

Emotional Orientation, Emotional Disconnectedness, and Marital Bonding: Evidence from a Cross-Sectional Study of Married Couples in Muzaffarabad, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan

Shaiba Arooj & Lukman Z. M.

Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Marriage remains a fundamental institution sustaining social stability, yet its success largely depends on the quality of emotional exchanges between spouses. This study examines the effects of emotional orientation and emotional disconnectedness on marital bonding within a South Asian context. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 700 married respondents in Muzaffarabad using structured Likert-scale questionnaires. The measures assessed emotional orientation, emotional disconnectedness, disagreement, emotional well-being, and marital bonding, each operationalized as the mean of multiple indicators. Data was analyzed using chi-square tests, Pearson's correlations, and multiple regression in SPSS. Results revealed significant associations among the variables. Emotional orientation was positively correlated with marital bonding ($r = .10, p < .01$), whereas emotional disconnectedness and disagreement were negatively correlated ($r = -.20, p < .01$; $r = -.88, p < .01$). Regression analysis indicated that emotional disconnectedness was the strongest negative predictor of marital bonding ($\beta = -.44, p < .001$), while emotional orientation emerged as a positive predictor ($\beta = .28, p < .001$). The overall model explained 6% of the variance in marital bonding, $F(2, 697) = 21.47, p < .001$. These findings underscore the critical role of emotional processes in sustaining marital ties, with emotional withdrawal exerting a stronger negative effect than the positive influence of emotional orientation. The study contributes to existing literature by offering empirical evidence from Pakistan, where marital expectations are shaped by collectivist norms and socio-cultural obligations. Practical implications highlight the need for marital counseling interventions that reduce emotional withdrawal while promoting positive emotional orientation to strengthen spousal bonds.

Keywords: Marital Relationship Quality, Emotional Orientation, Emotional Disconnectedness, Marital Bonding, South Asia

INTRODUCTION

Marriage remains one of the most enduring social institutions, forming the foundation of family life, emotional support, companionship, and social regulation. Yet, its stability and quality depend largely on the emotional processes within spousal interactions. Contemporary scholarship highlights emotional orientation, the capacity for partners to engage with warmth, empathy, and responsiveness – as a key determinant of marital stability. In contrast, emotional disconnectedness, characterized by withdrawal and detachment, weakens marital bonds. These dynamics are central to understanding marital bonding, which encompasses trust, closeness, and emotional unity. In Western contexts, research consistently shows that emotional orientation predicts marital satisfaction, intimacy, and resilience (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Markman & Rhoades, 2012). Conversely, withdrawal and disengagement predict dissatisfaction and dissolution (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Lebow & Snyder, 2022). Longitudinal studies further confirm that emotional attunement sustains marital quality across time (Rosen et al., 2025), while disengagement accelerates breakdown (Meier et al., 2024).

In collectivist societies such as those in South Asia, cultural expectations add complexity. Marriages are often embedded in networks of kinship, religious duties, and social obligations that prioritize family cohesion over individual fulfillment. Pakistani spouses, for instance, report valuing family responsibility and religious commitment more highly than Western couples (Ayub et al., 2023). Yet, expressions of affection and intimacy

still remain strong predictors of satisfaction. This duality reflects that while collectivist norms define marital roles, emotional connection remains universally vital. Our findings support this view: emotional orientation enhances bonding, but its positive effect is often overshadowed by the stronger negative impact of withdrawal. In cultures that emphasize togetherness, disengagement signals disloyalty and can be especially distressing – a pattern echoed in Nugrahani et al.'s (2025) Indonesian findings, where work–family conflict undermined satisfaction even when intimacy was high.

Despite growing recognition of these dynamics, South Asian marriages remain underexplored empirically. Marital expectations are shaped by dyadic exchanges and broader collectivist norms. Evidence from Pakistan shows that loyalty and cohesion are culturally emphasized, yet emotional intimacy and mutual support predict marital satisfaction (Shujja & Adil, 2024). Structural pressures, such as economic hardship or extended family obligations, may heighten disconnectedness (Akram & Khan, 2020). Moreover, emotion regulation strategies, particularly cognitive reappraisal, enhance marital quality even within traditional settings (Bloch et al., 2014). Recent scholarship identifies new challenges to marital emotional health. Digital media exposure, work–family conflict and shifting gender roles increasingly strain relationships (Wang & Zhao, 2023; Lu et al., 2025). Excessive online engagement diminishes face-to-face communication, fostering emotional distance (Choudary et al., 2024). Economic pressures and dual-earner responsibilities exacerbate these strains, particularly for women managing both employment and domestic duties (Rahman et al., 2023).

This study contributes to the literature by examining how emotional orientation and emotional disconnectedness affect marital bonding in Pakistan. Drawing on survey data from 700 married respondents in Muzaffarabad, it provides quantitative evidence from a collectivist cultural context where cohesion and intimacy coexist as marital ideals. Using chi-square, correlation, and regression analyses, the study identifies emotional orientation as a protective factor and emotional withdrawal as a strong negative predictor. The results highlight the need for culturally adapted marital counseling that reduces emotional withdrawal while fostering empathy and responsiveness.

Theoretical Background

Emotional orientation denotes a spouse's disposition to express empathy, affection, and understanding. It reflects emotional availability and has been linked with marital satisfaction, trust, and resilience. Couples high in orientation demonstrate greater intimacy and better conflict resolution (Meier et al., 2024). In Western samples, orientation predicts long-term stability (Fincham & Beach, 2010). In contrast, emotional disconnectedness involves withdrawal, avoidance of dialogue, and lack of empathy. It undermines trust, increases isolation, and erodes marital cohesion. Gottman & Silver (1999) identified withdrawal as one of the "Four Horsemen" predicting divorce. Longitudinal studies confirm that disengagement steadily reduces marital quality (Jolin et al., 2022). Observational research similarly finds that avoidance during conflict predicts dissatisfaction (Rosen et al., 2025). In Pakistan, frequent disagreements, negative communication cycles, and economic constraints amplify emotional distance, with demand–withdraw patterns intensifying distress (Caughlin & Huston, 2002). Negative exchanges correlate strongly with lower satisfaction (Lu et al., 2025), revealing the destructive potential of unresolved conflict.

Although much of this evidence derives from Western samples, cultural parallels appear in South Asia. Here, family structures and kinship obligations shape marital expectations, but emotional expression remains central to satisfaction (Shujja & Adil, 2024). Emotional orientation enhances bonding even in traditional marriages, whereas disconnectedness and role strain reduce harmony (Akram & Khan, 2020; Rahman et al., 2023). This combination of universal emotional mechanisms and culture-specific stressors warrants deeper investigation.

Marital Intimacy and Contemporary Stressors

Across contexts, recent research reinforces that emotional availability predicts higher marital quality, while withdrawal undermines intimacy. Lebow & Snyder (2022) emphasizes responsiveness and engagement as core elements of couple therapy, aligning with evidence that demand–withdraw cycles erode satisfaction over time (Caughlin & Huston, 2002). In Pakistan and similar societies, culturally embedded stressors—work–family imbalance, financial pressure, and shifting gender expectations – interact with these emotional patterns. Dual-

career couples often report greater conflict and reduced satisfaction (Rahman et al., 2023; Abdullah et al., 2023).

The digital era introduces additional risks. “Partner phubbing” (ignoring a partner to engage with a phone) and excessive social media use have been linked to lower marital satisfaction in Pakistan (Arshad & Imran, 2022). Broader meta-analyses suggest that moderate, shared online engagement supports relationship quality, whereas overuse diminishes well-being (Chadha et al., 2025). At the same time, research advances in psychometrics have enabled more refined analysis of conflict and bonding. The Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS) has been translated and validated for Pakistani couples, facilitating local assessment of communication styles (Farooq et al., 2024). Emotion regulation, particularly adaptive cognitive strategies, has also emerged as a crucial mechanism linking communication and satisfaction (Ali & Saleem, 2022). Such findings echo cross-national evidence that emotional regulation buffers the harmful effects of conflict on intimacy.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative research design to examine the relationships between emotional orientation, emotional disconnectedness, and marital bonding among married individuals in Pakistan. A total of 700 respondents participated in the survey. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to data collection and confidentiality strictly maintained. No financial incentives were offered, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure balanced representation across gender, age groups, and socio-economic strata. Respondents were recruited from both urban and semi-urban areas, capturing the cultural and demographic diversity of the region. All questionnaire items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. For each construct, multiple indicators were aggregated by computing their mean scores, a widely accepted method for generating reliable composite variables in social science research.

The constructs were operationalized as follows:

- i. Emotional Orientation (Independent Variable): Measured through items capturing empathy, emotional support, sharing of feelings, recognition of opinions, and expression of affection.
- ii. Emotional Disconnectedness (Independent Variable): Assessed through items reflecting emotional distance, avoidance of emotional issues, isolation, and withdrawal.
- iii. Disagreement (Independent Variable): Measured via indicators of the frequency and intensity of spousal disagreements.
- iv. Emotional Well-being (Control Variable): Evaluated using items assessing emotional stability and positive regulation strategies.
- v. Marital Bonding (Dependent Variable): Captured through items measuring closeness, trust, shared time, commitment, and emotional security.

Reliability analysis indicated that all measurement scales demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients exceeding 0.70, the widely accepted threshold for reliability. Structured questionnaires were administered both in person and online. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and informed that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time.

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. The analysis involved computation of descriptive statistics, followed by chi-square tests, Pearson’s correlation coefficients, and multiple linear regression to test the proposed hypotheses.

RESULTS

Descriptive analyses indicated variability among respondents in their experiences of emotional orientation, emotional disconnectedness, and marital bonding. Overall, mean scores suggested moderate levels of emotional orientation and bonding, accompanied by higher variability in emotional disconnectedness, indicating differing emotional engagement patterns among couples.

Chi-square analyses revealed a significant association between marital bonding and emotional disconnectedness, $\chi^2(50, N = 700) = 3109.23, p < .001$ (Table 1). This finding confirms that bonding and disconnectedness are not independent constructs, suggesting that variations in emotional withdrawal correspond closely with differences in bonding quality.

Table 1. Chi-Square Test of Association between Marital Bonding and Emotional Disconnectedness

Test	Value	df	p
Pearson Chi-Square	3109.23	50	< .001

Pearson's correlation coefficients demonstrated significant relationships among the key variables (Table 2):

- Emotional orientation \leftrightarrow Marital bonding: $r = .10, p < .01$
- Emotional disconnectedness \leftrightarrow Marital bonding: $r = -.20, p < .01$
- Disagreement \leftrightarrow Marital bonding: $r = -.88, p < .01$

These results indicate that while emotional orientation is positively associated with bonding, both emotional disconnectedness and disagreement are negatively related, with disagreement showing the strongest inverse association.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Variables	Emotional Orientation	Emotional Disconnectedness	Disagreement	Marital Bonding
Emotional Orientation	1	.871**	.094*	-.103**
Emotional Disconnectedness	.871**	1	.180**	-.197**
Disagreement	.094*	.180**	1	-.884**
Marital Bonding	-.103**	-.197**	-.884**	1

A multiple linear regression was conducted with marital bonding as the dependent variable (Table 3). The model was statistically significant, $F(2, 697) = 21.47, p < .001$, explaining 6% of the variance ($R^2 = .06$). Emotional orientation emerged as a positive predictor of bonding ($\beta = .28, p < .001$), whereas emotional disconnectedness was a stronger negative predictor ($\beta = -.44, p < .001$).

These results suggest that emotional withdrawal exerts a greater detrimental impact on marital bonding than the positive contribution of emotional orientation, underscoring the critical role of emotional engagement in sustaining marital relationships.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Predicting Marital Bonding

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	14.95	.53	—	28.32	< .001
Emotional Orientation	.48	.13	.28	3.78	< .001
Emotional Disconnectedness	-1.74	.29	-.44	-5.92	< .001

DISCUSSION

The findings provide compelling evidence for the central role of emotional processes in shaping marital bonding. Consistent with previous research, emotional orientation enhanced bonding, whereas emotional disconnectedness weakened it (Meier et al., 2024; Rosen et al., 2025). Importantly, the negative effect of disconnectedness outweighed the positive influence of orientation, indicating that withdrawal behaviors are particularly detrimental. This result aligns with theory by Gottman & Silver (1999), which identifies withdrawal as a destructive predictor of marital dissolution.

In the Pakistani context, these findings carry significant implications. Although collectivist norms emphasize family cohesion and social harmony, emotional intimacy remains a vital determinant of marital satisfaction

(Shujja & Adil, 2024). The results confirm that, despite socio-cultural pressures, emotional factors continue to play a decisive role in maintaining marital stability. The study adds originality by quantifying these effects in South Asia, where empirical evidence has been limited.

From a practical perspective, the results highlight the need for marital counseling programs to prioritize the reduction of emotional withdrawal and disconnectedness. Therapeutic frameworks such as Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) (Lebow & Snyder, 2022) could be culturally adapted to foster engagement and responsiveness. Likewise, workshops on emotional regulation (Bloch et al., 2014) can enhance orientation and reduce conflict by equipping couples with strategies to manage stress and express emotions constructively. The findings also resonate strongly with attachment theory, which emphasizes that secure attachment fosters emotional openness, responsiveness, and mutual support, thereby enhancing resilience in times of stress. In contrast, insecure attachment tends to produce withdrawal and emotional unavailability, gradually eroding relationship quality (Simpson & Rholes, 2017). Observational studies further show that small, everyday gestures—such as turning toward a partner’s emotional bids for attention—accumulate to build trust and satisfaction, whereas repeatedly ignoring these bids weakens intimacy and stability (Gottman & Schwartz-Gottman, 2024).

Clinical evidence reinforces these conclusions. Meta-analytic findings demonstrate that Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy, which helps partners become more accessible and attuned to one another, significantly reduces distress and improves satisfaction (Rathgeber et al., 2019). Reviews of contemporary couple interventions likewise stress that therapeutic success often depends on repairing emotional ruptures and rebuilding responsiveness between partners (Lebow & Snyder, 2022). These patterns highlight that addressing emotional disengagement is not peripheral but essential to successful relational intervention. Beyond empirical research, these insights echo philosophical traditions that view emotional connection as central to human flourishing. Nussbaum (2001) conceptualizes emotions as intelligent judgments about what we value; thus, neglecting a partner’s emotional needs represents a moral failure to acknowledge the relationship’s significance. Similarly, Buber’s (1970) distinction between I–Thou and I–It relationships illustrate how marriages thrive on mutual presence but deteriorate when partners treat each other as distant or instrumental. Recognition theory (Honneth, 1995) frames love as an affirmation essential for self-confidence, implying that emotional neglect constitutes a form of misrecognition. Correspondingly, the ethics of care (Noddings, 2013) reminds us that attentiveness, empathy, and responsiveness are not optional virtues but moral obligations within intimate bonds.

Taken together, this body of evidence underscores that emotional needs are central – not peripheral – to marital stability. Couples who feel consistently valued, heard, and emotionally supported tend to sustain stronger, more satisfying relationships. Conversely, when these needs are unmet through withdrawal, neglect, or modern disruptions such as phubbing, trust and closeness gradually erode. Addressing emotional needs is therefore not only a psychological necessity but also a moral commitment that underpins enduring, resilient marital partnerships.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that emotional disconnectedness is a stronger negative predictor of marital bonding than the positive influence of emotional orientation. These findings underscore the central role of emotional dynamics in Pakistani marriages and provide empirical evidence from a collectivist society. The study’s originality lies in demonstrating that emotional withdrawal is more damaging than orientation is protective, a nuance often overlooked in Western-centric literature. Policymakers, therapists, and counselors should therefore prioritize interventions that reduce emotional withdrawal while simultaneously encouraging positive emotional orientation to strengthen marital ties.

The results reaffirm that emotional processes remain fundamental to marital bonding across cultural boundaries. Even within collectivist societies—where loyalty, family duty, and religious values define marital roles – emotional orientation sustain closeness, trust, and resilience. Conversely, disconnectedness, manifested through avoidance, withdrawal, or neglect, poses a substantial threat to relationship stability. These findings affirm the universal importance of emotional engagement in marriage while highlighting the need for

culturally grounded counseling practices. By integrating cultural awareness with emotional education, practitioners can help couples balance social obligations with genuine emotional connection.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential response and social desirability biases. Third, the relatively low explanatory power ($R^2 = .06$) indicates that additional variables, such as socio-economic stress, family involvement, and digital media use, may also influence marital bonding.

Future research should therefore employ longitudinal or mixed method designs to capture temporal changes and deeper insights into emotional dynamics. Expanding the sample to include rural populations and incorporating qualitative interviews would further enrich understanding by revealing context-specific meanings of intimacy and withdrawal within collectivist frameworks.

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