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Gaslighting Exposure, Cognitive Emotion Regulation, and Relationship Satisfaction in Pakistani Couples: An Actor–Partner Interdependence Study

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Abstract

Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse in which the gaslighter attempts to convince the victim that their perception, memory, and judgment are flawed. Using a dyadic design, this study examined how each partner's exposure to gaslighting and their cognitive emotion regulation relate to relationship satisfaction in married Pakistani couples. The Urdu versions of Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), and the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) were used and The Gaslighting in Relationships Scale (GRS) was translated into Urdu and administered to a community sample of 100 couples (married 2–10 years), with each partner reporting their own exposure to gaslighting. Data were analysed using an Actor–Partner Interdependence approach. Each partner's gaslighting exposure was strongly and negatively associated with their own relationship satisfaction (actor effects: wife β = −.75; husband β = −.68, both $p < .001$). Significant partner effects emerged in both directions: wives' exposure predicted lower husband satisfaction (β = −.62) and husbands' exposure predicted lower wife satisfaction (β = −.46, both $p < .001$). Maladaptive emotion regulation was a robust negative correlate of satisfaction for both partners, at the actor level (wife β = −.62; husband β = −.61) and the partner level (β = −.56 and − .57, all $p < .001$). Adaptive emotion regulation did not significantly predict satisfaction and did not broadly buffer the gaslighting–satisfaction link; it moderated only husbands' own exposure effect. Given the cross-sectional design, findings reflect patterns of association rather than causal processes, indicating that gaslighting exposure and maladaptive emotion regulation are dyadic correlates of marital dissatisfaction in the South Asian context.

Introduction

Successful marriages require respect, trust and good communication. This can turn into a pattern of distrust and contention when one partner is psychologically manipulating the other. Gaslighting, a psychological form of abuse that causes a person to doubt their own perception, memory and judgment, has been receiving increasing attention for its negative impact on intimate relationships (Alsabbagh, 2023; Akdeniz & Cihan, 2024). Gaslighting may result in the person being targeted feeling insecure, confused, and reliant upon the person doing the gaslighting, through sustained denial, blame-shifting, and altering the reality of the partner (Gulbag, 2025; Klein et al., 2023). Recent research has correlated gaslighting behaviours with darker personality traits in the individual who is gaslighting and reduced relationship quality in the individual who has been gaslighted (March et al., 2025).

Gaslighting is now known as a specific form of psychological abuse in intimate partner violence (IPV) that targets a person's trust in their “knowing”. Measures like the Gaslighting in Relationships Scale (Hailes et al., 2025) and the Gaslighting Relationship Exposure Inventory (Tager-Shafrir et al., 2024) measure the extent to which an individual has been exposed to gaslighting by a partner, and higher exposure has been associated with greater psychological distress and lower relationship quality (Ciabatti et al., 2024; Tager-Shafrir et al., 2024). Sweet (2019) also places gaslighting in a gendered framework as it is often carried out through the culturally available stereotypes that portray the targeted partner as irrational.

Gaslighting undermines the way a person thinks about their experience, so it is linked to how they cognitively regulate the distress. Cognitive emotion regulation is the conscious cognitive processes that individuals employ to regulate emotionally arousing information (Garnefski et al., 2001). The strategies can be divided into maladaptive (self-blame, other-blame, rumination, catastrophizing) and adaptive (acceptance, positive refocusing, refocus on planning, positive reappraisal, putting into perspective); the maladaptive strategies have been more consistently associated with poorer emotional outcomes (Aldao et al., 2010; Garnefski & Kraaij, 2007). Cognitive emotion regulation is linked to dyadic outcomes: adaptive regulation is associated with better marital functioning, whereas emotion-regulation difficulties are associated with poorer marital functioning and depression in both partners (Morgan et al., 2024; Rusu et al., 2019). Exposure to gaslighting, in turn, has been linked to self-blame and self-doubt (Ermolova et al., 2024; Johnston et al., 2024; Klein et al., 2023), indicating that exposure to gaslighting might be associated with increased use of maladaptive regulation and, in turn, reduced relationship satisfaction.

In Pakistani and other South Asian cultures, marriage is viewed as an ongoing social and moral obligation with implications for social respect and gender roles, and divorce is not socially or practically accessible (Ahmed, 2022; Ayub et al., 2023; Mansab, 2024). Qualitative studies with Pakistani spouses reveal that unmet, gendered role expectations are a key source of marital conflict and psychological abuse (Ali et al., 2022) and that women in joint-family structures are often under greater pressure to tolerate stress silently than to express it (Ashfaq, 2024). Thus, it is particularly important to investigate both partners' experiences and regulatory strategies in this context, as partners may stay in and try to manage a conflictual relationship instead of ending it because of gaslighting.

Gaslighting should be viewed as a part of the marital relationship and not as an isolated incident involving just one spouse. If data is gathered from both members of the couple, then a relationship is expected between their responses, due to the shared household, historical and social and environmental context. Thus, the responses of husband and wife are not necessarily statistically independent. However, the interdependence of partners must be taken into account when analyzing the experiences and reactions of the partners: experiences and reactions of one partner may be associated with those of the other partner. Following the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kenny et al., 2006) framework, separate regression models were estimated for husbands' and wives' relationship satisfaction. In each model, both actor (own) and partner variables were entered simultaneously to estimate actor and partner associations while controlling demographic covariates. It models both members of a dyad simultaneously and distinguishes the association of a predictor with an outcome into two types of paths (Fig. 1): an actor effect (the association of a person's predictor with his/her outcome) and a partner effect (the association of a person's predictor with his/her partner's outcome). Modelling both allows to ask whether one partner's experience is only related to his or her own outcome, or also “spills over” to the other partner. If the two members are distinguishable on some meaningful variable (e.g., if the relationship is a heterosexual couple, then the gender of the actors), then they are treated as distinct dyad members and actor and partner effects are estimated separately for each. The

APIM has been used in various aspects of relationship research, such as emotion regulation and couple satisfaction (Jitaru & Turliuc, 2022).

In the present study, this dyadic framework (cross-sectional) was applied to Pakistani married couples to investigate the association between exposure to gaslighting and cognitive emotion regulation with relationship satisfaction for both partners and the role of adaptive emotional regulation (husband and wife) as a moderator between couples' gaslighting and relationship satisfaction; and couples' maladaptive emotional regulation and relationship satisfaction.

Actor–Partner Interdependence Model. Solid horizontal pathways are actor effects (a person's own predictor predicting his or her own outcome). Diagonal paths are partner effects (a person's predictor predicting his/her partner's outcome). The curved double-headed arrows indicate correlation between the two partners' predictors (left) and between their outcomes (right).

Method

Participants

The current study is cross-sectional correlational quantitative study. The participants were 100 married couples (200 people) recruited from the community using a snowball sampling approach. Couples were eligible if both were from the same ethnic background, neither had been previously married, the couple had been married for 2–10 years, and both partners were between 20 and 50 years old (husband mean age = 37.52, SD = 4.56; wife mean age = 34.15, SD = 4.20). Couples that were long-distance or where either spouse had a known psychological or physical ailment were not included. Of 226 couples identified as eligible, 183 agreed to participate, and 98 completed the study, with an additional 2 couples identified as eligible being recruited to complete the study for a final sample size of 100. 50% of the marriages were arranged within the extended family, 50% of the marriages were arranged outside the extended family, and 63% of the couples lived in a joint-family household.

Gaslighting in Relationships Scale (GRS)

Gaslighting exposure was measured using the GRS (Hailes et al., 2025), an 8-item screening tool that measures the presence and severity of gaslighting experiences in a relationship. The GRS was created from the literature, expert consultation, and clinical experience with IPV survivors and measures the respondent's experience of being gaslighted by a partner (e.g., denial of events, blame-shifting, undermining of the respondent's confidence). The scale was translated into Urdu to ensure participant fully understand the items. Each item is given a score of 0 for “no” and 0–4 for “yes”, with the sum of the item scores representing the total score, where higher scores reflect greater exposure. The GRS was filled out by both partners with regard to their own experience. Internal consistency of the present sample was α = .88 for wives and α = .85 for husbands.

Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS)

Relationship satisfaction was measured using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), a 7-item generic measure of satisfaction in a close relationship. Items are rated on a 5-point scale, with two items reverse-scored, yielding a possible total range of 7–35; higher scores indicate greater relationship satisfaction. An Urdu version previously used with married Pakistani women (Sadiq et al., 2022) was administered in the present study. Internal consistency in the present sample was α = .85.

Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ)

The CERQ (Garnefski et al., 2001) was used to measure cognitive emotion regulation and consists of nine 4-item subscales (self-blame, acceptance, rumination, positive refocusing, refocus on planning, positive reappraisal, putting into perspective, catastrophizing, blaming others). In accordance with the second-order structure of the instrument, items were grouped into an adaptive composite (acceptance, positive refocusing, refocus on planning, positive reappraisal, putting into perspective; 20 items) and a maladaptive composite (self-blame, rumination, catastrophizing, blaming others; 16 items). This aggregation was based on following considerations. First, it is based on the instrument: Garnefski and Kraaij (2006) found two general second-order factors in developing the CERQ short form—adaptive and less-adaptive—and the adaptive–maladaptive distinction is well established in the broader literature (Aldao et al., 2010; Garnefski & Kraaij, 2007). Second, the composites were very internally consistent in the present sample (all α ≥ .91). The present study used an Urdu translation of the CERQ validated by Shahzad et al., (2022). Although that validation was conducted with male patients with substance use disorders, the CERQ has been adapted and validated across numerous cultural contexts (Fekar Gharamaleki & Fathipour-Azar, 2025), and convergent evidence for its applicability in South Asia comes from its adaptation in a neighboring Bangladeshi sample (Uzzaman et al., 2024). The internal consistency for the adaptive composite was α = .91 (wives) and α = .92 (husbands); for the maladaptive composite, α = .92 (wives) and α = .91 (husbands).

Procedure

The snowballing technique was used to identify couples in the community. Of 226 couples identified as eligible, 183 gave their consent to participate in the study; 98 completed the protocol, and 2 more eligible couples were recruited to obtain a sample of 100 couples for the study. Informed consent was obtained in writing from each partner including confidentiality of responses and right to withdraw at any time. To ensure the responses were independent, husbands and wives completed the GRS, RAS and CERQ separately from each other. All the measures were given in Urdu. The time spent in administration was about 20 minutes per participant.

Results

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among Study Variables

Variable	***M***	***SD***	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**
1. Wife gaslighting exposure	6.55	6.71	—							
2. Husband gaslighting exposure	5.67	6.11	.59**	—						
3. Wife relationship satisfaction	28.10	6.62	− .75**	− .46**	—					
4. Husband relationship satisfaction	29.26	5.11	− .62**	− .68**	.73**	—				
5. Wife adaptive CER	56.57	16.19	.16	.26**	− .10	− .16	—			
6. Husband adaptive CER	53.70	17.92	.18	.24*	− .16	− .17	.78**	—		
7. Wife maladaptive CER	35.68	13.37	.66**	.49**	− .62**	− .56**	.53**	.49**	—	
8. Husband maladaptive CER	33.95	13.00	.62**	.62**	− .57**	− .61**	.47**	.57**	.79**	—

Note. N = 100 couples. CER = cognitive emotion regulation. Values are zero-order Pearson correlation coefficients.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlations among the study variables ($N = 100$ couples). Wives' and husbands' gaslighting exposure were positively correlated ($r = .59$, $p < .01$), indicating partner concordance in reported exposure. Gaslighting exposure was consistently linked to lower relationship satisfaction for both partners. Wives' exposure was negatively associated with their own satisfaction ($r = - .75$) and with husbands' satisfaction ($r = - .62$), and husbands' exposure showed a parallel pattern (own satisfaction $r = - .68$; wives' satisfaction $r = - .46$; all $p < .01$). Wives' and husbands' relationship satisfaction were strongly and positively correlated ($r = .73$, $p < .01$), reflecting dyadic interdependence in marital satisfaction.

Adaptive cognitive emotion regulation (CER) showed strong actor–partner concordance across spouses ($r = .78$, $p < .01$) but was largely unrelated to gaslighting exposure and relationship satisfaction. The only significant associations involving adaptive CER and the core variables were between wives' adaptive CER

and husbands' exposure (r = .26, p < .01) and husbands' adaptive CER and husbands' exposure (r = .24, p < .05).

Maladaptive CER was highly concordant across partners (r = .79, p < .01) and was robustly related to the study variables. For both spouses, higher maladaptive CER was associated with greater gaslighting exposure (rs = .49 to .66) and with lower relationship satisfaction for self and partner (rs = − .56 to − .62; all p < .01). Maladaptive CER was also moderately and positively associated with adaptive CER (rs = .47 to .57, p < .01).

Actor–Partner Effects on Relationship Satisfaction

Two simultaneous multiple regressions were conducted to examine actor and partner effects on relationship satisfaction, one for each spouse. In each model, the six predictors—both partners' gaslighting exposure, adaptive cognitive emotion regulation (CER), and maladaptive CER—were entered together in a single block, so that each coefficient reflects a unique association holding the remaining actor and partner variables constant. Actor effects refer to the association between an individual's own predictors and their own satisfaction, whereas partner effects refer to the association between one spouse's predictors and the other spouse's satisfaction.

Table 2

Actor and Partner Effects of Gaslighting Exposure and Cognitive Emotion Regulation on Husbands' Relationship Satisfaction

Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	B	*T*	*p*	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	34.236	1.336	—	25.63	< .001	—	—
Actor effects (husband predictors)							
Husband gaslighting exposure	-0.348	0.078	− .42	-4.46	< .001	.521	1.919
Husband adaptive CER	0.024	0.034	.08	0.70	.486	.317	3.155
Husband maladaptive CER	-0.079	0.054	− .20	-1.48	.142	.243	4.113
Partner effects (wife predictors)							
Wife gaslighting exposure	-0.118	0.079	− .16	-1.50	.138	.423	2.361
Wife adaptive CER	0.031	0.037	.10	0.86	.394	.334	2.993
Wife maladaptive CER	-0.073	0.050	− .19	-1.47	.146	.268	3.737

Note. N = 100 couples. The dependent variable is husbands' relationship satisfaction. All six predictors were entered simultaneously in a single block. Actor effects are husbands' own predictors; partner effects are wives' predictors. B = unstandardized coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; CER = cognitive emotion regulation; VIF = variance inflation factor. R^2 = .579, adjusted R^2 = .552, $F(6, 93) = 21.34$, $p < .001$.

Husbands' Relationship Satisfaction

The model predicting husbands' relationship satisfaction was significant and accounted for 57.9% of the variance, R^2 = .579, adjusted R^2 = .552, $F(6, 93) = 21.34$, $p < .001$ (Table 1). Only one predictor contributed uniquely. Among the actor effects, husbands' gaslighting exposure was a significant negative predictor, $B = -0.348$, $SE = 0.078$, $\beta = -.42$, $t(93) = -4.46$, $p < .001$, indicating that husbands who reported greater exposure to gaslighting reported lower satisfaction after controlling for both spouses' emotion regulation and wives' exposure. Neither husbands' adaptive CER (β = .08, p = .486) nor husbands' maladaptive CER (β = −.20, p = .142) accounted for unique variance.

None of the partner effects reached significance once the actor effects were controlled: wives' gaslighting exposure (β = −.16, p = .138), wives' adaptive CER (β = .10, p = .394), and wives' maladaptive CER (β = −.19, p = .146), although the two negative coefficients were in the expected direction.

Table 3

Actor and Partner Effects of Gaslighting Exposure and Cognitive Emotion Regulation on Wives' Relationship Satisfaction

Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	B	*T*	*p*	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	34.150	1.667	—	20.48	< .001	—	—
Actor effects (wife predictors)							
Wife gaslighting exposure	-0.513	0.098	− .52	-5.22	< .001	.423	2.361
Wife adaptive CER	0.079	0.046	.19	1.73	.086	.334	2.993
Wife maladaptive CER	-0.153	0.062	− .31	-2.46	.016	.268	3.737
Partner effects (husband predictors)							
Husband gaslighting exposure	0.006	0.097	.01	0.06	.953	.521	1.919
Husband adaptive CER	-0.004	0.043	− .01	-0.10	.923	.317	3.155
Husband maladaptive CER	-0.046	0.067	− .09	-0.68	.497	.243	4.113

Note. N = 100 couples. The dependent variable is wives' relationship satisfaction. All six predictors were entered simultaneously in a single block. Actor effects are wives' own predictors; partner effects are husbands' predictors. B = unstandardized coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; CER = cognitive emotion regulation; VIF = variance inflation factor. R^2 = .610, adjusted R^2 = .584, $F(6, 93)$ = 24.20, p < .001.

Wives' Relationship Satisfaction

The model predicting wives' relationship satisfaction was also significant and accounted for 61.0% of the variance, R^2 = .610, adjusted R^2 = .584, $F(6, 93)$ = 24.20, p < .001 (Table 2). Two actor effects contributed uniquely. Wives' gaslighting exposure was the strongest predictor, B = − 0.513, SE = 0.098, β = −.52, $t(93)$ = − 5.22, p < .001, and wives' maladaptive CER also contributed uniquely, B = − 0.153, SE = 0.062, β = −.31, $t(93)$ = − 2.46, p = .016. Wives' adaptive CER showed a positive association that did not reach significance (β = .19, p = .086).

None of the partner effects was significant. Husbands' gaslighting exposure (β = .01, p = .953), husbands' adaptive CER (β = −.01, p = .923), and husbands' maladaptive CER (β = −.09, p = .497) were each unrelated to wives' satisfaction once wives' own characteristics were taken into account.

Comparison Across Spouses

Considered together, the two models show a consistent pattern alongside one notable difference. In both cases, each spouse's own gaslighting exposure was the dominant unique predictor of their

satisfaction, and no partner effect remained significant once actor effects were controlled. The models diverged with respect to emotion regulation: wives' maladaptive CER contributed uniquely to their own satisfaction (β = −.31, *p* = .016), whereas husbands' maladaptive CER did not (β = −.20, *p* = .142). Collinearity diagnostics were identical across models because the same predictor set was used, with tolerance values from .243 to .521 and variance inflation factors from 1.92 to 4.11, all below the commonly used cut-off of 5; the elevated values for the maladaptive CER terms nevertheless indicate substantial shared variance between spouses' regulation scores, which reduces the precision with which their unique contributions can be estimated.

Moderation by Adaptive Cognitive Emotion Regulation

To test whether spouses' adaptive CER altered the associations between the study predictors and relationship satisfaction, eight moderation models were estimated with the PROCESS macro (Model 2; Hayes, 2022). In each model a focal predictor—gaslighting exposure or maladaptive CER, for husbands and wives—was regressed on relationship satisfaction, with husband adaptive CER and wife adaptive CER entered as simultaneous moderators and husband age, wife age, marriage duration, and family system included as covariates (all models df = 9, 90). Moderation was evaluated by the change in R^2 associated with each product term. A summary of the interaction tests appears in Table 4.

Table 4

Summary of Interaction (Moderation) Tests for Adaptive Cognitive Emotion Regulation Across Eight Covariate-Adjusted Models

Model	**Focal × Husband adaptive CER**			**Focal × Wife adaptive CER**			***R*²**
	B	**ΔR²**	***P***	***B***	**ΔR²**	***p***	
Actor effects							
Husb. gaslighting → Husb. satisfaction	.015	.036	.004	− .019	.051	< .001	.634
Husb. maladaptive CER → Husb. Satisfaction	.004	.012	.147	− .008	.032	.020	.489
Wife gaslighting → Wife satisfaction	− .003	.001	.590	.006	.002	.466	.626
Wife maladaptive CER → Wife satisfaction	.003	.003	.461	− .001	< .001	.791	.509
Partner effects							
Wife gaslighting → Husb. satisfaction	.002	< .001	.694	− .011	.013	.136	.476
Wife maladaptive CER → Husb. Satisfaction	.004	.007	.305	− .005	.013	.165	.389
Husb. gaslighting → Wife satisfaction	.013	.017	.090	− .014	.016	.099	.484
Husb. maladaptive CER → Wife satisfaction	.003	.004	.428	− .005	.006	.305	.458

Note. N = 100 couples; df = 9, 90 in every model. Each row is a separate PROCESS Model 2 analysis with husband adaptive CER and wife adaptive CER as moderators and husband age, wife age, marriage duration, and family system as covariates. B = unstandardized coefficient for the product term; ΔR² = increment in explained variance attributable to that product term.

As shown in Table 4, adaptive CER moderated only the *actor* effects for husbands; no wife actor effect and no partner effect was significantly moderated. Two models showed significant moderation.

Table 5

Covariate-Adjusted Regression Model for the Moderation of Husbands' Gaslighting–Satisfaction Association

Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	*T*	*p*	95% CI
Constant	28.140	2.290	12.29	< .001	[23.59, 32.69]
Husband gaslighting exposure	-0.312	0.291	-1.07	.287	[-0.89, 0.27]
Husband adaptive CER	-0.102	0.041	-2.47	.015	[-0.18, -0.02]
Gaslighting × Husband adaptive CER	0.015	0.005	2.98	.004	[0.00, 0.02]
Wife adaptive CER	0.126	0.048	2.63	.010	[0.03, 0.22]
Gaslighting × Wife adaptive CER	-0.019	0.005	-3.55	< .001	[-0.03, -0.01]
Husband age	2.621	0.565	4.64	< .001	[1.50, 3.74]
Wife age	-1.138	0.543	-2.10	.039	[-2.22, -0.06]
Marriage duration	-0.685	0.557	-1.23	.222	[-1.79, 0.42]
Family system	-0.584	0.862	-0.68	.500	[-2.30, 1.13]

Note. N = 100 couples. Dependent variable = husbands' relationship satisfaction. CI = confidence interval. R^2 = .634, $F(9, 90) = 17.35$, $p < .001$. Interaction tests: ΔR^2 (gaslighting × husband adaptive CER) = .036, $p = .004$; ΔR^2 (gaslighting × wife adaptive CER) = .051, $p < .001$.

The clearest case was husbands' gaslighting exposure predicting their own satisfaction (Table 5), which was moderated by both spouses' adaptive CER (gaslighting × husband adaptive CER: $B = 0.015$, $p = .004$; gaslighting × wife adaptive CER: $B = -0.019$, $p < .001$), with the two product terms jointly adding variance ($\Delta R^2 = .054$, $p = .002$). Probing the conditional effects showed that the negative impact of husbands' gaslighting on their satisfaction was strongest when the husband's own adaptive CER was low and the wife's was high ($B = -1.22$, $p < .001$) and was buffered to non-significance when the husband's adaptive CER was high and the wife's was low ($B = 0.01$, $p = .965$). In other words, a husband's own adaptive regulation attenuated the harm of gaslighting, whereas his wife's adaptive regulation intensified it.

A second, weaker instance involved husbands' maladaptive CER predicting their own satisfaction, which was moderated by wives' adaptive CER only (gaslighting × wife adaptive CER: $B = -0.008$, $\Delta R^2 = .032$, $p = .020$), not by husbands' adaptive CER ($\Delta R^2 = .012$, $p = .147$). The negative association was non-significant only when the husband's adaptive CER was high and the wife's was low ($B = -0.06$, $p = .578$) and was significant and negative elsewhere. The remaining six models—both wife actor effects and all four partner effects—showed no significant moderation (all interaction *p*s > .08).

Regarding covariates, husband age was a consistent positive predictor of both spouses' satisfaction, and wife age and family system were negative in several models predicting wives' satisfaction, but these

covariates did not alter the pattern of focal and interaction effects.

Discussion

In this study, the exposure to gaslighting from each partner and the cognitive emotion regulation were examined in relation to marital satisfaction of married couples in Pakistan, employing Actor–Partner Interdependence research design (Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kenny et al., 2006). The results are discussed in the context of the culture of these couples below.

As predicted, the actor effects were significant and negative: when exposed to gaslighting by their own partner, both partners' relationship satisfaction was significantly and negatively related to their exposure to gaslighting (wife $\beta = -.75$, $p < .001$; husband $\beta = -.68$, $p < .001$). This is consistent with evidence showing that gaslighting is related to self-doubt, distress, and poorer relationship quality (Ciabatti et al., 2024; Klein et al., 2023; March et al., 2025; Tager-Shafrir et al., 2024). The association is important because, in the Pakistani context, marriage is a socially and religiously entrenched institution and separation is deeply stigmatised, meaning that partners who are unable to escape marriage may experience a gradual loss of their reality-testing despite not being able to explicitly label the abuse as such by using a cultural script.

Partner (spillover) effects are more back and forth than one would expect. The directionality of the exposure was not different, as exposure by wives was correlated with husbands' lower satisfaction ($\beta = -.62$, $p < .001$), and exposure by husbands was correlated with wives' lower satisfaction ($\beta = -.46$, $p < .001$). This indicated that every partner's perception of being "gaslighted" was captured in the other's assessment of the marriage and helped to demonstrate the interdependence of marital wellbeing (Kenny et al., 2006). The spillover from wives to husbands' satisfaction was statistically significant, although somewhat stronger than the spillover from husbands to wives, consistent with previous research indicating that wives' experiences and regulation is particularly important for both spouses' marital outcomes (Bloch et al., 2014; Ali et al., 2022; Sweet, 2019). This is a tentative, associational and not a causal interpretation, as the distress of a wife might be more apparent within the dyad, reflecting the gendered division of emotional labour in this context.

At the actor level, maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation was significantly negatively associated with satisfaction for both partners ($\beta = -.62$ for wife and $-.61$ for husband) while at the dyadic level, it was highly negatively associated with satisfaction (all $\beta = -.56, -.57$, respectively, $p < .001$). The zero-order correlations also revealed that higher exposure to gaslighting was correlated with higher maladaptive regulation ($rs = .49–.66$). These patterns align with those found in the literature that correlate rumination, self-blame, and catastrophizing with relational dissatisfaction (Aldao et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2024; Rusu et al., 2019). When coping strategies are internalized and include self-blaming and rumination, and emotional expression and hardship tolerance are encouraged especially in marriage (Ashfaq, 2024; Batool & Khalid, 2012), it may be particularly likely that these coping strategies would accompany relational strain.

In contrast, adaptive cognitive emotion regulation did not significantly predict relationship satisfaction for either partner in the actor or partner models (β ranging from − .10 to − .17, all ns). The buffering (moderation) hypothesis received only limited, husband-specific support: adaptive regulation did not moderate any of wives' effects or any partner effect, but it did moderate husbands' own associations. Specifically, husbands' own adaptive regulation attenuated the negative link between their gaslighting exposure and their satisfaction, whereas wives' adaptive regulation strengthened it; wives' adaptive regulation likewise moderated the association between husbands' maladaptive regulation and husbands' satisfaction. This selective pattern is consistent with the view that individual cognitive strategies offer incomplete protection in the face of ongoing manipulation, and that emotion regulation operates within—rather than independently of—the dyad (Bloch et al., 2014; Jitaru & Turliuc, 2022).

The limited protective value of adaptive regulation may partly reflect the composition of the adaptive composite. Adaptive strategies showed a small positive association with gaslighting exposure rather than a protective one (e.g., wives' adaptive regulation correlated positively with husbands' exposure, r = .26), suggesting that in this context some "adaptive" responses—particularly acceptance, may reflect resignation to a difficult situation rather than healthy adjustment (Wojnarowska et al., 2020). Where marital endurance is normative (Ahmed, 2022; Ali et al., 2022; Mansab, 2024), acceptance may function as accommodation to circumstances a spouse feels unable to change, an interpretation that warrants direct examination in future research.

Implications

The results suggest that exposure to gaslighting and maladaptive emotion regulation are important dyadic correlates of marital dissatisfaction and are worthy of being targeted in awareness, screening, and couple-based intervention. Both parties' experiences influence relationship evaluations, so interventions may be best delivered dyadically, fostering emotional awareness and healthier emotional regulation in both partners and being culturally sensitive to disclosure and assistance barriers. It may be especially helpful to attend to the moderation of the husband and the role it plays in the wife's experience because of the moderation being unique to the husband. These implications are based on observation- rather than evidence-based treatment effects.

Limitations and Recommendations

There are a number of caveats to be noted. The cross-sectional design prevents any causal inferences, and longitudinal dyadic designs are required to examine directionality and mediating pathways. Second, all measures were self-reported within one cultural context, which could result in an overestimation of associations because of shared-method variance. Third, the GRS has been designed to measure the experience of being gaslighted, not who gaslights, as will be evident by the study's focus on exposure to gaslighting, not perpetration.

Longitudinal and mixed method designs are recommended for future studies, as well as studies that would measure exposure as well as perpetration, and would model the dyad in ways that allow for

simultaneous estimation of actor and partner regulation effects, such as in multilevel or structural-equation models that include highly correlated actor–partner predictor variables. A deeper examination of the moderating effect of each spouse's adaptive regulation (particularly of one's own vs one's partner's regulation observed here) and deeper examination of specific emotion-regulation strategies (e.g., acceptance) would clarify the effects of emotion-regulation on couples' responses to 'gaslighting'.

Conclusion

Among married couples in Pakistan, each partner's own exposure to gaslighting was strongly associated with their own lower relationship satisfaction, and exposure spilled over across partners in both directions, somewhat more strongly from wives to husbands. Maladaptive emotion regulation was independently linked to dissatisfaction for both spouses, whereas adaptive regulation was largely unrelated to satisfaction and buffered exposure only for husbands. These cross-sectional, dyadic findings highlight the relational impact of experiencing gaslighting and point to the value of longitudinal, culturally sensitive, couple-focused research and intervention.

Declarations

Author Contribution

F. A: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft.U. S: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Project Administration, Writing – Review & Editing.R. Mushtaq: Validation, Data Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing.S. R: Writing – Review & Editing, Data Interpretation.A. Y: Data Analysis, Data Interpretation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.Z. M: Writing – Review & Editing, Validation.

Data Availability

This study examines gaslighting exposure, cognitive emotion regulation, and relationship satisfaction among 100 Pakistani married couples using a dyadic Actor–Partner Interdependence framework. The study received ethical approval from the Ethical Review Committee of Bahria University Lahore Campus (BULC/PSY/2025/22A). Findings indicate that greater gaslighting exposure and maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation are associated with lower relationship satisfaction.

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Figures

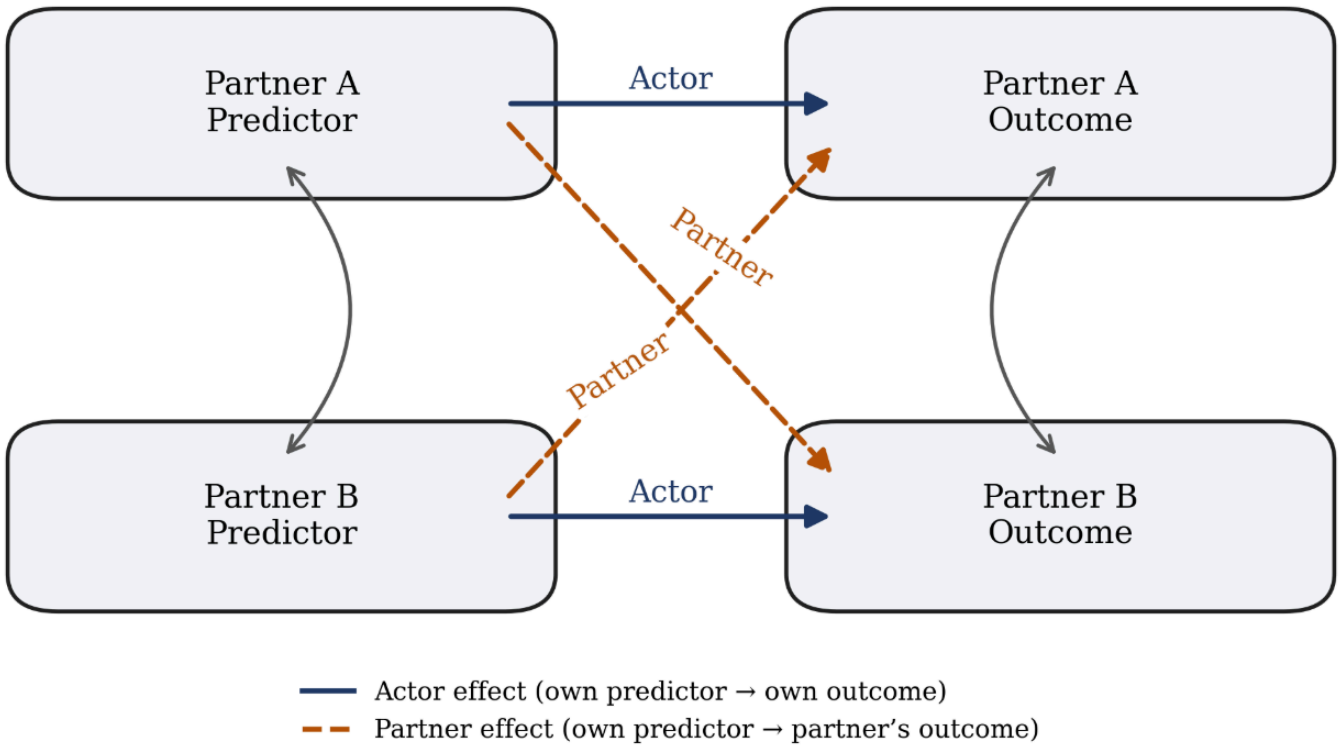


Figure 1

Actor–Partner Interdependence Model. Solid horizontal pathways are actor effects (a person's own predictor predicting his or her own outcome). Diagonal paths are partner effects (a person's predictor predicting his/her partner's outcome). The curved double-headed arrows indicate correlation between the two partners' predictors (left) and between their outcomes (right).

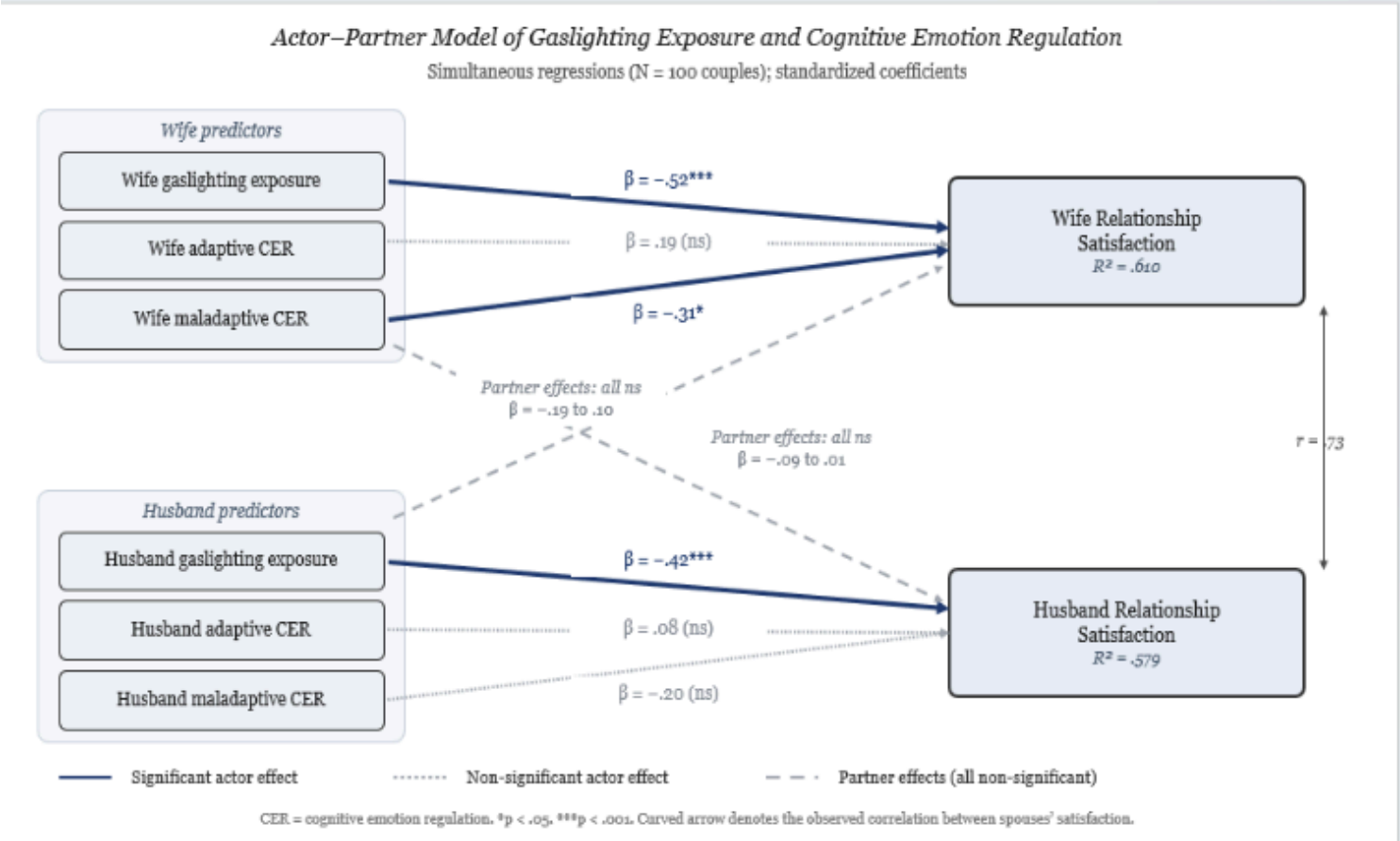


Figure 2

Legend not included with this version.