

Impact of Forward Deployment on Marital Issues Among Forward Deployed Officers and Families

Rameesha Irm^{1*}, & Imran Bukhari¹

Abstract

Forward deployment is a crucial part of any officer's career. During this time, the officer is deployed in the forward area, whereas the family stays back. This prolonged separation has the tendency to impact the relationship between spouses, particularly in regard to psychological well-being and marital satisfaction. The study investigates the impact of couple communication on marital satisfaction, psychological attachment, and psychological distress among forward-deployed officers and wives of forward-deployed officers. For this research, both forward-deployed officers and wives of forward-deployed officers were included. A correlational research design was used, and analyses were carried out to explore the relationships between the variables. This study used the Experience in Close Relationship Scale – Short Form (ECR-S), the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), Dutch Marital Satisfaction and Communication Questionnaire (DMSCQ). The sample consisted of 192 participants in total: 76 male officers and 116 female spouses. Results indicated that there is a significant positive correlation between couple communication, marital satisfaction, and psychological attachment. On the other hand, a negative correlation was found between psychological distress and couple communication, along with marital satisfaction. Although the present research focused on key relational variables, future research should incorporate other variables, including conflict resolution styles and attachment patterns to provide comprehensive insights. The findings of this research have practical implications for policy development that will help the forward-deployed officers. Acknowledging the importance of marital dynamics within relationships may lead to more informed decisions for married officers in regard to their deployment.

Keywords: deployment, marital relationships, family, communication, marriage

*Corresponding Author:

Rameesha Irm
National Institute of Psychology,
Quaid-e-Azam University,
Islamabad.

Correspondence Email:

rameesha.irm@gmail.com

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Introduction and Literature Review

In today's world, divorce rates have risen considerably making divorce a very common part of life. Ineffective communication along with other factors plays a major role in the breakdown of marriages. In long-distance relationships, especially those driven by occupational demands, communication plays a critical role in strengthening the quality of the relationship.

¹ National Institute of Psychology, Quaid e Azam University, Islamabad

According to the family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), individuals cannot be understood in isolation, away from their families. Every single individual's behavior is influenced by and influenced other family members. When the officer is deployed, the complete family dynamics are disrupted, adding additional strain on the spousal relationship. The absence of one partner from home can give birth to issues like emotional distance, role overload on one spouse, imbalance in the family system. Similarly, attachment styles have been shown to predict marital outcomes, with Zarrin (2020) and Kiełek-Rataj, et al. (2020) demonstrating that insecure attachment patterns are negatively associated with satisfaction, particularly when communication is limited.

In military context, forward deployment is an essential and career-enhancing assignment at every rank. During this time, officers are often stationed at locations where family housing is not available, leading to physical separation from their spouse and children. This separation arises challenges that align with the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), which stated that individuals with secure attachments relationships can help them cope with stress better. When this secure attachment is disrupted by factors like distance, partners tend to experience insecurity, emotional withdrawal or elevated anxiety. Efficient communication can help remove misunderstandings and promote better marital relationships.

Communication is a type of building block in marriage and marital adjustment. Scholars argue that even non-verbal cues or silence also constitute some kind of communication, thus it is not possible not to communicate in a relationship. The key, however, lies in the interpretation and awareness of these cues (Watzlawick, et al., 1967). Apart from this, communication can be different based on the gender and the circumstances. The way one communicates will be different to men and the same communication will be different for women. Prior research has consistently emphasized the central role of communication in marital satisfaction. Wong (2020) and Khezri, Hassan, and Nordin (2020) found that open and constructive communication patterns significantly enhance relationship quality, which aligns with the present study's finding that officers' marital satisfaction is more strongly tied to open communication.

There is another school of thought that says that there is no such thing as 'lack of communication' between any couple. This is because one person or the other person in a relationship is always communicating something, whether it is verbal, non-verbal, intentional or unintentional. There is also some kind of communication happening between two people who are in a relationship. However, if the person is more aware of the way he communicates their message, this will lead to more successful communication between the partners. In addition, Campbell (2020) and Er and Gokcearslan (2023) highlighted that military stressors and psychological distress undermine marital satisfaction, underscoring the vulnerability of military couples to relational strain when faced with deployment-related challenges.

Research Gap

Existing research in Pakistan largely overlooks armed forces families, with most studies focusing on non-force populations. There is limited empirical work examining the combined effects of forward deployment on couple communication, marital satisfaction, psychological distress, and attachment. Additionally, little attention has been given to comparing the differential experiences of deployed officers and spouses at home or to the buffering role of

social support systems. Hence, limited research in Pakistan addresses these dynamics within armed forces families.

Rationale of The Study

The family institution forms the foundation of an individual's emotional and relational life, making marital relationships particularly important to study under complex conditions such as military forward deployment. While cohabitation supports relationship stability, deployment to remote and high-risk areas creates challenges, including loneliness, job stress, vulnerability, and communication barriers. Forward deployment is unavoidable for military personnel across all ranks and locations and is considered career-enhancing, yet it can negatively affect marital relationships and family life. Personal observations indicate that deployment often leads to communication gaps, emotional strain, and the absence of spouses during significant family and child milestones. Experiences of deployment differ for deployed officers and spouses managing households at home. Social support, especially within Pakistan's joint family system, may help buffer these challenges.

Conceptual Framework of Study

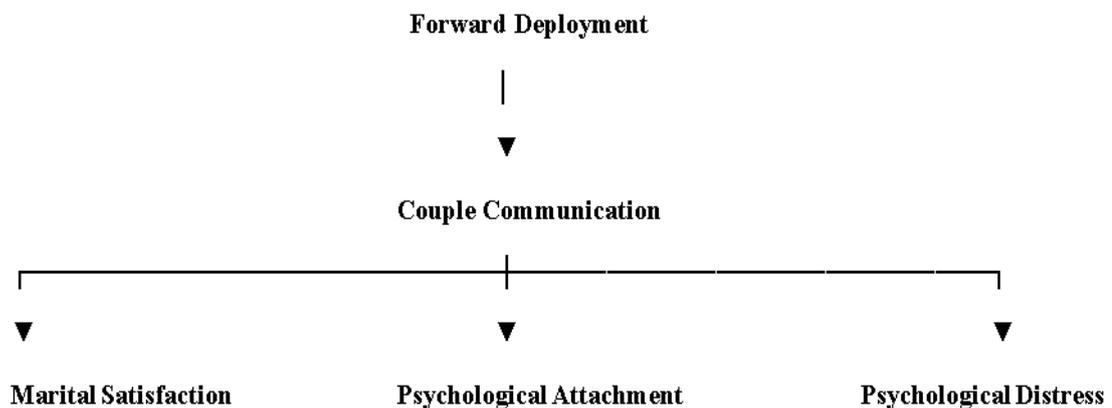


Fig 1: Conceptual Diagram

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the present study are as following:

1. To study the relationship between couple communication, marital satisfaction, psychological attachment and psychological distress among forward-deployed officers
2. To study the relationship between couple communication, marital satisfaction, psychological attachment and psychological distress among wives of forward-deployed officers.

Hypotheses of the Study

Following are the proposed hypotheses of the present study:

1. There will be a positive relationship between open couple communication and marital satisfaction among forward-deployed officers.
2. There will be a negative relationship between negative couple communication and marital satisfaction among forward-deployed officers.

3. There will be a positive relationship between open couple communication and psychological attachment among forward-deployed officers.
4. There will be a negative relationship between negative couple communication and psychological attachment among forward-deployed officers.
5. There will be a negative relationship between open couple communication and psychological distress among forward-deployed officers.
6. There will be a positive relationship between negative couple communication and psychological distress among forward-deployed officers.

Material and Methods

Research Design

The study used a correlational research design with the aim of investigating the relationship between couple communication, marital satisfaction, psychological attachment, psychological distress and social support among forward-deployed officers and families of forward-deployed officers. For this research Survey method was used for data collection.

Sample and Sample characteristics

For the present study, around 196 forward deployed officers and wives for forward deployed officers were required for comparison. Sample was collected using convenient sampling technique as it was easy to access forward-deployed officers and wives of forward-deployed officers in different cants and also through Google forms. Google Forms were also generated for this study to help gather as much data as possible from around the country. The officers who were on the frontline were given a Google Forms link so they could fill out the forms. The wives of deployed officers were also given physical printed-out forms in their homes whenever it was possible. However, Google Forms were also given to wives for convenience.

Measures

Experience in Close Relationship Scale – Short Form (ECR-S). ECR-S was used in the present study. It is a 12-item self-report scale that focuses on close relationships. The reliability of this scale was also checked in the study to make sure that the scale is reliable before using it on the sample. The values of Cronbach's Alpha for forward-deployed officers was .72 and for families was .81. which means that they fall into the acceptable range of reliability.

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). It is a 10-item scale used to find out adults with significant levels of psychological distress. Reliability for this scale was also checked and it was found that the values of Cronbach's alpha for forward deployed officers is .8 and for officer's wives is .82. The values suggest that they are in an acceptable region of reliability.

Dutch Marital Satisfaction and Communication Questionnaire (DMSCQ). DMSCQ is a 16-item questionnaire that measured marital satisfaction as well as negative and open communication. The values of Cronbach's Alpha for forward deployed officers for marital satisfaction is .79 and for couple communication is .85. For officer's wives the values for marital satisfaction is .70 and for couple communication is .73. All of these values suggest that they fall under acceptable region of reliability.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). MSPSS is a 12-item

scale that measure perceived social support from family friends and significant others. the values of Cronbach's Alpha for forward-deployed officers were .88 and for officer's wives was .84 both are acceptable in terms of reliability.

Data Analysis Technique

Reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to ensure internal consistency of the measures. Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was then conducted to examine the relationships among marital satisfaction, communication patterns, psychological attachment, and psychological distress. Figures depicting the correlation matrices were generated through IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26), which was also used to compute the coefficients and significance levels.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection, and all participants were informed about the study's purpose. Informed consent was secured, confidentiality was maintained, and participation was voluntary. No identifying information was disclosed, and data were used solely for research purposes.

Results

Table 1

Bivariate Correlations Between Study Variables for Forward Deployed Officers

Scales	1	2	3	4	5
1. Marital Satisfaction (MS)	—				
2. Negative Communication (NC)	-.67**	—			
3. Open Communication (OC)	.73**	-.82**	—		
4. Psychological Attachment (PA)	-.91*	.78**	-.65**	—	
5. Psychological Distress (PD)	-.42**	.33*	-.52**	-.42	—

Note. $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 1 shows the results of correlational analysis. Marital satisfaction is negatively correlated with negative communication ($r = -.67$, $p < .01$) and psychological distress ($r = -.42$, $p < .01$), while positively correlated with open communication ($r = .73$, $p < .01$). Psychological attachment shows a very strong negative correlation with marital satisfaction ($r = -.91$, $p < .05$), suggesting that higher attachment may paradoxically coincide with lower satisfaction in this sample. Negative communication is strongly negatively related to open communication ($r = -.82$, $p < .01$) and positively related to psychological attachment ($r = .78$, $p < .01$).

Table 2*Bivariate Correlations Between Study Variables for Forward Deployed Officer's Wives*

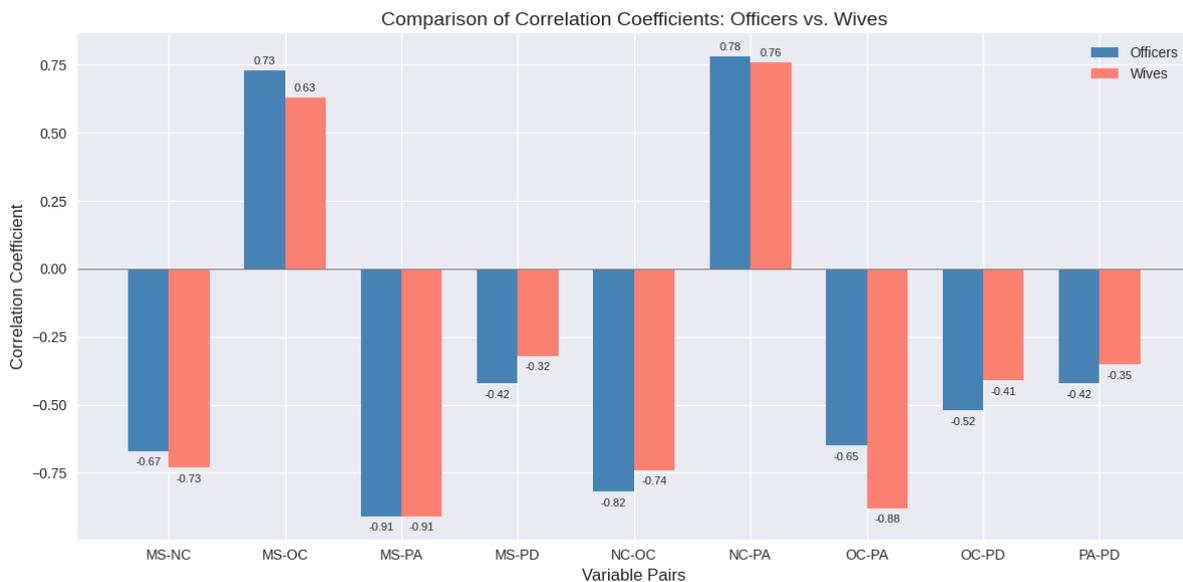
Scales	1	2	3	4	5
1. Marital Satisfaction (MS)	—				
2. Negative Communication (NC)	-.73**	—			
3. Open Communication (OC)	.63**	-.74**	—		
4. Psychological Attachment (PA)	-.91*	.76**	-.88**	—	
5. Psychological Distress (PD)	-.32**	.25**	-.41**	-.35**	—

Note. $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2 shows the results of correlational analysis for forward deployed officer's wives. For wives, the correlation matrix demonstrates similar but slightly different patterns. Marital satisfaction is negatively correlated with negative communication ($r = -.73$, $p < .01$), psychological attachment ($r = -.91$, $p < .05$), and psychological distress ($r = -.32$, $p < .01$), while positively correlated with open communication ($r = .63$, $p < .01$). Negative communication is strongly negatively associated with open communication ($r = -.74$, $p < .01$) and positively associated with psychological attachment ($r = .76$, $p < .01$). Interestingly, open communication shows a stronger negative correlation with psychological attachment ($r = -.88$, $p < .01$) compared to officers.

Figure 2:

Comparison of Correlation Coefficients Between Forward Deployed Officers and Their Wives.



This grouped bar chart illustrates the correlation coefficients for nine variable pairs

(e.g., marital satisfaction–negative communication, marital satisfaction–open communication) comparing forward deployed officers (blue bars) and their wives (salmon bars). The chart highlights differences in relational dynamics, showing that officers' marital satisfaction is more strongly linked to communication and distress, while wives' satisfaction is more strongly tied to attachment patterns.

Discussion

The present study aimed to find out the impact of couple communication on marital satisfaction, psychological attachment and psychological distress among male and female population of Pakistan whose spouse are in the military and are deployed in the forward areas of Pakistan. This study also aimed to compare the findings between forward-deployed officers and wives of forward-deployed officers. In order to compare the findings between the two group, analysis was run separately on officers and wives of forward-deployed officers. These findings from Table 1 showed officers' maladaptive communication patterns and heightened attachment are linked to reduced marital satisfaction and increased distress. Whereas, Table 2 suggest that wives' marital satisfaction is similarly undermined by negative communication and distress, but their open communication is more tightly linked to attachment dynamics.

The graphical representation of comparison between deployed officers and their wives can be seen in figure 2. The figure demonstrated that when comparing the correlations between officers and their wives, several notable differences emerge: wives show a slightly stronger negative association between marital satisfaction and negative communication ($-.73$ vs. $-.67$), whereas officers' marital satisfaction is more strongly tied to open communication ($.73$ vs. $.63$). In terms of attachment dynamics, wives exhibit a much stronger inverse relationship between open communication and psychological attachment ($-.88$ vs. $-.65$), highlighting the centrality of attachment in their relational patterns. Finally, distress-related links (marital satisfaction–psychological distress and open communication–psychological distress) are consistently stronger among officers, suggesting that psychological distress exerts a more pronounced impact on their marital dynamics compared to wives.

Consistent with the hypothesis, the present study revealed a negative relationship between negative communication and marital satisfaction in both forward-deployed officers and their wives. This supports classic findings that negative couple communication predicts lower relationship satisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Myers, 2005) and is reinforced by more recent evidence that maladaptive communication undermines marital outcomes (Khezri, et al., 2020). Conversely, open communication was positively associated with marital satisfaction across both groups, echoing earlier work showing that meaningful and positive communication enhances satisfaction (Jackson et al., 2014) and contemporary studies emphasizing the protective role of adaptive communication in military marriages (Wong, 2020). Notably, officers' marital satisfaction was more strongly linked to open communication, suggesting that adaptive communication may buffer against deployment-related stress (Khezri et al., 2020; Wong, 2020).

The present study also found that open communication is positively associated with psychological attachment among both groups. This finding is consistent with research on Dutch couples, which demonstrated that positive communication fosters secure attachment (Dainton, 2007; Kong, 2014; Yun & Yang, 2012), and is further supported by recent studies highlighting

the importance of attachment dynamics in shaping marital satisfaction (Kiełek-Rataj, et al., 2020; Zarrin, 2020). In contrast, wives demonstrated a stronger inverse relationship between open communication and psychological attachment, underscoring the centrality of attachment in their relational patterns. Similarly, negative communication was negatively associated with psychological attachment, consistent with prior findings that maladaptive communication erodes attachment bonds (Anne & Makr, 2003; Domingue & Mollen, 2009;).

Finally, the study confirmed a negative relationship between open communication and psychological distress, meaning that elevated levels of open communication reduce distress. This aligns with earlier evidence that open communication promotes psychological health (Flangie, 2001) and more recent findings that it minimizes distress in contemporary samples (Geçer & Yıldırım, 2021). Conversely, negative communication was linked to greater distress, supporting evidence from Yu and Sherman (2015) and Schulz et al. (2004), as well as recent military-focused studies showing that stressors and distress undermine marital satisfaction (Campbell, 2020; Er & Gokcearslan, 2023). Moreover, the stronger correlations between distress and marital outcomes among officer's mirror Campbell's (2020) and Er & Gokcearslan's (2023) findings that psychological distress exerts a heavier toll on military personnel than on spouses. Taken together, these results suggest that while communication is a critical determinant of satisfaction for officers, attachment dynamics play a more central role for wives, highlighting the need for tailored interventions that address both communication and attachment in military marriages.

Conclusion of the Study

This present study provided sufficient evidence that couple communication taking place between couples can change the whole dynamics of the relationship. Especially when one person is deployed in a forward area due to which the couple is not able to communicate effectively, that is when the relationship starts to suffer. Along with this, the present study also explored that if the couple is having open communication, then there are fewer chances of psychological distress among the individuals. moreover, along with open communication between couples, the individuals who practice open communication on daily basis are more satisfied from their marriage rather than the couple who exhibit negative communication. By focusing on such unique and under-researched population in Pakistan, this research contributes to the broader understanding of the relationship aspects under occupational stress.

Limitations and Suggestions for Study

The present study has several limitations that should guide future research. The sample consisted of relatively high-functioning, well-educated military couples, which restricts generalizability to more socioeconomically diverse populations, including civilians. Moreover, only officers and their spouses were included, excluding non-officer personnel, and the majority were junior officers, suggesting the need to examine senior officers for broader comparison. Contextually, the study focused solely on forward-deployed officers and their families, limiting applicability to those stationed at family postings; future work should compare both contexts for deeper insight. Additionally, data were collected only from officers and their wives, without incorporating dialectic perspectives, and relied exclusively on self-report measures, which may introduce bias. Methodologically, convenience sampling was used due to accessibility constraints, raising concerns about sampling bias and limiting

generalizability. Future studies should employ probability-based sampling and multi-method approaches to capture richer, more diverse data and strengthen the validity of findings.

Implications of the Study

This research highlights important implications for both scholarship and practice. While focusing on couple communication, marital satisfaction, psychological attachment, distress, and social support, future studies should expand to include variables such as conflict resolution and attachment style, and adopt longitudinal designs for deeper insights. Broader demographics, including officer rank, deployment area, and duration, would enhance generalizability. Practically, the findings can inform policies that consider marital status when deploying officers, guide communication strategies during forward deployment, and support coping methods for both spouses. Such efforts can strengthen resilience and relationship quality among military couples facing deployment challenges.

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