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Predicting Marital Conflicts Based on Dysfunctional Attitudes Mediated by Emotion Regulation

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to predict marital conflicts based on dysfunctional attitudes with a mediating role of emotion regulation. This was a descriptive correlational study in which the relationship between variables was examined using a structural equation model. The statistical population of the study included all couples (with marital conflict problems) who referred to counseling centers in Shiraz in the winter of 2020. The participants were 394 who were selected by purposive sampling. Structural equation modeling was used to test the hypotheses. For data collection, Sanai Marital Conflict Questionnaire, Ebrahimi and Ghafoor Mousavi Dysfunctional Attitudes Questionnaire and Garnefski Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) were used. The results exhibited that the components of dysfunctional attitudes (except for the vulnerability-performance evaluation) had a positive and significant relationship with the components of marital conflict. Positive cognitive emotion regulation strategies had a negative and significant relationship with the components of marital conflict, while negative cognitive emotion regulation strategies had a positive and significant relationship with the components of marital conflict. The results indicated that the tested model benefits from favorable fit indices. Also, dysfunctional attitudes mediated by emotion regulation, predicted the marital conflicts. In general, the findings of the present study support the role of cognitive factors in marital conflicts of couples with the mediating role of emotional regulation.

Keywords: Marital conflicts, Dysfunctional attitudes, Emotion regulation

Introduction

The family is the most important platform for the growth of children and all family members, and family interactions will play an important role in the health of each member. Therefore, it is very important to know the effective components in healthy family and family pathology. In the meantime, the relationship between husband and wife is of great importance as the pillars of the family. One of the signs of healthy interactions between couples is marital satisfaction. Dissatisfaction and the existence of serious conflicts in the marital relationship is one of the harms that threaten families.

In general, in the current era, marital conflicts are a major challenge for some married couples (Renanita & Lukito Setiawan, 2018). Marital conflicts are one of the most important causes of problems and negative consequences among couples, which can lead to divorce. If there is a child in family, this third side of the relationship will not be spared from the injuries of marital conflict and will find a high vulnerability for all kinds of psychiatric and physical disorders (Frankel, Umemura, Jacobvitz, & Hazen, 2015). Conflict management is one of the determining factors for resolving

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conflicts in relationships and therefore it is one of the most important marital skills. The way couples manage their conflicts affects not only the marital dynamic but also the entire family system. Conflicts are a natural and inherent phenomenon in marital relationships, and as a result, there are different interests, opinions and views between couples. Conceptually, conflict can be defined as an open opposition between husband and wife that shows differences and problems in the relationship (Delatorre & Wagner, 2018).

Dysfunctional attitudes are one of the issues that can affect the health of families and lead to conflict in family relationships (Loignon, Kellermanns, Eddleston, & Kidwell, 2015). The concept of dysfunctional attitudes was first proposed by Beck (1991) in describing the thoughts of depressed patients and became a turning point for researchers, counselors and couple and family therapists to realize the importance of couples' mentality in the adjustment or satisfaction of married life. Irrational beliefs and dysfunctional attitudes refer to false and inconsistent thoughts about oneself, the world, and the future (Strauss, 2018). Dysfunctional attitudes include attitudes that make a person vulnerable to depression and are activated immediately after negative life events happening. After being activated, these attitudes stimulate a pattern of information processing that has a negative bias; In other words, these attitudes are characterized by a negative error in thinking and can make mental health ineffective (De Graaf, Roelofs, & Huibers, 2009).

On the other hand, marital conflicts are affected by a series of factors called close antecedents that can affect marital conflicts. Since conflicts are more than anything related to emotions, a person's inability to control and manage their emotions can lead to the flare-up of couples' conflicts. The ability to regulate emotions associated with indicators of positive social functions such as higher levels of interaction and expression of emotions, lower stress, wider social support, intimacy with others, social satisfaction, greater interpersonal sensitivity, social tendencies, mutual friendships and better quality of interpersonal companionship (Besharat, 2013; Jalali, Rahimi, Mousavi, & Badri Bageh Jan, 2020). When couples are faced with highly negative emotional events, they often turn to a primitive and survivalist mode of interaction. In this way of interaction, couples repeatedly try to show their behavior by humiliating or criticizing their spouse (Gottman, 1994).

Marital relationship has an emotional and affective nature. Difficulty in regulating and expressing emotions can be the source of many couples' conflicts. In the systemic approach, linear causality is negated and circular causality is emphasized, that the cause of conflicts is not just a specific issue, but the accumulation of different reasons will lead to dissatisfaction and conflict in couples. Therefore, dysfunctional attitudes can lead to un-fulfillment of marital expectations and conflict. Meanwhile, it is necessary to pay attention to adaptive and maladaptive strategies of cognitive emotion regulation. In numerous studies, the predictors of marital conflicts have been taken into consideration. For instance, Yu (2021) in a research investigated the relationships between self-construals (subjective, objective, and autonomous selves) and marital conflict resolution strategies (avoiding, dominating, yielding, and integrating) and those between the strategies and marital satisfaction in Japan and Korea South. The results revealed that first, subjective self and autonomous self were strongly and positively associated

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and stronger in South Korea. Second, the Japanese had out-of-speculation interactions between self-constructs and marital conflict resolution approaches. Third, the positive correlations of integrating/obliging and marital satisfaction and the negative relationship of avoiding and marital satisfaction were confirmed in Japan and South Korea.

Wagner, Mosmann, Scheeren, and Levandowski (2019) in the study of conflict, conflict resolution and marital quality showed that there is a significant correlation between all variables. Conflict resolution had a positive effect on marital quality and was its most important predictor. Furthermore, after conflict resolution strategies, financial issues, household chores, and time spent together had the strongest relationships with marital quality.

Kalhor, Davoodi, Taghvael, and Heidari (2020) investigated the effectiveness of cognitive therapy based on mindfulness on dysfunctional attitudes and marital burnout of women with marital conflicts. The results showed that cognitive therapy based on mindfulness has a significant effect on the dysfunctional attitudes and marital burnout of women with marital conflicts and has condensed the dysfunctional attitudes and marital burnout. Kroska, Miller, Roche, Kroska, and O'Hara (2018) in a research investigated the effect of cognitive therapy based on mindfulness on dysfunctional attitudes in people with marital conflicts. The findings showed that these variables have a significant relationship with each other and led to the reduction of dysfunctional attitudes in people with marital conflicts.

Saadati Rad (2021) in a research entitled the mediating role of cognitive emotion regulation strategies in the relationship between marital conflict and marital burnout in women of Chalus city indicated that positive cognitive emotion regulation strategies does not mediate the relationship between marital conflict and marital burnout in women, but the negative strategies of cognitive regulation of emotion have had a significant mediating role. On the other hand, positive cognitive emotion regulation strategies significantly mediate the relationship between marital conflict and marital burnout. According to the findings, negative cognitive emotion regulation strategies significantly mediate the relationship between marital conflict and physical fatigue, emotional collapse, and psychological breakdown.

Frye-Cox, Ganong, Jensen, and Coleman (2021) examined differences between first-married and remarried couples in marital conflict, physical and mental health, and the emotion regulation strategies of cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. According to the findings, for cognitive reevaluation, a moderating effect was confirmed for wives only. More use of cognitive reappraisal weakened the negative relationship between marital conflict and mental health for first-married wives, but not for remarried wives. Expressive suppression moderated the effects of marital conflict on the physical health of husbands in a different way by marriage order. Among first-married husbands, higher degrees of expressive suppression diminished the positive relationship between marital conflict and physical health indicators; but for remarried husbands, higher levels of expressive suppression intensified the positive relationship between marital conflict and physical health symptoms. Among wives, however, further usage of expressive suppression amplified the negative effects of marital conflict on mental health, regardless of marriage order.

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Based on the theoretical foundations and the findings of previous studies, the aim of the current study was to predict marital conflicts based on dysfunctional attitudes with a mediating role of emotion regulation. The conceptual model is presented in the figure 1.

Material and Methods

The current research is a description correlational study in which the relationship of variables was investigated using structural equation modeling (SEM). In the present study, dysfunctional attitudes were examined as a predictor variable, cognitive regulation of emotion as a mediating variable, and marital conflicts as a criterion variable. In terms of the data collection method, the current research was a field research type and the data collection tool was a questionnaire. All the required information was collected at the same time, so the current research is a cross-sectional research.

The statistical population of this research included all the couples who referred to counseling centers in Shiraz (Iran) in the winter of 2020, who had referred to counseling centers due to marital conflicts or the need to improve their marital relations. A purposive sampling method was used to select the sample. In this way, 15 centers were randomly selected among the counseling centers (seven centers from the east of Shiraz and eight centers from the west of Shiraz). Then, all the clients whose counseling complaint was marriage and marital relationship were asked to answer the questionnaires. The minimum required sample size was determined based on the suggested method of Schumacker and Lomax (2004), which suggests the number of 20 participants per each parameter in structural equation modeling and path analysis (280 people). However, in order to ensure the complete coverage of the studied population and to ensure the generalizability of the findings, the final sample size was determined 394 people.

Descriptive and inferential statistics methods were used to analyze the obtained Data. In the descriptive part, the mean and standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores were used. In the inferential part, in addition to the correlation matrix, structural equation modeling was used to investigate the research hypotheses. In order to investigate the significance of indirect paths, the bootstrap method was used. Data analysis was done using SPSS-24 and AMOS-24 software.

Instruments

To measure marital conflicts, the questionnaire of Sanai (1993) was used. The revised version of this questionnaire has 42 items that measure seven dimensions of marital conflicts: decrease in cooperation, decrease in sexual relations, increase in emotional reactions, increase in obtaining support for children, increase in personal relations with relatives, decrease in relations with family relatives and Spouse's friends and separating financial affairs from each other (Amani, Isanejad, & Alipour, 2018). This questionnaire is structured as a five-point Likert scale, in which the answer never equals 1 and the answer always equals 5. In this questionnaire, a higher score indicates more conflict (Amani et al., 2018). Dehghan (2001) regarding the reliability of the questionnaire, reported the value of Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the whole questionnaire as 0.71. In Khazai (2006) study, in order to measure the validity, the correlation between the scores of the components of the conflict

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questionnaire with the total score was investigated, and the range of correlations was reported between 0.31 and 0.82. The reliability of the total questionnaire was also reported 0.91 using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The validity of this questionnaire in the present study was confirmed using factor analysis, and its reliability was in the range of 0.55 to 0.80 (Cronbach's alpha).

To measure dysfunctional attitudes, the 26-item questionnaire (Ebrahimi & Moosavi, 2013) was used. This questionnaire was prepared based on the 40-item scale of Weissman and Beck (1978). Answers are scored on a seven-point Likert scale (1 equals completely disagree and 7 equals completely agree). This scale includes four subscales: success-perfectionism, need for others' approval, need to please others, and vulnerability-appreciation of performance. It should be mentioned that in this scale, the scoring of the items related to the vulnerability-performance evaluation subscale is done in reverse (items 13, 19, 20 and 26). Weissman and Beck (1978) have reported the internal consistency coefficient of the scale (Cronbach's alpha) as 0.93 and the test-retest coefficient as 0.71 with a time interval of eight weeks. Also, in order to check the validity of the scale, they calculated its correlation with the Beck Depression Questionnaire, and its value was 0.76. The validity of this questionnaire in the present study was confirmed using factor analysis, and its reliability was in the range of 0.51 to 0.88 using Cronbach's alpha method.

Garnefski and Kraaij (2006) Questionnaire was used to measure cognitive emotion regulation. The structure of this questionnaire is multidimensional and it is used to identify cognitive coping strategies after an unfortunate experience. This questionnaire has 36 items, which are graded on a 5-point Likert scale, where a score of 1 is equivalent to never and a score of 5 is equivalent to always. Using this questionnaire, the two positive cognitive strategies (including positive refocusing/planning and positive evaluation/broader perspective) and 5 negative strategies (including self-blame, other-blame, rumination, catastrophizing and acceptance) are measured. High scores in each subscale indicate the greater use of the mentioned strategy in dealing with stressful events. The strategies of self-blame, blaming others, rumination, catastrophizing, and acceptance together form negative emotion regulation strategies, and positive refocusing/planning and positive evaluation/broader perspective strategies together represent positive emotion regulation strategies (Samani & Sadeghi, 2010). The developers of the questionnaire have reported its reliability by examining the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.91 for positive strategies and 0.87 for negative strategies (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2006). The validity of this questionnaire in the present study was confirmed using factor analysis, and its reliability was in the range of 0.68 to 0.89 using Cronbach's alpha method.

Ethical considerations: Participants were reminded that participation in the research is voluntary. However, by explaining the objectives of the research, an effort was made to encourage them to participate in the research. Also, the clients were reminded that there is no need to mention their names and sure names, and their personal information will not be given to any person or institution. In order to avoid any harm to the clients, all aspects related to the health protocols related to the Covid-19 epidemic were observed.

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Results

In this section, the descriptive findings of the research variables are reported. In table 1, the mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum score of the research variables are reported.

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores of research variables

Variable	Components	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Dysfunctional attitudes	Success-perfectionism	34.82	4.20	13	91
	The need for approval from others	17.50	6.11	4	28
	The need to please others	18.33	6.97	5	35
	Vulnerability-performance evaluation	10.61	4.04	3	21
Emotion regulation	Positive refocusing/planning	38.08	6.87	10	50
	Positive evaluation/broader perspective	21.07	4.36	6	30
	Blame yourself	8.33	2.33	3	15
	Blame others	10.49	3.34	4	20
	Rumination	16.79	3.31	5	25
	Catastrophizing	11.58	3.22	4	20
	Reception	12.89	2.83	4	20
Marital conflict	Reduction of cooperation	7.65	2.83	4	20
	Decreased sexual intercourse	8.46	3.26	4	20
	Increasing emotional reactions	16.38	5.23	8	38
	Increasing child support	10.21	3.50	5	23
	Increasing personal relationship with your relatives	10.08	4.06	6	30
	Reduction of relationship with relatives, spouse and friends	10.38	4.52	6	30
	Separating financial affairs from each other	12.43	4.23	6	26

As an initial appraisal of the relationship between the variables, the Pearson correlation coefficient (zero order) was calculated between the research variables and reported as a correlation matrix. According to result, the components of dysfunctional attitudes (except for the vulnerability-performance evaluation dimension) had a positive and significant relationship with the components of marital conflicts. In addition, the use of positive strategies of cognitive regulation of emotion had a negative and significant relationship with the components of marital conflicts, but the use of negative strategies of cognitive regulation of emotion had a positive and significant relationship with most of the components of marital conflicts. In other words, the use of positive strategies of cognitive regulation of emotion leads to the reduction of marital conflicts of couples and the use of negative strategies of cognitive regulation of emotion account for the increase of marital conflicts of couples.

Before the examining the proposed model, the assumptions of structural equation modeling have been examined and then the proposed research model was tested. After removing non-significant paths, direct, indirect and total effects for the remaining paths were calculated and reported. Before testing the model, it was necessary to ensure the establishment of the basic assumptions of structural equation modeling. For this purpose, multicollinearity of predictor variables was investigated using tolerance and variance inflation statistics. The results of the analysis indicated that the tolerance values for conflict resolution styles were between 0.31 and 0.58 and the range of the variance inflation index was between 1.72 and 3.13. The values of the tolerance values for the emotional non-verbal communication variable were between 0.54 and 0.80 and the range of the variance inflation index was between 1.25 and 1.92. The tolerance values for the variable of dysfunctional attitudes were between

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0.40 and 0.73 and the range of the variance inflation index was between 1.37 and 2.66. The tolerance value for the cognitive regulation variable of excitement was equal to 1 and the variance inflation index was equal to 1.04. These findings indicate there isn't any multicollinearity related to predictor variables. The univariate normality was determined by examining the skewness and kurtosis indices and their critical values. The results of this study indicated that the values of skewness and kurtosis of all variables are less than one. The multivariate normality was evaluated by examining multivariate kurtosis coefficient (Mardia's coefficient) and its critical value. The results of this study also indicated that the multivariate kurtosis value is 6.5 and its critical value is 1.94, which confirms the normality of the multivariate distribution. Therefore, data analysis using structural equation modeling with the maximum likelihood estimation method seems appropriate. In the following, according to the research hypothesis, the direct and indirect paths of the proposed model have been investigated and the relevant coefficients have been reported in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Direct path coefficients between research variables

Predictor	Criterion	B	ß	S.E	t	P
Dysfunctional attitudes	Marital conflicts	0.03	0.14	0.009	2.92	0.003
Positive SR strategies	Marital conflicts	-0.11	-0.29	0.02	-5.05	0.001
Negative SR strategies	Marital conflicts	0.56	0.33	0.09	6.14	0.001
Dysfunctional attitudes	Positive SR strategies	-0.04	-0.08	0.04	01.04	0.26
Dysfunctional attitudes	Negative SR strategies	0.02	0.16	0.007	2.32	0.02

In order to investigate the mediating role of cognitive regulation of emotion in the relationship between dysfunctional attitudes and marital conflicts, the bootstrap method in Amos software was used. Table 3 shows the results of the bootstrap analysis to investigate the significance of the indirect effect of dysfunctional attitudes on marital conflicts through the mediation of cognitive emotion regulation strategies.

Table 3. The results of the bootstrap analysis of the mediation effect

Predictor	Criterion	β	Lower limit	Upper limit	p
Dysfunctional attitudes	Marital conflicts	0.09	0.06	0.12	0.04

As seen in Table 3, the mediating role of emotion regulation cognitive strategies is significant in the relationship between dysfunctional attitudes and marital conflicts. Therefore, the research hypothesis is confirmed. According to the results of the bootstrap test, the obtained standard indirect effect is within the acceptable range.

Table 4 shows the fit indices of the research model after removing the non-significant paths along with the desired values of each index. According to Table 4, all the fit indices of the model are at an acceptable level and the model has a good fit.

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Table 4. Fit indices of the research model

Value	X^2/df	GFI	AGFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
Obtained value	2.37	0.93	0.90	0.95	0.92	0.07	0.13
Acceptable value	< 3	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	< 0.08	> 0.05

Discussion

The hypothesis of this research stated that marital conflicts are predicted based on dysfunctional attitudes with the mediating role of cognitive emotion regulation. Our results revealed that mediating role of emotion regulation cognitive strategies is significant in the relationship between dysfunctional attitudes and marital conflicts. Therefore, the research hypothesis is confirmed. These results are in agreement with the findings of Feeney and Karantzas (2017), Kalhor et al. (2020), Saadati Rad (2021), Dehghan (2001), and Frye-Cox et al. (2021).

In explaining these findings, it can be said that according to Ellis's point of view (Ellis & Dryden, 2007), mental illnesses and disorders are mainly caused by wrong cognitions, wrong beliefs and opinions, and wrong attitudes. He believes that inflexible and irrational thinking is the main cause of disturbances in social relations, especially in the relations of couples (Ostadi, Badeleh, & Mohseni Birjandi, 2014). In fact, dysfunctional attitudes that cause people confusion have two basic characteristics; first, these people usually have rigid, partial and strong expectations inside themselves, which are usually expressed in words such as must, definitely or necessarily. Second, they cause very unreasonable attributions and excessive and disastrous generalizations, which ultimately lead to confusion.

Maintaining the stability and strength of the family is more necessary and important than forming it. For a long time, the cognitive regulation of emotions in couples has been considered one of the important factors in maintaining the strength of the family (Eldesouky, English, & Gross, 2017). In addition to ineffective and negative styles, emotion regulation includes positive styles as well. The dimension of positive emotionality is conceptually developed in comparison with negative emotionality and expresses positive reactions to events and optimistic interpretation of phenomena (Aminabadi, Khodapanahi, & Dehghani, 2011).

Thoughts such as focusing on pleasant and joyful issues instead of focusing on negative and sad events, as well as a positive perception of events and considering that life's challenges are an opportunity to become stronger causes the person to have an appropriate appreciation of the world. Also, thoughts such as drowning in thoughts about negative events and consequences cause a person to distance himself from the people around him and lead to resentment on both sides. Blaming others for events that the person himself was involved in happening is not pleasant to anyone and in most cases leads to aggression and dissatisfaction, which itself is a big problem for social life, especially married life. Also, catastrophizing the events is actually a cognitive distortion that leads a person to be irreparable and unforgiving of the events and results in greater attention to negative issues (Tapia & Ponce, 2020).

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People who use dysfunctional attitudes in their relationships suffer from inconsistent thinking patterns, emotional disturbances and self-destruction, and due to having these qualities and characteristics; they experience negative emotions when facing life's challenges. They find that such emotions are the most important stimulus and tension in interpersonal relationships, especially marital relationships. Therefore, the results of the research confirm that dysfunctional attitudes can intensify marital conflicts through the mediation of cognitive emotion regulation.

The most important limitation of research projects in the current conditions and the spread of the corona disease is the lack of direct communication between the researchers and the participants. Due to the lack of access to the sample people, the sampling was done online, which reduced the respondents' desire and motivation to responding to the questionnaires. Due to the fact that the path analysis method was used in the assessment of the fit of the model, the necessary caution should be exercised in the causal analysis (cause and effect conclusion). Due to the lack of control of intervening variables such as social, economic, cultural status and education level, the generalization of the results to other samples should be done with caution.

It is suggested that pre-marriage counseling sessions should be held at longer times and with richer content so that couples can acquire the necessary skills for a successful married life. Considering that dysfunctional attitudes can have a great impact on people's emotions and ultimately intensify conflicts, and that dysfunctional attitudes have their roots in childhood and interactions with important others, it is suggested that workshops on the role of dysfunctional attitudes in development of peoples should be held. In the field of research, it is also suggested to carry out a research on a wider level of the statistical population and to use other sampling methods.

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