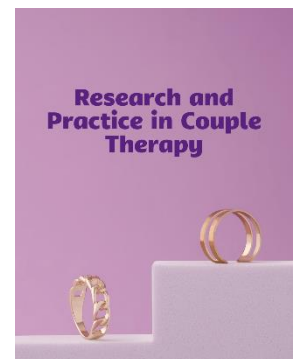


A Qualitative Exploration of Intrapsychic and Interpersonal Predictors of Long-Term Marital Adjustment

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the intrapsychic and interpersonal predictors that contribute to long-term marital adjustment among married individuals in Iraq. A qualitative research design using a thematic analysis approach was employed to capture the complex psychological and relational processes underlying marital adjustment. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 21 married participants (12 women and 9 men) who had been in marital relationships for a minimum of ten years. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling from various regions in Iraq, ensuring diversity in age, education, and socioeconomic background. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached and were transcribed verbatim for analysis. NVivo software was used to manage and code the data systematically, and an inductive approach guided the identification of themes and subthemes. Four overarching themes emerged from the data: (1) Intrapsychic Regulation, including emotional self-awareness, cognitive flexibility, and personal value alignment; (2) Interpersonal Communication, including empathy, conflict resolution, and emotional expression; (3) Shared Meaning and Relational Identity, encompassing couple rituals, “we-ness,” and joint meaning-making; and (4) External and Contextual Influences, such as economic pressures, extended family dynamics, cultural expectations, and technological interference. Participants consistently emphasized the interplay between psychological resilience, communication quality, and sociocultural context in shaping marital endurance and satisfaction. The study highlights that long-term marital adjustment is a multidimensional process shaped by internal psychological capacities, dyadic relational practices, and broader cultural and structural factors. Findings underscore the importance of culturally grounded interventions that enhance emotional regulation, mutual understanding, and shared meaning-making in marital relationships, particularly in transitional or post-conflict societies like Iraq.

Keywords: Marital adjustment; intrapsychic regulation; interpersonal communication; qualitative research; Iraq; cultural context; long-term relationships.

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Introduction

Marital adjustment is a dynamic and multifaceted construct, encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral harmony between spouses as they navigate the challenges of shared life. While many couples embark on marriage with the hope of lasting fulfillment, the reality of maintaining long-term marital satisfaction is shaped by a complex interplay of psychological, interpersonal, social, and cultural factors. Understanding the predictors that facilitate or hinder this adjustment is critical not only for clinical practitioners and family therapists but also for designing culturally sensitive interventions in diverse societies, such as Iraq and broader Middle Eastern contexts (Koenig et al., 2024; Sajjad & Thakur, 2025).

Research on marital adjustment traditionally focused on demographic variables and conflict frequency, but contemporary investigations emphasize more nuanced intrapsychic and interpersonal processes. Psychological flexibility, for instance, has

emerged as a robust predictor of marital harmony, allowing individuals to adaptively regulate their thoughts and behaviors within the relational context (Alizadeh et al., 2024). Cognitive-emotional variables such as frustration tolerance and resilience also serve as key internal regulators of marital behavior, buffering against the erosive effects of chronic stress and miscommunication (Sajjad & Thakur, 2025). In societies like Iraq, where economic instability, social norms, and extended family dynamics weigh heavily on relationships, these intrapsychic mechanisms may play a heightened role in predicting long-term adjustment (Assist. Lect. Abbas Adnan, 2021).

Interpersonal factors are equally vital in sustaining marital adjustment. Communication quality, mutual empathy, and conflict resolution styles influence not only daily interactions but also long-term relational stability (Kumcağız et al., 2020). Marital satisfaction is more likely when couples engage in open expression of needs, show appreciation, and validate one another's emotions (Birni & Eryılmaz, 2022; Gul & Muntaha, 2022). Moreover, marital satisfaction and stability are not synonymous. A couple may remain together despite emotional detachment, thus raising the need to distinguish between relational endurance and psychological adjustment (Koenig et al., 2024; Romanzini et al., 2018).

Social factors also shape marital dynamics in important ways. For instance, religiosity and spiritual values have been identified as mediators between personality traits and marital satisfaction, especially in religious societies such as Indonesia and the Middle East (Bukhari et al., 2023). In this context, faith-based meaning-making systems not only influence role expectations and conflict resolution styles but also bolster resilience during marital crises. These findings resonate with earlier research showing that family and religious traditions provide an anchor during periods of stress, which can foster intimacy or reinforce endurance (Al-Adwan et al., 2024; Koenig et al., 2024). However, in some cases, these norms may also promote silence around conflict or discourage divorce even when marital dissatisfaction is high (Shao et al., 2021).

Cultural constructs such as collectivism, extended family involvement, and patriarchal gender roles further complicate the landscape of marital adjustment. In many Iraqi households, family expectations and in-law relationships impose additional pressure on couples, sometimes acting as a stabilizing force and at other times intensifying stress (Shabani et al., 2019). Gender roles and economic responsibilities are also deeply embedded in cultural discourse, influencing how spouses interpret their relational obligations. For example, men may experience marital satisfaction as closely linked to their role as economic providers, while women may derive fulfillment more from emotional intimacy or harmony in family relations (Hayat et al., 2024; Kardan-Souraki et al., 2018). These culturally shaped role expectations underscore the necessity of contextualizing marital adjustment predictors within sociocultural frameworks.

Age and life stage are other important dimensions in understanding marital adjustment. Studies on aging couples show that psychological well-being, communication stability, and health predict long-term marital quality in later life (Novak et al., 2022). As couples age, their relational needs shift from passion and novelty toward emotional security, routine, and joint meaning-making. Dyadic aging—the shared experience of growing old together—was found to reinforce companionship and decrease marital volatility (Novak et al., 2022; Romanzini et al., 2018). However, this process is not immune to stressors. Chronic illness, economic strain, and caregiving burdens can challenge even well-adjusted marriages, making emotional resilience and interpersonal support more critical in later life.

Despite this growing body of literature, much of the existing research on marital adjustment stems from Western or Asian contexts, with limited representation from Middle Eastern societies undergoing cultural transition and sociopolitical turbulence. In Iraq, for instance, the aftereffects of war, displacement, unemployment, and shifting gender expectations may produce unique psychological and relational stressors. Thus, there is a pressing need to explore how individuals in these settings interpret and navigate the requirements of marital adjustment from their own cultural and emotional frameworks (Assist. Lect. Abbas Adnan, 2021; Hayat et al., 2024).

From a psychological standpoint, coping mechanisms, emotion regulation, and self-perception emerge as powerful predictors of marital resilience. Emotionally stable individuals are more likely to engage in adaptive conflict resolution and avoid destructive behaviors such as contempt or stonewalling (Khatibi & Meghrazi, 2023; Okojide et al., 2021). Similarly, psychological capital—which includes hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism—has been shown to mediate the impact of work-family conflict on marital satisfaction (Shabani et al., 2019). These findings reinforce the value of focusing not only on observable behaviors but also on underlying psychological constructs that sustain relational harmony.

Recent scholarship has also pointed to the role of positive psychological traits such as self-compassion, gratitude, and forgiveness in promoting marital well-being (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2022). For example, couples who practice mutual compassion tend to de-escalate conflict more effectively and maintain emotional closeness even during hardship. In contrast, rigid thinking, unresolved trauma, and unmet attachment needs may lead to maladaptive patterns that erode trust over time. In Iraq, the intersection of trauma exposure (due to conflict or displacement) and attachment insecurity is particularly salient, as it may manifest in hypervigilance, emotional suppression, or overdependence within marital relationships (Sajjad & Thakur, 2025; Shao et al., 2021).

Furthermore, economic stress and employment status were identified as significant correlates of marital satisfaction and stability. For employed individuals, particularly women, balancing work and family roles introduces challenges that can strain the marital relationship unless managed through adaptive strategies and equitable role negotiation (Mahayanti et al., 2020; Okojide et al., 2023). Women who experience psychological well-being and financial independence are more likely to report positive marital adjustment, provided their work does not become a source of additional conflict or neglect (Okojide et al., 2021). These findings align with global research emphasizing the relational cost of unbalanced domestic labor and economic inequality.

In addition, attachment-related mechanisms such as trust, intimacy, and emotional availability continue to surface as crucial domains of marital functioning. Dyadic coping—where partners jointly manage stress—is particularly predictive of marital adjustment in couples facing chronic or shared stressors (Romanzini et al., 2018). When one partner's psychological distress is met with understanding and support, marital resilience strengthens; when it is met with dismissal or blame, adjustment declines. This is particularly relevant in Iraqi and other collectivist cultures, where emotional interdependence and shared hardship play central roles in shaping relational dynamics (Al-Adwan et al., 2024; Koenig et al., 2024).

Given this complex and multidimensional background, this study aims to qualitatively explore the intrapsychic and interpersonal predictors of long-term marital adjustment among married individuals in Iraq.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design with an exploratory approach aimed at identifying the intrapsychic and interpersonal predictors of long-term marital adjustment. Given the complexity and context-dependent nature of marital dynamics, a qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, beliefs, and relational patterns.

The participants comprised 21 married individuals (12 women and 9 men) residing in various provinces of Iraq. All participants had been married for a minimum of 10 years, ensuring they had substantial lived experience in navigating long-term marital relationships. A purposive sampling method was used to select individuals with diverse socio-economic

backgrounds, educational levels, and urban-rural residency, thereby enhancing the richness and diversity of perspectives gathered.

Inclusion criteria included: (1) a minimum of ten years of marital experience, (2) willingness to participate in the study, and (3) the cognitive and emotional ability to reflect on marital experiences. Participants were recruited through social networks, referrals from family counselors, and community outreach efforts. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new codes or themes emerged from the data, which occurred after the 21st interview.

Measures

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed narratives of participants' perceptions and experiences regarding their marital adjustment. The interview guide included open-ended questions that explored emotional regulation, communication patterns, attachment dynamics, conflict resolution strategies, personal values, and shared meaning within the relationship. Example questions included: "What internal thoughts or emotions have helped you maintain your marital relationship over time?" and "How do you and your spouse typically manage disagreements or conflicts?"

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in participants' preferred setting (either in-person or via secure online platforms, depending on geographic accessibility and participant preference). All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board in Iraq, and all participants provided written informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured through the use of participant codes and secure data storage.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts, guided by the principles of Braun and Clarke. An inductive approach was employed to allow themes to emerge organically from the data without imposing predefined theoretical frameworks. The analysis process began with repeated reading of transcripts to ensure familiarity with the content. Initial codes were then generated and organized into meaningful categories based on similarities, contrasts, and patterns observed across participants.

To enhance the rigor and reliability of the analysis, NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to code and manage the data systematically. The coding process was iterative, with constant comparison between new data and existing categories to refine themes and subthemes. Themes were reviewed and revised through peer debriefing with two qualitative research experts to ensure credibility and confirmability. Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the process by keeping analytic memos and discussing potential biases in team meetings.

The final themes were those that captured key intrapsychic factors (e.g., self-reflection, emotional awareness, value alignment) and interpersonal processes (e.g., empathy, communication, mutual support) perceived to be crucial for sustaining marital adjustment over the long term.

Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 21 married individuals from various regions of Iraq who met the inclusion criterion of having been in a marital relationship for at least ten years. Of the participants, 12 were women (57%) and 9 were men (43%), ranging in age from 35 to 62 years. In terms of educational background, 7 participants (33%) held a university degree, 9 (43%) had completed secondary education, and 5 (24%) had only primary education. Regarding employment status, 10 participants (48%) were employed in public or private sectors, 6 (29%) were homemakers, and 5 (24%) were self-employed or engaged in informal

work. The duration of marriage varied from 10 to 34 years, with an average marital duration of approximately 18.7 years. Additionally, 16 participants (76%) reported having children, while 5 participants (24%) did not. The diversity in demographic characteristics contributed to a rich variety of marital experiences and perspectives relevant to the study's aim of exploring intrapsychic and interpersonal predictors of long-term marital adjustment.

Table 1. Categories, Subcategories, and Concepts from Thematic Analysis

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Intrapsychic Regulation	Self-awareness and Reflection	Recognizing personal triggers, acknowledging emotional needs, reflecting on past conflicts, personal growth
	Emotional Self-Regulation	Managing anger, delaying impulsive reactions, calming techniques, self-soothing
	Value Orientation	Prioritizing family, long-term vision, commitment to relationship, spiritual values
	Self-Efficacy in Relationship Roles	Feeling competent as a spouse, managing household roles, balancing responsibilities
	Cognitive Flexibility	Reframing situations, accepting difference, tolerating ambiguity, letting go of perfection
	Forgiveness and Letting Go	Releasing resentment, empathizing with spouse's flaws, moving beyond past hurt
	Intrinsic Motivation for Continuity	Internal desire to stay, emotional investment, meaning in marital bond
2. Interpersonal Communication	Conflict Management Styles	De-escalating arguments, respectful disagreement, time-outs, compromise
	Empathetic Listening	Active listening, understanding without judging, emotional mirroring, validation
	Expression of Needs	Stating needs clearly, emotional transparency, discussing desires, asking for support
	Humor and Lightness	Using jokes in tension, laughing together, diffusing anger with playfulness
	Role of Silence	Respecting silence, knowing when not to talk, using silence for reflection
3. Shared Meaning and Relational Identity	Rituals and Traditions	Celebrating anniversaries, shared meals, religious practices, storytelling
	Joint Goal Setting	Planning for future, aligning life paths, shared vision of parenting, saving together
	Couple Identity and 'We-ness'	Using "we" instead of "I", thinking as a team, shared decisions, marital unity
	Meaning-Making After Hardship	Finding purpose in struggles, growing together, using crises for closeness
4. External and Contextual Influences	Extended Family Dynamics	In-law interference, support from parents, cultural expectations, loyalty conflicts
	Socioeconomic Pressures	Financial instability, job loss, differing financial priorities, economic stress
	Cultural and Religious Norms	Gender roles, marital obligations, religious coping, social stigma
	Social Support Networks	Supportive friends, community help, religious leaders, neighbor solidarity
	Technological Impact on Intimacy	Social media intrusion, digital distractions, virtual miscommunication, overuse of screens
	War and Political Instability (Contextual)	Forced migration, trauma bonding, collective stress, marital survival under instability

1. Intrapsychic Regulation

Self-awareness and Reflection.

Participants emphasized that long-term marital satisfaction is deeply connected to the ability to reflect on one's thoughts and behaviors. Self-awareness helped individuals identify their emotional triggers, understand recurring patterns, and engage in self-improvement. As one female participant explained, "I realized that whenever I was frustrated at work, I brought that frustration home. It took time, but I learned to separate the two." The ability to look inward was often mentioned as the starting point for change.

Emotional Self-Regulation.

Many participants reported that their capacity to regulate intense emotions, especially anger and frustration, contributed significantly to preventing unnecessary escalation in conflicts. Techniques like taking deep breaths, stepping away from arguments, and delaying reactions were common. One man reflected, “When I used to react quickly, fights lasted for days. Now, I take a moment to calm down before saying anything.”

Value Orientation.

A shared or personal value system played a vital role in sustaining marriages over time. Participants frequently cited commitment, religious beliefs, and the importance of family as central motivators. One interviewee noted, “We both believe that marriage is sacred. That keeps us grounded even during hard times.”

Self-Efficacy in Relationship Roles.

Feeling competent and confident in fulfilling marital roles contributed to positive adjustment. Participants spoke about balancing tasks, managing parenting, and emotional caregiving. A participant shared, “Knowing that I can handle problems, financially or emotionally, makes me feel stable in my marriage.”

Cognitive Flexibility.

Adaptability in thinking was identified as a key strength. Many reported that changing perspectives and accepting imperfection in themselves and their spouses was crucial. One woman explained, “I used to think everything had to be perfect. But marriage taught me that accepting flaws is part of love.”

Forgiveness and Letting Go.

The ability to move past resentment and offer forgiveness emerged as a repeated theme. Participants described how harboring grudges weakened emotional bonds. As one male participant put it, “If I held onto everything she did wrong, we wouldn’t have lasted five years, let alone twenty.”

Intrinsic Motivation for Continuity.

Participants described an internalized desire to maintain the marriage that stemmed from emotional investment, identity, or moral conviction. “I don’t stay because I have to,” said one woman, “I stay because it still means something to me.”

2. Interpersonal Communication

Conflict Management Styles.

Participants highlighted how their strategies for managing conflict evolved over time, favoring calm and respectful dialogues over confrontation. Common techniques included taking breaks, compromising, and not raising voices. One man described, “We have an unspoken rule now—when it gets too heated, we pause. We talk later, when we’re both calm.”

Empathetic Listening.

The capacity to listen without judgment and with emotional resonance was repeatedly mentioned. Active listening promoted trust and reduced misunderstandings. A female participant shared, “Sometimes I just want him to listen, not fix. When he does that, I feel heard.”

Expression of Needs.

Open communication about emotional, sexual, and practical needs was viewed as essential for long-term stability. Participants noted that repressing needs often led to resentment. “I used to assume he knew what I needed,” said one participant, “Now I just say it directly.”

Humor and Lightness.

Couples who used humor during tense moments or regularly incorporated playfulness into daily life reported higher satisfaction. One interviewee explained, “Even when we fight, he finds a way to make me laugh. That saves us every time.”

Role of Silence.

Contrary to expectations, strategic or respectful silence was seen as beneficial by some participants. It was not avoidance, but rather a form of space and emotional pacing. As one man stated, “Sometimes silence isn’t a wall. It’s a cushion between two tired people.”

3. Shared Meaning and Relational Identity

Rituals and Traditions.

Shared routines and symbolic actions, such as celebrating anniversaries or engaging in religious practices, served as anchors of connection. “No matter how busy we are, we have tea together every night. That’s our thing,” said one woman.

Joint Goal Setting.

Many participants emphasized the importance of planning for the future together, whether financially, parentally, or spiritually. This forward-looking alignment fostered unity. A participant reflected, “Even our arguments have a direction. We want the same future.”

Couple Identity and ‘We-ness’.

Participants spoke about shifting from individualistic thinking to a shared identity. The use of “we” was common in descriptions of decisions and experiences. One husband said, “It’s not just me anymore. Everything I do reflects on us.”

Meaning-Making After Hardship.

Couples who survived financial crises, loss, or displacement often reported finding renewed strength and deeper connection. As one participant expressed, “Losing our home during the war broke us, but rebuilding it together made us unbreakable.”

4. External and Contextual Influences

Extended Family Dynamics.

The role of in-laws and extended relatives was complex. Some offered essential support, while others became sources of conflict. One participant said, “His mother interferes in everything. We had to set strict boundaries to survive.”

Socioeconomic Pressures.

Financial instability was one of the most commonly mentioned external stressors. Job loss and economic hardship led to tensions, yet some couples used these struggles to strengthen teamwork. A woman described, “When he lost his job, we sold my jewelry to get by. That’s when I knew we were in this together.”

Cultural and Religious Norms.

Gender expectations and religious roles shaped how couples negotiated power and responsibility. In some cases, traditional roles created strain; in others, they offered structure. “In our culture, the man leads. But in our home, we talk first. Then I lead,” said one participant with a smile.

Social Support Networks.

Support from friends, neighbors, and religious leaders often made a difference during crises. A participant mentioned, “When we had our first child, the whole neighborhood helped. That’s the kind of community that saves marriages.”

Technological Impact on Intimacy.

Digital distractions and social media conflicts were commonly cited. Excessive screen time and online miscommunication caused emotional distance. One husband admitted, “We were spending more time on our phones than with each other. It became a silent killer.”

War and Political Instability (Contextual).

Participants from conflict zones reported that national instability amplified stress but also created a form of trauma bonding. One woman said, “We were displaced twice. But holding each other through that made us feel like home was a person, not a place.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the intrapsychic and interpersonal predictors of long-term marital adjustment among Iraqi individuals in enduring marriages. Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews revealed four overarching categories—intrapsychic regulation, interpersonal communication, shared meaning and relational identity, and external/contextual influences—each encompassing multiple subthemes. These findings collectively highlight the dynamic interplay between internal psychological resources, dyadic relational processes, and broader sociocultural environments in shaping marital endurance and satisfaction.

The first emergent theme, *intrapsychic regulation*, reflects the critical role of self-awareness, emotional self-regulation, cognitive flexibility, and value orientation in sustaining marital harmony. Participants frequently emphasized their ability to recognize personal emotional patterns, regulate impulsive reactions, and reflect on their relational behaviors as fundamental to maintaining a healthy marriage. These findings are strongly aligned with previous quantitative studies that have identified psychological flexibility and emotional resilience as significant predictors of marital satisfaction (Alizadeh et al., 2024; Sajjad & Thakur, 2025). The role of forgiveness and intrinsic motivation for continuity further underscores the relevance of positive psychological traits in preventing emotional erosion and relational fatigue. This supports findings from prior work highlighting the value of self-compassion, intrinsic commitment, and resilience in long-term relational health (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2022; Romanzini et al., 2018).

The second theme, *interpersonal communication*, emerged as a central mechanism through which long-term marital adjustment was maintained or disrupted. Participants who reported high satisfaction described conflict resolution styles based on empathy, active listening, humor, and clear expression of needs. Such patterns resonate with earlier research demonstrating that communication quality is a primary determinant of both marital satisfaction and psychological well-being (Gul & Muntaha, 2022; Kumcağız et al., 2020). Empathetic listening and emotional validation were particularly emphasized by participants as protective factors during periods of relational stress. These findings mirror those of (Bukhari et al., 2023), who found that emotional responsiveness within religious and value-driven marriages mediates the relationship between personality traits and marital satisfaction. The nuanced subtheme of "the role of silence" also reflects a culturally embedded relational script, wherein non-verbal pacing is used not to avoid conflict but to maintain relational dignity—an aspect also noted in Middle Eastern marital dynamics (Koenig et al., 2024).

The third theme, *shared meaning and relational identity*, highlights the importance of couple rituals, shared goals, and mutual identity formation in sustaining marital longevity. Participants who engaged in joint rituals, such as nightly tea, religious practices, or shared meals, reported a greater sense of togetherness. This echoes findings from longitudinal studies suggesting that dyadic rituals and shared traditions serve as emotional anchors, reinforcing intimacy and collective resilience (Novak et al., 2022). Moreover, the concept of "we-ness," or the cognitive transformation from individual to relational identity, aligns with prior research on relational self-construal and its positive correlation with marital harmony (Koenig et al., 2024). Meaning-making after hardship was a particularly salient finding, where participants described how shared adversity (e.g., war displacement, illness, or financial crises) deepened their bond rather than fractured it. These experiences of "trauma bonding" and post-adversity growth are consistent with findings in post-conflict and war-exposed populations (Assist. Lect. Abbas Adnan, 2021; Romanzini et al., 2018).

The final theme, *external and contextual influences*, reflects how socio-political, economic, and cultural forces intersect with the marital unit. Participants described extended family dynamics, financial instability, and socio-cultural expectations as both stressors and supports. This duality corresponds with findings by (Kardan-Souraki et al., 2018), who emphasized that in

collectivist societies, extended families can be either a stabilizing resource or a disruptive force in marital functioning. The tension between cultural expectations and psychological needs was further evident in gendered narratives, where traditional roles often clashed with the emotional needs of modern marital relationships. The mediating role of religiosity—as noted in the present study and previously documented by (Bukhari et al., 2023)—illustrates how religious frameworks can support marital endurance through value reinforcement, while also limiting options for exit or voice in dysfunctional unions. Additionally, participants acknowledged the negative impact of technological overuse on emotional intimacy—especially social media and digital distractions—highlighting a modern layer to marital disconnection that complements recent global findings (Shao et al., 2021).

Another critical aspect that emerged was the impact of employment and economic pressures on marital adjustment. Participants frequently described how job loss or income instability led to heightened relational tension, particularly in patriarchal contexts where financial provision is culturally associated with male identity. These findings align with (Hayat et al., 2024; Okojide et al., 2023), who emphasize that economic insecurity exacerbates emotional withdrawal, psychological helplessness, and conflict frequency in married life. Interestingly, participants who described themselves as having a high level of psychological well-being or who engaged in collective problem-solving were better able to buffer the effects of these stressors. This supports findings from (Okojide et al., 2021), who reported that psychological well-being predicts marital stability even in economically constrained populations.

Furthermore, the emotional burden of caregiving, aging, and health-related stressors were noted by participants in later-life marriages. The dyadic nature of aging—marked by mutual adaptation to health decline and caregiving responsibilities—was perceived as both a challenge and a bonding experience. This finding echoes the work of (Novak et al., 2022), who demonstrated that older couples' marital quality is closely tied to their psychological and physical well-being. When combined with adaptive coping strategies and shared meaning-making, aging couples were able to maintain intimacy and satisfaction despite external stressors.

The findings of this study are also consistent with literature addressing maladaptive schemas, psychological helplessness, and coping strategies in the context of marital discord. For instance, participants who lacked emotional regulation and self-awareness often described repeated conflict cycles, rumination, and relational distance—patterns consistent with those identified by (Khatibi & Meghrizi, 2023). Moreover, couples who relied on adaptive schemas and reframing techniques demonstrated more harmonious communication, validating the role of schema-driven coping in marital adjustment.

Importantly, participants consistently emphasized the need for psychological capital in navigating work-family conflict, trauma history, and cultural expectations. This aligns with the model proposed by (Shabani et al., 2019), where psychological capital—including hope, optimism, and resilience—was found to mediate between external demands and internal relational outcomes. Similarly, the protective role of self-regulation and mindfulness—as identified in both this study and prior research—points to the increasing relevance of internal emotional competencies in marital well-being (Al-Adwan et al., 2024).

Overall, the results demonstrate that long-term marital adjustment is not solely dependent on interpersonal compatibility or external conditions but is significantly influenced by internal psychological processes, mutual identity development, and sociocultural navigation. While this study offers context-specific insights from Iraq, its thematic resonance with cross-cultural literature reinforces the universal yet culturally nuanced nature of marital endurance.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 21 participants from Iraq, which, although sufficient for theoretical saturation in qualitative research, limits generalizability beyond similar socio-cultural settings. Second, the study relied on retrospective self-reports, which may have been influenced by memory biases, social desirability, or selective recall—especially concerning sensitive topics such as conflict, infidelity, or emotional dissatisfaction. Third, the

absence of dyadic interviews meant that relational dynamics were explored from individual rather than couple-based perspectives. This may have obscured interactive processes that could only be captured through dual narratives. Furthermore, the study did not examine the perspectives of divorced individuals or those in highly distressed marriages, potentially excluding critical counter-narratives that could inform preventive or therapeutic interventions. Finally, while NVivo software facilitated data organization, interpretation still depended heavily on the researchers' analytical lens and cultural understanding, which may have introduced interpretive bias.

Future research would benefit from exploring long-term marital adjustment through dyadic or couple-based qualitative methods, allowing for direct comparison and contrast of spousal narratives. Studies could also incorporate a longitudinal design, following couples through various life stages and transitions (e.g., parenthood, retirement, illness), to examine how intrapsychic and interpersonal predictors evolve over time. Additionally, comparative cross-cultural studies involving other post-conflict or transitional societies would provide a richer understanding of how macro-level factors (e.g., war, displacement, gender policy) intersect with micro-level relational functioning. Future investigations may also consider integrating mixed-method designs, combining qualitative depth with quantitative generalizability. Finally, it is recommended to include marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, individuals in polygamous marriages, or couples navigating chronic illness, whose marital experiences remain underrepresented in the literature.

The findings of this study offer important implications for marital therapists, counselors, and community educators. First, interventions should target both partners' intrapsychic regulation skills—such as emotional awareness, self-compassion, and value alignment—through culturally adapted psychoeducation and mindfulness training. Second, communication skills training that emphasizes empathy, humor, and conflict de-escalation can strengthen relational resilience, particularly in high-stress environments. Third, therapeutic approaches should be sensitive to cultural norms around gender, religion, and extended family dynamics, integrating these elements rather than opposing them. Practitioners may also benefit from developing couple-based rituals and shared goal-setting tools to reinforce relational identity and meaning. Finally, community-based mental health programs and premarital counseling services should be expanded in Iraq and similar contexts to enhance relational skills before marital distress emerges, thus reducing the long-term emotional and social costs of marital discord.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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