



A Strained Relationship with the Mother-in-law: Can it Affect a Woman's Marital Satisfaction?

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Abstract

Marital satisfaction is influenced by various interpersonal dynamics, including relationships with extended family members. This study examined the impact of non-rapport with the mother-in-law on marital satisfaction and explored negative emotional states as a potential mediator. A sample of 108 married women completed standardized measures, including the Conflict Scale to assess non-rapport with the mother-in-law, the Marital Satisfaction Inventory – Brief Form (MSI-B) to measure marital satisfaction, and the Emotion State Questionnaire (EST-Q) to measure negative emotional states. Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between non-rapport with mother-in-law and marital satisfaction, and a series of regression analyses were conducted to examine the mediating influence of negative emotional state of the daughter-in-law. The findings revealed a significant negative association between non-rapport with the mother-in-law and marital satisfaction. However, the mediating role of negative emotional states was not supported. These findings highlight the complex influence of extended family relationships on marriage. Future research should further explore these dynamics and identify interventions to support marital satisfaction by working on the dyad's individual relationships with other family members.

Keywords: Marital Satisfaction · Relationship · Mother-in-Law · Emotions · Non-rapport

At the heart of any society lies the family unit, serving as its fundamental building block and the bedrock of social cohesion. Within this unit, relationships form the driving force, shaping the dynamics and functionality of familial bonds. It is within the context of these relationships that values, traditions, and norms are transmitted, influencing individual development and societal values. Happy families, characterised by strong interpersonal connections, mutual support, and understanding, play a pivotal role in fostering positive social outcomes. They not only contribute to the well-being and fulfilment of their members but also serve as catalysts for progress and prosperity within broader society. By prioritising the cultivation of harmonious and supportive family relationships, communities can nurture the conditions for collective growth, resilience, and advancement.

This study explores the important but frequently overlooked topic of a lack of connection between two important family members, a mother-in-law and a new daughter-in-law, and how it affects marital satisfaction. A newly married couple often faces the crisis of conflict or non-rapport between the new daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law. A survey conducted with older women revealed that 68% of the respondents reported having strained relationships with their daughter-in-law (Saleem, 2023). There are many cultural, sociological, and

interpersonal complexities in the connection between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, which makes it an important topic for research. Previous research has indicated that there is a possibility of conflict, rivalry, and strain in this kind of relationship, which can carry over into marriage and negatively impact the couple's quality of life (TOI, 2021). Through a holistic lens, this study aims to enhance our comprehension of the complex dynamics within extended families and the consequences that arise from non-rapport.

Influence of Family on Marital Satisfaction

In collectivistic cultures like India, marriage is often termed as a union of two families instead of just two individuals. This means that the immediate families of both the husband and wife are often heavily involved in the relationship of the couple. This often affects the couple's marital satisfaction. Tavakol et al. (2017) have defined marital satisfaction as a sense of happiness, satisfaction, and joy experienced by the husband or wife when they consider all aspects of their marriage.

A meta-analysis by Tavakol et al. (2017) revealed that the couple's families play an extremely crucial role in determining the marital satisfaction of the husband and wife. Negative interference from both pairs of in-laws can often lead to diminished family commitment and marital insecurity in turn increasing marital conflict and adversely affecting marital satisfaction (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). On the other hand, positive support from both pairs of in-laws can enhance marital stability and encourage healthy conflict resolution for the husband and wife as well (Samadaee-Gelekholaee et al., 2016).

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Kieren et al. (1975) further revealed that marital conflict is more likely to be caused by the involvement of the husband's side of the family as compared to that of the woman's. This could be due to the patriarchal nature of the institution of marriage which requires the woman to accommodate herself into her husband's family and therefore implies a lot more involvement of the husband's side of the family in their relationship. Additionally, research consistently indicates that women report more difficulty than men and mothers-in-law are more likely to be troublesome than fathers-in-law (Duvall, 1954; Kirkpatrick, 1963; Komarovskiy, 1964; Leslie, 1976). In other words, the husband's mother is more likely to be perceived as troublesome and the wife often faces difficulty to navigate conflict with the husband and his family.

Non-Rapport between Women and Their Mothers-in-Law

Research supports the anecdotal claims of the strained relationships between women and their mothers-in-law. Kang (2017) conducted a discourse analysis on the relationship between women and their mothers-in-law and found that a generation gap or a stark difference in ideologies lied at the heart of the conflict between the two. On the other hand, a qualitative study by Zaharakar et al. (2022) further revealed that the conflict was essentially based on the inability to find a common family identity. In other words, the new daughter-in-law coming in from a different family background had various different views and therefore there was high likelihood of an "us vs them" mindset coming into play while the two interacted as they both strived to hold to their own views based on their different backgrounds.

Any kind of conflict between two family members is never limited to that dyad and also often affects and involves the other members of the family. Anderson (2016) found that if there is a strained relationship between the new daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law in a family system, then its effects are not limited to the two women involved but it significantly affects every other member in the family system, especially the daughter-in-law's husband.

Research has further provided evidence indicating that the daughter-in-law's husband plays a very significant role in the relationship between a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law. Wu et al. (2010) for instance, studied the effect of a conflict with the mother-in-law, can have on the marital satisfaction of the daughter-in-law. They found that the marital satisfaction of the daughter-in-law gets significantly affected when her relationship with her mother-in-law was strained, however, in cases where the husband intervened and sided with his wife (i.e., the daughter-in-law), the conflict did not affect the daughter-in-law's marital satisfaction. Goldstein (2011) also found that the effect of a conflict between the mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law on the daughter-in-law's marital satisfaction is mediated by the perceived boundaries set by the husband of the daughter-in-law. In other words, if the daughter-in-law perceives that her husband has set adequate boundaries for his mother (i.e., her mother-in-law) then the negative effect of the conflict on her marital satisfaction is significantly diminished.

In general, Fischer (1983) found that, within the conflict between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, daughters-in-law are more likely to be irritated or experience negative emotions towards their mother-in-law than the other way round.

The research by Wu et al. (2010), Goldstein (2011) and Fischer (1983) indicates that among the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, the latter is more likely to experience significant distress and develop a negative emotional state as a result of a strained relationship between the two. Additionally, the husband of the daughter-in-law plays a significant role in buffering these negative consequences the daughter-in-law experiences. Additionally, the daughter-in-law's strained relationship with her in-laws predicts her perceptions of marital success (Bryant et al., 2001). Mirsaleh et al. (2022) revealed that a negative atmosphere in the family of origin is the most significant factor associated with decreased marital satisfaction among newly married couples, this means that it is likely that the couple's marital satisfaction would be getting negatively affected as a result of conflict between his mother and his wife.

Additionally, especially among newly married couples, a negative emotional state for either of the partners is likely to lead to marital dissatisfaction (Caughlin et al., 2000). Levenson & Gottman (1985) specifically provide evidence for the fact that, in case of conflict between any two members, including mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, in a family system the physiological arousal that results due to the negative emotional state is the factor that adversely affects marital satisfaction of married couples. In support of this, Cheraghi et al. (2018) found that high emotional stability and intimacy were both important for high marital satisfaction.

The previous literature fails to clearly draw the connection between a newly married couple's marital satisfaction and the negative emotional state of the new wife as a result of non-rapport with her mother-in-law. This is why it becomes important to address and explore if the relationship of a new daughter-in-law with her mother-in-law affects her marital relationship. This paper thus aims:

1. To study the effect of a strained dynamic between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law on the marital satisfaction of the daughter-in-law.
2. To study the role of a negative emotional state experienced by the daughter-in-law as a result of the conflict in determining the effect of said conflict on the marital satisfaction of the daughter-in-law.

Participants

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit 108 married women (daughter-in-laws) who had been married for less than 10 years. Participants provided informed consent before participation, ensuring they understood the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any stage.

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Women who had been married for less than 10 years.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Women who did not have a mother-in-law when married (due to death, estrangement, etc).
2. Women who had been diagnosed with one/more mental disorders.
3. Women experiencing any major stressors (bereavement, financial struggle) for the past 1 month.

Study Design

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design to examine the relationship between non-rapport with the mother-in-law and marital satisfaction. A mediation analysis was conducted to determine whether this relationship was partially or fully mediated by the negative emotional state of the daughter-in-law.

Variables:**1. Predictor Variable:**

Non-rapport between Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-Law: Defined as the extent of perceived conflict in the relationship between the daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law, as indicated by a score of more than 5.09 on the Conflict scale.

2. Mediator Variable:

Negative Emotional State Of The Daughter-In-Law: Defined by the scores on the Emotional State Questionnaire (EST-Q) as reported by the daughter-in-law, such that the higher the score, the more negative the daughter-in-law's emotional state and experiences.

3. Criterion Variable:

Marital Satisfaction: Defined as the degree of perceived satisfaction in the marital relationship, indicated by the scores on the Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire, such that a score below 8 is considered to be low marital satisfaction.

Hypotheses

H1. There will be a significant negative correlation between Non-rapport with mother-in-law and Marital Satisfaction.

H2. The relationship between the variables of Non-rapport with the mother-in-law and Marital Satisfaction would be influenced by the Negative Emotional State of the daughter-in-law.

Tools**The Conflict Scale**

The Conflict Scale is a subscale of Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos & Moos, 1986) which consists of nine dichotomous (True or False) items that assess the amount of expressed anger, aggression, and conflict among family members. It is scored by assigning a value of 1 to 'True' and 0 to 'False', and calculating the overall sum. Upon standardisation with a normative sample, the mean score on the conflict subscale was found to be 3.18 (SD = 1.91), the internal consistency (Cronbach's α) was 0.75, and the two-month test-retest reliability was 0.85 (Moos & Moos, 1986). Kleinman, et al. (1989) validated cut off scores for the conflict scale: a score of more than one standard deviation above the mean i.e. above 5.09 was considered to be indicative of high conflict and a score of more than one standard deviation below

the mean i.e. below 1.27 was considered to be indicative of low conflict.

Emotional State Questionnaire (EST-Q):

The Emotional State Questionnaire (EST-Q) is a 33-item scale in order to measure the extent of a negative emotional state an individual is experiencing at a given moment. This scale is based on a 5-point likert scale: 0-not at all; 1-seldom; 2-sometimes; 3-often; and 4-all the time. The overall score is obtained by adding the values assigned to answers of each question. The internal reliability of the total scale and all the subscales was found to be adequate such that the total EST-Q had an α of 0.88, the Depression scale, 0.87; Anxiety, 0.69; Agoraphobia-Panic, 0.82; Fatigue, 0.77; and Insomnia, 0.76. Additionally, all subscales were internally consistent, with α values exceeding 0.6 (Aluoja, 1999).

Marital Satisfaction Inventory- Brief (MSI-B)

The Marital Satisfaction Inventory – Brief Form (MSI-B) is a 10-item scale designed to assess distress in intimate relationships. Developed by Whisman et al. (2009), it is a condensed version of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory – Revised (Snyder, 1997). The MSI-B consists of five subscales: Global Distress, Time Together, Sexual Dissatisfaction, Affective Communication, and Problem-Solving Communication, each comprising two items. Responses are scored dichotomously, with "True" assigned a value of 1 and "False" assigned 0. Items 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9 are reverse-scored, and the total score is calculated as the sum of all responses. The MSI-B demonstrates strong test-retest reliability ($r = 0.79$). Furthermore, a cut-off score of 4 was determined based on sensitivity (0.88) and specificity (0.84) levels, ensuring effective identification of relationship distress.

Procedure

Participants completed an online self-report questionnaire assessing non-rapport, negative emotional state, and marital satisfaction through the given tools. The survey was anonymous to encourage honest responses. Data were screened for missing values and outliers before analysis.

Data Analysis**Step 1: Correlation Analysis**

Pearson product moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between non-rapport with mother-in-law and marital satisfaction.

Step2: Mediation Analysis

A mediation analysis was conducted using three hierarchical regression models following Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step approach:

1. **Regression 1:** Non-Rapport with the Mother-in-Law → Marital Satisfaction.
2. **Regression 2:** Non-Rapport → Negative Emotional State (Mediator).
3. **Regression 3:** Both Non-Rapport and Negative Emotional State (Mediator) → Marital Satisfaction.

The Sobel test (Baron & Kenny, 1986) was conducted to assess the statistical significance of the indirect effect.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the study variables, including means and standard deviations, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Number
Non-rapport with mother-in-law	4.29	1.41	108
Negative emotional state of daughter-in-law	30.62	26.55	108
Marital Satisfaction	7.13	2.94	108

The mean score for non-rapport with the mother-in-law was 4.29 ($SD = 1.41$), while marital satisfaction had a mean score of 7.13 ($SD = 2.94$). The emotional state questionnaire (ESQ), measuring the negative emotional state of the daughter-in-law, had a mean score of 30.6 ($SD = 26.55$).

Pearson product moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between non-rapport with the mother-in-law and marital satisfaction.

Table 2
Correlation between Non-Rapport with the Mother-in-Law and Marital Satisfaction

		conflicttotal	msttotal
conflicttotal	Pearson Correlation	1	-.269**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.005
	N	108	108
msttotal	Pearson Correlation	-.269**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	
	N	108	108

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results indicated a significant negative correlation between non-rapport with mother-in-law and marital satisfaction, ($r = -.269$, $p = .005$). This supports Hypothesis 1 (H1), suggesting that higher levels of non-rapport with the mother-in-law is associated with lower marital satisfaction.

To examine whether the negative emotional state of the daughter-in-law (ESQ) mediates the relationship between conflict with the mother-in-law and marital satisfaction, a three-step hierarchical regression analysis was conducted following Baron and Kenny's (1986) mediation framework.

Table 3
Simple Regression Analysis Predicting Marital Satisfaction from Non-Rapport with Mother-in-Law

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	9.535	.880		10.839	<.001
	conflicttotal	-.561	.195	-.269	-2.877	.005

a. Dependent Variable: msttotal

In the first regression, the non-rapport with mother-in-law was entered as the predictor variable, and marital satisfaction was the dependent variable. Results indicated that non-rapport with mother-in-law significantly predicted marital satisfaction, ($B = -0.561$, $SE = 0.195$, $t = -2.877$, $p = .005$), explaining 7.2% of the variance ($R^2 = .072$, $F(1, 107) = 8.276$, $p = .005$).

Table 4
Simple Regression Analysis Predicting Negative Emotional State of Daughter-in-Law from Non-Rapport with Mother-in-Law

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	15.203	8.108		1.875	.064
	conflicttotal	3.596	1.798	.191	2.001	.048

a. Dependent Variable: esqtotal

In the second regression, non-rapport with the mother-in-law significantly predicted negative emotional state ($B = 3.596$, $SE = 1.798$, $t = 2.001$, $p = .048$), explaining 3.6% of the variance ($R^2 = .036$, $F(1, 107) = 4.002$, $p = .048$).

Table 5
Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Marital Satisfaction from Non-Rapport with Mother-in-Law and Negative Emotional State of Daughter-in-Law

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	10.583	.694		15.246	<.001
	conflicttotal	-.313	.154	-.150	-2.032	.045
	esqtotal	-.069	.008	-.623	-8.422	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: msttotal

In the final regression, both non-rapport with the mother-in-law and negative emotional state were entered as predictors of marital satisfaction. The overall model was significant, explaining 44.6% of the variance in marital satisfaction ($R^2 = .446$, $F(2, 105) = 42.33$, $p < .001$). The effect of non-rapport with the mother-in-law on marital satisfaction was reduced but remained significant ($B = -0.313$, $p = .045$) when emotional state was included in the model ($B = -0.069$, $p < .001$). This suggests partial mediation, indicating that conflict impacts marital satisfaction both directly and indirectly through emotional distress, with the latter playing a crucial mediating role.

A Sobel test was conducted to examine whether the indirect effect of non-rapport with the mother-in-law on marital satisfaction through emotional state was significant.

Table 6
Indirect Impact of Non-rapport with Mother-in-Law on Marital Satisfaction through Negative Emotional State of Daughters-in-Law

Path	Effect	SE	Z	p value
Indirect Effect (a*b)	0.248	0.136	1.82	0.69

The results indicated that the indirect effect was not significant ($Effect = 0.248, SE = 0.136, Z = 1.82, p = 0.69$). This suggests that while negative emotional state plays a role in the relationship between non-rapport with mother-in-law and marital satisfaction, its mediating effect does not reach statistical significance. Thus Hypothesis 2 (H2) was not supported.

Discussion

The findings of the present study contribute to the growing body of literature on the impact of in-law relationships on marital satisfaction, underscoring the role of non-rapport with the mother-in-law and its interaction with the emotional state of the daughter-in-law. The results demonstrated that greater non-rapport with the mother-in-law was significantly associated with lower marital satisfaction, aligning with previous research emphasising the influence of extended family dynamics on couples' well-being (Liu et al., 2022; Fingerman et al., 2012). This finding further supports Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which posits that close familial relationships exert a direct influence on individual and relational outcomes. Given that conflicts with mother-in-laws could create stress, loyalty dilemmas, and role strain within the marriage, the observed negative relationship is consistent with studies suggesting that a couple's marital quality is deeply embedded within broader family networks (Song & Zhang, 2012).

Despite the significant direct association between non-rapport with mother-in-law and marital dissatisfaction, the hypothesized mediating role of negative emotional state was not supported. One possible explanation for the non-significant mediation is that individuals may develop coping strategies that buffer the emotional consequences of in-law conflict, thereby preventing the distress from fully translating into marital dissatisfaction. Bodenmann et al. (2019) indicates that couples who engage in effective stress management techniques, such as mutual support and emotional regulation, may mitigate the emotional toll of external conflicts.

Cultural factors may also explain the lack of a significant mediation effect. In collectivist societies, familial harmony is often prioritised over individual emotional expression, leading individuals to suppress negative emotions to maintain social cohesion (Chadda & Deb, 2013). Suppression of negative emotions may reduce the observable impact of emotional distress on marital satisfaction, weakening the expected mediation pathway. Research on emotion regulation strategies have shown that individuals from collectivist cultures are more likely to engage in repressive coping mechanisms to navigate interpersonal stressors (Matsumoto et al., 2008). Consequently, future studies should examine cultural variations in the emotional response to non-rapport with in-laws and their implications for marital well-being.

While the mediation hypothesis was not supported, the findings still underscore the importance of extended family dynamics in shaping marital satisfaction. The results reinforce family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974), which emphasises that marital quality is not solely determined by the dyadic relationship between spouses but is also influenced by

interactions with extended family members. Given the increasing role of in-laws in many cultural contexts, particularly in multigenerational households, these findings highlight the need for interventions aimed at fostering positive in-law relationships.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that marital counselling and family-based interventions should address in-law conflict as a potential source of marital strain. Relationship education programs could incorporate strategies for boundary-setting and effective communication with in-laws, helping couples navigate familial tensions without compromising marital harmony. Additionally, psychoeducational programs for in-laws could promote mutual understanding and reduce intergenerational conflicts by fostering respect and cooperation within extended family networks.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships, necessitating longitudinal studies to examine how in-law conflict and emotional distress evolve over time. Furthermore, the study relied on self-reported measures from daughters-in-law, excluding the perspectives of husbands and mothers-in-law, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. Future research should adopt a multi-informant approach to capture the perspectives of all key family members involved in these relationships. Additionally, given the potential influence of cultural norms on in-law relationships, comparative studies across different cultural contexts could yield deeper insights into the interplay between in-law conflict, emotional regulation, and marital satisfaction.

Conclusion

The study highlights the significant role of non-rapport with the mother-in-law in predicting marital dissatisfaction, aligning with previous research on extended family influences on marital quality. However, the expected mediating role of negative emotional state was not supported, suggesting that alternative mechanisms may explain the link between in-law conflict and marital satisfaction. These findings underscore the complexity of familial relationships and emphasise the need for future research to explore the moderating effects of coping mechanisms and cultural factors in shaping marital outcomes.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest: The author has no conflicts of interest.

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