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Impact of Cynical Hostility on Couples' Marital Adjustment and Psychological Wellbeing

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Abstract

The present study examined the role of cynical hostility in marital adjustment and psychological wellbeing of married couples. It also investigated the differences in cynical hostility across gender. The sample for the study was comprised of husbands (n=120) and wives (n=120) living in Swabi, Mardan, and Peshawar districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The Marital Satisfaction Test (Locke & Wallac, 1959), the Cook-Medley Hostility Scale (Cook & Medley, 1954), and the Psychological Wellbeing Scale (Ryff, 1989) were utilized for data collection. Findings of Linear Regression Analyses showed that cynical hostility is a significant predictor of both marital adjustment and psychological wellbeing. Results indicated that a high level of cynical hostility negatively influences the psychological wellbeing and marital adjustment of couples. Further, no significant gender differences were revealed in the level of cynical hostility. The study possesses several implications in social and interpersonal relationships, the family environment, and the health sector.

Keywords: Cynical hostility, marital adjustment, psychological wellbeing

1. Introduction

Hostility is a form of psychological coercion in which people and groups, in various social circumstances, attempt to force reality to deliver the desired response, including bullying, to

make their beliefs more widely accepted. (Claxton,1984). Cynical hostility is more cognitive, consisting of negative views, thoughts, and attitudes about others' intentions, motives, and integrity. It can be described as suspicion, distrust, or cynical and pessimistic views about people (Tyra et al., 2020). It is a belief that people are responsible for bad happenings and they should not be trusted (Smith, 1994). According to Barefoot (1989), a person's negative attitude towards interpersonal interactions can take many different cognitive, emotional, and behavioral forms, which together make up the large psychological domain of hostility. Cynicism, rage, distrust, and violence are the main characteristics of cynical hostility.

Several studies have connected prolonged hostility to detrimental health consequences, such as hypertension and coronary heart disease (Chesney & Rosenman, 1985; Williams, & Barefoot, 1988), and all might cause mortality. Due to these severe adverse effects on physical health, it is essential to study the effects of cynical hostility in psychological and interpersonal domains. The present study attempts to explore this phenomenon among couples by studying the significant impact of cynical hostility on couples' marital adjustment and psychological well-being.

Marital adjustment is the process of integrating couples with various personality features into a partnership so that they may support each other and attain satisfaction and shared objectives. (Burgess & Cottrell, 1998). It is a process in which partners adjust to their new roles by supporting one another and working as a team rather than as separate entities. Partners need to share their respective interests and values, to keep boundaries of interaction open, and to encourage each other to express their communication (Sam, 2013)

The couple should establish marital adjustment in order to come to a consensus on financial, management, and psychosocial issues such as common values and objectives, decision-making, the manner to handle domestic tasks and manage income, the way to interact with close family members, and make use of free time. If they fail to achieve marital adjustment, there may be issues with the family's solidarity and cooperation, which might cause conflict, emotional impairment, and family disintegration (Terzioglu, 1987). To achieve and maintain harmony in their marital relation couples' attitude and their overall psychological state play very essential role.

Previous research has shown that cynical hostility can significantly influence the marital adjustment among couples. Couples in which one or both partners display high levels of cynical

hostility tend to have lower levels of marital satisfaction and are at a greater risk of divorce (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993). For example, in a study, Karney and Bradbury (1995) found that cynical hostility was a significant predictor of both initial levels of marital satisfaction and changes in marital satisfaction over time. Couples in which one or both partners scored high on cynical hostility at the beginning of the study had lower levels of marital satisfaction at that time and experienced greater declines in satisfaction over the course of the study.

Similarly, a study by Fincham and Bradbury (1993) found that cynical hostility was associated with a greater likelihood of divorce among couples. Couples in which one or both partners scored high on cynical hostility were more likely to divorce within five years of marriage compared to couples with lower levels of cynical hostility. These studies indicate that cynical hostility can negatively affect marital adjustment and might increase the risk of divorce. Couples who are facing difficulties in their marriage can benefit by addressing issues related to cynical hostility and working to improve communication and trust in their relationship. According to a cross-sectional study, having a partner who is more cynically hostile is associated with more depressive symptoms in women as opposed to men. (Brummett et al., 2000).

Donnellan et al. (2005) noted that those with high levels of cynical hostility experience less relationship satisfaction and more conflict in their marriages. The study also found that these individuals were more prone to symptoms of anxiety and depression. Roberts et al. (2010) conducted a longitudinal study and found that cynical hostility predicted declines in marital satisfaction over time. The study also found that the negative impact of cynical hostility on marital satisfaction was greater for wives than for husbands. Smith (1990) found that highly cynical husbands regarded their wives' behaviour that led to arguments as more purposeful and blamed her more for their frequent disagreements on the high-conflict issue. Among women, only overt hostile behaviour was marginally connected to their cynical hostility scores.

Previous studies have confirmed that cynical hostility is associated with poorer social functioning and interpersonal relationships. Individuals high in cynical hostility often have difficulties in establishing and maintaining positive connections with others. Their negative attitudes and mistrust can create a hostile environment that leads to strained relationships, social isolation, and increased feelings of loneliness (Segel-Karpas, 2022). Such marital conflict among couples is an essential risk factor for their physiological and psychological health. Longitudinal research studies have also indicated that individuals in unhappy marriages showed more depressive symptoms as compared to those in happy marriages (Beach et al., 2003; Williams,

2003).

In this study, we will assess the significant effects of cynical hostility on the psychological wellbeing of husbands and wives. Psychological well-being is an optimal state of psychological functioning and practices in life (Ryan & Deci, 2001). There are two psychological research viewpoints on psychological well-being, on is *hedonism* which emphasizes being happy; and the other one is *eudaimonism* which stresses the essence of being meaningful in one's life (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Various theorists have based their wellbeing models on these two philosophical concepts. Such as Diener (2000) proposed the idea of subjective well-being on the basis of hedonism which refers to an individual's evaluations of one's life from both cognitive and affective perspective. Diener argued that experiences of happiness and fulfilment with life is universal, even though the causes of pleasure and fulfilment differ among cultures and societies (Diener et al., 2009). Ryff (1989) presented a model of psychological well-being on the basis of thorough study of human functioning consisting of six different facets including meaning in life, independence (autonomy), environmental mastery, self-acceptance and personal growth, and successful relationship with others (Ryff, 1989).

Research indicated that psychological health is adversely affected by a high level of cynical hostility. The psychosocial vulnerability model of hostility considers hostile persons to have more interpersonal conflicts, experience more challenging life events, achieve less social support, and be at greater risk of depression. This view suggests that cynical hostility is a significant and strong predictor of depressive symptoms (Nabi, 2010). Suls et al. (2002) also found a similar connection between cynical hostility and psychological health, describing that cynical hostility is strongly correlated with increased symptoms of depression. Individuals high in cynical hostility tend to have a negative view of one's life and distrust the intentions of others, which can contribute to a pessimistic and depressive mindset.

According to Arehart-Treichel (2010), hostility and depression are significantly associated with each other, with people who are more hostile they have more risk of depression. Li et al. (2023) also noted that depression was worsened by hostile affect indicating the significant link between hostility and depressive symptoms. Taken together, these studies provide evidence for the detrimental impact of cynical hostility on psychological wellbeing, including increased symptoms of depression, overall psychological distress, and impaired social functioning.

So far gender differences in cynical hostility are concerned there are mixed views some

researchers suggested that when compared to women, men scored somewhat higher on verbal aggressiveness and hostility and much higher on physical aggression. (Buss & Perry, 1992). While other researchers supported that men and women expressed similar levels of aggression, men are considered to possess trait aggression depending upon the levels of provocation. This finding suggests that both genders may be equally aggressive conditional to the type of situations where differences might occur in the expression of aggression (Fahlgren et al., 2022). In this study we will try to ascertain whether there exist any differences in the cynical hostility of husbands and wives.

2. Purpose of the study

Cynical hostility significantly influences psychological and physical health as well as social and interpersonal relationships of an individual, contributing to symptoms of depression, anxiety, overall distress, poor social functioning, and cardiovascular problems. When occur among couples' cynical hostility might cause adverse consequences for both partners and early identification and control of cynical hostility can reduce the adverse effects on their marital relation, their psychological and physiological health. The study will be helpful in recognizing the effects of cynical hostility in order to promote healthier psychological functioning and overall wellbeing. The following are the main objectives of the study.

2.1. Objectives

1. To ascertain the significant effects of cynical hostility on couples' marital adjustment and their overall psychological wellbeing.
2. To determine gender differences in the level of cynical hostility.

2.2. Hypotheses

Keeping in view the above objectives, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. Cynical hostility will negatively affect the marital adjustment among couples.
2. Couples' cynical hostility will lead to poor psychological wellbeing.
3. There will be no significant gender differences in the level of cynical hostility.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

In the present study, the sample (N=240) was comprised of married couples with an equal ratio of men (n=120) and women (n=120). The age limit of the study sample was from 25 to 45 years with the mean age of (M= 35.0 ±SD= 4.10). Using convenient sampling method couples were recruited from three districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) such as Swabi, Mardan and Peshawar. To control the individual differences factor to an extent the couples who were having children were included in the sample.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Demographic Information

Participants were required to provide demographic details of age, gender, qualification, and their socioeconomic status, number of children, and number of years of being in a marital relationship.

3.2.2. The Cook-Medley Hostility Scale

The short form of the Cook-Medley Hostility Scale (Cook & Medley, 1954) was used in this study; it consists of 14 items in a true-false format. The items reflect feelings of distrust, suspicion, and a general negative attitude towards others, which are central features of cynical hostility. Scoring of the scale is based on adding the total number of items marked as true, with high scores indicating greater levels of hostility. The alpha coefficient value of the scale in the study was 0.78.

3.3. Marital Adjustment Test (MAT)

Marital Adjustment Test is a 15-item scale developed by Locke and Wallac (1959). It was initially used to differentiate well-adjusted couples from distressed (unsatisfied) couples. The scale consists of 15 items that evaluate general marital happiness, the extent of agreement between couples on various issues, how they manage disagreements, their choice of common interests, and their marriage expectations. All of the items are answered on a variety of response scales. To obtain the total score, responses on all 15 items are summed together, where high scores correspond to a higher level of satisfaction. Reliability of the scale, as reported by Urbina (2004), was .90 using the split-half technique (Urbina, 2004). Validity was confirmed by the

differences in the scores of maladjusted and stable, well-adjusted groups.

3.4. Psychological Well-Being Scale

This self-report inventory for assessing psychological wellbeing was formed by Ryff (1989). It is based on 42 items, including negatively phrased items, which are all rated on a six- point Likert scale. The total score is calculated by adding all 42 items. Where high scores indicate more satisfaction. The test-retest reliability of the measure has been reported as 0.82. There exists significant correlation of PWBS with self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and happiness indicating high validity of the scale (Bayani, 2008).

3.5. Procedure

For assessing cynical hostility, marital adjustment and psychological wellbeing of married couples three questionnaires were distributed namely Marital Satisfaction Test, the Cook-Medley Hostility Scale (short version), Psychological Wellbeing Scale. Participants were approached from three districts, i.e., Swabi, Peshawar, and Mardan. The districts were chosen on the basis of convenience. Before collecting their responses, proper informed consent was obtained from the subjects, and they were assured that the confidentiality of their responses would be maintained. Both written and verbal instructions were given about filling out the questionnaire. It took 15-20 min to fill all the forms, and at the end of the data collection process, the participants were thanked for their participation and were debriefed.

4. Results

The objective of this study was to explore the effects of cynical hostility on marital adjustment and psychological well-being among married couples. Gender differences in the level of cynical hostility were also explored. Various statistical analyses were carried out to test the hypotheses, such as Linear regression, Pearson correlation, t-test, descriptive statistics and alpha reliability analyses were also performed on the data using computerized software SPSS 22 (Statistical Package of Social Sciences).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Baseline Characteristics	*n*	%
Gender		
Female (Wives)	120	50
Male (Husbands)	120	50
Number of years in marital relation		
1-5 years	100	41.6
5-10 years	60	25
10- 15 years	45	18.75
15-20 years	35	14.58

Note: n= number of participants and number of years of being in marital relationship.

Table 2: Alpha Coefficient Reliability of Cook-Medley Hostility Scale, Marital Adjustment Test and Psychological Well-Being Scale (N=240)

Scale	M	SD	Number of items	Cronbach's α
Ho Scale	9.70	3.83	14	0.78
MAT	15.14	4.51	15	0.80
PWBS	68.38	11.31	42	0.88

Note. M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; Cook-Medley Hostility Scale= Ho Scale; Marital Adjustment Test= MAT; Psychological Well-Being Scale= PWBS.

Table 2 indicates the mean, standard deviation, and alpha coefficient of reliability of the scales. The results show that the reliability of all of the scales is high, suggesting that the scales are internally consistent and can be used in the present study.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation of Ho Scale, MAT and PWBS (N=240)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Ho scale	9.70	3.83	-		
2. MAT	15.14	4.51	-.47**	-	
3. PWBS	68.38	11.31	-.59**	.57**	-

Note. Cook-Medley Hostility Scale= Ho Scale; Marital Adjustment Test= MAT; Psychological Well-Being Scale= PWBS; **p<.01

Table 3 shows the Pearson correlation of total scores of Ho Scale, MAT, and PWBS. The

results depict that the score of cynical hostility is negatively correlated with marital adjustment and psychological wellbeing scores at the0.01 level, and there is a significant positive correlation between the Marital Adjustment Test and the Psychological Well-Being Scale at the 0.01 level.

Table 4a: Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Marital Adjustment from Cynical Hostility

Variables	*B*	*β*	*SE*
Constant	41.15**		1.35
MAT	-.12	-.24**	.03
R^2		.11	

Note. SE= Standard Error; Marital Adjustment Test= MAT; CI=95%; **p<.01.

Table 4a shows the linear regression analysis where cynical hostility significantly predicts marital adjustment. The results indicate that cynical hostility explained 11% of the variance in marital adjustment, F (2, 237) = 22.37, p <.01.

Table 4b: Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Psychological Wellbeing from Cynical Hostility

Variables	*B*	*β*	*SE*
Constant	51.23**		1.46
PWBS	-.26	-.46**	.05
R^2		.20	

Note. Psychological Well-Being Scale= PWBS; SE= Standard Error; **p<.01; CI=95%.

Table 4b illustrates linear regression analysis where cynical hostility significantly predicting psychological wellbeing. The results indicate that cynical hostility explained 20% of the variance in psychological wellbeing, F (2, 237) = 29.51, p <.01.

Table 5: Mean, Standard Deviation and t Value of male and female on Hostility Scale (240).

Gender									
	Male		Female						
	n=120		n=120				95%CI		
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t (238)*	*P*	*LL*	*UL*	*Cohen's d*
Ho Scale	81.46	20.50	78.51	19.60	-.59	.37	-9.81	5.11	0.124

Table 5 shows the mean value, standard deviation, and t-value of males and females. The results illustrate that there is no statistically significant difference in the cynical hostility of both genders.

5. Discussion

The present study attempts to explore significant adverse effects of cynical hostility experienced by couples on their marital adjustment and psychological health. Further the gender differences on the basis of cynical hostility were also explored. To test the study hypotheses, three questionnaires such as the Cook-Medley Hostility Scale short version (Ho Scale), Marital Satisfaction Test (MAT), and Psychological Wellbeing Scale (PWBS) were utilized. The alpha reliability values of the Ho Scale (.78), MAT (.80), and PWBS (.88) were high enough (see Table 2), indicating that all of the questionnaires utilized in this study were highly reliable and suitable for the present sample.

After completing the preliminary steps, various statistical analyses such as Pearson correlation, Linear regression, and t-test were run to test the study hypotheses. The first hypothesis assumed that a high level of cynical hostility by both husbands and wives will negatively influence their marital relationship. The results of the study confirmed the negative impact of cynical hostility on couples' marital adjustment. The results showed that there is a negative correlation ($r = -0.47$; $p < 0.01$) between cynical hostility and marital adjustment. Cynical hostility also predicted significant variance in marital adjustment. Earlier research work also confirmed the findings of this study; for example, Lawson (2008) studied hostility with respect to family attachment and found that cynical hostility is linked with severe violence and psychological rage. According to Smith et al. (2004), anger and hostility are examples of negative social interaction. Anger and hostility on the part of the wife are firmly associated with marital distress in both wives and husbands (Glazer et al., 2002). Similarly, Baron et al. (2007) suggested that when taking into account dependency in the marital connection, wives' anger and hostility more significantly predict marital functioning than do husbands. On the other hand, Newton and Kiecolt-Glaser (1995) noted that hostility among husbands significantly decreases the marital quality of their own as well as their wives.

Marital satisfaction and individual happiness in families are affected by various factors such as hostility, power-oriented struggles, and oppression of one's partner. Specifically, wives are

more inclined to perceive that their sense of self-worth, their freedom, and competence to engage in certain tasks are controlled by their hostile husbands (Ehrensaft et al., 1999). The level of hostility in families also negatively affects attachment patterns in families (Horowitz, 1993). Smith (1988) revealed that in marital relationships, those who possess high scores on the hostility scale are more likely to feel disappointment with their marriage and are more susceptible to marital conflicts.

The second hypothesis of the study was about the adverse effects of cynical hostility on the psychological wellbeing of both husbands and wives. It was predicted that cynical hostility would negatively affect the psychological wellbeing of married couples. The findings of the study confirmed the hypothesis, indicating that cynical hostility ($r = -0.59$; $p < 0.01$) is negatively correlated with the psychological wellbeing of married couples. Further, regression analysis showed that cynical hostility accounted for significant variance in psychological wellbeing. The findings of this study are also described by previous literature. In a study, Greenglass and Julkunen (1989) noted that cynically hostile individuals are less likely to receive social support that might results in social isolation, suggesting a possible connection between cynical distrust and psychological and physical illnesses. Hostile behavior has been confirmed by various studies to harmfully affect individuals' health regardless of their age (King, 2012; Smith et al., 2000). Hostility is associated with stress responsiveness in that it predicts both evaluation of stressful situations and coping responses of an individual (Smith, 2006).In the third hypothesis it was predicted that there will be no significant gender differences in the level of cynical hostility. The results of the study confirmed the hypothesis, and previous research also supports the hypothesis, but there are mixed findings. Robinson et al. (2001) found that women are more hostile than men, but other studies found no significant gender differences in cynical hostility. Men and women both experience rage on a regular basis. Men who are furious are more prone to act aggressively, but this does not indicate that women are not driven by anger as frequently. (Devlin, 2019). Similarly, Deary et al. (1996) suggested that there are no significant gender differences in hostility. These findings explain that male and female both can experience the cynical hostility but there might exist difference in their expression of these hostile feelings. This may be influenced by societal norms and gender role expectations, where men are often encouraged to display assertiveness, competition, and skepticism. Women, on the other hand, may be more inclined to express their negative emotions in a more indirect or socially acceptable manner.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the current study suggest that cynical hostility has a significant negative impact on marital adjustment and psychological well-being of couples. Couples who are aware of these issues and who work to actively address them can improve their relationship satisfaction and overall well-being. This may involve seeking professional counseling or therapy, practicing effective communication and conflict resolution skills, and cultivating positive attitudes and behaviors towards one another.

7. Limitation

A better explanation of this phenomenon under study can be obtained if the sample is studied for a longer period of time, i.e., longitudinal studies. Future studies can also consider various other contributing factors such as number of children, other financial and socioeconomic factors that can affect the link between cynical hostility, marital adjustment and psychological wellbeing of couples.

8. Implication

It is helpful to understand psychological and interpersonal concerns pertaining to gender since this study evaluated both spouses and looked at both men and women. Couples who fail to settle their rivalry may eventually notice a reduction in their own or their partner's psychological wellbeing. So, a better understanding of their condition might help them to address these issues promptly and hence avoid marital conflicts.

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