

**The role of Gender differences and length of marriage in Attachment Styles, Marital Satisfaction, and Emotion Regulation**



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**Abstract:** *This study was designed to assess the role of gender and length of marriage in different attachment styles and types of emotional regulation used by the individuals. The sample included married (n=385) males and females residing in Peshawar, Pakistan. Three self-report scales, namely, Experiences in Close-Relationships – Revised Questionnaire (Fraley et al., 2000), ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (Fowers & Olson, 1993) and Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross et al., 2003) were applied on the sample. The results revealed that anxious and avoidant attachment style being more prevalent in females, as well as females scored significantly lower on marital satisfaction scale. Length of marriage was significantly positively correlated with cognitive reappraisal strategy whereas significantly negatively correlated with expressive suppression strategy. To better understand the complex nature of marital dynamics, it is crucial to gain insight into the underlying demographics like gender differences and length of marriage that could be useful in treatment implemented for specific culture, harboring different values and traditions.*

**Keywords:** Gender differences, Marriage, Marital Satisfaction, Marital Relationships, Men and Women

## Introduction

Marriage is a union recognized socially, legally or religiously between two individuals (Stritof, 2022). Though marriage may seem a desirable relationship, yet literature suggests satisfying marital relationships are not easily attained. Having quality marital relationships is more important than just being in a marital relationship. Both the individuals in a marital union play their part in the success of their marriage (O'Hara, as cited in Friedlander, 2020). Different characteristics of the marital partners are functional with in the marital domain, such as their level of commitment, respect, communication patterns, conflict resolution styles, intimacy, marital satisfaction

etc. Marital satisfaction is defined as a state of fulfillment, pleasure and contentment regarding all the aspects of a marital relationship (Nicholas et al., 2000). Marital satisfaction is vital for the stability of a marital relationship (Al-Masri & Al-Quran, 2022). Research on marital satisfaction has been subject of interest entirely in the Western world (Sorokowski et al., 2017). The differences in customs, values and cultural norms necessitate researching it in the East as well.

One of the factors that influence marital satisfaction is attachment with the significant other. It refers to an emotional connection that is characterized by proximity, connectedness and security. It is a lasting bond between humans

(Ainsworth & Bell, as cited in Santrock, 2018). Bowlby (as cited in Santrock, 2018) was the first theorist to present the attachment theory specifically within the parent-child context. Those children whose needs were consistently met, attached securely with the caregiver, whereas those children whose needs weren't consistently and timely met, formed an insecure attachment with the caregiver. In the 1970s, Ainsworth presented her theory of attachment styles within the child-parent context. She conducted the strange-situation experiment and identified three different patterns of attachment between children and their mothers. Secure attachment develops when the needs of the child are consistently and adequately met; anxious attachment results when the caregiver provides an inconsistent care whereas, avoidant attachment develops when the caregiver is not available and the needs of the children are not met adequately. The emotional bonds developed during the early years impact the interpersonal relationships in the long run (Ainsworth & Bell, as cited in Santrock, 2018). Later, Hazan and Shaver (1987) presented the adult attachment theory. Their theory is an extension of the Ainsworth theory of attachment and has described three styles of attachment. Those with secure attachment style are comfortable with initiating and maintaining relationships. They communicate clearly and are open about expressing their desires with intimate partner. Individuals with an avoidant style of attachment tend to be self-reliant and hesitant to seek closeness and proximity with their partner. They deny any dependency needs and are emotionally distant from their significant others. Those with an anxious attachment style seek closeness and an emotional connection with their partner but fear rejection and abandonment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Attachment styles are among the central elements for assessing relationship with others (Ottu & Akpan, 2011). Research has demonstrated that the kind of attachment pattern with one's partner affects marital satisfaction. Those with secure attachment are content with their intimate relationships, whereas those with attachment problems are reportedly dissatisfied

with their marriages (Conradi et al., 2017). It is noteworthy that various studies have documented gender-based differences in the utilization of different attachment styles. For instance, Ciocca et al. (2019) observed that males tend to exhibit higher scores on the insecure/dismissing attachment style, while females show a propensity for the insecure/fearful-attachment style. Similarly, Weber et al. (2022) found that women tend to score higher on anxious attachment, whereas males tend to report a greater inclination toward an avoidance attachment style. Interestingly, in their study, single males displayed higher levels of attachment anxiety, which may have contributed to their single status. Additionally, Gugová and Heretik (2011) also noted that females tend to score higher on anxious attachment, while males lean more towards avoidant attachment.

Like attachment styles, gender differences are also seen in marital satisfaction. Jackson et al. (2014) reported significant but slightly low marital satisfaction among females. Similarly, the results of another study revealed men to report greater marital satisfaction than women (Rostami et al., 2014). Connides (2001) and Whiteman et al. (2007) have found women to experience less satisfaction with marriage as compared to their counterparts. National surveys have also indicated women to report dissatisfaction with their marriage (Umberson et al., 2006).

Likewise, the attachment patterns are likely to be stable during adulthood; however various life events and interpersonal experiences can modify them to a certain degree. Over time, different viewpoints have been developed regarding satisfaction with marriage and the length of one's marriage. Some researchers reported marital satisfaction to improve with time, while some reported otherwise. Studies conducted by Glenn (1998) and Kurdek (1999) have revealed a negative association between duration of marriage and partners satisfaction. Similar results were reported by Ziaei et al. (2014); stating a decline in marital satisfaction with increasing duration of marriage. Conversely, Bulgan et al. (2018) have reported a direct

relationship between marital satisfaction and length of marriage. Couples with greater time spent in a marriage have better adaptability and fewer issues with their marriages (Tavakol et al., 2017).

Another factor that can influence marital satisfaction is the duration of marriage, as the appropriate expression of emotions is known to have implications for an individual's social life (Omidi & Talighi, 2017). Gross (1998) introduced the Process Model of Emotion Regulation, which posits that individuals can actively modify and regulate their emotional responses at various stages of the emotional experience. This regulation is achieved through the utilization of different strategies, specifically cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Cognitive reappraisal involves the cognitive reframing of emotional triggers before the complete unfolding of an emotional response, with the aim of altering the emotional impact. This strategy is particularly effective in transforming the experience and expression of unpleasant or negatively charged emotional situations. In contrast, expressive suppression comes into play after the emotional response has fully unfolded, serving to inhibit both verbal and non-verbal emotional expressions in any given situation (Gross, 2001).

In interpersonal relationships, individuals encounter and convey a multitude of emotions. It is evidenced that emotional regulation and emotional equilibrium are closely linked to the quality and stability of one's social connections (Lopes et al., 2011). The use of appropriate emotion regulation strategies can aid couples in coping with emotionally challenging situations. However, individuals may vary in their proficiency at employing these strategies. Deficiencies in emotion regulation skills can have detrimental effects on one's overall well-being (Omidi & Talighi, 2017).

Numerous studies have explored the impact of emotion regulation on both individuals and their relationships. The cognitive reappraisal strategy for emotion regulation has been found to yield more favorable personal and social outcomes compared to the expressive suppression strategy. According to Levenson et al. (2013),

the use of the appropriate emotion regulation strategy can enhance emotional coordination and interpersonal relationships, thus increasing the likelihood of greater satisfaction in one's relationships. Individuals who employ the cognitive reappraisal strategy report improved social interactions and functioning (Richards et al., 2003), ultimately resulting in greater marital satisfaction (Mazzuca et al., 2018). The effective use of this strategy helps individuals navigate life's stressors efficiently and promotes high-quality relationships between partners. Conversely, expressive suppression has been associated with lower relationship satisfaction, as it hinders effective rapport building and communication in interpersonal relationships (Velotti et al., 2016). Similarly, Butler et al. (2003) have reported that expressive suppression is linked to unfavorable emotional outcomes and affiliative behavior in social relationships. Inhibiting emotional expression within close relationships may be interpreted as indifference and can impede feelings of closeness and intimacy. Such behavior may also be associated with feelings of contempt and dissatisfaction in both partners. The present study aims to investigate whether the duration of marriage plays a role in the utilization of emotional regulation strategies by spouses.

As individuals progress through life, the process of emotion regulation undergoes continual development, as elucidated by Masumoto et al. (2016). With the passage of time, the duration of a marriage emerges as a potential protective factor, offering resilience against undesirable psychological outcomes. This protective effect is attributed to the proficient emotional regulation exhibited by spouses, as evidenced by Masumoto et al. (2022). Similarly, the understanding of gender disparities within the intricate tapestry of marriage assumes paramount significance. The growth and development of both men and women are influenced by a multitude of multifaceted factors. Gaining profound insights into these gender-based distinctions is imperative, as it unravels the intricacies of marital life, thereby equipping us to address them effectively. Consequently, there is a compelling need to

investigate how various emotion regulation strategies contribute to the dynamics of marital relationships. Comprehending the impact of emotion regulation strategies in conjunction with attachment styles on marital life bears the potential to yield substantial benefits, not only on an individual level but also within the context of couples and their well-being. This understanding can, in turn, inform and enrich therapeutic interventions. By fostering lasting and harmonious marital relationships, we can generate a ripple effect, enhancing multiple facets of one's life, as aptly underscored by Çelebi (2018).

### **Objectives**

1. To explore gender differences in attachment styles and marital satisfaction.
2. To investigate the relationship between length of marriage, marital satisfaction and emotion regulation strategies.

### **Hypotheses**

1. Females will score high on anxious and avoidant attachment styles as compared to males.
2. Females will score low on marital satisfaction as compared to males.
3. There will be positive correlation between length of marriage, marital satisfaction and cognitive reappraisal.
4. There will be an inverse correlation between length of marriage and expressive suppression.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample**

The study included a total of 385 married individuals, comprising 195 males and 190 females. We determined the sample size using the "Raosoft Sample Size Calculator" (Raosoft, 2004). Convenience sampling was employed to recruit participants from Peshawar, Pakistan. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 56 years ( $M = 34.42$ ,  $S.D. = 8.34$ ). The duration of marriage among participants spanned from 1 to 21 years ( $M = 10.56$ ,  $S.D. = 4.26$ ), excluding those with less than a year of marriage.

Participants with at least an intermediate level of education were included in the study.

### **Instruments**

#### **Demographic sheet**

The demographic sheet collected information on participants' gender, education, age, and the duration of marriage.

#### **ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (Fowers & Olson, 1993)**

This scale, a shorter version of the ENRICH Marital Inventory (Fowers & Olson, 1989), assessed marital satisfaction. It consisted of 15 items, with six items reverse-coded. Out of these 15 items, 10 measured satisfaction with marriage, while the remaining items assessed idealistic distortion to control for socially desirable responses. Participants rated their agreement or disagreement with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicated greater marital satisfaction. Concurrent validity was established with correlations of .81 for couples' scores and .73 for individual scores with the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment scale.

#### **The Experiences in Close-Relationships - Revised Questionnaire (Fraley et al., 2000)**

This questionnaire measured different attachment styles and comprised 36 items, including 14 reverse-scored items. Participants rated their agreement or disagreement with the statements on a 7-point Likert scale. The scores for each attachment style were averaged, and a higher score indicated the presence of that style of attachment. The instrument demonstrated strong reliability, with a reported value of .93.

#### **Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003)**

Developed by Gross and John (2003), this questionnaire assessed emotional regulation strategies, namely expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal. It consisted of 10 items, each measuring the two strategies used by individuals for emotion regulation. Participants provided responses on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Scores were averaged for each strategy,

with higher scores indicating greater usage of that strategy. The cognitive reappraisal items demonstrated good reliability with a reported value of .90, while the expressive suppression items had a reliability of .80.

### Procedure

To conduct this research, a convenience sampling strategy was employed for participant selection. The sample consisted of married men

and women residing in Peshawar, Pakistan, with a preference for those who had at least an intermediate level of education. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and approached for data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were assured of the confidentiality of their data. When necessary, participants received guidance on completing the questionnaires.

## RESULTS

**Table 1**

*Descriptive statistics and Psychometric properties of the scales*

Scales	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	$\alpha$
ERQ				
CR	4.31	.98	1.34 – 6.49	.90
ES	3.97	1.18	1 – 6.76	.83
Exp Close Rel-Rev				
Anx Att	3.32	.99	1.38 – 6	.95
Avo Att	2.98	1.03	1.34 – 6	.98
MS	50.34	15.40	13 – 75	.94

Note. ERQ= Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, CR= Cognitive reappraisal, ES= Expressive suppression, Exp Close Rel-Rev=Experiences in close relationships revised, Anx Att= Anxious attachment, Avo Att= Avoidant Attachment, Ms=Marital Satisfaction

Table 1 shows the psychometric properties of the three scales used in the current study. The alpha reliabilities show that all the scales are reliable hence suitable for hypothesis testing.

**Table 2**

*t-test showing gender differences in anxious and avoidant styles and marital satisfaction*

Variable	Males		Females		<i>t</i> (383)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Anxious	3.05	.95	3.37	1.02	3.10	.001	.004
Avoidant	2.89	.98	3.09	1.07	1.86	.031	0.19
Marital Satisfaction	51.25	15.09	47.47	15.57	2.42	.008	0.24

Note: EMSS = ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale

\* $p < .05$

Table 2 shows significant gender differences in attachment styles (i.e., avoidant and anxious) and marital satisfaction. Females show high

anxious and avoidant styles and low marital satisfaction.

**Table 3**

*Interscale correlations between Length of marriage, Marital Satisfaction, Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression*

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Length of M	-	.530**	.392**	-.475**
2. MS		-	.567**	-.470**
3. CR			-	-.505**
4. ES				-

*Note:* Length of M = Length of Marriage; MS=Marital Satisfaction CR= Cognitive Reappraisal, ES= Expressive Suppression. \*\* $p < 0.01$

Table 3 indicates the relationship between length of marriage, marital satisfaction, cognitive reappraisal, and expressive suppression. A significant positive correlation exist between length of marriage, marital satisfaction and cognitive reappraisal ( $r = .53$  &  $.32$  respectively). Whereas, a significant negative correlation exist between length of marriage and expressive suppression ( $r = -.47$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

### Discussion

The innate human inclination for social connection and affiliation is a fundamental aspect of our nature, extending to the realm of enduring marital relationships. Marital satisfaction is a pivotal component in understanding the dynamics of such relationships. In the context of our current research, we aim to delve deeper into this intricate web of factors that contribute to marital satisfaction. In our current study, we aimed to investigate variances in attachment styles and marital satisfaction between genders. Additionally, we examined the influence of marital duration to understand how it affects emotion regulation strategies.

Hypotheses number 1 and 2 aimed at finding gender differences in the use of attachment styles and marital satisfaction.

Table 2 shows significant gender differences in anxious and avoidant attachment styles as well as marital satisfaction, females as scoring high on anxious and avoidant styles and low on marital satisfaction. Empirically, these findings

resonate with prior research in the field of attachment theory. Attachment theory, as established by Bowlby and further developed by Ainsworth, posits that individuals develop distinct attachment styles based on their early caregiving experiences. Anxious attachment, characterized by a heightened need for reassurance and fear of rejection, often correlates with greater emotional expressiveness and, in some cases, relationship dissatisfaction. Avoidant attachment, on the other hand, is associated with emotional self-sufficiency and a reluctance to depend on others, often resulting in emotional distance and lower marital satisfaction (Bretherton, 2013). The findings of our study harmonize with the underpinning theoretical framework, accentuating the prevalence of specific attachment styles, particularly in females, and their consequential impact on the overall satisfaction within marital unions. Moreover, these findings are consistent with existing empirical research that has repeatedly documented gender differences in attachment styles. This alignment is corroborated by prior investigations, such as those conducted by Ciocca et al. (2019), Del Giudice (2019), and Weber et al. (2022), all of which support the notion of gender-related distinctions in attachment dynamics. Likewise, a study conducted by Kiani et al. (2020) also draws a parallel, reporting diminished level of marital satisfaction among female doctors in Pakistan. In the context of Eastern Pakistani culture, where prevailing gender roles often cast males in dominant positions and where modesty is closely associated with shyness, these findings

acquire a heightened level of clarity and comprehension. It is unsurprising that within such a societal context, a scenario may emerge where male dominance within relationships may potentially trigger anxious and avoidant responses from the female spouse. The notable prevalence of anxious and avoidant attachment styles among females can substantially account for their relatively lower levels of marital contentment. The relationship between attachment styles and marital satisfaction gains further credence from existing research. Securely attached individuals, as evidenced by Heidari and Kumar (2021), tend to exhibit higher levels of satisfaction and contentment within their marital relationships. Conversely, individuals with insecure attachment orientations, as documented by Li and Chan (2012), often report diminished levels of satisfaction in their marital lives. Anxiously attached individuals, grappling with emotional distress stemming from unmet needs such as care, support, and affection, tend to experience heightened apprehension regarding their intimate relationships, as described by Mikulincer and Shaver. This heightened anxiety can impede the establishment of stable and fulfilling connections with their significant others. Similarly, individuals characterized by avoidant attachment patterns, who tend to eschew attachment-related needs and consequently avoid emotional closeness and intimacy with their romantic partners, are prone to report lower levels of satisfaction within their relationships. This aligns with the findings elucidated by Segrin and Flora (2005), emphasizing that the avoidance of self-disclosure can contribute to reduced satisfaction within romantic relationships.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> hypothesis of this study explored the correlation of the length of marriage with emotional regulation strategies and marital satisfaction. It was assumed that length of marriage will have a positive association with cognitive reappraisal. Our findings supported the research assumption by yielding a significant positive correlation between the two (see table 3). Cognitive reappraisal, an established and constructive emotion regulation strategy, has

been shown to yield positive outcomes within the realm of relationships (Meyer et al., 2012) such as better functioning and satisfaction with intimate relationships (Mazzuca et al., 2019). This strategy holds the potential to fortify mutual cohesion and deepen interpersonal understanding among marital partners, aligning with the principles of the Process Model (Gross, 1998). The adept use of cognitive reappraisal is instrumental in addressing stressors and plays a pivotal role in nurturing fulfilling marital relationships (Mazzuca et al., 2019). Furthermore, the passage of time spent together in a marital union equips couples with a profound comprehension of how to effectively harness their emotions, as well as a heightened awareness of each other's emotional landscapes. As couples accumulate years of shared experiences, their capacity for emotion regulation tends to evolve (Masumoto et al., 2016). Marriages with longer durations serve as protective buffers against unfavorable psychological outcomes, chiefly due to the adept emotional regulation skills exhibited by the spouses (Masumoto et al., 2022). The ability of couples to regulate their negative emotions emerges as a potent instrument for fostering an enduring and harmonious relationship (Sisson et al., 2022).

The 4<sup>th</sup> hypothesis assessed the relationship between length of marriage and expressive suppression. It was hypothesized that there will be a negative correlation between length of marriage and expressive suppression. Pearson correlation supported the hypothesis. A significant negative correlation ( $r = -.47$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) existed between the two variables. In the context of social interactions, the inability to effectively regulate emotions can lead to adverse outcomes. Research by Meyer et al. (2012) highlights the unfavorable consequences of employing expressive suppression as compared to cognitive reappraisal. Habitual use of expressive suppression tends to yield negative consequences on both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. It has the potential to impede the maintenance of healthy and satisfying relationships. In fact, this maladaptive emotion regulation strategy, as pointed out by

Velotti et al. (2016), can significantly undermine an individual's social competence and hinder effective communication. By employing expressive suppression one risks being perceived as indifferent by their intimate partner, thereby obstructing genuine interpersonal communication. Over time, this may lead to a decline in emotional connectedness and, ultimately, dissatisfaction within one's marital life.

Our findings also offer intriguing insights into the evolution of emotion regulation strategies within the context of long-term marriages. As the duration of a marriage increases, individuals tend to develop a deeper understanding of one another and acquire effective communication skills. Consequently, they rely less on expressive suppression, as indicated by Low et al. (2017), who have noted that this strategy can often prove counterproductive, exacerbating the very negative emotions it seeks to mitigate. With the passage of time spent together, marital couples tend to refine their communication techniques, leading to more effective and harmonious interaction. Marriages with greater durations serve as protective factors against unfavorable psychological outcomes. This is attributed to the increased use of cognitive reappraisal and reduced reliance on expressive suppression by the partners, as suggested by Masumoto et al. (2022).

## Conclusion

In this comprehensive exploration, our study delved into the intricate dynamics of gender disparities in attachment styles, as well as the intriguing correlation between the duration of marriage, emotion regulation strategies, and marital satisfaction. Our findings illuminated a striking pattern, with females demonstrating a higher prevalence of anxious and avoidant attachment styles, alongside reporting lower levels of marital contentment. In a parallel vein, the length of one's marriage exhibited compelling associations, revealing a significant positive correlation with cognitive reappraisal and marital satisfaction, while concurrently manifesting a negative correlation with expressive suppression.

The insights gleaned from this investigation underscore the profound significance of comprehending the intricate interplay between attachment histories, emotion regulation strategies, and marital satisfaction. These elements collectively shape the landscape of our interpersonal relationships, carrying implications that extend beyond the realms of individual well-being to encompass the vitality of couples and their shared experiences. This knowledge is a valuable asset for therapists and practitioners in the field of family and marriage counseling, offering a roadmap to address the nuanced challenges that may arise within marital relationships. By integrating an understanding of gender-specific attachment styles and the dynamic nature of emotion regulation, therapists can facilitate interventions that alleviate marital distress and nurture enduring and harmonious unions.

## Limitations and Suggestions

The current study has some limitations and suggestions that shall be taken into consideration when conducting similar research.

- As the sample was selected only from Peshawar which makes the findings less generalizable.
- In the current research only one spouse in the couple was selected which gives half of the picture of the type of relationship they had. In future studies inclusion of married couples is suggested.
- The present study is a cross sectional one with its limitations, length of marriage will more effectively serve as a variable when studied along a longitudinal research design.
- Family and marriage therapists may take gender into account as a determiner of attachment style of the subject.

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