

EFFECTS OF CONFLICTS WITH IN-LAWS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF MARRIED WOMEN

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Abstract

The present paper addresses the adverse effects of conflicts with in-laws on the psychological well-being of married women. The study was comparative in nature. Approximately, fifty (N=50) women having conflicts with their in-laws were compared with a sample of fifty women (N = 50) without conflicts in relation to psychological well-being (anger, hostility and life satisfaction). It was assumed that women having conflicts with their in-laws would significantly report more anger and hostility but less satisfaction with their life than women without conflicts. Data was obtained from participants using Brief Interview Form, subscales of Anger and Hostility and Satisfaction with Life Scale. Statistical analysis of data, independent t-test, reveals that women having conflicts with in-laws reported more anger, hostility and less life satisfaction as compared to women without conflicts. Conflicts with in-laws have profound impact on psychological well-being of married women.

Keywords: In-laws, Conflicts, Psychological Well-being, Women

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Introduction

People of South Asian countries prefer to dwell in extended family (Kadir, Fikree, Khan & Sajan, 2003). Women, after marriage, have to accommodate accordingly. Adjusting in extended family/ in-laws becomes challenging for married women when they encounter conflicts. Virtually, in entire South Asia, conflict with in-laws has emerged as a prime issue for married women. In China, conflict with mother-in-law was reported as a third significant stressful life event (Zheng & Lin, 1994). In Hong Kong and India, daughters-in-law also reported their mothers-in-law perpetuating domestic violence against them (Leung et al, 2002).

Pakistani married women also undergo the same mental distress. A research conducted in 2007 shows that about 97% women reported to have conflicts with in-laws (Ali & Bustamante-Gavino, 2007). Conflicts occur when in-laws desire to handle family finance (Nakazawan, 1996), increase household responsibilities and restrict the mobility of daughter-in-law in the community (Khan, 2007), and own the authority of handling family matters (Ali & Bustamante-Gavino, 2007). In most of the families, in-laws blow the problematic situation instigating the dispute with husbands. Showing disobedience to parents-in-law and visiting natal family or friends without taking permission from them result in serious arguments with husbands. In a study, about 36.4% women reported to have arguments with their husbands because of their in-laws (Fikree & Razzak & Durocher, 2005). Another study also has documented in-laws as a stimulating factor of marital conflict among 30% married women (Fikree & Bhatti, 1999).

Encountering frequent conflicts or problems within in-law family, women's psychological well-being gets deteriorated. A large body of research evidence depicts that mental disturbance in married women of Pakistan is the direct result of marital/family conflicts (Khan, 1998). Due to conflicts within in-law family, women are more vulnerable to psychiatric problems (Ali et al, 2002). Problems with in-laws are salient contributors of developing common mental disorders (Batoool et al, 2008). Research evidences show that the problematic relations with in-laws are leading cause of depression (Mirza & Jenkins, 2004), anxiety (Niaz 1994), suicidal behaviors (Khan, 1994; 1997], and mood disorders (Rabbani & Raja, 2000).

Furthermore, conflicts within family environment adversely affect the sense of satisfaction in life. Social support determines the life satisfaction and family is the leading

supporter for any individual (Böhnke, 2005). Relationship with in-laws is one of the main social relations of married women (Niaz, 1994). Support from husband, and less difficulties in living with in-laws contribute the women's agency to great extent (Allendorf, 2009).

Keeping this in view, anger, hostility and life satisfaction are being examined as the components of psychological well-being of married women in the context of conflicts they have been facing within in-law family. Less anger and hostility but more satisfaction with life is presumed to be the indication of psychological well-being. In the present study, it has been assumed that;

- Women having conflicts with their in-laws will significantly report more anger than women without conflicts.
- Women having conflicts with their in-laws will significantly report more hostility than women without conflicts
- Women having conflicts with their in-laws will significantly report less satisfaction with their life than women without conflicts

Method

Sample

For the current investigation, total one hundred (N=100) married women were recruited through snowball sampling technique. Half of the sample (N=50) comprised of women having conflicts with their in-laws, whereas other fifty (N=50) women were without conflicts. The ages of all participants ranged from 21 to 50 years with minimum educational level of grade ten. Minimum duration of their marriage was one year. They were living with their husbands and in-laws in a joint family system. They all were from middle class families residing in the metropolitan city, Karachi, Pakistan.

Measurements

Interview form was used to collect information concerning demographic characteristics (age, educational level, duration of marriage, number of children, number of in-law family members, head of the family, residential area) of women, their daily routine (daily responsibilities at home) and conflicts they had been encountering living with their in-laws.

Psychological well-being was examined in terms of anger, hostility and life satisfaction. Urdu Versions of Anger, Hostility, and Satisfaction with Life Scale were used to remove language barrier. Anger and Hostility are the subscales of Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992). Anger subscale has seven items and Hostility Subscale has eight items. Reliability for Anger subscale is ($r=0.82$) and for Hostility subscale is ($r=0.74$). All items of both subscales were scored on 5-point rating scale.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) comprising of 5 items was used to examine satisfaction with life among participants of the present study (Diener et al, 1985). Reliability of its Urdu Version is ($r=0.87$). Items were scored on 7-point rating scale.

Procedure

Via snowball sampling technique, all participants were approached and interviewed sitting in their own homes. They all were debriefed with regards to research purpose and methods of responding on measurements used in the study. Each participant was interviewed in one to one setting ensuring the ethics of privacy and confidentiality. During brief interview, they were requested to verbally report all information per instruction. After that, they were given the scales of Anger, Hostility, and Satisfaction With Life Scale, one at a time, to be filled by themselves. They were requested to read the instructions written on the top of questionnaires first and then respond to the items accordingly. On the completion of administration, they were thanked for being volunteer participants of the current research project.

Data was analyzed through SPSS, Version 17.0. Frequencies and percentages were computed regarding demographic information and nature of conflicts with in-laws. Independent t- test was employed to examine the difference among women of both groups on the variables of anger, hostility, and satisfaction with life (psychological well-being).

Results

Table: 1

Demographic Characteristics of Women (N=100)

Characteristics	Frequencies (f)	Percentages(%)
Age		
21-30	36	36
31- 40	43	43*
41-50	21	21
Educational level		
Secondary	22	22
Higher Secondary	40	40*
Graduate	25	25
Masters	13	13
Duration of Marriage		
1-5 years	28	28
6-10years	41	41*
11-15 years	11	11
16-20 years	17	17
Above	03	3
No. of Children		
1	17	17
2	14	14
3	24	24
4	29	29*
5	11	11
Above	05	05
No. of in-law family members		
10 or less than 10	57	57*
More than 10	43	43

It is revealed (Table: 1) that most of the women of present study of both groups (43%) were falling in the age range of 31 to 40 years, 40% were educated up to higher secondary. Majority (41%) was married for 6 to 10 years, and 29% were having four children. Maximum numbers of in-law family members were 10 as reported by majority of the women (57%).

Table: 2

Descriptive statistics of psychological well-being among women with conflicts and without conflicts

Psychological Well-being	Women having Conflicts with in-laws		Women without Conflicts with in-laws	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Anger	22.54	4.66516	17.70	6.15862
Hostility	24.12	5.46096	18.78	5.78982
Satisfaction with Life	23.40	7.07107	26.32	6.24480

Results (Table:2) show mean scores of women having conflicts with their in-laws on anger scale are ($M=22.54$, $SD = 4.66516$), on hostility ($M=24.12$, $SD = 5.46096$), and on life satisfaction ($M=23.40$, $SD = 7.07107$). Whereas, mean scores of women without conflicts with in-laws on anger scale ($M=17.70$, 6.15862), on hostility scale ($M= 18.78$, $SD =5.78982$) and on life satisfaction are ($M = 26.32$, $SD= 6.24480$)

Table: 3

Psychological Well-being	<i>N</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig(2-tailed)</i>
Anger	100	98	4.430	.000
Hostility	100	98	4.744	.000
Satisfaction With Life	100	98	-2.18	.031

Results (Table: 3) reveal a significant difference among married women with, and without conflicts, in relation to their psychological well-being. Women who reported conflicts with their in-laws also reported more anger ($t = 4.430$, $df = 98$, $p = .000$), more hostility ($t =$

4.744, $df = 98$, $p = .000$), and less satisfaction with their life ($t = -2.18$, $df = 98$, $p = .031$) than women who did not report the conflicts with their in-laws.

Discussion

Present research findings have demonstrated the deleterious effects of conflicts with in-laws on the psychological well-being of the participant women. Women who were encountering conflicts reported experiencing more anger and hostility, and less satisfaction with their lives when compared with women who did not report the above mentioned conflicts with their in-laws (Table: 3).

Psychological theories connote anger as the production of unfair treatment, unreasonable expectations, and violation of rules and norms (Greenberger & Padesky, 1995). Women are sensitive creatures who are easily influenced by the quality of their relationships. Their sensitivity to interpersonal relations plays an imperative role in reacting angrily to interpersonal events [Fehr, 1999; Jack, 2001]. Conflicts with in-laws (for example; controlling finance, imposing social restrictions and assigning huge household responsibilities) are usually perceived as an unfair treatment, goading angry feelings and thoughts in married women. Dwelling in the stressful environment, they angrily react in response to perceived hurt for which their close relations are responsible. Further, they have more expectations from their significant relations. In-law family is an immediate family for married women in Pakistan, with whom they develop expectations with regards to their own rights and needs. Rights to move in the society, to have complete financial assistance, and spare time to relax are some of the social and religious rights that are expected to be respected by the In-law family. Violation of these rights and needs are, therefore, perceived as an absolute unfair or unreasonable treatment provoking anger in women as depicted by results (Table:3).

In the present endeavor, women having conflicts with their in-laws also reported more hostility than women without conflicts. Hostility, here, refers to a submissive manner of response including negative thoughts, resentment, cynical distrust or suspiciousness (Buss & Perry, 1992). Negative life events and lack of social support are contributing factors of hostility (Scherwitz, 1991). Current research findings indicate that conflicts with in-laws served as

negative life events or experiences for married women that contaminated their beliefs and thoughts. When women underwent the painful experiences, they were overwhelmed by resentment, cynicism, and mistrust. People holding beliefs of cynicism and mistrust expect the re-occurrence of hurtful experiences and perceive others as having selfish motives (Buss & Perry, 1992). In the current study, these beliefs might have been developed due to the conflicts frequently faced by women. As a result, women perceived their in-laws as selfish and showed extreme disdain towards them. Beliefs of mistrust, cynicism and feelings of lack of support from significant relations seemed to develop hostility (Table:3).

Another significant finding of the present investigation is that women encountering conflicts with in-laws reported to be less satisfied with their life as compared to women without conflicts (Table: 3). Life satisfaction refers to one's judgment towards own life/circumstances (Diener, 1985). This judgment is based on standards and criteria one sets for his or her own life. Married women in South Asia have their own standards and criteria for a happy life. Pakistani culture emphasizes on getting married and staying in this relation forever. Girls are still brought up with the dream of having a happy marital life. Traditionally, Pakistani married women have to live with their in-laws either for a few years or for life-time. For these reasons, women, in this culture, immensely desire to have quality relationships not only with husbands but their in-laws as well.

Previous studies suggest that women's well-being is associated with the emotional make up of their relationships (Umberson, 1996). A positive perception of family support has a strong association with life satisfaction and vice-versa (Yeung & Fung, 2007). The current findings support this evidence; women reporting conflicts related to insufficient financial support, social restriction, and a huge burden of household chores were less satisfied with their lives as compared to women who did not report these conflicts. Attending to all household responsibilities alone, instigated the thought of being treated as a servant for all. They did not have access to their husbands' income (Jan & Masood, 2008). Basic needs were not being fulfilled. A mere errand to the nearby grocery store required the permission of in-laws. Lack of reciprocity in relationships diminished the sense of being loved and respected by significant ones (Wong, Yoo & Stewart, 2007). As a consequence, these women developed a negative perception of family support that laid the grounds for an unsatisfied life.

It should, however, be noted that the present study highlighted the psychological and family issues of full time home- makers (housewives) only. Full time home- makers (women) are usually dependent on their husbands and in-laws for all of their needs. Taking into account this limitation, further studies should be carried out to examine the effects of conflicts with in-laws on working women who are self-supporting, independent, and have access to facilities available in their community. Married women belonging to the higher socio-economic status or the upper class, who assumed to have more autonomy regarding their married lives, need also to be studied regarding family conflicts and psychological well-being in-order to better, understand our family systems.

Conclusion

To conclude, the current research re-establishes the fact that marriage is a strong institution in Pakistan that binds families with each other via the newly married couple. Its quality develops the self-esteem of the married woman. Her well-being is proportional to the quality of relationships with the husband and his biological family; her in-laws. Conflicts with them are risk factors for anger, hostility, and less satisfaction in life. If women are treated by their in-laws as part of their own family, given the desired respect and affection, it will be easy, not only for daughters-in-law but also for all in-law family members, to establish a psychologically healthy functioning family system.

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