

STABILITY OVER SELF: A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY OF THE MARITAL PARADOX AMONG PAKISTANI COUPLES

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ABSTRACT

Marriage in Pakistani society is widely regarded as a lifelong institution sustained by cultural, religious, and familial obligations. Yet a pervasive paradox exists whereby many couples remain in marriages characterized by emotional dissatisfaction, conflict, and psychological distress. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of Pakistani married couples who maintained stable but emotionally unfulfilling marriages, a phenomenon conceptualized as the marital paradox. Drawing on Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) as outlined by Charmaz (2006), semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 participants (seven couples) recruited through purposive sampling across diverse regions and socioeconomic backgrounds in Pakistan. Data analysis proceeded through iterative cycles of initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding using NVivo 12, yielding 59 initial codes, 23 focused codes, and eight theoretical categories. The emergent grounded theory of Stability Over Self reveals that marital endurance in the Pakistani context is primarily sustained not by mutual affection or satisfaction but by a convergence of deeply embedded sociocultural forces, economic constraints, religious obligations, and internalized coping mechanisms. The eight theoretical categories are: Social and Cultural Pressures, Emotional Regulation and Acceptance, Fear of Divorce and Reputation, Financial Dependency, Children as a Stabilizing Force, Coping through Distraction and Faith, Gender Role Expectations, and Emerging Hopes for Change. These categories illuminate how individuals suppress personal emotional needs to preserve the marital institution, often at significant psychological cost. The findings contribute a culturally grounded theoretical framework to the marital and family literature and carry important implications for counseling practice, policy reform, and community intervention in collectivist societies.

Keywords: marital paradox, Pakistani couples, marital stability, emotional dissatisfaction, grounded theory, collectivism, coping mechanisms, gender roles, divorce stigma

INTRODUCTION

In a Pakistani culture, marriage is not only a bond between two people but a social event that also brings about numerous changes in the family, its honor, social status, and spiritual goals.

Most marriages in Pakistan are arranged and there is very little pre-marital contact between individuals, marriages are within extended family systems and preferences are often sacrificed for

the good of the family (Qaiser, 2022; Naeem et al., 2023). In such a cultural setting, there is a very peculiar paradox because while many couples in Pakistan have taken to marriage which is characterized by emotional dissatisfaction, struggles, and mental anguish, they seem to project stability and longevity (Ramzan et al., 2025a),

The marriage paradox is that while marriage is structurally stable, it also has emotional problems, whereas Western views of marital quality are associated with structural stability (Karney and Bradbury, 2020). Emotional fulfillment, intimacy and personal happiness have been shown to play an important role on marital stability in several studies that have been conducted in individualistic cultures (Bachand & Caron, 2001; Phillips et al., 2012). However, in the Pakistani sociocultural setting, the values of collectivism, patriarchal norms and Islamic religious teachings are embedded, which makes it possible to continue with marriage despite the absence of such qualities (Javaid & Ramzan, 2025)

The issue of emotional dissatisfaction remains under-developed in South Asian contexts as a theoretical concern in sustaining marriage. The previous research highlighted the significance of religion in marital stability (Li et al., 2018; Simonich and Klobucar, 2017), forgiveness as an adaptive process (Fincham and Beach, 2010; Worthington, 2005), and commitment theory (Stanley et al., 2020) and vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney and Bradbury, 1995). But such frameworks have been mostly created in western individualistic settings and are unable to explain the cultural logic of marital endurance in Pakistan. Although factors such as family honour, fear of social stigma, economic dependency, religious obligation and prioritisation of child welfare have been noted as shaping the marital paradox, there is a lack of sufficient and empirical theoretical explanation towards the intersection and impact of these factors on the creation and maintenance of the marital paradox in Pakistan (Amato, 2010; Hussain and Bano, 2020).

The paradox is not just related to marital satisfaction. It is well established in the literature that negative consequences of poor marital quality include depression, anxiety, stress and low life satisfaction (Karney and Bradbury, 1995; Wang et al., 2015). Economic dependence of husband on wife is a major limitation on the autonomy of women and increases the psychological susceptibility of women for Pakistani women (Khalid and Choudhry, 2018). Social stigma related to divorce - especially females - is an important factor in its negative impact on leaving; social stigma can keep couples in a marriage that leaves them feeling emotionally disconnected. (Khan et al., 2009; Ramzan et al., 2025b). Although the marital paradox is common and a public health issue, there is a remarkable lack of qualitative studies that are able to capture the subjective meaning and coping strategies of life in the marital paradox in the Pakistani context.

In this context, the aim of this study was to fill this gap which was not addressed in previous studies by carrying out a detailed study, which was based on a qualitative approach using a Constructivist Grounded Theory method. The main research questions were: What are the lived experiences of Pakistani couples who are in stable but emotionally unsatisfying marriages and how do they explain the absence of emotional satisfaction in the context of their stable marriage? This study aimed at generating a grounded theory that sheds light on the how and the why of persons' remaining in a stable marriage when they are emotionally unsatisfied. In this paper, the qualitative results of one part of a larger mixed methods study are reported that led to the emergence of the theory of Stability Over Self and the categories that make it up.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There have been major changes in the theories of healthy and stable marriage, from negative conflict processes in the early days to the understanding of the interplay of positive and protective factors in the last few decades. The vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney and

Bradbury, 1995) suggests that both enduring vulnerabilities (personality traits, psychological factors) and stressful life experiences, as well as adaptive relational processes, all play a role in the course of marital quality and stability. It has had a profound impact on the research on multi-dimensional marital determinants and was significantly based on western, individualistic samples.

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) is another approach that proposes that individuals assess the costs and benefits of ongoing relationships. However, divorce is perceived as having much higher costs in Pakistan with respect to social isolation, financial insecurities and religious stigmatisation. It can be hard to make decisions and can cause the situation to be so set that the cost of leaving is high, and the emotional release much higher than the benefit of the marriage.

According to commitment theory (Stanley et al., 2020), there are two types of commitment: dedication commitment, which is based on the motivation to stay and contribute; and constraint commitment, which is based on the reasons that make it difficult to leave. The marriage paradox in Pakistan appears comparable to constraint commitment as people are not attached to marriage for affective reasons, but for reasons of salient structural and normative barriers. When satisfaction was not included in the analysis, Schoebi et al. (2012) found commitment to be one of the most important predictors of marital stability when the environment was constrained.

In many cultures, religion has been proven to be one of the strong determinants of marriages which last. It has been consistently observed that religion is one of the reasons why marriages last even in various cultures. Being religious is related to greater marital quality, lower risk of divorce, and greater dedication (Li et al., 2018; Tuttle and Davis, 2015; Aman et al., 2019). In the Islamic context, marriage is considered a holy obligation and divorce is not considered to be desired unless there are severe circumstances. The following are types of religious coping that have been demonstrated to provide psychological nourishment when life gets difficult for the

marriage: prayer, recitation of religious texts, and seeking advice from religious leaders. This is particularly the case in Pakistan where Islamic principles have a significant influence on social and marital customs.

Theory is another important prism through which to look at gender roles. Emotional labor has been repeatedly documented as an unequal burden, such that women are at a greater risk of having to maintain the relationship, deal with conflict and provide emotional support (Elliott and Umberson, 2008). In the Pakistani patriarchy, women are raised to place the family ahead of themselves and make sacrifices for the family, and a combination of these attributes would be considered feminine good qualities like patience, self-giving and tolerance (Hadi, 2020). While on the other hand, masculinity is socialized in terms of obligations of social protection and financial provision, which is also a restrictive gendered obligation in the marital institution.

In some cultures, conflict avoidance has been theorized as an adaptive process (Feeney and Karantzas, 2017) and research has been conducted on suppression of individual desires as a relational maintenance strategy in collectivist societies (Nosheen et al., 2017; Zaman and Shehzad, 2018). However, over time, the lack of addressing the underlying relational issues can result in dissatisfaction and emotional disengagement (Karney and Bradbury, 2020). Thus, the coping strategies of Pakistani couple are culturally specific coping which has high costs in its system and low costs on the surface.

In spite of such theoretical resources, there is no current framework that fully explains the particular cultural logic that helps to build and reproduce the marital paradox in Pakistan. In the present study, the constructivist grounded theory was chosen to develop a theory that is grounded in the culture and can be elicited from the data and to integrate these multiple dimensions in an explanatory model of the grounded theory.

METHOD

Research Design

The qualitative research style adopted in this study is constructivist grounded theory (CGT) method as proposed by Charmaz (2006). CGT was chosen due to both the aim of the research – not to test pre-existing theory – and to build theory inductively from the subjective experiences of the participants. The researcher's reflexivity is an interpretive tool, not a tool for bias, and is expressly acknowledged as a co-constructive process in developing the categories of theory in CGT (Charmaz, 2014). This epistemological approach is apt, given the nature of the phenomenon – marital paradox – being examined in the context of a specific culture and society – in Pakistan.

The study was based on constructivist ontological paradigm which posits that reality is socially constructed, dynamically produced in interaction and contextually situated. In this form of knowledge, the knowledge that is created is not an objectification of the social world, but a result of a meeting in between the researcher and the participant (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This paradigm was the basis for the semi-structured, participative interview method in which themes that arose from the participants' story-telling and were not imposed by the interviewer.

Sampling and Participants

Recruitment of the participants was done by purposive sampling to ensure the conceptual focus of the study. Social media channels aimed at the targeted audience to Pakistan were used to recruit the participants. First screening used the Multimodal Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire Revised (Lazarus, 1997) as well as a demographic questionnaire to determine whether the married were emotionally dissatisfied with their marriages but thought it was structured well.

The inclusion criteria were married Pakistani, who had stated that they were emotionally dissatisfied despite living with their spouse, they had lived together with their spouse for at least 5 years, they had at least one child and they were not divorced or separated and knew Urdu or

Punjabi very well. There were an equal number of men and women. To expand the conceptual spectrum, participants were selected from a diverse geographic, urban, rural and socioeconomic background. People who had not been married for five years or less, second marriages or people who refused to be involved in qualitative interviews or people who did not consider themselves as a Pakistani were excluded from the study.

After purposive selection, decisions were made for the next data collection based on theoretical sampling, as recommended by the principles of CGT (Charmaz, 2006). The more analysis that was done, more participants were recruited to either expand categories, or to challenge them, such as financial dependency and gendered coping. Sampling was continued until theoretical saturation was reached, which is when no further conceptual properties or categories were gained from further data. A final sample of 14 participants (seven couples) was used to obtain saturation. This sample size is not defined by the conceptual focus and the level of analysis of CGT, but by the focus on statistical representativeness (Morse et al., 2002).

Data Collection

The interviews were semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted individually with each spouse to assure the interviews were confidential, that the respondent would be honest, and the spouse would not affect disclosures. Through separate interviews with the spouse, it was possible to gain insights into the power imbalance and powerlessness in Pakistani marriages that might otherwise pose a challenge in revealing dissatisfaction. The interviews were between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews were done in Urdu/Punjabi language according to the choice of the participants to facilitate authentic and culturally relevant communication.

A preliminary 22 questions were pilot tested and two of them were excluded and two were modified due to the pilot feedback and thus a semi-structured interview guide was developed. Completed guide addressed marital expectations,

marital conflict, coping, emotional functioning during marriage, family/social pressures, finances, and religious issues. The guide was, however, used as a flexible template and interviews were conducted mostly in a conversational style with the addition of probes as they were required, depending on the depth and direction of the narrative of a specific participant. Participant consent was obtained for audio-recording the interviews and the tapes were transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were conducted in the source language (i.e., the native language) and subsequently translated into English and back translated by a bilingual expert to render an accurate and culturally faithful translation.

Notwithstanding, in order to simplify the logistical aspects of participation, non-monetary incentives (i.e. transport and meal) were provided to participants, while avoiding any financial coercion, in accordance with the guidance of the American Psychological Association (2017) and the British Psychological Society (2021). All participants gave informed consent before data was collected and pseudonymity was observed throughout. Approval was given by the institutional review board. It was not the focus of the interview to ask participants if they were distressed; however, if they were, it was offered, but no participant reported distress.

Researcher Positionality

The first author was a female Pakistani researcher who was able to contribute indigenous cultural knowledge and an insider perspective on the social norms and relationships influencing marriage in Pakistan. The positionality was seen as an interpretative resource in accordance with the axiological assumption of the constructivist paradigm (Creswell and Poth, 2018). To document the process of personal observations, assumptions that came to light, and analysis decisions, a reflexive diary was kept throughout the data collection and analysis. This reflexivity had been used to make this co-constructive element of the research process visible and to minimise the possibility of projecting the

researcher's own cultural presumptions onto the narratives of the participants.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006) were used for data analysis and NVivo 12 software was used to support this analysis. The first step in analysis was initial coding in which the transcripts were read line by line and incident by incident. Wherever possible, short, descriptive labels were generated from the participants' own words, to keep close to the data. This resulted in 59 initial codes describing the range of experiences described in the 14 interviews.

Next, a coding technique that focused on the most frequently occurring and conceptually most salient initial codes was used to form larger categories from the codes. There were 23 'focused' codes, which were grouped by similarity in pattern, and by theoretical relevance, into eight 'theoretical' categories. The relationships between these categories were explored theoretically in the coding and a higher order explanatory framework was created. Constant comparative analysis was employed throughout the process to compare data to data, data to codes, codes to categories, and categories to emerging theory to systematically refine the categories, to note variation and commonality across the participants.

Memos were used reflexively and analytically as an important part of the analytic process. Changes in interpretation, conceptual connections, new theoretical speculation and signs of saturation were recorded on memos. After descriptive coding, iterative memoing was used to move towards conceptual abstraction, which led to the final category of Stability Over Self.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

The four criteria by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) for establishing trustworthiness were credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Triangulation of data sources and literature, member checking (summaries of participant responses reviewed by participants), and peer

debriefing (by seasoned qualitative researchers) were used to support credibility. Rich and thick description of participant demography, cultural context, and a variety of marital circumstances offered a basis for readers to evaluate applicability in other collectivist contexts. All coding and analytic decisions were methodically documented according to an audit trail for dependability. The confirmability of the data was reinforced by coding using NVivo, by using an independent researcher to test intercoder reliability for selected segments of the data, and by ensuring that all categories were based on verbatim data provided by the participants.

FINDINGS

The data were analyzed using 59 initial, 23 focused and then eight theoretical codes; the latter eight codes were grouped together to form the core emergent grounded theory of Stability Over Self. This is a core process that has been identified with all participants, and can be described in this core category: Systematic prioritization of marital stability, social acceptance and role performance over personal emotional fulfillment. Participant narratives and insights from analytic memos are provided for each theoretical category to further clarify the category.

Core Category: Stability Over Self

The over-riding theme throughout all the participants is that the strength of marriage when it is a marriage of unhappiness is not a reflection of peoples' love for one another or their satisfaction with the marriage, but of outside factors and internalised rules. In all, the experience of the participants was a rule-abiding, religiously duty-bound, family-reverent, and economically safe one of cultural conformity. This concept is a mix of the eight theoretical categories which are described below and the primary explaining process in the emergent grounded theory.

Theoretical Category 1: Social and Cultural Pressures

The social stigma, family honor and religious teachings were cited numerous times as factors affecting participants' decision to stay in their poor marriages. In Pakistan marriage had not been considered as an agreement of one's personal choice for emotional satisfaction, rather as a social construction with a social system which needed to be sustained and supported as a moral obligation. Marital endurance was valued as a private virtue in community norms, which opposed separation, largely by extended family (mainly in-laws). There was a feeling of responsibility for the cultural notion of izzat (honor) that would be caused by marrying someone who was not happy: Marriage was considered as a communal duty such that marrying a person who is not happy will lead to the collective shame of the family.

Participant 6 said: "Our parents say that marriage is an eternal thing and nothing comes between. It's a matter of continuity of the family name. Participant 12 said: I was taught that the first responsibility of a woman, regardless of what her feelings or emotions are, is to adjust and accommodate. Participant 2 commented: It would be disappointing to my whole family if I decided to end my marriage. I would not do such a thing.

Analytic memos revealed cultural and religious norms were not only background variables but rather active variables in marital preservation. The notions of "sharam" (shame), "izzat" (honor) and the notion of Islamic values were very common and perceived as social duties. Having never been considered a failure, the unhappily married were considered to be sacrificing their own best interests for good social order.

Theoretical Category 2: Emotional Regulation and Acceptance

We identified a wealth of evidence on emotional suppression, expectation adjustment, and internalized acceptance as coping strategies for dealing with marital dissatisfaction. There seemed to be a general feeling of emotional

separation, as participants described feeling like strangers living together as a couple. What they were doing instead of the relational upset, were complex and nuanced ways of normalizing the distress, and redefining resignation as resilience. When I'm around people, when my cheeks are smiling wide open, like I'm happy, that's when I'm happy and satisfied. (Participant 9) I'm the only one in here. Participant #4 said: "We both live like we are roommates and we have our own lives to live and our own duties and obligations to ourselves. Participant 8 said: I now understand the importance of not being so demanding. I see that I'm not as hurt or affected as I thought I would be.

The emotional restructuring that ensued in the process of writing the memos was a process of memo-writing; in the process, the participants not only found themselves feeling dissatisfied but they also rethought the notion of what it means to be successful in marriage as being fulfilled: survival. The normalisation of pain was a potent mechanism of mind that continued the basic process of 'Stability Over Self' and maintained the dissatisfaction as tolerable and the continued endurance as a virtue.

Theoretical Category 3: Fear of Divorce and Reputation

Divorce social stigma became an omnipresent and ingrained social control. Divorce was not seen as a viable choice, but as a death without return, especially for women, reported by participants. Divorce was seen as a sign of personal failure, social undesirable and a bad moral choice. This fear was bolstered by parental disapproval, media condemnation of divorce and community surveillance of marital behavior.

Participant 1 said: Divorce appears to be a failure particularly for the woman. A compromise is a more preferable choice. Participant 7 commented: In our society a woman who has no husband has no respect. I would not be able to divide with my family even if they weren't my own, said Participant 6.

This fear was not simply abstract but that of identity threat, which was reflected in memo

reflections. Throughout the stories, the phrase 'log kya kahenge' (what will people say) was used on numerous occasions. On closer inspection, it was revealed that the participants weren't afraid of outside evaluation, but rather they weren't afraid of losing their identity and sense of belonging. This category was created to serve the function of maintaining one's reputation, and was closely linked to the process of selecting stability over self as one's primary function.

Theoretical Category 4: Financial Dependency

One concrete structural barrier which became evident for many participants was the threat of economic insecurity, especially that of women participants. Analytic memos showed that the majority of the women who participated were not working for pay or had no professional qualifications or housing options, thus in an economic state of captivity. This reliance was particularly entrenched in the norms on how the traditional role of the male should be the chief breadwinners and the role of women the homemakers which had become institutionalised across generations and thus inter-generational structural disadvantage.

Participant 2: I think we have both felt like we don't have that closeness or that relationship that we once had, but in our financial situation there are so many complications and restrictions. As I said, I didn't have a house at the moment, so I'm in the situation I'm in.

The helplessness was felt in the stories of women as they came to the fore in their analysis of the situation as they saw it in the memo when queries arose about separation. I wouldn't know what to do and I have no money was repeated a number of times. The idea was not a financial one, but a structural one; one that was linked to the idea of patriarchal dependency that was not seen as a short-term, but rather a longer-term, concern. The prosperity of the marriages was taken for granted and became apparent in the economy, making the bigger wager of Stability Over Self a foregone conclusion.

Theoretical Category 5:

Children as a Stabilizing Force

In almost all participant stories, less than satisfactory marriage was largely driven by children's health and wellbeing. Endurance was seen as a parental sacrifice and a long-term investment as parents always believed that stability was something they had to provide their children with, implying that it was the job of both parents. Parents suppressed their own emotional needs, as they saw that children would have to deal with the psychological effects of their parents splitting up as well as the social shame of a broken family.

Participant 3 said: I want my kids to be spared from all those types of sufferings and pains and so that's why I have decided to be here to take care of them. Participant 9 said: The woman will always be the one to make a sacrifice. Participant 13 commented: In Marriage patience is a good thing, God will reward.

Memo analysis was a way of thinking that understood this as a 'moral economy', in which children's futures were traded for personal sacrifice. After the children, there was not a passive love but an active and strategic endurance. This category has been dedicated as such as an illustration of a cultural legitimization of parents' emotional deprivation, thus having its own dedicated space in the Stability Over Self framework.

Theoretical Category 6:

Coping through Distraction and Faith

Participants reported various behavioral and spiritual coping mechanisms used to try to deal with the emotional aspects of marital dissatisfaction. The inner peace and moral strength were said to come from prayer, recitations of the Quran and mentioning religious leaders. The participants were provided with ways to avoid direct facing the relational conflict with the use of work, household activities, child rearing and socialization activities. Emotional support was also shared with trusted friends, the family members and community members and, in some cases, psychological

professional support was sought, though this was not always because of cultural stigma.

Participant 12 commented that prayer is the only rest and tranquility he has in his life and he prays a lot. Participant 8 commented: "I have taught myself to have low expectations. So I won't feel as bad. I work hard as much as I work hard on my other hobbies," added Participant 5. These are a means to break free of the negativity going on at home.

This was recognized as a pattern of strategic disengagement rather than problem solving in analytic memos. The participants always opted for redirection to the outside rather than confrontation of relationship issues. The spiritual aspect, as seen through the lens of *sabr* (patience) in Islam, infused a moral dimension in behavioural avoidance, making endurance a manifestation of religious virtue. All these strategies were futile in their external appearance, while the inner discontent remained unexpressed and thus contributed to the larger process of Stability Over Self.

Theoretical Category 7:

Gender Role Expectations

The nature of the sacrifices and endurance that women and men carried out in marriage were strongly influenced by gender role expectations. Women were brought up to believe from early childhood that there were certain notions and ideas that they must "take on board" or accommodate in the family system such as notions of "sacrifice," "emotional labor," "submission," and "accommodation. The good wife was an ideology that was not forced on others, but rather lived deep inside them: it was a cultural identity. When women complained - even thought of leaving their husbands - they were regarded as ungrateful, self-centered, or immoral.

To be honest, the society expects a lot from women and expects them to go through various stages of life, no matter how difficult and harsh they are. Participant 9 commented: "It's always the woman who's in the situation where she has to make a sacrifice.

In contrast, the role of the man was primarily one of the provider of financial resources, father of the family and protector. This breadwinner role created the idea of marital obligation, to keep the family together, and not necessarily by love. In memo analysis it was revealed that there was consensus that which was referred to as an 'emotional labour' and an 'economic labour' respectively was the responsibility of the wife and man. This category further enriched the theoretical model since it shed light on how the individuals perform the role of Stability over Self is a gendered process.

Theoretical Category 8: Emerging Hopes for Change

The dominant message from the participants was acceptance, sacrifice and coping responses, but there was a subset of participants (mostly mothers) who expressed their hopes for change in the future generations. The reflections were not always part of the participants' own lives, but rather were pieces of subtle counter-narratives that were connected to stories of endurance. Participants felt that they would like their daughters to be better prepared for marriage, financially independent, and how to make decisions in their relationships.

Participant 11 said: No one ever tells you before you get married what it's all about. Justly we must be led. Divorce, in the relationship sphere, is typically understood by most people as a big failure, but, in some cases, it is the most appropriate and best option for people. Participant 14 reported: In the relationship context divorce is generally considered by most to be a huge failure, but there are some situations in which divorce is considered to be the most suitable and best option for people. It is necessary that we get ourselves engaged in changing this universal mindset.

A memo analysis showed that the new hopes were an early sign of opposition to the prevailing cultural paradigm of the marital paradox. While none of the participants was going out and doing something about the injustice, they did talk about the changes they wanted; in their case, the

changes were in the form of premarital counseling, women's economic empowerment, and destigmatization of divorce, indicating that they were aware of the institutional influences that perpetuated their own suffering. This area is not the main focus of the dominant pattern but celebrates these aspirations of this generation and indicates the possibility of cultural change.

The Grounded Theory: Stability Over Self

The eight theoretical categories are included within the developing grounded theory of Stability Over Self, which explains how and why Pakistani couples maintain a structurally stable, but emotionally unfulfilling marriage. The theory suggests that marital endurance in Pakistan is not very much kept as a result of mutual affection, relational satisfaction or personal commitment, but because of the interaction and congruence of external sociocultural pressures and coping mechanisms that together produces the cultural logic of marital endurance.

Structural logic is expressed at the social normalization, social stigma related to divorce, the necessity to maintain family honour, patriarchal gender norms and economic dependence on others, impeding individuals to leave. On a psychological level, individuals internalise coping strategies and adapt to feeling uneasy, for instance by suppressing, lowering expectations, distracting themselves, or accepting the situation based on their beliefs, which are considered good. These external and internal pressures are creating a vicious circle, maintaining marital stability – at the cost of emotional health.

This is a gendered process, the theory argues, as women are mainly responsible for emotional labour and self-giving, while men are mainly responsible for endurance, or social role performance and financial responsibility. Both of these are hidden from the social world, much of the private cost of the marital paradox, but a morally compelling reason for children's welfare. The current theory of Stability Over Self offers a culturally-sensitive and theoretically integrated account of a phenomenon that is not accounted

for in current theories from the West, which are based on individualistic perspectives.

DISCUSSION

To conclude, the results of this research contribute to the studies conducted on the marriage paradox in Pakistan in several ways and in a theoretically solid and culturally rich manner. This new emerging concept of Stability Over Self highlights a basic imbalance in the structural and emotional aspects of marriage that has not yet been captured in previous studies, especially in a collectivist cultural context. Findings are discussed with the literature, theory is developed and implications for practice and policy explored.

The significance of social and cultural aspects stated in this research is similar to the previous studies, that explained that collectivist values have a negative impact on marriage choice in the society of South Asian countries (Nawaz et al., 2022; Waseem et al., 2020). In the present study, the findings add to this literature by highlighting the dynamic nature of cultural norms, as processes that generate moral pressure toward marriage and constraints on identity. Izzat (honor) and sharam (shame) were internalized forms of control which recapitulated the marital paradox across generations in participants' narratives (Ramzan et al., 2023a).

The findings of the financial dependency as a factor in the perpetuation of marital paradox is similar to the findings of Khalid and Choudhry (2018) and Sami (2024) in Pakistan which show that economic insecurity is a significant factor in women's failure to leave of dissatisfaction and discontent in marital relationships. The present study expands upon this idea and theorises financial dependency as a practical limitation, because it is an expression of structural power of patriarchy that is mediated by cultural norms, thereby forming an economic form of captivity. This conceptualisation is congruent with theoretic approaches of feminist perspectives that regard the role of marriage as a space for the allocation of gendered resources (Ahmed and Noreen, 2019).

The results of this study were consistent with the results of previous studies conducted in South Asian context on the role of children in marital decision making (Day et al., 2009). The present findings, however, provide a theoretical nuance as it reveals the cultural construction of sacrifice of parents as a moral economy where parents' emotions are traded for children's futures. By definition, this framing supports ongoing emotional deprivation and exit as socially unacceptable AND morally irresponsible, so it can contribute to the process of Stability Over Self at a larger scale.

The coping mechanisms found in this research are consistent with the coping mechanisms observed in other South Asian marital settings such as emotional suppression (Nosheen et al., 2017; Zaman and Shehzad, 2018; Aman et al., 2021), conflict avoidance, religious endurance and behavioral distraction. This work is extended in the present study in that it theorizes the relationship between the concept of sabr as a culturally specific emotional regulation strategy, and faith-based endurance, which is not focused on understanding the root causes of the marital paradox. While religious coping provides some psychological sustenance (Webb et al., 2010), it also faces the challenge of not directly engaging in action for the relationship and to reinforce cultural messages emphasizing the stability of marriage over the well-being of the individual (Ramzan et al., 2023b).

Gendered nature of the marital paradox explained in the study is similar to the marital paradox studied previously in Pakistan by Hadi (2020) and Asim et al. (2024) in their study of emotional labor and role expectations in marriages. The finding that the management of emotions was the domain of females, and the role of management/control was largely financial behavior indicates that the scripts for women's and men's role in emotion management/control are still present and firmly embedded in women. These scripts have a negative effect as they introduce an imbalance in the relationship or marriage; cause resentment, emotional isolation and psychological distress, which are important

factors in the paradox of 'stable but unhappy marriages'.

In the findings presented, the aspirations to change as expressed by a group of the participants align with the other findings of Ali and Saleem (2022) who found that emotional resilience can be a catalyst to facilitate adaptive awareness, as well as with the general call in literature for the need of premarital education and economic empowerment and destigmatization of divorce (Shamsi and Asad, 2021; Shellenberg et al., 2011). The present results suggest that the marital paradox is not a stable, culturally determined phenomenon, but one that may change endogenously, particularly with an enhanced education for women, and the existence of alternative models of relationships.

Theories from the west are significantly different to the Stability Over Self theory. The concept of commitment theory (Stanley et al., 2020) and the VSA model (Karney and Bradbury, 1995) have been developed in the Western culture where personal autonomy and emotional benefits are the main criteria used to measure the quality of marriage. The following are the points that are specifically placed under collective obligations and religious calls, economic constraints with respect to Pakistan as explained in this context. Likewise, in Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) the lack of emotional security within the marriage would drive people to find other attachment figures. This is evident in current results which indicate that family members, friends, and religious leaders are actually a source of emotional support and approval for participants, rather than a facilitator for leaving, and are a way to continue with an unsatisfying relationship with the spouse.

A more contextually appropriate explanation is derived from the Social Exchange Theory of Blau, 1964 which proposes that people stay when their expected value of exit is less than the value of their staying. The current results extend this framework in the Pakistani context by describing the type of costs involved: social ostracism, family dishonor, economic insecurity, religious condemnation and a lost sense of identity. The

theory of Stability Over Self is thus considered as a Pakistani contextually developed theory of social exchange theory.

CONCLUSION

This paper is an attempt to develop a grounded theory of grounded data model which is culturally based and from the perspective of Pakistani couples' marital paradox. The newly emerging theory of Stability Over Self shows that stability of marriage in Pakistani context is contingent upon the overall manifestation of the sociocultural pressures, economic pressures, religious obligations and self-denial coping strategies that focus on the welfare of the marital institution rather than the emotional needs of the partners. All of these eight theoretical categories help to illuminate the complex processes through which structurally stable and emotionally poor marriages are negotiated and remade in the Pakistani context.

There are a number of limitations that need to be recognized. Given that the study used a relatively small number of participants (N = 14) in keeping with the methodology of CGT, but may have less statistical generalizability. This focus on long-term marriages with children might not apply to people in shorter-term marriages and/or marriages patterns. Self-reported data obtained from interviews might also incur social desirability bias particularly in reporting marital dissatisfaction because it is a sensitive topic in the Pakistani cultural context. The results are not always gender representative as non-binary and gender fluid were not represented. The theoretical model should be extended in future research by the use of the dyadic analysis (both partners' perspectives at the same time), longitudinal research (stability over self as a theory through time), and cross-cultural comparative research (transferability of the stability over self theory to other collectivistic societies).

The consequences of these results are far-reaching. The results of this study highlight the importance of culturally responsive therapeutic practices for those working in the mental health

field that are mindful of structural stressors rather than focusing exclusively on personal and/or relational issues in explaining marital problems. The components of realistic expectation setting, emotional intelligence training and communication skill development should be included in the premarital counseling programs (Hamid et al., 2009; Qadir et al., 2013). Marital therapy should be geared toward constraining and committing to marriage and should discuss with clients the distinction between health and forced marriage. It is important to point out that the low utilization of psychological services in this study is reflective of the extent of stigma surrounding mental health treatment and counselling services, and underscores the need for destigmatisation campaigns at a community level.

Policy implications consist of economic empowerment programs which seek to increase women's financial independence and minimize the dependency of marriage as an economic requirement (Ahmed and Noreen (2019); Rashid (2020)). Legal improvements need to reinforce rights of those seeking to divorce, increase accessibility of divorce, and reduce structural obstacles to divorce. The mental health implications of the paradox, like depression and anxiety, as well as emotional alienation should be emphasised in public health campaigns and help seeking made normal in a Pakistani cultural context. Community and religious leaders can play a significant role in transforming the culture around divorce and making it not a personal problem, but a socially acceptable option, when it is necessary.

The study is a substantive contribution to the existing literature on marriage, culture and mental health in South Asia and elsewhere. It offers a culturally relevant grounded theory to understand how marital stability and emotional mismatch can co-exist and serves as a basis for further theoretical development, empirical research and practice for promoting healthier, more equitable and more emotionally satisfying marital relationships in Pakistani society.

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