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Cognitive Distortion and Unrealistic Expectation: A Clinical Study of Marital Dissolution

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Abstract

The aim of the proposed study was to concentrate on establishing the relationship between cognitive distortions and having unrealistic expectations, and how it led to the dissolution of marriages. Purposive sampling of a group of (N=120) 66 women and 54 men was undertaken in the urban areas in Pakistan. The age of respondents ranged between 25 and 55 years; they had either experienced separation or divorce. The tools that were used in the data collection process were standardized such as the Interpersonal Cognitive Distortion Scale (ICDS), Marital Attitude Scale (MAS) and Marital Disillusionment Scale (MDS). This study discovered that there are significant and positive association among cognitive distortions, unrealistic expectations and marital dissolution which implies that the greater the irrational thinking and unrealistic belief also would be that closely-related to marital dissolution. The two variables were supported as having significant effects on divorce through the interrelationship between high expectations and cognitive distortions obtained through correlation analysis. Such findings bring out the psychological processes that interfere with matrimonial satisfaction and steadiness. The implications of the results are very practical implying that there is a need of a culturally modified therapeutic intervention that can target distorted cognitions and unrealistic marital expectations so as to improve quality of relationships and decrease marital distress.

Key words: Cognitive Distortion, Unrealistic Expectation, Marital Dissolution, Cognitive-Behavior Therapy, Relationship Conflict



Introduction

Marriage is generally considered important to an emotional equilibrium of an individual as well as to societal operation. In the modern world divorces and split-ups are becoming common matters in marriages worldwide. In the recent past, the rise in the number of divorces has prompted people to take a keen interest in the psychological, relational and social affairs that cause a marriage to break up. Whereas divorce was unheard of in the South Asian cultures earlier, it is increasingly gaining popularity in these cultures in addition to other cultures in the West (Hussain, 2023).

Experts have over the years found social and economic cause of divorce, though in the past few years, psychological factors including how individuals think, how they would like their relations to go, how individuals perceive things and so on have been a major concern in explaining divorce. How people in a relationship respond to the actions of others is so much relevant to their joy or troubles (Ellis, 2022). Thoughts that we have about each other having bad thoughts can destroy a good conversation and feelings in relationships. When left unattended, such psychological problems can result in incessant bickering, which can make one feel separated and, worst of all, lead to divorce (Uddin 2025).

Cognitive distortions were initially created by Aaron Beck (1976) and refer to a series of constant biased thinking patterns, including, but not limited to, mind reading, catastrophizing, and personalization. Such misinterpretations are not only personal cognitive risks but may regularly occur in close relationships, as an inaccurate interpretation of the intentions of a partner is often the precursor of misunderstanding and mutual disagreement (Beck & Haigh, 2022). As an example, among Pakistani educators, interpersonal cognitive distortions significantly and positively explained marital dissatisfaction (Gezer & Ozkamali, 2023). According to Kim and Lee (2023), cognitive distortions play a major role in making problem-solving less effective in distressed couples which leads to more conflict and unhappiness.

An unrealistic expectation is the set belief concerning the way things should be in a marriage or with a partner and in most cases springs out of fantasy rather than reality. Other aspects of these anticipations are the thought that love remains stagnant and requires no work, that a partner has to fulfill all emotional needs and that conflict never predicts well. Some of the key determinants of such beliefs as a child may be the interaction with parents, culture and, more recently, the fantasies of the perfect family model witnessed in a documentary and other programs on TV (Nelson & Wright, 2023). According to Epstein (2022), the cause of dissatisfaction due to impossible expectation in marriage happens most of the time when individuals cannot resolve their conflicts or modify their attitudes as the situation changes.

Cognitive distortions and unrealistic expectations are independent problems that may collaborate to make a relationship less stable. They are psychological instruments with the assistance of which individuals analyze what their partner acts and why and how the relationship is developing. These thinking habits, if left unchecked may result in a home setting full of misunderstanding, sense of loss and conflicts that will inevitably causes desolation in the marriage and potential divorce (Gottman & Silver, 2022).

In recent years, the number of divorces witnessed all over the globe has been



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growing exponentially and this has left clinicians and researchers worried. As indicated in a report by the United Nations (2023), divorce has increased almost by 15 percent across the world in the past 10 years and in certain countries such as Pakistan, an increasing number is seen within the urban population. The rise of divorce cases by 12% in major cities is prevalent due to various issues like altering expectations and roles in marriages and the difference in the characters of couples (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Other than awareness enhancement, little research work in Pakistan has been conducted on the psychological reasons that lead to marital break downs. The given research aims at filling in that gap by learning the extent to which unrealistic expectations and maladaptive thinking may impact divorce in addition to providing therapists and conducting intervention programs with culturally sensitive suggestions.

Literature Review

Marriage dissolution is now a psychological and social phenomenon that is becoming a world-level concern and not a South Asian problem Yeung & Jones, G. W. (2024). In spite of the significance that the initial research works gave to the role of peripheral influences such as financial crunch or family intrusion, the subsequent psychology surveys concentrated on the role of self-thinking and feel grades in shaping the relationship of marital. Cognitive distortions According to Aaron Beck (1976), cognitive distortions are misguided or misguided thoughts that result in the disablement of perception and action. In fact, such distortions as catastrophizing, mind reading and emotional reasoning contribute rather to the increase of conflict and the deterioration of emotional intimacy in the framework of the intimate relationships (Raymond, E. S. (2024).

A.T. Beck (1976) in his Cognitive Therapy talked of the stinking thinking of all or nothing, catastrophizing and generalization among others as being some of the bad judgment people have about things. Possessing such thought patterns can make an individual respond negatively and act badly that can impair his/her relationships with others.

In the updated version of Feeling Good (2024), Darnell further elaborated the cognitive theory of Beck to demonstrate that such behavior usually makes a person misunderstand a partner and leads to emotional discord and dissatisfaction. Cognitive restructuring in form of thought patterns should enable one to know more about the spouse as well as reduce marriage stress and enhance relations.

Gottman and Silver, (2022), implied that the manner of communications within a couple is of utmost priority in establishing what would be the outcome on both successful and unsuccessful marriages. They refer to their four horsemen, which include criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. In their longitudinal study, they succeeded to determine that the couple that is prone to indulge in these harmful behaviors continuously has high chances of divorcing. The research shows the direct effects of the misconceptions of information in communication on to the marriage stability.

Abdullah and Subhan (2024), have conducted a research that studies the relationship between the unrealistic marital expectations with respect to the media role of portrayals of romance and even young adulthood. The study found a tight relationship of such internalized romantic myths with a higher rate of marital dissatisfaction, conflict and emotional distress. Rather, people often became disappointed, and their partners were not able to meet such ideal



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standards which have been developed by media.

W. K. Halfords, H. J. Marksman and S. M. Stanley (2022). This research denies any suggestion to the effect that counselors should not mention the problem of unrealistic expectations as couples are which to get married. The authors maintained that individuals, who entered their marriage with thoughts that romance and discord would be smooth, had higher chances of being disappointed. According to analyzed literature, it is possible to say that unrealistic expectations and cognitive distortions can be described as significant causes of marital dissatisfaction resulting in its ultimate break. The foreign study observes the universality of the given psychological patterns, but the native study reveals such peculiarities of the distribution of these patterns as the cultural and gender ones. Together, the findings indicate the need to deliver culturally vulnerable cognitive-behavioral therapeutic care that looks at the perversely twisted beliefs and hard-nosed expectations that damage spousal intercourse.

Rational of the Study

This current study aims to examine the psychological premises underlying marital dissolution, detailing the means by which cognitive distortions and unrealistic expectations contribute to marital breakdowns, a topic commonly underrepresented to view the direct impacts of external pressures such as finances or cultural changes. The study will apply a quantitative research methodology whereby standardized, culturally adapted psychometric instruments will be employed that include the Marital Attitude Scale, Marital Disillusionment Scale, and Interpersonal Cognitive Schema (ICS) in the attempt to objectify distorted thinking patterns of marital distressed individuals. This study involves the application of regression analysis and correlation in order to assess the predictive value and interactive benefits of these mental patterns by controlling demographic aspects, i.e. age, gender, education, and family system. Although the focus is not on clinical interventions at present, the design is also likely to produce findings on which the future developments of cognitive-behavioral models aimed at couples at risk will be based. Finally, the research findings touch on a critical literature gap, where it provided an in-depth psychological insight into the internal dynamics contributing to marital instability using the Pakistani context.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the relationship between cognitive distortions, unrealistic expectation and marital dissolution among married individuals.
2. To investigate cognitive distortions as a significant predictor of marital dissolution among married individuals.
3. To investigate unrealistic expectation as a significantly predictor of marital dissolution among married individuals.

Hypothesis of the Study

1. There is a significant relationship between cognitive distortion, unrealistic expectations and marital dissolution among married individuals.
2. Cognitive distortion significantly predicts marital dissolution among married individuals.
3. Unrealistic expectations significantly predict marital dissolution among married individuals.



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Methodology

Population and Sampling Size

The targeted population of this research are recently experienced the process of separation or divorce. Male and female participants aged, education and belonging to different family (joint or nuclear) systems will be involved. In this research, 120 respondents will be chosen. Purposive sampling will be performed this implies that the researcher will consider individuals who satisfy certain criteria related to the research.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

This study includes participants who had been legally separated, were between the ages of 25 and 55, clinically diagnosed psychological disorder had not include, and had attained at least a tenth-grade education. This study did not include individuals who were widow or who had been married. Furthermore, individuals having a clinical diagnosis of any psychological disorder were excluded.

Tools for Assessment

In the current study, following measurement tools were used

Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions Scale (ICDS)

ICDS is among standardized self-report questionnaire designed to measure irrational thought patterns in close relationships and marriage Hamamcı and Buyukozturk, 2004). The 19-items version of the scale has become popular in marital and psychological studies since it is reliable. Each of the items will be measured on a 5-point Likert type of scale that ranges between 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and higher the score, the higher the level of cognitive distortion. The scale has exhibited positive levels of internal consistency (Cronbach alpha of 0.70-0.83) and has endorsed cross cultural validity

Marital Attitude Scale (MAS)

Marital Attitude Scale is psychometric instrument of use developed by Braaten and Rosen (1998) to evaluate the general attitude, beliefs and opinion of the individuals towards any marriage institution. The MAS is a 23-item Likert type (usually 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) scale that indicates better attitudes to marriage the higher the score. Psychometric rating has demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha being commonly more than 0.80) and construct validity. MAS can be utilized among both married and non-married people and is commonly used in studies examining such issues as how individual beliefs affect the levels of marital satisfaction and marital decision-making.

Marital Disillusionment Scale (MDS)

Marital Disillusionment Scale is a self-report scale that is used to determine the measure of emotional disappointment, lack of fulfilling expectations and deteriorating connection in a marriage. It consists of 11 items rated at a Likert scale with a higher score representing increased disillusionment. This scale has exhibited acceptable levels of reliability (Cronbach alpha 0.80 and above) and it has been used widely in investigations of marital dissatisfaction and breakdown. It too has been culturally modified to use in Pakistani populations.



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Result

In this section, we revisit the initial analysis of the result, along with the descriptive analyses to explore various statistical measure. This was followed by an inferential analysis to investigate correlation between variables, and regression analysis was used to explore the mediation model.

Table 1: Frequencies and Percentages of Demographic variables under Study (N = 120)

Variables	F	%
Gender		
Female	66	55
Male	54	45
Age		
25-35	68	56.7
36-45	36	30
46-55	16	13.3
Family System		
Joint	62	51.7
Nuclear	58	48.3
Religion		
Muslim	102	85
Non-Muslim	18	15
Socio economic status		
Upper	29	24.2
Middle	87	72.5
Lower	4	3.3
Education		
Intermediate	11	9.2
Bachelor's	47	39.2
Master	44	36.7
MPhil	18	15

Note. f=frequency; %=percentage

Table1 show detailed description of categorical variables with the help of frequencies and percentages. The first categorical variable was gender which revealed that female (55%) and male (45%) were divided into two categories. In family system (51.7%) participant belong to joint family system and (48.3%) belong to nuclear family system. Next categorical variable was religion which revealed that Muslim (85%) and non-Muslim (15) were divided into two categories. In socio economic status 24.2% participants belong to upper class, 72.5% belong to middle class and 3.3% belong to lower class. In an age, 56.7% were 25-35 years, 30% were 36-45 years and 13.3% were 46-55 years old. Furthermore, education variable also revealed that 9.2% having intermediate degree 39.2% having bachelor's degree 36.7% were having master and 15% were having MPhil.



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Table 2: Inter-correlations among Cognitive Distortion, Unrealistic Expectation and Marital Dissolution (N = 120)

S.No	Variable	1	2	3
1	Cognitive distortion		.37**	.43***
2	Unrealistic expectation			.35***
3	Marital dissolution			

Note * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

A bivariate correlation was carried out to determine the correlation of all the study variables (Table 2). Pearson correlation coefficient was used in the correlation analysis of examining the interrelationship between marital dissolution score and demographics cognitive distortion and unrealistic expectation. Table indicated that cognitive distortions was having positive significant relationship with marital dissolutions ($r=.43, p < .01$) and unrealistic expectations ($r= .35, p < .01$) in the fact that unrealistic expectations were associated with increase in marital dissolution. Result showed that there is a close association between high cognitive distortion and unrealistic expectation and the dissolutions of Maritals.

Table 3: Linear Regression Analysis of Predictors for Marital Dissolution

Variables	B	95% CI			SE	B	R ²	ΔR ²
		LL	UL					
Step 1						.18	.17***	
Constant	29.06**	24.31	33.81	2.40				
Cognitive Distortion	.19***	.11	.26	.04	.43***			

Note, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4: Linear Regression Analysis of Predictors for Marital Dissolution

Variables	B	95% CI			SE	B	R ²	ΔR ²
		LL	UL					
Step 1						.22	.04*	
Constant	26.56**	21.53	31.59	2.54				
Cognitive Distortion	.15***	.07	.23	.04	.34***			
Unrealistic expectation	.13*	.03	.22	.05	.22*			

Note, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table indicates the effect of cognitive distortion, and unrealistic expectation on marital dissolution. The first step showed the R² of 18 which emphasized that the impulsivity explained 18% of the variance in the moral disengagement with [F (1,118) = 26.08 $p < .001$]. Step 2- the value of R² which was .22 indicated that cognitive distortion and unrealistic was able to explain 22% variance in the marital dissolution with [F (1,117) = 6.56 $p < .001$] level. The result showed that cognitive distortion (.19***) and unrealistic expectation (.13*) has positive effect in predicting the marital dissolution.



Discussion

In the current research it was hypothesized that cognitive distortions has positive significant relationship with marital dissolutions and unrealistic expectations indicating that unrealistic expectations is associated with increase the marital dissolution Result also indicted that cognitive distortions showed the positive significant association with unrealistic expectations. Result indicated that a high cognitive distortion leads to unrealistic expectation and marital dissolutions.

First hypothesis states that there was a significant relationship between cognitive distortion, unrealistic expectations and marital dissolution among married individuals. Numerous researches support the hypothesis like Masood, M. M. (2024), conducted a study to aim to understand how unrealistic expectations in marriage arise due to media portrayals. Scientists discovered that those who constantly watched romantic films and TV shows as young adults often had unrealistic expectations about love, communication and gender which resulted in difficulties and pain in their marriages.

Second hypothesis stated that cognitive distortions is a significantly predict marital dissolution among married individuals. Aaron Beck (1976) describes Cognitive distortions as incorrect or exaggerated ways of thinking that lead to impairment of perception and behavior. These distortions, including catastrophizing, mind reading and emotional reasoning, actually exacerbate conflict and undermine emotional intimacy in the context of intimate relationships (Beck & Haigh, 2022). And the hypothesis proved cognitive distortion is a significantly predict marital dissolution among married individuals. Silver (2022) conducted a study explain that high cognitive distortions such behaviors can be seen as misinterpreting your partner and having strange assumptions about your relationship.

Third hypothesis postulated that unrealistic expectation was a major determiner of marital dissolution in married people. Examples revealed that the mode of interaction between a couples is the main because some couples divorce. Since result had shown that high cognitive distortion causes unrealistic expectation and marital dissolutions and problems. Similarly, it was also revealed that the breakdown of marriage was directly related to unreasonable opportunities. The strict or unrealistic beliefs about the spouse or marriage institution also inclined those who participated to be annoyed, angry, and disappointed when their expectations were unmet. This confirms previous study that individuals whose expectations are not rational find it more difficult to adapt to married life and was less satisfied by relationships. The hypothesis confirmed that the unrealistic expectations which suggest that unrealistic expectations are linked with increase the marital dissolution.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study aimed to investigate relationship between declining of marriage among individuals who are married and cognitive distortions and unrealistic expectations. The findings supported the view that both unreasonable expectation and cognitive distortions were significantly related to divorce as it has been hypothesized that distorted ways of thinking and unrealistic beliefs contribute to the unstable nature of marriages. Moreover, both cognitive distortion and unrealistic expectations were high predictors of marital dissolution meaning that the two allude to significant roles as psychological risk factors to the



breakdown of marriages.

Limitations and Recommendation

Although this study provides interesting data regarding the relationship between impulsivity, dark triad moral disengagement, it ought to be mentioned that it is associated with several limitations. To begin with, small sample sizes can be considered the drawbacks of the present research. In supplementing the interval effects of impulsivity on marital dissolution, experimental studies would give us a well understanding regarding the long term effects of impulsivity on marital dissolution. Some methods can include expanding the sample to encompass a variety of demographic features, such as different ethnicities, socioeconomic status, and geographical location, to find out whether the effect of dark triad and connection is uniform across different cognitive distortion.

- Incorporate cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques in marriage counseling to help individuals recognize and challenge cognitive distortions affecting their relationships.
- Include elements on managing and setting realistic expectations in pre-marital and marital education programs.
- Introduce media literacy programs to help individuals disparagingly assess romantic depictions in films and television, reducing the development of unrealistic relationship anticipations.

Implication

The conclusions of the study have a lot of significant theoretical, clinical, social implications. The academic contribution that the study makes to the literature is that unreasonable expectations and cognitive distortions are considerable psychological predictors of marital dissolution because they are proven empirically. It enhances our understanding of how inner-based reasoning and belief systems can make a difference in the outcomes of relationship and also gives us a psychological lense in which we can study marital wastage.

Results are indicative of the clinical need to apply cognitive-behavioral methods to couples and marriage therapy. To reduce the risk of conflict and eventual separation, therapists, and counselors may apply these results to help couples recognize and dispute irrational expectations and irrational concepts during the first stages of the relationship. Such mental factors can be dealt with during pre-marital counseling programs to help the couples develop less rigid and less ideal expectations regarding marriage.

Finally, by addressing the cognitive and emotional mechanisms of marital difficulties, these conclusions can be used by policymakers and organizations that provide family welfare and mental health services to create focused interventions and support networks that support and improve family systems.

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