity to be associated with many adverse consequences in adult life. On the same note, Brown et al. (2011) have noted that patients with multiple ACEs are more likely to encounter complications with intimacy and divorces. As the study does not stop there, Crawford et al. (2013) also insisted that ACEs interfere with secure attachment development, which results in an inability to regulate adult relationships emotionally. On the same note, Karney and Bradbury (2005) have maintained that early maladaptive schemas experienced early in a childhood life greatly influence adult relationship satisfaction distorted expectations and lack of skill in conflict resolution. According to meta-analysis research done by Dube et al. (2017), there is an inverse correlation between the scores of ACE and emotional sensitivity toward intimate relationship as an adult as well as the reported sexual dissatisfaction. McLafferty et al. (2018) continued by stating that ACEs also help to entail poor communication patterns, avoidance behavior, and increased marital distress. Culturally, Soysal (2016) observed that citizens living in collectivist cultures within nations like Pakistan tend to push emotional trauma due to stigmatization, which may be experienced in the future as conflicts and dissatisfaction in a marriage. According to Fincham et al. (2015), when the processes of cognitive appraisals are based on life experiences in early life, they directly associate with the interpretation of the way the other person acts which tends to be distorted in most cases and may cause resentment.

In a dyadic study, Eyisoğlu and Erdem (2023) observed that individuals with traumatic childhoods exhibited reduced acceptance of partner influence, a key predictor of marital unhappiness. Umberson and Thomeer (2020) highlighted how unresolved family-of-origin trauma can be transmitted into adult relationships through stress proliferation.

Attachment theory, proposed by Bowlby (1979), provides a solid framework for understanding this phenomenon. It posits that individuals with insecure attachment styles often a result of ACEs are more likely to experience difficulties in trust,

communication, and intimacy. These challenges inevitably undermine marital satisfaction.

In sum, the literature strongly supports the hypothesis that ACEs have a significant negative effect on adult marital satisfaction. Yet, the majority of existing studies are based in Western contexts. There is a pressing need to investigate this relationship within South Asian cultures, where family roles, societal expectations, and emotional expressiveness differ significantly.

Material and Methods

Research Design

A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed to explore the relationship between ACEs and marital satisfaction.

Participants

A purposive sample of 150 married adults (101 females, 49 males) aged 20–50 years participated. Most resided in joint family systems (63.3%) and rural areas (56.7%).

Instruments

- **ACE Questionnaire (Felitti et al., 1998)** – 10 items measuring exposure to trauma before age 18.
- **Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-31) (Funk & Rogge, 2007)** – 31 items assessing relational satisfaction across emotional, behavioral, and cognitive domains.

Reliability

All instruments demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ACEs: $\alpha = .724$ and Marital Satisfaction: $\alpha = .804$

Procedure

Participants provided informed consent. Data were collected through paper surveys and analyzed using SPSS v25. Pearson correlation and linear regression were used for analysis.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive analyses were conducted to determine the mean and standard deviation of the two key variables: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Marital Satisfaction. As shown in Table 1, the average ACE score was 18.13 (SD = 2.06), indicating a moderate level of childhood adversity among the participants. The mean score for marital satisfaction was 71.95 (SD = 18.54), reflecting a moderate level of perceived relationship quality.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 150)

Variable	M	SD
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)	18.13	2.06
Marital Satisfaction	71.95	18.54

Correlation Analysis

Pearson's product-moment correlation was employed to examine the bivariate association between ACEs and marital satisfaction. The analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between ACEs and marital satisfaction ($r = -0.479$, $p < .01$), suggesting that higher exposure to adverse childhood experiences is associated with lower marital satisfaction in adulthood.

Table 2
Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2
1. ACEs	1	
2. Marital Satisfaction	-0.479**	1

Note. ** $p < .01$

This finding is consistent with the theoretical assumptions of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1979), where early disruptions in emotional security can manifest as difficulties in emotional intimacy, trust, and communication in adult romantic relationships. It also echoes previous empirical findings indicating that individuals with high ACE scores are more prone to relational dissatisfaction due to maladaptive coping mechanisms and emotional dysregulation (Crawford et al., 2013; Dube et al., 2017).

Regression Analysis

To further investigate the predictive power of ACEs on marital satisfaction, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted. As shown in Table 3, ACEs emerged as a significant predictor of marital satisfaction ($B = -4.218$, $p = .002$), accounting for 23.1% of the variance ($R^2 = .231$). The negative regression coefficient confirms that an increase in ACEs is associated with a significant decrease in marital satisfaction.

Table 3
Linear Regression Summary: ACEs Predicting Marital Satisfaction

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
Constant	153.753	13.357	—	11.511	.000	127.357	180.149
Adverse Childhood Experiences	-4.218	0.468	-2.884	-3.867	.002	-5.552	-2.884

These results provide robust support for the hypothesis that adverse childhood experiences have a detrimental effect on marital satisfaction. The strength of the association ($\beta = -2.884$) highlights the emotional residue that early trauma can leave on adult relational patterns, especially in contexts where such trauma is unaddressed or culturally stigmatized.

From a clinical perspective, this underscores the importance of trauma-informed therapeutic approaches in marriage counseling. Couples who present with persistent dissatisfaction may benefit from exploring unresolved childhood trauma as part of treatment. As supported by Fincham et al. (2015) and Eyisoğlu & Erdem (2023), maladaptive attributions and attachment insecurities formed during early developmental stages often resurface in adult intimacy, conflict resolution, and emotional reciprocity.

Furthermore, the high R^2 value (23.1%) suggests that ACEs alone explain nearly a quarter of the variability in marital satisfaction, which is substantial in behavioral

research. It also suggests the need for broader exploration of additional factors – such as communication patterns, gender roles, economic stressors, and external support systems – that may mediate or moderate this relationship.

Discussion

The major objective of the study was to analyze the correlation between ACEs and marital satisfaction among the marital adults. The results are empirical evidence of the fact that people who perceive greater exposure to ACEs report to a lesser extent of marital satisfaction. These findings are similar to many findings of studies indicating that childhood trauma that remains unresolved may adversely affect the functioning of relationships in adulthood. This study finds significant negative relationship ($r = -0.479$, $p < .01$) which is congruent with the last researches. As an example, Brown et al. (2011) have shown that adults who have multiple ACEs had higher chance of being unsatisfied and exhibited relational instability. In the same line of thought, Dube et al. (2017) concluded that childhood maltreatment was a predictive factor of poor quality of intimacy and trust in romantic relationships. Based on these patterns, one can surmise that the early trauma derails secure attachment which is important to the well-being of adult relationships (Bowlby, 1979).

Using the regression analysis, it was evident that ACEs was a significant predictor of marital satisfaction ($p = .002$) and it explained 23% of the variance. This outcome supports the earlier research by Crawford et al. (2013) and Fincham et al. (2015), who asserted the importance of emotional regulation and interpersonal problem-solving skills in the family that are undercut by childhood adversity in influencing successful marriage adaptation. Besides, the results of this study help to endorse the attachment theory framework that early affectionate relationships with caregivers form expectations and behaviour patterns in intimate relations later (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Individuals who have insecure attachment due to experiencing instability, neglect, or abuse as children may also have dissatisfying relationships with their spouses because they tend to interpret their actions negatively, based on their ideas of relationships in their childhoods. The findings are particularly applicable in the case of South Asia. The Pakistani culture was collectivist in nature, implying that it laid a big emphasis on familial pride, emotional inhibition, and adhering to things regardless of how emotionally unpleasing they were (Soysal, 2016). Consequently, a person might be getting into marriage without settling the pre-existing emotional trauma, which is transferred into the interpersonal relationship with a spouse. This paper, therefore, concludes that applying trauma-informed practices through marital therapy and family counseling initiatives are a cultural need dedicated to ensuring that trauma is holistically addressed in every facet of the population or community..

More recently, other studies (Eyisoğlu & Erdem, 2023; Umberson & Thomeer, 2020) demonstrated that ACEs could worsen the responsiveness to the needs of a partner and make individuals more sensitive to stress, which is the case with lower marital satisfaction in this research. All these interpersonal challenges must be because of the innerized coping strategies that occurred when they were young like emotional withdrawal, hypervigilance, or mistrust. Although results are rather strong, they also imply in favor of other contextual variables being potential mediators or moderators, including emotional intelligence, styles of communication, social support, or gender specific styles of coping. These dimensions can be studied in the future to give a better insight into the effects of ACEs on marital functioning. Overall, the research has

confirmed and broadened the preceding studies by signifying that ACEs serve as a serious risk element of poor marital satisfaction. It notes the necessity of having early psychological interventions and adds that childhood trauma should be addressed in the framework of marital therapy especially where exposing a person to emotional suffering is rejected in cultural contexts.

Recommendations

In light of the results of this environmental health study, the following recommendations can be made in practical terms:

1. **Universal Practices in Marital Counseling:** What follows is that clinical psychologists and marriage counselors are recommended to screen ACEs during the initial intake. Unresolved childhood trauma can provide the possibility of improving the therapeutic results and the relational functioning.
2. **Apply Trauma-Informed Practices:** Psychological education program and couples therapy exercise must be imparted a module to promote emotional, safe attachment and communication competence amid partners with high ACE exposure.
3. **Policy and Community Support:** Mental health policy in Pakistan is needed to facilitate on-site preventive measures to increase awareness regarding long-term effects of the ACEs. Such protective cushion can be in the form of marital enrichment programs and Community based workshops.
4. **Pre-Marital Counseling:** Encouraging pre-marital counseling in educational and religious institutions may help identify potential vulnerabilities due to ACEs and promote healthier relational expectations.

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