



Research Paper

Emotional Self Disclosure and Relationship Satisfaction among Married Adults during COVID19

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Abstract

The current study aimed to examine emotional self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction, among married adults during the COVID19 pandemic and to assess if disclosing emotions with one's partner tends to have any correlation with relationship satisfaction. The sample consisted of married adults in the age range of 20-50yrs from Bangalore urban, been married for more than 1 year and had an arranged marriage. Two psychometric tests were used namely; the Emotional self-disclosure scale and the Relationship satisfaction scale. Data was collected online through google forms. The final sample consisted of 130 individuals. The participants of the study expressed a low level of emotional self-disclosure and moderate levels of relationship satisfaction. There was no significant gender difference concerning emotional self-disclosure, however, there was a significant gender difference in relationship satisfaction (males showing low levels of satisfaction). Lastly, there was a significant positive relationship between emotional self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction. Thus, within the Indian diaspora, during the pandemic, emotional self-disclosure does seem to have been an important aspect that promotes positive emotional expression and relationship satisfaction among married adults.

Keywords: Emotional self-disclosure; Relationship satisfaction; Emotional Regulation; Marriage; Self-disclosure

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I. Introduction

Close intimate relationships especially the ones we share with our partners tend to elicit the most intense emotional reactions (Berscheid, 1983; Clark, Fitness, & Brissette, 2001; Fehr, Baldwin, Collins, Patterson, & Benditt, 1999). As Berscheid and Ammazalorso (2001) put it, "close interpersonal relationships are the setting in which people most frequently experience intense emotions, both the positive emotions, such as joy and love and the negative emotions, such as anger and fear" (p. 308). Emotionality and intimate, romantic relationships tend to share a bi-directional relationship. Emotion is a central theme in romantic relationships and conversely, relationships are a prime source of emotions. People experience many of their emotions, positive or negative, in their give and take with their partners (Guerrero & Andersen, 2000). Being open about our emotions lays the foundational basis for a strong relationship. Emotional transparency rather than suppression goes a long way in making the relationship stronger and more stable, reducing conflicts, and building trust.

According to Friedman & Tucker (1993) "emotional self-disclosure refers to the communication of sensitive knowledge to another entity, offering a beneficial catharsis of built-in feelings, increasing the degree of intimacy and confidence in a relationship". They further said that it involves revealing the personal and private facets of one's identity to another, thus enhancing the nature of interpersonal relationships and promoting trust. Emotional self-disclosure thus tends to give a structure and consistency to one's relationship. In a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies on marriage, Karney and Bradbury (1995) found the experience and expression of negative emotions to be the most significant variable affecting marital outcomes. Kurdek (1999) in his study found that lack of emotional expressivity is among the predictors of low relationship satisfaction. A key component of having a healthy relationship with one's partner is to be mindful, accepting, concerned, understanding, and supportive of their needs. Being responsive to a partner's needs helps to strengthen the bonding (Reis et al., 2004). Individuals' responsiveness towards their partners gets affected when they are faced

with external stressors and challenges in their day-to-day life like work stress, managing household chores, taking care of kids and extended family, and financial difficulties. These stressors then affect the communication pattern between the partners making it more critical and argumentative where the partners are unable to hear out each other and understand one another's perspectives. Slowly over time, they then become less satisfied with their partner and their relationship (Bodenmann et al., 2007, 2010; Neff & Karney, 2004; Bodenmann et al., 2015).

COVID-19 pandemic restricted the movement and socialization process of people forcing them to stay at home which led to a disruption in the family's routines, affecting the rapport between the members. This effect was predominantly seen in couple relations as they were both working from home and at the same time had extra work of managing housework, and kids' responsibilities as the children also had online classes. At the same time support from their social network like daycare facilities, relatives, maids, friends, etc. was less due to the restrictions making it harder for them to manage. This was seen as giving rise to a lot of conflict between the couple. Some conflicts were related to the current situation and frustration and others related to past unresolved emotional issues between them which until now was getting pushed under the rug due to their busy schedule. Also, an increase in domestic violence was noticed during this period. According to Pietromonaco & Collins (2017) "people have a fundamental need for belonging, and they are most likely to thrive in the face of stress when they feel closely connected to significant others". As emotional expression and sensitivity is an integral part of a healthy, thriving relationship thus it becomes important to understand the relationship between emotional self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction. Thus, the current study aimed to assess the level of emotional self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction among married adults in Bangalore city during the pandemic.

II. Methodology

Purposive sampling technique was used to gather data from the sample which consisted of married adults in the age range of 20-50yrs. who have been married for more than 1 year and have had an arranged marriage. The sample belonged to Bangalore urban and due to the pandemic situation, the data was collected through online mode using a google form that was made available online from 4/1/21 to 30/5/21. The sample consisted of 130 individuals (65 male and 65 female). Two validated tools namely: The Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale (ESDS) and The Relationship Satisfaction Scale (RSAT) were used.

Measures:

The Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale (ESDS)

This scale by Snell, W. E., Jr., Miller, R. S., & Belk, S. S. (2013) consists of 8 subscales, each containing five separate items. The total number of items is 38. The eight subscales on the ESDS have high internal and test-retest reliability. The measures of internal reliability ranged from a low of .83 to a high of .95. Thus, there was clear evidence that the items on each subscale were coherent and internally consistent. A 5-point Likert scale is used for responses, with the following anchors: 1 = not at all willing to discuss this topic and 5 = willing to discuss this topic. Each item was scored from 1 to 5, with higher scores thus corresponding to greater willingness to discuss emotions, showing higher emotional self-disclosure

The Relationship Satisfaction Scale (RSAT)

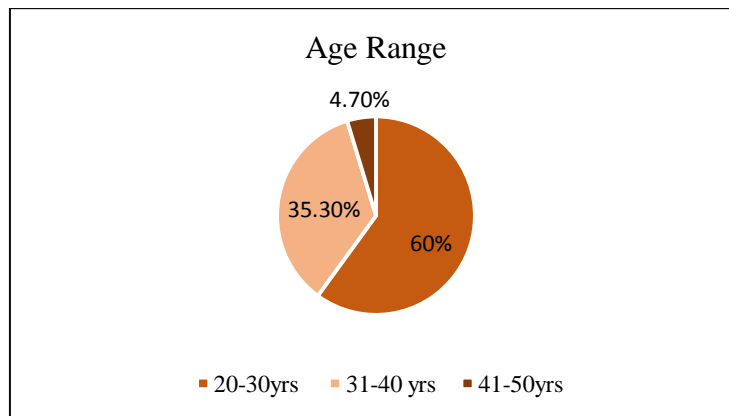
This scale by Burns, David D. (1993) evaluates how satisfied one feels about their most intimate relationship. It is suitable for both heterosexual and same-sex relationships. The seven items on the RSAT ask about communication and openness, resolving conflicts and arguments, and the degree of affection and caring. For each item on the scale, an individual has to indicate how satisfied they have recently been feeling in their relationship. The score ranges from 0- 42. Higher the score higher the satisfaction experienced in all dimensions of relationship satisfaction.

Ethical Consideration:

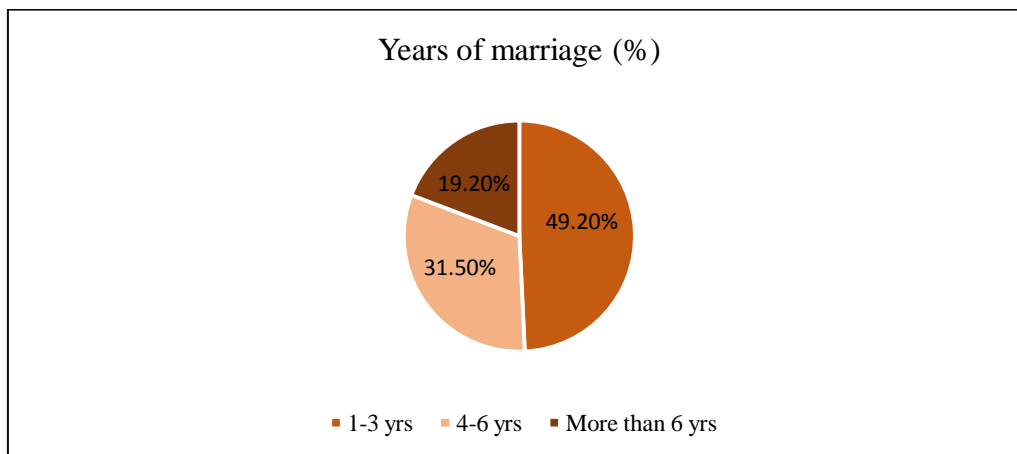
The study followed the ethical guidelines for research on human subjects. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Post-Graduate Department of Psychology, Bishop Cotton College, Bangalore. The google form consisted of details of the study and the investigator for easy accessibility by the participants. Participants were asked to sign a consent form if they were willing to participate in the study. Anonymity was assured and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any point in time if they wanted to.

Sample demographic

Graph 1 shows the age range distribution in the current sample and graph 2 shows the distribution of the sample as per the year of marriage. On the socio-demographic variable gender, the sample had an equal representation of males and females. Out of the total sample size of 130, 65 were males and 65 were females.



Graph 1: shows the age range composition of the sample



Graph 2: showing no. of years the individuals in the sample were married for

Data analysis

A correlational research design was used in the current study. As the data were not normally distributed, therefore, non-parametric tests were used to analyze the data. Under Non-Parametric Test, Mann-Whitney U test, and Spearman's Correlation, were the statistical tools used. The alpha value for the current study was fixed at 0.05 significant level.

III. Results and Discussion

The current study firstly tried to identify the levels of emotional self-disclosure in the sample during the pandemic. Out of the 130 participants, 64 (48.9%) of them reported low levels of emotional self-disclosure, 36 (27.5%) participants reported medium levels and 30 (22.9%) participants reported high levels of emotional self-disclosure. It can be seen that majority of the sample had low levels of emotional self-disclosure. The basic nature of humans is that they are social and sharing emotions helps them to regulate their emotions better. The process of self-disclosure helps an individual to express themselves and their emotions openly without inhibitions. The importance of emotional self-disclosure is immense, as is evident from the findings of previous studies wherein disclosure was found to impact the immediate emotional experience of a discloser by reducing stress arising from negative experiences (Martins et al., 2013), diminishing anxiety (Tam et al., 2006), and increasing negative affect in the short term (Greenberg & Stone, 1992), which ultimately results in long-term psychological improvement (Kelley, Lumley, & Leisen, 1997). Further, disclosure met with support can improve relational outcomes, enhancing relational closeness and intimacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Sprecher, Treger, & Wondra, 2013). Disclosure has been found to improve psychological outcomes deeply rooted in individuals' self-image, such as experiencing greater self-affirmation and a restored sense of worth after intimate disclosure (Creswell et al., 2007).

COVID-19 pandemic as an external stressor disrupted the functioning of couples. The sudden changes brought by the pandemic like unemployment, financial instability, and reduced job opportunities (Coibion et al.,2020) had a major psychological impact resulting in anxiety, and depression (Brodeur et al., 2020; Idoiaga Mondragon et al.,2020). The distressed couples then displaced their frustrations onto their partners leading to an increase in negative affect and marital conflicts. Having deep conversations about each other's emotions and distress gives the partner feelings of being validated, understood, and cared for thereby preventing resentment in the relationship and helping them to form a deeper emotional connection. This was found to be missing during the pandemic where the frustration of each partner overpowered their logical approach to conflict.

The study further assessed the level of relationship satisfaction in the current sample during the pandemic. Descriptive statistics showed that out of 130 participants, 36 (27.5%) individuals were moderately satisfied in their relationship with their spouse, 30 (22.9%) individuals were very satisfied, 20 (15.3%) individuals were somewhat satisfied, 19 (14.5 %) individuals were somewhat dissatisfied, 16 (12.2%) individuals were moderately dissatisfied, 6 (4.6%) individuals were very dissatisfied and 3 (2.3%) individuals were extremely dissatisfied. Again, the level of relationship satisfaction among married adults was overall found to be moderate during the pandemic. A multitude of factors could have affected marital satisfaction among the partners during the current pandemic. One of the reasons is economic complications where lack of resources could have made partners more negative about the overall situation and which could have then led them to displace their frustration onto each other and thus, wrongly accusing each other and considering their marriage to be a reason for their suffering. Lack of communication, i.e., lack of appropriate disclosure of emotions as seen earlier in the current study where emotional self-disclosure was low could have led to an increase in arguing, stonewalling, and contempt. Due to the work-from-home situation, both partners had to manage the excessive workload not only at the office but also at home. This was far more frustrating and tiring for individuals who had children or in-laws at home or were part of an extended family set-up as is common in India. All this could have further increased the negative perception of marriage.

Next, the study tried to examine if there was any significant gender difference in these two variables (emotional self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction) during the pandemic. Results showed that there was no significant gender difference in emotional self-disclosure however, results of Mann- Whitney U test revealed that there was a significant gender difference observed in relationship satisfaction wherein males were found to be experiencing lesser satisfaction in comparison to females as seen in table 1. The mean rank for females for emotional self-disclosure was 66.68 and the sum of rank was 4334.00 and for males, the mean rank was found to be 64.32, and the sum of rank was 4181.00.

Table 1 shows the Mann-Whitney U test results for gender differences in relationship satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction	
Mann-Whitney U	1688.500
Wilcoxon W	3833.500
Z	-1.986
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.47*

*Significant at 0.05 level

According to the results of this study, men experienced low levels of relationship satisfaction in comparison to women during the pandemic. Both women and men can struggle with sharing feelings, but men seem to have a much harder time (Chaplin TM, 2015). A plausible explanation could be men might indulge in negative self-disclosure (which means self-disclosure of negative emotions, in an unhealthy manner) which leads to conflicts, which in turn, sours the relationship.

Lastly, the study attempted to find out if emotional self-disclosure had any correlation with relationship satisfaction i.e., does emotional transparency has an impact on relationship satisfaction. Looking at table 2 it can be seen that the Sig. (2- tailed) value is .000 which is lesser than the alpha value of 0.05, thereby showing that there is a significant relationship between emotional self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction among married adults. The correlation in this study is a positive one, which indicates that when there is an increase in emotional self-disclosure, there is a simultaneous increase in relationship satisfaction.

Table 2 shows the relationship between emotional self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction among young married individuals

ESDS	RS total score
Correlation Coefficient	.575
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000*
N	130

*Significant at 0.05 level

Conflict is inescapable in relationships that are progressing toward intimacy. Couples' attitude to disagreement, as well as the disposition and tone of their emotional give and take, define the relationship's fate (Berscheid & Ammazalorso, 2004). If both the partners do not have a balanced sense of positive and negative emotional-self disclosure then it may lead to an unhealthy pattern of stifling emotions which can then lead to more conflicts (Gross, 2002). The emotional interchange between partners in a marriage may thus decide the fate of a relationship in the long run (Fardis, 2007) and hence, should be an important aspect when it comes to resolving marital conflicts.

IV. Conclusion

From the current study, it can be noticed that within the Indian diaspora, emotional self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction had a direct correlation during the current pandemic with low levels of emotional self-disclosure leading to low levels of relationship satisfaction. There are remarkable differences in experience, expression, and regulation of emotions between partners in the marital relationship and these individual differences in emotionality are likely to produce different outcomes for them in romantic relationships. Concerning the current study, it can thus be postulated that emotional self-disclosure is necessary when it comes to experiencing satisfaction in a relationship with one's spouse, especially during a stressful period. However, it is equally important that this emotional disclosure should be accompanied by positive expression. Emotional self-disclosure thus facilitates intimacy between couples playing a crucial role in setting the tone of the relationship. Expression of emotions to one's partner is essential in maintaining a working relationship and couples should thus, try to be more receptive and communicative about their emotions in a positive manner when faced with challenging situations and circumstances, like the current pandemic. This information can further be utilized by mental health providers who can apply this in their practice while counseling couples and working on marital issues and discord that their clients might be facing.

Limitations

The current study did have a few limitations. Firstly, the sample consisted of only one member of the dyad thus not giving us a complete picture of how the dynamics of the relationship tend to play a role. Secondly, it has been shown that the expression of emotions in romantic relationships tends to vary with age as well as the number of years the partners have been together for. Couples in relationships that are new tend to have more positive emotional sharing and interaction compared to those who have spent a few years together (Strzyzewski Aune, Aune, & Buller, 2001). Due to the nature of this sample, the study participants do not fully represent all stages of relationship development. Therefore, the nature of the correlation between emotionality and relationship satisfaction might differ getting affected by these two variables. This could then affect the generalizability of the study findings. Further limitations were that the study just focused on the urban population, the sample size was comparatively less, purposive sampling and online data collection mode were used, correlation statistics were utilized, and all these factors tend to affect the generalizability of the results found.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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