

## MEDIATING ROLE OF PERCEIVED CRITICISM IN PREDICTING MARITAL SATISFACTION FROM EMOTIONAL GRANULARITY

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### Abstract

*The current research was carried out to find the relationship of emotional granularity, perceived criticism and marital satisfaction among couples. Sample comprised of individuals who were couples (44 men, 44 women) and were selected by using purposive sampling technique from Islamabad. All the participants were educated. The inclusion criterion states that they must have at least one child. Exclusion criterion states that the newly married couples whose duration of marriage is less than 1 year will not be part of this study. The average wedded life duration of sample ranges between 1.5 and 30 years of marriage. Along with demographic sheet, standardized images from the Open Affective Standardized Image Set (OASIS), Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), Level of Expressed Emotion Scale-criticism items (LEE), Urdu translated version of ENRICH Couple scale were administered in this research. Correlation and mediation analysis were computed to examine the relation between variables. This study found that the couples having low emotional granularity rate were low on marital satisfaction and perceived their partner's comments as a criticism. They rate higher on perceived criticism from their partner thus scoring low on marital satisfaction. Mediation analysis was also done to find the mediating role of study variables on marital satisfaction. Results indicated that total effect of negative affect on marital satisfaction is significant. The research offers a general pragmatic substantiation and speculative understanding about the role of perceived criticism in prediction of marital satisfaction from emotional granularity. It unlocks novel facets for marital literature. The outcomes of the existing study augment the understanding amid partners and therapists to guide couples who are struggling for more contentment in life.*

**Keywords:** Perceived Criticism, Marital Satisfaction, Emotional granularity.

### Introduction

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Marital satisfaction is a complex and multifaceted construct, affected by various emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal variables. Of all aspects of life however, marital and family interactions are often the most emotionally fraught (Mirgain 2007). It is no wonder that both theoretical and empirical studies have extensively examined the components of happiness in close relationships. Marital satisfaction depends on how couples interact with each other, especially on what constitutes such connections as strengthen it or undermine it (Allsop, Leavitt, Timmons, & Carroll, 2021).

The ability to precisely recognize and distinguish between one's feelings is known as emotional granularity, and it has become recognized as an important aspect of relationship dynamics (Tan, Wachsmuth, & Tugade, 2022). A person with a higher emotional granularity can react to emotional situations in a more adaptive way, which can improve communication and help couples resolve conflicts. On the other hand, less emotional granularity can result in more generic and ineffective emotional reactions, which could exacerbate interpersonal conflicts.

Another important factor influencing marital satisfaction is perceived criticism, or the degree to which people believe their partners have criticized them. High levels of perceived criticism have been associated with higher levels of marital discontent and conflict, according to earlier study (Sanford, 2007). Emotional reactions may operate as a mediating factor in the detrimental effects of perceived criticism on marital satisfaction (Karney, & Bradbury, 2020). In other words, people with less emotional granularity may interpret and react to criticism more negatively, which lowers marital pleasure.

This study attempts to investigate how perceived criticism functions as a mediator in the relationship between marital satisfaction and emotional granularity. This study aims to shed light on the emotional and cognitive processes that underlie marital dynamics by investigating how emotional granularity affects perceived criticism and, in turn, marital pleasure. Emotional granularity will be measured using validated measures, such as the Open Affective Standardized Image Set (OASIS) and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), while perceived criticism and marital satisfaction will be assessed using other standardized measures.

## **Literature review**

Perceived criticism can be defined as the level of criticism an individual perceives from one's significant others. It is a subjective measure. This concept was developed to measure the construct of expressed emotions in a simpler way. It was developed by Hooley and Teasdale (1989). Based on meta-analytic

reviews, emotional expression seems to act as threatening and risk factor that augments the relapse of mental disorders in general clinical population, it also adversely effects the marital satisfaction among couples and lowers the overall quality of life (Butzlaff & Hooley, 1998). In spouses, perceived criticism has been mentioned as a fundamental predictor for emotional and behavioral difficulties (Wedig & Nock, 2007). Prominently, empirical evidence proposes that perceived criticism (PC) seems to play a damaging role in one's relationship with others. It was found that the individuals who rate high on perceived criticism have difficulty in leaving behind negative emotions and paying attention to cognitive tasks by performing them with optimistic approach. It was revealed that negative emotions have a stronger linkage with one's cognitive functioning than otherwise (Renshaw, Blais, & Caska, 2010). In other words, those individuals who have difficulty in diverting their attention from negative emotions would also have high perceived criticism (PC). However, it is hypothesized that those who are likely to perceive more criticism may actually have a deep-rooted issue of misinterpretation of vague or ambiguous affective information.

According to Barrett (2004), discriminating feeling 'sad' from 'happy' is comparatively trouble free. The happiness is an emotion linked with average or above average extent of activation while alternatively; feelings of sadness has negative valence and related with moderate to low levels of activation. Higher degree of emotional granularity is required when it comes to make a finer distinction among emotions of same valence (e.g. frustrated versus angry) by taking into consideration the knowledge in relation to arousal (i.e. frustration is naturally linked to less arousal than anger). A person who is low in emotional granularity (EG) expresses his emotions using more generalized terminology. Such people use separate emotions such as "sad," "angry," etc., to represent only the most global aspects of their internal affective state (typically displeasure and pleasure) and tend to perceive neutral statements as negative and as criticism.

In a study examining perceived criticism among spouses, Renshaw (2007), examined changes in symptoms of depression in relation to criticism ratings perceived by various respondents as unresponsive. Only criticism from romantic partners or family members who lived with participants depicted the changes in symptoms of depression. Therefore, we assume a negative relationship between emotional granularity and perceived criticism and it also plays a vital role in effecting marital satisfaction in a negative way. Marital satisfaction refers in this study to a global degree of favorable relationship between spouses (Roach, Frazier and Bowden, 1981).

Marital satisfaction was another term coined for perceiving martial happiness by the social writers. Marital satisfaction is referred to as a subjective sense of intimate affinity in an individual according to Sabatelli (1984). Research

has investigated those emotions has a significant role in contentment in marital bond and affects the marital life. Intimate relationships among couples call for strong skills of communication, such as knowledge of the need, sensitivity to the point of view of the partner and ability to value the understanding of the partner (Gotman & Levenson, as stated in Bui Wrzosinska, 2013). Their genuine or deepest emotions such as joy, hate, fear sorrow, wrath, and love are shared in the marital bond, and a pure understanding of their spousal feelings and emotions are a reason of contentment in the marriage (Fitness, 2013).

While the literature on emotional granularity is minimal, a new analysis on emotional granularity in pairs shows the role of emotional granularity in the lives of pairs. The hypothesis of higher emotional distinction for individuals with greater empathic accuracy (i.e. assess the emotions more accurately) was tested in an experimental sampling study among romantic pairs. Results show that people who highly differentiate between negative emotions, i.e. high negatives, can more clearly deduce how pleasant their partners are in their everyday living (Erbas, Sels, Ceulemans & Kuppens, 2016). The results show that the most common of them have very negative emotions.

Supplementary research studies are needed to explore, develop and spread the awareness of significance of emotional granularity. The researchers published studies which explore relationship amongst perceived criticism (PC), severity of symptoms & treatment outcome amid adult samples. Till date, the relationship between Emotional Granularity, Perceived Criticism and Marital Satisfaction in spouses has not been explored. Therefore, there is a need to explore emotional granularity in relation with marital satisfaction and perceived criticism because the literature on its relationship is lacking.

### **Methodology**

Correlational research design was used in this study. A literate sample from population was selected using purposive sampling technique which comprised of 44 couples (44 men, 44 women) who were residents of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The inclusion criteria comprised of couple having at least one offspring. Exclusion criteria comprised of recently wedded individuals. The period of marital life had a range between 1.5 & 30 years. After informed consent, a demographic sheet along with scales to measure study variables was administered. An experimental protocol was followed specifically for measurement of emotional granularity. The correlations among study variables were also explored.

### **Instruments**

**Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS).** Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988) developed this scale. Administration of this scale takes place by asking the participants to rate their momentary feelings on Likert scale of 5- points that ranges from “very slightly” to “very much” across 20 words that depicts emotions. The range of scores for PA is from 10-50; the higher score denotes greater level of the positive affect of the person. Whereas the range of negative affect is also 10-50 and minimum scores show low negative affect.

**Stimuli selection for PANAS scale.** A visual stimulus was used to trigger emotions of the participants. 28 Stimulus pictures were taken from Open Affective Standardized Image Set (OASIS) which was developed by Kurdi, Lozano, & Banaji, in 2017.

**1. Experimental protocol for picture viewing and affective rating.** A computer screen was used to display the stimulus images. The stimulus viewing lasted for 27 minutes. First of all, baseline was established for 30 sec, in which the participants closed their eyes and the screen was blank. After that a warning sign for 2 sec was given before each of the image (28 images\*2 sec= 56sec), that prepared and alerted the participant for the upcoming image on screen so that they could pay full attention. Each image shown afterwards lasted on the screen for 6 sec (28 images\*6 sec=168 sec) and 15 sec (28 images\*15 sec=420 sec) time was given to rate their emotions on PANAS scale after the view the image on screen. After each viewing session, 30 sec (28 images\*30 sec=840 sec) resting time was given in order to minimize the impact of previous image on the upcoming image. Resting time and baseline was kept same in the sense that in both situations, the participants had their eyes closed with blank screen. There were seven sets of four images for each individual.

Baseline	Warning (indicating the beginning)	Viewing set (neutral/pleasant/unpleasant)	Rating each viewed set	Resting (after viewing each set)
30 seconds	2 sec	6 sec	15 sec	30 Sec

Figure 1. Visual stimuli viewing protocol

**Level of Expressed Emotion Scale Criticism Items** This scale was developed by Cole and Kazarian in 1988. It is a 4-point likert scale with five items. The last two statements are reverse coded. An individual has to rate it in relation to his partner. The range of scores is from 5 to 20, with high score depicting more perceived criticism.

**ENRICH Couple Scale.** This measure was developed in 1989 by Fowers and Olson. It's a five point likert-type scale. It has 35 items. The minimum score an individual can have is 35 and maximum potential score is 175. The higher a person scored on this scale, the higher his/her marital satisfaction.

## RESULTS

**TABLE I: CRONBACH ALPHA AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS ON MEASURES OF THE STUDY (N = 88)**

Scales	k	A	M	SD	Score Range		Skew	Kurt
					Actual	Potential		
PANAS								
PA	10	.86	25.34	5.01	10-37	10-50	-.43	.94
NA	10	.88	21.75	4.73	10-34	10-50	.41	.40
LEES	5	.76	9.19	3.46	5-19	5-25	.64	-.21
ENRICH MSS	35	.89	122.39	18.62	55-159	35-175	-.84	1.75
MSS	10	.81	39.19	7.01	16-50	10-50	-.79	.59
MCS	10	.70	33.77	5.91	12-44	10-50	-1.00	1.97
CRS	10	.61	30.39	4.68	17-40	10-50	-.37	.10
IDS	5	.78	19.02	4.13	5-25	5-25	-.94	.98

Note. k = Number of items; Skew = Skewness; Kurt = Kurtosis; PANAS = Positive and Negative Affect Scale; PA = Positive Affect; NA = Negative Affect; LEES = Level of Expressed Emotion Scale; ENRICH MSS = ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale; MSS = Marital Satisfaction Subscale; MCS = Marital Communication Subscale; CRS = Conflict Resolution Subscale; IDS = Idealistic Distortion Subscale.

All the scales and subscales of study variables as seen in Table I have alpha reliabilities within the acceptable range (Salvia, Ysseldyke, & Salvia et al. (2010) value of alpha reliabilities falls in acceptable range. With respect to Skewness and kurtosis of scales and subscales lie between satisfactory ranges of  $\pm 2$  (George & Mallery, 2010) reflecting the normal distribution of data.

**Table II: CORRELATION AMID EMOTIONAL GRANULARITY, PERCEIVED CRITICISM AND MARITAL SATISFACTION (N = 88)**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
EG									
1 PA	-	.40**	-.12	-.01	-.12	-.03	-.09	-.16	-.16
2 NA		-	-.04	.07	-.41**	-.33**	-.39**	-.27*	-.39**
3 PC			-		-.58**	-.57**	-.45**	-.37**	-.56**
4 ENRICH				-		.88**	.90**	.73**	.87**
5 MS					-		.69**	.42**	.80**
6 MC						-		.67**	.69**
7 CR							-		.49**
8 ID									-

Note. EG = Emotional Granularity; PA = Positive Affect; NA = Negative Affect;; PC = Perceived Criticism; MS = Marital Satisfaction; MS = Marital Satisfaction; MC = Marital Communication; CR = Conflict Resolution; ID = Idealistic Distortion.

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table II shows that NA is significantly correlated with overall marital satisfaction of couples, so as the negative affect increases, it leads to a significant decrease in marital satisfaction of the couple. NA also has a significantly negative correlation with subscales marital satisfaction, MC, CR and ID. Social comparison of an individual is positively correlated with perceived criticism. Moreover, perceived criticism has a significant negative correlation with marital satisfaction.

**TABLE III: STEP-WISE MULTIPLE REGRESSION FOR PREDICTING MARITAL SATISFACTION (N = 88).**

Predictors	Outness					95% CI	
	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	B	B	F	LL	UL
Model 1	.34	.34					
Constant					44.14***	141.99	160.40
PC			-3.13	-.58***		-4.07	-2.19

Model 2	.47	.13		
Constant			38.31***	166.09 196.64
PC	-2.98	-.55***		-3.83 -2.14
NA	-1.45	-.37**		-2.06 -83

Note. PC = Perceived Criticism; NA = Negative Affect.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table III shows that perceived criticism in model 1 appears as the significant negative predictor showing 34% of the variance in outcomes ( $\beta = -.58$  and  $F = 44.14$ ) In Model 2, negative affect increased variance to 47% ( $\beta = -.37$  and  $F = 38.31$ ). Thus a variance of 13% is added to the model which is unique in negatively predicting outcomes.

**TABLE IV: Mediating Role of Perceived Criticism in Predicting Marital Satisfaction from Emotional Granularity**

Predictors	Marital Satisfaction			
	Model 1	Model 2	95% CI	
	B	B	LL	UL
Constant	137.75***	163.12 ***	144.36	181.88
Positive Affect	-44	-3.14***	-4.07	-2.20
Perceived Criticism		-.46	-1.11	.17
R <sup>2</sup>	.01	.35		
$\Delta R^2$		.34		
F	1.27	23.39***		
$\Delta F$		22.12		

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit.  
\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Mediation analysis was performed to check the mediating effect of perceived criticism in predicting marital satisfaction from emotional granularity (positive affect) (see Table IV).



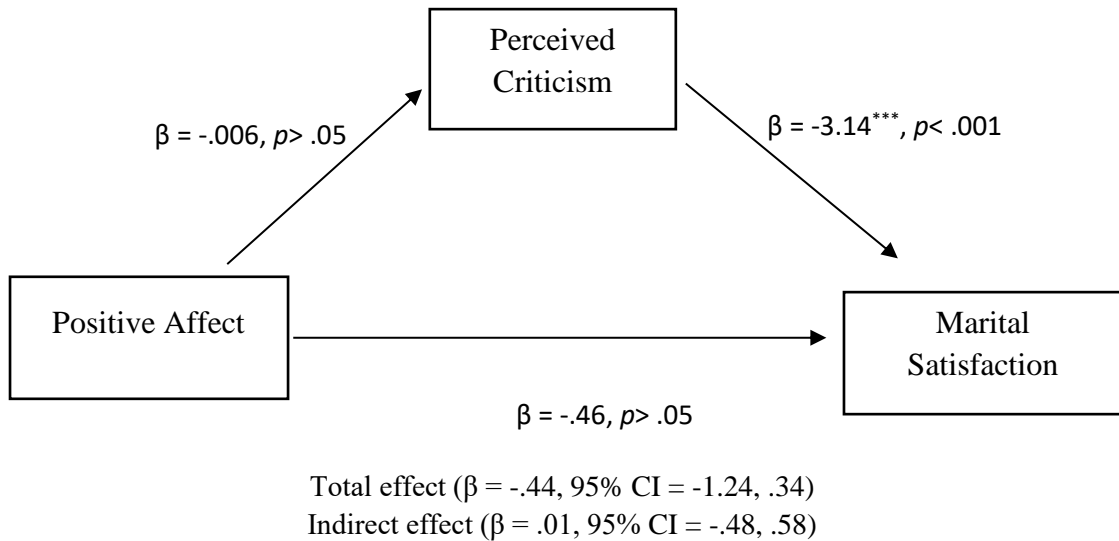


Figure 2. Model shows mediated effect of perceived criticism between positive affect and marital satisfaction.

It also shows the mediating effect of perceived criticism between positive affect and marital satisfaction. Perceived criticism acts as a mediator between positive affect and marital satisfaction which means that the relationship between positive affect and marital satisfaction explained through a third variable that is perceived criticism.

Table IV shows mediating effect of perceived criticism between positive affect and marital satisfaction. Results indicate that total effect of positive affect on marital satisfaction is non-significant as describes in model 1 and significant in model 2, direct effect of positive affect remains non-significant while controlling for the effect of perceived criticism. Furthermore, perceived criticism non-significantly mediates the relationship between positive affect and marital satisfaction ( $B = .01, 95\% \text{ CI} = -.48, .58$ ) and explaining 34% of variance in the marital satisfaction.

**TABLE V: INDIRECT RELATIONSHIP OF NEGATIVE AFFECT AND MARITAL SATISFACTION THROUGH PERCEIVED CRITICISM (N = 88)**

Predictors	Marital Satisfaction			
	Model 1	Model 2	95% CI	
	B	B	LL	UL
Constant	157.44***	181.37***	166.09	196.64
Negative Affect	-1.61***	-2.98***	-3.83	-2.14

Perceived Criticism		-1.44***	-2.06	-.83
R <sup>2</sup>	.16	.47		
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		.31		
F	17.33***	38.31***		
ΔF		20.98		

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit.

\*\*\*p < .001.

Mediation analysis was performed to check the mediating effect of perceived criticism in predicting marital satisfaction from emotional granularity (negative affect) (see Table IV).

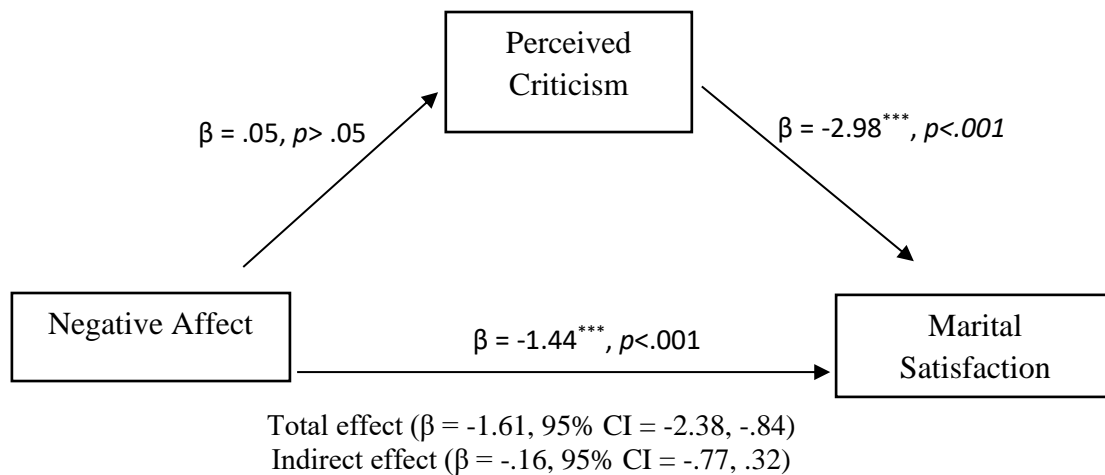


Figure 3. Model shows mediated effect of perceived criticism between negative affect and marital satisfaction.

It also shows the mediating effect of perceived criticism between negative affect and marital satisfaction. Perceived criticism acts as a mediator between negative affect and marital satisfaction which means that the relationship between negative affect and marital satisfaction explained through a third variable that is perceived criticism.

Table V shows mediating effect of perceived criticism between negative affect and marital satisfaction. Results indicate that total effect of negative affect on marital satisfaction is significant as describes in model 1 and model 2, direct effect of negative affect remains significant while controlling for the effect of perceived criticism. Furthermore, perceived criticism non-significantly mediates the relationship between negative affect and marital satisfaction ( $B = -.16$ , 95% CI = -.77, .32) and explaining 31% of variance in the marital satisfaction.

**TABLE VI: INDIRECT RELATIONSHIP OF NEGATIVE AFFECT AND MARITAL SATISFACTION THROUGH PERCEIVED CRITICISM (N = 88)**

Predictors	Marital Satisfaction			
	Model 1	Model 2	95% CI	
	B	B	LL	UL
Constant	157.44***	181.37***	166.09	196.64
Negative Affect	-1.61***	-2.98***	-3.83	-2.14
Perceived Criticism		-1.44***	-2.06	-.83
R <sup>2</sup>	.16	.47		
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		.31		
F	17.33***	38.31***		
ΔF		20.98		

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit.

\*\*\*p < .001.

Table VI shows mediating effect of perceived criticism between negative affect and marital satisfaction. Results indicate that total effect of negative affect on marital satisfaction is significant as describes in model 1 and model 2, direct effect of negative affect remains significant while controlling for the effect of perceived criticism. Furthermore, perceived criticism non-significantly mediates the relationship between negative affect and marital satisfaction (B = -.16, 95% CI = -.77, .32) and explaining 31% of variance in the marital satisfaction.

### Discussion

Among all domains of life, the most emotionally challenging areas are matrimonial and familial dealings (Mirgain, 2007) as a consequence it is not astonishing that the conceptual and pragmatic studies have studied the constituents that are ingredients of contentment from intimate relationships. The bond between couples' predicting the marital consummation by recognizing the aspects affecting worth of interaction between couples was the main aim of the study. To prospect the part of emotional granularity on perceived criticism, social comparison and marital satisfaction between couples present study was conducted.

To measure the construct of emotional granularity, standardized figures were taken from the Open Affective Standardized Image Set (OASIS) developed by Kurdi (2017) and asked how participants felt after seeing images that reflected

constructive and dismissive interactions. The schedule (PANAS) is an experimental protocol for image viewing and rating was developed and followed (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The expression level was utilized to evaluate the level of perceived criticism (Lee, Cole & Kazarian, 1988). In addition, to ascertain relationship satisfaction, dispute resoluteness, idealistic distortion, and conversational ability, translated version of the Enrich duet in Urdu was utilized (Fowers & Olson, 1989). Alpha coefficient reliability of the scales was adequate (see Table I). Also correlations amid study variable were explored to understand the course of the variable in the study. Table II showed that Negative affect has significantly negative correlation with communication in spousal bond. This also indicated that the negative affect was significantly associated to overall dyad satisfaction with the marital life, so as the negative affect increases, which leads to a noticeable decrease in the partners' marital life satisfaction. In previous studies, during social interactions, the expression of negative affect was found to increase in negative communication (Sanford, 2007). Thus, negative affective expressions during marital interactions can greatly impair marital adjustment. Moreover, NA also has a significantly negative correlation with subscales MS, MC, CR and ID. It is suggesting that if a person has high score on negative emotions, he would focus more on the problems related to married life with paying less attention to the positive side of the marital bond. Similarly, Petrican, Moscovitch, and Grady (2014) found that only optimistic sentiments were associated to life satisfaction of the couples or case is opposite to it.

Moreover, marital satisfaction is also affected by the criticism a person perceives from partner, suggesting a significant negative correlation of Perceived criticism with marital satisfaction (see Table 6). This indicates that the partners who perceive high criticism from their counterparts will not experience high marital satisfaction. They would feel dissatisfied in their marital bonds. This is similar to the findings of a research, depicted that regulated level of depression, a pessimistic companion was accompanying with visual dissatisfaction to marital life (Sacco & Phares, 2001). The outcomes of this research can be inferred from the facet of socio-cognitive interactional marital crisis (Feldman, 1976; Sacco, 1999). Present model suggests that social-cognitive elements (e.g., spouse evaluation and goal personal-schemas) with inter-personal-conduct constituents (e.g., partner's denunciation and low brace) are central components of bilateral directional engagement that contribute to the goal's marital satisfaction effect, which contributes to considerable dissatisfaction (Barnett & Gotlib, 1988).

## **Conclusion**

The study investigated the role of emotional granularity in perceived criticism, social comparison, and marital satisfaction among couples. Utilizing

standardized measures such as the Open Affective Standardized Image Set (OASIS) and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), the research examined how emotions influenced marital dynamics. Findings indicated that negative affect was significantly associated with decreased marital satisfaction and impaired communication within spousal relationships. Perceived criticism from partners also negatively impacted marital satisfaction, aligning with previous studies that linked negative emotional expression to marital discord. The results underscore the importance of socio-cognitive and inter-personal factors in marital satisfaction, suggesting that both emotional regulation and positive partner interactions are crucial for maintaining a healthy marital bond. These insights highlight the need for interventions targeting emotional awareness and communication skills to enhance marital satisfaction. The research offers a general pragmatic substantiation and speculative understanding about the role of perceived criticism in prediction of marital satisfaction from emotional granularity. It unlocks novel facets for marital literature. The outcomes of the existing study augment the understanding amid partners and therapists to guide couples who are struggling for more contentment in life.

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