

## Perceived Stress and Marital Satisfaction: The Mediating Effects of Coping Strategies

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### Abstract:

Marital satisfaction is necessary for the personal well-being of married individuals, their family's stability as well as for successful social functioning. Perceived stress in married individuals has risen due to the rising life demands and psychosocial pressures, and that is likely to influence the quality of relationships negatively. Using the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) framework, the current research studies the connection between perceived stress and marital satisfaction with special emphasis on the role of coping strategies. The quantitative and cross-sectional design has been used, and the data on married men and women have been gathered with the help of standardized tools. Structural equation modeling has been utilized to test both the direct and indirect relationships between the study variables.

The findings indicated that perceived stress was a strong predictor of maladaptive coping strategies and adaptive coping strategies. Specifically, Perceived Stress was a positive predictor of Emotion Focused Engagement and Problem Focused Engagement and a negative predictor of Emotion Focused Disengagement and Problem Focused Disengagement. Perceived Stress was negatively linked to Marital satisfaction.

Maladaptive coping strategies revealed a negative relationship with marital satisfaction and adaptive coping (problem focused engagement) exhibited a positive relationship. Mediation analysis established that perceived stress had an indirect relationship with marital satisfaction mediated by coping strategies, which implies that stress has direct and indirect effects on marital satisfaction through coping strategies.

The results facilitate the theoretical supposition that adaptive processes are the major tools that interconnect stress with marital functioning. The research also emphasizes the need to enhance the adaptive coping abilities with the aim of countering the negative impact of stress on marital relationship. The findings present some useful conclusions to implement in marital counseling, preventive programs, and family well-being programs to promote relationship strength and satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Perceived stress, coping strategies, marital satisfaction, vulnerability–stress–adaptation model, mediation

### 1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the most long-lasting and socially important interpersonal bonds, which can provide emotional security, lead to inter and intrapersonal growth and contribute towards the stability of the society. In all cultures, marriage is supposed to serve the psychological, emotional, and social needs of people and also create an environment that is supportive in ensuring personal development and well-being. Although it plays a central part in the life of man, having a good marital relationship is a complicated issue. Research has mostly shown a significant percentage of marriages as distressful, unsatisfactory and in most instances they break up in the long run (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). Such trends help emphasize the role of learning about psychological processes that influence marital satisfaction and determine protective factors that can be used to reinforce the quality of relationships.

Marital satisfaction is the subjective assessment of a person in terms of happiness, fulfillment and general quality of the marital relationship (Ziaee et al., 2014). It indicates the perceived reward to cost ratio felt in the relationship, which affects the emotional health, physical health and life satisfaction (Baumeister, 2006; Waite, 1995). Further, marital satisfaction influences the psychological growth, academic performance, and social adaptation of children (Cummings and Davies, 2010; Hetherington and Kelly, 2002). Stable marriages at the societal level also mean less crime, better economic stability and better community integration (Dush et al., 2008). The implications of these broad dimensions highlight the importance of a systematic study of the determinants of marital satisfaction.

Personal compatibility or emotional intimacy is not the only cause of marital satisfaction which should occur, but the modern relationship research has identified that marital satisfaction is developed in a consequence of the dynamic relationship between individual traits, environmental stressors and adaptation mechanisms. The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model was suggested by Karney and Bradbury (1995) to describe the combined effect of persistent vulnerabilities (e.g. personality traits), stressful life situations and adaptive coping mechanisms on the quality and stability of marital relationships over time. This model states that the influence of individual vulnerabilities and environmental stressors on marital satisfaction is mostly achieved through adaptive behavior and cognitive mechanisms. This theoretical model has helped to carry out vast empirical studies and is considered to be a useful theoretical perspective to understand the complexity of marital functioning (Karney and Bradbury, 2020).

Perceived stress is one of the strongest contextual variables that influence marital satisfaction. Perceived stress denotes the degree to which the individuals view the conditions in their lives as unpredictable, overwhelming, or hard to control (Cohen et al., 1983; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In comparison to objective stressors, perceived stress prompts subjective appraisal processes that influence emotional reactions and behavioural control. People who have gone through similar life events might have strikingly varied levels of stresses based on their personality, coping strategies, and available social support. It has been demonstrated that elevated perceived stress is always linked to emotional strain, poor communication, poor relationship satisfaction, and increased conflict in intimate relationships (Bodenmann et al., 2007; Ledermann et al., 2010; Leidy et al., 2009). A series of studies have found a negative relationship between perceived stress and marital satisfaction, which suggests that the higher the perceived stress of an individual, the lower the satisfaction level with their marriage (Mehra et al., 2019; Isik and Kaya, 2022). Such a stressful environment can affect the emotional availability of partners, their ability to solve problems, and their responsiveness to one another, which negatively affects the quality of relationships.

Nonetheless, stress is not a decisive factor which leads to marital dissatisfaction. The differences between couples in coping with the stressful situations is significant, which implies that adaptive processes are an important mediating factor. Coping strategies can be described as cognitive and behavioral attempts that people make to deal with the internal and external demands that are demanding or straining their resources (Folkman, 2013). Coping behaviors can be broadly divided into approach-oriented strategies, which is the active approach to stressors in terms of problem-solving, emotional expression, and avoidance-oriented strategies, such as, lack of engagement and the denial or rejection of emotions (Graziano and Eisenberg, 1997; Roberts and Mroczek, 2013). It has been found that adaptive coping strategies are related to superior psychological adaptation, whereas avoidant coping is related to higher levels of distress and poor interpersonal relationships (Jalbrzikowski et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2010).

Coping styles in marital relationships affect the way partners resolve conflict, express themselves when they are under pressure and control their ability to stay emotionally connected. Couples that have positive coping styles, including, open communication and sharing problems together are more likely to report increased marital satisfaction and relationship stability (Bodenmann and Cina, 2006; Alexander, 2008). Maladaptive coping styles, such as blame, withdrawal, and emotional avoidance, on the other hand, are linked to higher levels of marital dissatisfaction and relational strain (Berghuis and Stanton, 2002; Kraemer et al., 2011). Such results indicate that coping strategies are an important process by which stress influences outcome in relationships.

There is also a good relationship between perceived stress and coping strategies. Increase in perceived stress is likely to lead to more maladaptive ways of coping where lower stress levels were related to more adaptive ways of coping (Kardum et al., 2001; Crockett et al., 2007). When people are under high levels of stress, they can be

exposed to cognitive overload, emotional breakdown, and diminished problem-solving skills and this prevents them making use of productive coping methods (Compas et al., 2001; Moos and Holahan, 2003). Therefore, perceived stress does not only have a direct influence on marital satisfaction but indirectly through coping behavior.

Although there has been a lot of research relating to the perceptions of stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction on their own, there is a scarcity of research that has shaped their interactions in a single theoretical framework. Numerous studies have been conducted on bivariate relationships without paying sufficient attention to mediating mechanisms that clarify how stress is converted to relational effects. The VSA model has focused on the significance of adaptive processes acting as intermediations between stressors and the quality of relationships (Karney and Bradbury, 1995). Nonetheless, the empirical studies that test the mediation pathways between perceived stress and coping styles are scarce especially in non-Western and multicultural settings. In addition to this, a considerable portion of the literature has focused on general stress as opposed to subjective stress appraisal, which could provide more accurate information on how people become vulnerable and resilient.

Knowledge of the mediation of coping strategies between perceived stress and marital satisfaction has significant practical implications. When coping behaviors either partially or completely account for the influence of stress on marital outcomes, then interventions can be developed to improve adaptive coping capabilities and shield the couples against the adverse effects of stress. This kind of intervention can enhance emotional regulation, work on communication patterns, and develop problem-solving in marital relationships. Furthermore, the recognition of the particular coping dimensions which have the most potent mediating effect can inform the development of the direct therapeutic intervention and preventive measures among couples, which are at risk of relational distress.

The current research intends to fill this gap by analyzing the mediating effect of coping strategies in the relationship between perceived stress and marital satisfaction advancing the conceptual framework of VSA model. This study attempts to offer a deeper explanation of psychological processes that lead to marital well-being by incorporating perceived stress, coping dimensions and marital satisfaction into a structural model. The results will be expected to assist in the refinement of theories and practice in the field of marital and family psychology.

## **2. Literature Review**

Literature on marital satisfaction reflects on the multifaceted nature of intimate relationships and suggests that the complex relationship between an individual's traits, environmental pressure and coping via adaptive processes is deeply interwoven. Psychologists, sociologists, and family researchers have attempted to understand what makes marital relationships better or worse regardless of their stability or lack thereof and their long-term satisfaction.

The best-known theoretical framework that steered this study is the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) framework, which is a product of both the chronic personal vulnerabilities and external stressors and coping strategies that lead to differences in the marital outcome (Karney and Bradbury, 1995). In this context, the perceived stress and coping strategies are the key mechanisms that can determine how couples manage daily life challenges and maintain the relational well-being.

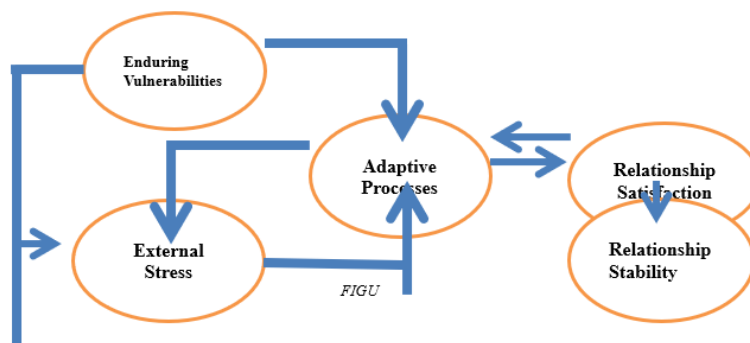
### **2.1 Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation Model of Marriage**

The VSA model is a complex study explicating the changing nature of marital satisfaction over time by connecting the predispositions of the individuals with a situational stressor and the process of adapting to stressful situations. Enduring vulnerabilities according to Karney and Bradbury (1995) are the comparatively constant personal characteristics including personality traits, attachment pattern and past life experiences. These weaknesses determine the perceptions and reactions that couples have to stressors they face in marriage. Fatal events consist of acute and long-lasting demands, whereas stressors include financial issues, workload, medical issues, and family issues. Adaptive processes entail how the partners manage emotions, problems, communicate, and support one another when encountering difficulties.

The model hypothesizes that neither vulnerabilities nor stress directly dictate outcomes of marital consequences, but they relay them to adaptive behavior. The couples with positive coping behavior and effective communication

tend to keep the relationship satisfaction even in the unfavorable conditions. On the other hand, maladaptive coping and dysfunctional interaction patterns are likely to amplify the adverse consequences of stress and individual susceptibility and result in marital dissatisfaction and instability. This conceptualization has been supported by longitudinal research that has proven that the adaptive processes of couples are strong predictors of change in marital quality over time (Karney and Bradbury, 1995; Karney and Bradbury, 2020).

One significant input of the VSA model is that it stressed dynamic interaction as opposed to its predictors which are static. The concept of marital satisfaction is considered a dynamic one, which depends on the continuous interactions between the couple and the surrounding world. This school of thought emphasizes the fact that mediating and moderating pathways should be studied and not only direct associations should be used. In this model, coping strategies are adaptive processes that buffer the effect or enhance the effect of perceived stress on marital satisfaction.



RE 1 – Theoretical Model (VSA Model)

## 2.2 Marital Satisfaction: Conceptual Foundations and Outcomes

Marital satisfaction is the general judgment of a person on the state of his/her marital relationship in terms of emotional proximity, quality of communication, call to resolve conflicts, mutual support, and perceived satisfaction (Ziaee et al., 2014). It is an opinion that is formed based on expectation, cultural norms and personal values. The social exchange views have suggested that individuals evaluate their associations in terms of perceived advantages and expenses in attempts to maximise gains and minimize dissatisfaction (Baumeister, 2006). Marital satisfaction tends to go up when there is a higher perception of benefits compared to the perception of costs.

The importance of marital satisfaction has always been proven by factual evidence of its importance on both psychological and physical well-being. People who are in fulfilling marriages are happier, have lower levels of stress, and better emotional control (Be et al., 2013; Robles et al., 2014). Longitudinal research suggests that marital satisfaction is a contributor to longevity and decreased mortality rate (Whisman et al., 2018). In addition to personal performance, marital satisfaction is associated to family performance and child development. Emotional stability, academic achievement, and social competency are more likely to be seen in children who had been raised in supportive family settings than those who have been exposed to marital conflict (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). At the societal level, marital stability leads to societal cohesion and stability in the economy (Dush et al., 2008).

Marital satisfaction is an ephemeral thing in spite of its significance. The studies also reveal that the levels of satisfaction can be lower in the initial years of marriage because of the difficulty in adjusting and the role exchange, and that these levels can be stabilized or even improve gradually as the couples learn to cope with life's situations (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Rolins & Feldman, 1970). The cultural context also manipulates marital expectations and stress experiences, as well as in collectivist cultures where family pressures and social norms affect the dynamics of relationships (Garg et al., 2023). Such differences highlight the necessity to study psychological mechanisms, which enable resilience in marital relationships.

### **2.3 Perceived Stress and Marital Satisfaction**

Stress has come out as a vital issue in the realms of marital functioning. Perceived stress can be defined as subjective assessment of the perception of individuals on the seeming overwhelmingness or helplessness of their life situations (Cohen et al., 1983; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This appraisal approach perspective acknowledges the fact that different people can perceive the same situation in different ways depending on the available resources, coping ability, and emotional control.

Numerous research studies have shown that there is a negative link between stress and marital satisfaction. High stress can lower emotional availability, communication and raise irritability levels hence compromising on the quality of the marital relationship (Bodenmann et al., 2007; Ledermann et al., 2010). Longitudinal studies indicate chronic exposure to stress as one of the causes of gradual loss of marital satisfaction and heightened conflict (Leidy et al., 2009). Empirical research has also established negative associations between perceived stress and marital satisfaction in a wide range of people (Mehrra et al., 2019; Isik & Kaya, 2022).

Marriages can be impacted through stressful environments in various ways. Financial strain, workload and health difficulties are external forces that may decrease any chance of positive interaction and emotional bonding between the couples. Cognitive overload and emotional exhaustion can diminish the ability of people to participate in the positive problem-solving process which results in avoidance, withdrawal, or hostility (Cohan and Bradbury, 1997; Conger et al., 1999). Nevertheless, in some studies, the effects are not reported as negative. There is even some evidence that moderate stress levels when appropriately handled can enhance relationships and bring about mutual support (Gritz et al., 1990; Ward & Spitze, 1998). These ambivalent results underline the significance of the adaptive processes which condition the effect of stress on marital outcomes.

### **2.4 Coping Strategies and Marital Satisfaction**

Coping strategies are the behavioral and mental answers to the stressful situations people employ in order to cope with them (Folkman, 2013). Coping is theorized as problem-focused (e.g., planning, active coping), emotion-focused (e.g., emotional support, positive reframing) and avoidant (e.g., denial, self-blame, disengagement) strategies (Carver, 1997). Such dimensions of coping vary in their effectiveness and results of psychological adjustment.

It has repeatedly been evidenced in research that individuals who practice adaptive coping strategies tend to have healthier relationships. Those that practice collaborative problem solving, open communication, and emotional expression have marital satisfaction and stability (Bodenmann and Cina, 2006; Alexander, 2008; Majhi, 2016). Positive coping leads to mutual understanding, resolving of conflicts and emotional closeness which further enhance relationships.

On the other hand, maladaptive coping behavior is associated to marital dissatisfaction and relation distress. Avoidance-oriented behavior can lead to diminished emotional distress but can frequently inhibit successful resolution of the underlying problems - causing conflict to accumulate (Berghuis & Stanton, 2002). There is evidence that the dependence on self-accusation, withdrawal, and emotional repression anticipates a lower communication pattern and a lower level of marital satisfaction (Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004). It has also been noted that gender differences in coping also play a role, implying that coping styles of partners do not act independently of each other but do interact in a manner that has ramifications on the quality of the relationships (Berghuis & Stanton, 2002).

### **2.5 Perceived Stress and Coping Strategies**

Perceived stress and coping strategies have a mutually dynamic relationship. High stress states can impair cognitive resources such that the individuals do not have an ability to utilize adaptive coping behaviors (Compas et al., 2001; Moos & Holahan, 2003). As it has been shown empirically, it is those who have greater perceived stress that tend to engage in avoidant coping behaviors, such as denial, emotional disengagement, and self-blame (Guruprakash et al., 2018). Contrary to that, people who engage in problem-centered coping are less likely to have increased stress levels and they tend to have better psychological adaptation (Kumanova & Karastoyanov, 2013).

Longitudinal researches also indicate that the exposure to stress influences patterns of coping in the long run. Wosidlo and Segrin (2013) discovered that the couples with greater family and occupational stress levels used lesser problem-solving strategies, which consequently led to lower levels of marital satisfaction. These results endorse the idea that perceived stress has a greater impact on more than just the emotional well-being but also the behavioral adaptation in intimate relationships.

## **2.6 Coping as a Mediator Between Stress and Marital Satisfaction**

A number of researchers have suggested the mediation of coping strategies between stress and marital satisfaction. The adaptive processes are the process whereby the vulnerabilities and stressors in the VSA model have their impact on marital outcomes (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Buffering effects of effective coping have been supported by empirical studies, which have demonstrated that constructive coping has a reduced adverse effect on marital satisfaction due to the negative effect of economic stress and other negative life situations (Conger et al., 1999; Cohan & Bradbury, 1997).

This process of mediation is further explained by cognitive and behavioral pathways. It can negatively affect emotional control and decision-making and more importantly cause dependence on maladaptive coping responses that ultimately disrupt the patterns of communication and lower relational satisfaction (Neff & Karney, 2004; Graham & Conoley, 2006). On the other hand, adaptive coping can also increase resilience when it fosters joint problem-solving and emotional support and thus maintain the quality of relationships despite external pressures.

Although there is increased evidence, very limited empirical studies have been conducted on mediation models employing structural equation modeling that concurrently examine perceived stress, coping styles, and satisfaction with marital life. This gap restricts the knowledge of the relative strength and directionality of indirect pathways. Further, cultural differences in appraisal and coping mechanisms have not been extensively studied and so, there is the need to investigate this aspect in diverse groups.

## **2.7 Summary and Research Direction**

The literature reviewed highlights the focal importance of perceived stress and coping strategies to determine marital satisfaction. Although the direct association between these variables is well established, it is not clearly known how these associations take place. The VSA model offers an effective theory that can be used to understand coping strategies as the mediators between stress and marital outcomes. The given research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on marital resilience and vulnerability processes by incorporating these variables into one structural framework.

## **3. Methodology**

The quantitative research design followed in the current study will be used to determine the levels of relationship between perceived stress and coping strategies and marital satisfaction with special attention to mediation effects of coping strategies. The study has its theoretical basis in the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) framework that explains the process of adaptation as the mechanism by which stress affects the outcomes of relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). The survey method adopted was a structured approach that allowed the collection of standardized data among married individuals so that statistical modeling and testing of hypotheses that were based on multivariate methods could be applied.

### **3.1 Research Design**

The correlational design that was employed to study the relationship between the study variables was cross-sectional. The design enables it to test the relationship among psychological constructs at a single time and is frequently employed in marital and behavioral studies when it is not possible to experimentally manipulate a study. The objective of the study was to test both direct and indirect mediating paths between perceived stress and marital satisfaction by employing strategies of coping. The mediation model was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) and was used to estimate the standardized regression pathways among variables.

### **3.2 Participants and Sampling**

The respondents were married men and women living in urban and semi-urban areas. Accessibility and feasibility issues led to the selection and application of the purposive sampling method. The participants had to be legally married and living with their spouse to be included in the study. The participants ranged from 1 year of being married to 20 years of being married. They were classified into four groups; 1-4 years, 5-10 years, 11-14 years, and 15-20 years of marriage. This classification was grounded on the fact that previous studies have shown that marital satisfaction can change through various stages of married life, and initial years can be characterized by the challenging aspects of adjustment, and later years with the stabilization tendencies (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Rolins & Feldman, 1970; Dutt, 2015).

The calculation of the sample size was informed by the statistical principles of Cohen in order to have sufficient power to determine medium-large effect sizes in multivariate analysis. In SEM, a sufficient sample size is vital to stabilize the model and estimating any parameter. The participants had been recruited using community networks, institutions, and social contacts. All subjects gave their informed consent before taking part in the study, and were guaranteed of confidentiality and voluntary participation and their ability to withdraw their participation at any stage in the investigation.

### **3.3 Tests and Measurement Tools**

Marital satisfaction, perceived stress and coping strategies were assessed using three standardized measures. The instruments used in the research all have good psychometric properties as they have been used in studies conducted previously on similar samples, and they have been chosen based upon their reliability and validity and their applicability to the study's objectives.

#### **3.3.1 Marital Satisfaction**

The Enrich Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS) created by Fowers and Olson (1993) was used to measure marital satisfaction. This scale has 15 items, which evaluate perceived marital satisfaction. The respondents answer on a five-point Likert scale with statements ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The EMS includes statements that measure communication, emotional closeness, conflict resolution, and mutual understanding. Internal consistency reliability has been previously determined to be high on the scale (0.86), which suggests that the scale can be used to measure marital satisfaction. High scores on this test indicate high perceived marital satisfaction. The EMS was chosen because it covers all the areas of relational functioning and is widely used in studies of marital satisfaction. It has a brief design that minimizes respondent demand without compromising the psychometric properties, and it is suitable in survey research.

#### **3.3.2 Perceived Stress**

Perceived stress was measured with the help of Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Cohen et al. (1988). The PSS is a 10-item self-report tool that is aimed at determining how individuals perceive their lives to be unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overwhelming. The rating of responses is done on a five-point Likert scale ranging from never to very often. The scale measures subjective evaluation of stress as opposed to objective events in life, which is in line with transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The PSS has shown a good internal consistency reliability (0.84) and has been extensively tested successfully on varied samples. Increased scores are proxies of increased perceived stress. The scale was also chosen because it conceptually fits well with the research due to its solid psychometric properties.

#### **3.3.3 Coping Strategies**

The Brief COPE (Brief Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory) developed by Charles S. Carver (1997) was used to measure coping strategies. The Brief COPE has 28 items that evaluate a wide spectrum of coping strategies. The items are scaled on a four-point Likert scale ranging from never to almost always. The instrument provides scores of the following subscales - problem-focused engagement, problem-focused disengagement, emotion -focused engagement and emotion -focused disengagement.

The Brief COPE inventory has also shown high internal reliability (0.86) and has appeared extensively in research on stress and coping. Its multidimensional design permits one to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive coping patterns and is therefore applicable in mediation studies and therefore is being used in this study.

### **3.4 Procedure of the Investigation**

Individualized self-administered questionnaires were used for data collection. The participants were given brief instructions regarding the aim of the study and their answers were guaranteed to be confidential and anonymous. The time of completion was about 20-25 minutes.

The subjects were first provided with a demographic information form where they had to fill in their age, sex, length of marriage, education, and occupation. Thereafter, they filled out the Perceived Stress Scale, the Brief COPE inventory, which was followed by the Enrich Marital Satisfaction Scale. In order to reduce the bias of responses, the sequence of instruments was standardized among the respondents. All questionnaires filled in were filtered out to detect missing data and inconsistencies in response before the analysis.

Ethics was dealt with strictly. The respondents were given the freedom to join the study and were made aware of their free will to pull out any time without being penalized. No information that could identify the participants was gathered, and confidentiality and the protection of the data was ensured.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (version 24.0) and structural equation modeling software (Amos) were used in the analysis of data. Descriptive statistics were also calculated to focus on the central tendencies, variability and distributional qualities of the variables. The Pearson correlation analysis was used to measure bivariate relationships between perceived stress, coping strategies and marital satisfaction.

In order to assess the predictive relationships between perceived stress and dimensions of coping and the impact of coping strategies on marital satisfaction, the multiple regression analysis was employed. The hypothesized mediation model was then tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM offers the capability to estimate a number of regression pathways at the same time and provides ways of evaluating the overall model fit through the Chi-square, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA).

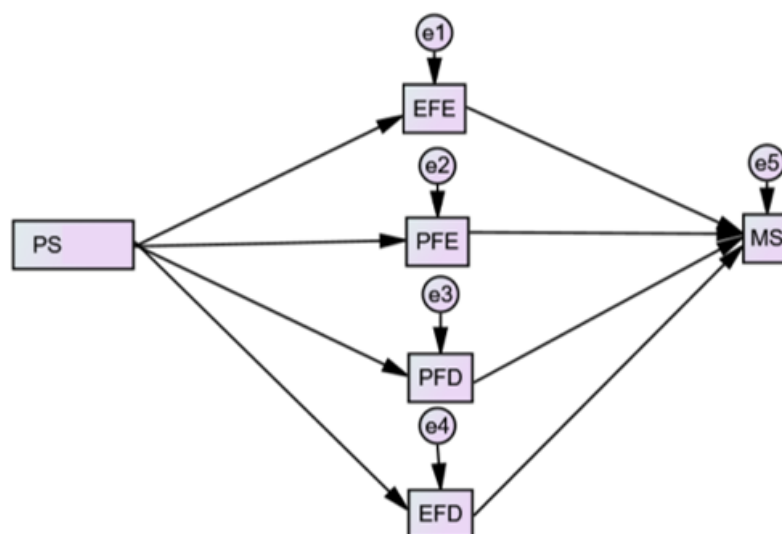
Bootstrapping methods were used to determine the importance of indirect effects to give strong estimates of mediation routes. The interpretation of standardized regression coefficients was aimed at determining the strength and direction of relationships between variables.

### **3.6 Validity and Reliability Considerations**

The measurement instruments used in this study were standardized measures. They were reliable, as shown by their internal consistency coefficients of several studies on large samples. Construct validity was achieved by use of well-established scales which were based on established theoretical frameworks. Comprehensive marital functioning, stress appraisal and coping behaviors have ensured content validity.

In order to minimize common method bias, the researchers assured the participants of anonymity, compelling them to be truthful. Standardized instructions and the same administration procedures were upheld in order to reduce measurement error.





**FIGURE 2 – Conceptual Framework of the Present Study**

Note: PS: Perceived Stress; EFE: Emotion Focused Engagement; PFE: Problem Focused Engagement; EFD: Emotion Focused Disengagement; EFD: Problem Focused Disengagement; MS: Marital Satisfaction

#### 4. Results

The main aim of the current research was to test both the direct and indirect associations between perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction with special consideration given to the mediating role of coping strategies. The hypothesized model was tested by using structural equation modeling (SEM). In this section, the descriptive statistics, regression path estimates, model fit indices, and mediation analysis results are presented.

##### 4.1 Preliminary Analysis

The data were screened with regards to completeness, normality and multicollinearity before the structural modeling was conducted. Descriptive statistics showed that all the observed variables have acceptable distributional properties. The results of the correlation analysis indicated that there is a strong relationship between perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction, which validates the appropriateness of multivariate modeling.

There were strong positive correlations between perceived stress and maladaptive dimensions of coping (disengagement) and negative correlations between perceived stress and adaptive coping strategies (engagement), which implied that stress levels showed strong positive relationships with maladaptive coping (disengagement) and a negative relationship with adaptive coping (engagement). Marital satisfaction had negative relationships with perceived stress and maladaptive coping patterns (disengagement) which implied that those who had higher stress levels and poor coping patterns reported lower levels of satisfaction in marital relationships. Marital satisfaction had a positive relationship with adaptive coping patterns (engagement) which implied that those who have adaptive coping patterns (engagement) reported higher levels of satisfaction in marital relationships.

##### 4.2 Structural Model Estimation

Maximum likelihood estimation was used to estimate the hypothesized mediation model. The model incorporated perceived stress as the exogenous predictor, the four coping strategies as mediators and marital satisfaction as the endogenous outcome variable. Theoretical assumptions, which arose on the basis of the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model, were chosen as regression paths (Karney and Bradbury, 1995).

Table 1. Regression Weights for Structural Paths

| Path      | Estimate | S.E.  | Standardized estimate | p-value |
|-----------|----------|-------|-----------------------|---------|
| PFD ← PS  | 0.456    | 0.015 | 0.869                 | ***     |
| EFE ← PS  | -0.290   | 0.018 | -0.678                | ***     |
| PFE ← PS  | -0.163   | 0.022 | -0.397                | ***     |
| EFD ← PS  | 0.225    | 0.024 | 0.434                 | ***     |
| EFD ← PFD | 0.506    | 0.046 | 0.513                 | ***     |
| MS ← EFE  | 0.207    | 0.151 | 0.045                 | 0.171   |
| MS ← PFE  | 0.487    | 0.126 | 0.103                 | ***     |
| MS ← PFD  | -0.524   | 0.217 | -0.141                | 0.016   |
| MS ← EFD  | -0.887   | 0.229 | -0.236                | ***     |
| MS ← PS   | -0.947   | 0.119 | -0.485                | ***     |

\* $p < .001$

#### 4.2.1 Direct Effects

The regression coefficients showed that perceived stress was a significant predictor of various dimensions of coping. Perceived stress was significantly positively related to problem-focused disengagement ( $b = 0.869$ ) which showed that the more one experienced stress the more dysfunctional the coping response. In the same manner, emotion-focused disengagement was a positive predictor of perceived stress ( $b = 0.434$ ). Perceived stress, in contrast, was negatively related to emotion-focused engagement ( $b = 0.678$ ) and problem-focused engagement ( $b = 0.397$ ).

Along with the indirect routes, perceived stress had a considerable direct negative impact on marital satisfaction ( $b = 0.485$ ), indicating that people experiencing more perceived stress levels reported lower levels of satisfaction in their marital relationships. This result is consistent with the prior studies that showed that there was an inverse relationship between stress and marital quality (Bodenmann et al., 2007; Isik & Kaya, 2022).

Problem-focused engagement had a positive relationship with marital satisfaction ( $b = 0.103$ ) among the coping dimensions indicating that active problem-focused coping styles could lead to improved relationships. On the other hand, problem-focused disengagement ( $b = 0.141$ ) and emotion-focused disengagement ( $b = 0.236$ ) had negative relationships with satisfaction in marital relationships, which means that maladaptive coping mechanisms do not lead to satisfaction in marital relationships. Emotion focused engagement showed no significant interaction with marital satisfaction which means that not every emotion focused coping strategy has a direct impact on marital outcomes.

Moreover, problem-focused disengagement and emotion-focused disengagement were found to have a significant positive relationship ( $b = 0.513$ ), which shows that those individuals who cope through problem-focused disengagement are more likely to also have emotion-focused disengagement as a coping behavior.

#### 4.2.2 Model Fit Evaluation

Several fit indices were used to test overall model fit. The Chi-square value exceeded the significance level and this is typical when the sample size is large and the model is complicated. Chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio (CMIN/DF = 3.244) was within the acceptable range, which indicated an acceptable model fit.

The goodness-of-fit Index (GFI = 0.983) and the adjusted goodness-of-fit Index (AGFI = 0.929) are above the desired values indicating good model aptness. Incremental fit indices such as Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.993), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI= 0.980), Normed Fit Index (NFI= 0.991) and Incremental Fit Index (IFI= 0.994) all passed the traditional test of 0.90, which indicates a good fit of the model.

Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.087) was within the acceptable-to-marginal range and, the confidence intervals showed that there was reasonable approximation of the population model. Collectively, the fit measures show that the suggested structural model gives a satisfactory explanation of the data at hand.

**Table 3. Goodness-of-Fit Statistics for the Structural Model**

| Fit Index               | Value  |
|-------------------------|--------|
| Chi-square (CMIN)       | 16.221 |
| Degrees of Freedom (DF) | 5      |
| p-value                 | 0.006  |
| CMIN / DF               | 3.244  |
| RMR                     | 0.549  |
| GFI                     | 0.983  |
| AGFI                    | 0.929  |
| PGFI                    | 0.234  |
| NFI                     | 0.991  |
| RFI                     | 0.972  |
| IFI                     | 0.994  |
| TLI                     | 0.980  |
| CFI                     | 0.993  |
| PRATIO                  | 0.333  |
| PNFI                    | 0.330  |
| PCFI                    | 0.331  |
| RMSEA                   | 0.087  |
| RMSEA LO 90             | 0.042  |
| RMSEA HI 90             | 0.135  |
| PCLOSE                  | 0.083  |

#### **4.3 Mediation Analysis**

Bootstrapped indirect effects (bias-corrected confidence interval) were estimated to investigate the mediating effect of coping strategies. The indirect effect of perceived stress on marital satisfaction was statistically significant and standardized ( $p = 0.002$ ). The indirect effect confidence interval was not equal to zero, and it is certain that the mediation pathway is significant.

In particular, the problem-focused disengagement mediated the effect that perceived stress had on marital satisfaction. The perceived stress level was higher and led to more maladaptive coping behavior, hence lessening marital satisfaction. The estimates of the indirect effects were in the range of -0.538 through -0.248 which shows that there is a negative mediation effect.

The fact that both important direct and indirect effects are present indicates partial mediation. This shows that although perceived stress has a direct effect on marital satisfaction, a significant amount of its effects is mediated through the coping mechanisms. These results confirm the hypothesis that perceived stress is related to marital satisfaction through coping strategies.

**Table 4. Bootstrapped Standardized Indirect Effects of Perceived Stress on Marital Satisfaction**

| Predictor | Mediator           | Outcome | Lower Bound | Upper Bound | p-value |
|-----------|--------------------|---------|-------------|-------------|---------|
| PSTotal   | PFD                | MS      | -0.195      | -0.056      | 0.001   |
| PSTotal   | (Overall Indirect) | MS      | -0.538      | -0.248      | 0.002   |
| PSTotal   | EFD                | MS      | 0.000       | 0.000       | NS      |
| PSTotal   | PFE                | MS      | 0.000       | 0.000       | NS      |
| PSTotal   | EFE                | MS      | 0.000       | 0.000       | NS      |

#### 4.5 Summary of Findings

These findings suggest that perceived stress is at the center of influencing coping behaviors and marital satisfaction. High-stress levels augment dysfunctional coping mechanisms and inhibit adaptive responses in coping. In return, maladaptive coping behaviors also have a negative impact on marital satisfaction. Despite the fact that perceived stress has a direct effect on marital satisfaction, the role of coping strategies in the relationship is partially explained and therefore makes it important as psychological processes that connect stress with relational outcomes.

Overall, the structural model was found to be well fitting and empirically underpinning the theoretical assumptions based on the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation framework. The results have highlighted the tolerability of adaptive processes in counteracting the adverse effects of stress in marital relationships.

#### 5. Discussion

The current paper tested the mediation effect of coping strategies in the interaction between perceived stress and marital satisfaction within the context of the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model. The results support a theoretical hypothesis that adaptive processes are key elements in the determination of the effect of stress on marital outcomes (Karney and Bradbury, 1995). The findings have shown that perceived stress is a significant predictor of both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies as well as has a direct impact on marital satisfaction. Besides, the study hypothesis was confirmed as coping strategies partly mediated the relationship between perceived stress and marital satisfaction.

Among the major findings is the negative significant relationship between perceived stress and marital satisfaction. People who reported greater levels of perceived stress, reported less levels of marital satisfaction. This finding is coherent with the past studies that have shown that stress compromises the quality of relationships through the escalation of emotional distress, lack of positive interaction, and poor communication (Bodenmann et al., 2007; Ledermann et al., 2010). Likewise, negative correlations have been reported in the literature on the perceived stress of married people (Mehrara et al., 2019; Isik & Kaya, 2022). Emotional resources can be exhausted by stressful events in life that leave an individual in a less stressful position to participate in supporting, understanding and constructive relationships with his or her spouse. Stress can also distort cognitive appraisal procedures and people may start to perceive even normal marital things as more dangerous or frightening (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As the perception of stress escalates, emotional control is undermined, which makes one more

susceptible to the development of conflict and withdrawal behaviors. It is due to these dynamics that stress has a chronic negative impact on marital satisfaction despite the fact that coping mechanisms have been taken into consideration.

The findings also showed that perceived stress is a very good predictor of coping strategies. Stress was linked to an increase in the level of dependency on dysfunctional coping mechanisms and a decline in the application of adaptive coping mechanisms. The trend can be supported by the previous results indicating that stress overload decreases the ability of individuals to solve problems reflectively and have emotional control over their reactions (Compas et al., 2001; Moos & Holahan, 2003). Empirical research has shown that those who are under high levels of stress use avoidance-oriented mechanisms like denial, disengagement, and self-blame (Guruprakash et al., 2018). Conversely, people experiencing lower stress experience will tend to adopt problem-centered coping mechanisms that enable adaptive adjustment (Kumanova & Karastoyanov, 2013).

The identified correlation between maladaptive coping and lower marital satisfaction brings out the behavioral mechanisms within which stress can be converted into relational distress. The dysfunctional coping mechanisms can hinder successful solving of the marriage problems and in lieu, the unresolved conflicts and lack of emotional involvement will build up. It has been noted in the earlier researches that avoidance-oriented coping is a predictor of marital dissatisfaction and instability in relationships (Berghuis & Stanton, 2002; Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004). On the other hand, collaborative problem-solving and emotional expression can facilitate mutual understanding and relationship satisfaction since they are adaptive coping strategies (Odmann et al., 2006; Alexander, 2008; Majhi, 2016). The current results support the significance of the adaptive mechanisms in maintaining marital health.

Notably, the mediation analysis has found that coping strategies are the mediators of the relationship between perceived stress and marital satisfaction to some extent. The result justifies the main assumption of the VSA model that adaptive processes can be the mediators between stressors and relationship outcomes (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Although perceived stress had a direct negative impact on marital satisfaction, a significant amount of its effect had been mediated by coping behavior. This implies that stress does not work by itself but it influences marital outcomes by influencing the behavior and cognitive responses of individuals.

The partial mediation pattern implies that the strategies used to cope with stress do not completely remove the effect of stress on marital satisfaction. Direct stress effects can indicate physiological challenges, emotional burnout and cognitive load that has independent effects on relational functioning. Nonetheless, stress coping can be improved significantly, which can alleviate the extent of marital dissatisfaction caused by stress. This is in line with the past studies that have proven that good coping cushions the negative impacts of economic strain and poor life situations on the quality of marriage (Conger et al., 1999; Cohan & Bradbury, 1997).

Theoretically, the results put in the accumulating evidence on the effectiveness of integrated models of marital functioning. Empirical validation of the mediating role of coping strategies makes the study more powerful in the explanatory power of the VSA framework and makes it more applicable in the case of subjective stress appraisal instead of objective stressors only. The findings emphasize the need to take into consideration psychological appraisal processes and behavioural regulation mechanisms when analyzing marital dynamics.

The implications of the findings on the practice of marital counseling, family therapy, and preventive interventions are also of great significance. Stress management and positive coping interventions can be used to improve the resilience and relationship satisfaction of couples. Couple training on adaptive coping skills, emotional regulation and joint problem-solving can be used to alleviate the adverse impacts of stress on marital functioning. Cognitive reappraisal and behavioral flexibility could be a part of the therapeutic strategies that enhance the ability of couples to overcome life stressors.

The context of the Indian population is sensitive to family obligations, social norms, and financial demands, which can compound stress responses, which makes it especially appropriate to enhance coping processes (Garg et al., 2023). Other culturally sensitive interventions that incorporate family values and social support networks can further improve the effectiveness of interventions.

The study must be judged with some consideration even though it made its contribution. This cross-sectional study design cannot be used to make major inferences about causation, longitudinal research is required for measuring temporal relationships between stress, coping and marital satisfaction. There are response biases that Self-report measures can give, though standardized measures with high psychometric characteristics were employed. Future studies can include the dyadic data to include the influence of the partners and investigate gender differences in coping.

Altogether, the results support the vitality of coping strategies as psychological processes by which perceived stress is related to marital satisfaction. The combination of stress appraisal and adaptive behavior as a model provides a contribution to the study of the process of marital resilience and vulnerability.

## **6. Conclusion**

The purpose of the current research was to explore the relationship between perceived stress and marital satisfaction with a special reference to the mediating effect of the coping behavior through the prism of the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model. The study aimed to explain the psychological processes by which stress leads to relationship quality by incorporating perceived stress, coping behavior, and marital satisfaction into a structural framework.

The results actually show that perceived stress is a strong predictor of marital satisfaction. Those who were exposed to greater levels of stress indicated a low level of satisfaction in their relationships at the marital level. The given result supports the already existing facts according to which stress impairs the emotional availability, the quality of communication, and the stability of relationships (Odmann et al., 2007; Isik & Kaya, 2022). Cognitive overload and emotional exhaustion related to stress can affect the ability of people to interact positively with their partners and, therefore, undermine the relationship.

The research also determined that perceived stress is a major determinant of coping mechanisms. High levels of stress made people more dependent on maladaptive coping mechanisms and less involved in adaptive coping mechanisms. This trend can be related to the previous studies indicating that stress affects self-regulation and facilitates avoidance-based reactions (Compas et al., 2001; Guruprakash et al., 2018). Disengagement and self-blame were maladaptive coping mechanisms linked to low marital satisfaction, but adaptive coping behavior had a positive relationship as a source of relational well-being.

Above all, the mediation analysis proved that coping strategies partially mediate the relationship between perceived stress and marital satisfaction. Such a discovery lends credence to the major assumption of the VSA model that adaptive processes are mechanisms that cause stressors to connect to marital outcomes (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Although perceived stress had a direct influence on marital satisfaction, a significant part of its effect was mediated by coping behaviors. This implies that the coping mechanisms of stress perceived by different individuals is critical in determining the effects of stress on the quality of marriage.

Competitive implication of the study is that the theoretical impact of the work is the enhancement of the empirical support of VSA framework through structural modeling, in which coping strategies play a mediating role. The study contributes to the knowledge of individual vulnerability and resilience processes in marital relationships by addressing subjective stress appraisal instead of objective stressors. The results indicate that it is crucial to investigate psychological processes and not to assume direct linkage between stress and marital satisfaction.

Practically, the findings highlight the importance of intervention strategies that promote adaptive coping ability in married persons. Counseling positionalities, encouraging problem solving skills, emotional regulation skills and practical communication skills can assist couples to cushion the impacts of the stress and satisfaction in relationships. Couples also can benefit by participating in stress management training, cognitive restructuring, and dyadic coping interventions that would help them increase their resilience. Such interventions are to be culturally sensitive in culturally diverse environments to ensure the highest level of effectiveness (Garg et al., 2023).

Despite the valuable insights that the study provides, it has some limitations that should be admitted. The cross-sectional design limits causal implication, and longitudinal research is suggested in the future to observe the

developmental patterns of stress, coping and marital satisfaction. The use of self-report measures can create a social desirability bias, yet validated measures were used. Also, convenience sampling has the disadvantage of reducing generalizability. Dyadic data, bigger sample sizes, and culturally comparative designs can be included in future research to expand the results.

**Future Directions:**

Longitudinal research is suggested in the future to observe the developmental patterns of stress, coping and marital satisfaction and the causal implication of their relationship. Stress can be measured via the use of bio-feedback machines and other physiological measures. Personality, coping strategies and marital satisfaction can be measured through behavioral experiments and projective techniques to remove the social desirability component. Future studies can focus on using dyadic data, larger sample sizes, and cross-cultural designs to expand these findings.

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