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Designing a Model of Marital Conflict Based on Conflict with the Family of Origin and In-laws

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to design a model of marital conflict based on the lived experiences of couples who experienced conflicts in their relationships with their family of origin and in-laws.

Methods: This qualitative research employed a grounded theory approach following Strauss and Corbin's methodology. Participants included 13 conflicted couples referred to counseling centers in Shiraz and 4 expert family counselors, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews until theoretical saturation was achieved. The data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding to construct the conceptual model.

Results: Findings revealed that several factors contribute to the emergence and persistence of marital conflicts. These include conflicts with traditional family structures, control and constant interference by families, lack of emotional support, unresolved childhood wounds, chronic psychological stress, cognitive and emotional deficiencies among couples, and disturbances in communication patterns.

Conclusions: The resulting conceptual model provides a context-oriented framework for understanding the dynamics of marital conflict in relation to inter-family relationships. This model can serve as a guide for family counselors and therapists in addressing marital issues influenced by extended family interactions.

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Introduction

Marriage is a multifaceted interpersonal relationship built upon emotional intimacy, mutual support, and shared life experiences (Goyal & Narayan, 2024). Ideally, marital relationships strengthen over time as couples cultivate deeper trust and understanding. However, unresolved problems and unmanaged relational dynamics can gradually erode marital harmony, leading to chronic dissatisfaction or even separation (Tasso & Getahon, 2021). Among the various interpersonal challenges that couples encounter, marital conflict occupies a central position. Its consequences extend far beyond the dyadic relationship, influencing individual psychological well-being, children's emotional security, and the overall stability and functioning of the family system (Salehi et al., 2025).

Because couples bring with them different histories, expectations, and family backgrounds, it is natural for tensions to arise when merging two distinct family systems (Spammer et al., 2025). Marital conflict does not occur in isolation; rather, it unfolds within the broader context of the couple's intergenerational networks and family-of-origin dynamics (Ehrlich et al., 2019). The family of origin—a foundational concept in marriage and family theories—represents the earliest environment in which individuals learn relational norms, communication patterns, emotional regulation, and expectations of loyalty and support. Although the influence of this system can be managed and reshaped, its impact persists throughout adulthood (Bechon, 2022). Consequently, many marital challenges have roots in earlier family experiences, highlighting the importance of understanding intergenerational interaction patterns when examining marital conflict (Lim & Lee, 2020).

Empirical evidence supports the centrality of the family of origin in shaping marital outcomes. Negative experiences within the childhood family environment are associated with poorer marital quality and a higher likelihood of divorce in adulthood (Salma et al., 2019). Similarly, Munk et al. (2021) found that destructive conflict patterns modeled in the family of origin often manifest in adult intimate relationships, primarily due to acquired weaknesses in communication, emotional expression, and conflict-resolution skills. These intergenerationally transmitted patterns influence how couples perceive problems, respond to stress, and interpret the intentions of their partners. Furthermore, extended family members can themselves become active sources of conflict (Gehren et al., 1987; Bahari, 2017). Individuals who have not fully differentiated from their parents—

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especially those raised in overly controlling or emotionally enmeshed families—may struggle to establish healthy marital boundaries, increasing the likelihood of serious relational tensions (Bahari, 1402).

Beyond family-of-origin dynamics, in-law relationships form another critical subsystem affecting marital life. The spouse's family occupies a unique and often ambiguous position: they are simultaneously intimate and unfamiliar, relationally bound through marriage but not biologically connected (Allendorf, 2017; Karim, 2023). Unlike family-of-origin bonds, which are shaped from early childhood, relationships with in-laws are forged in adulthood and lack clear societal guidelines regarding expectations and boundaries (Fingerman et al., 2012). This ambiguity can create uncertainty and make these relationships particularly susceptible to misunderstanding or conflict.

Consistent with this view, many couples identify in-law relationships as one of the most frequent sources of marital tension. Hostile or strained interactions with in-laws can undermine marital cohesion (Fury et al., 2020). Scholars point out that some of these tensions may stem from cultural stereotypes or negative narratives about in-laws, which shape expectations and interactions before the relationship even develops (Woolley & Greif, 2018). Common examples include mother-in-law/ daughter-in-law conflicts or rivalry for emotional closeness in mother-in-law/ son relationships (Pachent, 2023; Thomas et al., 2017). In contemporary marriages, in-law intrusion is often reported as a major source of conflict—sometimes more significant than financial strain or differences in personal values. Such interference can threaten the autonomy of the marital subsystem, and couples' difficulties in setting and maintaining boundaries often lead to ongoing emotional and relational distress (Daly & Perry, 2021; Karim, 2023). Moreover, because family bonds are typically long-term and difficult to sever, conflicts involving families of origin or in-laws may impose heavier emotional and social costs than conflicts occurring solely within the couple's dyad (Anderson, 2016).

Despite the central role of intergenerational and extended family dynamics in marital conflict, domestic research offers limited comprehensive explanations or conceptual models addressing these forms of conflict. Therefore, the present study adopts a qualitative approach using the grounded theory method to develop a context-specific conceptual model of marital conflict emerging from family-of-origin and in-law dynamics. The purpose is to explore these conflicts

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through couples' lived experiences, identify underlying cognitive and emotional structures, and describe interactional patterns that shape how couples navigate relationships with their own families and their spouses' families. The resulting model aims to contribute to the development of indigenous theoretical frameworks and expand the scientific understanding of marital relationships within Iranian cultural contexts.

Accordingly, the main research question guiding this study is: What factors influence marital conflict among couples who experience tension with their families of origin or with their in-laws?

Material and Methods

The present study aimed to develop a conceptual model of marital conflict rooted in intergenerational dynamics involving the family of origin and in-laws, grounded in the lived experiences of couples. In terms of purpose, the study employed a developmental–applied orientation, seeking to generate knowledge that could inform culturally relevant interventions. Methodologically, the research adopted a qualitative approach using **Grounded Theory** based on Strauss and Corbin's systematic design. This approach was selected because it enables the discovery of latent structures, processes, and relationships embedded within participants' narratives, thereby facilitating the development of a theory that is firmly grounded in empirical data.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

The target population included all couples experiencing marital conflict who sought services at counseling and psychological centers in Shiraz during the study period, where the identified conflicts were directly or indirectly associated with families of origin or in-laws. Sampling was conducted using purposeful, criterion-based selection, ensuring that only participants with relevant lived experiences were included. Ultimately, the sample consisted of 13 couples who met the inclusion criteria and 4 licensed family and couples' therapists with specialized expertise in relational dynamics. The inclusion of expert counselors allowed for triangulation of perspectives and enhanced the theoretical richness of the emerging model.

Sampling followed the principle of theoretical saturation, meaning data collection continued until no new themes, categories, or conceptual insights emerged from the interviews. Saturation was

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reached when interviews began to produce repetitive information, signaling that the analytical categories were sufficiently developed.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich, detailed accounts of participants' experiences. Interview guides included open-ended and exploratory questions addressing topics such as:

- the type, frequency, and intensity of marital conflicts;
- perceptions of family-of-origin and in-law involvement;
- emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to conflict;
- strategies used to cope with or manage these conflicts;
- contextual and developmental factors contributing to conflict formation.

Interviews were conducted in a private setting, audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. The researchers ensured confidentiality and adhered to ethical guidelines throughout the process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Strauss and Corbin's (1990) three-stage coding procedure, allowing the conceptual model to emerge inductively from participants' accounts:

Open Coding: Transcripts were examined line by line to identify key concepts, actions, and meanings. Initial codes were generated to capture the essence of participants' statements.

Axial Coding: Codes with conceptual similarities were grouped into categories and subcategories. Relationships among categories were examined to identify causal conditions, contextual factors, intervening variables, strategies, and consequences.

Selective Coding: The core category—representing the central phenomenon—was identified, and all other categories were integrated around this core theme. Through this process, the overarching conceptual model of intergenerational marital conflict was constructed.

This iterative and comparative process provided a deep, nuanced understanding of the psychosocial mechanisms underlying marital conflicts within the Iranian cultural context.

To enhance the credibility and confirmability of the findings, the study employed peer review and external audit techniques. Experienced qualitative researchers reviewed the coding procedures, category formation, and emerging theoretical structure to ensure analytical accuracy and

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consistency. Additionally, prolonged engagement with the data and careful documentation of analytic decisions strengthened the dependability of the research process.

Results

Table 1 presents the three-stage coding process (open, axial, and selective) and illustrates the step-by-step progression from participants' statements to the formation of concepts and categories. The quoted examples are representative, abbreviated, and anonymized to preserve both clarity and confidentiality. Category labels were derived directly from patterns of code co-occurrence, overlap, and semantic similarity.

Table 1. Open, central and selective coding process

Selective coding	Axial coding	Open coding	Content and important phrases
Conflict with traditional family structure	Strict family structure	Inflexibility of the family	In my wife's family, her mother imposes her opinion and is not flexible.
		Family opposition	During the marriage, my family opposed the marriage and strained the relationship.
		Disturbing the family	My mother-in-law made my wife not forget her sadness about me.
	Family stereotypes	Family friendly boy	My father is a friendly boy and he doesn't care about me and my sisters.
		Mental forms of the family	My mother-in-law did not allow us to go out before the wedding because she said that things would come out.
		Traditional belief about love	My mother used to say that there is no need for romance, just cook food.
	Cultural and generational conflict	Cultural differences of families	In my wife's family, there is no example of a working woman and they don't understand me.
		generational difference	My mother was 35 years older than me and I did not feel close.
		Ethnic differences	In our family, entertainment is only with relatives, but my wife's family thinks differently.
Controlling and interfering in the couple's life	Interference and control of families	Family involvement	My mother-in-law wanted my wife to inform her where she was going.
		Entry without family permission	My wife's family used to enter our house without permission and we had to lock the door.
		Failure to pay attention to the wishes of the couple	Many times my family has treated me and my wife against my opinion and wishes.

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	Lack of boundaries and determination	Lack of demarcation of the couple	My wife tells her family all the secrets of our life together.
		Indecisiveness of the couple	My wife never questioned her mother for her interference.
		No boundaries between family members	In my wife's family, everyone knows each other's life details.
	Unhealthy family patterns	Repetition of the parent's negative pattern	My wife repeats the behavior of her unloving father and raises our child in the same way.
		Incorrect parenting style	My father-in-law used to treat his children harshly, and now it's the same with me.
		Authoritarian style	My father-in-law must have his own food and room, and he has the final say.
		Strict style repetition	My wife's strict behavior with me is like my father-in-law's behavior with my mother-in-law.
Lack of emotional support	Experience humiliation and disrespect	Abusive treatment of the family	My father-in-law broke our relationship with insults and aggression.
		Experience humiliating comparison	As a child, I was always sad to be compared to others.
		Lack of family benevolence	My mother-in-law brought me an ointment that was ten years old.
		Lack of understanding of romantic relationships	My father always wanted me to go shopping on Fridays, even when my wife was with me.
	emotional void and carelessness	lack of gratitude	I never saw gratitude for the support I gave to my wife.
		Not hearing feelings	My wife never asks what I am upset about.
		Lack of expression of affection	My wife never says "I love you" because she doesn't know.
	Lack of support and prioritization	Lack of spousal support	My wife does not support me and does not give me time.
		Spouse's lack of priority	My wife's priorities are her family, not me.
		Emotional absence of the husband	My husband makes weekend plans with his family, not with me.
Childhood wounds	Childhood and adolescent experiences	Being neglected as a child	My family paid more attention to my brothers and ignored me.
		Corporal punishment in childhood	When I was a child, my mother would hold my hand and put pepper in my mouth.
		Lack of family sympathy	Since I was a child, I did not feel that my family paid attention to my feelings.

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		Lack of interest in family	I hate my mother because she ignored my wishes when I was a teenager.
		Weak emotional attachment	My husband is indifferent because he did not see love as a child.
	Dependence and unresolved family emotions	Family dependency	My relative's mother was upset that I distanced myself after marriage.
		Family growth challenge	My wife cannot feel sorry for her mother, because she has always been with her.
		Emotional attachment to family	My mother stopped us by crying and my wife felt guilty.
		Pure obedience to the family	My wife does what her mother says, even if it is to my detriment.
		Extreme dutifulness	My wife says I have to do my duties to my family.
		Immaturity of the couple	My wife does not have the necessary intellectual maturity and is still dependent on her family.
		Favoring the family	Every time my mother-in-law says something, my husband approves it.
Psychological and stressful pressures	Chronic stress in relationships	Family stress	Family stress has affected our lives.
		role conflict	I am stuck between the role of being a father and taking care of my old mother and I don't know what to do.
		Exhaustion of the couple	The problems I have with my wife's family have made me very tired and weak.
	Despair and lack of motivation in life	Tired of the relationship	I no longer have the passion to continue living with my wife.
		Lack of couple motivation	I am thinking about separation because I have no motivation to fix anything.
		couple disappointment	I hate the world and think everything is meaningless.
Cognitive and emotional deficiencies of couples	Inability to solve the problem	Lack of skill in solving even problems	Whenever there is a problem with his family, my husband does not give any special opinion or solution
		Lack of independent decision making	My husband has a passive personality and always waits for his mother's opinion.
		Using an inappropriate solution	My wife aggressively tells them about the unhappiness I have with her family and makes the problems worse
	Weakness in self-concept and self-confidence	Weak self-confidence	I have low self-confidence and I have always compared myself to others.
		Appearance in the relationship	The appearance of my life is good, but inside I am full of fear and pain.

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		feeling worthless	I don't like myself and I feel worthless.
Spousal communication disorder	Humiliating and threatening behaviors	Spouse threat	My husband threatened me with betrayal and mocked me in front of his family.
		Humiliation of the wife	My wife has become like a housemate who always humiliates me.
		Revenge in the relationship	I am taking revenge on my wife because she disrespected my family.
	Misunderstanding and misconception	misinterpretation	My wife says that because you accepted your mother's words, then I am not important to you.
		misappropriation	My wife misunderstands and sees my mother's affection as an enemy.
		Extreme generalization	My wife says your mother will never accept me.

As shown in Table 1, the open codes derived from participants' statements were initially organized into a series of family-centered categories, including strict family structure, stereotypical family beliefs, cultural and generational conflict, family interference and control, lack of boundaries and assertiveness, unhealthy family interaction patterns, experiences of humiliation and disrespect, emotional neglect and emptiness, lack of support and prioritization, childhood and adolescent experiences, dependence and unresolved family emotions, chronic relational stress, despair and reduced life motivation, problem-solving difficulties, weak self-concept and low self-confidence, degrading or threatening behaviors, and misunderstanding or inaccurate perceptions.

In the selective coding stage, these categories were further integrated into several core components, including conflict with traditional family structures, controlling and intrusive family involvement, deficits in emotional support, childhood wounds and unresolved dependencies, psychological pressures, cognitive–emotional deficiencies, and disruptions in marital communication and interaction. Together, these integrated components reveal the underlying logic and interconnected nature of marital conflict within the broader context of intergenerational dynamics and kinship systems.

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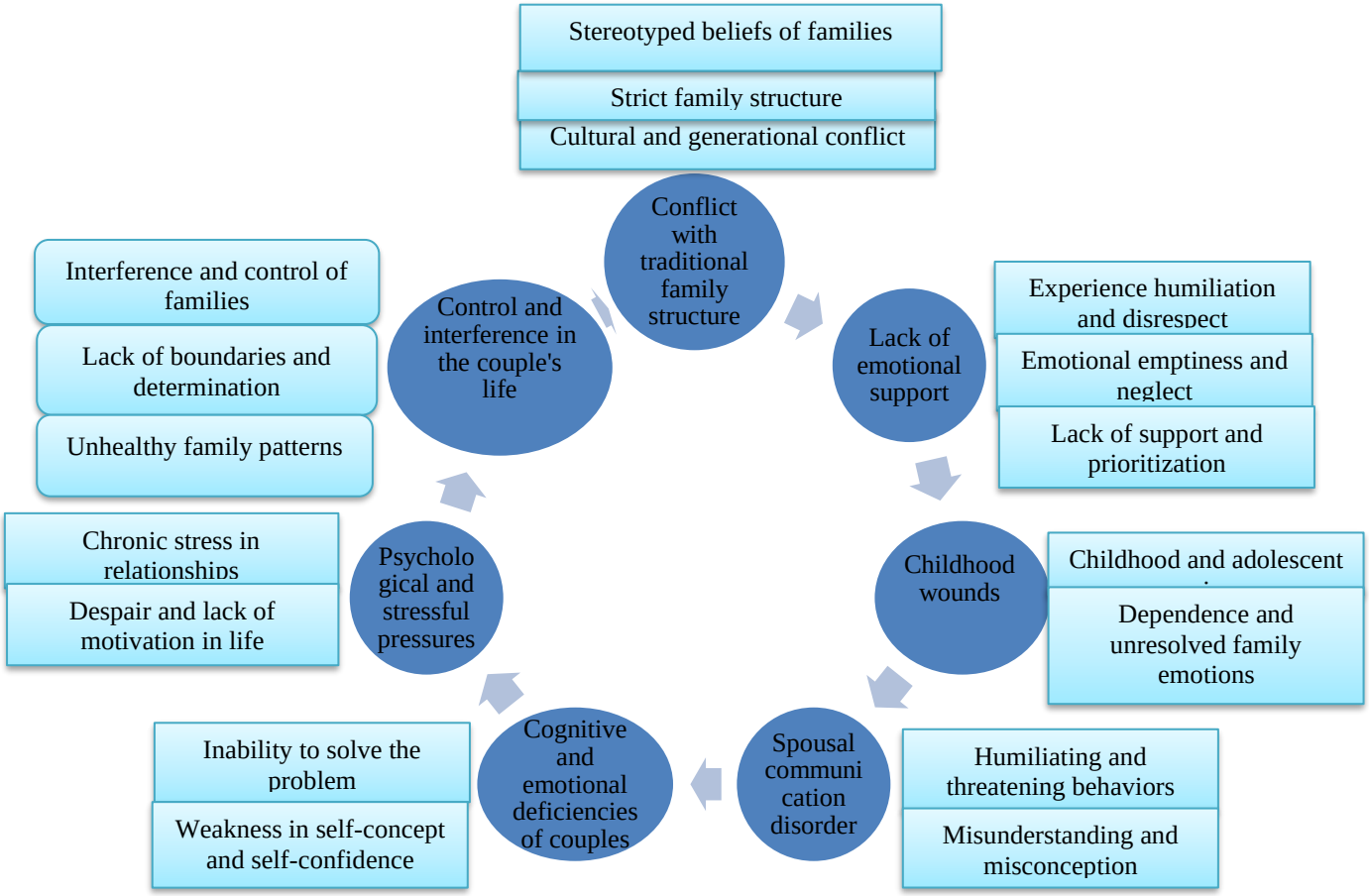

Figure 1. A pattern of marital conflict based on conflict with the family of origin and in-laws

Discussion

This study sought to answer the central question: *"What factors contribute to marital conflict among couples who experience tension with their families of origin or their in-laws?"* Through an in-depth qualitative analysis of participants' lived narratives, several interconnected components emerged, each representing a layer in the complex structure of intergenerational marital conflict. These components included: conflict with traditional family structures, pervasive family control and interference, insufficient emotional support, unresolved childhood wounds, chronic psychological pressures, couples' cognitive and emotional limitations, and dysfunctional communication patterns. These findings were grounded in participants' authentic accounts—often

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shared with noticeable emotional strain—and were consistent with elements reported in previous research (Munk et al., 2021; Fury et al., 2020; Salma et al., 2019; Daly & Perry, 2021; Rabbani et al., 1401).

A central theme in the present model was conflict with traditional family structures, which participants frequently described as rigid, hierarchical, and resistant to change. This pattern aligns with Bowen's emphasis on differentiation: families with strong emotional fusion often hinder children's development of independent thought and emotional self-regulation. Research supports the view that healthy parent–child relationships foster higher levels of differentiation, contributing to better emotional maturity, interpersonal competence, and well-regulated stress responses (Khuan & Kane, 2018). Likewise, higher differentiation is associated with improved mental and physical well-being, stronger parenting skills, and more adaptive coping mechanisms (Rodriguez González et al., 2019). Conversely, in rigid or authoritarian families, underdeveloped differentiation manifests as emotional dependency, difficulty managing stress, and limited autonomy—conditions that intensify marital challenges when couples attempt to form an independent household.

A second major finding involved childhood wounds and unresolved early-life emotional injuries, such as experiences of humiliation, neglect, rejection, or inconsistent caregiving. These wounds were pervasive in participants' narratives and were linked to longstanding feelings of insecurity, diminished self-worth, and difficulty forming emotionally safe connections in adulthood. Empirical evidence demonstrates that unresolved childhood trauma negatively affects communication, trust, and emotional regulation in intimate relationships (Silva et al., 2024; Lerio et al., 2018). Bowen's intergenerational theory similarly suggests that unresolved family-of-origin issues are transmitted across generations, reproducing dysfunctional patterns—including marital conflict, withdrawal, or emotional cutoff (Brun, 2024).

Another prominent theme was the controlling and interventionist role of families, which often undermined couples' sense of independence and agency. Excessive involvement from family-of-origin or in-laws weakened marital boundaries, escalated tensions, and reinforced dependency patterns (Karim, 2023). In many cases, couples lacked the necessary problem-solving skills to manage these boundary violations. Problem-solving is a crucial coping strategy that promotes personal competence, psychological adjustment, and relational resilience (Abolghasemi &

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Abolghasemi, 2019). Here, participants' difficulties in problem-solving were linked not only to family interference but also to low differentiation and longstanding emotional pressures. Without adequate skills to navigate family conflict, couples found themselves increasingly vulnerable to stressors that gradually eroded marital harmony.

Lack of emotional support, both from families and from spouses, emerged as another significant contributor to conflict. Spousal support is widely recognized as a key predictor of marital satisfaction and resilience (Hefner et al., 2004). Yet many participants reported feeling unsupported in managing family tensions, leading to emotional isolation and decreased motivation to sustain the relationship. The absence of familial support further compounded feelings of vulnerability. As a result, couples often confronted their challenges alone, reinforcing negative perceptions of their marriage and intensifying relational strain.

Ineffective communication patterns played a considerable role in escalating conflict. While communication is one of the most fundamental interpersonal skills, many participants described using maladaptive strategies such as criticism, blame, ridicule, or withdrawal. These communication failures created emotional distance, misunderstandings, and a persistent pattern of unresolved grievances. Literature shows that ineffective communication increases loneliness, psychological distress, and family dysfunction (Bolton, 2009). Within marital relationships, such patterns not only impede problem-solving but also damage trust and emotional safety, thereby fueling cycles of conflict.

Finally, family-related psychological pressures—including persistent demands, expectations, and interpersonal tensions—generated chronic stress for many participants. When individuals are unable to regulate stress originating from extended-family dynamics, their marital relationship becomes the primary site of emotional spillover (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2003). This intrusion of external stress exacerbates conflict, weakens emotional availability, and undermines marital stability.

Taken together, these findings highlight that marital conflict in the studied couples is not a phenomenon confined to the marital dyad. Rather, it is an *interwoven outcome* of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and intergenerational dynamics. The meaning and intensity of marital conflict must therefore be understood within the broader cultural context, where extended-family relationships often maintain high influence, and where boundaries between marital and familial subsystems may

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be blurred. The true contribution of this research lies not only in identifying conflict factors but in illuminating the deeper cultural and relational structures that sustain them—revealing marital conflict as an emergent property of the interactions between individuals, their histories, and the wider kinship system.

This study was limited to couples who voluntarily sought counseling services in Shiraz, which may reflect a specific socio-cultural profile. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted within the cultural context of Fars province and may not be generalizable to other regions or populations. Additionally, while qualitative analysis offers depth and contextual insight, it is inherently bound to the narratives of participants and does not replace broader quantitative generalizations.

Future research could build on these findings in several meaningful directions. First, comparative qualitative studies across diverse ethnic and cultural groups in Iran would help identify both shared and context-specific intergenerational sources of marital conflict. Additionally, employing complementary qualitative methodologies—such as phenomenology, narrative inquiry, or discourse analysis—could deepen understanding of the meaning-making processes and identity dynamics that shape couples' experiences. Adopting multi-perspective research designs, including interviews with families of origin and in-laws alongside the couples themselves, would provide a more holistic picture of the relational system in which conflicts emerge. Finally, longitudinal qualitative studies could illuminate how intergenerational tensions develop, intensify, or diminish over time, offering insight into how couples adapt—or struggle to adapt—to persistent family pressures.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The authors state that all procedures were performed in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations regarding ethical approval and company consent.

Author contributions

This article is taken from the doctoral thesis of the first author, which was done with the help and guidance of the supervisors and advisors.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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