



PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND SELF-WORTH OF DIVORCED WOMEN: THE ROLE OF COPING MECHANISMS

A CROSS SECTIONAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Divorce is a significant life event that can lead to numerous challenges and psychological distress for women in Pakistan. This quantitative study aimed to explore the mediating role of coping mechanisms in the relationship between psychological distress and self-worth among divorced women in Pakistan. The sample consisted of 104 divorced women taken from Islamabad and Rawalpindi with demographic characteristics of age, number of children, divorce duration, residency, education, employment, monthly income and number of dependents. The data was collected through Google Forms by using three instruments: The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6), Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale, and The Brief COPE. The results of correlation analysis demonstrated that increased psychological distress in divorced women was associated with decreased self-worth and the adoption of ineffective coping mechanisms. Specifically, psychological distress was significantly, positively correlated with avoidant coping. Avoidant coping was also significantly negatively correlated with self-worth domains; family support and competition and academic competence. Problem focused coping was positively and significantly correlated with family support, competition and academic competence and God's love and Virtue while being negatively, significantly correlated with approval from others. Emotion focused coping was positively and significantly correlated with family support, competition and academic competence and God's love and virtue. Mediation analysis indicated that avoidant coping played an indirect role between psychological distress and specific self-worth domains, namely family support, competition and academic competence. This suggests that increased psychological distress led to higher levels of avoidant coping, resulting in decreased self-worth in these domains. Additionally, divorced women with 50000-100000 monthly income had higher scores of psychological distress than others, it was also indicated that divorced women with two dependents had higher score of self-worth in domains of competition and academic competence than those without dependents.

Keywords: Psychological distress, coping mechanisms, contingencies of self-worth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Divorce is a complex process with emotional ups and downs. In Pakistan, divorce rates have increased significantly [1], impacting women's well-being due to social stigmatization, financial struggles, and emotional challenges [2]. Divorced women often face depression, anxiety, stress, and social interaction issues [3]. The emotional toll of divorce includes feelings of helplessness, anger, depression, guilt, and loneliness. Divorced women may blame themselves for the breakup and experience frustration in job interviews, potentially linked to perceived

discrimination. These emotional struggles collectively fall under "psychological distress" [5]. Coping mechanisms play a crucial role, and ineffective coping can exacerbate these issues [6]. Contingencies of self-worth, based on domains like academics, appearance, and family support, can lead to fluctuations in self-esteem. Individuals strive to maintain self-esteem by succeeding in these areas or using defensive strategies when they face failure [7]. The impact of divorce on self-worth across these domains requires a closer look at coping mechanisms. Post-divorce, women may adopt coping strategies to manage psychological distress and protect their self-esteem. Coping mechanisms encompass cognitive and behavioral strategies aimed at dealing with internal and external pressures [8].

1.1 Rationale

Divorce poses significant challenges for women in Pakistan, including societal stigma, family and workplace conflicts, financial issues, and low self-esteem [4]. Coping effectively is crucial for divorced women [2]. However, research on the relationship between psychological distress and self-worth among divorced women, especially in Pakistan, is limited. This study aimed to explore the role of coping mechanisms in this relationship. The study was grounded in role identity and self-worth concepts. When societal roles, like being a spouse, are threatened or lost due to divorce, individuals may experience psychological distress and lower self-esteem [9]. Self-worth, based on seven domains, including academics, appearance, and family support, was assessed in divorced women experiencing psychological distress. Coping mechanisms, cognitive and behavioral strategies for managing stress, were assessed in the cultural context of Pakistan. The study aimed to understand how psychological distress leads to specific coping mechanisms and how these affect self-worth. This research filled a gap in the literature, contributing to our understanding of divorced women's psychological well-being in Pakistan. It also offered insights for clinical practitioners to design interventions promoting positive coping and self-worth. By exploring the complex relationship between distress, coping, and self-worth, the study empowered divorced women to navigate challenges and improve mental health.

1.2 Objectives

1. To investigate the relationship of Psychological Distress, Self-Worth and Coping Mechanisms in divorced women of Pakistan.
2. To find out the indirect effect of Coping Mechanism between Psychological Distress and Self-Worth of divorced women in Pakistan.
3. To investigate the association of various demographic variables (age, income source, job status, education, independent living or living with family, having children or no children and duration of divorce) with Psychological Distress and Coping Mechanisms with respect to Self-worth among divorced women in Pakistan.

1.3 Hypothesis

- Divorced women who will experience an increased level of Psychological Distress will also experience an increase in ineffective Coping Mechanism and decreased levels of Self-worth.
- There will be an indirect effect of Coping Mechanisms between the relationship of Psychological Distress and Self-worth of divorced women.
- There will be significant differences between the demographic variables (monthly income, job status, education, independent living or living with family, having children or no children and duration of divorce) and the study variables (Psychological Distress, Coping Mechanisms and Self-worth) among divorced women.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

Toiths' "Identity-Relevant Stressors" theory posits that threats to societal roles can lead to psychological distress, as individuals invest their self-esteem in these roles. For example, married individuals often derive their identities and self-esteem from roles like being a spouse, fulfilling family responsibilities, and working. When these roles are threatened or lost, such as in divorce, it can result in psychological distress and diminished self-esteem tied to their societal identities. Crocker and Knight's "Contingencies of Self-Worth" theory suggests that a person's self-worth is based on self-esteem invested in various domains, like academics, appearance, approval from others, family support, competition, religious beliefs, and personal ideals. Success in these domains boosts self-esteem, while failure can lower it. This concept motivates individuals to excel in these areas but also makes them vulnerable to self-esteem fluctuations. Considering these theories, divorced women's psychological well-being may be influenced by how psychological distress and coping mechanisms impact their self-worth contingencies. Leonard Pearlin's "Theory of Psychological Distress" highlights the role of coping among four factors, including personal characteristics, social support networks, and the type and timing of stress, in shaping an individual's response to life-changing situations, such as divorce. In summary, divorced women's self-esteem, emotional well-being, and coping strategies are interconnected in complex ways, influenced by their societal roles, self-worth domains, and responses to distressing life events like divorce.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

The current study is quantitative in nature in which the researcher studied the role of coping mechanisms in the relationship of psychological distress and self-worth of divorced women.

2.2 Sample

A sample of 104 divorced women was selected, according to the G power calculator. The sample was selected from Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The sample was collected through purposive sampling and snowball sampling technique. The participants were approached from the social groups formed on different social media networks. They were also asked to nominate other potential participants. The divorced women who had been divorced since 6 months at least and who gave consent on the social groups, were included in the sample. Women, who had been divorced for less than 6 months, were excluded from this study as well as those who have remarried.

2.3 Instruments

The following instruments were used in this research for data collection:

2.3.1 Demographic Sheet

A demographic sheet was used to collect demographic information and the demographic variables were age, income source, job status, education, independent living or living with family, having children or no children and duration of divorce.

2.3.2 The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6)

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6) was a six-item K6 screening scale for psychological distress, developed by Kessler and colleagues (Kessler et al, 2003). A higher score indicated a high level of psychological distress and a low score indicated a low level of psychological distress. The reliability of the scale was well established as Cronbach's alpha was 0.86 (Ferro, 2019). It had an official translation in Urdu language provided by World Mental Health Surveys. The Urdu translated version was used in the present study.

2.3.3 Contingencies of Self -Worth Scale

The Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale had seven subscales, namely Appearance, Others' Approval, Competition, Academics, Family Support, God's Love, and Virtue (Crocker at al., 2003) Each subscale had five items. The reliability of the scale was well established as Cronbach's alpha for each subscale was 0.85, 0.87, 0.88, 0.87, 0.88 and 0.94. The scale was translated into the Urdu language and used in the present study.

2.3.4 The Brief COPE

The Brief-COPE was a twenty eight item self-report inventory. It had three subscales; Problem-Focused Coping, Emotion-Focused Coping and Avoidant Coping. The scores were to indicate the particular type of coping mechanism being used more, as there will be three different scores on the basis of the three domains. The reliability of the scale was well established as Cronbach's alpha for most of the subscales was around 0.75 (Yusoff, 2010). The Urdu translated version was used in the present study.

2.4 Procedure

Participants were recruited through social media and referrals. They were informed about the study's purpose and confidentiality, and their consent was obtained. Data collection occurred online via Google Forms. Participants completed demographic sheets and three questionnaires: the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6), the Brief COPE, and the Urdu-translated Contingencies of Self-Worth. Withdrawal from the study was allowed at any time. After data collection, participants received a debriefing, and emotional support was offered to those in need. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS.

3. RESULTS

Table 1

Bivariate Correlation between Psychological Distress, Brief Cope and Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
K6	-	-.06	.28**	.025	-.040	-.02	.09	-.01	.13
Problem Focused Coping		-	-.34**	.65**	.37**	.66**	.07	.47**	-.27**
Avoidant Coping			-	-0.12	-.28**	-.30**	-.08	-.11	.09
Emotion Focused Coping				-	.28**	.50**	.02	.38**	-.14
Family Support					-	.37**	.33**	.22*	-.07
Competition and Academic Competence						-	.09	.51**	-.26**

Appearance	-	-.21*	.36**
God's Love and Virtue		-	-.46**
Approval From Others			-

Note: *n*=No. of participants, *M*=Mean, *SD*= Standard Deviation, **= *p*<.01

Table 1 presents correlation results. Psychological distress showed a significant positive correlation with avoidant coping and non-significant relationships with problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Psychological distress displayed non-significant negative correlations with family support, competition and academic competence, and God's love and virtue. It had non-significant positive associations with appearance and approval from others. Avoidant coping significantly negatively correlated with family support and competition and academic competence. It displayed non-significant negative associations with God's love and virtue and appearance. Problem-focused coping significantly positively correlated with family support, competition and academic competence, and God's love and virtue. It had non-significant positive correlations with appearance and significant negative correlations with approval from others. Emotion-focused coping significantly positively correlated with family support, competition and academic competence, and God's love and virtue. It showed non-significant positive correlations with appearance and negative correlations with approval from others.

Table 2

Mediating effect of Avoidant Coping on Psychological Distress and Contingencies of Self-Worth (N=104)

Predictor	Avoidant Coping		Family Support		Competition and Academic Competence		Appearance		God's Love and Virtue		Approval From Others	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Psychological distress	.28**	.13	.04	.17	.07	.32	.11	.15	.03	.18	.11	.18
Avoidant Coping	-	-	-.29*	.12	-.32**	.23	-.11	.11	-.13	.13	.06	.13
R ²	.08		.00		.00		.01		.00		.02	
F	8.32		.16		.05		.74		.01		1.7	

Note: B=Standardize Coefficient, SE= Standard Error, R²= Effect Size of Regression

Table 2 shows the results of mediation analysis which indicated that psychological distress was a significant and positive predictor of avoidant coping. Whereas, psychological distress was a negative and non-significant predictor of family support, competition and academic competence, appearance, God's love and virtue and approval from others. Avoidant coping was a significant and negative predictor of family support and competition and academic competence. Psychological distress accounted for 7.5% variance in avoidant coping. Psychological distress accounted for 0% variance in family support, competition and academic competence and God's love and virtue. While it accounted for 1% variance in appearance and

2% variance in approval from others In addition, indirect effect of avoidant coping between psychological distress and family support was found to be significant (Effect= -.08, SE= .04, LL= -.17, UL= -.01) which shows that an increase in psychological distress will increase avoidant coping which in turn will decrease self-worth dependent upon family support. Also the indirect effect of avoidant coping between psychological distress and competition and academic competence was found to be significant (Effect= -.09, SE= .05, LL= -.19, UL= -.01) which shows that an increase in psychological distress will increase avoidant coping which in turn will decrease self-worth dependent upon competition and academic competence.

Table 3

Mediating effect of Emotion Focused Coping on Psychological Distress and Contingencies of Self-Worth (N=104)

Predictor	Emotion Focused Coping		Family Support		Competition and Academic Competence		Appearance		God's Love and Virtue		Approval From Others	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Psychological distress	.025	.09	-.05	.17	-.03	.28	.09	.15	-.02	.16	.13	.18
Emotion Focused Coping	-	-	.28**	.18	.50***	.30	.02	.16	.38***	.17	-.14	.19
R ²	.00		.00		.00		.01		.00		.02	
F	0.06		.16		.04		.74		.01		1.7	

Note: B=Standardize Coefficient, SE= Standard Error, R²= Effect Size of Regression

Table 3 shows the results of mediation analysis which indicated that psychological distress was a non-significant and positive predictor of emotion focused coping. Whereas, psychological distress was a non-significant predictor of family support, competition and academic competence, appearance, God's love and virtue and approval from others. Emotion focused coping was a significant and positive predictor of family support and competition and academic competence and God's love and virtue. Psychological distress accounted for 0% variance in emotion focused coping. In addition, indirect effect of emotion focused coping between psychological distress and family support, competition and academic competence, appearance, God's love and virtue and approval from others was found to be non-significant.

Table 4

Mediating effect of Problem Focused Coping on Psychological Distress and Contingencies of Self-Worth (N=104)

Predictor	Problem Focused Coping		Family Support		Competition and Academic Competence		Appearance		God's Love and Virtue		Approval From Others	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE

Psychological distress	-.06	.14	-.01	.16	.02	.25	.09	.15	.02	.15	.11	.17
Problem Focused Coping	-	-	.37**	.12	.66***	.18	.08	.11	.47***	.11	-.26**	.12
R ²	.00	.00		.00		.01		.00		.02		
F	0.42	.16		.05		.74		.01		1.7		

Note: β =Standardize Coefficient, SE = Standard Error, R^2 = Effect Size of Regression

Table 4 shows the results of mediation analysis which indicated that psychological distress was a non-significant and negative predictor of problem focused coping. Whereas, psychological distress was a positive and non-significant predictor of family support, competition and academic competence, appearance, God’s love and virtue and approval from others. Problem focused coping was a significant and positive predictor of family support and God’s love and virtue and a negatively significant predictor of approval from others. Psychological distress accounted for 0% variance in problem focused coping. In addition, indirect effect of problem focused coping between psychological distress and family support, competition and academic competence, appearance, God’s love and virtue and approval from others was found to be non-significant.

4. DISCUSSION

The study aimed to investigate the mediating role of coping mechanisms in the relationship between psychological distress and self-worth among divorced women in Pakistan. It sought to explore these relationships and demographic associations within a sample of 104 divorced women from Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Validated instruments, including the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale and the Brief-COPE Urdu, were used. The Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale, comprising subscales such as Family Support, Competition and Academic Competence, Appearance, God's Love and Virtue, and Approval From Others, demonstrated good internal consistency.

The results of Pearson Product-Moment Correlational Analysis revealed significant positive correlations between psychological distress and avoidant coping, as well as significant negative correlations between avoidant coping and self-worth domains, particularly family support and competition and academic competence. Avoidant coping displayed non-significant, negative correlations with God's love, virtue, and appearance within the self-worth domains. Post-divorce, Pakistani women face workplace stigma and reduced social support due to societal norms branding them as deviants. Appearance is less criticized than other factors, and divorced women report losing self-worth due to revealing marital details post-divorce [4]. This study confirms decreased self-worth in domains like family support and academic competence, with less impact on appearance, God's love, and virtue. Appearance-related self-worth is subjective and influenced by personal, cultural, and societal factors. Avoidant coping has a weaker effect on appearance-related self-esteem. Divorced women prioritize coping with other aspects during post-divorce challenges, reducing the link between avoidant coping and appearance-related self-worth. Pakistani women tend to rely on religious coping during distress [13], which also affects virtue. This study supports a negative but non-significant link between avoidant coping and God's love and virtue. Avoidant coping, characterized by disengagement, is considered ineffective [14], and divorced women experiencing psychological distress tend to increase avoidant coping, signifying an ineffective coping mechanism.

The mediation analysis revealed an indirect effect of avoidant coping between psychological distress and self-worth domains of family support and competition and academic competence. This suggests that increased psychological distress leads to higher avoidant coping, subsequently decreasing self-worth in these domains. This aligns with research suggesting that avoidant coping is ineffective. The mediation result is supported by the negative relationship in most self-worth domains. An analogous study on college students by Pairat et al. [15] showed increased stress led to elevated avoidant coping, negatively affecting academic performance and social support. This suggests self-worth in domains like family support, competition, and academic competence would likely decrease due to reduced performance. The mediation analysis also revealed a non-significant indirect effect of problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping between psychological distress and all self-worth domains. This can be attributed to Pakistan's cultural context, where societal norms, gender roles, and social support networks shape coping mechanisms and the psychological distress-self-worth relationship among divorced women. In Pakistan, cultural importance is placed on familial and marital relationships, making divorce a significant life event affecting women's self-worth. Divorced women in Pakistan face unique challenges due to the sensitive nature of divorce and associated stigma in certain cultural contexts. The non-significant mediating effect of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping suggests other factors play a more influential role in shaping the psychological distress-self-worth relationship among divorced women in Pakistan. For instance, a study in Pakistan revealed some divorced women use avoidant coping or conceal their identity to cope with workplace discrimination due to divorce stigma [16].

Regarding demographic variables, a significant difference was observed in psychological distress concerning monthly income, with lower and middle-income groups experiencing more distress. However, no significant differences were found in self-worth and coping mechanisms based on income. This underscores the importance of social and interpersonal factors in determining self-worth in Pakistan, beyond individual economic status. Previous research found that lower-income women had a 25% higher risk of psychological distress than higher-income women. This aligns with our study's significant differences in psychological distress based on monthly income. However, monthly income did not significantly affect self-worth or coping mechanisms. Khan and Qureshi's [17] research emphasized cultural values and social factors in shaping self-worth in Pakistan, highlighting the importance of family and community relationships over individual economic status. Cultural expectations related to gender roles in Pakistan also influence the link between income and coping mechanisms for divorced women, given the social and economic challenges imposed by traditional norms [18]. Therefore, monthly income alone may not solely determine coping strategies among divorced women, as cultural and gender-related factors are significant contributors. The one-way independent measure ANOVA revealed significant differences in self-esteem's Competition and Academic Competence aspect based on the number of dependents (0, 1, 2, or 3+). More dependents meant more responsibilities and time constraints, potentially hindering academic performance and self-perceived competence. Those with fewer dependents had more time for academics, fostering higher competence and competitiveness. These findings align with Smith and Johnson's research [19], emphasizing dependents' impact on academic performance and self-perceived abilities. However, no significant differences were found in psychological distress and coping mechanisms concerning the number of dependents, suggesting that dependents may not substantially affect psychological distress. Pakistani culture's strong family bonds and collective support may mitigate this influence [16].

Surprisingly, no significant variations in psychological distress were identified across various factors, including job status, education, living arrangements, children's presence, and

divorce duration. This underscores the resilience of divorced women in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, who may have developed effective coping mechanisms and support networks, regardless of their specific circumstances. Coping mechanisms did not significantly differ among demographic variables. This might be due to shared societal expectations and norms for coping among divorced women in the region. It's possible that cultural norms dictate common coping strategies for divorce-related distress. Additionally, the study's sample size may have influenced these results.

4.1 Implications of the study

Avoidant coping was linked to higher psychological distress and lower self-worth, particularly in domains like family support, competition, academic competence, and virtue. Divorced women who rely on avoidance as a coping mechanism may struggle to maintain positive self-perceptions in these specific areas. On the other hand, problem-focused and emotion-focused coping were associated with higher self-worth across various domains. This suggests that actively addressing stressors and using adaptive coping strategies can boost self-worth. Interventions promoting these coping mechanisms could benefit divorced women. The mediation analysis revealed that avoidant coping indirectly connects psychological distress to specific self-worth domains, including family support, competition, academic competence, and virtue. This highlights the need for interventions targeting the reduction of avoidant coping and the promotion of adaptive strategies to enhance self-worth in these areas. Significant differences were observed in psychological distress based on monthly income, indicating that lower and middle-income women experience more distress. Addressing financial difficulties and providing support is crucial to alleviate distress in this population. Differences in academic competence based on the number of dependents highlight the influence of caregiving responsibilities on divorced women's perceptions. Supportive interventions that recognize and address these challenges can positively impact academic competence and overall well-being. In summary, tailored interventions should focus on promoting adaptive coping, addressing financial concerns, and assisting with caregiving responsibilities to enhance self-worth and reduce distress among divorced women in Pakistan, ultimately supporting their overall well-being and adjustment.

4.2 Limitations and Future Recommendations

- Cross-sectional design as the study adopted a cross-sectional design, which captures data at a single point in time. This design may not establish causal relationships between variables. To establish causal relationships and assess changes over time, future researchers should conduct longitudinal studies to examine how coping mechanisms and self-worth evolve after divorce.
- The study focused exclusively on divorced women who had not remarried, which may limit the understanding of coping mechanisms and self-worth in broader marital statuses. Therefore expanding the sample in future studies to include divorced men and women who have remarried would allow for a comparative analysis of coping strategies and self-worth across different marital statuses.
- Data collected relied on self-report measures, which could introduce response bias and social desirability effects. Contrary to this, complementing self-report measures with qualitative methods in future researches, like interviews or focus groups can offer deeper insights into the subjective experiences of divorced women and their coping mechanisms.

4.3 Conclusion

The study revealed that psychological distress was significantly, positively correlated with avoidant coping and avoidant coping was significantly negatively correlated with self-worth and its domains; family support, competition, academic competence and virtue. The results of mediation analysis revealed that there was an indirect effect of avoidant coping between the relationship of Psychological Distress and certain domains of self-worth; family support, competition, academic competence and virtue. The results indicate that an increase in psychological distress will increase avoidant coping which in turn will decrease self-worth related to family support, competition, academic competence and virtue. Significant differences were found between monthly income and one of the study variable; psychological distress, such that the two income range (low and middle range) experienced more psychological distress as compared to women in the highest income range. Self-worth and coping mechanism had no significant differences with monthly income. The results of one way independent measure ANOVA also showed significant differences on the levels of number of dependents i.e. 0, 1, 2, and 3 or above in terms of one of the domain of self-worth: Academic Competence.

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