

Original Article

Prediction of Marital Conflicts Based on a Systems Approach with the Mediating Role of Attachment Styles

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Abstract

Background: Attachment style is a major variable in the creation and description of marital problems and has received greater attention in recent years. The traits of secure attachment include constructive emotional interactions and intimate marital relationships. The present study aimed to predict marital conflicts using a problem-centered systems approach with the mediating role of attachment styles among conflicting couples.

Methods: In this descriptive correlational study, the statistical population in this study was the total number of conflicted couples in Tehran and Qom in 2020. The sample included 540 men and women with marital conflict selected by convenience sampling. The research instruments included the Experience in Close Relationship Scale (ECR-S), the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ), and the Family Assessment Device (FAD). Data were analyzed by Pearson correlation method and structural equation modeling using SPSS version 22.0 and LISREL version 8.0 software.

Results: The assessment of the hypothetical model of the research indicated that it was a good fit with the measurement model (CFI>0.90; IFI>0.90; RMSE>0.08). The results demonstrated that the components of the systems approach with the mediating role of attachment styles could explain marital conflicts ($P<0.001$). These components had an indirect relationship with marital conflicts through attachment styles ($\beta = -0.27$, $P = 0.01$).

Conclusion: Based on the results, the proposed model had a good fit. Overall, the findings verified the marital conflict model based on a systemic approach mediated by attachment styles.

Keywords: Couples Characteristics; Family; Family Conflict.

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Introduction

With the drastic increase in the divorce rate, some family experts have considered divorce as a social crisis and sought to identify its underlying causes and factors (1, 2). Moreover, the rate of emotional divorce in couples is probably far greater than that of legal divorce. Previous research has shown

that psychological problems affect marital conflicts and divorce (3, 4).

One of the psychological variables that can play an important role in a couple's relationship is attachment style (5). Attachment as a relationship, affects confidence, flexibility, self-esteem, and future social relationships, and any disruption in it can have serious

consequences (6). Attachment style is a major variable in the creation and description of marital problems and has received greater attention in recent years. The traits of secure attachment include constructive emotional interactions and intimate marital relationships. In contrast, insecure attachment styles (namely avoidant, anxious, and ambivalent) are associated with emotional withdrawal and the inability to express feelings and establish affectionate relationships (7).

The emotional climate of the family plays an effective role in attachment formation, and the absence of emotional development is a major factor in the formation of attachment conflicts. Individuals with insecure attachment are engaged in a range of efforts to increase or decrease their attachment needs in order to overcome the negative emotions they experience. These strategies may expose people to greater psychological vulnerability as insecure individuals are likely to experience more negative emotions than secure ones. Some researchers believe that marital problems are rooted in couples' attachment styles (8). These styles determine the emotional and cognitive rules as well as strategies that direct emotional responses in individuals and interpersonal relationships. They provide a framework that contributes to a better and more accurate understanding of marital relationships and coping strategies of marital conflicts (9, 10).

Studies show that there is a relationship between marital conflict and incompatibility with family functioning (11, 12). Although there is extensive research on family conflicts, it seems that these efforts fall short of providing an accurate explanation of the reality of marital conflicts. The reasons for this can be attributed to substandard methodologies and theoretical frameworks. Most of these studies have selected their samples from divorced families or families who have visited family courts (13). However, many conflicts between spouses are not reported

outside their families and such conflicts in divorced families are limited to the couples who have been referred to family courts and those that have resulted in separation (14).

Obviously, marital conflicts are not limited to those that have led to divorce, and sampling only from the divorced cases means neglecting a major portion of the conflicts. Accordingly, we looked for a new model to better explain marital conflicts by considering the various variables in the family and couples. Based on McMaster's systems approach, this model examines the structure, organization, and transactional patterns of the family (15). Family assessment is problem-centered this model and emphasizes the current functioning of the family rather than its current or past growth stage. According to McMaster's model, the family is functionally viewed as a system that plays an important role in the biological, psychological, and social development as well as the protection and maintenance of its members (15, 16). Miller et al. (17), reported that McMaster's systems approach had a relationship with family functioning and attachment styles.

Legal divorce is on the rise, but family and marriage researchers have reported emotional divorce to be far more common (18). Moreover, the marital conflict has been shown to be a predictor variable of divorce (19). Therefore, identifying and examining factors that may predict marital conflict and satisfaction seems necessary to increase couples' satisfaction with marriage, curtail social harms, and prevent the increase in the number of children from divorced families. Since the authors did not reach a study that simultaneously examined the mediating role of attachment styles in the relationship between problem-centered systems approach and marital conflicts among conflicting couples, the need for the present study is felt more than ever. Regarding the above statements, the present study aimed to predict marital conflicts based on a systems approach with the

mediating role of attachment styles among couples with marital conflict.

Methods

This survey study used a descriptive correlational research design. The statistical population in this study was the total number of conflicted couples. The target population in this study were conflicted couples in Tehran and Qom (Iran) in 2020. The study population in this study were conflicted couples who referred to family counseling centers. In the present study, 5Q n $15Q$ was used to select the sample size (20). According to the 60-item family assessment device questionnaire in this study, the sample size should be between 300 and 900 people. With this in mind, 540 participants were selected as the sample. In this study, to reduce sampling error a total of 566 questionnaires were provided to the participants, and finally, by eliminating the incomplete questionnaires (26 cases) 540 questionnaires filled out by qualified participants were analyzed. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, a large part of the questionnaires was provided to the participants through online platforms, and a part was provided to the clients who had been referred to the counseling centers in person. The inclusion criteria included: getting a score above mean in the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ), no record

of psychological disorders, the age of 20-60, marital life history of more than 1 year, and no divorce application. The exclusion criteria of the study were failure to answer all questions of the questionnaire. For ethical considerations, the informed consent to participate in the research, and ensuring the participants' information confidentiality were taken into consideration. The conceptual model of the research is presented in Figure 1.

Research Instruments

Experience in Close Relationship Scale (ECR-S): The Experience in Close Relationship Scale (ECR-S) is based on the dimensional approach of attachment and is one of the most widely used tests regarding adult attachment. This scale was designed by Brennan, Clark, and Shaver in 1998 (21). It is based on Bartholomew's four-factor model of attachment styles. As regards the content validity of this instrument, four attachment styles are based on the two dimensions of anxiety and avoidance. Individuals are identified with the fearful avoidance attachment in cases where they have a high level of anxiety and avoidance, but with the secure avoidant attachment if they have a low level of anxiety and avoidance. Moreover, low anxiety and high avoidance represents

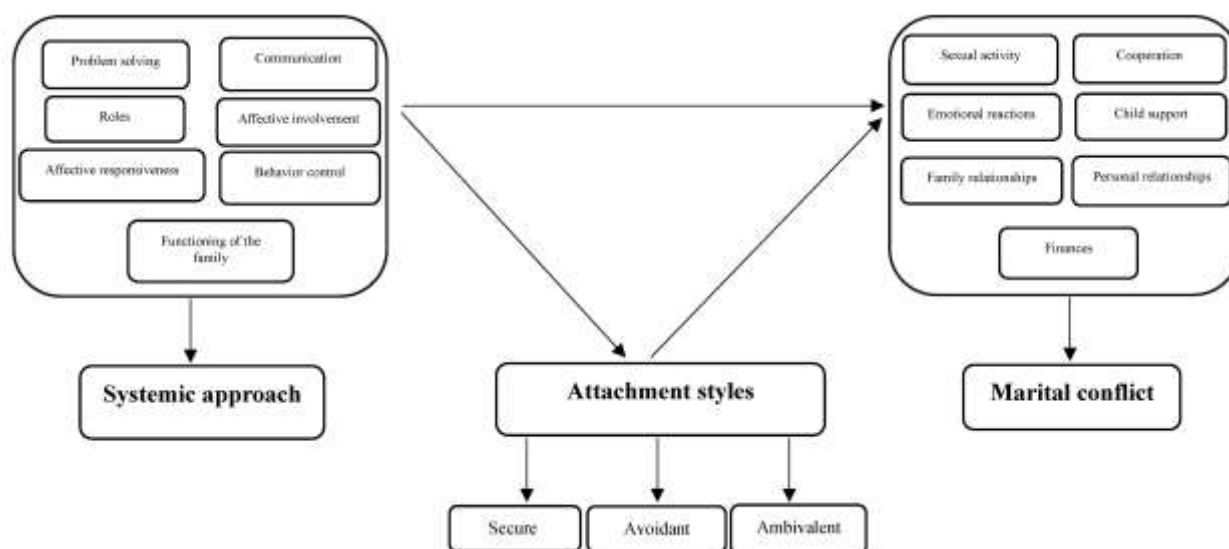


Figure 1. Conceptual model of research

avoidant attachment, while high anxiety and low avoidance represents preoccupied attachment. Although the avoidance and anxiety dimensions have an interval scale, they deal with the four attachment styles based on the cut-off point and can accurately measure the attachment styles. The 36-item ECR-S measures adult attachment in the two dimensions of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance (18 items each) in romantic relationships. The questionnaire is scored based on 7-point Likert scale ranging from one (never) to seven (very often) (21). The reliability and validity of the Persian version of the ECR-S was confirmed by Panaghi et al. (22). Cronbach's alpha of the two dimensions of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance was reported to be 0.88 and 0.90, respectively (22). Cronbach's alpha coefficient for attachment-related anxiety and avoidance in the present study was 0.85 and 0.88, respectively.

Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ):

The MCQ is a 54-item tool developed by Sanaei Zaker in 2008 to measure marital conflict based on clinical experience. It measures the dimensions of marital conflict. The dimensions of this questionnaire are: decrease in cooperation, decrease in sexual activity, increase in emotional reactions, increase in getting child support, increase in personal relationships with one's own relatives, decrease in relationships with the spouse's relatives and friends, separation of finances, and decrease in effective communication. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for these dimensions were 81%, 61%, 70%, 33%, 86%, 89%, 71% and 69%, respectively. The maximum and minimum total scores of the questionnaire are 270 and 54, respectively, with a higher score meaning more conflicts and a lower score indicating a better relationship and fewer conflicts. The scoring options are as follows: Never (1), Rarely (2), Sometimes (3), Often (4), and Always (5), (23).

The Family Assessment Device (FAD):

The FAD is a 60-item questionnaire developed by Epstein et al. in 1983 to measure family functioning based on the McMaster model. It contains six subscales, namely problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control. For each item, the subject selects one of the options (Strongly Agree: 1, Agree: 2, Disagree: 3, and Strongly Disagree: 4). Any family member over the age of 12 can complete this questionnaire. A higher score indicates an unhealthier functioning (24). The reliability and validity of the Persian version of the FAD was confirmed by Yousefi (25). Cronbach's alpha of the dimensions of problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control was reported to be 0.69, 0.72, 0.70, 0.81, 0.78 and 0.76, respectively (25). Cronbach's alpha coefficient for problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control was 0.71, 0.73, 0.72, 0.79, 0.77 and 0.80, respectively.

Data were analyzed by Pearson correlation method and structural equation modeling using SPSS version 22.0 and LISREL version 8.0 software. The significance level of the research was considered to be $\alpha=0.01$.

Results

The participants included 540 men and women with marital conflict. The mean and standard deviation (SD) of age of participants was 43.72 ± 9.28 . The demographic variables of the participants are shown in Table 1.

Before analyzing the data, structural equation modeling was first used to evaluate and confirm the assumptions of multivariate normal distribution, linearity, multi-linearity, and error independence. Skewness and Kurtosis tests were used to

Table 1. Demographic variables of the participants.

Demographic variables		N	%
Age (years)	20-30	130	24.44
	30-40	160	29.63
	40-50	183	33.90
	50-60	65	12.04
Gender	Female	311	57.59
	Male	229	42.41
Education	High school education	409	75.74
	University education	131	24.26
Employment status	Employed	447	82.78
	Unemployed	93	17.22

assess the data's normal distribution. Given that all research variables have absolute skewness coefficient values of <3 and absolute kurtosis coefficient value of <10 , the data normal distribution was confirmed. Multi-linearity was also checked by tolerance statistics and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). All the variables had $VIF < 10$ and tolerance statistics > 0.1 ; therefore, the assumption indicating non- multi-linearity was met.

In the first hypothetical model, the effects of components of the systemic approach on marital conflicts were examined. Fit indices for this model are presented in Table 2. These indices showed that the hypothetical model had a good fit. The systemic approach components influence marital

conflicts with the standardized coefficient of -0.50 .

The second hypothetical model dealt with the effect of the systems approach components on marital conflicts with the mediating role of attachment styles. The fit indicators for this model are presented in Table 3. They indicated a very good fit of the hypothetical model.

The components of the systems approach influence attachment styles and marital conflicts with the standardized coefficients of -0.46 and -0.23 , respectively. Also, attachment styles affect marital conflicts with the standardized coefficient of 0.62 . Figure 2 shows the hypothetical structural model together with the standardized coefficients.

Table 2. The first model fit indicators

Fit indicators	χ^2	(χ^2/df)	CFI	IFI	GFI	NFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Value	301.19	5.19	0.97	0.97	0.92	0.96	0.061	0.088
Acceptable range	-	< 3	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	< 0.10	< 0.08

Table 3. The second model fit indicators

Fit indicators	χ^2	(χ^2/df)	CFI	IFI	GFI	NFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Value	648.64	5.06	0.97	0.97	0.88	0.96	0.065	0.087
Acceptable range	-	< 3	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	< 0.10	< 0.08

Table 4. Results of the Bootstrap method for investigating indirect and intermediary paths

Predictor variable	Mediator Variable	Criterion variable	Bootstrap		β	t	R^2	Adjusted R^2	P
			Lower limit	Upper limit					
Systemic approach	Attachment styles	Marital conflict	-0.21	-0.35	-0.27	2.75	0.59	0.51	0.01

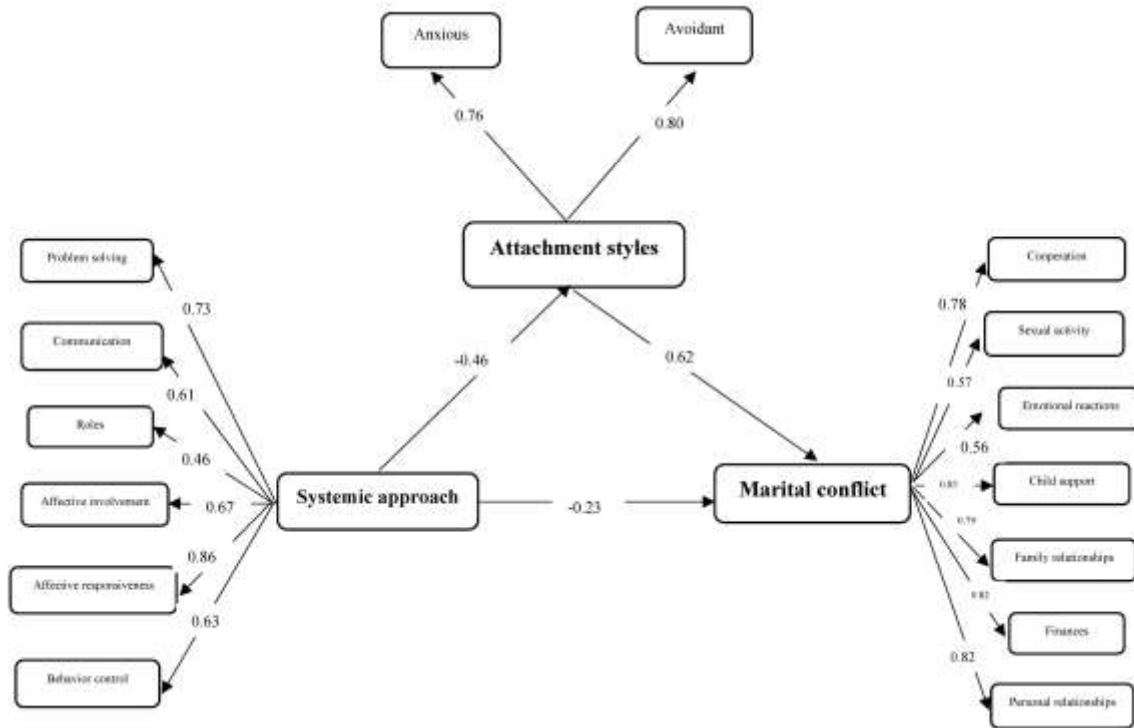


Figure 2. Structural model of research with standard coefficients

In the present study, the Bootstrap test was used to evaluate the mediating relationships. According to Table 4, the path of intersystem components to marital conflicts mediated by attachment styles was significant ($\beta = -0.27$, $t = 3.54$, $P = 0.01$).

Discussion

The present study aimed to predict marital conflicts based on a systems approach with the mediating role of attachment styles among couples with marital conflict in 2020. The results of this study confirmed the hypothesis of the structural relationships of marital conflicts based on the components of the systems approach. To explain the findings, we can say that family functioning is associated with the members' ability to adapt to the changes and resolve the conflicts, family cohesion, success in applying disciplinary models, observance of the boundaries between the members, and compliance with the rules and principles of the family institution with the goal of protecting the entire family system (26). Therefore, it can be said that the more functional the couples act, the better and more cohesive relationship they

will experience, which in turn decreases marital conflicts. Conflict arises when couples show varying degrees of independence and cohesion because of their cooperation and joint decisions. The more couples are successful in the dimensions of family functioning, including problem solving, communication, family roles, affective response, affective involvement, and behavior control, the greater cohesion they will have in their marital system (27). Consequently, their marital conflicts in general and in each of the structures in marital conflict, i.e., “separating finances from each other”, “increased personal relations with his/her own kindred”, “decreased coordination”, “decreased sexual intercourse”, and “increased children’s protection”.

To explain the findings, we can also say that family functioning reflects the adaptive skill of the family that leads to its development and performance, and the dimensions of family functioning indicate the optimal status of the family in terms of development, problem solving, communication, family roles, affective

response, and affective involvement (28). As a result, families with a optimal level of these dimensions are more functional, reducing the conflicting elements of the family leading couples towards more positive and constructive interactions. Therefore, the functionality of couples in any of the structures of family functioning may be a shield against the factors causing conflicts in couples.

In another explanation, according to McMaster's model of family functioning, all dysfunctional families who are often unable to go through the problem-solving process have difficulty expressing and accepting emotional issues. Communication is neglected or abandoned in such families. Moreover, there are fewer agreements on assigning roles and affective response, emotional connections fade, and couples are disinterested in each other, as if the family members live separately under the same roof. Couples' functioning in various dimensions of family functioning such as problem solving, establishing normal relationships, explicit exchange of emotions, determining, assigning, and agreeing on family roles, fulfilling the emotional needs and concerns of family members, and monitoring and controlling members' behaviors all require an intimate and threat-free atmosphere as well as agreement and coordination between the members involved in transaction (29). This leads to greater functioning of the family in various aspects of life and creates a normal and progressive cycle in the growth and development of the family. According to Halford (30), intercouple intimate attitudes indicate the existence of constructive interactions between spouses and lack of these attitudes indicates marital distress.

Furthermore, concurrent with the results of Shi et al. (31), this study found that people with preoccupied attachment (anxious-ambivalent in another classification) try to please others at times of interpersonal conflicts and adopt obliging conflict management. In this study, preoccupied

attachment style predicted both obliging and dominating conflict management styles. Obliging and dominating styles are not as contradictory as expected, and one attachment style may simultaneously predict both obliging and dominating styles.

The attachment style remains active throughout life and as a principle, determines marital relationship. Adults with a secure attachment style have a positive sense of self and a positive perception of others, have more self-esteem, and are more successful (5). However, those with an insecure attachment style tend to have a less positive view of themselves, are often hesitant about their own worth as a spouse, and blame themselves for their spouse's lack of accountability. Individuals with an anxious attachment style have a pervasive fear of being rejected by their spouse and are overly dependent on their spouse. Nonetheless, those with an avoidant attachment style avoid proximity and attention to the manifestations of attachment by relying on themselves when dealing with tension.

Given the implications of the attachment theory, it could be claimed that the quality of attachment bonds between couples is likely to determine the pattern of marital conflict behaviors. In other words, attachment styles determine individual differences in spouses' ability to use each other as a source of support, especially in times of tension and conflict (6). Secure people find their spouse supportive and caring and use more self-disclosure in their marital relationship. In addition, they do not avoid conflict, show less verbal aggression, and use more positive behaviors such as humor in mutual conflicts (32). However, insecure people have a negative attitude toward conflict. Thus, it can be concluded that secure people view conflict as a normal event and while accepting and using peaceful strategies, they avoid unfortunate consequences and escalation of conflict,

whereas insecure people avoid the normal issues, use more violent tactics and lack sufficient skill to manage and control conflict at a milder level.

According to the results, systems approach can explain marital conflicts based on attachment styles. Therefore, mental health specialists can adopt this approach taking into account the attachment styles to treat couples in conflict and can play a more effective role in solving their problems.

One of the limitations of this study was related to the socio-economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, as possible variables influencing marital conflict. Due to the prevalence of this virus, the researchers had to distribute 65% of the questionnaires among the subjects through online platforms. Another limitation of the present study was that other factors that cause conflict in couples were not considered. The other limitation was the cross-sectional nature of the study, which hindered causal inferences and accurate knowledge of the real nature of the relationship between the variables. To remove the existing limitations, it is suggested that future research be conducted by controlling the variables affecting marital conflict and the components of a systems approach such as socio-economic status. It is also recommended to utilize other evaluation methods such as interviews with a larger sample size in order to obtain more accurate results. It is suggested that newer indicators such as Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio be used for report reliability in future studies. It is also suggested that other studies be performed when we get rid of the Covid-19 pandemic in order to deduce the causal relationships and clarify the effect of research variables.

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Authors' contribution

FD, and HM developed the study concept and design. FD, and MZH acquired the data. FD, HM, and MZH analyzed and interpreted the data, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the intellectual content, manuscript editing and read and approved the final manuscript. HM, and MZH provided administrative support.

Ethics Consideration

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Islamic Azad University, Qom branch (code: IR.IAU.QOM.REC.1399.045).

Conflicts of Interests

There was no conflict of interest to be declared.

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