

Psychological Adjustment in Married Women: The Predictive Contribution of Moral Disengagement and Alexithymia

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Abstract

The emotional and cognitive-moral processes play a role in psychological adjustment in marriage. The current research question was to determine the predictive value of alexithymia and moral disengagement to psychological adaptation among married women. Cross-sectional correlational design was used and the sample involved was 200 married women between ages of 20-35 years. The participants were given the Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20 (Urdu version), the Moral Disengagement Scale, and the Psychological Adjustment Scale. Pearson correlation tests showed that there were significant positive relationships between alexithymia, moral disengagement, and psychological maladjustment. The multiple regression analysis revealed that the joint effect of alexithymia and moral disengagement accounted 27.6% of the variation in psychological adjustment. Both variables were found to be high independent predictors among which alexithymia showed a relatively stronger predictor. The results indicate that deficit of emotional awareness and morally not involved pattern of thought are significant predictors of psychological maladjustment during a marital situation. The findings indicate the need to incorporate emotional regulation and moral self-regulating processes in explaining and enhancing psychological functioning among married women. Clinical intervention implications and future research implications are discussed.

Keywords: Psychological Adjustment, Alexithymia, Moral Disengagement, Married Women, Marital Functioning.

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Introduction

Psychological adjustment is a multidimensional construct which is used to mean the capability of a person to balance his emotions, psychological, and functional well-being in responding to both internal and external needs. In the marital situation, the aspect of psychological adjustment obtains a certain more importance, because marriage is one of the most persistent as well as emotionally rich interpersonal relations during adulthood. In the case of married female, the process of adjustment is influenced not only by personal psychological peculiarities but also by the expectations related to relationships, emotional work, and social rules which govern the marriage roles and conduct. As empirical evidence always shows, women are more likely to report the presence of marital stressors compared to men, are usually more likely to report emotional burden, relational dissatisfaction, and susceptibility to psychological distress, especially where emotional expression and autonomy are not an option (Gul & Muntaha, 2022).

Marriage involves long-term emotional work, ethical responsibility, and adaptive response to the interpersonal stress. In case of disruption in these processes, mental adaptation may worsen and be manifested either through emotional anguish, disconnectedness in relationships or disturbed mental stability. Previous studies have reported various intrapersonal forecasts of marital readjustment, such as emotional control, individual qualities, and stress susceptibility (More, 2025; Munir, 2025). Nevertheless, the role of cognitive-moral processes and emotional awareness failures that can contribute to compromising psychological adaptation in married women have received relatively low attention.

Moral disengagement is a collection of mental mechanisms by which a person disarms internal moral norms so that they can justify, downplay or rationalize actions that would otherwise elicit a feeling of guilt or self-condemnation. Though moral disengagement has been analyzed quite intensively regarding aggression, antisocial behavior, and unethical behavior (Navas et al., 2021), there is an emerging source of evidence indicating that it is an instrumental factor in intimate relationships as well. Moral disengagement could be used in marriage to enable emotional detachment, rationalization of mistreatment, or redefinition of marital commitments, thus diminishing the process of psychological and relationship adaptation (Aignesberger and Greitemeyer, 2024).

Similarly, to the moral disengagement, alexithymia is recognized as one of the essential emotional weaknesses factors in adult relationships. The Alexithymia is distinguished by the inability to detect and label emotions, deficient emotional awareness, and externally focused way of thinking. These vices undermine emotional communication, empathy and adaptive coping all vital to healthy marital functioning. The studies have attributed alexithymia to relational distress, emotional divorce, and impaired mental health in married women (Al-shahrani and Hammad, 2023a; Al-shahrani and Hammad, 2023b). The more alexithymic women are, the higher the chances that they cannot express their needs, process stress in marriage, or participate in emotionally expressive communication, which makes them more susceptible to psychological maladjustment.

The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model is the model that offers an effective theoretical framework of comprehending the role of moral disengagement and alexithymia in the context of psychological adaptation in marriage. This model suggests that the prolonged presence of individual vulnerability plays with relational stress factors to influence the adjustment process (Gul & Muntaha, 2022). Moral disengagement might be a cognitive vulnerability which changes the moral self-regulation, and alexithymia is an emotional

vulnerability limiting emotional awareness and control. In combination with other types of vulnerabilities, they can lead to a vicious cycle of maladjustment, where emotional deprivations lead to empathic unresponsiveness, and maladaptive relational behavior is justified by moral disengagement (An et al., 2022; Kiefer et al., 2023).

Although there are increased empirical studies regarding marital adjustment, there has been a vast literature that has investigated moral disengagement and alexithymia separately. There is little research done to examine the combined contribution of these constructs towards psychological adjustment especially in married women. Such omission is prominent considering that there is some evidence to suggest that emotional processing deficits can enhance the consequences of moral disengagement by decreasing guilt, empathy and emotional responsibility (Mannarini et al., 2023; Ścigała et al., 2021). Therefore, there is still an urgent necessity to have integrative studies that can study cognitive-moral and emotional predictors of adjustment in marriage simultaneously.

This gap is addressed by the present study which explored psychological adjustment among married women using the combined predictive model of moral disengagement and alexithymia. The research is expected to make contributions to the existing knowledge on the topic by targeting this population and combining these two theoretically relevant constructs, the study is expected to enhance the comprehension of intrapersonal processes that discourage or support psychological adaptation in marital life.

Significance of the Study

The relevance of the current research is that it offers theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions. In theory, the research contributes to the existing models of marital and psychological adjustment, by combining the moral disengagement, which is a cognitive-moral concept, with alexithymia, which is an emotional processing deficit. Although the concept of moral disengagement is novel to the previous studies, the conceptualization of adjustment becomes broader through the incorporation of moral disengagement in intimate relationships (Petloo et al., 2022).

Empirically, the study rises to a rather small literature on the topic with a specific population, that is, married women, being under specific pressure of psychological and sociocultural nature in marriage. The previous literature has identified the correlations between marital adjustment and stress, mental health, expectations, and body image (More, 2025), and between depression and anxiety (Munir, 2025). Nonetheless, little studies have been conducted to identify the role of moral cognition and emotional awareness as predictors of adjustment in this population. The study addresses a significant gap in the research on marital psychology by testing the prediction value of moral disengagement and alexithymia empirically.

In clinical application, the results have an implication on clinical psychology, marital counseling, and mental health intervention. The discovery of moral disengagement and alexithymia as the predictors of low-quality psychological adjustment can be used to create a specific therapeutic program to promote emotional awareness, moral responsibility, and adaptive coping in married women. These interventions could eventually lead to better marital functioning, psychological health and relationship stability.

Research Gap

The critical analysis of the literature in existence shows that there are certain gaps. To begin with, psychological and marital adjustment are many years old topics, but much of the existing body of literature has focused on adult populations or couples in general, and not on married women as a distinct psychosocial category with its own emotional and moral

experiences (Adekanmbi et al., 2021). This restricts knowledge on gender-specific processes of adjustments that take place during marriage.

Second, the study of moral disengagement has so far been done mainly in the context of aggression, criminality, or in an organizational setting, and there is little research regarding its application in intimate relations and marital relationships (Navas et al., 2021). Although the role of moral disengagement in relationship satisfaction and infidelity definitions is indicated in recent research (Aignesberger and Greitemeyer, 2024), the role of it in general psychological adaptation among married women is not studied.

Third, most studies have focused on alexithymia as a predictor per se, although emotional divorce, relational dissatisfaction, and mental health issues among married women have been associated with alexithymia (AL-shahrani and Hammad, 2023a; AL-shahrani and Hammad, 2023b). The research is deficient in terms of research that focuses on the interaction of alexithymia with other intrapersonal vulnerabilities to determine the effects on psychological adjustment.

Above all, a definite shortage of integrative studies that test the joint predictive value of moral disengagement and alexithymia in the psychological adaptation is evident. Current literature has not paid much attention to the fact that cognitive moral disengagement mechanisms and deficiency of emotional processing can work together to assist maladjustment (Koçyigit & Uzun, 2025). This theoretical and practical gap highlights the necessity of the current research.

Rationale of the Study

Marriage is an institution that is controlled morally and emotionally and involves a person being emotionally sensitive and at the same time complying with inherent moral norms. Psychological adjustment could be worsened when one or both moral self-regulation and emotional awareness are damaged. Moral disengagement enables people to rationalize maladaptive behaviors in their thoughts and alexithymia limits emotional awareness and expression. Combined, the mechanisms can significantly undermine adaptive functioning in marriage.

The justification of the current research is based on the fact that psychological adjustment could not be entirely explained without analyzing moral-cognitive process as well as emotional one. Previous studies have established that emotional deficits can decrease empathic concern and guilt and thus enhance the impact of moral disengagement on maladaptive behavior (Mannarini et al., 2023; Scigala et al., 2021). Equally, moral disengagement can justify withdrawal of emotions and lack of relations, which further undermine adaptation.

It is especially important to focus on married women because women tend to have more burdens of emotional responsibility in marriage, and may be more susceptible to adjustment challenges when they cannot express their feelings or when they are compelled to do it in a morally justified manner. In studying moral disengagement and alexithymia as two predictors, the current research offers a theoretically reasonable and contextually sound framework of psychological adjustment in married women.

Objectives

Following are the objectives of the study:

- i. To test the correlation between moral disengagement, alexithymia, and psychological adjustment in married women.
- ii. Moral disengagement, alexithymia as the predictive factors of psychological adjustment in married women.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design adopted in this study was the cross-sectional correlational research design in order to determine the predictive value of moral disengagement and alexithymia in psychological adjustment among married women. The design was suitable when it comes to exploring the strength and orientation of associations among variables and their joint predictive influence with no manipulation.

Participants

A total of 200 married women aged between 20 and 35 years were included in the sample which is considered to be early and middle adulthood. The study sample included people living in different cities in the geographic field that was accessible to the researcher. Women with different education and socioeconomic status were selected to increase variability and representativeness in the identified population.

Sampling Technique

The convenience sampling technique was employed because of the accessibility and feasibility requirements, which are characteristic of a time-constrained quantitative study. Individuals that had attained the inclusion criteria and were present at the time of data collection were invited to the study.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria were:

- i. Married women aged 20-35 years
- ii. Married for at least one year
- iii. Reading and understanding the questionnaire.
- iv. Being willing to give an informed consent.

Exclusion criteria were:

- i. Divorced, widowed women or divorced women.
- ii. Women with self-reported diagnosed mental health disorder.
- iii. Questionnaires that are not available in their entirety or those that were not completed.

Measures

Demographic information was obtained through a demographics form. Respondents had to give details about age, education, marital period, and family background.

Moral Disengagement Scale

Moral disengagement was assessed with Moral Disengagement Scale developed by Riaz and Bano (2020). The scale has 35 questions that measure cognitive processes that help individuals dissociate themselves with moral norms. The ratings are applied to a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The scores above 5 denote moral disengagement.

Toronto Alexithymia Scale- 20 (Urdu Version)

The Urdu version of the Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20 (TAS-20) was used to measure Alexithymia, the scale was adapted and validated by Zahid, and Colleagues (2024). It has 20 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Greater difficulty in describing and identifying emotions is reflected by higher scores.

Psychological Adjustment Scale

The Adjustment Scale for Adults was used to measure psychological adjustment (Naz, et al., 2018) The questionnaire has 48 questions that measure emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal adjustment. The ratings for items are done on a 3-point scale (1 = Sometimes, 2 = Somewhat More/Quite a Bit, 3 = More/Increased). The higher the scores, the more the psychological maladjustment.

Procedure

The respective scale developers gave their permission before the data were collected. The study participants were contacted in the community settings individually and told about the purpose of the research. Informed consent was taken prior to participation in written form.

After the consent, the participants were asked to complete the demographic form and the three standardized instrumentation (Moral Disengagement Scale, TAS-20 Urdu Version, and Psychological Adjustment Scale). The administration of questionnaires was done in the presence of the researcher in order to explain any ambiguities. The participants would be guaranteed of confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any point. The mean time taken to complete was around 20-25 minutes. Questionnaires having completed data were coded anonymously and kept in a secure location so as to be analyzed.

Statistical Analysis

The Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. The demographic variables and study measures were calculated in descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations). The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was applied in the analysis of the relationships between alexithymia, moral disengagement, and psychological adjustment. To determine the combined predictive outcomes of alexithymia and moral disengagement on psychological adjustment, multiple regression analysis was used. The significance of the results was considered as $p < .05$.

Results and Discussion

To check on the accuracy and completeness of the data, the data were screened before the inferential analysis. All the study variables, such as moral disengagement, alexithymia and psychological adjustment, were calculated using descriptive statistics. The standard deviations and means both demonstrated a sufficient variability among measures, and thus they are suitable to be tested using parametric tests.

Table 01: Correlation Among Alexithymia, Moral Disengagement and Psychological Adjustment (N=200)

Variable	1	2	3
Alexithymia	—	.47**	.39**
Psychological Adjustment	.47**	—	.40**
Moral Disengagement	.39**	.40**	—

Values are Pearson coefficients of correlation.

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

Dependent variable: Psychological (PA)

Table 1 demonstrates the product-moment correlation coefficients between alexithymia, moral disengagement and psychological adjustment ($N = 200$). Findings show that there is a moderate positive relationship between alexithymia and psychological maladjustment ($r = .47$, $p < .01$), indicating that the greater the degree of difficulty in the recognition and expression of emotions, the worse the psychological adjustment of the married women. Equally, moral disengagement was also positively related to psychological maladjustment ($r = .40$, $p < .01$), meaning that the higher propensities to achieve cognitive disengagement of moral self-regulatory mechanisms are correlated with a higher level of adjustment problems.

In addition, the relationship between alexithymia and moral disengagement was also moderate and positive ($r = .39$, $p < .01$) suggesting that moral disengagement cognitive patterns are associated with emotional processing deficits. The correlations were all significant at the .01 level showing that the study variables have significant associations between each other.



The correlation of the relationships has given a direction indicating that greater increase in alexithymia and moral disengagement are linked with more psychological maladjustment among married women.

Table 02: Summary of Regression Analysis Predicting Psychological Adjustment from Alexithymia and Moral Disengagement

Variables	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	P
Alexithymia	.525	.276	.269	37.53	< .001
Moral Disengagement					

Table 2 shows the outcomes of the linear regression analysis of the predictive value of the alexithymia and moral disengagement concerning psychological adjustment. The explanatory power of the overall regression model was significant because $F (2, 197) = 37.53$, $p < .001$, which means that the predictors together accounted a high part of the variance in psychological adjustment. The overall relation between the predictors and psychological adjustment was moderate as indicated by the multiple correlation coefficient of $R = .525$.

The model explained about 27.6% of psychological adjustment difference ($R^2 = .276$), which has an adjusted R^2 value of .269, showing that close to 27% of the difference in psychological adjustment among women in marriage can be attributed to alexithymia and moral disengagement. These results indicate that emotional processing problems and the tendency of being morally disengaged add a substantial amount of psychological maladjustment. The high power of the model shows that these variables are significant psychological predictors of the adjustment outcomes in the marital settings.

Table 03: Multiple Regression Predicting Psychological Adjustment from Alexithymia and Moral Disengagement

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	SE B	β	t	P
Constant	60.83	3.62	-	16.79	< .001
Alexithymia	.299	.053	.369	5.60	< .001
Moral Disengagement	.068	.017	.257	3.9	< .001

The multiple regression analysis revealed that alexithymia and moral disengagement had significant predictive values of psychological adjustment in married women. The factor of Alexithymia was found to be a strong predictor ($B = .299$, $SE = .053$, $b = .369$, $t = 5.60$, $p = .001$) meaning that the more the emotional processing problems, the more the maladjusted the psychological conditions. Maladjustment had also significant predictions with moral disengagement ($B = .068$) having ($SE = .017$) and ($b = .257$, $t = 3.90$, $p < .001$) as its effect size. On the whole, alexithymia proved to have a greater unique impact on the psychological adjustment compared to the moral disengagement.

Discussion

The current research has investigated the predictive value of alexithymia and moral disengagement in predicting the psychological adjustment in married women. The results showed that alexithymia as well as moral disengagement were significantly correlated with worse psychological adaptation, and their sum of contribution explained meaningful proportion of variance in the outcome of psychological adaptation. These results highlight the significance of applying emotional and moral-cognitive processes to the study of psychological functioning in relations with a spouse.

Alexithymia proved to be a very strong predictor of psychological maladjustment, and this is in line with other studies conducted in relational research. Frye-Cox and Hesse (2013) established the idea that alexithymia erodes the quality of marriage by increasing loneliness and poor intimate communication. Emotional challenges related to the identification and expression of emotions can cause emotional isolation of married women, as well as ineffective interpersonal interactions, which can be a factor contributing to psychological distress and poor adaptive functioning. The current results supplement this evidence by demonstrating that alexithymia is linked not only to relational dissatisfaction but also to more general psychological adjustment issues too.

Psychological adjustment was also largely predicted by moral disengagement, which upholds the conceptualization developed by Bandura (1999), in which moral disengagement is simply a failure of moral self-regulation. In the marriage, moral disengagement can facilitate cognitive explanations of emotional withdrawal or emotional disregard, undermining responsibility and exerting greater psychological pressure internally. The current findings are supported by empirical studies that have demonstrated that relational dissatisfaction and maladaptive behavior in intimate settings are related to moral disengagement (Lisman and Holman, 2022; Maftei et al., 2022).

Significantly, the predictive power combined of alexithymia and moral disengagement is in line with the emerging evidence that shows that the two are causing psychological maladjustment jointly. According to Lu et al. (2024), alexithymia and moral disengagement have a sequential and interactive association in the prediction of depressive symptoms. Emotional unawareness and moral disengagement could be taken together to strengthen maladaptive cognitive and emotional styles, which eventually can weaken psychological adjustment in the married women.

Limitations

There are a certain limitations that need to be recognized. To begin with, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal inference results; the results indicate associations and not directional influences. Second, because self-report measures were used, they could have been biased in response such as to social desirability and subjectivity. Third, convenience sampling was used in selecting the sample, which was limited to married women, thus limiting how it applies to other age groups, men, or even different cultural backgrounds. It should be suggested that future research should use longitudinal designs, multi-informant measured variables, and more representative sample designs.

Recommendations

The study of these relationships should be done in future research by applying longitudinal or dyadic designs to have a better perception of what happens in marriage with time and interpersonal interactions. The inclusion of qualitative designs can serve as a way of obtaining a better understanding of the functioning of emotional awareness and the role of moral reasoning in marital scenarios. In clinical practice, emotional regulation and emotional expression training, and moral self-reflection interventions can be used to improve psychological adaptation in married women. Programs focusing on processes of communication and accountability that are based on couples may also be effective.

Conclusion

The current paper reveals the huge contributions of alexithymia and moral disengagement in psychological adaptation in married women. Deficits in emotional processing and moral disengaged cognitive patterns independently and in combination with each other led to psychological maladjustment with a stronger relationship evident in alexithymia. These results



support the significance of the incorporation of emotional and moral-cognitive model in the study of psychological functioning in the context of marital relationships. The challenge of emotional awareness and moral self-regulation could thus be a concern that would be key towards enhancing healthier marital and psychological results.

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