

OVER-IDEALIZATION, RELATIONAL UNCERTAINTY AND AUTONOMY-CONNECTEDNESS AS PREDICTORS OF MARITAL SATISFACTION IN NEWLY MARRIED MEN AND WOMEN: A MODERATED-MEDIATION ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The objective of the current study was to explore the mediating effect of relational uncertainty and moderating effect of autonomy-connectedness between over-idealization and marital satisfaction.

Design of the study: Correlational research design was utilized for the current study.

Place and duration of the study: The current study was conducted in Lahore, Pakistan at Centre for Clinical Psychology, University of the Punjab Lahore, from October, 2016 to August, 2017.

Sample and Method: A sample of 150 newly married participants comprising of men (72) and women (78), having age of 20 to 36 years ($M = 27.59$, $SD = 3.56$) were included. Data were collected from various community settings and workplaces of participants via Purposive Sampling. Moderated-mediation analysis was employed for this study.

Results and Conclusion: The findings revealed that relational uncertainty explains the moderating relation between over-idealization and marital satisfaction. In addition, it was evident that autonomy-connectedness moderating the association between relational uncertainty and marital satisfaction. The findings of the present research have important implications for couple counseling and marital therapy, suggesting that increasing autonomy-connectedness can protect relationships from idealization discrepancies and relational uncertainty.

Keywords: Over-Idealization; Relational Uncertainty; Autonomy-Connectedness, Marital Satisfaction; Romantic Relationships

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a normative, personal life experience and in which two people commit to live together, having varied needs and traits (Sassler & Lichter, 2020), with the resolution of achieving one's physical, psychological and emotional needs, and to gain pleasure (Afonso et al., 2021), and the success in marriage is governed by the couple's marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction is a person's emotive state of contentment regarding the happenings, expectations and interactions in one's marital life (Ward, et al., 2009). Literature indicates that almost 90% of world's population try to get married for once in their life (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). While Afonso et al., (2021) elaborated that not all couples experience a successful married life, as more than half of the marriages end up in divorce, separation or regrets in United States. Similarly, indigenous literature indicates that in Pakistan divorce and marital conflicts are also increasing rigorously (Hussnain, 2014).

Literature explained that the causes of marital discords can be inability to meet partner's expectations (sexual dissatisfaction), and need to seek freedom (Qavami et al., 2023), relational stress and emotional dysregulation (e.g., anger issues, sadness, confusion or regrets about one's partner or relationship). It was also evident from literature that un-realistic expectations regarding marital life and spousal relationship tend to increase the relational uncertainty, eventually leading to divorce or martial conflicts (Zhou et al., 2022). Research showed that marital relationship is significantly related to positive illusions (Wingens, 2022), romantic beliefs, impact of romantic beliefs and idealization (Star et al., 2022).

Over-Idealization is defined as an extremely optimistic phenomenon comprising of experiences of attraction, excessively thinking and imagining about the prospective spouse, and planning to spend time with them (Niehuis, et al., 2015). Literature suggests that over-idealization may make the relationship dynamics ambivalent and uncertain, by making the individuals more or less dependent on their relationship (Tomlinson, et al., 2013).

Knobloch and Solomon (2002) explained that the level of confidence (trust) or lack of confidence one has about his or her perception of connection and involvement in a relationship, is regarded as relational uncertainty. Significant research evidence highlights that during the initial years dating and married couples may experience idealization and illusion, but as the relationship

progresses disillusionment, discrepancy in idealization (or idealization bias) may happen. This occurs because when married couples beginning to deal the responsibilities of marital life then they become more inter-dependent, hence losing their desire to maintain a good (or ideal) image or impression. This leads to the susceptibility to compare one's courtship period (expectations and idealizations) with the current married life (Rigby & Cobb, 2022). Further Buehler et al. (2020) explained that if there is greater discrepancy between the courtship period and the actual marital life, then it also interacts with relational uncertainty and hence detrimental to the marital interaction.

In relational dynamics, autonomy-connectedness has been explained as the need and the capability to be self-sufficient and independent, and the desire to maintain intimacy and congenial relationship (Bekker & vanAssen, 2006). In another study Grundström et al. (2021) explained that for psychical and psychological well-being, a congenial marital relationship is significant. However, as the relationship advances, the newly married spouses tend to focus more on roles and responsibilities of the daily life rather than the joyful or pleasurable activities, and eventually become less responsive, attentive and sensitive towards each other (Rigby & Cobb, 2022). This shift in focus from leisure activities to chores and responsibilities, lead to the relational conflicts, declining the marital wellbeing, and hence increases the likelihood of marital dissolution, separation or divorce (Khezri et al., 2020).

Research evidence indicates that marital distress or dissatisfaction occur because of idealistic biases. During the courtship period, the individuals believe that their spouses are the exact replica (or image) of their ideal standards. But they may experience resentment, frustration or disappointment when they realize that their spouses aren't the exact image of their exaggerated and over-embellished ideals (Joel et al., 2023), on the contrary, spouses who feel over-idealized in a marital relationship attempt to create detachment with their partners, or may become hyper-dependent toward them. This dynamic may also create relational conflict and marital dis-satisfaction (Tomlinson et al., 2013).

The review of indigenous literature indicates that there is massive evidence about marital satisfaction in Pakistan, however the literature lacks the evidence regarding impact of over-idealization and autonomy-connectedness in wedded couples. Research indicates that in the early years of marriage, couples are likely to experience relational distress and deterioration of marital satisfaction, however, the literature lacks the evidence regarding the causal

factors of marital dis-satisfaction, and how to sustain a long-term healthy marital relationship. This research lacking leads to the need to identify the causal factors in Pakistani culture, where married individuals are subjected to the weight of handling the expectations of marital relationship, family, culture, and society as well.

Theoretical backgrounds have highlighted the need to ascertain the function of perceived over-idealization and its impact on relational uncertainty and marital satisfaction in marital relationship. This research was needed to lessen the divorce rates, as couples or spouses who experience relational uncertainty during the initial years of their marriage are likely to choose separation or divorce.

Furthermore, the literature review emphasized to recognize the impact of autonomy-connectedness (moderator) for the path of relational uncertainty and marital satisfaction, as recent trend of excessive glorification in romantic relationships has broadly increased in Pakistani culture and hence affecting the relational dynamics significantly. Therefore, it was suggested that autonomy-connectedness is one of the beneficial factors to enhance marital wellbeing.

Therefore the objective of this study was to study the contribution of relational uncertainty as a mediator, and autonomy-connectedness as a moderator for the pathway of over-idealization and marital satisfaction. For this study, the proposed hypothesis was that relational uncertainty will mediate the relationship between over-idealization and marital satisfaction, and autonomy-connectedness will moderate the relationship between the statistical pathway of relational uncertainty and marital satisfaction (Moderated-Mediation).

METHOD

Participants

Total 150 individuals including men (72) and women (78), between the age of 20-36 years ($M = 27.59$, $SD = 3.56$), were recruited for this study, utilizing purposive sampling. The marriage duration of participants was 3 months to 3 years (Kreider & Ellis, 2011) and those who were able to comprehend Urdu language, were recruited from the community and at their workplaces.

Individuals who were divorced, widow/widowed, had a second marriage, and those who reported any physical or psychological illness were excluded.

Measures

The following measures were used in the current study;

Demographic Information Sheet

The researcher developed a detailed demographic information form to identify the demographic correlates of the study participants including age, marriage duration, marriage-type (arranged or marriage of choice), education, and family system (joint or nuclear family).

Interpersonal Qualities Scale (Murray et al., 1996)

Interpersonal Qualities Scale was developed by Murray et al. (1996), a 20-item measure that identifies the perceptions about the individuals' positive qualities. In counter-balance order, the participants have to rate themselves, their partner/spouse and their ideal partner, on the given attributes using a 9-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 9 = completely characteristic of it). High scores on the self, partner and ideal partner idealization traits indicated the more positive views. The authors have advised to use the sub-scales of the measure for the analysis. Cronbach alpha co-efficients for each sub-scale were .67 for perceptions about self, .75 for perception about the spouse, and .70 for perceptions about the ideal partner (spouse). The scale was translated in Urdu language after seeking permission from the authors for its utilization and translation.

Relational Uncertainty Scale (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999)

Relational Uncertainty Scale developed by Knobloch and Solomon (1999) was utilized to assess the participants' uncertainty levels associated with self, partner and relationship. It has total 20 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = completely or almost completely uncertain to 6 = completely or almost completely certain). The Cronbach alpha co-efficients for each sub-scale were excellent, as evident by .89 (self-uncertainty), .93 (partner uncertainty), .95 (relationship uncertainty) and .96 (relational uncertainty) scale. Permission was sought from the original authors of the scale to administer the translated (Urdu) version (Farooq & Fatima, 2014) of Relational Uncertainty Scale.

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Autonomy-Connectedness Scale ACS-30 (Bekker & Assen, 2006)

Autonomy Connectedness Scale (ACS-30) developed by Bekker and Assen (2006) was used to measure the autonomy-connectedness of research participants. It consists of 30 statements, and three sub-scales i.e., self-awareness, sensitivity to others and capacity to manage new situations, rated on 5-point Likert scale (1 = disagree to 5 = agree). The sub-scales of ACS-30 showed satisfactory validity, as evident by Cronbach alpha coefficients .67, .79 and .62 for each sub-scale. Formal permission was sought by the researcher, from the scale's authors to use and translate the scale in Urdu language.

Marital Satisfaction Scale (Ayub, 2010)

For the current study, marital satisfaction of the research participants was measured using the Marital Satisfaction Scale (Ayub, 2010). The scale comprised of total 40-items and 12 domains, rated on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = Never to 3 = Always). The Cronbach alpha co-efficient was .81, indicated excellent validity. The scale was translated in Urdu language and used after seeking permission from the author of scale.

Procedure

The research was approved by the research committee i.e., Doctoral Degree Program Coordination Committee of University of the Punjab, Lahore. A formal permission was sought from all the authors of the scales for the utilization and translation of scales in Urdu language. Prior to data collection, the consent and approval was obtained from the administrators of institutions, and then the researcher introduced herself to the research participants. The research participants were recruited from the community and from their workplaces. Purposive Sampling was employed as per the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study. In the beginning, the response rate of the research participants was quite low, as it was challenging to find married participants with the marriage duration of 3 months to 3 years. The research participants were briefed about the consent, confidentiality, nature and purpose of the study. The researcher orally administered the research questionnaires, within 40 to 45 minutes, after taking the written and verbal informed consent from the research participants. For the

current study, the overall sample size comprised of 189 married individuals who were recruited from community and at their workplaces. 12 individuals declined to participate in the study because of their hectic work schedules, 7 individuals refused because their in-laws didn't allow them, 10 of them denied to participate without giving any reason, and 10 participants left the administration midway. Hence, the overall response rate for the current study was approximately 70%.

Scoring and Statistical Analysis

For Descriptive statistics SPSS 23 and for inferential statistics Process macro (Hayes, 2013) were applied.

RESULTS

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 150)

Demographics	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	-	-	27.71	3.59
Duration of Marriage (in Months)	-	-	22.63	10.64
Gender				
Men	72	48	-	-
Women	78	52	-	-
Education				
Primary	14	9.3	-	-
Secondary	28	18.7	-	-
Intermediate	5	3.3	-	-
Graduate	64	42.7	-	-

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Post-Graduate	39	26	-	-
Type of Marriage				
Arranged Marriage	116	77.3	-	-
Marriage of Choice	34	22.7	-	-
Family System				
Joint	147	73.5	-	-
Nuclear	53	25.5	-	-

Inferential Statistics

Process macro (Hayes, 2013) had been utilized to assess the moderation of autonomy-connectedness and mediation of relational uncertainty between the statistical pathway of over-idealization and marital satisfaction, via path of moderated-mediation, as SPSS-23 doesn't support the moderated-mediation statistics. The total score of relational uncertainty (mediator) and autonomy-connectedness (moderator) were used for this analysis. The models of moderated-mediation were run for perceptions about the spouse/partner and idealization discrepancy (the sub-scales of over-idealization), as these sub-scales significantly correlated and predicted the marital satisfaction. While the correlation and prediction for rest of the two sub-scales i.e., perceptions about the ideal spouse/partner and perceptions about the self (over-idealization sub-scales) were non-significant (See Table 2).

Table 2
Moderation of autonomy-connectedness on the indirect effects of perception about partner and marital satisfaction (N = 150)

	M (Relational Uncertainty)		Y (Marital Satisfaction)			
	B	SE	B	SE		
Predictors						
X ₂ (Perceptions about Spouse)	a	-7.27***	1.48	c'	1.42	1.12
M (Relational Uncertainty)	-	-	b ₁	-.03	.05	
V (Autonomy-Connectedness)	-	-	b ₂	.73***	.10	
M×V (Relational Uncertainty × Autonomy Connectedness)	-	-	b ₃	.01*	.01	
Constant	i ₁	30.16**	11.04	i ₂	63.44	7.14
Control Variables						
Arguments with Spouse		5.10*	2.14		.40	.75
Willingness for Marriage		2.13	1.54		6.64***	1.07
R ²		.24***			.52***	

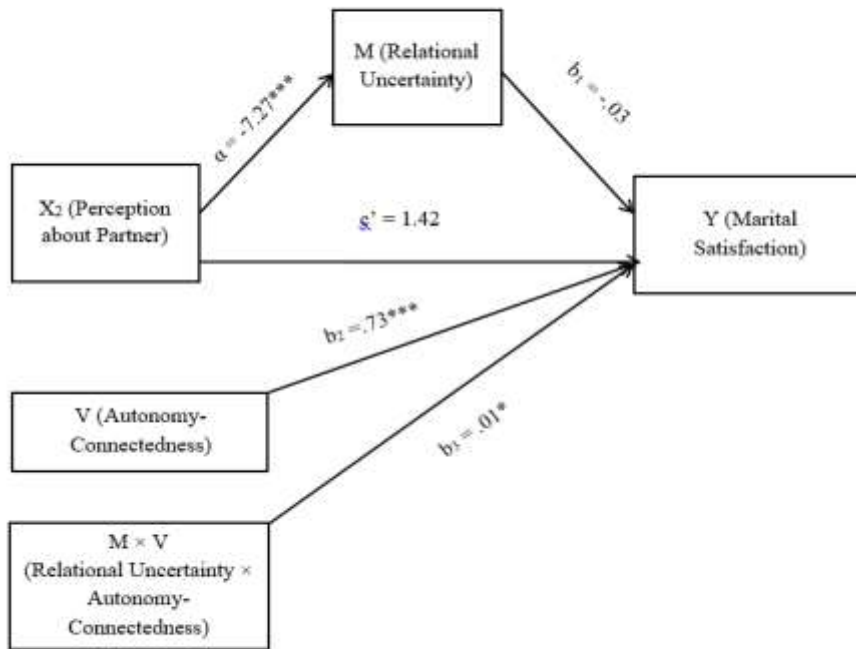
Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, B = Un-Standardized Coefficients, SE = Standard Error

The results of moderated-mediation analysis showed that the model was significant $F(3, 146) = 14.24, p < .001$ and contributing noteworthy variance of 24% ($R^2 = .24$), indicating that the relational uncertainty in married individuals was predicted by perception about partner (over-idealization-subscale). However, the moderated-mediation model indicated that marital satisfaction was not significantly predicted by perceptions about partner and relational uncertainty. This can be explained by the fact that when indirect effects are assessed as a function of moderator, then none of the indirect effects can be computed (Hayes,

2013). Nevertheless, the results showed that the mediating role of relational uncertainty for the path of perceptions about the spouse (partner) and marital satisfaction, was significant, as evident by Bootstrap Confidence Intervals (-.14, -.02).

It was evident from the analysis that marital satisfaction was also significantly predicted by autonomy-connectedness. The model was substantially remarkable $F(6, 143) = 26.74, p < .001$, causing variance of 52% ($R^2 = .52$) for marital satisfaction, indicating that interaction of relational uncertainty (M) and autonomy connectedness (V) i.e., $RU \times AC$ caused significantly evident moderation for the indirect pathway, for perceptions about spouse (partner) (X_1) and marital satisfaction (Y) (See Figure 1);

Figure 1



Note. Shows the conditional effects of Autonomy-Connectedness (V) on the indirect effects of perception about partner (X₂) on marital satisfaction (Y) through relational uncertainty (M)

Similarly, a second model of moderated-mediation was also evaluated to assess moderating effect of autonomy-connectedness for the indirect pathway for the fourth sub-scale of over-idealization (i.e., idealization discrepancy) and marital satisfaction via relational uncertainty (See Table 3).

Table 3
Moderating effects of autonomy-connectedness on the indirect effects of idealization discrepancy and marital satisfaction (N = 150)

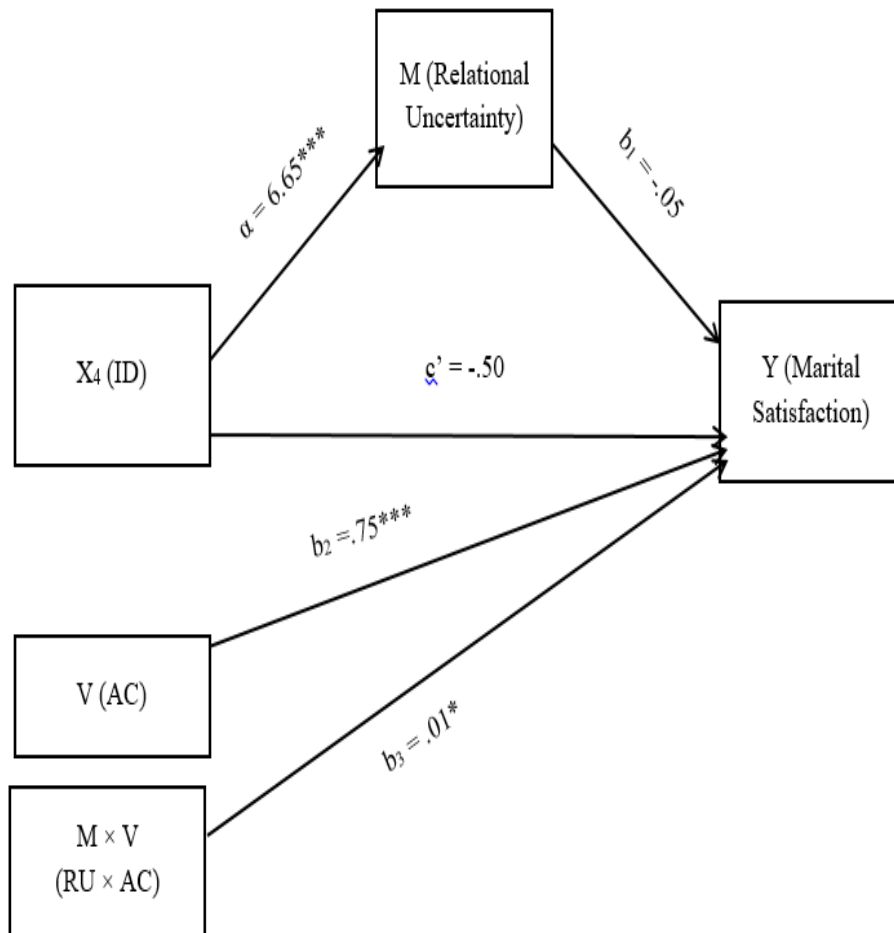
		M (Relational Uncertainty)		Y (Marital Satisfaction)		
		B	SE	B	SE	
Predictors						
X ₁ (Idealization Discrepancy)	α	6.65***	1.21	c'	-.50	.98
M (Relational Uncertainty)		-	-	b ₁	-.05	.05
V (Autonomy-Connectedness)		-	-	b ₂	.75***	.10
M×V (Relational Uncertainty × Autonomy-Connectedness)		-	-	b ₃	.01*	.01
Constant	i ₁	-21.47***	4.99	i ₂	72.36***	3.45
Control Variables						
Argument with Spouse		5.08	2.07		.08	1.26
Willingness for Marriage		1.74	1.56		6.92***	1.02
R ²		.27***			.51***	

*Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001, B = Un-Standardized Coefficients, SE = Standard Error*

Moderated-mediation analysis indicated that relational uncertainty among the married spouses was significantly predicted by idealization discrepancy (fourth dimension of over-idealization), after controlling the covariates like arguments with one's spouse and willingness for marriage. This model also showed considerable statistics $F(3, 146) = 14.90, p < .001$, causing variance of 27% ($R^2 = .27$) in relational uncertainty. It was evident that marital satisfaction was not significantly predicted by idealization discrepancy and relational uncertainty. This can again be explained by the same fact that when indirect effects are assessed as a function of moderator, then none of the indirect effects can be computed (Hayes, 2013). Furthermore, the Bootstrap Confidence Intervals (.02, .13) depicted that idealization discrepancy strongly predicted the marital satisfaction through the path of relational uncertainty, and hence showing substantial mediation.

It was also evident from the analysis that marital satisfaction was significantly predicted by autonomy-connectedness. Similarly, the statistical interactions of relational uncertainty (M) and autonomy-connectedness (V) i.e., $RU \times AC$ significantly predicted marital satisfaction, as the conditional effects of autonomy-connectedness for the indirect pathway of idealization discrepancy (X_4) to marital satisfaction (Y) were significantly noteworthy. After controlling impact of spousal arguments and willingness for marriage, the model was significantly noteworthy $F(6, 143) = 26.74, p < .001$, and contributing 51% ($R^2 = .51$) variance in marital satisfaction (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



Note. Shows the conditional effects of Autonomy-Connectedness (V) on the indirect effects of idealization discrepancy (X₄) on marital satisfaction (Y) through relational uncertainty (M)

DISCUSSION

For this research, it was intended to assess the mediation levels of relational uncertainty and moderation levels of autonomy-connectedness (Moderated-Mediation Analysis) for the statistical pathway of over-idealization and marital satisfaction. The analysis of the present research indicated that the research variables i.e., perceptions about spouse (partner), idealization discrepancy, relational uncertainty, autonomy-connectedness and marital satisfaction had a significant correlation among them.

Moderated-mediation analysis indicated that for the indirect path of perception about spouse (partner) and marital satisfaction, the conditional effects of autonomy-connectedness were significant, as evident by previous literature that positive self-perceptions in married or dating partners lead to the development of similarity bias between self-perception and partner's perception (Murray et al., 1996; Murray et al., 2002). Such similarity bias will help the individuals to have surety about their own emotions and feelings. This develops a sense of certainty and assurance about their spouse's love and hence nurturing the sense of mutual understanding and care. Hammonds et al. (2020) claimed that this sense of security will help the spouses to be more self-assured about their spouse's affection / love, and hence lowers the relational uncertainty levels, and resultantly improving the marital satisfaction among them (Milon et al., 2020). These findings supported the results of current research that in newly married individuals, positive perceptions about one's spouse/partner lessened the uncertainty about self, partner and relationship, and enhanced the marital wellbeing. Hence, there was reported to be significant mediation caused by relational uncertainty between partner's perceptions of research participants and their marital wellbeing.

Results also showed that the autonomy-connectedness was turned out to be a moderating factor between relational uncertainty and marital satisfaction, and hence enhanced marital wellbeing (Grundström et al., 2021). Previous literature indicates that cultural and relational dynamics of Pakistani society are relatively inter-dependent. The institution of marriage has been considered as the significant societal unit, and the termination of marriage is a societal stigma and disgrace, specifically for women. Consequently, in Pakistan, married individuals attempt to secure their marriage by having positive perceptions about their spouses (bias) and by reducing the idealization discrepancy (attempting to obtain

accurate information about their spouse). Therefore, perceptions about spouse (partner) and idealization discrepancy (sub-scales of over-idealization) meaningfully predicted marital wellbeing (satisfaction) in Pakistani couples.

Furthermore, it was also hypothesized that for the indirect pathway of idealization discrepancy and marital satisfaction (via relational uncertainty) there is likely to be a conditional effects of autonomy-connectedness. The study indicated that relational uncertainty was predicted by idealization discrepancy among spouses, and thus contributing to the reduction in marital satisfaction. Uzieblo et al. (2022) also claimed that accuracy (accurately perceiving one's spouse) or bias (discrepancy between idealization and perception about spouse's qualities) function simultaneously. Bias and accuracy are self-determining phenomenon, but can co-occur in an intimate relationship. Recent literature also showed contradictory findings reflecting that during major life-transitions, married individuals feel the need to precisely comprehend their close/intimate relationships (Maitlis, 2022). This explains the mediational effect of relational uncertainty between the pathway of idealization discrepancy and marital satisfaction, indicating that fantasy related inconsistencies in one's marital relationship leads to relational uncertainty, hence reducing the levels of marital wellbeing.

While autonomy-connectedness significantly buffers the impact of interpersonal ambiguity for marital wellbeing hence, enhances the marital contentment of newly married individuals, as supported by Karney and Bradbury (2020). A novel finding of the current study indicated that a sound stability and harmony between the needs for discreteness (independence) and the connectedness (belongingness) will facilitate the married men and women to maintain valuable close relations and interactions with their spouses and in-laws (Sassler & Lichter, 2020).

The implications of the current study state that it would be beneficial to rule out the degree of relational uncertainty at the initial stages of marital contact, so that relational coherence can be ensured through early intervention. The current outcomes can be utilized by the marriage counselors, clinical psychologists and family therapists to rule out the impact of perceived over-idealization, to minimize the idealization discrepancy and relational uncertainty among married couples in Pakistan, as it can be one of the principal causes of relationship termination or dis-satisfaction. This study will also help the

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clinicians to guide the married couples regarding the balance of autonomy and connectedness to sustain a healthy marital relationship.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the results that in newly married couples, the marital satisfaction can be improved when the individuals are more self-aware, sensitive towards others and have the capability to manage new situations. Research indicates that newly married individuals generally experience novel, new, different, critical and difficult situations or interpersonal conflicts that may eventually affect their marital wellbeing. Therefore, having high autonomy-connectedness and intimacy with one's spouse would likely to improve one's satisfaction in marital relationship, and such individuals would be better able to manage relational conflicts, uncertainty and ambiguities.

Limitations and Recommendations

Research has certain limitations, as the sample included newly married participants with marriage duration of 3 years, therefore the future researches should aim to include the participants with extended marriage duration. It is also recommended to conduct a longitudinal study to assess the change in relationship of current study's variables, as the marriage matures in Asian culture.

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