





## The Mediating Role of Dark Personality Traits in Explaining the Structural Relationships Between the Desire to Control Others and Women's Sense of Happiness

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The purpose of the current study was to investigate the mediating role of dark personality traits in explaining the structural relationships between the desire to control others and women's sense of happiness.

**Methods:** The research method was descriptive correlational with a structural equation modeling approach. The population of the study comprised all married women in Tehran in the year 2021. The sample size was 448 participants, selected through purposive convenience sampling and assessed using the Taghizadeh and Shadmehri Happiness Scale (2016), the Graham-Kwan and Archer Controlling Behaviors Scale (2005), and the Johnson and Webster Dark Personality Traits Scale (2010). Data analysis was performed using structural equation modeling.

**Findings:** The analysis indicated that the structural model of the study fits well with the collected data, and dark personality traits significantly and negatively mediate the relationship between the desire to control others and women's sense of happiness.

**Conclusion:** Thus, it can be stated that the higher the desire to control others and the presence of dark personality traits, the lower the sense of happiness, which can be a useful insight in couples' counseling.

**Keywords:** *Sense of happiness, desire to control others, dark personality traits.*

### 1. Introduction

The term "happiness" has been the subject of numerous studies over the past three decades, especially in sociology. This term has managed to attract a vast body of literature in less than two decades and has become a

somewhat mythical concept (DeFilippis, 2001). In marital life, some individuals (whether male or female) are completely or relatively satisfied with their lives; therefore, they consider themselves happy. Conversely, some individuals are dissatisfied with their lives and consider themselves unhappy (Heiman et al., 2011; Nezami et al.,

2023). Happiness is a concept that all humans seek (Diener, 2013). From a psychological perspective, happiness means joy, and many believe that happiness can be increased by enhancing pleasure and reducing pain and discomfort (Tamir et al., 2017).

Numerous factors are associated with the feeling of happiness, which this research explored in relation to several variables. One factor that can have a serious impact in unhealthy family relationships is controlling behavior in marital relationships. Controlling (restraint) is a trait where an individual has a tendency to restrain the behaviors of others. This term is synonymous with dominance (Pourrajab Ravari & Kamyabi, 2021). Control over others can occur regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status. Control is commonly observed in relationships between couples (Bonior, 2015). Control is a form of torture for the other party, occurring in a relationship with strong personal commitment, hopes, and dreams. Control diminishes the self-agency and health of the victim over time. The victim lives in fear and anxiety of direct restraint and potential violence. The victim is constantly disturbed and stressed, even when situations seem calm (Fontes, 2015).

One of these factors and variables is the dark personality traits of individuals. This concept in the field of personality psychology is a relatively new concept known as James Bond psychology. These personality traits were introduced and conceptualized by Paulhus and Williams (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The dark personality traits of each person are made up of three dimensions: antisocial, narcissism, and Machiavellianism, which directly influence individuals' attitudes towards life. These traits consist of three related but distinct components: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. These components are all related to exploitation, emotional coldness, duplicity, aggression, and a sense of importance (Ardic & Ozsoy, 2016). The Machiavellian personality construct refers to multiple and pessimistic interpersonal relationships, self-centeredness, indifference to moral principles and values, inclination towards unethical behaviors, and violation of typical behavioral norms, deception, and lack of empathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Narcissism is also observed with characteristics such as arrogance, selfishness, grandiosity, aggression, perfectionism, lack of empathy, and a sense of superiority in areas of intelligence, wealth, beauty, and fame (Brewer et al., 2023; Ghasemzadeh et al., 2023). Research predicts that women, with each of these triadic personality traits, are more likely to control relationships (Brewer &

Abell, 2017). Studies conducted have shown that the variable of dark personality traits is associated with many behavioral and psychological problems including the inclination towards substances (Jonason et al., 2010), impulsivity and thrill-seeking (Crysel et al., 2013), swearing and aggression (Sumner et al., 2012), lack of empathy (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012), and emotional coldness (Jonason et al., 2012), each of which also affects marital relationships.

Given that the family is considered one of the main pillars of society and achieving a healthy society definitely depends on having a healthy family, and having a healthy family is conditional on its members enjoying mental health and having desirable relationships with each other (SedaghatKhah & BehzadiPoor, 2017), thus, improving the mental health of family members and their relationships will undoubtedly have positive and effective effects on society. Also, the term "happiness" has been the subject of many studies over the past three decades, especially in sociology. This term has managed to attract a vast body of literature in less than two decades and has become a somewhat mythical concept. The concept of happiness can assist psychologists in scientific investigations and counseling in the area of family and enhancing the quality of marital relationships in today's world. Therefore, the researcher aims to answer the question of whether dark personality traits play a mediating role in explaining the structural relationships between the desire to control others and women's sense of happiness.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

The research method employed in this study was descriptive correlational utilizing a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. The population comprised all married women in Tehran in the year 2022. Determining the minimum sample size necessary for collecting data relevant to structural equation modeling is critical. Although there is no general consensus on the required sample size for factor analysis and structural models, many researchers suggest that the minimum sample size should be 200. Kline also believes that 10 or 20 samples per variable are necessary for exploratory factor analysis, but a minimum sample size of 200 is defensible (Kline, 2011; Kline, 2023). In the present study, the sample size evaluated was 448 participants (it is necessary to mention that the intended sample size was 400; however, due to the online nature of the research, 448 respondents completed the questionnaires due to the lack of

control). The sampling method, given the dispersion of the samples, was purposive convenience.

Entry Criteria for the Research Included: Being married, willingness to participate in the study, female gender, and cohabiting with a spouse. Exit criteria included: Unwillingness to participate in the research, being in the process of divorce. The research was conducted by initially developing the questionnaires online. Subsequently, the links to the questionnaires were sent to virtual groups. The method of conducting the research and the objectives were provided in the questionnaire descriptions. Ethically, it was explained that if they consented to participate, they should complete the questionnaire, and there was no need to provide names and surnames; the research results would be used in a thesis and the information would remain confidential.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Sense of Happiness

This questionnaire was developed by Taghizadeh and Shadmehri (2016) during a study that evaluated the psychometric indicators of this questionnaire. It uses a 4-point Likert scale with the values being very low=1, low=2, high=3, very high=4. The maximum score is 164 and the minimum score is 41, with the highest scores representing the greatest sense of happiness and the lowest scores representing the least sense of happiness. The face validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by psychology experts, and after ensuring content validity of the items, the Women's Sense of Happiness Questionnaire, which includes 41 items, was completed by 60 married individuals. The overall reliability score obtained from this research using Cronbach's alpha internal consistency method was 0.97, indicating that the questionnaire has good reliability and validity. The Women's Sense of Happiness Questionnaire has an alpha coefficient of 0.97, indicating high reliability and good validity. The sub-scales of the questionnaire include 1- trust, empathy, attention, cooperation, 2- love, marital intimacy, honesty, 3- support, compassion, emotion regulation. The classification of results is as follows: lowest sense of happiness 48-81, acceptable level of happiness 82-123, highest sense of happiness 124-164. The cutoff point on the Women's Sense of Happiness scale is 102 (Moshtaghi, 2018).

### 2.2.2. Spousal Controlling Behaviors

The Spousal Controlling Behaviors Scale was developed by Graham-Kwan and Archer in 2005 to assess controlling behaviors in marital life. This tool is a 24-item scale that examines controlling behaviors among couples. For couples with children, 5 additional statements are added to the scale (5 statements to the end of the test). Subjects must specify on a 5-point Likert scale (from 0 to 4) how much they and their spouse exhibit each of the behaviors listed. This questionnaire consists of 5 sub-scales (considering the statements about children, 6 sub-scales); economic control (statements 1 to 4), threatening control (statements 5 to 8), control through intimidation (statements 9 to 13), emotional control (statements 14 to 18), and control through isolation (statements 19 to 24). Research has shown that the Controlling Behaviors Scale has satisfactory external validity overall. The overall alpha coefficient of the test in the female sample was 0.90 and in the male sample was 0.89. The internal consistency of the economic control sub-scale was reported as low, between 0.48 and 0.66. The internal consistency of the emotional control and isolation control sub-scales was good, reported between 0.80 and 0.87 (Jones & Paulhus, 2009; Pourrajab Ravari & Kamyabi, 2021).

### 2.2.3. Dark Personality Traits

The Dark Triad Personality Questionnaire was developed by Johnson and Webster (2010) in a 12-item self-report format that measures the dark personality traits of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism. This questionnaire is answered on a Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Johnson and Webster (2010) reported a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.89 for the entire scale, 0.86 for the Machiavellianism sub-scale, 0.76 for the psychopathy sub-scale, and 0.87 for the narcissism sub-scale (Jonason & Webster, 2010). In Iran, this questionnaire was studied for translation and psychometric properties, and the correlation of the items with the total scale score (0.75 to 0.83) was reported. Also, its internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha was 0.81, and its split-half reliability was 0.78 (Basharpoor et al., 2021).

## 2.3. Data Analysis

After conducting the research, the raw scores were analyzed using statistical methods. Initially, the variables under study were preliminarily analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, correlation matrix).

Subsequently, data screening and preparation of the collected data were undertaken, particularly focusing on the main assumptions of structural equation modeling (SEM), including missing values, normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. Finally, multivariate analysis using structural equation modeling was performed to test the research hypotheses.

**3. Findings and Results**

In the current study, 448 participants with a mean age of 36.98 and a standard deviation of 8.70 were present. Among the participants, 214 (47.8%) were employed, 17 (3.8%)

were students, and 217 (48.4%) were homemakers. Furthermore, 123 participants (27.5%) were childless, 172 (38.3%) had one child, 120 (26.8%) had two children, and 33 (7.4%) had more than two children. Regarding educational attainment, 23 participants (5.1%) had less than a high school diploma, 66 (14.7%) had a high school diploma, 54 (12.1%) had an associate degree, 189 (42.2%) had a bachelor's degree, and 116 (25.9%) had a master's degree or higher. It is also worth mentioning that the average duration of marriage among participants was 13.18 years, with a standard deviation of 10.12 years. Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients among the research variables.

**Table 1**

*Means, Standard Deviations, Correlation Coefficients, and Other Statistical Indices Among Research Variables*

Research Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Controlling Behaviors - Economic Control	-										
2. Controlling Behaviors - Threatening Control	.68*	-									
3. Controlling Behaviors - Control through Intimidation	.70*	.64*	-								
4. Controlling Behaviors - Emotional Control	.64*	.57*	.66*	-							
5. Controlling Behaviors - Control through Isolation	.36*	.37*	.36*	.36*	-						
6. Dark Traits - Machiavellianism	.13*	.33*	.15*	.19*	.33*	-					
7. Dark Traits - Psychopathy	.42*	.50*	.45*	.47*	.18*	.55*	-				
8. Dark Traits - Narcissism	.25*	.34*	.28*	.41*	.34*	.40*	.60*	-			
9. Sense of Happiness - Trust/Empathy/Attention/Cooperation	-.42*	-.45*	-.32*	-.36*	-.18*	-.41*	-.46*	-.43*	-		
10. Sense of Happiness - Love/Intimacy/Honesty	-.47*	-.51*	-.38*	-.41*	-.20*	-.46*	-.53*	-.47*	.62*	-	
11. Sense of Happiness - Support/Compassion/Emotion Regulation	-.33*	-.46*	-.32*	-.34*	-.19*	-.50*	-.49*	-.51*	.57*	.48*	-
Mean	7.29	5.92	6.41	8.25	7.57	8.39	8.95	13.51	28.03	47.98	24.40
Std. Dev.	2.89	2.20	2.34	2.52	2.35	2.71	2.44	2.87	7.50	10.92	6.19
Skewness	-0.03	0.99	-0.56	0.61	0.72	1.01	1.51	0.51	1.14	-1.35	-0.46
Kurtosis	1.14	0.13	0.47	0.58	0.07	0.59	0.25	-0.73	-0.73	0.28	-0.93
VIF	0.39	0.42	0.37	0.42	0.78	0.65	0.43	0.58	-	-	-
Tolerance	2.60	2.37	2.68	1.38	1.28	1.55	2.33	1.74	-	-	-

\*p<0.01

Table 1 indicates that all components of controlling behaviors and dark personality traits are significantly and negatively correlated with women's sense of happiness. As shown in Table 1, the study examined the normality of the distribution of single variables through skewness and kurtosis of each variable, and the results indicated that the skewness and kurtosis values of all components are within ±2. This finding suggests that the assumption of normality for the distribution of single variables is met. The assumption of multicollinearity was examined using the indices of tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF).

Table 1 shows that the multicollinearity assumption is also met in the data of the present study, as the tolerance values of the predictor variables are greater than 0.1 and the VIF values of each are less than 10. According to Mire and colleagues (2006), a tolerance value of less than 0.1 and a VIF value greater than 10 indicate a violation of the multicollinearity assumption.

In this study, to evaluate the establishment or non-establishment of the assumption of multivariate normal distribution, the Mahalanobis distance data analysis was used. The skewness and kurtosis values related to the

Mahalanobis distance were respectively 1.03 and 0.40, indicating that the skewness and kurtosis values are within  $\pm 2$ . This finding indicates that the assumption of normality for the distribution of multivariate data is established. Finally, to evaluate the homogeneity of variances, the scatter plot of the standardized residuals was examined and confirmed.

Following the evaluation of assumptions, the data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) with AMOS 24.0 software and maximum likelihood (ML) estimation. All three variables—controlling behaviors, dark personality traits, and women's sense of happiness—were assumed to be latent and measured by their respective indicators. The research model hypothesized that controlling

behaviors predict women's sense of happiness through the mediation of dark personality traits. The fit indices of the model examination, with the exception of the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), support an acceptable model fit with the collected data ( $\chi^2/df = 4.31$ , CFI = .967, GFI = .941, AGFI = .891, RMSEA = .086). Due to the importance of the RMSEA fit index in model data fit, the measurement model was adjusted by creating a covariance between the errors of the indicators for control through intimidation and emotional control, and as Table 4 shows, the fit indices obtained indicate that the model fits the collected data acceptably ( $\chi^2/df = 3.58$ , CFI = .973, GFI = .953, AGFI = .911, RMSEA = .075). Table 2 displays the path coefficients among the variables in the structural model.

**Table 2**

*Path Coefficients in the Structural Model*

Paths	b	SE	$\beta$	p
Path coefficient between Controlling Behaviors ← Dark Personality Traits	.329	.041	.611	< .001
Path coefficient between Dark Personality Traits ← Sense of Happiness	-1.362	.209	-.492	< .001
Direct path coefficient between Controlling Behaviors ← Sense of Happiness	-.364	.085	-.244	< .001
Indirect path coefficient between Controlling Behaviors ← Sense of Happiness	-.449	.087	-.300	< .001
Total path coefficient between Controlling Behaviors ← Sense of Happiness	-.813	.075	-.544	< .001

Table 2 indicates that the path coefficient between dark personality traits and women's sense of happiness ( $\beta = -.492$ ,  $p < .001$ ) is negative and significant at the .001 level. Both the total ( $\beta = -.544$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and direct ( $\beta = -.244$ ,  $p < .001$ ) path coefficients between controlling behaviors and women's sense of happiness are negatively significant at the .001 level. Table 2 also shows that the indirect path

coefficient between controlling behaviors and women's sense of happiness ( $\beta = -.300$ ,  $p < .001$ ) is negative and significant at the .001 level. Accordingly, it can be said that dark personality traits significantly and negatively mediate the relationship between controlling behaviors and women's sense of happiness.

**Figure 1**

*Model with Standard Coefficients*

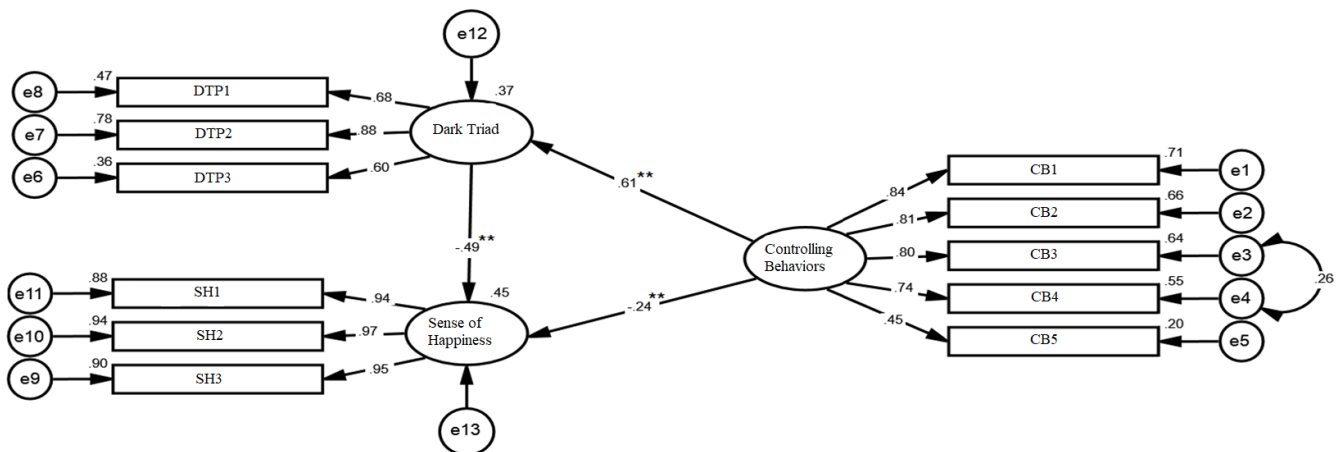




Figure 1 shows that the total squared multiple correlations ( $R^2$ ) for the variable of women's sense of happiness is .45, indicating that controlling behaviors and dark personality traits together explain 45% of the variance in women's sense of happiness.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the research findings, it was concluded that the structural model fits acceptably with the collected data. In testing the eighth hypothesis, it was concluded that dark personality traits significantly and negatively mediate the relationship between the desire to control others and women's sense of happiness. The current research results are consistent with the findings of prior studies (Botta et al., 2019; Pourrajab Ravari & Kamyabi, 2021).

They found that the lack of success in marital life often stems from what William Glasser refers to as a controlling nature. This disposition is not exclusive to marital bonds but manifests more intensely in them. The fundamental assumption of those who exhibit controlling behaviors is that "if we feel unhappy, we are not to blame for such feelings; rather, it is others and events beyond our control, or our brain is structurally or chemically configured to automatically rectify this problem without our volition." In this hypothesis, people's unhappiness is never recognized as being due to their choices and actions. Those who are dissatisfied with their marriage and express negative emotions in their marital life resort to controlling behaviors, asserting that their spouse is the cause of all misfortunes, and they feel obligated to do whatever they can to change their spouse's behavior, even if it costs their spouse's life (Glasser, 2000; Glasser, 2004).

In controlling behaviors in marital life, an individual attempts to control their spouse through methods such as economic control, threatening control, control through intimidation, emotional control, and control through isolation, which significantly impacts women's sense of happiness. More precisely, individuals with high Machiavellian traits tend to dominate and influence others, show a greater desire to win, are more convincing, and are less easily persuaded themselves. Their primary focus is on what they hold or must do rather than on anything else. In antisocial personality as well, control traits exist, initially characterized by a congenital emotional defect and marked by traits such as selfishness, cruelty, lack of interpersonal affect, superficial charm, oppression, and exploitation of

others. Individuals with antisocial personality disorder and narcissistic personality disorder are similar in their cunning, glibness, superficiality, exploitativeness, and lack of empathy. Also, symptoms of narcissistic disorder include a lack of empathy, self-centeredness, grandiosity, and a sense of uniqueness, disregard for rules, demeaning others, an excessive need for admiration, jealousy, exploitativeness, and experiencing intense negative emotions, which can well explain the results of the current research.

#### 5. Suggestions and Limitations

In the process of conducting the research, limitations such as convenience sampling, conducting research during the COVID-19 crisis, reliance on self-reported questionnaires, and not considering cultural, social, and economic variables were noted. Given the research results, future studies should utilize various tools such as observation, interviews, and behavioral rating of subjects. This research can open a new field for researchers in the country in the area of marital relations, with further research and the development of therapeutic protocols potentially aiding in improving marital life. Moreover, the research findings can be used to enhance premarital counseling and couple therapy to improve the quality of marital relationships.

#### Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

#### 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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## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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