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Moderating Effect of Marital Satisfaction on Acculturative Stress and Psychological Distress among Marriage Migrant Women in South Korea

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Purpose: This study investigated the moderating role of marital satisfaction in the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological distress among marriage migrant women in South Korea.
Methods: We recruited 142 marriage migrant women from a metropolitan city in the southwestern region of the Korean Peninsula and used survey questionnaires to collect information on demographics as well as inventories assessing acculturative stress, psychological distress, and marital satisfaction.
Results: We found that acculturative stress significantly affected psychological distress. Marriage migrant women experiencing higher levels of acculturative stress reported greater psychological distress. We further found that marital satisfaction moderated the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological distress. Specifically, low levels of marital satisfaction strengthened the association between acculturative stress and psychological distress. In contrast, among women with high levels of marital satisfaction, the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological distress was still present but relatively weaker.
Conclusions: These findings suggest that marital satisfaction is a critical variable that prevents the adverse effects of acculturative stress on psychological distress among marriage migrant women in South Korea.

Keywords: Acculturation; Marriage; Migrant; Psychological distress

Introduction

Globalization has made it easier for people to migrate between nations; consequently, South Korea is now becoming a multicultural nation. Since the 1990s, the number of marriage migrant women has seen a steady increase, driven by a rise in marriages between Korean men and women from Southeast Asian countries [1]. The number of migrants has continuously increased, and their contacts in South Korea have become a multicultural society. However, native Koreans have a negative and biased perception of migrants, including marriage migrants [2]. According to Kim [3], Korean university students showed negative attitudes toward marriage migrant women and migrant workers, particularly migrants from less-developed Asian countries. Moreover, Koreans' multicultural acceptance index decreased in 2021 compared with that in 2018 [4]. This is especially evident in their "Relationship with Others" score which indicates one's preference for participating in social groups with multicultural members. Thus, despite Korean society's transformation into a multicultural society, native Koreans' attitude toward migrants is neither accommodating nor positive. Negative perceptions and attitudes toward migrants, including marriage migrant women, may

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lead to discrimination and hatred against migrants and multiculturalism, thereby hindering social integration [5].

This negative perception is reflected in the lived experiences of migrants. Migrants from Southeast Asia feel socially isolated and discriminated against because of Koreans' negative attitudes toward them [6]. As most marriage migrant women in South Korea belong to developing countries, they may encounter social exclusion and discrimination. Moreover, marriage migrant women experience discrimination in their daily lives and at work [7]. In addition, they experience cultural conflicts and communication difficulties with their spouses, which negatively impacted marriage stability [8].

Men living in rural areas are facing increasing challenges in securing marital partners owing to urbanization, consequently causing a rapid decrease in the rural population. Therefore, transnational marriage with Southeast Asian women has become a popular choice not only for rural men but also for those with a low socioeconomic status in South Korea [9]. The dating period in most transnational marriages involving Korean men and foreign women is relatively short, and they get married without knowing enough about each other's lifestyle, cultural customs, values, and language [10].

Given these personal and cultural differences, along with communication difficulties, marriage migrant women are likely to face a wide range of adjustment challenges. They may experience psychological distress, such as depression, as a result of perceived cultural differences in Korean society—particularly in their relationship with their spouse—and this effect may be exacerbated when they experience social discrimination [11]. Additionally, they face the hurdles of not only assimilating into a new culture but also adapting to marital life with a man from a different culture, establishing a family, and raising children [12]. As they adapt to these changes, they may fail to overcome some challenges and experience various stresses, such as acculturative stress [13]. Adapting to a new culture and dealing with difficulties relating to cultural adaptation are inevitable for migrants. The issue at hand is the severity of acculturative stress and its adverse impact on migrants' physical and mental health.

In this context, acculturative stress pertains to the psychological challenges encountered by migrants as they adapt to a new lifestyle and navigate the nuances of a different culture [14]. Such acculturative stress can negatively impact migrants' physical and mental health, causing somatic symptoms, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety [15,16]. Further, it negatively affects migrants of all ages, generations, and cultural backgrounds. According to a longitudinal study on immigrant adolescents, greater degrees of acculturative stress are related to social withdrawal, somatic symptoms, anxiety, and depression [17]. Additionally, Asian American and Mexican immigrants experiencing acculturative stress reported experiencing depression [18,19]. Adolescents, adults, and older adults also experience psychological distress as a result of acculturative stress. Furthermore, Korean Americans reported experiencing depressive symptoms and anxiety because of acculturative stress [20].

Women who migrate to a host country through marriage with a local man inevitably experience acculturative stress. They are reported to experience various types of psychological distress, including depression, loneliness, anxiety, somatization, and PTSD as a result of acculturative stress [8,21]. Several studies have also shown the negative effects of acculturative stress on the mental health, life satisfaction, and general domains of the life of marriage migrant women [22,23]. Thus, acculturative stress is a strong predictor of psychological distress among marriage migrant women.

To better understand how marriage migrant women cope with such stress, it is important to consider the potential role of marital satisfaction as a protective factor. The stress-buffering model proposed by Cohen and Wills [24] provides a theoretical rationale for considering marital satisfaction as a moderator that attenuates the impact of stressors—such as acculturative stress—on psychological outcomes. According to this model, individuals cope with stress by utilizing various coping resources, which serve to buffer the negative effects of stress. Consistent with this, Lazarus and Folkman [25] propose that coping resources help mitigate the adverse impacts of stress and contribute to the preservation of psychological well-being. Migrants can draw on coping resources, such as social support, to alleviate the psychological distress induced by acculturative stress [26]. The more social support an individual obtains, the easier it is for them to attain a sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy, helping them manage stress more effectively or strengthen their problem-solving skills [27].

Moreover, social support serves as a protective buffer, diminishing the adverse psychological effects of acculturative stress [16]. Social support is the perception or feeling of being respected, valued, and supported by one's family, peers, partners, or the community [28,29]. Additionally, it serves as a potent coping resource, mitigating the adverse effects of stress [25,29]. Prior research has indicated that social support acts as a protective factor, alleviating the impact of acculturative stress on psychological distress in marriage migrant women [30,31]. However, as migrant women leave their families and friends behind and migrate to a new country, their social network becomes limited. In this con-

text, the quality of the marriage and the spouse's role are critical social and coping resources.

In relation to this, marital satisfaction is related to greater life satisfaction, physical and psychological well-being, and lower depression levels [32,33]. Previous studies have identified spousal relationship satisfaction as the most influential family factor contributing to life satisfaction among marriage migrant women [34]. In this way, the bond between partners or spouses constitutes one of the most crucial social support networks, and a satisfying relationship can provide emotional support. This type of social support becomes most significant for marriage migrant women, given that their social network in the host country may not be sufficient to provide the required emotional support. Thus, the relationship quality between spouses can serve as a strong buffer against acculturative stress.

Furthermore, previous studies have suggested that relationship satisfaction may have a buffering effect on individuals' stress levels [25,33]. In other words, maintaining a stable and satisfying marital relationship can serve as a strong protective factor that mitigates the impact of stressful events [8,35]. This study focuses on marital satisfaction as an intervention variable that may facilitate the adjustment of marriage migrant women, and hypothesizes that marital satisfaction moderates the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological distress. Specifically, it is assumed that women with higher-quality marital relationships may experience lower levels of psychological distress, even when exposed to the same level of acculturative stress.

Nevertheless, there is still a lack of empirical studies examining the protective role of marital satisfaction as a moderator in the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological distress among marriage migrant women in South Korea. Marital satisfaction functions as a moderating variable that buffers the impact of stressful life events on psychological distress, providing a crucial coping resource for marriage migrant women who often have limited social networks in the host country. Therefore, assessing its buffering effect on psychological distress resulting from acculturative stress is essential. The present study aims to highlight the moderating effect of marital satisfaction, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of the role of spousal relationships in the mental health of marriage migrant women.

The study model is presented in Figure 1, and the study hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1. Acculturative stress has a significant positive effect on psychological distress.

Hypothesis 2. Marital satisfaction moderates the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological distress.

Methods

Participants

In this study, a survey was conducted with marriage migrant women from Vietnam, Japan, China, Cambodia, and the Philippines, reflecting the nationality distribution of marriage migrant women residing in a metropolitan city in the southwestern region of South Korea. Participants were recruited through flyers posted at five multicultural family support centers in the same metropolitan area. A total of 154 marriage migrant women completed the questionnaires. Of these, 142 responses were included in the final analysis, with 12 excluded due to substantial missing data. The required sample size was calculated using G*Power (version 3.1), assuming a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), eight predictors, a statistical power of 0.80, and a significance level of $\alpha = .05$. The minimum required sample size was estimated to be 109. Thus, the final sample size of 142 was considered adequate for the planned analyses.

Measures

Sociodemographic questionnaire

Sociodemographic variables included participants' age, heritage country, education level, and monthly income.

Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS)

Acculturative stress was measured using the ASSIS developed by Sandhu and Asrabadi [36]. The ASSIS is a self-administered instrument designed to measure stress experienced during the acculturation process. Originally developed to examine international students' acculturative stress, it is now widely used to assess the acculturative stress of migrants. It comprises 36 items with the following seven subscales: perceived discrimination, homesickness, perceived hate, fear, stress due to change/cultural shock, guilt, and a nonspecific subscale. The responses range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), yielding total

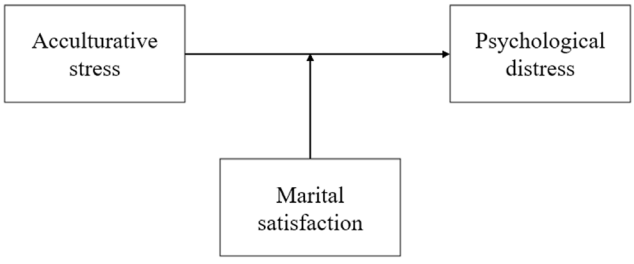

Figure 1. The study model.

scores ranging from 36 to 180. Elevated scores indicate a heightened perception of acculturative stress among marriage migrant women. The Cronbach's alpha was .96.

Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R)

Psychological distress was measured using the SCL-90-R developed by Derogatis [37]. It is a self-administered instrument intended to measure psychological distress experienced during the past week and is widely used in clinical settings. The SCL-90-R comprises 90 items with the following nine subscales: somatization, obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, anger-hostility, depression, anxiety, paranoid ideation, phobic anxiety, and psychoticism. The responses range from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely), and the total scores range from 0 to 360. The total score indicates general psychological distress, and the subscale scores indicate specific symptoms. The Cronbach's alpha was .99.

Couples Satisfaction Index-16 (CSI-16)

Marital satisfaction in marriage was measured using the CSI-16 developed by Funk and Rogge [38]. It is a self-administered instrument intended to measure relationship satisfaction. The CSI-16 comprises 16 items with a six-point response format, except Item 1, which has a seven-point scale. The first 10 items deal with the quality of relationship satisfaction, and the remaining six items address the participants' feelings and emotions regarding their relationship with their spouse. The total scores range from 16 to 97, and higher scores indicates greater relationship satisfaction with their spouses. A CSI-16 score of 51 or less indicates relationship dissatisfaction. The Cronbach's alpha was .84.

Control variables

Sociodemographic variables, such as age, marriage duration, heritage country, level of education, and monthly income, were controlled for. We examined the following variables: age and marriage duration were included as continuous variables; heritage countries included Cambodia, China, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam; education levels included middle school diploma, high school diploma, two-year college diploma, and bachelor's degree; and monthly income included the following categories: no income, under 1,000,000 won, between 1,000,000–1,500,000 won, between 1,500,000–2,000,000 won, and over 2,000,000 won.

Procedure

The study received approval from the Chonnam National University Institutional Review Board (IRB 1040198-230331-HR-033-01). Prior to data collection, the questionnaires were translated into Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Khmer, and Vietnamese, and then back-translated into Korean by independent translators to ensure accuracy. Participants were recruited through flyers outlining the study's objectives, which were posted at five multicultural family support centers in a provincial region of South Korea. A total of 154 marriage migrant women who expressed interest in the study provided written informed consent and completed the questionnaires. The survey took approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete, and as a token of appreciation, each participant received a gift valued at approximately KRW 20,000 (equivalent to about $15 USD). Participant recruitment and data collection were conducted in May 2023.

Data analysis

Statistical analysis was carried out utilizing SPSS 21.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). First, we conducted a descriptive analysis to confirm the normality of the data and compute the means and standard deviations for continuous variables, along with frequencies and percentages for categorical variables. Heritage country, education level, and monthly income were coded as nominal variables. Second, we conducted a Pearson's correlation analysis on acculturative stress, marital satisfaction, and psychological distress. Third, a multiple regression analysis was performed to examine the impact of acculturative stress on psychological distress. We converted these variables into dummy coded variables: Vietnam, middle school diploma, and no income were treated as the reference groups. Finally, we examined the moderating effect of marital satisfaction on the association between acculturative stress and psychological distress using Model 1 of Hayes' [39] PROCESS macro in SPSS 21.0. Control variables included age, heritage country, education level, and monthly income. To avoid the potential threat of multicollinearity, independent variables were mean-centered. A two-way interaction graph was plotted to explore how acculturative stress and marital satisfaction jointly contribute to psychological distress.

Results

General characteristics

Figure 1 presents the general characteristics of the participants. This study included 142 marriage migrant women with a mean age of 38.56 years (SD = 8.16) from a metropolitan city in the southwestern province of South Korea. The participants' heritage countries were Vietnam (n = 61; 43.0%), China (n = 47; 33.1%), Japan (n = 13; 9.2%), the Philippines (n = 11; 7.7%), and Cambodia (n = 10; 7.0%). Among the participants, 57 (40.1%)

had a high school diploma, 33 (23.2%) a bachelor's degree, 32 (22.6%) a college diploma, and 17 (12%) a middle school diploma, while 3 (2.1%) did not respond; 81 (57.0%) had a full-time job, and 61 (43.0%) did not; 54 (38.0%) did not have a monthly income, 32 (22.5%) earned under 1,000,000 won, 19 (13.4%) earned between 1,000,000–1,500,000 won, 15 (10.6%) earned between 1,500,000–2,000,000 won, 21 (14.8%) earned over 2,000,000 won, and 1 (0.7%) did not respond. The average marriage duration was 10.50 years (SD = 6.58) (Table 1).

Preliminary analyses

We examined the regression assumption of normality. Study variables had acceptable ranges of skewness (0.16–1.39) and kurtosis (0.98–1.17). These results confirmed the normality.

We conducted a descriptive and correlation analysis on the variables under investigation. Table 2 displays the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations of acculturative stress, marital satisfaction, and psychological distress. Acculturative stress had a negative correlation with marital satisfaction ($r = -.43$, $p < .001$) and a positive correlation with psychological distress ($r = .58$, $p < .001$). Psychological distress was negatively correlated with marital satisfaction ($r = -.36$, $p < .01$). Moreover, marriage migrant women with elevated acculturative stress levels were more prone to experiencing psychological distress. However, marriage migrant women with higher levels of marital satisfaction were less inclined to experience psychological distress.

Table 1. General Characteristics of Participants (N=142)

Variable	Categories	n	%	Mean	SD
Age	-	-	-	38.56	8.16
Marriage duration	-	-	-	10.50	6.58
Heritage countries	Vietnam	61	43.0	-	-
	China	47	33.1		
	Japan	13	9.2		
	The Philippines	11	7.7		
	Cambodia	10	7.0		
Education level	Middle school	17	12.0	-	-
	High school	57	40.1		
	College	32	22.6		
	University	33	23.2		
	Not respond	3	2.1		
Employment status	Full-time employment	81	57.0	-	-
	Unemployed	61	43.0		
Monthly income	No income	54	38.0	-	-
	Under 1 million won	32	22.5		
	1-1.5 million won	19	19.0		
	1.5-2 million won	15	10.6		
	Over 2 million won	21	14.8		
	Not respond	1	0.7		

The main effect of acculturative stress on psychological distress

Table 3 presents the main effects of acculturative stress on psychological distress. Acculturative stress accounted for 29.4% ($\Delta R^2 = .29$) of the variance in psychological distress. This suggests that acculturative stress statistically significantly predicts psychological distress ($\beta = .56$, $p < .001$). Further, high levels of acculturative stress predicted a high level of psychological distress among marriage migrant women.

The moderating effect of marital satisfaction on acculturative stress and psychological distress

Table 4 presents the moderating effect of marital satisfaction on the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological distress. The two-way interaction (acculturative stress X marital satisfaction) statistically significantly predicted psychological distress ($\beta = -.03$, $p < .05$). In particular, the two-way interaction term contributed an additional 2.5% ($\Delta R^2 = .03$) to the variance in psychological distress, signifying the moderating effect of marital satisfaction on the association between acculturative stress and psychological distress. Conditional effects were also examined for significance at ±SD, and the results are presented in Table 5. There was a statistically significant conditional effect ($t = 4.94$, $p < .001$) when the level of marital satisfaction was -SD. It was also statistically significant ($t = 2.00$, $p < .05$) when the level of marital satisfaction was +SD.

To graphically explore the moderating effect of marital satisfaction on acculturative stress and psychological distress, we plotted

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1. Acculturative stress	74.63	24.24	0.16	-0.98	-		
2. Marital satisfaction	64.97	18.75	-0.34	-0.35	-.43***	-	
3. Psychological distress	19.30	29.09	1.39	1.17	.58***	-.36**	-

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

Table 3. Effect of Acculturative Stress on Psychological Distress

Dependent variable	Independent variable		Model 1		Model 2	
			β	t	β	t
Psychological distress	Age		.20	1.36	.11	0.91
	Marriage duration		-.05	-0.42	-.01	-0.06
	Heritage country	Vietnam (ref)	-	-	-	-
		Japan	-.21	-1.64	-.21	-2.00*
		China	-.18	-1.43	-.22	-2.15*
		Cambodia	.12	1.33	.05	0.71
		Philippines	.05	0.47	.02	0.25
	Education level	Middle school (ref)	-	-	-	-
		Highschool	.03	0.17	.02	0.14
		College	-.00	-0.02	.03	0.24
		University	-.01	-0.09	-.03	-0.24
	Monthly income	No income (ref)	-	-	-	-
		Under 1 million won	-.17	-1.56	-.06	-0.73
		1-1.5 million won	-.22	-2.27*	-.16	-1.92
		1.5-2 million won	-.16	-1.71	-.11	-1.37
		Over 2 million won	-.12	-1.16	-.03	-0.30
	Acculturative stress				.56	7.61***
				R^2 = .11		R^2 = .40
						ΔR^2 = .29

*p < .05, ***p < .001.

Table 4. Moderating Effect of Marital Satisfaction on Acculturative Stress and Psychological Distress

Dependent variable	Variable		B	t	R^2	ΔR^2	F
Psychological distress	Independent variable	Acculturative stress (X)	1.09	5.04***	.48	.03	4.13*
		Marital satisfaction (W)	-0.52	-1.85			
		X * W	-0.03	-2.03*			
	Control variable	Age	0.93	1.03			
		Marriage duration	-0.22	-0.23			
		Vietnam (ref)	-	-			
		Japan	-38.92	-1.81			
		China	-25.33	-1.87			
		Cambodia	32.37	1.45			
		Philippines	19.60	0.85			
		Middle school (ref)	-	-			
		High school	-0.01	-0.00			
		2-yr-College	0.43	0.03			
		University	-1.87	-0.11			
		No income (ref)	-	-			
		Under 1 million won	-17.38	-1.30			
		1~1.5 million won	-29.38	-1.83			
		1.5~2 million won	-24.01	-1.55			
		Over 2 million won	-15.39	-1.03			

*p < .05, ***p < .001.

Table 5. Conditional Moderation Results of Marital Satisfaction

Moderating variable		Conditional effect	SE	t	95% CI	
					Lower CI	Upper CI
Marital satisfaction	-1 SD	1.56	0.32	4.94***	0.93	2.18
	Mean	1.09	0.22	5.04***	0.66	1.52
	+1 SD	0.63	0.32	2.00*	0.00	1.25

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

a two-way interaction effect (Figure 2). The simple effect results showed a positive and statistically significant relationship between acculturative stress and psychological distress, evident for both low ($\beta = 1.56$, $p < .001$) and high ($\beta = .63$, $p < .05$) levels of marital satisfaction. Thus, when acculturative stress increased, marriage migrant women with low levels of marital satisfaction became more vulnerable to psychological distress. Conversely, those who reported a high level of marital satisfaction were less vulnerable to psychological distress.

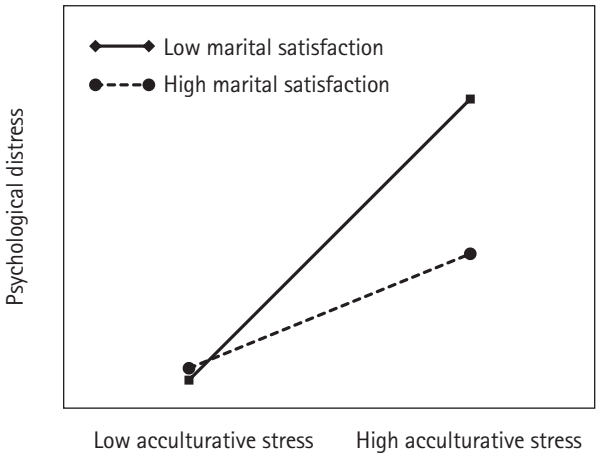

Figure 2. Moderating effect of marital satisfaction on acculturative stress and psychological distress.

Discussion

This study investigated the impact of acculturative stress on psychological distress and whether marital satisfaction significantly moderates the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological distress.

Our first finding supported Hypothesis 1. Aligning with previous studies [30,40], we found that acculturative stress had a statistically significant effect on the psychological distress of marriage migrant women. Notably, acculturation stress negatively impacts the mental health of marriage migrant women, causing depression and anxiety [8], and it has been confirmed that acculturative stress is prevalent among marriage migrant women. Although these women are members of Korea's multicultural society, they continue to experience discrimination and acculturative stress, which affects their mental health. Their mental health can affect their children's mental health and behavior [41,42]; thus, diverse types of social support are needed to reduce the adverse effects of acculturative stress. Therefore, continuously providing support, such as language, cultural, and psychological adaptations, and parenting programs is necessary for them to adapt and become healthy members of Korean society. Moreover, native Koreans should be educated to develop a positive view of multiculturalism and migrants.

Our second finding supported Hypothesis 2. marital satisfaction had a statistically significant moderating effect on the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological distress. Specifically, individuals who perceived a low level of marital satisfaction reported psychological distress when faced with acculturative stress. Moreover, those who perceived a high level of marital satisfaction still reported psychological distress owing to acculturative stress; however, they were less vulnerable to psychological distress (see Figure 2). This indicates that marital satisfaction is a coping resource for marriage migrant women to cope with the adverse psychological effects of acculturative stress, thus aligning with prior research [33]. Experiencing acculturative stress and psychological distress is inevitable for women who migrate to a host country and marry men from different cultural backgrounds. They may experience cultural conflict with their spouses, culture shock, cultural discrimination, and homesickness. These stressors may induce acculturative stress, resulting in psychological distress. Acculturative stress is a robust predictor of psychological distress, such as depression and anxiety, among migrants [43,44], but it can be alleviated by utilizing coping resources. Thus, this study showed that marital satisfaction reduces the adverse effects of acculturative stress experienced in a host country. Our results align with those of Lazarus and Folkman's

stress and coping model [25], stating that coping resources alleviate the adverse effects of stress. As marriage migrant women leave their families and friends and move to a host country, generally, the only person they know initially is their spouse. Hence, spouses can offer crucial social and emotional support, underscoring the significance of quality and satisfaction in marital relationships for marriage migrant women.

In South Korea, marriage migrant women face numerous challenges, such as social discrimination, culture shock, and language barriers. Additionally, they experience difficulties with their spouses at home, such as cultural conflicts and communication difficulties. Moreover, they experienced various difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic because of quarantine, which made it difficult to interact with others and participate in social activities. COVID-19 has adversely impacted individuals' mental health and social networks, especially socially vulnerable groups, such as migrants [45]. Environmental and socially induced stressors are inevitable and difficult to control. Consequently, it is necessary to control factors that can be changed by individuals. Given this, this study demonstrates that marital satisfaction can reduce the adverse impacts of acculturative stress on psychological distress among marriage migrant women. Therefore, programs that enhance the quality and satisfaction of marital relationships should be offered to marriage migrant women and their spouses.

In contrast to migrant workers and international students, marriage migrant women form families, raise children, and reside permanently in South Korea. They are expected to become integrated and embedded into Korean society. Therefore, the mental health and quality of life of marriage migrant women are especially important, and improving these will affect the mental health of their children [41] and, consequently, their social integration in Korea. With an increase in marriage migrant women and the recognition of the importance of their mental health and cultural adaptation, multicultural family support centers have been instituted to offer services, including language, culture, psychological counseling, and education programs, such as programs focused on parenting [1]. The results of this study emphasize the protective factor of marital satisfaction on the mental health of marriage migrant women. Therefore, multicultural family support centers should still consider offering services and programs to enhance marital satisfaction.

According to Lee [46], how gender roles are perceived among marriage migrant women's spouses impacts their marital satisfaction. The more traditional the husband's attitude toward gender roles, the lower the marital satisfaction of marriage migrant women. Therefore, to enhance marital satisfaction, counseling and education are necessary to change husbands' perception of gender roles to become more gender equal. Thus, providing education and programs for marriage migrant women and their spouses is recommended.

Conclusion

This study is a pioneering investigation of the moderating influence of marital satisfaction on the association between acculturative stress and psychological distress among marriage migrant women in South Korea. It illustrates the importance of marital satisfaction as a coping resource for marriage migrant women experiencing psychological distress resulting from acculturative stress.

The study has several clinical implications. Social workers, counseling psychologists, and mental health professionals should consider the factors that contribute to marriage migrant women's acculturative stress and its negative effects. Moreover, they should attempt to eliminate the risk factors for acculturative stress in marriage migrant women. Furthermore, they should consider the critical role of marital satisfaction in alleviating psychological distress among marriage migrant women. It is also noteworthy that the levels of acculturative stress and psychological distress in the study sample were not particularly high. This suggests that the protective role of a satisfying marital relationship may operate not only in high-risk or clinically distressed populations, but also among psychologically well-functioning marriage migrant women. These findings imply that enhancing the quality of spousal relationships could be a valuable preventive approach to supporting the mental health of marriage migrant women, even before stress levels reach clinically significant thresholds.

This study can aid social service providers and policymakers design social programs and policies for marriage migrant women experiencing stress from adapting to a new culture. Moreover, it empirically examines the moderating role of marital satisfaction in the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological distress among marriage migrant women. The findings indicate that marital satisfaction functions as a moderator, highlighting its significance as a buffering factor in the context of acculturative stress and psychological distress. This contributes valuable empirical insights to the limited existing data on the importance of the buffering effect of marital satisfaction.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations. First, the participants were

mainly from Vietnam and China, residing in the southwestern region of the Korean peninsula. Thus, this study only reflects the subset of marriage migrant women who are willing to participate or actively participate in the programs provided by the multicultural family support centers in the provincial area, South Korea. Thus, our sample may be biased. Second, similarities and differences among Asian countries exist [47]. However, this study disregarded the participants' cultural characteristics and considered them as a homogeneous group. Therefore, the generalization and interpretation of the study findings should be performed with caution.

Future research directions

Research on large samples of marriage migrant women in South Korea is recommended to enhance the generalizability of the study results. Moreover, because each country has different cultural characteristics, further research should be conducted to consider these cultural characteristics. A program to improve the marital satisfaction of marriage migrant women should be developed and examined to gauge its impact on alleviating psychological distress. Finally, other protective factors may alleviate the adverse impacts of acculturative stress on the psychological distress of marriage migrant women. Therefore, further research should identify protective factors other than marital satisfaction.

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Conflict of interest

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Authors' contributions

Oan Na Lee contributed to conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, writing - original draft, investigation, and validation. Seong-Eun Jeon contributed to methodology, writing - review & editing, investigation, and validation. Bong-Kyu Sun contributed to conceptualization, data curation, project administration, investigation, and validation. Young-Shin Kang contributed to conceptualization, funding acquisition, methodology, project administration, writing - review & editing, investigation, supervision and validation.

Data availability

Please contact the corresponding author for data availability.

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