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Adaptive Processes in Gender-Role Conflicts among Arranged Married Couples in Tamil Nadu, India: A Multiple Case Study Using Dyadic Analysis

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Abstract

Arranged marriages in Tamil Nadu, India, often involve limited pre-marital interaction, creating potential conflicts as women's expectations shaped by education, employment, and globalization intersect with men's traditional roles. External influences such as extended family, peers, and the COVID-19 pandemic further complicated marital dynamics. Guided by the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), a qualitative multiple case study was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Dyadic interviews were carried out with ten married couples aged 26–37 years, with 3–8 years of marital life. Credibility was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and auditing. Findings revealed that transitions from traditional to progressive gender-role expectations were a major source of conflict. Extended family influence was more often disruptive than supportive. Couples adopted adaptive processes including family commitment, sacrifice, open communication, compromise, emotional adjustment, and conflict management to sustain marital satisfaction and stability. Notably, a family-focused motive emerged as a culturally specific dimension of adaptation, extending beyond self-, partner-, and relationship-focused motives documented in Western contexts. This study is the first to apply the VSA model to Tamil arranged marriages, highlighting culturally specific adaptive strategies that couples employ to navigate gender-role conflicts. Findings contribute to literature on marital adaptation, inform culturally sensitive clinical practice in counseling and psychotherapy, and provide guidance for family welfare agencies in collectivist societies.

Introduction

India continues to practice traditional arranged marriages in the 21st century, even as globalization since the 1990s exposed younger generations to both collectivist traditions and individualistic values (Chawla, 1992; Madon, 1997; Jaiswal, 2014). Couples often enter marriage with limited pre-marital interaction, unaware of vulnerabilities that may affect their relationship.

Educated women increasingly expect equality in household responsibilities, child-rearing, and work-family balance, while men's roles remain largely traditional (Kashyap, 2004; Netting, 2010; Sharangpani, 2010). These differing gender-role attitudes frequently lead to marital conflict (Abraham, 2001; Bowman & Dollahite, 2013). External influences such as extended family and peers further complicate marital dynamics (Pothen, 1989; Chawla, 1992; Netting, 2010). Pandemic-related stressors, including job loss and unequal division of household labor, have intensified these conflicts (Evans et al., 2020; Smyth et al., 2020).

Cultural and social changes highlight the need for relationship education and culturally sensitive therapy in India (Shah et al., 2000; Huang, 2005). Sacrifice, a common conflict-resolution strategy, can foster closeness when motivated by approach goals but may reduce satisfaction when avoidance-based (Impett et al., 2005; Neff & Harter, 2002; Stanley et al., 2006; Findley et al., 2014). Further, Impett Le et al. (2013) state that avoidance goals may facilitate subjective well-being in particularly in collectivistic contexts.

Accordingly, this study explores adaptive processes in response to conflicts in gender-role attitudes and expectations among young arranged married couples in Tamil Nadu, guided by the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) Model

The VSA model provides a holistic framework for understanding how gender-role attitudes, marital conflicts, external stressors, and adaptive processes contribute to marital satisfaction and stability. It has been applied across diverse contexts, including Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and India (Al Tamimi, 2009; Aditya & Magno, 2011; Jaiswal, 2014), and offers testable predictions for how couples adapt to stressors such as COVID-19 (Rosenfeld et al., 2022). Developed by Karney and Bradbury (1995), the model integrates perspectives from social exchange, behavioral, attachment, and crisis theories.

Enduring vulnerabilities are stable demographic, personality, and experiential factors that shape marital development (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). *Internal stressors* arise within the relationship, such as conflicts over attitudes or habits (Bodenmann, 2005; Ledermann et al., 2010). *External stressors* originate outside the relationship, including economic strain or unstable work conditions, and often intensify internal conflicts (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). *Adaptive processes* refer to the behaviors and cognitions couples use to manage differences and resolve difficulties (Bradbury, 1995).

Marital satisfaction reflects perceived happiness and contentment in the relationship (Yedirir & Hamarta, 2015), while marital stability refers to the absence of divorce or separation (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Together, these constructs explain how marriages improve, deteriorate, or remain stable over time (Karney et al., 2005), providing the VSA model a holistic framework for exploring adaptive processes to gender-role conflicts in arranged marriages.

Enduring Vulnerabilities: Transition of Gender-roles. Couples enter marriage with enduring vulnerabilities—stable characteristics shaped by family upbringing, personal characteristics, and childhood experiences—that influence marital interactions (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Among these, gender-role attitudes strongly shape marital expectations (Kaufman, 2005). These attitudes evolve during childhood and emerging adulthood through education, career exploration, and early career choices (Halimi et al., 2016). Traditionally, women are viewed as homemakers and caregivers, while men are expected to provide financially (Reis & Sprecher, 2009). In India, however, gender-role attitudes are shifting, influenced by globalization, Western culture, and laws promoting equality (Tiwari & Ghadially, 2006; Seth & Patnayakuni, 2009; Dommaraju, 2016).

Gender-role Expectations. Gender-role attitudes shape marital expectations differently for men and women (Kaufman, 2005). Marital expectations refer to the desires and needs each partner holds within the relationship (Palit, 2013), shaped by prior experiences (Lemay et al., 2015) and relationship cognitions about future partner behavior (Plamondon & Lachance-Grzela, 2018). Such expectations influence behavioral responses in romantic relationships (Lemay & Venaglia, 2016). Egalitarian women

expect a more equitable division of household labor and strive to balance professional work with family responsibilities (Kaufman, 2005; Mickelson et al., 2006; Eccles, 1987; Davey, 1998). Similarly, egalitarian men place greater emphasis on family involvement alongside their work commitments (Kaufman, 2005).

Stressful Event: Gender-role Conflicts. In traditional arranged marriages, husbands often expect wives to fulfill parental needs while simultaneously supporting careers and education (Bowman & Dollahite, 2013; Titzmann, 2013). Despite valuing wives' education, many husbands still expect them to manage household chores and childcare (Barhate et al., 2021). Educated women increasingly adopt dual roles as companions and co-providers rather than solely homemakers (Bharat, 1995). These shifting expectations create challenges in balancing career goals, equality, and division of labor (Sharangpani, 2010; Chawla, 1992). Unmet expectations generate vulnerability (McNulty & Karney, 2004), and role conflict arises when men resist sharing household responsibilities (Lee, 2002). Literature consistently shows that conflicts stem from women's changing expectations and men's unchanging attitudes (Ramu, 1987; Pothen, 1989; Kashyap, 2004).

External stress -Friends, Extended Family, and the COVID-19 Pandemic. Extended family living arrangements strongly influence gender roles, with in-laws shaping childcare and household responsibilities (Desai & Andrist, 2010; Joshi et al., 2017). While elders often provide support, their involvement can reinforce traditional roles and create tension, particularly for working wives (Sonawat, 2001; Sonpar, 2005).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these dynamics. Traditional roles re-emerged, with men focusing on work and women managing caregiving and children's distance learning, often at the expense of women's careers (Rosenfeld et al., 2022). In some families, husbands temporarily assumed childcare duties, leading to more equal division of labor (Alon et al., 2020). The absence of grandparents, who traditionally provide childcare support, further strained working couples (Evans et al., 2020; Rosenfeld et al., 2022). Most pandemic-related studies were conducted in Western contexts (Smyth et al., 2020; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021), with limited research in India beyond preliminary assessments (Ganguly et al., 2020). This gap underscores the need for further exploration in the Indian context.

Adaptation. Sacrifice is a common strategy couples use to resolve conflicts, requiring one or both partners to forgo immediate self-interests for the welfare of the relationship (Stanley et al., 2006; Van Lange et al., 1997). When partners' interests align, sacrifice becomes unnecessary (Mehr et al., 2017). Most existing studies on sacrifice focus on Western contexts, examining motives, perceptions, and outcomes (Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist et al., 1999; Whitton et al., 2007; Impett et al., 2005, 2013). Scholars have emphasized the need to extend research on sacrifice and motives to collectivist cultures, which emphasize avoiding and eliminating negative outcomes rather than pursuing positive ones. In such contexts, avoidance goals may play a central role in sustaining well-being (Impett et al., 2013; Righetti & Impett, 2017; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Elliot et al., 2001).

India, as a collectivist society rooted in arranged marriages yet transitioning toward egalitarian values, offers a unique context for examining sacrifice and its motives. Sacrifices are requisite for sustaining

committed relationships, but their specific motives, perceptions, and outcomes remain underexplored in arranged marriages, particularly in Tamil Nadu. In line with these recommendations, a constructivist qualitative approach involving both partners provides deeper insight into adaptive processes, as sacrifices occur in daily interactions such as household responsibilities and childcare (Canel, 2013).

Although sacrifice has been widely studied in Western contexts, research in collectivist societies such as India remains limited. Existing studies often rely on student samples or focus on one partner's perspective, leaving dyadic experiences underexplored. Moreover, little attention has been given to how sacrifices operate within arranged marriages, especially under external stressors like the COVID-19 pandemic. These gaps highlight the need for qualitative inquiry into how couples in collectivist settings negotiate sacrifice, motives, and outcomes in their everyday lives. Addressing these gaps is essential for understanding how sacrifice functions as an adaptive process in collectivist arranged marriages under contemporary stressors.

Conceptual Framework

In the current study's conceptualization, each domain of the VSA model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) is incorporated as follows. Enduring vulnerabilities, characterized by evolving gender-role attitudes and expectations of women and static traditional attitudes of men, were denoted as Path C, manifesting as conflicts in gender-role expectations treated as stressful events. These internal conflicts were compounded by external stressors—including extended family influence, job loss, low income, work-from-home arrangements, and the absence of social support during COVID-19—illustrated in Path D. Adaptive processes, represented by sacrifices and their underlying motives, were outlined in Path E as mechanisms to reduce or eliminate stressors. The culmination of these adaptive processes (Path F) leads to marital outcomes, notably satisfaction and stability (Paths F and H). Dotted lines indicate areas not under focus in the present study.

Note

Conceptual framework adapted from the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995)

Purpose of the Current Study

This study therefore explores sacrifices, their motives, and outcomes among young arranged married couples in Tamil Nadu, addressing gaps in collectivist literature, the lack of dyadic qualitative research, and the limited focus on arranged marriages under pandemic stressors. In doing so, it advances understanding of adaptive processes during gender-role conflicts and external stressors in the Indian context. Guided by the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. 1. How do different gender-role attitudes and expectations of young married couples bring about conflict among them?
2. 2. How do extended family and friends, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic contribute to conflicts in gender-role attitudes and expectations?
3. 3. How do young married couples engage in adaptive processes as a response to conflicts in gender-role attitudes and expectations?

Method

Research Design

A qualitative multiple case study design was employed within a constructivist paradigm to capture couples' perspectives and meanings constructed jointly with the researcher (Adom et al., 2016). This design provided depth and triangulation through semi-structured interviews, observational notes, and personal information forms (Morrow & Smith, 2000), enabling exploration of adaptive processes in arranged marriages. The methodology offered exploratory, in-depth, dyadic data, as emphasized by prior researchers (Parnell et al., 2018; Pyke & Adams, 2010).

Sampling Strategy

Purposive criterion-based sampling was used to recruit couples as the unit of analysis, reflecting their interdependence and reciprocal influence (Morrow & Smith, 2000; Cutrona & Gardner, 2006). Recruitment occurred through parishes, schools, colleges, and companies in major cities of Tamil Nadu, where arranged marriages remain culturally prevalent.

Eligibility Criteria. Couples were recruited from major cities in Tamil Nadu, South India.. Eligible participants were graduates, with wives aged 25–35 years and husbands aged 25–39 years, married for at least three years in an arranged marriage, and having at least one child. To ensure inclusion of wives with egalitarian attitudes, they were required to score moderate to high on the Scale of Egalitarian Sex Role Attitudes SESRA-S (Suzuki, 1994), while both spouses scored ≤ 13 on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Langeslag et al., 2012) to confirm non-clinical status. Couples with prior clinical intervention histories were excluded to focus on natural marital development. The SESRA-S was administered solely for eligibility screening (Uji et al., 2006), after which in-depth interviews were conducted. Given the sensitivity of marital and family issues, participants scoring ≥ 14 on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) were excluded and referred for free counseling services. The researcher, trained in counseling, monitored for psychological distress during interviews and ensured participants' comfort.

Sample Size and Saturation. From 111 initial responses, 16 couples agreed, including two for pilot testing. Following saturation guidelines (Yin, 2018), ten couples (20 participants) were included in the final study.

Context. The study was conducted in major cities of Tamil Nadu, South India, where arranged marriages remain a prevalent cultural practice within collectivist family structures. This setting was chosen to capture the adaptive processes of young married couples navigating traditional expectations alongside modern urban influences.

Participants. All participants were in their first arranged marriage, identified as Tamil ethnicity, and resided in Tamil Nadu. Wives averaged 30 years of age and husbands 34, with marital duration ranging from 3 to 8 years (mean ≈ 6 years). Four couples had two children, while six had one. Religious affiliation included seven Roman Catholic couples, two from other Christian denominations, and one Hindu couple. Professionally, seven wives were homemakers and the remainder teachers, while husbands held varied professional roles across education, business, and service sectors.

Table 1

In-Depth Interview Participants Profile

CN	Age	Education	Occupation	Religion	NYM	C	SESRA-S	BDI
C01W	30	BA, B. Ed	Homemaker	Hindu	6	2	48	2
C01H	34	BE	Quality Engineer	Hindu	6	2	51	2
C02W	33	M.Sc, B. Ed	Teacher	Christian	7	1	55	1
C02H	34	BE	Banking	Christian	7	1	70	6
C03W	28	M.Sc	Homemaker	Catholic	3	1	71	4
C03H	37	B.Sc	Teacher	Catholic	3	1	55	0
C04W	29	BE	Homemaker	Catholic	7	2	58	3
C04H	35	M.Sc.	IT Professional	Catholic	7	2	63	3
C05W	26	BE	Homemaker	Catholic	3	1	53	2
C05H	31	MBA	HR Welfare Officer	Catholic	3	1	51	6
C06W	33	M.Sc. B.Ed.	Teacher	Catholic	7	1	53	12
C06H	36	B.Sc.	IT professional	Catholic	7	1	62	13
C07W	32	B.Sc. B.Ed.	Teacher	Christian	7	2	61	1
C07H	35	M.Sc.	Private Ltd	Christian	7	2	57	2
C08W	27	BE	Homemaker	Catholic	4	1	47	5
C08H	34	B.Sc.	School Technician	Catholic	4	1	42	3
C09W	33	MCA, B.Ed.	Homemaker	Catholic	8	1	44	8
C09H	33	M.Sc.	Private Ltd Employee	Catholic	8	1	51	12
C10W	28	M.Sc.	Homemaker	Catholic	4	2	63	13
C10H	29	M.Sc.	Banking	Catholic	4	2	61	7

Note. CN=Couple Number; H= Husband; W=Wife; NYM= Number of Years of Married; C= Child

Data Collection

Data were gathered through video-recorded semi-structured interviews, observational notes, and personal information forms. Interviews were conducted individually to reduce social desirability bias and

encourage openness, particularly on gender-role issues (Bowman & Dollahite, 2013; Jaiswal, 2014; Parnell et al., 2018). Each session lasted 60–105 minutes via Zoom, with one or two sessions per participant. Pilot testing and expert validation established the reliability of the interview guide (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). All interviews were conducted online to adhere to pandemic health protocols, ensuring participant privacy and minimizing risk.

Data Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021, 2022) guided analysis. Individual interviews with husbands and wives were analyzed with the couple as the unit of analysis, enabling both individual and dyadic insights. Data were inductively coded at semantic and latent levels, refined iteratively, and collated into themes using spreadsheets with participant identifiers. Dyadic procedures (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010) compared husbands' and wives' codes to identify overlapping, contrasting, and complementary perspectives (Hudson et al., 2020). Themes were then defined, named, and integrated into a coherent narrative that connected individual and dyadic insights with the research questions and existing literature.

Methodological Integrity

Credibility, reliability, and confirmability were ensured through multiple strategies. Member checking established accuracy of interpretations, while transcript verification and expert consultation ensured translation fidelity. A robust audit trail was maintained, with two independent co-raters and a peer debriefer reviewing transcripts, codes, and theme development at multiple stages. Triangulation across interviews, notes, and forms, as well as merging spouses' perspectives, enhanced validity (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010).

Researcher's Characteristics and Reflexivity

The researcher, a trained counselor with extensive experience working with families and couples in Tamil Nadu, conducted all interviews. His professional background in counseling facilitated trust and openness among participants, while also shaping assumptions about marital adaptation. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, critically examining these influences to minimize bias and enhance contextual understanding.

Findings

Analysis of interview transcripts from ten couples revealed themes highlighting a departure from traditional gender-role expectations and the influence of external stressors such as extended family, friends, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these challenges, couples engaged in adaptive processes that to sustain marital satisfaction and stability. Guided by the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) Model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), the findings are organized into Stress, External Factors, and Adaptive Processes.

Stress: Conflicts in Gender-Role Attitudes. Six themes emerged regarding conflicts in gender-role expectations: (a) career-centeredness, (b) contrasting career choices, (c) unenthusiastic commitment, (d) differences in parenting style, (e) inconsistency in parental duties, and (f) divergent perspectives on homemaking. Couples ranged from traditional to egalitarian, with transitional attitudes often producing disagreements. Parenting styles were a frequent source of conflict: husbands tended toward permissive or authoritative approaches, while wives emphasized stricter discipline. Vijay noted, "*We get problems out of our son, she supports him, I beat him, if I beat him, she gets angry*." Childcare responsibilities reflected partial adherence to traditional roles, particularly in the denial of infant care by husbands. Kevin explained, "*Sometimes, I care for the elder child, not the younger one… the mother has to take care*." Divergent perspectives on homemaking also created tension, with disagreements over cleanliness, routines, and household order. Novena shared, "*…my husband would open the main door and leave it open. The child ran out. I would shout that time*." Her husband Baskar added, "*If I walked out for some work without sandals and entered the house, it would get dirty; that's when it would strike*."

External Factors. As couples experienced internal conflicts due to transitional gender-role attitudes and expectations, the analysis highlighted the compounding impact of external stressors. Three major influences emerged:

Pandemic stressors. Couples reported increased childcare demands due to school closures, restricted career opportunities, and financial strain. Wives' professional pursuits were curtailed, while husbands' traditional earning roles were disrupted. Financial stability did not necessarily translate into prioritizing wives' careers; men's financial security often reinforced traditional roles. Some women chose to prioritize family responsibilities over workforce participation. Catherine reflected, "Fortunately, we did not face challenges like my husband losing his job or me having to look for employment."

Extended family influence. Participants described more trouble than support from in-laws, particularly regarding childcare and housework. The presence or absence of extended family reshaped husbands' gender-role perceptions and often reinforced traditional roles, sparking discussions between spouses. Liza shared, "My in-laws told me to go for teaching. I went and told my husband… He responded, 'You don't like teaching, isn't it? Then, why are you getting into it?'"

Work-from-home dialectics: Remote work offered flexibility but also increased household workload and disrupted bonding. Couples reported diminished time for shared activities, reinforcing traditional divisions of labor. Priya explained, *"During this pandemic, he would sit with the laptop in the morning and continue until late at night."* Her husband Muhil added, *"Now, I am sitting with the laptop throughout the day. Even at night, I must log in sometimes. So, due to career demands, the housework is left undone, sir."*

Adaptive Processes to Conflicts

Couples employed four major adaptive strategies, each with subthemes:

Prioritizing family well-being. Wives often placed husbands' satisfaction and children's welfare above career development. Novena reflected, *"At present, I am prioritizing my husband's career. My turn will come*

later (smiles).” Her husband Baskar confirmed, *“My wife mentioned, ‘I will go for work in the near future; I will definitely go.’ However, she is attached to the child, so we’ve decided to wait until the child starts school before making a final decision.”* Husbands also reported proactive sacrifice, giving up personal enjoyment, adjusting routines, and engaging in childcare despite fatigue. Wives assumed traditional roles, while husbands occasionally sacrificed stereotypical roles for the sake of their child, spouse, and family well-being. Joseph noted, *“To attend family functions and to accompany my son, I had to travel, facing transportation challenges. It was a significant difficulty, though it may seem trivial now.”* His wife Josephine added, *“Managing household chores in the morning before heading to work at school and handling all tasks upon returning home is challenging, especially when there’s no one at home.”*

Mutual support rather than blame. Couples emphasized open communication, apologies, and compromise. Husbands acknowledged limitations and communicated openly, fostering acceptance and cooperation. Velan noted, *“She may get frustrated… I offer a loving and caring smile, which usually resolves the situation.”* Indra confirmed, *“Sometimes, when I get angry, I might sit outside. He would ask, ‘Why are you like this?’ Then, we would talk.”* Conflicts were typically resolved quickly through compromise or withdrawal, preventing long-term instability. Catherine reflected, *“We have intense fights… but they end quickly. He would initiate talk the next moment.”* Her husband Kevin explained, *“I asked her niece to take care of the children since she arrived, and that problem was solved.”* Notably, the couples reported that while occasional disagreements occurred, either the husband or the wife compromising or giving in contributed to a prompt resolution and did not disturb their stability.

Resisting external pressure. The analysis of couples’ adaptive processes revealed the theme of resisting external pressure, with two subthemes: supporting spouses deliberately and managing conflict within the couple. Husbands deliberately supported wives in housework despite parental disapproval, while wives often remained silent in response to external pressure, relying on their husbands’ efforts to resist in-law expectations. Vijay reflected, *“In the beginning, when we were alone and during my parents’ visit, there was sometimes some hesitation to help my wife. However, later (laughs), it changed. Life is like this for everyone, especially in our generation when we are alone.”*

Couples also maintained privacy by avoiding disclosure of conflicts to outsiders, thereby protecting relationship integrity. Wives reported using indirect communication with in-laws, tactfully navigating interactions to prevent potential disputes. Ann explained, *“My mother-in-law doesn’t like my husband helping me in the kitchen. If she dislikes something, she tells her son; if I have issues, I tell him. We prefer avoiding arguments when we meet.”*

Emotional adjustment

Couples engaged in emotional adjustment through four subthemes:

Regulating emotions. Wives often suppressed anger and addressed issues later, reflecting traditional attitudes toward emotional regulation. Beena explained, *“When he is not listening… I stop there and say,*

'All right, I'll take care of it.' After he cooled down, I explained the situation." Her husband Vijay added, *"It only lasts for about five minutes. However, one of us has to adjust."*

Seeking external support. Friends and family provided advice and perspective, enriching couples' ability to manage conflicts. Josephine shared, *"Even if my husband says something, elderly people like my father advise us, saying 'OK. Leave it.' My sisters also give advice."* Joseph affirmed, *"…when I am at the worksite… her father is there for her support."*

Embracing realities. Couples accepted limitations in work and household roles, reducing stress. Wives reported unconditional acceptance of husbands' lower contribution to housework, while husbands acknowledged the realities of career demands. Joseph reflected, *"I think giving up my job and returning home would be even worse. If it doesn't work out now, going home next week is always possible. I understood the reality."*

Engaging with children. Wives found contentment in childcare despite career sacrifices, while husbands recognized the strong mother-child bond. Novena noted, *"After our baby was born… her smile, her gradual steps… brought contentment to my mind."* Baskar confirmed, *"Now I am only helping her a little because the bond between mother and child is strong."*

Discussion

Couples in this study faced daily stressors from differing gender-role attitudes and external pressures such as societal norms and the pandemic. They engaged in adaptive processes at both dyadic and individual levels, including resisting external pressure, engaging with children during unemployment, practicing spiritual coping, and managing conflicts through sacrifice, compromise, communication, and emotional regulation. These strategies were primarily approach-motivated, reflecting partner-, relationship-, and family-focused orientations.

A central finding was the family-centric commitment of couples in collectivistic Tamil culture, where spouses consistently prioritized children, partners, and extended family over individual interests. This commitment shaped career choices, financial decisions, and lifestyle patterns, aligning with prior research that demonstrates how commitment predicts relationship behaviour and promotes sacrifice (Agnew & Dove, 2011; Van Lange et al., 1997; Stanley et al., 2006). While sacrifice was mutual, wives often made greater sacrifices, consistent with literature on gendered roles in collectivist contexts (Bianchi et al., 2000; Cao, 2017).

Couples demonstrated both approach motives (proactively fostering positive outcomes) and avoidance motives (minimizing conflict and tension). Approach-motivated sacrifices enhanced satisfaction, while avoidance motives maintained harmony without high cost in interdependent cultures (Righetti & Impett, 2017; Elliot et al., 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Importantly, sacrifice was not the only resolution strategy: couples relied heavily on open communication and compromise, echoing findings across cultures (Hyun & Shin, 2010; Singh & Bhayana, 2015). Smiles, apologies, and acknowledgment of

limitations fostered receptivity and quick resolution, while compromise ensured stability (Neff & Harter, 2002; Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010).

In resisting external pressure, husbands supported wives despite parental disapproval, and couples maintained privacy by avoiding disclosure of conflicts to outsiders. This boundary-setting protected relationship integrity, consistent with healthy family functioning literature (Sabatelli & Bartle, 1995). Couples addressed daily stress together to maintain stability and happiness (Bodenmann & Cina, 2006). Emotional adjustment was another key process: wives often suppressed anger and accepted realities, while couples sought external support or engaged with children to buffer stress. These strategies reflect collectivist norms of emotional regulation (Butler et al., 2007) and confirm that adaptive processes buffer negative stress effects (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Overall, couples prioritized family goals over individual needs, using adaptive strategies to preserve harmony and stability. Their behaviours illustrate Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) coping strategies: changing situations directly, reframing problems, and managing emotional responses. The findings expand understanding of motives in non-Western collectivist societies, showing how cultural norms shape adaptive processes. While couples adhered closely to traditional expectations, they also demonstrated flexibility, with shifts in attitudes influencing behaviour as highlighted in the VSA model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Contribution to the Literature on Adaptive Processes

Couples in this study demonstrated unique adaptive processes that transformed conflicting interests into marital satisfaction or relationship harmony, both highly valued for stability in collectivist contexts. While Western literature often associates avoidance-motive adaptive processes with dissatisfaction, this study found that for Tamil collectivist couples, avoidance motives — such as preventing disappointment or emotional upset — promoted harmony and satisfaction by eliminating negative outcomes.

In addition, while prior research has emphasized self-, partner-, and relationship-focused motives, this study identified a family-focused motive as a distinctive contribution. By prioritizing children, spouses, and extended family, Tamil couples expanded the scope of adaptive processes beyond what has been documented in Western contexts. Thus, while confirming established aspects of adaptive processes, this study adds a culturally specific dimension that enriches understanding of marital adaptation in non-Western societies.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study makes valuable contributions, certain limitations must be acknowledged.

Couples were interviewed individually to capture each partner's unique perspective. While this approach avoided hesitation, fear of hurting, or reactive responses in joint sessions, it limited the ability to observe direct interactions. Future research should employ dyadic interviews, where both partners are present, to provide deeper insights into communication, influence, and emotional responses.

Second, data collection was restricted to virtual formats due to quarantine protocols and international travel bans. Face-to-face interviews would have offered richer contextual understanding of the environment and non-verbal cues, which could strengthen the interpretation of findings.

Conclusions

This study is the first to apply the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model to explore adaptive processes in response to gender-role conflicts among married couples in Tamil Nadu, India. Couples' attitudes and expectations ranged from traditional to progressive roles, and these transitions became sources of conflict, particularly for younger couples navigating changing gender norms. Within the arranged marriage system, extended families provided both support and challenges: while they offered childcare and assistance, they also influenced career choices and reinforced traditional divisions of labor. Couples therefore needed to set boundaries and rely on mutual support to maintain independence while preserving family ties.

Extended family support proved especially valuable during the pandemic, easing childcare burdens despite restrictions. Across conflicting expectations, couples consistently prioritized family well-being, engaging in proactive sacrifice, open communication, and adaptive processes motivated not only by self-, partner-, and relationship-focused considerations but also by family-focused motives. This emphasis on family harmony reflects the collectivistic Tamil cultural context and expands understanding of adaptive motives in non-Western societies. Maintaining positive relationships with extended family emerged as essential for marital harmony in Indian contexts.

Couples resolved conflicts through open communication, compromise, and external attribution rather than blame, while resisting external pressure and maintaining privacy. They employed both internal adaptive processes—such as emotional regulation, acceptance of realities, and spiritual practices—and external ones, including seeking support and engaging with children. These strategies reduced recurrence of conflict and fostered relationship harmony. Addressing disagreements daily, rather than allowing them to accumulate, empowered couples to sustain stable partnerships and strengthened their resilience against external stressors.

Implications

The findings highlight that marital and family therapists working with Indian couples must consider cultural context. Alongside marital satisfaction, relationship harmony should be recognized as a counseling goal, as it enhances marital stability. Counselors should guide couples in supporting each other and setting boundaries with extended family, rather than focusing solely on assertiveness training. Each spouse has a responsibility to manage family interference to prevent disputes with relatives.

Given the strong influence of in-laws, family therapists may need to involve them in counseling sessions to reduce interference and promote supportive dynamics. Counselors must also recognize that socialization into conventional roles remains a barrier to women's empowerment within the home, even

if women achieve empowerment in other areas of society. The persistence of traditional gender roles requires careful attention: psychoeducation for men on egalitarian attitudes should precede assertiveness training for women to avoid unintended consequences. In doing so, these findings empirically support Carson and Chowdhury's (2000) recommendation for culturally sensitive family therapy in India, extending their call with evidence from Tamil couples.

Therapists can also teach couples emotional adjustment strategies, including regulation, seeking trustworthy external support, and stress-reduction techniques. These may be introduced in individual sessions before conjoint sessions to strengthen coping skills. Finally, counseling institutes offering family enrichment programs can incorporate these adaptive processes into their curricula to improve both marital satisfaction and relationship harmony.

Recommendations

Future research can extend this study in several important directions. Studies on stable couples who live separately due to work settings would provide insight into how physical distance influences adaptive processes, marital satisfaction, and relationship stability. Examining divorced or separated couples could reveal where adaptation processes failed, offering valuable lessons for prevention and intervention.

Finally, relationship harmony can be explored beyond marriage, in romantic partnerships and other relational contexts such as friendships, sibling bonds, and professional connections. Since collectivistic cultures prioritize harmony across relationships, such research would broaden understanding of adaptive processes and their outcomes in diverse social settings.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable national regulations. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Review Committee of De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines. Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose and procedures, informed of their voluntary participation and right to withdraw at any time, and assured of confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity, and no details were disclosed to partners due to the sensitivity of the questions. Participants agreed to publication.

Author Contribution

Dr. Dewaram Francis Raj conceived and designed the study, conducted the interviews, performed the data analysis, and prepared the entire manuscript.

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Data Availability

The qualitative data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements. Anonymized excerpts supporting the findings are included within the article.

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Figures

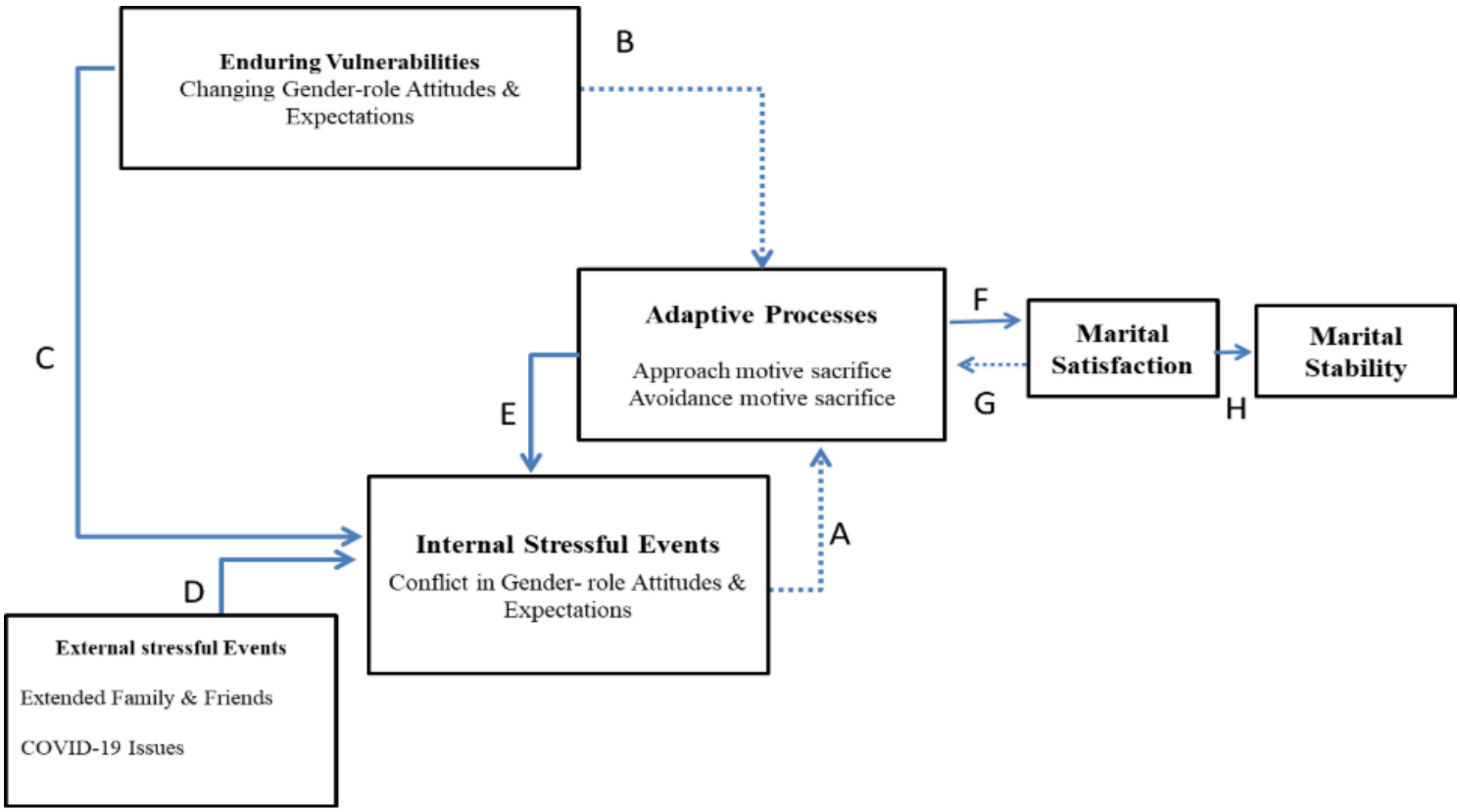


Figure 1

Conceptual Framework

Note. Conceptual framework adapted from the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995)