

Marital Quality and Parenting Stress

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to empirically examine the relationship between marital quality and parenting stress among parents. The hypothesis was that marital quality would be negatively associated with parenting stress. Parents with higher marital quality were expected to experience lower parenting stress, whereas parents with lower marital quality were expected to experience higher parenting stress. Participants were 205 married men and women with children. Marital quality and parenting stress were measured using the Indonesia Muslim Marital Quality Scale (IMMQS) and the Parental Stress Scale (PSS), respectively. The results showed a significant negative relationship between marital quality and parenting stress.

Keywords: marital quality, parenting stress, parenting

INTRODUCTION

Parenting stress experienced by parents while raising children can have negative consequences for both parents and their children, and research has consistently supported this. High levels of parenting stress are associated with increased parental burnout [1,2]. Meta-analyses have also found a negative association between parenting stress and well-being [3]. Longitudinal studies indicate that parenting stress mediates the relationship between negative affect and violent parenting practices [4]. In

addition, parenting stress reported by both fathers and mothers is linked to children's externalizing behaviors, while stress experienced by mothers in particular is also associated with children's internalizing behaviors [5]

Parenting stress is influenced by many factors. Research suggests that prenatal attachment style, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and difficult infant temperament can contribute to postpartum parenting stress [6]. Mothers of children with ASD also tend to experience parenting stress in line with the severity of their child's condition [7]. In addition, parenting stress is shaped by child characteristics and the quality of the marital relationship [8]. Among working parents, work-family conflict has been linked to higher parenting stress [9]. Moreover, in low socioeconomic contexts, mothers' income and education have been identified as predictors of parenting stress [10].

The various factors related to marital quality described above suggest that marital quality is an important determinant of parenting stress. Marital conflict can spill over into parenting, increasing the pressure parents feel as they manage the demands of day-to-day childrearing [11]. Conversely, marital quality can also function as a resource that supports parents in their parenting role. Higher marital quality is associated with lower parenting stress, both among new parents and among parents facing crisis situations [12]. In clinical contexts, marital quality has been found to predict parenting

stress, which in turn is associated with child depression [13].

Research on the relationship between marital quality and parenting stress over the past ten years has produced two broad sets of findings. One group of studies suggests that marital quality influences parenting stress, whereas another indicates that parenting stress influences marital quality [14–16]. In this study, however, we emphasize the direction from marital quality to parenting stress for preventive purposes. Marital quality is a relational factor that is generally more amenable to intervention than parenting stress, which is more complex because it is also shaped by child characteristics. In addition, research has shown spillover effects, in which negative marital interactions are associated with higher parenting stress [17]. Marital dissatisfaction has also been linked to greater vulnerability to parenting stress in the context of sibling relationships [11]. Therefore, the present study aims to empirically test the correlation between marital quality and parenting stress. The hypothesis was that marital quality would be negatively associated with parenting stress.

MATERIALS & METHODS

Participant

The study participants consisted of 205 parents ($N = 205$), including 55 men (26.8%) and 150 women (73.2%). Most participants were aged 26–30 years (37.1%; $n = 76$). Regarding family characteristics, the majority had one to two children (83.0%; $n = 170$), with a tendency toward having one child. Most participants had been married for 1–5 years (44.4%; $n = 91$), while the remaining participants were distributed across the 6–30-year range in relatively diverse proportions.

Measures

This study examined two variables: parenting stress and marital quality. Parenting stress was assessed using the Parental Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Berry and Jones [18] and adapted by Sabam

[19]. The PSS contains 18 items, including 10 items measuring the strain dimension and 8 items measuring the pleasure dimension. Favorable items are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), whereas unfavorable items are reverse-scored (5 to 1). Higher total scores indicate higher levels of parenting stress. Berry and Jones [19] reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 for the original instrument, and Sabam [19] reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 for the adapted version. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.832.

The marital quality measure used in this study was the Indonesia Muslim Marital Quality Scale (IMMQS) developed by Wahyuningsih et al. [20]. Marital quality was assessed across three dimensions using 13 items: friendship (7 items), satisfaction with children (3 items), and harmony (3 items). Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 4-point Likert scale (4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). Higher total scores indicate higher marital quality, and lower scores indicate lower marital quality. Wahyuningsih et al. [20] reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 for the original scale, whereas the present study obtained a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.890.

PROCEDURE

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Cultural Sciences. Eligible participants were married men or women with children. The online questionnaire included measures of marital quality and parenting stress. In the first stage, the researcher obtained permission from the scale author to use the adapted instrument. Data were then collected by distributing the questionnaire via Google Forms, and participants were asked to respond based on their experiences over the past three months. To recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria, the questionnaire link was disseminated through social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and others.

All data were collected online using Google Forms.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis in this study was performed using SPSS 21.0.

RESULT

Table 1 presents the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and correlation between aspects for 205 respondents. Descriptively, the mean values for each aspect are Pleasure (M = 10.20; SD = 2.60), Strain (M = 19.80; SD = 5.30), Harmony (M = 9.10; SD = 1.60), Satisfaction with children (M = 10.30; SD = 1.30), and Friendship (M = 23.10; SD =

3.10). The correlation results show that the first aspect of marital quality, namely Harmony, is negatively correlated with the aspect of pleasure ($r = -0.27$; $p < 0.01$) and the aspect of strain ($r = -0.33$; $p < 0.01$) of parenting stress. The second aspect of marital quality, Satisfaction with children, also correlated negatively with the pleasure aspect ($r = -0.26$; $p < 0.01$) and did not correlate with the strain aspect ($r = -0.05$; $p > 0.05$) of parenting stress. The third aspect of marital quality, Friendship, also correlated negatively with the pleasure aspect ($r = -0.34$; $p < 0.01$) and the strain aspect ($r = -0.20$; $p < 0.01$).

Table 1 Mean, Standard Deviation, and Inter-Variable Correlation (N = 205)

No	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1	Pleasure	10.20	2.60	—			
2	Strain	19.80	5.30	.42**	—		
3	Harmony	9.10	1.60	-.27**	-.33**	—	
4	Satisfaction with children	10.30	1.30	-.26**	-.05	.28**	—
5	Friendship	23.10	3.10	-.34**	-.20**	.52**	.56**

Note. The correlation value is Pearson (r) and is displayed in the lower triangle. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ (one tailed).

A normality test was first conducted to determine whether the study data were normally distributed. The distribution was considered normal if the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test produced a significance value greater than 0.05. The results indicated that the parenting stress data had a Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistic of 0.073 with $p = 0.010$ ($p < 0.05$), while marital quality had a Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistic of 0.125 with $p < 0.05$. Thus, the data for both variables were not normally distributed. Therefore, Spearman's rho was used for the correlational analysis. The results of the hypothesis test are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Spearman's Correlation Test between Parenting Stress and Marital Quality

	r_s	p	r^2
Total (N = 205)	-.323	< .001	.104
Female (N = 150)	-.377	< .001	.142
Male (N = 55)	-.255	.031	.065

Based on the results of the analysis as shown in Table 2, there is a significant negative

relationship between marital quality and parenting stress, both in the overall sample and when analyzed by gender. In the overall sample (N = 205), a moderate negative correlation was obtained ($r_s = -0.323$; $p < .001$; $r^2 = 0.104$), indicating that the higher the marital quality, the lower the parenting stress. The same pattern was found in the female group (N = 150) with a stronger negative correlation ($r_s = -0.377$; $p < .001$; $r^2 = 0.142$), as well as in the male group (N = 55) with a weaker but still significant negative correlation ($r_s = -0.255$; $p = .031$; $r^2 = 0.065$). These findings support the hypothesis that marital quality is negatively related to parenting stress, with the relationship appearing to be stronger in women than in men.

DISCUSSION

The results of the data analysis show that the quality of marriage has a direct impact on parenting stress. The better the quality of the couple's relationship, the lower the stress felt

by parents in caring for their children. Destructive conflict between couples tends to increase parenting stress. This is in line with the findings of a longitudinal study showing that destructive conflict between couples increases parenting stress [21]. Another study also found that the quality of parental intimacy is associated with lower levels of parenting stress [22]. Other studies have also shown that the relational dimension in couples is associated with levels of parenting stress [23]. Furthermore, research in the context of couple relationships confirms that relational conflict and couple dynamics are associated with increased parenting stress. This further reinforces that the quality of marriage is an important factor to consider in explaining the parenting stress experienced [24].

The results of this study support findings from research conducted over the past ten years, which show that the couple's relationship is the primary emotional context in child rearing. Better quality marriages tend to reduce parenting stress, while poor relationships tend to increase parenting stress because sources of emotional support are reduced and tension between partners 'spills over' into the realm of parenting [25,21]. Longitudinal evidence also shows that marital relationships affect parenting stress [25]. In families with high marital conflict, parental parenting stress increases and is associated with poorer child adjustment [26]. Destructive conflict between parents is associated with high parenting stress [21]. Dyadic analyses of fathers and mothers also show that the quality of the relationship between parents has an impact on parenting stress for both oneself and one's partner (actor-partner effect), so it can be concluded that the quality of marriage is one of the key factors in preventing parenting stress [27].

The results of this study show that the correlation between marital quality and parenting stress is stronger in the mother group than in the father group. This may be because in most families, mothers tend to have a greater share of childcare and mental burden than fathers. The condition of the

couple's relationship is a source of support that greatly determines emotional regulation and daily coping capacity. When marital quality declines, mothers are more likely to experience increased demands as caregivers and feel a lack of resources, which can then increase parenting stress compared to fathers. Dyadic evidence shows gender differences in marital-to-parenting spillover. Parenting stress is more likely to occur when mothers are dissatisfied with their marriage [11]. Daily studies also confirm spillover patterns between marital interactions and parenting stress that can differ according to gender, with mothers more easily carrying their relationship issues into the parenting process [28,17]. Destructive conflict between partners is associated with increased parenting stress in both fathers and mothers, while constructive conflict is associated with decreased parenting stress, especially in mothers [21].

The results of this study may have implications for the prevention and management of parenting stress. To prevent and manage parenting stress, it is necessary to target the quality of the couple's relationship as the main resource of the family. Intervention programmes need to include components of marital quality such as conflict management and increased emotional support between partners, as improvements in the marital sphere have the potential to directly reduce the burden of parenting stress. The finding that 'mothers are more affected' indicates that the quality of spousal support, feeling valued, and coparenting coordination greatly determine mothers' stress experiences. Therefore, interventions need to pay special attention to the mental and parenting burdens that mothers more often bear, including strategies to increase consistent father involvement and build real parenting cooperation. Practically, counsellors and family services can prioritise early screening for marital conflict in families with young children and offer couple-based interventions as a preventive measure, with the aim of breaking the 'spillover' of couple conflict into parenting.

CONCLUSION

The results of the analysis show a significant negative relationship between marital quality and parenting stress, both in the sample as a whole and when viewed by gender. The better the marital quality, the lower the level of stress felt in carrying out parenting roles. This pattern of relationship is apparent in both women and men, but the tendency is stronger in women than in men. These findings support the hypothesis that marital quality is associated with reduced parenting stress.

Declaration by Authors

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