



# Predicting Marital Conflicts in Couples Based on A Systemic Approach Mediated by Personality Traits

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Marital conflicts are among the main factors that threaten marital relations and contribute to conflicts and divorces in Iranian society. The present study has been carried out in order to predict marital conflicts in couples based on a systemic approach mediated by personality traits in the cities of Tehran and Qom.

**Methods:** The research method was descriptive-correlational. The statistical population consisted of troubled/struggling couples in Tehran and Qom. The sample consisted of 540 men and women with marital conflict selected by convenience sampling. The research instruments included Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, (NEO) Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), 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:** Results revealed that the hypothetical model fit the measurement model (CFI = 0.97; IFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.088). In addition, the systemic approach components mediated by personality traits were able to explain marital conflicts ( $P = 0.001$ ). These components indirectly influenced marital conflicts through personality traits ( $\beta = -0.38, P = 0.005$ ).

**Conclusions:** Overall, the findings verified the marital conflict model based on a systemic approach mediated by the personality traits.

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage has long been considered the highest social tradition for meeting the emotional and security needs of individuals [1]. However, a wide range of factors can threaten this sacred institution. The divorce rate has increased to the extent that some family experts consider it a social crisis and endeavor to find its causes and factors influencing it [2, 3]. The rate of emotional divorce is probably much higher than that of formal divorce [4]. Research has shown that one of the key psychosocial roots of divorce is personality traits and mental disorders [5]. Some personality traits and most mental disorders such as depression [6], anxiety [7] and practical obsession [8] can reduce the couple's satisfaction and create tensions and conflicts between couples. In some cases, these personality traits and mental disorders can lead to divorce [9].

Personality is the behaviors, emotions, thinking style, way of talking, perception of the environment and interpersonal interactions that are constantly observed [based on a recognizable pattern] in a person [10]. According to this definition of personality, it can be said to have a lasting effect on marital relationships [11]. Some personality traits, such as emotional instability [12] and neuroticism [13], increase couples' vulnerability, especially in stressful situations.

Many studies have been conducted on the importance of marriage, all showing marital conflict and incompatibility to be associated with inefficiency in the whole family [14]. Although a considerable number of studies have been carried out on family conflicts, it seems that they have failed to correctly explain the reality of marital conflicts. This failure could be due to their methodological and theoretical weaknesses. Most

of the studies on marital issues "have selected their participants among divorced families or couples that went to court to get divorced" [15], whereas many conflicts between couples are not reported outside the families and divorced families are limited to those marital conflicts where the couples were first referred to judicial authorities and then got divorced [16]. Obviously, marital conflicts are not limited to cases that have ended in divorce, and adopting such a procedure in studies leaves out a considerable number of conflicts [17].

Therefore, we searched for a new model that could enable us to better explain marital conflicts by considering the various variables in the family and couples. In this model, which is based on McMaster's systematic approach, the structure, organization and exchange patterns of the family are examined. Family evaluation in this model is based on a problem-solving style and emphasizes the current functioning of the family rather than its current growth stage or its previous growth stages. According to the McMaster model, the family is functionally considered a system that plays an important role in biological, psychological and social development as well as protection of its members [18]. Formal divorce is rapidly on the rise, and family and marriage researchers have reported that emotional divorce is much more common than formal divorce [4]. Marital conflict has also been reported to be one of the

predictor variables of divorce [19]. Therefore, it seems necessary to identify and analyze the factors that can predict marital conflict and dissatisfaction in order to reduce the divorce rate, increase marital satisfaction, and reduce the social problems and the number of children of divorce. Therefore, based on above considerations, the present study aimed to predict marital conflicts in couples based on a systemic approach mediated by personality traits in the cities of Tehran and Qom.

## METHODS

This survey study used a correlational research design. The statistical population consisted of couples with marital conflicts in Tehran and Qom in 2020. A number of couples with husbands in conflict with their wives were selected in Tehran and Qom as the sample. In this study, sample selection took two months from April to June 2020. Bhattacharya [20] considers the minimum sample size of 200 for structural equation modeling (SEM), proposing 10 to 15 participants for each parameter that must be estimated. Accordingly, the number of parameters of the hypothetical model (the model mediated by personality traits) was 42. The sample size had to be between 420 and 630; with this in mind, 540 participants were selected as the sample. The conceptual model of the research is presented in Figure 1.

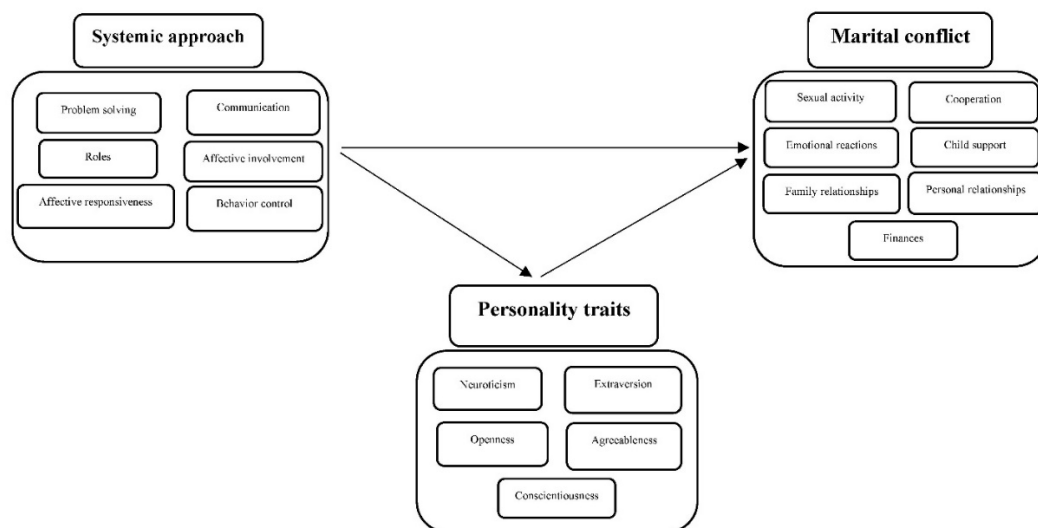


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Research

## Instruments

Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness; NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI): This inventory contains 60 items, with 12 items for each factor and has been developed by Costa in 1992. The items were selected based on their highest factor loading in relation to the desired attribute. The participants answered the items on a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree,

Strongly Agree). In this inventory, five main dimensions can be considered. Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C). Anisi [21] reported the validity and reliability of the Persian version of this questionnaire as acceptable in Iranian society. The authors reported the reliability of this tool as 0.83 [21]. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.86 for the questionnaire.

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), [22]. Mohammadi et al. [23] reported the reliability of this questionnaire equal to 0.81 based on Cronbach's alpha coefficient. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.79 for the questionnaire.

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. Yousefi [24] reported Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.92 for the Persian version of the questionnaire. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.86 for the questionnaire.

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

**Table 2.** The First Model fit Indicators

| Fit Indicators   | $\chi^2$ | $(\chi^2/df)$ | 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   | $\chi^2$ | $(\chi^2/df)$ | CFI    | IFI    | GFI    | NFI    | SRMR   | RMSEA  |
|------------------|----------|---------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Value            | 260.79   | 5.21          | 0.98   | 0.98   | 0.93   | 0.97   | 0.061  | 0.088  |
| Acceptable range | -        | < 3           | > 0.90 | > 0.90 | > 0.90 | > 0.90 | < 0.10 | < 0.08 |

**Table 4.** The Third Model Fit Indicators

| Fit Indicators   | $\chi^2$ | $(\chi^2/df)$ | 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 |

A total of 540 men and women with marital conflict participated in this study. The demographic variables of the participants are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic Variables of the Participants.

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

In the first hypothetical model, the effects of marital conflicts on the components of the systemic approach were examined. Fit indices for this model are presented in Table 2. These indices showed that the hypothetical model was a very good fit. The systemic approach components influence marital conflicts with the standardized coefficient of -0.50.

In the second hypothetical model, the effect of personality traits on marital conflicts was examined. The fit indices of this model are listed in Table 3. These indices demonstrated that the hypothetical model was a very good fit. Personality traits affect marital conflicts with the standardized coefficient of -0.67.

In the third hypothetical model, the effects of the components of the systems approach components on marital conflicts with the mediating role of personality traits was examined. The fit indices for this model are shown in Table 4. The indices showed that the hypothetical model was a very good fit. The components of the systems approach influence personality traits and marital conflicts with the standardized coefficients of 0.66 and -0.15, respectively. Also, personality traits affect marital conflicts with the standardized coefficient of -0.58. Figure 2 shows the hypothetical structural model together with the standardized coefficients.

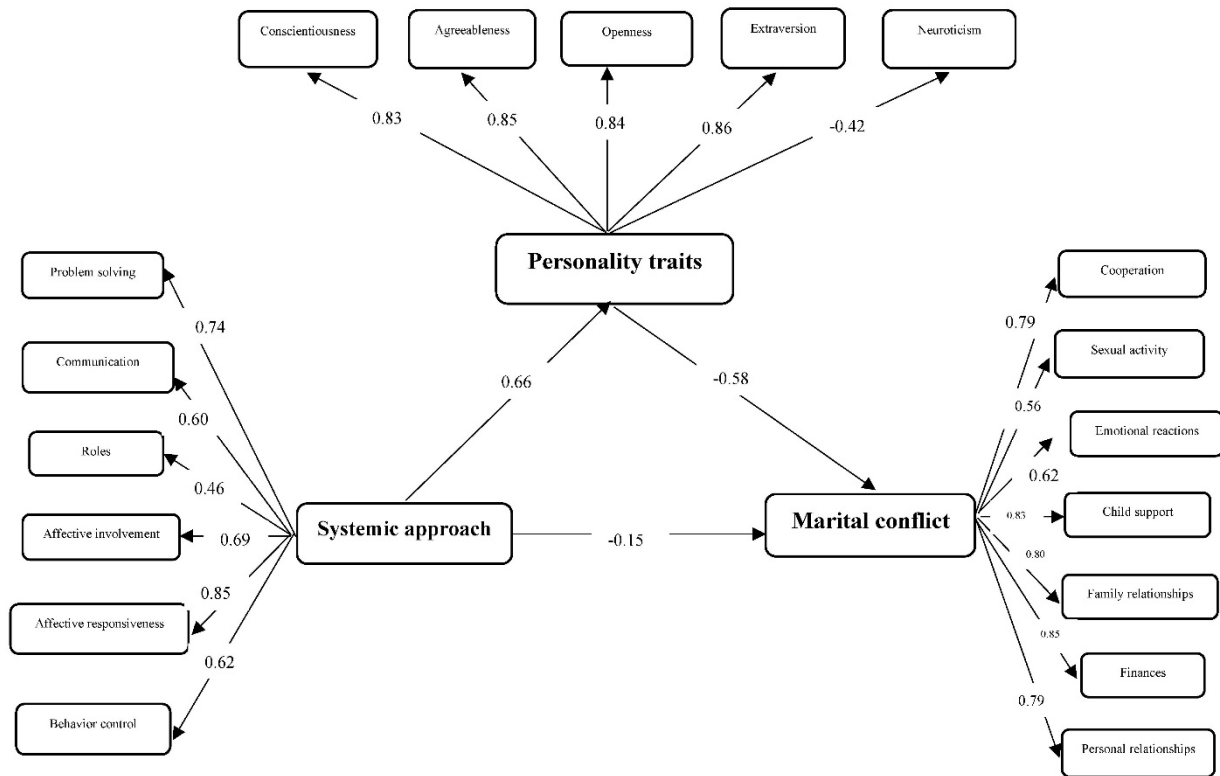


Figure 2. Structural Model of Research with Standard Coefficients

Table 5. Results of the Bootstrap method for Investigating Indirect and Intermediary Paths

| Predictor Variable | Mediator Variable  | Criterion Variable | Bootstrap   |             | $\beta$ | P     |
|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------------|---------|-------|
|                    |                    |                    | Lower limit | Upper limit |         |       |
| Systemic approach  | Personality traits | Marital conflict   | -0.31       | -0.49       | -0.38   | 0.005 |

The Bootstrap test was used in the present study to evaluate the mediating relationships. According to Table 5, the path of intersystem components to marital conflicts mediated by personality traits was significant ( $\beta = -0.38$ ;  $P = 0.005$ ).

**DISCUSSION**

The present study aimed to predict marital conflicts in couples based on a systemic approach mediated by personality traits in the cities of Tehran and Qom in 2020. The results of the present study showed that the hypothesis related to the structural relationships of marital conflicts was verified based on the components of the systems approach. These results are consistent with the results of previous studies [25-29]. To explain this finding, it can be said that healthy family functioning is associated with the members' ability to adapt to changes and resolve the tensions and conflicts as well as correlation between members and success in applying disciplinary patterns, observance of the interpersonal boundaries, and application of the rules and principles governing this institution with the aim of protecting the entire family system. It can thus be said that the more efficiently the couples act, the better and more cohesive

relationship they will experience, which will in turn reduce marital conflicts.

A conflict arises when couples show varying degrees of independence and solidarity because of their cooperation and the joint decisions they make. The more successfully they act in each of the dimensions of family functioning (problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control), the greater solidarity they will enjoy in the marital system. Consequently, marital conflicts will decrease in general, and so will each of the constructs of marital conflict (separation of finances, increased relationships with one's own relatives, decreased cooperation, decreased sexual activity, and increased level of getting child support [30]).

To explain the other results, it can be said that family functioning reflects the adaptive skill of the family that leads to its transformation and fulfillment. The dimensions of family functioning show that the desirable situation of the family in terms of development rests upon problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control. That is why families with desirable levels of these dimensions are more efficient. In this situation, the conflict instigating elements in the family

will lose their power and couples will move towards more positive and effective interactions instead of conflict [25].

The results may also be explained in another way. According to the McMaster's model of the family functioning dimensions, all poorly functioning families are often unable to get involved in the problem-solving process, and have difficulty expressing and accepting affective issues. Communication is a neglected or non-existent issue in such families. There is little agreement on role allocation and responsiveness, affective considerations no longer exist, and couples show no interest in each other. They live together in a common shelter but like separated couples. In such inefficient families, there is such little partnership among the family members that it seems as if a group of strangers are living under one roof. This is where tensions and conflicts take precedence over interaction, understanding and intimacy, a center formed on the basis of marriage and its continuation guaranteed through intimacy [31].

The results showed that the hypothesis related to the structural relationships of marital conflicts was verified based on the components of the systems approach. These results are consistent with the results of previous studies [32-34]. Theoretically, this is because neurotic people are prone to negative and irrational ideas and thoughts, which are among the main causes of marital conflict. This neuroticism may lead couples to irrational beliefs and adversely affect their ability to cope with stress, thereby increasing the likelihood of divorce [35]. Responsible couples make more purposeful efforts to maintain and stabilize their marital relationships due to personal commitment. Moreover, a high level of responsibility causes one to avoid showing violent behavior in marital relationships and to control his/her impulses [36].

To explain this, we can say that the similar personality traits of spouses will lead to greater coordination in their outlook on life such as goals, opinions, wishes, desires and needs, and similarity in lifestyle. Couples with similar characteristics are less likely to experience conflict in their marital life and lead better and happier lives than those with differences [37]. Couples' personality traits and beliefs affect their relationships and interactive processes through various mechanisms and pave the way for marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Obviously, such issues can lead to couple burnout if not prevented and treated. Spouses with similar personality traits accept each other's characteristics and consequently there will be less room for misunderstanding between them.

To explain the findings of this part of the research, we can say that extraversion, which is characterized by warmth and affection, sociability, assertiveness, activity, excitement seeking, and positive and desirable emotions [37], enables couples to create a happy and pleasant atmosphere in the family and increase their level of

marital adjustment. Basically, extraversion is associated with a sense of humor and happiness and creates favorable living conditions. Agreeableness, which is composed of trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, moderation and humbleness, creates a spirit of compassion and honesty in family relationships, which is a good behavioral model for adjustment in marital relationships. It shows the fact that straightforward, explicit and effective talks between couples can help solve their marital problems [38].

Individuals with high levels of agreeability have a higher level of tolerance and forgiveness in the face of interpersonal behavioral adversity and thus create more marital satisfaction and adjustment for themselves. Commitment and conscientiousness, which are composed of aspects such as morality, adequacy, discipline, progress seeking, patience, sobriety and contemplation, promote commitment and observance of moral standards in marital life, which raises the level of couples' adjustment and satisfaction. Finally, it can be said that openness, which is composed of intelligence, creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness and openness to experience, helps form a rational argument for marital life that leads to rational adjustment [39].

Neuroticism, which consists of anxiety, mood swings, hostility and impulsivity, leads to inability in controlling negative emotions and in establishing lasting positive relationships, so that divorce applicants show high levels of psychological problems. The higher the couples' level of neuroticism in each member of a couple, the more negative behaviors they will have towards each other, which will lead to a decrease in marital satisfaction and adjustment. To explain this, we can argue that individuals with high neuroticism are flighty and very irritable, a feature also used to describe dissatisfied couples who have experienced emotional divorce [40].

## LIMITATIONS

Although the findings supported the hypothetical model of the study, the results of this study should be interpreted in the light of its limitations. One of the limitations of this study was related to the socioeconomic 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 percent of the questionnaires among the subjects through online platforms. The other limitation was the cross-sectional nature of the study, which hindered causal inferences and an accurate knowledge of the real nature of the relationship between the variables. The large number of questionnaires was one of the limitations of the present study. 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 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. A longitudinal study makes it possible to examine the course and trend of the effects of personality traits on marital satisfaction over time.

## CONCLUSION

It can be said that marital conflicts based on personality traits can be explained by using a systems approach. Therefore, mental health professionals can play a more effective role in solving the problems of conflicting couples by employing a systems approach and considering personality roles.

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## ETHICS CONSIDERATION

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

## AUTHOR'S 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.

## CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

There was no conflict of interest to be declared.

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