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Investigating the Relationship between Psychological Flexibility and Couple Conflicts: Mediating Role of Perceived Competence and Couple Self-Determination

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine the relationship between psychological satisfaction and couples' conflicts, with a specific focus on the mediating roles of perceived competence and couples' self-determination.

Methods: The research employed a descriptive-correlational design using structural equation modeling. The statistical population consisted of couples who visited counseling centers in Arsanjan city during the spring of 1404. Based on the Morgan table, 120 participants were selected through available sampling. Data were collected using four standardized instruments: the Couple Conflict Questionnaire (Torabi & Sanaei, 1375), the Perceived Competence Scale (Harter, 1985), the Couple Self-Determination Questionnaire (LaGuardia et al., 2000), and the Successful Cognitive Acceptance Questionnaire (Dan Gardavarie & Anderval, 2010). Data analysis was performed using SmartPLS software, applying multiple structural equation modeling and testing various role models.

Results: Findings indicated that psychological acceptability was positively and significantly associated with both perceived competence and self-determination. Additionally, these two variables demonstrated a negative relationship with couple conflicts. Further analysis confirmed that perceived competence and self-determination served as significant mediators in the relationship between psychological acceptability and couple conflict.

Conclusions: Psychological acceptability contributes to reduced couple conflicts both directly and indirectly by enhancing partners' sense of competence and autonomy within the relationship. These results highlight the importance of fostering psychological satisfaction to improve relational functioning and reduce conflict among couples.

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Introduction

Marriage, as the cornerstone of the family institution, plays an undeniable role in ensuring individuals' psychological and social well-being. Nevertheless, the continuity and quality of this vital relationship are continually exposed to challenges known as marital conflicts (Khajeh-Noori et al., 2021). Marital conflict refers to a situation in which the behaviors of one spouse interfere with the interests and needs of the other (Asadi et al., 2015). If not managed constructively, such conflicts may lead to harmful consequences, including reduced marital satisfaction, deterioration of mental health, and even separation (Gottman & Levenson, 2002).

In recent decades, numerous studies have attempted to identify risk and protective factors related to marital conflicts. Findings suggest that the mere presence of conflict does not necessarily threaten a relationship; rather, the inability to regulate emotions and resolve disagreements constructively undermines the foundation of the relationship (Shirmohammadi et al., 2021; Gottman, 2014). This perspective has encouraged researchers to move beyond a sole focus on reducing conflict and instead examine factors that enable couples to respond more flexibly and effectively when facing the inevitable challenges of life (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010).

One of the key factors identified in this context is psychological flexibility. This construct refers to an individual's ability to maintain full contact with the present moment and to persist in or change behavior in accordance with personal values, even in the presence of difficult experiences (Hayes et al., 2016). Individuals with high psychological flexibility are able to accept the negative emotions arising from disagreements without judgment and, rather than reacting impulsively, act in ways that are consistent with the deeper values of their relationship (Levin et al., 2020).

Although the direct role of psychological flexibility in reducing conflict has been supported by empirical findings (Dorukhan & Haktanir, 2022), the precise mechanisms underlying this relationship remain insufficiently understood. This gap in knowledge has led researchers to explore the potential mediating role of other psychological variables.

According to Self-Determination Theory proposed by Deci and Ryan (2000), three basic psychological needs—competence, autonomy (self-determination), and relatedness—are essential for individuals' growth, integration, and well-being. Within the context of marital relationships, perceived competence refers to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully perform marital roles and manage relational challenges (Wei et al., 2021). Self-determination in the marital

domain reflects the extent to which individuals feel that their presence and commitment in the relationship arise from conscious choice and authentic personal values (Mousavi & Gholi-Nasab Ghouseh Beigloo, 2019).

Research indicates that higher levels of self-determination are associated with lower levels of marital conflict and greater marital satisfaction (Ardakani et al., 2022; La Guardia & Patrick, 2015). Similarly, perceived competence reduces fear of inadequacy and empowers couples to approach problems with greater confidence (Zarei & Amini, 2022). It is therefore plausible that psychological flexibility, as a broader construct, may reduce the intensity and frequency of destructive conflicts by strengthening individuals' sense of competence and self-determination.

Despite the strong theoretical foundations, a significant research gap remains in this area. Most previous studies have examined these variables in pairs, and a comprehensive model simultaneously testing the independent mediating roles of perceived competence and self-determination in explaining the relationship between psychological flexibility and marital conflict has not yet been adequately explored. Furthermore, much of the existing evidence on these constructs has been derived from Western cultural contexts, and the generalization of these findings to the sociocultural context of Iran—with its unique cultural characteristics—requires empirical examination.

Focusing on couples who attend counseling centers in Arsanjan County further highlights the practical significance and urgency of this study. Marital life in towns such as Arsanjan often develops at the intersection of traditional and modern values and is strongly influenced by dense kinship networks and specific social expectations. In such a context, the expression of individual self-determination may encounter greater cultural constraints. Consequently, the present study is not merely an academic inquiry but also a necessary response to a tangible need within this specific sociocultural setting. Accordingly, the present research was conducted to examine the relationship between psychological flexibility and marital conflict, with the mediating roles of perceived competence and self-determination.

Material and Methods

The present study employed a descriptive–correlational design and utilized structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the relationships among the research variables. The statistical

population consisted of couples who referred to counseling centers in Arsanjan County during the spring of 2025. From this population, 120 participants (60 men and 60 women) were selected as the research sample using convenience sampling, based on the Morgan sampling table.

Research Instruments

Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ): The Marital Conflict Questionnaire was developed by Sanaei (1996) and consists of 54 items. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The total score ranges from 54 to 270, with higher scores indicating greater levels of marital conflict. In the present study, the reliability of the questionnaire, assessed using Cronbach's alpha, was 0.89.

Perceived Competence Questionnaire: The Perceived Competence Questionnaire was developed by Harter (1985). In the present study, the reliability coefficient calculated through Cronbach's alpha was 0.87.

Couples' Self-Determination Questionnaire: This questionnaire was developed by La Guardia et al. (2000) and includes 21 items. In the present study, its reliability coefficient was found to be 0.91.

Cognitive Flexibility Questionnaire: The Cognitive Flexibility Questionnaire was developed by Dennis and Vander Wal (2010). In the present study, its reliability coefficient was calculated as 0.84.

Procedure

After obtaining the necessary permissions and observing ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality of participants' information, the questionnaires were distributed among the participants. The completed questionnaires were subsequently collected for analysis.

Data Analysis

After data collection, the data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were first calculated to describe the data. Because the data distribution was not normal according to the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, Spearman correlation coefficients were used to examine relationships among variables. Subsequently, structural equation modeling using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach was conducted in SmartPLS software to test the research model and examine the mediating roles of the variables.

Results

The descriptive statistics of the study variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables

Variable	Subscale	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Perceived Competence	Behavioral Competence	120	2.786	0.687	1.23	3.54
	Social Competence	120	2.920	0.817	1.00	4.00
	Physical Competence	120	2.892	0.849	1.00	3.83
	Total Score	120	2.849	0.747	1.11	3.63
Psychological Flexibility	Perception of Alternative Options	120	3.068	0.878	1.38	6.38
	Control	120	3.270	0.606	1.33	6.33
	Flexibility in Different Perspectives	120	3.617	0.533	1.50	6.33
	Total Score	120	3.318	0.620	1.40	6.35
Marital Conflict	Reduced Cooperation	120	1.814	0.616	1.14	4.29
	Reduced Sexual Relationship	120	2.075	0.833	1.00	4.60
	Increased Emotional Reactions	120	1.750	0.698	1.20	4.10
	Seeking Support from Children	120	2.079	0.748	1.00	4.57
	Increased Relationship with Own Relatives	120	1.988	0.797	1.00	4.17
	Increased Family Relationship with Spouse's Relatives	120	1.770	0.772	1.17	4.17
	Financial Separation	120	2.393	0.882	1.29	4.57
	Total Score	120	1.989	0.725	1.22	4.31
Couples' Self-Determination	Autonomy	120	3.887	0.941	1.29	4.71
	Competence	120	3.843	1.056	1.00	5.00
	Relatedness	120	3.906	1.004	1.13	5.00
	Total Score	120	3.880	0.993	1.14	4.86

To examine the assumption of normality, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was employed. In this test, the normality of the data distribution is evaluated based on the following hypotheses:

H0: The data follow a normal distribution.

H1: The data do not follow a normal distribution.

According to the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test criteria, if the significance level for all independent and dependent variables is greater than 0.05, the data distribution can be considered normal.

Table 2. Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test for Normality

Variable	Test Statistic	Significance Level	Result
Perceived Competence	0.295	$p < 0.001$	Not Normal
Psychological Flexibility	0.125	$p < 0.001$	Not Normal
Marital Conflict	0.205	$p < 0.001$	Not Normal
Couples' Self-Determination	0.223	$p < 0.001$	Not Normal

However, as shown in Table 2, the significance level for all variables was less than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H0) was rejected, indicating that the variables do not follow a normal distribution. Consequently, non-parametric methods were employed to examine the relationships among the study variables and to test the research hypotheses.

Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

To evaluate the coefficient of determination, Chin (1998) proposed three threshold values of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67, representing weak, moderate, and strong levels, respectively. Based on the results presented in Table 3, the coefficients of determination for the endogenous constructs were within the moderate range. These results indicate that the structural model of the study demonstrates an acceptable level of explanatory power.

Table 3. Coefficient of Determination (R^2) for Endogenous Variables

Endogenous Variable	R^2	Result
Marital Conflict	0.654	Supported
Couples' Self-Determination	0.260	Supported
Perceived Competence	0.151	Supported

Stone–Geisser Q^2 Criterion

Henseler et al. (2009) suggested three values for Q^2 (0.02, 0.15, and 0.35), representing weak, moderate, and strong predictive relevance, respectively. The results reported in Table 4 indicate that the Q^2 values for all constructs in the research model are greater than 0.35. This finding demonstrates moderate to strong predictive relevance of the model and confirms the adequacy of the structural model's predictive capability.

Table 4. Stone–Geisser Q^2 Predictive Relevance

Variable	Q^2 Value	Predictive Power
Cognitive Flexibility	0.492	Strong
Marital Conflict	0.889	Strong
Couples' Self-Determination	0.900	Strong
Perceived Competence	0.857	Strong

Goodness-of-Fit Evaluation

The Goodness-of-Fit (GOF) index ranges between 0 and 1, with values closer to 1 indicating a better model fit. According to recommended criteria, a GOF value greater than 0.35 represents a strong overall model fit. In the present study, the GOF index obtained from the analysis was 0.568, indicating that the proposed research model has a satisfactory and acceptable level of fit.

Table 5. AVE and Coefficient of Determination

Construct	R^2	AVE
Cognitive Flexibility	—	0.764
Marital Conflict	0.654	0.920
Couples' Self-Determination	0.260	0.988
Perceived Competence	0.151	0.964

Model fit refers to the degree to which a proposed model is consistent with the observed data. Therefore, the fit of the proposed research model was evaluated to ensure its compatibility with the collected data and to enable the interpretation of the research hypotheses.

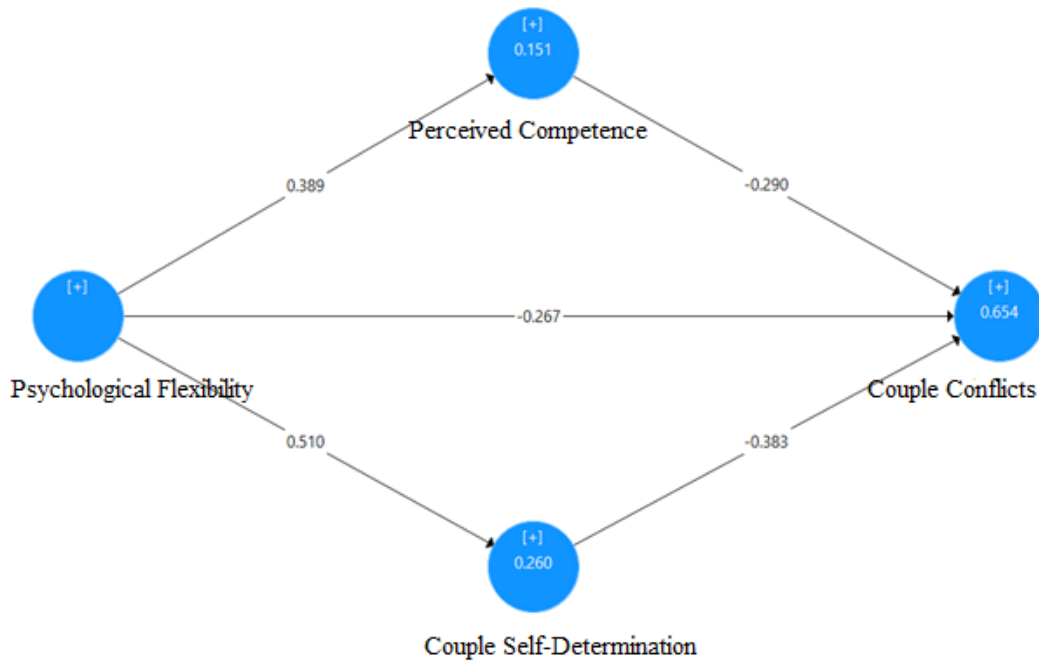


Figure 1. Standardized regression coefficients of the research model

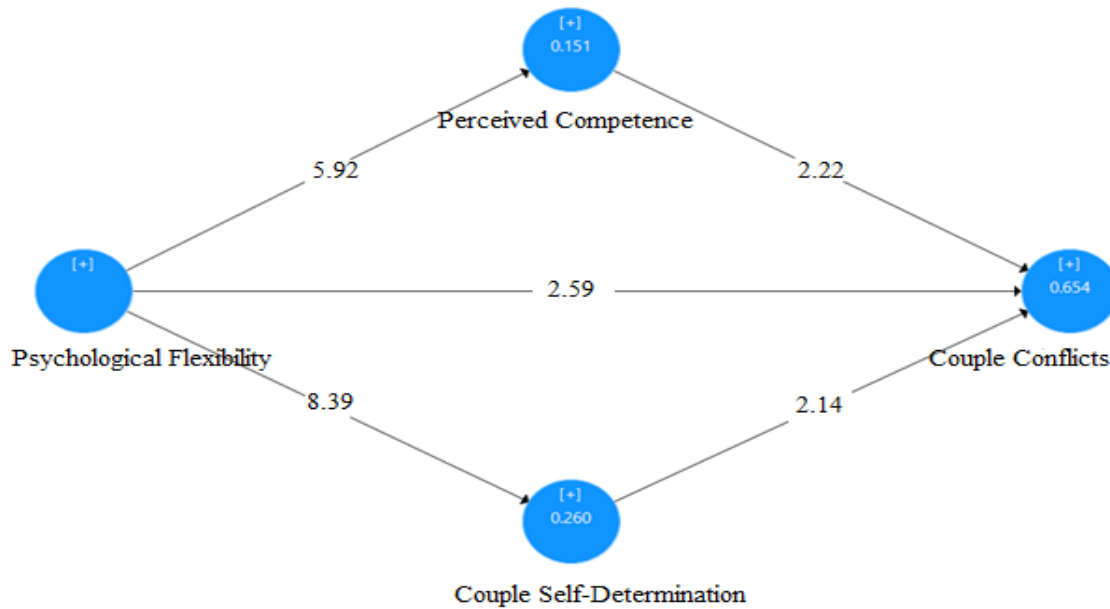


Figure 2. T-values of the structural model.

In Smart PLS software, the significance of path coefficients is assessed using the t-statistic. At a 5% significance level, the critical value for the t-statistic is 1.96. Therefore, if the calculated t-value exceeds 1.96, the relationship is considered statistically significant. The overall results of the structural model are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Standardized Path Coefficients of the Structural Model

Path	Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Result
Psychological Flexibility → Marital Conflict	-0.267	2.596	0.010	Supported
Psychological Flexibility → Couples' Self-Determination	0.510	8.390	$p < 0.001$	Supported
Psychological Flexibility → Perceived Competence	0.389	5.592	$p < 0.001$	Supported
Couples' Self-Determination → Marital Conflict	-0.383	2.147	0.032	Supported
Perceived Competence → Marital Conflict	-0.290	2.224	0.027	Supported

The results of testing the main hypothesis using structural equation modeling indicated that the proposed model demonstrated a satisfactory fit and that psychological flexibility influences marital conflict both directly and indirectly through mediating variables. The findings revealed that psychological flexibility has a significant negative effect on marital conflict ($\beta = -0.267$, $t = 2.596$), indicating that higher levels of psychological flexibility are associated with lower levels of marital conflict.

Furthermore, the results of the Sobel test indicated that perceived competence ($t = 2.067$) and couples' self-determination ($t = 2.080$) play significant mediating roles in the relationship between psychological flexibility and marital conflict. In other words, psychological flexibility not only directly reduces marital conflict but also indirectly contributes to its reduction by enhancing couples' perceived competence and self-determination. Accordingly, the main hypothesis of the study regarding the relationship between these variables with the mediating roles of perceived competence and self-determination was supported.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between psychological flexibility and marital conflicts with the mediating role of perceived competence and self-determination. The findings showed that psychological flexibility has a significant positive relationship with both perceived competence and self-determination. This result is consistent with the findings of previous studies

(Levin et al., 2020; Dorukhan & Haktanir, 2022). Based on the theoretical framework of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), psychological flexibility enables individuals to remain present in the current moment, accept difficult emotions without judgment, and act in accordance with their authentic values. This process naturally leads to an increased sense of effectiveness (competence) and a sense of freely chosen action (self-determination) in interpersonal relationships, including marital relationships.

The findings also indicated that perceived competence and self-determination have a significant negative relationship with marital conflicts. This result is consistent with the foundations of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) as well as domestic and international research (Ardakani et al., 2022; Elgardia & Patrick, 2015). When individuals feel competent and autonomous within a relationship, they are less likely to perceive conflicts as threats to their identity or independence. Instead, they view them as opportunities for dialogue and strengthening cooperation. This constructive perspective reduces the likelihood of using destructive strategies such as criticism, contempt, and defensiveness.

The most important finding of this study was the confirmation of the partial mediating role of perceived competence and self-determination in the relationship between psychological flexibility and marital conflicts. This means that psychological flexibility contributes to the reduction of marital conflicts both directly (through skills such as mindfulness and acceptance that improve emotional regulation) and indirectly (by strengthening feelings of competence and autonomy). This finding represents an important step toward understanding the mechanisms through which psychological flexibility influences the quality of marital relationships. It also explains why training skills based on ACT can be effective in couple therapy: such interventions not only increase coping skills but also strengthen intrinsic motivation to maintain and improve the relationship by satisfying fundamental psychological needs.

This study had several limitations that require caution in generalizing the findings. Among these limitations were the use of convenience sampling, the cross-sectional design of the study, and reliance on self-report measures.

Based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that family counselors and therapists, in addition to teaching conflict-resolution skills, focus on strengthening couples' psychological flexibility (through ACT-based techniques such as acceptance, mindfulness, and committed

action) and on supporting their needs for competence and autonomy within the relationship context. Designing and implementing culturally adapted educational and therapeutic interventions based on these three components may be effective in reducing conflicts and improving marital satisfaction among Iranian couples.

Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that psychological flexibility is associated with reduced marital conflicts both directly and indirectly through strengthening perceived competence and self-determination. These results highlight the importance of integrating two powerful theoretical frameworks—Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT)—in understanding and intervening to improve marital relationships. Enhancing psychological flexibility appears to create a context in which couples feel able to be their authentic selves, function effectively in managing their relationship, and ultimately handle conflicts in a more constructive manner.

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 studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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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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