



Explaining the Model of Marital Commitment Based on Object Relations with the Mediating Role of Ego Strength

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is the greatest and most significant event in an individual's life, and a healthy marriage requires several elements, including intimacy, commitment, and satisfaction. This study aimed to explain a model predicting marital commitment based on object relations with the mediating role of ego strength. The statistical population of the present study included all married couples residing in the city of Qom in 2023, totaling 7,634 individuals. Of these, 258 individuals (148 women and 110 men) were selected through purposive sampling. This study used a descriptive-correlational research design and structural equation modeling. Participants completed the Marital Commitment Inventory (DCI) by Adams and Jones (1997), the Object Relations Inventory by Bell et al. (1995), and the Ego Strength Inventory by Markstrom et al. (1997). Data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially using SPSS-28 and AMOS-24 software. The relationships among variables were examined using Pearson correlation and path analysis, and the mediating role was tested using the Sobel method. The findings of this study confirmed the mediating role of ego strength in the relationship between object relations and marital commitment ($p < .05$). The indirect effect of object relations on marital commitment was -0.062 . The results indicate that considering the complex interplay of issues that arise in couples' interactions and experiences, as well as the role of ego strength, can provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to the success and longevity of relationships.

Keywords: Marital Commitment, Ego Strength, Object Relations, Couples.

1. Introduction

Marriage is the greatest and most significant event in an individual's life, and a healthy marriage requires several elements, including intimacy, commitment,

satisfaction, and communication, as well as the absence of elements like violence and infidelity. Thus, marital commitment is one of the most important issues among couples (1). One of the crucial factors in a successful marriage is marital commitment. Marital commitment is one

of the most essential pillars of a healthy and successful marital life; without it, couples cannot experience true romantic connection and intimacy. Lack of marital commitment negatively impacts the individual, family, and society. It appears that love styles and emotion regulation are influential factors in commitment and the durability and stability of the marital relationship. Marital commitment is also recognized as a key component in the development and stability of marital relationships (2). In fact, commitment is the most critical qualitative aspect of a successful marriage, and its stability requires marital commitment. Therefore, marital commitment is recognized as a key component in the growth and stability of marital relationships, reflecting the nature of each partner's dependence on the marital relationship. Marital commitment, as a comprehensive structure, supports the view of Adams and Jones (1997), who consider it a vital part of any marriage (3). Tariveh et al. (2020) regard marital commitment as an essential element in the stability and durability of marriage and believe that interpersonal factors among couples, such as beliefs, criticisms, thoughts, emotions, intimacy, and marital conflicts, affect marital commitment. A marriage that begins with satisfaction, willingness, and the intention to have committed relationships gradually faces multiple factors that disrupt marital commitment (4). Yu et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of identifying factors that cause anxiety and distress in committed marital relationships and believe that individual characteristics and cognitive factors certainly affect this dimension of marital life (5).

Conversely, couples' communication patterns are significant cognitive variables that affect marital commitment. Constructive and effective communication is a prerequisite for psychological-emotional health, happiness, and the survival of marital relationships (2, 6). Constructive communication between couples is widely recognized as a key component in the functioning of a successful marital relationship. Communication in relationships between couples encompasses a wide range of behaviors and behavioral patterns. In this regard, Christensen and Shenk employ the concept of communication patterns, describing them as communication channels through which individuals interact with each other. Couples create a set of communication patterns, including mutual constructive communication, mutual avoidant communication, and

demand-withdraw communication patterns (6). The effective pattern in marital relationships is constructive communication, which includes mutual discussion, efforts to understand each other, and negotiation to reach solutions. The two unproductive patterns, mutual avoidant communication and demand-withdraw communication, are among the behavioral patterns that perpetuate and intensify conflicts and are accompanied by negative emotions during interactions between couples. Mutual avoidant communication involves avoidant behaviors during conflicts and distancing oneself after stressful discussions, describing a process where both spouses avoid conflict, for example, through silence, changing the subject, or withdrawing from each other.

Moreover, marital commitment and satisfaction and spouses' commitment to each other correlate with communication patterns and marital satisfaction. Specifically, in comparison, couples with higher marital commitment and satisfaction exhibit more coherent communication patterns. Communication patterns directly impact marital satisfaction and sustained commitment in marital relationships, also serving as a link between gender attitudes and marital satisfaction (5).

Some studies have shown that couple therapy based on object relations can enhance the marital intimacy of couples with severe borderline personality organization (7). Object relations theorists believe that personality is structured in patterns of feelings, behavior, and thoughts due to changes in early and current relationships. Thus, object relations theory defines an individual's internal structure in a social context, emphasizing the role of interpersonal interactions both in personality development through relationships with primary caregivers and in establishing and maintaining psychological and behavioral patterns in current relationships with family, friends, or colleagues (8). The object relations perspective emphasizes internalization, structuring, and reactivation of the earliest dyadic object relations in the clinical space (transference and countertransference). Internalization of object relations refers to all interactions the infant or child has with significant individuals. The child internalizes an image, a representation of a person, or a representation of an individual interacting with an object. From the object relations theory perspective, the individual grows up with

distorted expectations of others and unconsciously forces intimate individuals to conform to these internalized role patterns. One of the main sources of marital conflicts is spouses who project their hateful aspects onto their partner and then struggle with these traits in their spouse. A couple may also intuitively assign inappropriate family roles to their children. Unresolved psychological conflicts with the primary family continue to be expressed in intimate relationships with the spouse and children. Couples' attempts to resolve inner conflicts through interpersonal relationships are the focal point of all observed problems in troubled marriages and families (9).

To control such problems, object relations couple therapy assumes that individuals are prone to fixing problematic interactive patterns because they establish their current relationships based on unconsciously formed communication patterns in early life (10). This approach believes that current communication problems reflect primary family issues, as individuals hold idealized beliefs about marital relationships and seek to meet unmet needs from childhood relationships with their parents in a marital relationship (11). The advantage of focusing on object relations is that, unlike most couple therapy perspectives, it addresses unconscious desires and unrealistic expectations, potentially steering couples into a cycle of marital conflicts. Couples can change their perspective and behavior by understanding that their problems stem from maladaptive work in the previous family. This approach also attempts to explain current interactions in terms of past internalizations. This model allows therapists to focus simultaneously on both past and present periods (10).

On the other hand, satisfying primary needs leads to self-control and ego strength. Thus, fulfilling these needs through ego organization impacts life control and marriage quality. Additionally, ego strength positively mediates the relationship between basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and the quality of marital life (12). Therefore, another factor significantly impacting mental health is ego strength (13). Various studies have explored the relationship between ego strength and mental health, suggesting that the ego plays an important role in psychological functioning. Ego strength, as a personality trait, has its roots in the theories of Freud (1923) and Erikson (1965). Erikson introduced the concept of ego

strength in his psychosocial development theory (14, 15). Moreover, weak ego strength is associated with personality disorders. Davis et al. (1983) demonstrated that lack of ego strength leads to lower self-esteem, with the ego playing a leading role in the psychological structure, and many psychological disorders emerge when the ego is not well developed and fails to function properly. Ego strength enables individuals to achieve emotional balance and adapt well to internal and external stresses and tensions (15). Weak or strong ego strength in individuals is also related to experienced traumas (16, 17). Since numerous challenges occur in marital life affecting its quality, the level of "ego strength" indirectly impacts marital quality through proper management and handling of these challenges (18). Ego strength refers to a state where the self lacks sufficient resources for self-control, self-regulation, impulse control, and resistance to inner temptations (17).

Ego strength, as a set of "self" functions, is one of the fundamental structures of personality. The level of ego strength is determined by the individual's psychological abilities to resolve internal conflicts and deal with the environment, including self-control, resilience, defense mechanisms, and coping strategies (19). Similarly, Shokri et al. (2021) concluded that individuals with higher ego strength are more capable of facing problems and changes in their relationships, thus experiencing higher marital quality (20). Sivandian et al.'s (2015) study showed that couples with higher avoidant attachment in their families had lower marital adjustment if they had lower ego strength and higher marital adjustment if they had higher ego strength (13). Khosrobeysi et al.'s (2021) study indicated that increased ego strength enhances marital empathy through attachment styles. Conclusion: Based on the research findings, providing appropriate strategies to improve the predictive components of ego strength to enhance marital satisfaction, stability, and empathy should be considered (21). Furthermore, ego strength significantly mediates the relationship between basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness and marital quality. Therefore, in counseling and psychological service centers, education should be provided to married individuals with marital complaints on how to satisfy their basic psychological needs and methods to increase ego strength and marital quality (12).

Research in the field of marital relations and commitment has shown that ego strength can play significant roles in marital commitment. Ego strength refers to the belief in one's ability to face life's challenges and issues. This belief can directly impact marital commitment; in other words, individuals who believe in their ability to solve problems and face challenges may make their best effort to maintain and strengthen their marital relationships. Given these points, studies have shown that ego strength may act as a mediating factor in marital commitment. In other words, this factor may exert its influence through impacting object relations and couples' emotions on marital commitment. Therefore, based on the research literature, the present study seeks to fill the gap in the topic of couples. The researcher aims to address the question of whether explaining the model of marital commitment based on object relations with the mediating role of emotion regulation has a suitable fit.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present research method is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive-correlational in nature, specifically based on structural equation modeling. The statistical population of this study consisted of all married couples in Qom in 2023, totaling 7,634 cases according to the National Registry statistics. Given the optimal sample size in structural equation modeling research, many researchers consider a minimum sample size of 200. Using purposive sampling and informing on commonly used online platforms such as Telegram, Eita, and Instagram, and also through referrals to the counseling center (Farhan), a sample of 300 individuals was selected. After sample attrition, 258 individuals remained. Data obtained from this research were analyzed using Pearson correlation test, and the research model was tested using path analysis technique. Mediating relationships were examined using the Sobel test. Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 28 and Amos version 24 software. The maximum alpha error level for hypothesis testing was set at .05 ($p < .05$).

Inclusion Criteria:

- Resident of Qom city
- Minimum literacy (ability to read and write)
- Married with a minimum of one year of cohabitation

- No chronic illnesses (psychotic disorders, physical and mental disabilities)
- No addiction to narcotics and stimulants
- Informed consent to participate in the study

Exclusion Criteria:

- In the stage of emotional or legal divorce
- Non-participation in couples therapy sessions
- Incomplete questionnaires

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Ego Strength

This inventory was developed by Markstrom et al. (1997) based on Erikson's eight ego strengths. It contains 64 questions and 10 subscales, including hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom. The items are scored on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" (score 4) to "strongly disagree" (score 1). Reverse scoring is applied to negatively worded items. The highest possible score is 300, and the lowest is 60. A higher score indicates a higher level of ego strength. The total score is obtained by summing the individual's responses. The validity of the PIES has been confirmed through face, content, and construct validity. The reliability of the inventory, using Cronbach's alpha, was reported as .68. In Parviz et al.'s (2016) study, Cronbach's alpha reliability was .74 (15, 22). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for ego strength was .91.

2.2.2. Commitment

Marital commitment beliefs were measured using the Dimensions of Commitment Inventory (DCI) by Adams and Jones (1997), which has three subscales reflecting three dimensions of marital commitment: commitment to spouse, commitment to marriage, and feeling trapped. The DCI consists of 45 items (15 items per subscale) rated on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," with scores ranging from 1 to 5. Most items are directly scored, except for items 11, 12, 16, 23, 28, 29, 30, 32, 34, 35, 36, and 38, which are reverse-scored. Total scores range from 1 to 172, with higher scores indicating greater commitment. Adams and Jones reported a Cronbach's alpha reliability of .89 for the entire questionnaire. In a validation study by Shahsiah et al. (2009), content validity was confirmed by university counseling professors, and Cronbach's alpha was

.85 (23). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the entire questionnaire was .94, and for the subscales of commitment to spouse, commitment to marriage, and obligatory commitment, it was .83, .81, and .90, respectively.

2.2.3. Object Relations

Developed by Bell in 1995, this inventory consists of 90 items: 45 items measure object relations, and 45 items measure reality testing or ego functions, using a yes/no format. A "yes" response scores 1, and a "no" scores 0. Reverse scoring applies to items 1, 7, 8, 15, 21, 30, 37, and 42. The cut-off score is set at 60, clinically significant. The inventory measures four factors for object relations: alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence, and three factors for reality testing: reality distortion, perceptual uncertainty, and delusions/hallucinations (24). Validity is confirmed by correlations with the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale (ranging from .21 to .29) and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (ranging from .67 to .75). Reliability coefficients for four- and 13-week test-retest for object relations subscales ranged from .58 to .90. Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was calculated at .76 (9). In the present

study, Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was .86, and for the subscales of alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence, it was .82, .79, .76, and .80, respectively.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially using SPSS-28 and AMOS-24 software. The relationships among variables were examined using Pearson correlation and path analysis, and the mediating role was tested using the Sobel method.

3. Findings and Results

Regarding demographic characteristics, 148 participants (57.4%) were women and 110 participants (42.6%) were men. Concerning educational levels, the most frequent level was a Bachelor's degree with 83 participants (32.2%), followed by high school diploma with 65 participants (25.2%), Master's and Doctoral degrees with 55 participants (21.3%), and Associate degree with 21 participants (8.1%). The average age of respondents was 37.59 years, with a range from 23 to 58 years. The average duration of marriage was 8.60 years, with a range from 3 to 28 years.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Main Variables

| Variables | Components | Mean | Standard Deviation | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|--------------------|------------------------|--------|--------------------|----------|----------|
| Object Relations | Alienation | 3.99 | 1.68 | -0.004 | -0.519 |
| | Insecure Attachment | 5.14 | 2.25 | -0.065 | -0.635 |
| | Egocentricity | 4.52 | 3.10 | 0.752 | -0.142 |
| | Social Incompetence | 3.83 | 2.36 | 0.833 | 0.384 |
| | Total | 17.48 | 7.73 | 0.502 | -0.029 |
| Ego Strength | Hope | 26.80 | 5.93 | -0.379 | -0.022 |
| | Will | 28.09 | 5.09 | 0.273 | -0.194 |
| | Purpose | 29.67 | 6.29 | -0.414 | -0.583 |
| | Competence | 27.37 | 4.78 | 0.096 | 0.371 |
| | Fidelity | 31.41 | 4.54 | -0.266 | -0.607 |
| | Love | 25.56 | 4.34 | -0.098 | -0.715 |
| | Care | 30.75 | 4.99 | -0.342 | -0.165 |
| | Wisdom | 24.37 | 5.10 | -0.217 | -0.483 |
| Total | 224.02 | 29.19 | -0.176 | -0.512 | |
| Marital Commitment | Commitment to Spouse | 37.67 | 7.15 | -0.740 | 0.720 |
| | Commitment to Marriage | 42.61 | 7.72 | -0.561 | -0.091 |
| | Obligatory Commitment | 80.23 | 14.11 | -0.811 | 0.390 |
| | Total | 160.51 | 26.92 | -0.774 | 0.324 |

Reviewing the means in Table 1 showed that the overall mean for object relations was 17.48, with the lowest mean in

the social incompetence component (3.73) and the highest mean in the insecure attachment component (5.14). The

overall mean for ego strength was 224.02, with the lowest mean in the wisdom component (24.37) and the highest mean in the fidelity component (31.41). The mean for marital commitment was 160.51, with the lowest mean in the commitment to spouse component (37.67) and the highest

mean in the obligatory commitment component (80.23). Skewness and kurtosis indices were used to determine the data distribution status (univariate normality test). If these statistics' values are between -2 and +2, it indicates univariate normal distribution.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Matrix Between Main Variables

| Variables | Object Relations | Ego Strength | Marital Commitment |
|--------------------|------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Object Relations | 1 | | |
| Ego Strength | -0.28** | 1 | |
| Marital Commitment | -0.43** | 0.34** | 1 |

$p \leq .05, p \leq .01$ **

Results in Table 2 showed a statistically significant relationship between the two variables, object relations and ego strength, with the dependent variable of marital commitment ($p < .05$). The direction of the relationship between object relations and marital commitment was negative, indicating that an increase in object relations was associated with a decrease in marital commitment. The

direction of the relationship between ego strength and marital commitment was positive, suggesting that an increase in ego strength was associated with an increase in marital commitment. The correlation strengths showed that the strongest relationship with marital commitment was object relations ($r = -0.43$) and ego strength ($r = 0.34$).

Table 3

Model Fit Indices

| Index | Acceptable Value | Result |
|---|------------------|--------|
| R2 (Coefficient of Determination) | > 0.33 | 0.57 |
| GFI (Goodness of Fit Index) | > 0.90 | 0.93 |
| RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) | < 0.08 | 0.069 |
| CFI (Comparative Fit Index) | > 0.90 | 0.91 |
| NFI (Normed Fit Index) | > 0.90 | 0.87 |
| IFI (Incremental Fit Index) | > 0.90 | 0.86 |
| AGFI (Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index) | > 0.90 | 0.92 |
| PGFI (Parsimonious Goodness of Fit Index) | > 0.70 | 0.74 |
| Chi-Square/df | 1 to 5 | 3.25 |

As indicated in Table 3, the fit indices from show that the model has acceptable fits.

Table 4

Testing the Mediating Role of Ego Strength in the Relationship Between Object Relations and Marital Commitment Based on Sobel Test

| Path | Indirect Effect | t Value | p Value | Result |
|--|-----------------|---------|---------|-----------|
| Object Relations -> Ego Strength -> Marital Commitment | -0.062 | 2.15 | 0.032 | Confirmed |

The executed model shows the standardized coefficients indicating the strength of the variables' impact on each other. Examining the coefficients' strength showed that the strongest effect on the dependent variable of marital

commitment was from object relations ($\beta = -0.42$). Accordingly, results in Table 4 indicated that the mediating role of ego strength in the relationship between object relations and marital commitment was confirmed ($p < .05$).

The indirect effect of object relations on marital commitment was -0.062 .

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of the present study was to explain a model predicting marital commitment based on object relations with the mediating role of ego strength. The results showed that the mediating role of ego strength in the relationship between object relations and marital commitment was confirmed ($p < .05$). According to the findings, the indirect effect of object relations on marital commitment (mediated by ego strength) was confirmed. This finding aligns with prior studies (12, 20, 21, 25).

To explain this finding, ego strength, the process of enhancing an individual's sense of self-worth and personal power, can significantly impact the relationship between object relations and marital commitment. Object relations refer to the ways individuals perceive and interact with their emotional partners, while marital commitment is the level of dedication and loyalty each partner has toward their marriage. Ego strength refers to personal agency, self-worth, and the ability to overcome challenges (12). It includes feelings of capability, flexibility, and control over one's life. Ego strength may mediate the relationship between object relations and marital commitment. In other words, themes in marriage may affect each partner's ego strength, influencing their commitment to the relationship. For example, a marriage characterized by mutual respect, trust, and intimacy (positive themes) may strengthen each partner's ego. Feeling empowered in the relationship can increase their commitment to maintaining it. Conversely, a marriage with themes of criticism, control, and emotional distance (negative themes) may weaken each partner's ego strength. Feeling powerless in the relationship can reduce their commitment. In fact, ego strength can enhance object relations and, in turn, increase marital commitment. When individuals feel empowered, they are more likely to openly express their thoughts and feelings, communicate effectively, and engage in problem-solving behaviors. This can lead to a deeper understanding of each other's needs and desires, fostering stronger emotional bonds and increasing commitment to the marriage. However, it is important to note that if ego strength leads to narcissistic or self-centered behaviors, it can have negative consequences. In such cases,

it can undermine the relationship and reduce marital commitment. Therefore, it is crucial for individuals to strive for a healthy balance between ego strength and empathy for their partners.

Ultimately, it appears that ego strength can mediate the relationship between object relations and marital commitment by enhancing effective communication, problem-solving, and emotional connection. However, ensuring that this process is balanced and does not lead to self-centered behaviors that could harm the relationship is essential. Thus, if ego strength is considered a mediator, it indicates that interventions aimed at enhancing a sense of empowerment in couples can help strengthen marital commitment, particularly when facing challenging relationship issues.

Limitations of this study include the geographic limitation of the sample, making it difficult to generalize the findings to all couples. Additionally, controlling for intervening variables such as the number of children, concurrent care of parents, and economic and welfare status is crucial for generalizing results. Therefore, it is recommended to replicate and extend the proposed model in couples therapy centers and community centers. Longitudinal studies following couples over time can help clarify the directionality of these relationships.

Authors' Contributions

M.R. conceptualized the study, designed the research methodology, and supervised the data collection process. M.Z.H., the corresponding author, conducted the structural equation modeling, performed the data analysis using SPSS-28 and AMOS-24 software, and led the drafting and revising of the manuscript. N.M. assisted with participant recruitment, supported the administration of the questionnaires, and contributed to the literature review. All authors participated in discussing the findings, critically reviewed the manuscript for important intellectual content, and approved the final version for publication.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study placed a high emphasis on ethical considerations. Informed consent obtained from all participants, ensuring they are fully aware of the nature of the study and their role in it. Confidentiality strictly maintained, with data anonymized to protect individual privacy. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for research with human subjects as outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

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