

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

Hafiza Arooba Javed^{*1}, Prof. Dr. Muhammad Saleem²

^{*1}PhD Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, the Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan

²Professor/Chairman, Department of Applied Psychology, the Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan

^{*1}arooba.javed@iub.edu.pk

Corresponding Author: *

Hafiza Arooba Javed

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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 used Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) to explore this marital paradox among 14 Pakistani married individuals (seven couples) recruited through purposive sampling across diverse regions and socioeconomic backgrounds. Iterative coding yielded eight theoretical categories, 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, which together generated the grounded theory of stability over self. This theory establishes that marital endurance in the Pakistani context is sustained not by mutual affection but by the convergence of sociocultural obligation, economic constraint, religious duty, and internalized coping mechanisms through which individuals repeatedly subordinate emotional need to relational and social continuity. Stability over Self extends Western marital frameworks such as commitment theory, social exchange theory, and the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model, which center individual affect and satisfaction, by identifying collectivist obligation as the primary mechanism of marital endurance. Beyond Pakistan, this theory offers a transferable framework for understanding marital stability in other collectivist societies across South Asia, the Middle East, and East Asia, with implications for cross-cultural counselling practice, family policy, and international research on marriage and wellbeing. A key limitation is the study's reliance on a small, non-probability sample, which constrains statistical generalizability though not conceptual transferability.

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. In this study, the marital paradox is defined as the sustained coexistence of structural marital stability with prolonged emotional dissatisfaction, in which couples remain married and outwardly functional while experiencing ongoing psychological distress within the relationship. 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 (Naeem et al., 2023; Qaiser, 2022). 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.

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 & 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.

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; Simonič & Klobučar, 2017), forgiveness as an adaptive process (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Worthington Jr, 2007), and commitment theory (Stanley et al., 2020) and vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (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 prioritization of child welfare have each been noted individually, no study has theorized how these factors intersect to produce and sustain the marital paradox in Pakistan ((Amato, 2010; Kamal, 2026).

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 (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 (Qaiser, 2022). 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)..

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 (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. This model does not account for contexts in which structural and moral constraints, rather than adaptive relational processes, are the primary determinants of marital continuation, limiting its applicability to Pakistan.

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 2017) 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. As formulated, Social Exchange Theory treats costs and benefits as individually calculated, whereas in the Pakistani context these costs are collectively imposed through family and community surveillance, a dimension the original theory does not specify.

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. Commitment theory does not, however, theorize the cultural and religious sources of constraint commitment itself, treating constraint as a generic structural variable rather than a culturally produced one.

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 (Aman et al., 2019; Li et al., 2018; Tuttle & Davis, 2015). 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. These studies establish religion as a correlate of marital durability but do not explain the mechanism by which religious obligation is experienced and enacted as a barrier to exit.

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 & 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, 2018). 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. This literature identifies gendered emotional labour as a pattern but stops short of situating it within a process model of marital endurance.

In some cultures, conflict avoidance has been theorized as an adaptive process (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017) and research has been conducted on suppression of individual desires as a relational maintenance strategy in collectivist societies (Ahmad & Jahangir, 2020; Akhtar et al., 2025). However, over time, the lack of addressing the underlying relational issues can result in dissatisfaction and emotional disengagement (Karney & 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.

Taken together, these frameworks each capture a fragment of the marital paradox (structural constraint, economic calculation, religious duty, or gendered labour) but none integrates them into a single explanatory process specific to the Pakistani

context. Constructivist Grounded Theory was therefore selected not to test any of these frameworks but to inductively generate an integrative, culturally grounded theory from participants' own accounts.

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 & Poth, 2016). 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, 2006) 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. Saturation was operationalized as the point at which three consecutive interviews produced no new codes and no modification to existing categories, confirmed independently by the second author during category review. A final sample of 14 participants (seven couples) was used to obtain saturation. The seven couples were recruited but the subjects were analyzed separately. This was done to preserve disclosure – pilot feedback suggested that joint/paired analysis would be prone to 'adding up' one partner's story with the other's, and that it may mask the gendered nature of the asymmetry in the experience and maintenance of stability. The objective of the study, however, was to gain insight into each partner's personal interpretation of the relationship's paradox, so individual-level analysis was more appropriate for this purpose. Couple-level patterns are mentioned qualitatively where appropriate. This sample size is not dependent on the conceptual focus and level of analysis of CGT, but on 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. The first author's positionality as a Pakistani woman shaped the interview dynamic, particularly with female participants, who at times disclosed experiences of gendered hardship more readily with a same-gender interviewer. This proximity was treated reflexively rather than as a source of bias: the researcher's reflexive diary was used during interviews to note moments where shared cultural understanding might have led to unspoken assumptions, and probes were adjusted accordingly to avoid supplying meaning the participant had not stated.

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 (Association, 2002) and the (Oates et al., 2021). All participants gave informed consent before data was collected and pseudonymity was observed throughout. Approval was given by the institutional review board. Approval was granted by institutional review board (IRB) Committee, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur. 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 & Poth, 2016). 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. To illustrate this process, one participant's statement, "It would be disappointing to my whole family if I decided to end my marriage" (Participant 2), was initially coded as *family disappointment*. This was grouped with related codes into the focused code *fear of collective shame*, which was subsequently integrated into the theoretical category Social and Cultural Pressures, and ultimately contributed to the core category Stability over Self by illustrating how personal decision-making is subordinated to collective reputation. 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. Two pairs of categories showed conceptual proximity during analysis: Social and Cultural Pressures overlapped with Fear of Divorce and Reputation, and Emotional Regulation and Acceptance overlapped with Coping through Distraction and Faith. These were retained as distinct categories because the former pair operates at the level of external social sanction (family and community judgment) while the latter operates at the level of internal psychological management (individual emotional processing), even though both pairs are mutually reinforcing within the broader process of Stability over Self.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

The four criteria by (Tisdell et al., 2025) 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. Within a constructivist paradigm, intercoder checks were not used to establish a single objective truth but to test the plausibility and communicability of the first author's

interpretations, consistent with (Charmaz, 2014) view of coding as a co-constructed rather than purely verified process.

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 never do such a thing.

These results indicate that izzat and sharam are not just a part of the decision to stay married, but are intrinsic factors in the decision, and create regulatory mechanisms that make separation conceptually undesirable for the individual. This places social and cultural pressure in a way that is not just external pressure but one which is internalised, affecting the very notion of choice.

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. A general sense of emotional detachment was implied – participants spoke of a sense of being strangers living together as a couple. Their way of coping with the relational disruptions was more complex and nuanced ways of normalizing distress, and redefining resignation as resilience.

It makes me feel happy and satisfied when I'm around people, when my cheeks are smiling, when I am happy. (Participant 9) I am one of the only people who are here. I told Participant #4 that, "We both live like we are room mates and we both have our own lives to live and we have our own duties and obligations to ourselves. Participant 8 said: I now understand the importance of not being so demanding. I realize that I'm not as wounded or impacted as I thought I would be.

These findings suggest that emotional regulation in this context serves as a reinterpretation of relational success and that survival and endurance become criteria of relational success rather than fulfilment. De-normalizing the pain in this manner is not passive resignation, it is an active cognitive strategy that makes it psychologically viable to continue enduring and morally acceptable as part of the whole process of Stability over Self.

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. Participant 6 said that even if he wasn't his family, I would not be able to divide with them.

The reflections indicated that the threat of "log kya kahenge" is more internalized as a threat to identity/belonging rather than an external judgement, as it would cut away participants' sense of self from relational connections. Divorce anxiety is not a single act of fear but an institutionalized state of fear, from which exit is denied as a possibility as part of the Stability Over Self process.

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 institutionalize across generations and thus inter-generational structural disadvantage.

Participant 2: I believe both of us have felt like we don't have that level of intimacy, that level of relationship anymore but with money things are so complicated and there's all these restrictions. As I said, I didn't have a house at the moment, so I'm in the situation I'm in.

These findings situate financial dependency as a life course condition rather than a stand-alone economic constraint, and demonstrate a structural aspect of patriarchal dependency. Economic insecurity is then a foreclosing mechanism, and one that makes separation essentially impossible, even if one is emotionally unsatisfied, and which grounds the entire process of Stability over Self in material as

well as cultural terms.

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 has to always take the sacrifice. The 13th person said : "When someone is patient in Marriage, God will reward him/her."

These results indicate that children operate within a moral economy where parents' self-giving for children's perceived future stability is an active and sought-after option, rather than a given, sanctioned by morality. This reframing validates parents' emotional deprivation as 'virtuous sacrifice' and inserts it as a separate process into an overall Stability over Self process.

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.

The results suggest that distraction and faith-based coping are more like strategic disengagement from the relationship than a resolution of the issues, shifting the focus away from the relationship. This avoidance is given a religious dimension and turns what could be interpreted as a lack of resolution in conflict into a manifestation of good will and patience, thus preserving the emotional expense that lies in the Stability over Self, and not eliminating it.

Theoretical Category 7: Gender Role Expectations

Gender role expectations influenced the nature of the sacrifices and endurance that was given by women and men as they married. From a young age, women were taught by their families that there were ideas and notions that they needed to "take on board" or "accommodate" within the family system, like the ideas 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.

These findings indicate that Stability over Self is enacted through a gendered division of labour, in which women perform emotional labour and men perform economic labour, each fulfilling a distinct but complementary obligation that sustains the marriage's outward stability. This division does not merely describe role behavior but constitutes the mechanism through which endurance is distributed and normalized across gender lines.

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. The findings here indicate that early expectations of change are part of an emerging counter-narrative to the dominant narrative of Stability over Self, one that locates the same structures that are considered targets for future change interventions: economic dependency, social stigma and insufficient preparation for marriage. While it may be peripheral in the overall data, this aspect suggests that participants are not convinced that the cultural logic that creates the marital paradox is unchangeable.

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 honor, patriarchal gender norms and economic dependence on others, impeding individuals to leave. On a psychological level, individuals internalize 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. The process unfolds through four interlocking components.

Structural causal conditions are economic dependency, patriarchal gender norms and religious obligation. These have an interactional relationship with intervening conditions which are internalized coping strategies a suppression of emotions and an endurance of faith that a couple rely upon to cope with the distress. Outward effects of this interaction are: marital stability, continued private psychological cost. The underlying process, Stability over Self, is the continual negotiation between these structural pressures and internal coping mechanisms, in which individuals repeatedly sacrifice emotional needs in favor of continuity of their relationships and social support.

Theoretical propositions

Proposition 1: Assessed Cost of Marital Exit (ACE) is higher with structural conditions, economic dependency, patriarchal gender norms, and religious obligation even when controlling for relational satisfaction. Structural conditions, economic dependency, patriarchal gender norms, and religious obligation are positively related to Assessed Cost of Marital Exit (ACE) independently of the assessment of relational satisfaction.

Proposition 2: As perceived exit costs increase, individuals adopt internalized coping strategies (emotional suppression, faith-based endurance, distraction) to render continued marriage psychologically tolerable.

Proposition 3: These internalized coping strategies do not address the structural conditions that produce marital endurance, but rather they produce them. Proposition 3: These internalized coping mechanisms perpetuate, rather than address, the structural conditions that produce marital

endurance, thus creating a self-perpetuating cycle of Stability over Self.

Proposition 4: Coping labour is distributed in a gendered way – women's coping labour is mostly emotional coping, whereas men's coping labour is mostly of economic and social role maintenance, leading to asymmetric psychological costs of endurance.

Proposition 5: The adherence to the Stability over Self process is negatively correlated with exposure to alternative relationship models, either in the educational system or in economic empowerment or media, which means that the process is not universal but is culturally and historically contingent.

DISCUSSION

This study makes a major contribution by developing a grounded theory, Stability over Self, that elucidates how marriages in Pakistan are able to persist in a stable structure over time despite having chronic emotional dissatisfaction. The concept of collectivist obligation, not individual affect or satisfaction, as the key mechanism of marital survival, and the concept of economic dependency, religious obligation, and gendered role expectations as being part of one explanatory process, not separate correlates as previous research had suggested, is novel. The rest of this discussion places the theory in relation to current frameworks and then moves on to implications for practice and policy.

The importance of social and cultural factors mentioned in this is consistent with earlier studies on marital choice in the South Asian context which has found that collectivist values limit marital choice in South Asian societies (Abdullah, 2025; Kamal, 2026). 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.

The findings of the financial dependency as a factor in the perpetuation of marital paradox is similar to the findings of (Khan, 2024; Siddiqa & Majeed, 2021) 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 theorizes 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 conceptualization is congruent with theoretic approaches of feminist perspectives that regard the role of marriage as a space for the allocation of gendered resources (Aman et al., 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., 2005). 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 (Qaiser, 2022; Siddiqa & Majeed, 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.

Gendered nature of the marital paradox explained in the study is similar to the marital paradox studied previously in Pakistan by (Hadi, 2018) and (Abdullah, 2025) 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 (Akhtar et al., 2025) 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 (Siddiqi & Majeed, 2021). 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.

Theoretical contribution

Stability Over Self departs from the three Western frameworks most commonly used to explain marital endurance. Commitment theory (Stanley et al., 2020) and the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Bradbury, 1995) were developed in contexts where personal autonomy and emotional satisfaction serve as the primary criteria for evaluating marital quality, treating structural constraint as incidental to that satisfaction. The present theory, by contrast, considers constraint, as represented by honour, religious obligations and economic dependence, as the main structuring force of marriage continuation rather than as a secondary influence on it.

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 2017) suggests that when the perceived costs of leaving a relationship is greater than the costs of staying in the relationship, the person maintains the relationship. Stability over Self takes this logic a step further, defining cost in the Pakistani context as: social ostracism, family dishonour, economic insecurity, religious condemnation and loss of identity, all of which are imposed and enforced collectively, but not individually calculated.

All of these comparisons suggest that Stability over Self does not merely represent Western marital theories in a different context. It is a structural and not incremental departure from the existing frameworks since it extends the structure by introducing collective, rather than individual, cost-benefit calculation as the guiding logic of marital

endurance.

CONCLUSION

This study presents a culturally-based theory of marital paradox in the context of Pakistani couples, and how structurally stable marriages can co-exist with ongoing emotional discontents. 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 several 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). Also, the participants were solicited via social media, and persons with no access to digital media may be underrepresented, potentially understating financial dependence found in this study, particularly among those with lower incomes or from rural communities. Future studies with community based or clinical recruitment would provide further validation of the present categories if they were to be found to be valid when applied to other recruitment strategies.

Practical implications

Clinical practice and mental health services

Mental health practitioners working with Pakistani couples need to be culturally responsive in their

therapeutic methods to recognize the importance of various structural stressors such as economic dependency, family obligation and religious duty, which often lead to marital problems, rather than viewing marital difficulties as a personal or relational issue. Low psychological service use rates in this study corroborate the continued stigma associated with mental health treatment and the importance of community-level mental health destigmatization initiatives, but also the need for public health messaging stating that depression, anxiety, and emotional alienation are all valid outcomes of the marital paradox.

Premarital counselling

The programmes of premarital counselling should include realistic expectation setting, emotional intelligence training, and development of communication skills (Hamid et al., 2009; Qadir et al., 2013) so that the couples enter marriage with a better preparedness to negotiate the structural pressures identified in this study and not being caught off-guard.

Family therapy

The therapeutic work for people in a marriage should make clear the difference between a marriage that is held together by mutual commitment and a marriage held together by constraint, and should help the client identify the type of marriage they are in, rather than assume that signs of distress indicate that the marriage is failing.

Policy implications

Reform law and make it easier for individuals to seek divorce, enhance their rights, and minimize institutional obstacles to divorce. Community and religious leaders can be instrumental in redefining divorce as a viable and socially acceptable choice to do when needed, not just as a personal or moral problem.

Women's empowerment

Economic empowerment programmes that improve women's financial independence directly tackle women's financial dependency (as found in this study) as a major factor in why marriage has become an economic necessity instead of an elective relationship.

The findings in this study add to the literature on marriage, culture and mental health in South Asia and beyond by providing a culturally-informed theory of how marital stability and emotional

dissatisfaction can coexist, and a foundation for further theoretical development, empirical study and practice.

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