

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED STRESS AND MARITAL WELL-BEING AMONG DUAL-EARNER COUPLES IN SARAWAK: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOSOCIAL PRACTICE

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Abstract

Perceived stress has become an important psychosocial concern among dual-earner couples due to its potential influence on marital relationships and family functioning. Despite the increasing number of dual-earner couples, empirical evidence on the relationship between perceived stress and marital well-being among dual-earner couples in Sarawak remains limited. This study aimed to examine the relationship between perceived stress and marital well-being among dual-earner couples in Sarawak. A cross-sectional quantitative correlational design was employed using an online survey involving 85 respondents who met the study inclusion criteria. Data were collected using the Malay version of the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) and the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS-M), and analysed using descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank-order correlation. The findings showed that the majority of respondents experienced a moderate level of perceived stress (71.8%). No significant relationship was found between perceived stress and overall marital well-being ($r_s = -.122, p = .268$). However, additional correlation analyses revealed significant associations between perceived stress and the three dimensions of marital well-being, namely marital consensus, satisfaction, and cohesion. These findings suggest that although perceived stress was not significantly associated with overall marital well-being, significant associations were observed with specific dimensions of marital functioning. The findings provide empirical evidence to inform counselling practice and psychosocial interventions by emphasising stress management, healthy couple communication, and work-life balance. They also support the development of family-friendly workplace initiatives that promote employee well-being while strengthening marital and family relationships.

Keywords: perceived stress, marital well-being, dual-earner couples, counselling practice, psychosocial intervention

Introduction

The increasing participation of dual-earner couples in today's workforce has transformed family roles and responsibilities, creating new challenges in balancing occupational demands with marital and family life. While dual-income households contribute to greater financial stability and improved quality of life, they are also more likely to experience competing work and family responsibilities that increase psychological demands and perceived stress (Yucel & Latshaw, 2020; Allen et al., 2020). Prolonged exposure to stress may affect emotional well-being, communication, relationship satisfaction, and family functioning, making it an important issue for psychology, counselling, and social work professionals. Consequently, understanding how perceived stress relates to marital well-being has become increasingly relevant in supporting healthy couple relationships and promoting family resilience.

In Malaysia, psychosocial risks in the workplace have received increasing attention following the introduction of the Guidelines on Psychosocial Risk Assessment and Management at the Workplace (PRisMA) by the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH, 2024). The guideline

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recognises psychosocial hazards such as excessive workload, organisational factors, role conflict, inadequate support, and work-life imbalance as important occupational risk factors that may negatively affect employees' psychological well-being, interpersonal relationships, and overall quality of life. These developments highlight the growing need for evidence-based interventions that extend beyond individual stress management to include family functioning and relationship well-being. For dual-earner couples, the interaction between occupational stress and marital relationships is particularly important because both partners are simultaneously exposed to work-related demands while managing shared family responsibilities.

The relationship between stress and marital well-being has been widely discussed in previous studies. The Work-Family Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) explains that incompatible demands between work and family roles may create inter-role conflict, which subsequently affects relationship quality and family functioning. Similarly, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) proposes that the effects of stress depend on individuals' cognitive appraisal of stressful situations and the coping resources available to them. These theoretical perspectives suggest that the impact of perceived stress on marital relationships is not determined solely by the presence of stressors but also by how couples interpret, manage, and respond to stressful experiences.

Previous empirical studies have reported that perceived stress and work-family conflict are associated with various marital outcomes, including relationship satisfaction, communication, emotional intimacy, and psychological well-being (Allen et al., 2020; Yucel & Latshaw, 2020). However, research findings remain inconsistent, with some studies reporting weak or non-significant relationships after considering contextual and protective factors such as coping strategies, social support, and marital adjustment. Moreover, most Malaysian studies have focused on work stress, family conflict, or marital problems separately, while limited attention has been given to examining the relationship between perceived stress and overall marital well-being among dual-earner couples, particularly within the socio-cultural context of Sarawak. This gap limits the availability of empirical evidence that can inform counselling practice, psychosocial intervention, and workplace policies designed to support working families.

Therefore, this study aimed to examine the relationship between perceived stress and marital well-being among dual-earner couples in Sarawak. Specifically, the study investigated the level of perceived stress experienced by respondents and examined whether perceived stress was significantly associated with overall marital well-being. The findings are expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on marital well-being while providing practical implications for counselling professionals, psychologists, employers, and policymakers in developing evidence-based psychosocial interventions, stress management programmes, and family-friendly workplace initiatives that promote healthy marital and family relationships.

Literature Review

2.1 Perceived Stress

Perceived stress refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of situations that are perceived as unpredictable, uncontrollable, or overwhelming in relation to the resources available to cope with them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Unlike objective stressors, perceived stress reflects individuals' cognitive appraisal of life demands and their ability to manage those demands effectively.

Among working adults, perceived stress commonly arises from excessive workload, time pressure, role ambiguity, interpersonal conflict, and difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities. The *Malaysian Guidelines on Psychosocial Risk Assessment and Management at the Workplace* (Department of Occupational Safety and Health [DOSH], 2024) identify psychosocial hazards such as work overload, organisational climate, inadequate supervisory support, and work-life imbalance as important workplace risks that may adversely affect employees' psychological well-being and social functioning.

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Previous studies consistently demonstrate that higher perceived stress is associated with poorer psychological well-being, emotional exhaustion, work-family conflict, and reduced relationship quality (Allen et al., 2020; Yucel & Latshaw, 2020). These findings suggest that perceived stress should be understood as a psychosocial process that may influence both individual functioning and interpersonal relationships among dual-earner couples.

2.2 Marital Well-Being

Marital well-being refers to the overall quality of the marital relationship, encompassing emotional satisfaction, effective communication, mutual understanding, commitment, and constructive conflict resolution (Hamid et al., 2020). Couples with high marital well-being generally report stronger emotional intimacy, collaborative decision-making, and supportive interpersonal relationships despite facing everyday challenges, which contribute to healthy family functioning (Allen et al., 2020; Yucel & Latshaw, 2020).

In this study, marital well-being was assessed using the Malay version of the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS-M), which measures three dimensions of marital functioning: marital consensus, marital satisfaction, and marital cohesion (Hamid et al., 2020). Collectively, these dimensions provide a comprehensive assessment of relationship functioning beyond the presence or absence of marital conflict.

Previous studies indicate that healthy marital relationships contribute positively to psychological well-being, family stability, and overall life satisfaction. Conversely, lower levels of marital well-being have been associated with poorer relationship quality, psychological distress, and reduced family functioning (Allen et al., 2020; Yucel & Latshaw, 2020). Consequently, marital well-being has become an important outcome in counselling psychology and psychosocial intervention research.

2.3 Relationship Between Perceived Stress and Marital Well-Being

The relationship between perceived stress and marital well-being has received increasing attention due to the growing number of dual-earner couples worldwide. Previous studies generally report that higher levels of perceived stress are associated with lower marital satisfaction, poorer communication, and increased work-family conflict (Allen et al., 2020; Yucel & Latshaw, 2020). However, the strength of these relationships varies across studies, suggesting that perceived stress alone may not sufficiently explain marital outcomes.

Previous research also indicates that supportive couple relationships, effective communication, and a healthy work-life balance may help minimise the negative influence of perceived stress on marital relationships (Allen et al., 2020; Yucel & Latshaw, 2020). In addition, the Malaysian Guidelines on Psychosocial Risk Assessment and Management at the Workplace (Department of Occupational Safety and Health [DOSH], 2024) emphasise that psychosocial risk management should include organisational support, workload management, and work-life balance initiatives to enhance employees' psychological well-being.

Despite these findings, empirical evidence examining the relationship between perceived stress and overall marital well-being among dual-earner couples in Sarawak remains limited. Most previous Malaysian studies have focused on work stress, work-family conflict, or marital satisfaction separately, with limited attention given to overall marital well-being among dual-earner couples. Therefore, further investigation is warranted to provide locally relevant evidence that can inform counselling practice, psychosocial intervention, and workplace policy development.

2.4 Theoretical Foundation

This study was guided by the Work-Family Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The Work-Family Conflict

Theory explains that incompatible demands between work and family roles may create inter-role conflict that affects relationship quality and family functioning. Meanwhile, the Transactional Model proposes that the consequences of stress depend on individuals' cognitive appraisal and the coping resources available to manage stressful situations.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how perceived stress may relate to marital well-being among dual-earner couples.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating the relationship between perceived stress and marital well-being among dual-earner couples in Sarawak

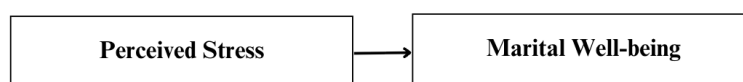


Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. It illustrates the hypothesised relationship between perceived stress and marital well-being among dual-earner couples in Sarawak. The framework is informed by the Work–Family Conflict Theory and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which provide the theoretical basis for examining the relationship between the study variables.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between perceived stress and marital well-being among dual-earner couples in Sarawak. A quantitative correlational approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to determine the statistical association between the study variables without manipulating them.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. Eligible participants were legally married individuals aged between 25 and 60 years, had been married for at least one year, resided in Sarawak, and both spouses were employed full-time. A total of 101 responses were initially collected through an online questionnaire. Following data screening, 16 responses were excluded because they did not fulfil the inclusion criteria, resulting in a final sample of 85 respondents.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire comprising three sections. The first section obtained demographic information. The second section utilised the Malay version of the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) to assess respondents' perceived stress (Al-Dubai et al., 2012). The third section employed the Malay version of the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS-M) to measure marital well-being across three dimensions: marital consensus, marital satisfaction, and marital cohesion (Hamid et al., 2020).

The pilot study demonstrated acceptable internal consistency for the Malay Version of the PSS-10 (Cronbach's $\alpha = .691$) and good internal consistency for the RDAS-M (Cronbach's $\alpha = .868$), indicating that both instruments were suitable for use in the present study.

Participation was voluntary. All participants provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics and levels of perceived stress. Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed to examine the relationship between perceived stress and overall marital well-being because the data were non-parametric. Additional correlation analyses were conducted to

examine the associations between perceived stress and the three dimensions of marital well-being: marital consensus, marital satisfaction, and marital cohesion. Statistical significance was established at $p < .05$.

Results

Respondents' Characteristics

A total of 85 respondents who met the inclusion criteria participated in this study. The respondents consisted of married individuals aged between 25 and 60 years, with both spouses employed full-time. As presented in Table 1, the majority of respondents were female (58.8%), aged between 41 and 45 years (36.5%), had been married for more than 15 years (38.8%), possessed STPM/Diploma qualifications (42.4%), and reported a monthly household income of RM7,001–RM10,000 (31.8%).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 85)

Variable	Category (Majority)	n	%
Gender	Female	50	58.8
Age	41–45 years	31	36.5
Duration of marriage	>15 years	33	38.8
Education	STPM/Diploma	36	42.4
Household income	RM7,001–RM10,000	27	31.8

Level of Perceived Stress

Descriptive analysis showed that the majority of respondents experienced a moderate level of perceived stress (71.8%), followed by high (18.8%) and low (9.4%) levels of perceived stress. The findings indicate that moderate perceived stress was commonly experienced among dual-earner couples in the present study.

Table 2: Level of Perceived Stress

Level	n	%
Low	8	9.4
Moderate	61	71.8
High	16	18.8

Relationship between Perceived Stress and Marital Well-Being

As shown in Table 3, Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis indicated that perceived stress was not significantly associated with overall marital well-being ($r_s = -.122$, $p = .268$). Therefore, the findings did not support a statistically significant relationship between perceived stress and overall marital well-being among dual-earner couples in Sarawak. However, significant relationships were observed between perceived stress and the three dimensions of marital well-being. Perceived stress was positively associated with marital consensus ($r_s = .256$, $p = .018$), but negatively associated with marital satisfaction ($r_s = -.336$, $p = .002$) and marital cohesion ($r_s = -.465$, $p < .001$).

Table 3: Relationship between Perceived Stress and Marital Well-Being

Variable	r_s	p	Interpretation
Overall marital well-being	-.122	.268	Weak negative, not significant
Marital consensus	.256	.018*	Weak positive, significant
Marital satisfaction	-.336	.002*	Weak-to-moderate negative, significant
Marital cohesion	-.465	< .001*	Moderate negative, significant

Note. r_s = Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient. $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between perceived stress and marital well-being among dual-earner couples in Sarawak. Contrary to expectations, the findings indicated that perceived stress was not significantly associated with overall marital well-being. This finding suggests that perceived stress alone may not sufficiently explain variations in overall marital well-being among dual-earner couples. Marital relationships are multidimensional and are likely influenced by a combination of personal, relational, and contextual factors, including communication patterns, emotional support, shared responsibilities, coping strategies, and relationship commitment (Hamid et al., 2020). Consequently, couples may still maintain satisfactory marital relationships despite experiencing moderate levels of perceived stress.

Although no significant relationship was observed for overall marital well-being, additional analyses revealed significant associations between perceived stress and specific dimensions of marital well-being, namely marital consensus, satisfaction, and cohesion. These findings indicate that perceived stress may be associated with particular aspects of couple functioning rather than the overall quality of the marital relationship. In particular, higher perceived stress was associated with lower marital satisfaction and cohesion, suggesting that stress may reduce opportunities for meaningful interaction, emotional closeness, and shared activities between spouses. Conversely, the positive association observed for marital consensus may indicate that some couples maintain agreement in decision-making and family responsibilities despite experiencing psychological stress, possibly through adaptive communication and collaborative coping.

The findings are consistent with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which proposes that the effects of stress are influenced by individuals' cognitive appraisal and coping resources rather than by stressors alone. Couples who perceive stress as manageable and possess effective coping strategies may experience fewer negative consequences on their marital relationships. Similarly, the Work–Family Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) suggests that competing work and family demands may create tension within relationships; however, the extent of this tension depends on how couples negotiate role expectations and manage competing responsibilities. Therefore, the absence of a significant relationship between perceived stress and overall marital well-being does not necessarily imply that stress is unimportant, but rather that its influence may be buffered by protective relational factors.

The present findings also support previous studies suggesting that stress does not inevitably lead to poorer marital outcomes. Instead, factors such as effective communication, partner support, adaptive coping, and work-life balance may reduce the adverse effects of stress on couple relationships (Allen et al., 2020; Yucel & Latshaw, 2020). From a practical perspective, these findings reinforce the importance of strengthening psychosocial resources rather than focusing solely on stress reduction. Counselling interventions that enhance communication skills, collaborative problem-solving, emotional regulation, and dyadic coping may assist couples in managing perceived stress more effectively while maintaining healthy marital relationships.

In addition, the findings have broader implications for organisational practice and workplace policy. The Malaysian *Guidelines on Psychosocial Risk Assessment and Management at the Workplace* (PRisMA) emphasise the importance of addressing psychosocial hazards through organisational support, workload management, and work-life balance initiatives (Department of Occupational Safety and Health [DOSH], 2024). The present findings provide empirical support for such initiatives by demonstrating that although perceived stress may not directly relate to overall marital well-being, it is associated with important dimensions of marital functioning that contribute to healthy couple relationships. Promoting family-friendly workplace policies may therefore enhance both employee well-being and family functioning.

Study Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the interpretation of causal relationships between perceived stress and marital well-being. Second, the use of self-reported questionnaires may introduce response bias. Third, the study focused on dual-earner couples in Sarawak, limiting the generalisability of the findings to other populations. Future studies are encouraged to employ longitudinal research designs, include participants from different Malaysian states, and examine additional protective factors, such as dyadic coping, resilience, organisational support, and family-friendly workplace practices, that may influence marital well-being.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between perceived stress and marital well-being among dual-earner couples in Sarawak. Although no significant relationship was found between perceived stress and overall marital well-being, significant associations were identified between perceived stress and specific dimensions of marital functioning, namely marital consensus, satisfaction, and cohesion. These findings indicate that perceived stress may be associated with particular aspects of couple relationships even when the overall level of marital well-being remains relatively stable.

The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on perceived stress and marital well-being by providing empirical evidence from the context of dual-earner couples in Sarawak, where related research remains limited. The findings further extend existing literature by demonstrating the importance of examining individual dimensions of marital functioning rather than relying solely on an overall measure of marital well-being.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of integrating stress management, effective communication, adaptive coping strategies, and work-life balance into counselling and psychosocial interventions for working couples. In addition, the findings support the implementation of family-friendly workplace policies and psychosocial risk management initiatives, as recommended by the Malaysian Guidelines on Psychosocial Risk Assessment and Management at the Workplace (DOSH, 2024), to promote employee well-being, strengthen couple relationships, and enhance family functioning. Future studies are recommended to employ longitudinal research designs and include additional psychosocial factors that may influence marital well-being among dual-earner couples. The findings may also assist social work practitioners in designing community-based family support programmes that strengthen resilience and promote healthy family relationships among dual-earner couples.

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