

Relationship of Marital Attitudes with Adverse Childhood Experiences and Present Family Relationship in Young Adults

Soni Kewalramani and Sneha Hazra

Amity University, Uttar Pradesh

Marital Attitudes and Expectations refer to an individual's thoughts, beliefs and approach towards the institution of marriage and relevant anticipations regarding the characteristics of one's own marital relationship. Adverse Childhood Experience insinuates one's exposure to intensive and habitual toxic stress or traumatic events before the age of 18 years. Family Relationship pertains to the degree of connectedness among the members in a household. The present paper aimed to analyse the association of exposure to adverse childhood experiences and the aspects of present family relationship (i.e., cohesiveness, expressiveness and conflict) with marital attitudes and expectations in Indian young adults.

Keywords: Marital Attitudes, Expectation, Adverse Childhood Experience, Family Relationship, Young Adults

The need of humans to affiliate has led to the genesis of various forms of companionship. Marriage was one such institution; it has been catering to the tendency of individuals to ally and procreate since time immemorial. The concept of marriage has evolved over time in various aspects. Now, marriage neither stands as economic liaison nor as an act of forming alliance between families. (Stritof, 2019) Individuals seek to tie the knot with a partner they love and complement. There may be several factors that determine one choice of partner and decision for marriage, such as expectation and attitudes towards marriage, marital history of parents, attachment behaviors, etc. This paper focuses to explore the how the attitudes and expectations towards marriage in young adults may relate to their adverse childhood experiences and present family relationships.

Marital Attitudes and Expectations

Marriage refers to the cultural and legal contract embarking the emotional, familial, and sexual unification of two individuals. There have been several characteristic features of marriage: creating lineage and holding parental responsibility to provide for one's children and family, ensuring legitimate inheritance of property, socially recognized sexual relationship, division of labour based on gender role,

exchanging of good will, and forming alliance between families, etc. (Kanodia, 2016)

The processes entailing marriage are diverse, varying across cultures, religions, states, family traditions, etc. However, there are five standard stages in marriage which one nearly goes through (Rev. Tony & Shola Peters, Rock Solid Marriages):

Stage One- Romance: The phase of courtship and fantasizing that may last from two months to two years. One idealizes one's partner and their relationship in this stage and regards conflict in negative connotation, thus avoiding it. One lets their guards down to be together with their partner, without whom their life seems unimaginable, as much as they can. Biologically, this stage entails releasing of happy and love hormones such as, endorphins and oxytocin.

Stage Two- Disillusionment: The couple gets adjusted to the reality and familiarization in this phase. They face conflicts that need mutual resolution; they get to know each other's flaws and see beyond the prior perfection in the relationship. This phase may see confusion and disappointments.

Stage Three- Power Struggle: This phase involves distress that seems hard to cope with as conflict intensifies. The couple try to define each

other's unacceptable behaviours, seek to draw necessary boundaries, and may have second thoughts about the relationship. Failure to deal with resentments respectfully and effectively, lead to fallout at this stage in most cases.

Stage Four- Stability: This is a phase for friendship and reconciliation where the partners develop a sense of peace and feel greater feelings of love, trust, and connectedness. They continue to maintain the interest in each other, as created in the romance phase, while exploring other areas of intrigue that may not be common.

Stage Five- Commitment: This is a transformative phase of acceptance and real love, where one consciously decides to be with their partner in spite of their flaws and differences within. The partners act as a team in facilitating mutually planned life, overcoming challenges, and deciding on future expectations.

Marital Attitudes refers to how one conceptualizes the institution of marriage and its related facets. Marital expectations refer to the pre-notions about the should and should nots in one's marriage. One forms their marital attitudes primarily on the basis of their opinions developed through the marital relationship of their parents or guardians, and also influenced by one's social experiences and observation.

Individuals set their marital expectations in accordance with their marital attitudes. Some common marital expectations are compatibility, empathy, respect despite differences, affection, companionship, sharing quality time, adequate sexual activity, commitment, emotional and physical intimacy, communication, humour, healthy conflict resolution, offering space and maintaining boundaries, collaborative spiritual growth, effective dealing with in-laws, overcoming challenges and mutuality in decisions, etc. (Dave Willis, 2018; Tonda R. Brian, 2019)

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences refers to one's exposure to traumatic incidents, inveterate toxicity, or major distress before 18 years of age. It can include instances of individuals facing physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and household dysfunctions-

mental illness, incarceration, substance abuse, violence, or divorce in family.

Negative manifestations of ACEs may be seen in later adulthood years. Individuals may be prone to affected physical health (obesity, cancer, stroke, diabetes, etc.), mental health (depression, suicidal tendencies, emotional issues etc.) and behavioural problems (addiction to smoking, alcohol or substance, physical inactivity, poor quality of work, etc.)

The impact of ACEs on adult's personal relations can also be instantiated as follows - sexual abuse in childhood may influence one's sexual relations, divorce of parents may lead to refraining from marital relationship and preferring cohabitation, or an earlier or late marriage (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Cui, Wickrama, Lorenz, & Conger, 2011), exposure to violence on mother may lead to intolerance of any conflict and arguments with partner may act a trigger to unresolved trauma, and so on.

A child's opinion towards their parent's marriage influences their own intent to get married. (Kasearu, 2010) Thus, adverse experiences in childhood can negatively affect an individual's attitude towards marriage; their marital expectations can seek to experience what they have missed out during childhood (security, comfort, care, etc.) or to avoid the adversities faced priorly (example: an individual with an abusive and alcohol parent may expect their spouse's abstinence from liquor and ability to resolve conflict in a healthy manner)

Family Relationship

Family relationship refers to the degree of affiliation in one's household. It is based on one's perception of their family's 'getting-along' nature. A family's relationship is reflected through the degree of commitment and supportiveness of the members towards each other. Family dynamics is regulated by how the household members choose to communicate and express their feelings or opinions in a healthy and effective manner, and the effort they put to resolve conflicts collaboratively. Thus, cohesiveness, expressiveness and conflict are the fundamental aspects portraying the relationship among a family. (Moos and Moos, 1994)

One's family relationship serves as a basic guide to one's marital attitudes and expectations. A healthy relationship between parents influences a positive image of marriage while a negative parenting relationship may develop a negative schema towards marital relationships. Parents' opinions about a well-functioning marriage may help develop what one expects from their marital relationships. One may seek dimensions of their parents' good marriage (communication, team-playing, honesty, etc.) in theirs' while tend to avoid negative aspects in marital relationship of parents' (unhealthy conflict, abuse, suspicion, etc.)

The styles of parenting and involvement patterns of parents may further influence how one expects to take up parenting duties and strategize child rearing collaboratively with their spouse.

Review of Literature

Studies around Marital Attitude and Expectations have explored the factors that correlate and influence the tenets and domains of marital perceptions. Allendorf, et al. (2019) studied developmental idealism- beliefs and values, to influence the perception of late marriage as ideal in youth. A young adult's expectations about marriage and beliefs about marriage centrality was studied to have a high possibility of being modelled by elder siblings. (Cassinat & Jensen, 2019). Willoughby, Hall & Goff (2015) studied marriage to be considered more important than career, leisure activities and parenting in young adults on an average, and associated marriage centrality to sexual activity, binge-drinking and other outcomes. A positive correlation between marital quality, reflection of gender roles and life satisfaction was revealed by Semanur Kodan Çetinkaya and Başaran Gençdoğan, (2014). Willoughby, et al. (2011) deemed that an individual's marital attitudes are related to that of their parents'.

Family Relationship and Marital Attitudes & Expectations have been related in various studies Goldberg and Carlson (2015) studied a reciprocal relationship between parental relationship quality and behaviour of children in stable and cohabiting families, where supportiveness in parental relationship

experiences fewer behavioural problems in children and also act as a factor on which the internalization or externalization of children relies. The study of Soderman et al. (2015) found that a girl's good relationship with her father encourages positive expectations regarding marital success, however a similar effect was not realized for boys with regard to their maternal relationship. Cunningham and Thorton (2013) studied attitudes (regarding cohabitation, premarital sex, and singlehood) may be transmitted intergenerationally when the quality of marital relationship between parents are high. Randal D. Day (2009) aimed to highlight the importance of marital quality of parents- strengths, interpersonal protective factors, conflicts, and ability to resolve them, etc. in child outcomes- including several factors such as self-esteem, anxiety levels, etc. that are carried into adulthood. The same paper also discussed that both marital relationship and relationship between parent and adolescent correlates with various outcomes (physical and mental health, sexual activity, religious activity, use of substance, etc) in middle adolescence and early adulthood. Steinberg et al. (2006) regarded insecure attachments with parents as a factor influencing negative perception of conflicts which in turn evokes negative marital attitudes and experiences in romantic relationships.

The study of Cui, Fincham & Durtschi (2010) marked that perception towards parental divorce relies on inter-parental relationship and marital quality pre divorce, and a positive perception towards divorce elicited low commitment in romantic relationships in young adults. Exposure to violence in earlier years affects marital adjustments in adulthood and creates anxiety related to abandonment and fear of intimacy (Godbout et al., 2009). Riggio & Weiser's study (2008) considered parental conflict and divorce to shape negative marital attitudes. Hollie Nichole Dillon (2005) aimed to understand marital expectations as realistic, pessimistic, or idealistic of individuals having experienced violence or divorce in family. Her study did not realize a significant relationship between the variables of study, however, indicated a significant difference in the marital expectations of males and females. In the study, conducted

by Boyer-Pennington et al. (2001), the results reveal that individuals experiencing parental divorce do not necessarily show a lower intent to marry rather hope for a successful marital relationship in future.

There have been a significant number of analyses around the subject of marital attitude and expectations, adverse childhood experiences and family relationships, however, findings establishing direct relationships between the variables of the study are limited.

Rationale

India has been seeing a gradually changing trend in the institution of marriage. The youth prefer marital relationship more for its romantic affiliation and companionship rather than for any religious, societal, or economic essence. There has been a shift in various aspects of marital institution, such as the purpose of getting married, criteria of partner selection, practice of rituals, governing social and moral standards around marriage, tenets of marital relations, deciding on the right age for marriage, stability of marriage and rejection of the idea that considers marriage as an absolute and unbreakable bond, etc. (Mondal, 2013; Ruwali, 2018; Kaur & Singh 2020)

As marriage is muchly based on personal concepts now, it is essential to focus on subjective experiences that help develop one's idea towards marital institution. It is important to analyse relevant aspects that may have significant effects on an individual's schema of marital relationships. The literature review suggests that adverse childhood experiences have been studied to have both negative or no significant effect on marital attitudes, and the aspect of divorce has been perceived both positively and negatively in shaping attitudes towards marriage. The mixed findings thus prompted a further probing into the same variables.

Family relationships that one experiences in their earlier years of life is established as a factor affecting later life beliefs. However, to the best of the knowledge of the researcher, there is insufficient exploration about the effect of

family relationship at present. The beliefs and expectations one form regarding the aspects of marriage may get reinforced or motivated for alterations as per current family relationship. To validate the same, a relationship between cohesiveness, expressiveness and conflict in present family relationship and marital attitude and expectations was aimed for studying.

A sample of young adults, 20-30 years, was considered as it is in this phase of life individuals develops their own principles of life and seeks affiliation to the marital institution. These years also form a part of the 'Intimacy vs Isolation' phase of Erikson's psychosocial development, where an individual seeks to affiliate romantically. The sample was expected to be unmarried to get an authentic perception and anticipations regarding marital institution without having experienced it in actual.

Lastly, realization of the effect of adverse childhood experiences on marital attitudes and expectations or its relationship with present family relationship may elicit better understanding of distorted beliefs or unresolved aspects that an individual may work on. This may also be helpful in provision of effective therapeutic guidance or facilitation towards marital and couple counselling.

Purpose

- i. To study the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and marital intent, attitudes and expectations.
- ii. To study the relationship between the domains of present family relationship i.e. cohesiveness, expressiveness and conflict and marital intent, attitudes and expectations.

Hypotheses

For objective (i), the hypotheses are as follows:

- a. Exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences will be negatively related to Intent to Marry.
- b. Exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences will be negatively related to Attitudes towards Marriage.

- c. Exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences will be positively related to Marital Expectations.

For objective (ii), the hypotheses are as follows:

- d. Cohesiveness in present family will be positively related to Marital Attitudes and Expectations.
- e. There will a positive relationship between Expressiveness in present family and Marital Attitudes and Expectation.
- f. There will a negative relationship between Conflict in present family and Intent to Marry.
- g. Conflict in present family will be negatively related to Marital Attitudes.
- h. Conflict in present family will be negatively related to Marital Expectations.

Method

Variables

Adverse Childhood Experiences: It refers to the exposure to traumatic events such as -physical/ psychological/ sexual abuse, household dysfunction- mental illness, incarceration, substance abuse, violence, or divorce in family, before the age of 18 years.

Family Relationship at present: It considers the aspects of cohesiveness, expressiveness, and conflict in one's household scenario at current.

Marital Attitude and Expectations: It refers to the thoughts and beliefs about the aspects of marriage and prenotions about one's marital relationships.

Instruments

- (i) Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Scale by Felitti and colleagues, 1998, is a reliable and valid tool comprising 17 items that measures if an individual had faced physical abuse, psychological trauma, sexual abuse, use of substance, mental illness, domestic violence, or incarceration in family before the age of 18 years.
- (ii) Brief Family Relationship Scale (BFRS)

adapted from the Relationship Dimension of the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1994) by Tin Fok et al. (2014) is a satisfactorily reliable tool consisting of 16 items measuring cohesiveness, expressiveness, and conflict in one's family dimension.

- (iii) Marital Attitude and Expectation Scale (MAES) by Stacey S. Park (2012) comprises 36 items under three distinct scales with good psychometric properties, namely Intent to Marry scale ($\alpha=.91$), General Attitude towards Marriage scale ($\alpha=.84$) and Aspects of Marriage scale ($\alpha=.92$), which seeks to measure an individual's willingness to get married, favourableness towards marital relations and expectations from it.

Participants

The sample consisted of 104 Indian based unmarried young adults within 20 to 30 years of age, 52 males and 52 females. Demographic details and the responses to the questionnaires were collected from the consenting participants through an online mode. A structured interview was conducted in the same to understand in detail the subjects' idea about the purpose of marriage, recipe to a successful marital relationship, what an ideal marriage looks like and influence of parents'/ guardian's marital relation.

Scoring

- (i) *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Scale* consists three sets of questions under the subscale of Childhood Abuse, including psychological abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse, and four set of questions under Exposure to Household Dysfunction subscale, including use of substance, mental illness, domestic violence, and criminal behaviour. A positive response to any item under a domain would be counted as an exposure to that category of adverse experiences (Mark, 1998).
- (ii) *The Brief Family Relationship Scale (BFRS)* is based on a three-point Likert scale ranging from 0-3 for Strongly

Agree to Strongly Disagree. It comprises eight items under cohesiveness, three items under expressiveness and six reverse scored items under conflict, to understand if the mentioned dimensions of family relationship are present mostly, moderately, or least.

- (iii) *The Marital Attitude and Expectation Scale (MAES)* comprises three items under Intent of Marry Scale (IMS), 10 items under General Attitude towards Marriage Scale (GAMS), and 13 items under Aspects of Marriage Scale (AMS), requiring responses on a Likert scale of 6 points ranging from 0-6 for strongly disagree to strongly agree. Ten items are reverse scored. The range of scores for the test is 0-216, with 0-18 for IMS, 0-60 for GAMS and 0-138 for AMS, where higher scores indicate more positive attitude.

Results

The first objective of the study was to analyse the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and marital intent, attitudes, and expectations.

It was hypothesized that exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences will be negatively related to Intent to Marry. Though a negative trend is seen, the result highlights no relation between ACE and all its domains and Intent to Marry. Hypothesis (a) is thus not accepted.

Adverse Childhood Experiences was hypothesized to be negatively related to Attitudes towards Marriage. The result highlights a negative correlation, though weak, between ACE and GAMS. Hypothesis (b) is thus accepted. However, only the domains of sexual abuse and exposure to household dysfunction shows to have a negative correlation towards marital attitudes while psychological or physical abuse shows no relationship with the same.

It was hypothesized that exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences will be positively related to Marital Expectations. Though a positive trend is seen, the result highlights no relation. Hypothesis (c) is thus not accepted. Physical abuse and exposure to household dysfunction, though shows a negative trend, indicates no relation between the variables like the other domains.

The second objective of the study was to analyse the relationship between the domains of present family relationship i.e., cohesiveness, expressiveness and conflict and marital intent, attitudes, and expectations.

Table 2. Correlation of Marital Attitudes and Expectations (MAES) with cohesiveness and expressiveness in present family.

N: 104	Cohesiveness (μ : 7.394 σ : 5.919)	Expressiveness (μ : 3.904 σ : 2.599)
MAES (μ : 170.635 σ : 21.827)	0.422	-0.062

Table 1 correlation derived between ACE and its domains and Intent to Marry (IMS), Marital Attitudes (GAMS) and Marital Expectations (AMS)

N: 104	ACE (μ : 1.135 σ : 14.495)	Psychological Abuse (μ : 0.317 σ : 4.495)	Physical Abuse (μ : 0.25 σ : 4.416)	Sexual Abuse (μ : 0.26 σ : 4.472)	Household Dysfunctions (μ : 0.365 σ : 7.49)
IMS (μ : 11.79 σ : 4.768)	-0.041	-0.042	-0.002	-0.004	-0.064
GAMS (μ : 35.135 σ : 10.455)	-0.203	-0.028	0.004	-0.281	-0.134
AMS (μ : 123.597 σ : 14.065)	0.0158	0.014	-0.025	0.052	-0.051

A positive relationship between Cohesiveness in present family and Marital Attitudes and Expectations was hypothesized. As lower scores indicate higher cohesiveness, a negative correlation was anticipated. Though a negative trend is seen, the result emphasizes no relationship between the given variables. Hypotheses (d) is thus not accepted.

It was hypothesized that there will a positive relationship between Expressiveness and Marital Attitudes and Expectations. The result shows there is no relationship between the given variables. Thus, hypothesis (e) is not accepted.

Table 3 Correlation derived between present family Conflict and Intent to Marry (IMS), Marital Attitudes (GAMS) and Marital Expectations (AMS)

	IMS	GAMS	AMS
N: 104	(μ : 11.79 σ : 4.768)	(μ : 35.135 σ : 10.455)	(μ : 123.597 σ : 14.065)
Conflict (μ : 8.769 σ : 4.443)	0.039	-0.225	0.149

Conflict in present family was hypothesized to have a negative relationship with Intent to Marry, however the result yields no relationship. Thus, hypothesis (f) is not accepted. As hypothesized, the correlation established between conflict and marital attitudes and marital expectations are negative and positive respectively, though weak. Thus, both hypotheses (g) and (h) are accepted.

Discussion

The phenomenological approach to life and its aspects are reasoned out by the diversity in individual experiences. Major theories associated adult thought processes and behaviours with nurturing environment in childhood years. Traumatic and adverse experiences in the growing years have been empirically accepted to cause physical and psychological issues. However, the impact of those adverse childhood experiences on the same family environment at present times of adulthood seem to have not been sufficiently addressed. What role may various toxic traumatic childhood experiences play when one ponders upon their decision to start their own family through marital relations, develop attitude and expectations regarding the same? Childhood family relationships is

notably regarded as the foundation to adulthood relationship patterns. But what may be the role of current family relationship that either reinforces or provokes change in already formed beliefs about family and relations? The purpose of this study was to ponder these inquiries and foster an understanding towards the same.

It was intended to analyse how exposure to adverse childhood experiences is related to marital attitudes and expectations in young adulthood phase. A negative relationship of adverse childhood experiences with marital intent and marital attitudes, and positive association with marital expectations (hypotheses a, b and c), was expected, as traumatic experiences in the initial years, especially in one’s own household, may discourage one from marital affiliations and shape negative perceptions about the same while creating high expectations for starting own family.

However, contrary to the hypothesis, though a negative trend can be seen in the results (Table 5.1), one’s intention to form marital relations or setting expectations regarding the same was found to have no relation with the adverse experiences one faced as a child. Although adverse childhood experiences did not seem to be associated to marital expectations, it did show a weak negative relationship with marital attitudes.

This study also explored the relationship between the present family functioning and marital attitudes and expectations. While cohesiveness and expressiveness were hypothesized (d and e) to show a negative relationship with marital attitudes and expectations, conflict was anticipated to be negatively related to marital intent and attitude and positively related to marital expectations (hypotheses f, g, and h). However, no relationship was established between cohesiveness and expressiveness and marital attitudes and expectations. (Table 5.2). Conflict in present family shown no relationship with intent to marry but indicated a negative association to marital attitudes and positive relation with marital expectations (Table 5.3).

This may insinuate that though one forms a schema of marital relations through one’s childhood experience, or support their

established beliefs by present family dynamics, they may develop their own ideals towards marital relationship and hope for fulfilment of the same. An intention to seek marital relations and developing ideas and criteria for the same may be related to and dependent on factors other than experiences in childhood or family relations. For example, one may be influenced by observing couple in a fulfilling and successful relations, one may want to break the chain of some societal norm and expect their partner to be on the same page, one may want to affiliate to someone that cater to one's psychological needs, etc.

64.4% of the sample intended to marry in near future while 14.4% did not put a thought about the same. 21.2% of the sample regarded personal experiences to justify their decision to not intending to marry, which included not giving into strict social norm of marrying and procreating, unpreparedness in females to leave paternal home, unavailability of partner of choice or preferring to have freedom from responsibilities generally expected in marital relations.

48% of the sample disregarded being inspired from their parental marital relationship. The subjects mentioned several factors that they personally consider as red flags to a successful marital relationship, which includes incompatibility, forced marriage, unrealistic expectations, incongruent backgrounds, abuse and violence, financial aspects, communication gap or unhealthy behaviours such as aggression, dishonesty/disloyalty, suspicion, violation of personal space, etc. The example set through the marital relations around individuals help shape their beliefs about marital relationships. Apart from parents', marital relations of celebrities, grandparents, siblings, cousins, or relatives were considered by subjects to have influenced their marital attitudes and expectations. The subjects regarded marriage of choice, trust, commitment, intimacy, passion, financial stability, independence, collaborative growth, compatibility, equality, and teamwork, healthy humour, etc. among many other factors to serve the basis for a successful marriage. 36.6 % of the sample, though unmarried, were in a relationship and could explore the necessary aspects of

developing marital attitudes and expectations through personal experiences apart from being influenced by parents or other relevant members in or around their life.

The correlations established being weak may hint towards understanding the causal factors that may have been missed while developing associations between the present variables. Notably, a section of subjects mentioned the importance of self-healing, growing out of one's negative experiences and developing personal responsibility to be an architect of their desired aspects of life (e.g., family environment, tents of successful relationship, etc.) irrespective of the situations one has been through. This may be probed into in further analyses concerning the variables under study.

It can be concluded with the suggestions to understand the variables through comparative study on different genders and to further establish causal links between the given variables.

Limitations and Suggestions

The study has its limitations in the following aspects:

- The sample size was limited.
- Gender based impact of the variables was not studied.
- The causal relationship between the variables was not established.

The following points can be considered while making advancements in the present study:

- Larger sample size may be regarded.
- The study may be based on diverse cultural backgrounds.
- The relevance of socioeconomic status may be reflected upon.
- The difference in results may be compared based on gender.
- Causal relationships between the variables may be aimed to realize.

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Soni Kewalramani, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus

Sneha Hazra, Student, MA Counselling Psychology, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus