

Impact of Covid 19 on Perceived Stress and Relationship Quality of Married Individuals in India

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Abstract

In early 2020 the novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) spread across the world and dramatically affected the daily lives of everyone. This study aims to assess the impact of COVID -19 pandemic on perceived stress and relationship quality of married individuals in India. The chief objectives of the study were to identify if individuals experienced a greater number of stressors during the pandemic, if the numbers of years of marriage and gender had an impact on perceived stress and relationship quality and if perceived stress levels influenced relationship quality. Using an online survey, data from 135 married individuals (49 Males, 86 Females) between the ages of 25-55 years were collected. The Perceived Stress Scale by Cohen (1983) was used to measure perceived stress. A 24-item Relationship Quality Questionnaire was developed for the purpose of the study by the researcher based on the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model proposed by Pietromonaco and Overall (2020). Psychometric properties of the scale were established, and this scale was used to assess relationship quality. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, independent sample t-test. One way ANOVA, Tukey test and Regression analysis was used to analyse the data. Results indicated that about 25% of the sample reported experiencing more than 3 stressors. It was found that women experienced greater amounts of perceived stress than men and men tended to have higher relationship quality than women. The study also revealed that there was a significant relationship between perceived stress and relationship quality and perceived stress had a significant influence on relationship quality.

Keywords: perceived stress, relationship quality, covid-19, pandemic, gender differences

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Introduction

A relationship is characterized by a stable pattern of interaction between at least two individuals (Asendorpf & Banse, 2000; Hinde, 1993). Relationship quality refers largely to how individuals feel about their relationship (Morry et al., 2010). The construct of relationship quality has been operationalized differently by different researchers as it includes a lot of different aspects to it. Intimacy, agreement, autonomy and sexual harmony are considered the most important dimensions of relationship quality (Hassebrauck & Fehr, 2002).

Relationships are an important part of our lives as we are social beings. Especially at a time when there is great uncertainty, anxiety and stress, we tend to fall back on our relationships. Among other things, stress has been found to be a prospective threat to relationship stability and its functioning (Bodenmann, 1997). The impact of stress on relationship quality has been well documented by theoretical models. A review of research literature however, points that one's appraisal of a stressor affects marital quality

(Bodenmann 2005). The crisis theory (Hill, 1949) focuses on how individual resources used for coping can buffer the adverse effects of stress and hence on marital outcomes. Research has shown that daily hassles affected relationship quality of intimate partners more than critical life events (Bodenmann, Ledermann and Bradbury, 2007). Since COVID 19 pandemic precipitated stress from daily hassles and also critical life events and marriage is the most intimate relationship, the current study sought to understand the extent to which the pandemic affected perceived stress levels and relationship quality.

Pietromonaco and Overall (2020) presented a conceptual framework based on the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model and suggests that COVID-19 related external stressors are likely to increase harmful dyadic processes which may reduce relationship quality of couples. The present study has employed this model to operationalize and understand relationship quality which includes exploring aspects of responsive support, warmth and affection, relationship satisfaction and positive interactions.

Methodology

Aim of the study

The aim of the present study is to determine impact of COVID -19 pandemic on perceived stress and relationship quality of married individuals in India.

Objectives:

1. To identify if individuals experienced a greater number of stressors during the COVID 19 pandemic.
2. To determine if gender and the numbers of years of marriage had an impact on perceived stress and relationship quality
3. To find out if perceived stress levels had an impact on relationship quality among married individuals in India

Hypotheses:

- H₁: There will be no significant difference in the level of stress experienced between married men and women during the COVID-19 pandemic
- H₂: There will be no significant difference in the relationship quality experiences between married men and women during the COVID-19 pandemic
- H₃: Number of years individuals have been married will have no impact on perceived stress experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic
- H₄: Number of years individuals have been married will have no impact on the Relationship Quality experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic
- H₅: There will be no significant relationship between the perceived stress and relationship quality of married individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic
- H₆: There will not be a significant influence of the perceived stress on the relationship quality of married individuals during the COVID 19 pandemic

Research Design

Ex-post facto research design was employed. The data was collected by employing the questionnaire method that involved circulating Google Forms through social media platforms.

Sample

Convenient sampling method was employed in the sample design. The sample included married individuals between 25-55 years. The sample size was 135 which included 49 males and 86 females.

Instruments Used

- Demographic details were collected.
- The number of stressors experienced was assessed by giving a list of potential stressors in which Participants were asked to choose the stressors they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Perceived Stress Scale by Sheldon Cohen (1983) was employed in the study to assess individuals' level of perceived stress. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the PSS-10 is 0.79 and it also has been found to have a high construct and concurrent validity.
- The Relationship Quality was assessed through a questionnaire which was developed for this study based on the conceptual framework of Vulnerability Stress Adaptation model proposed by Pietromonaco and Overall (2020) to reflect aspects of Responsive Support, Warmth and Affection, Relationship Satisfaction and Positive Interactions. Psychometric properties of the scale were established. The Cronbach alpha for the entire scale was found to be 0.97. Content validity was also established. Factor analysis was done to obtain dimensions and a single factor emerged which showed 89% of the variance. This was named Relationship Quality. Relationship Quality is defined as the extent to which married individuals showed responsive support, warmth and affection, were satisfied in their relationships and had positive interactions with their partner.
- An open - ended question was included which inquired individuals about their relationship during the pandemic to further the understanding of the influence of stress.

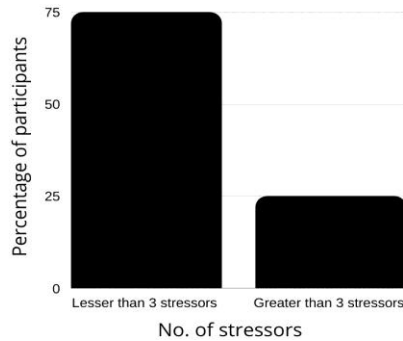
Statistical Analysis

Descriptive Statistics, Pearson's correlation, Independent t-tests, one way ANOVA, Tukey test and Regression Analysis were used to analyze the data.

Results And Discussion

Figure 1

Shows percentage of Individuals who reported lesser than 3 and greater than 3 stressors during the COVID 19 pandemic



From the figure, it was evident that about 25% of the sample experienced greater than 3 stressors and 75% of the sample experienced less than 3 stressors. The participants of the study were given a list of stressors from which they were asked to choose from. This list included a range of stressors from work stress, increased responsibility from elderly/childcare, stress from isolation, loss of significant people, health and sickness, financial constraints and loss of job. It was found that stress from isolation either from quarantine, sickness or loss of loved one was a topmost concern among most of the respondents, which included even the 75% of the sample who reported a smaller number of stressors. However, perceived stress scores remained in the moderate range probably because individuals still got the much-needed break to halt and rethink life situations despite the adverse effects of the pandemic.

Table 1:

Independent t-test between men and women with respect to Perceived Stress and Relationship Quality

Variables	Groups	N	Mean Deviation	Std.	t
Perceived Stress	Men	49	15.04	7.65	-4.72***
	Women	86	21.04	6.06	
Relationship Quality	Men	49	106.71	13.41	4.415***
	Women	86	92.59	23.75	

*** $p < 0.001$, significant at 0.001 level

From the above table, it is evident that there is a significant difference between married males and females with respect to Perceived Stress $t(133) = -4.72$, $p < 0.001$ and Relationship Quality $t(133) = 4.415$, $p < 0.001$. Hence hypothesis H_1 and H_2 are rejected. This result is similar to the findings in the study done by Matud (2004) which revealed that females experienced greater levels of stress and were mostly related to family and health-related events. Most of the females in the study were homemakers and hence the responsibilities at home seem to have increased for females during the pandemic with children and husbands at home. From the responses of the open-ended question, it is evident that several females felt that their needs for support, warmth and affection were not sufficiently met. With more responsibilities, the need, desire and opportunity for joint activities and intimacy was greatly reduced. This might be associated with lower levels of relationship quality.

Table 2:

ANOVA for Perceived Stress and Relationship Quality with respect to the Number of years individual have remained married (0-10 years, 11-20 years, 21-30 years)

Measures	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Perceived Stress	316.64	2	158.32	3.10*
	6738.95	132	51.05	
Relationship Quality	3528.93	2	1754.46	3.93*
	59282.37	132	449.10	

* $p < 0.05$, significant at 0.05 level

From the above table it is evident that the number of years of marriage has an influence on how individuals's perceived stress $F(2,132) = 3.10$, $p < 0.05$ and their relationship quality at $F(2, 132) = 3.93$, $p < 0.05$. Hence H_3 and H_4 are rejected. Post hoc showed that there was a significant difference in perceived stress and relationship quality between individuals who are married for 11-20 years and 21-30 years. Individuals who are married for 11-20 years may have experienced more perceived stress due to adolescent children, aging parents, work stress and also increased household responsibilities and this increased stress may have also reduced their relationship quality compared to those who were

married for 21-30 years as they may have fewer financial troubles and may be well adjusted in their marriage as a result of long years of togetherness. The results are in line with a study by Gorchoff, John and Helson (2008) which revealed that marital satisfaction increased in middle age due to the empty nest transition.

Table 3:

Pearson Correlation between Perceived Stress and Relationship Quality

Variable	Perceived Stress	Relationship Quality
Perceived Stress	-	
Relationship Quality	-.375**	-

** p< 0.01, significant at 0.01 level

From the above table it is evident that there is a significant inverse relationship between Perceived Stress and Relationship Quality $r = -0.375$, $p < 0.01$. Hence H_5 is rejected. It shows that higher the Perceived stress, lower the relationship quality. Since the relationship between these two variables is small, it can be said that a lot of other factors like attachment styles, personalities, communication, and intimacy may play a role in mediating the relationship between these two variables.

Table 4:

Regression Analysis Summary for predicting Relationship Quality

Variable	B	SE	β
(Constant)	121.73***	4.44	
Perceived Stress	-1.02***	0.22	-0.58

***p<0.001, significant at 0.001 level, $R^2 = 0.14$

The R^2 value of 0.14 reveals that the predictor variable explained 14% variance in the outcome variable with $F(1,133) = 21.65$, $p < 0.001$. Hence Relationship Quality was successfully predicted by Perceived Stress ($B = -1.02$, $p < 0.001$). This result is similar to the findings of the study done by Balzarini, et al. (2020) which revealed that COVID-19 related stressors lead to poorer relationship quality and was also higher for individuals who perceived their partner to show poor responsive support. This was also evident from the responses of the open-ended question which revealed that

individuals who had high perceived stress actually found their relationship to be worse than before and some even found it unbearable. The individuals with lower perceived stress revealed that they got to spend quality time after a long time, and this actually strengthened their relationship.

Findings of the Study

- A great majority of participants experienced less than 3 stressors while 25% of the participants reported experiencing greater than 3 and most of the stressors were COVID – specific.
- Females experienced more stress than males during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Males reported higher levels of Relationship Quality than females during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Married individuals who experienced greater amounts of stress, also had a lower Relationship Quality during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Perceived stress had a significant influence on relationship quality. Higher amounts of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with poor relationship quality.

Implications of the Study

Uncertainty has a potential to enhance stress levels. The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated unprecedented stress by eliciting fear and confusion stemming from having to face uncertainty. Families, especially ones that were unprepared for a crisis of this magnitude were robbed of its vitality and the stress they experienced created room for chaos and confusion. However staying together as a family seemed to have buffered a little against the debilitating effects of stress despite a sizable number reporting more stressors. This has clearly shown that individuals need to be more equipped with resources to deal with the stressor both at the personal and interpersonal level. At the personal level, teaching individuals about several stress reduction techniques like relaxation techniques, Stress inoculation training or other cognitive behavioural therapies is imperative. Such interventions might equip individuals to keep their stress levels at such uncertain times under check. Educating married individuals about adaptive

dyadic processes like responsive support and affection, positive conflict resolution methods and effective communication to strengthen their relationships and to gain understanding about how these could be used as a buffer against stress during the COVID-19 pandemic and other such future catastrophes.

Limitations Of the Study

- There is a high possibility of social desirability bias due to the method employed for data collection.
- The study was limited to assessing married individuals with good educational background and income.

Suggestions For Further Research

- The study can be conducted on married individuals with different demographics.
- There is a need to study factors like pre-existing vulnerabilities- like attachment styles, personality traits, temperament, several internal stressors originating from within the relationship, the coping mechanisms each to gain a comprehensive understanding of the several factors that may have affected relationship quality during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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