

MARITAL CONVENTIONALISATION IN WIVES OF ALCOHOLICS AND NON-ALCOHOLICS

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The study of marital adjustment and its concomitants has been the focus of several investigations both in India and the west. Research into this dimension with reference to distressed couples as in the case of alcoholic families has of late gained momentum particularly in the Indian context.

It is an acknowledged fact that any study of marital dynamics would essentially involve dependence on data based on the verbal report of the spouses. Therapists and researchers may often have to put up with information which is far from factual and is often provided by the respondent in a manner which he / she perceives to be socially desirable. The extent to which a person distorts the appraisal of his marriage in the direction of social desirability has been referred to as marital conventionalisation (Edmonds, 1967).

The issue of marital conventionalisation has drawn the attention of western researchers more out of concern of it being a contaminant of self-report marital adjustment inventories rather than as having implications for therapeutic intervention. One hardly finds any Indian literature specifically addressing this issue. Investigation is required into whether the inclination to conventionalise one's marriage and 'cover up' the true marital situation is a natural tendency to be expected in normal populations or is a unique phenomenon seen only in distressed and stigmatised groups.

An understanding of marital conventionalisation has implications not only for researchers but also for therapists in de-addiction settings since it would facilitate a better understanding of marital dynamics in alcoholic couples for the purpose of marital counselling and family therapy.

There is ample evidence in the alcoholism-marital literature to indicate that being married to an alcoholic husband has drastic consequences for the spouse. Poor marital adjustment (Soni et al, 1993; Perodeau and Kohn, 1989), disturbed family environment and greater family burden (Aruna, 1988), wife battering (Nicol et al., 1973), family violence (O' Leary et al.,

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1989), marital aggression (Leonard and Blane, 1992; Gondolf and Foster, 1991; Parvathi, 1989; Leonard and Senchak, 1993) are some of the often reported features of alcohol complicated marriages.

It was therefore hypothesised that wives of alcoholics being a maligned and stigmatised category of women with traumatic marital experiences, would have a higher tendency to cover up the deficits in their marital life and provide more socially desirable responses than a comparative group of women with non-alcoholic husbands. This study was planned against this background.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

I. STUDY GROUP

150 wives of alcoholics were contacted at the de-addiction centre of the Khajmalai Ladies Association, Trichy (a NGO), and were included as respondents based on the following criteria:

1. Their husbands were registered as in-patients after being diagnosed by the Psychiatrist according to ICD-10 criteria.
2. They should be married for at least three years and living with their spouses.
3. The subject should not be the wife of a relapsed or recovering alcoholic visiting the center for follow up services.

II. REFERENCE/CONTROL GROUP

150 wives of non-alcoholics were identified through the study group respondents each of who provided two addresses of friends, neighbours or relatives where the husband was not an alcoholic and who had a similar background as their own family. Home visits were made and the family which more closely resembled the referrer study group respondent in terms of socio-demographic background was shortlisted for data collection. The wives were included as control group members only if their husbands scored less than seven (indicating non-alcoholic status on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test : Babor et al., 1989) and if she herself had no known history of psychiatric illness.

The two groups were comparable and matched on the following variables:

Table - 1 : Mean Value Profiles of the Respondents on Matched Variables

Sl. No.	Variables	Study Group*	Ref. Group*	t. Value	Statistical Significance
1	Present Age	31.77 yrs.	31.32 yrs	0.61	P > 0.05, NS
2	Duration of Marriage	13.17 yrs.	11.32 yrs.	2.37	P > 0.05, NS
3	No. of Children	2.19	1.99	1.46	P > 0.05, NS
4	Size of Family	4.91	4.68	1.18	P > 0.05, NS
5	Family Income	Rs. 1392.62	Rs. 1433.97	0.30	P > 0.05, NS

NS = No Significant Statistical Differences

* n = 150

The majority of respondents in both groups were Hindu housewives. Most of their husbands were in semi/unskilled occupations and in agriculture. Educational level of spouses in both groups was low with most having studied up to high school. The majority in both groups had non-consanguineous, arranged marriages.

INSTRUMENT

The marital conventionalisation scale developed by Edmonds (1967) was administered for data collection. It is a 15 item true/false type of scale, with each item having been given weights in direct proportion to their contribution to the total variance. Tamil translated version of the scale was used after ascertaining the translation validity of the instrument.

RESULTS

Table - 2 : Marital Conventionalisation - Mean Scores, Standard Deviation and t-values

Sl No.	Type	Mean	Standard Deviation	Statistical Significance
1	Wives of Alcoholics (n = 150)	36.97	22.08	t = 14.90
2	Wives of Non-Alcoholics (n = 150)	72.69	19.36	P < 0.001

Mean score comparison of the two groups reveals that they show a statistically significant difference with regard to their tendency of marital conventionalisation and the wives of alcoholics have manifested this tendency to a lesser extent.

For the purpose of distributing the respondents in low, moderate and high categories, the raw scores obtained by them were converted to sten scores (standard ten). The sten scores are distributed over ten equal-interval standard score points from 1 through 10, with the population mean (n=300) fixed at sten 5.5 with the outer limits for stens 1 and 10 at 21/2 standard deviations above and below the mean (X-SD to X+SD). Having thus standardised the raw scores on a single sten scale from 1 to 10, respondents obtaining sten scores of 1,2,3 & 4 were categorised as 'low', sten scores of 5 & 6 as 'moderate' and those above 6 as being high in terms of marital conventionalisation. The frequency profile of the respondents thus obtained is depicted in Table No. 3.

Table - 3 : Marital Conventional Profile of the Respondents

Sl No.	Marital Conventionalisation	Study Group*	Control Group*	Statistical Significance
1	Low	88 (58.7%)	13 (8.6%)	X ² = 65.92 df = 2 P < 0.001
2	Moderate	49 (32.7%)	25 (16.6%)	
3	High	13 (8.6%)	112 (74.87%)	

* n = 150

In terms of frequency distribution it is seen that the majority of wives of alcoholics fall in the 'low' conventionalisation category as against the majority of reference group respondents who fall in the 'high' category.

Pearson's product moment correlations plotted for the study group respondents between their marital conventionalisation score and socio-demographic variables such as their age (r=0.05, p>0.05), duration of marriage (r=0.10, p>0.05), family size (r=0.10, p>0.05), family income (r=-0.05, p>0.05) were not statistically significant. However it was seen that the duration of the husband's drinking related negatively to a significant extent with the marital conventionalisation score (r=-0.17, p<0.05)

DISCUSSION

Contrary to expectation, it was seen that it was the reference group spouses who obtained almost double the mean score than that of the wives of alcoholics who have shown a much lesser tendency for conventionalisation. A related study by Rychtarik et al (1989), indicated that the tendency for providing socially desirable responses was virtually negligible in wives of alcoholics when compared to their husbands.

A possible explanation for the relative low manifestation of the tendency to conventionalise may have to do with the setting of data collection and the point at which contact was established with the wives of alcoholics in this study. As mentioned earlier data was collected from them at a de-addiction centre, which perhaps many of these women has approached with the hope that at least the trauma and agony of their personal lives could be successfully weaned away from alcohol. It is possible that their frame of mind could have been such that they were willing to share any information, however sensitive it might be. Further the lesser tendency on their part to conventionalise could also be indicative of a greater need on their part to ventilate and share with somebody who is sympathetic and willing to listen patiently to the sufferings induced by alcohol in their marital lives.

On the other hand, the wives of non-alcoholics (reference group) were contacted at their residence to whom the researcher was introduced by one of their own acquaintances (as detailed earlier) and as such they were required to share intimate details about their marital life with a total stranger. Further they had no stakes in sharing such sensitive information and did not perceive any benefit accruing to them by involving in self-disclosure. These could be some of the factors responsible for the higher tendency of the reference group respondents to provide socially desirable responses.

The negative correlation obtained between the marital conventionalisation score and the duration of the husband's drinking perhaps indicates that the longer the husband has been drinking, there is a tendency on the part of the wife to become apathetic and somewhat tuned to her changed marital environment and thereby she may not feel the need to cover up what, in her perception, is a matter of routine.

The findings of this study imply that counsellors and therapists in de-addiction settings need not be unduly suspicious regarding marital life

information furnished to them by wives of alcoholics since the tendency for marital conventionalisation in them is minimal.

NOTE: THIS ARTICLE IS EXCERPTED FROM THE THESIS SUBMITTED BY THE AUTHOR TO THE BHARATHIDASAN UNIVERSITY FOR THE AWARD OF Ph.D. IN SOCIAL WORK.

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