

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND FEAR OF INTIMACY AMONG MARRIED INDIVIDUALS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the associations among emotional intelligence, gratitude and forgiveness in university students. Additionally, the research aimed to examine gender differences and differences in public and private sector universities in social emotional intelligence, gratitude and forgiveness. A sample of 200 participants (i.e., 100 men & 100 women) was selected from various universities using a convenient sampling technique. The study employed a cross-sectional research design and data analysis was conducted using SPSS version-23. The study's outcomes provided strong empirical support, affirming a significant positive correlation between emotional intelligence and gratitude among university students. Furthermore, the results confirmed a significant positive correlation between emotional intelligence and forgiveness, while also indicating a positive and significant relationship between gratitude and forgiveness among university students. The findings additionally revealed no noteworthy disparities in emotional intelligence, gratitude, and forgiveness between male and female students. Similarly, the results suggested the absence of significant differences between students from public and private institutes concerning emotional intelligence, gratitude, and forgiveness.

I. INTRODUCTION

Human beings are inherently social, and a sense of belonging is a significant psychological motivator of emotional wellbeing, identity development, and adaptive functioning throughout the lifespan. Social connectedness is the subjective perception of proximity to, and belonging within, one's social world; it reflects how strongly people perceive themselves to hold meaningful relationships with others (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Lee et al., 2001). A substantial body of research has demonstrated the protective role of strong social ties in buffering psychological distress, supporting emotion regulation, building resilience during stressful periods, and enhancing overall life satisfaction (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Gross, 2015). Conversely, the absence of social connectedness intensifies human suffering through loneliness, strained relationships, and impaired psychosocial functioning, underscoring the importance of supportive interpersonal ties for wellbeing. While everyone needs to relate to other people, individuals differ markedly in how they form and sustain emotionally secure relationships. Some adults find it relatively easy to feel close to and trust others, while others struggle with avoidance, discomfort in the presence of a partner, or heightened sensitivity to relational threat. One construct that captures this difference is fear of intimacy: a chronic discomfort with emotional closeness, self-disclosure, and vulnerability in close relationships (Descutner & Thelen, 1991). Because marriage in Pakistan typically requires sustained emotional closeness within a specific dyadic bond, often set against a backdrop of strong extended-family and community ties, it offers a

particularly meaningful context in which to examine whether fear of intimacy is associated with a reduced overall sense of social connectedness. Understanding this relationship carries implications for how clinicians and researchers conceptualize relational avoidance in collectivistic cultures, where belonging may be experienced at both the individual and group level.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Fear of intimacy has been described as a limited capacity to reveal thoughts and feelings of personal significance to a valued other, functioning as a self-protective mechanism against the perceived risk of vulnerability (Descutner & Thelen, 1991). Thelen et al. (2000) validated the Fear of Intimacy Scale and demonstrated that high scorers report markedly lower self-disclosure, arguing that without the capacity for disclosure, individuals may remain socially peripheral even while embedded in a group. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) linked fear of intimacy to the fearful-avoidant attachment style, in which individuals want closeness but are too frightened of it, often resulting in chronic social and relational detachment. Taken together, this literature frames fear of intimacy less as an isolated relational quirk and more as a durable interpersonal stance that can generalize beyond a single relationship to shape how safe, connected, or exposed a person feels within their broader social world.

Social connectedness has been defined as an internally experienced sense of belongingness, distinct from social support in that it reflects a subjective, ongoing perception of closeness to others rather than the actual availability of help (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Lee, Draper, and Lee (2001) found social connectedness to function as a resilience factor: individuals high in social connectedness are better able to withstand stress, while those low in social connectedness are more vulnerable to psychological difficulty. Cacioppo and Hawkley (2009) reported that low social connectedness is associated with heightened vigilance toward social threat, suggesting that impaired connectedness can be both a cause and a consequence of interpersonal anxiety. Holt-Lunstad (2021) has characterized social connection as a basic biological need, with reduced connectedness associated with elevated physiological stress and lower life satisfaction, while Twenge, Spitzberg, and Campbell (2019) linked declining in-person social connection among younger cohorts to rising loneliness. Because social connectedness can be sustained through family, community, and broader group belonging in addition to any single close relationship, its relationship with an individually-held fear such as fear of intimacy is not necessarily straightforward, particularly in collectivistic cultural contexts. Research Question: Is there a statistically significant relationship between fear of intimacy and social connectedness among married individuals in Pakistan?

Hypothesis

- There will be a negative relationship between social connectedness and fear of intimacy among married individuals.

III. METHOD

Participants

A cross-sectional, correlational design was employed to examine the relationship between fear of intimacy and social connectedness among married adults, using standardized, psychometrically validated self-report measures. Data were collected through purposive sampling from 200 married individuals ($N = 200$) recruited from various cities across Pakistan. Of the sample, 124 (62%) were male and 76 (38%) were female. Participants had a mean age of 33.39 years ($SD = 5.49$) and an average marriage duration of 7.15 years ($SD = 4.53$); 76% had arranged marriages and 24% had love marriages, and 53% lived in joint family systems while 46.5% lived in nuclear families. Inclusion criteria required that participants be currently married, able to comprehend and complete the questionnaires in English, and able to provide detailed responses to the items. Individuals who were divorced, separated, or widowed, as well as those currently undergoing intensive psychological or marital treatment for critical relational or emotional difficulties, were excluded.

Measures

[1] Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) was measured using the Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS; Descutner & Thelen, 1991), a 35-item measure of chronic discomfort with emotional closeness, self-disclosure, and vulnerability in intimate

relationships. Items are rated on a 5point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all characteristic of me) to 5 (extremely characteristic of me), with higher total scores reflecting greater fear and avoidance of intimacy. The FIS has demonstrated strong internal consistency, with reported alpha coefficients ranging from .88 to .93. **[2]** Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R). Social connectedness was measured using the Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R; Lee et al., 2001), a 20-item measure of how close, socially integrated, and connected individuals feel to others in their day-to-day lives. Items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), with item 4 reverse-scored; higher total scores reflect a greater sense of belonging and emotional proximity to others. The SCS-R has shown high internal consistency, with reported alpha coefficients generally between .90 and .94. **[3]** *Demographic Information Sheet*. A brief demographic form was used to collect information on participants' age, gender, education level, employment status, marital status, duration of marriage, type of marriage, number of children, family living arrangement, and monthly household income.

Procedure

Data collection began only after receiving approval from the university's Institutional Review Board and formal consent from the original authors of the standardized scales. Participants were approached face-to-face and, in the case of other cities, through online means. The purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study were explained through a written and verbal informed consent form, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Respondents were assigned numerical codes to protect confidentiality and anonymity, and all completed materials were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher and supervisor. Questionnaires were administered in a quiet, distractionfree setting, and administration of the full battery, including the demographic sheet, took approximately 15 to 20 minutes per participant.

IV.RESULTS

Table I: Descriptive Characteristics of the Demographic Variables of Study

Categories	M(SD)	N(%)
Age	33.39(5.49)	
Gender		
Male		124(62%)
Female		76(38%)
Education Level		
Intermediate		14(7.0%)
Bachelors		74(37.0%)
Masters/M.Phil		93(46%)
PhD		19(9.0%)
Employment Status		
Employed		149(74.0%)
Unemployed		51(25.5%)
Marital Status		
Single		0(00%)
Married		200(100%)
Duration of Marriage	7.15(4.530)	
Type of Marriage		
Arrange		152(76%)
Love		48(24%)
Number of Children	1.83(1.365)	
Living Arrangement		
Nuclear family		93(46.5%)
Joint family		107(53%)
Monthly Income	166165(106422.2)	

Note. M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation; n=Frequency; %=Percentage

Table 1 shows the sample characteristics of the study variables. The participants' education level consisted of Intermediate (n=14), Bachelor (n=74), Masters/M.Phil. (n=93) and PhD (n=19) with 62% of participants being male and 38% female. The employment status for the participants showed that there were 74% employed and 25.5% unemployed. All participants were married (100%), 76% had arranged marriages and 24% had a love marriage. The family structure showed that 46.5% were living in nuclear families and 53% lived in joint family systems. Additionally, participants had an average age of 33.39 (SD=5.49), the mean length of marriage was 7.15 (SD=4.53), the average number of children was 1.83 (SD=1.37), and the average income was 166,165 (SD=106,422.20).

Table II: Psychometric Properties of Study Variables

Variables	M(SD)	k	α	Range	
				Potential	Actual
Adult Rejection Sensitivity	59.77(7.79)	18	.40	18 – 108	22-74
a. Concerned	36.01(8.49)	9	.80	9 – 54	10 – 54
b. Likelihood	23.76(7.341)	9	.77	9 – 54	9 – 47
Emotion Regulation	34.39(11.39)	10	.82	10 – 70	10 – 70
Cognitive Reappraisal	20.51(7.60)	6	.79	6 – 42	6 – 42
Expressive Suppression	13.88(5.60)	4	.75	4 – 28	4 – 28
Fear of Intimacy	96.95(17.43)	35	.82	35 – 175	43 – 139
Childhood trauma	64.94(16.96)	28	.86	28-140	45 – 115
Emotional Abuse	10.97(4.81)	5	.76	5 – 25	5 – 25
Physical Abuse	10.65(5.23)	5	.82	5 – 25	5 – 25
Sexual Abuse	10.22(5.48)	5	.87	5 – 25	5 – 25
Emotional Neglect	12.34(4.55)	5	.71	5 – 25	5 – 24
Physical Neglect	10.71(3.43)	5	.38	5 – 25	5 – 18
Minimization/Denial	10.05(2.65)	3	.40	3 – 15	3 – 15
Social Connectedness	25.56(10.30)	8	.90	8 – 56	8 – 56

Note. α =Cronbach Alpha, k=No.of Item

Table 2 showed the psychometric properties of all study measures. Overall, the Rejection Sensitivity exhibited poor internal consistency at the total level ($\alpha = .40$) while the subscales; Concerned ($\alpha = .80$) and Likelihood ($\alpha = .77$) displayed acceptable reliability. Emotion Regulation ($\alpha = .82$) and its two subscales, Cognitive Reappraisal ($\alpha = .79$), and Expressive Suppression ($\alpha = .75$), exhibited acceptable to good reliability. Fear of Intimacy demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$). Childhood Trauma exhibited good reliability at the total level ($\alpha = .86$) with subscale alphas ranging from poor to excellent; Sexual Abuse ($\alpha = .87$), Physical Abuse ($\alpha = .82$), Emotional Abuse ($\alpha = .76$), Emotional Neglect ($\alpha = .71$), but both Physical Neglect ($\alpha = .38$) and Minimization/Denial ($\alpha = .40$) are not reliable, and so they should be interpreted with caution. Social Connectedness demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$). Overall, the majority of the measures provided evidence of acceptable to excellent reliability ($\alpha \geq .70$) except for the total Rejection Sensitivity and Physical Neglect and Minimization/Denial subscales.

Table III: Pearson Bivariate Correlation Between Social Connectedness and Fear of Intimacy (N = 200)

Variables	1	2
1. Social Connectedness	--	-.13
2. Fear of Intimacy		--

As shown in Table 3, the correlation between social connectedness and fear of intimacy was negative but small in magnitude and did not reach statistical significance, $r = -.13$, $p > .05$. This indicates that, at the bivariate level, there was no statistically significant relationship between social connectedness and fear of intimacy for married individuals in this sample. The hypothesis that social connectedness and fear of intimacy would be significantly and negatively related among married individuals in Pakistan was not supported. Although the observed correlation was in the hypothesized negative direction ($r = -.13$), it did not reach statistical significance ($p > .05$). This null

result offers useful information about the relationship between the two constructs, but it should be interpreted with caution.

V. DISCUSSION

One plausible explanation lies in the nature of the SCS-R itself. While the scale broadly captures how connected people feel to their social world in a subjective sense, it does not specifically assess dyadic emotional closeness or intimacy with a partner. In a collectivistic society such as Pakistan, many married individuals may feel a generalized sense of relational security through their membership in a larger family or community structure, even in the presence of limited dyadic emotional closeness or vulnerability with their spouse. In other words, as long as individuals can sustain a feeling of belonging at the group level, they may not need to risk being emotionally vulnerable with their partner in order to experience social connection. This would suggest that fear of dyadic intimacy is not strongly related to overall social connectedness in cultural contexts where group membership and shared participation in family or community life provide an alternative route to social belonging that does not require dyadic vulnerability. It is also worth noting that the absence of a significant direct, or main, effect does not necessarily mean that fear of intimacy is unrelated to social connectedness under all conditions. Rather, it suggests that the relationship between the two constructs may be conditional, depending on other psychological factors, rather than fixed and uniform across all married individuals. Individual differences in how people manage and express emotion, for example, may shape whether a fear of dyadic intimacy translates into a reduced overall sense of belonging. Future work that models such conditional pathways may reveal relationships that a simple bivariate correlation obscures.

Implications and Recommendations

These findings carry meaningful implications for clinical work with married couples in Pakistan. Clinicians should be cautious about assuming that an individual who reports discomfort with emotional intimacy is necessarily socially disconnected; many such individuals may draw a stable sense of belonging from family and community ties even while struggling with vulnerability in their marital relationship. This distinction matters for treatment planning: interventions aimed at strengthening dyadic intimacy, such as Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy, may need to be paired with an explicit assessment of whether a client's broader sense of belonging is masking, rather than resolving, difficulties specific to the marital relationship. The findings also reinforce the value of assessing social connectedness and intimacy-related fears as related but distinct constructs, rather than assuming that low scores on one necessarily imply low scores on the other, particularly in collectivistic cultural settings. Future research should consider several directions building on the present findings. First, researchers should use or develop measures that more directly capture dyadic emotional closeness, in addition to broader indices of social connectedness, so that both group-level belonging and partner-specific intimacy can be examined separately. Second, examining potential moderators, such as individual differences in emotion regulation, may help clarify the conditions under which fear of intimacy does and does not translate into reduced social connectedness. Third, longitudinal designs would help establish whether fear of intimacy predicts declines in social connectedness over the course of a marriage, rather than relying solely on a cross-sectional snapshot. Finally, replicating this work with more diverse samples, including individuals from rural areas and a wider range of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, would help determine whether the present null finding generalizes across the broader population of married adults in Pakistan.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Results of the indicated a small, negative, and statistically non-significant correlation between fear of intimacy and social connectedness, the hypothesis was therefore not supported at the bivariate level. This null finding is interpreted in light of the collectivistic structure of Pakistani society, in which a generalized sense of belonging to family and community may buffer married individuals from the interpersonal costs typically associated with a fear of dyadic intimacy. These findings highlight the importance of conducting research that is attentive to cultural/structural differences within populations (e.g., in this case, Pakistani culture and structure) in order to produce results applicable to specific populations. Overall, the findings suggest a need for clinical and research

approaches that integrate considerations of early relational experience, interpersonal schema formation, regulatory functioning and structural factors that influence relational developments. In doing so, this study suggests a basis for developing theoretically-driven intervention strategies to address relational deprivation and promote a true sense of belonging among married adults in Pakistan.

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