




Structural Equation Modeling of Marital Conflicts Based on Early Maladaptive Schemas, Gender Stereotypes, and Emotional Needs with the Mediation of Coping Styles

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to develop and test a structural equation model for predicting marital conflict based on early maladaptive schemas, gender stereotypes, and emotional needs, with the mediating role of coping styles.

Methods and Materials: The research adopted a correlational design using structural equation modeling. The statistical population included 1,760 married men and women with marital conflicts who had sought counseling services in Tehran in 2024. Using purposive sampling, 500 participants were selected who had been married for at least six months and voluntarily completed six standardized questionnaires: the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ), Young Schema Questionnaire-Short Form, Bem Sex Role Inventory (short form), Emotional Needs Questionnaire, Young-Rigg Schema Avoidance Inventory, and Young's Overcompensation Inventory. Data were analyzed using SmartPLS software through both descriptive and inferential statistics, including path coefficients and indirect effects.

Findings: The results showed that disconnection and rejection schema ($\beta = 0.413$, $p < 0.001$), other-directedness ($\beta = 0.214$, $p < 0.001$), avoidance coping ($\beta = 0.217$, $p < 0.001$), and overcompensation coping ($\beta = 0.122$, $p = 0.010$) were significant direct predictors of marital conflict. Emotional needs significantly predicted both avoidance ($\beta = 0.175$, $p = 0.014$) and overcompensation coping ($\beta = 0.246$, $p < 0.001$). Gender stereotypes also played a role, with neutrality negatively predicting marital conflict ($\beta = -0.229$, $p < 0.001$). Mediation analysis confirmed significant indirect effects of impaired autonomy and emotional needs on marital conflict via avoidance coping, and of impaired limits and over-vigilance via overcompensation coping ($p < 0.05$). However, several indirect paths through gender stereotypes were not statistically significant.

Conclusion: The findings support a comprehensive model where early maladaptive schemas, emotional needs, and gender stereotypes predict marital conflict through maladaptive coping styles. These insights can inform schema-based couple therapy by addressing cognitive-emotional vulnerabilities and promoting healthier coping mechanisms in marital relationships.

Keywords: Marital conflict, early maladaptive schemas, gender stereotypes, emotional needs, coping styles

1. Introduction

Marital conflict remains one of the most persistent and psychologically taxing phenomena in the lives of couples, often rooted in deeply embedded intrapersonal dynamics. Understanding the underlying psychological mechanisms that predispose individuals to relational instability has been the focus of contemporary clinical and theoretical investigations. Among the most robust frameworks to emerge in recent years is schema theory, particularly the concept of Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs), which are pervasive, self-defeating patterns established during childhood and elaborated throughout one's life (Afshin et al., 2024; Chaharrahi et al., 2023). These schemas, when triggered in close relationships, can distort perceptions, fuel maladaptive reactions, and ultimately contribute to escalating marital discord (Grabowski, 2023).

EMSs are tightly interwoven with early attachment experiences and are known to guide the formation of internal working models of the self and others (Karimi et al., 2023; Rahiman, 2024). These schemas may manifest most saliently in intimate partnerships where unmet emotional needs are activated. As maladaptive schemas are activated, individuals often revert to ineffective coping styles—commonly avoidance, surrender, or overcompensation—as defensive responses to emotional pain (Ghiasi et al., 2024; Khatibi & Meghrazi, 2023). These coping responses, though temporarily soothing, often perpetuate relational tension, especially in long-term marital contexts where patterns become cyclical.

Coping styles, thus, play a critical mediating role between schemas and the experience of marital conflict. Avoidance strategies, such as emotional withdrawal or disengagement, can lead to the erosion of marital intimacy and communication (Rahiman et al., 2023; Selvi, 2022). Overcompensation strategies—like control, criticism, or dominance—may provoke defensive reactions from the partner, accelerating cycles of conflict. The literature indicates that coping styles are not merely reactive mechanisms but dynamic mediators that shape the course of marital adjustment or maladjustment (Laiou et al., 2024; Moghaddam et al., 2024).

Equally important in the examination of marital functioning are the roles of gender stereotypes. These cognitive generalizations about socially appropriate behavior for men and women are internalized from early life and may inform how spouses perceive roles, express

emotions, and manage conflict (Chen, 2024; Osmonova et al., 2024). Traditional gender role expectations—such as the male breadwinner and the emotionally submissive female—can restrict authentic expression and perpetuate power imbalances, which are particularly toxic in emotionally charged interactions like marital disputes (Rahiman, 2024; Stroian, 2021). Moreover, adherence to rigid stereotypes can constrain the use of adaptive coping and reduce mutual empathy, further intensifying the schema-driven cycles of misunderstanding and rejection (Olave et al., 2024).

A related yet often overlooked domain is the individual's core emotional needs. According to schema therapy, unmet emotional needs in childhood—such as safety, autonomy, or validation—lay the foundation for maladaptive schemas (Estebasari & Abolghasemi, 2024; Stroian, 2021). These needs, when unfulfilled, become chronic voids that individuals attempt to fill in adult relationships, often through unrealistic demands or emotionally regressive behaviors (Pour et al., 2020). Within marriage, this dynamic can manifest as excessive dependency, control, or withdrawal—all of which destabilize relational harmony. The role of unmet emotional needs is not only foundational to schema formation but also crucial in understanding the activation of specific coping styles in response to marital stress (Mirzaei et al., 2023; Ramezani et al., 2022).

In addition to intrapersonal processes, recent scholarship emphasizes the complex interplay between personality, schemas, and dyadic interactional patterns. Research shows that personality traits, such as neuroticism or introversion, interact with EMSs to shape emotional regulation and communication in marital settings (Joshua et al., 2023; Rahiman et al., 2023). Such traits may predispose individuals to interpret their partner's behavior through a biased schematic lens, especially during emotionally loaded exchanges. For example, someone with a strong schema of mistrust may misinterpret a benign disagreement as betrayal or abandonment (Afshin et al., 2024).

In clinical populations, particularly among couples experiencing marital infidelity or severe relational dissatisfaction, the influence of schemas becomes even more pronounced. Studies have shown that maladaptive schemas such as emotional deprivation, defectiveness, or failure are significantly elevated in individuals engaged in or affected by infidelity, and these schemas correlate strongly with feelings of betrayal, rejection, and shame (Karimi et al., 2023; Khatibi & Meghrazi, 2023). Furthermore, schema activation in such high-stress scenarios often triggers

primitive coping responses, intensifying conflict and undermining resolution (Chaharrahi et al., 2023).

The multidimensional nature of marital conflict thus demands an integrated model that accounts for early psychological vulnerabilities (i.e., schemas), contextualized behavioral responses (i.e., coping styles), and sociocultural factors (i.e., gender roles). Several models have been proposed to explain these relationships, yet few have empirically examined them through the lens of structural equation modeling (SEM), which allows for the simultaneous evaluation of direct and indirect effects among multiple variables (Moghaddam et al., 2024; Rahiman, 2024).

The present study aims to bridge this gap by developing and testing a structural equation model in which early maladaptive schemas, gender stereotypes, and unmet emotional needs predict marital conflicts through the mediating roles of avoidance and overcompensation coping styles.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research employed a fundamental, correlational design based on structural equation modeling (SEM), which is a multivariate statistical analysis technique used to analyze structural relationships. SEM is a combination of factor analysis and multiple regression and is utilized to analyze the complex relationships between observed variables and latent constructs. The statistical population included all married men and women with marital conflicts who sought counseling services in Tehran in the year 2024. According to estimates from counseling centers, this population comprised approximately 1,760 individuals who had been living independently as a couple for at least six months. Some of these individuals had been referred to counseling centers following court mandates. Based on recommendations for SEM studies and the number of questionnaire components, a sample size of 500 participants was deemed appropriate. The research process began with a literature review across domestic and international databases to identify relevant theoretical and empirical sources, which formed the basis for the first and second chapters of the study. An introductory letter from the university was obtained to facilitate data collection, and researchers approached family counseling centers in Tehran to recruit participants. Purposeful sampling was applied, including only those married individuals who had visited counseling

centers due to marital conflicts. Participation was voluntary, and individuals who consented to the study were provided with standardized questionnaires. The collected responses were subsequently entered into the PLS software for statistical analysis.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ)

The MCQ is a 42-item self-report tool developed by Sanaei (2000) based on clinical observations, designed to assess eight dimensions of marital conflict. These include reduced cooperation, decreased sexual relations, heightened emotional reactions, increased seeking of children's support, intensified personal relationships with one's own relatives, reduced family relations with the spouse's relatives and friends, financial separation, and diminished effective communication. The scoring follows a five-point Likert scale (Never to Always). A cumulative score below 42 indicates low conflict, scores between 42 and 126 reflect moderate conflict, and scores above 126 indicate high levels of conflict, with 126 being the cut-off. The instrument demonstrated acceptable reliability in previous studies, including a Cronbach's alpha of .90 in this research for the total scale and subscale alphas ranging from .56 to .89, confirming its internal consistency.

2.2.2. Young Schema Questionnaire – Short Form

The short form of the Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ-SF) contains 75 items assessing 15 early maladaptive schemas across five domains. These domains include Disconnection/Rejection, Impaired Autonomy/Performance, Other-Directedness, Overvigilance/Inhibition, and Impaired Limits. Each schema is assessed via five items, rated on a five-point Likert scale. A total score above 150 indicates significant schema activation. Prior psychometric evaluations by Baranoff and colleagues reported Cronbach's alphas ranging from .94 to .96. In this study, the overall internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for the YSQ-SF was calculated at .83, confirming its suitability for research purposes.

2.2.3. Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ)

Bem Sex Role Inventory – Short Form

The short form of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) is a 30-item instrument derived from the original longer

version. It includes ten items each for femininity (e.g., affectionate, compassionate), masculinity (e.g., assertive, independent), and social desirability. Items are rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "Completely False" to "Completely True." Scores for each subscale are averaged, and a cut-off of 40 is used for interpretation. The short form has demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .75 to .90 in Iranian studies. In this study, the alpha for the total scale was .79, indicating satisfactory reliability.

2.2.4. *Young-Rigg Avoidance Inventory*

The Young-Rigg Avoidance Inventory consists of 41 items and was designed to assess 14 different avoidance coping strategies related to schema-driven behavior. Responses are given on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Completely False) to 6 (Completely True). A total score above 123 signifies a high tendency toward avoidance strategies. This inventory includes behaviors such as sleeping to avoid stress, distraction, suppression of unpleasant thoughts, and compulsive behaviors like overeating or excessive shopping. Psychometric analysis in Iranian samples reported a Cronbach's alpha of .79, and in this study, the internal consistency was confirmed at .81.

2.2.5. *Young's Overcompensation Inventory*

Developed in 1995, this 48-item scale evaluates excessive compensatory strategies employed in response to maladaptive schemas. Items are rated on a six-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating a stronger presence of overcompensation behaviors, such as hyper-assertiveness, obsessive thoughts, or unrealistic optimism. A cut-off score of 120 has been suggested for clinical interpretation. Internal consistency and construct validity were supported by previous studies, and in the current research, the overall Cronbach's alpha was found to be .86, confirming strong reliability.

2.2.6. *Primary Emotional Needs Questionnaire*

This 30-item self-report instrument assesses six core emotional needs using a six-point Likert scale. Participants rate each item based on how well it reflects their personal experience. Scores of 5 or 6 on two or more items related to

a particular need suggest that the need is unmet. The instrument was developed by Ghaderi and has demonstrated solid psychometric properties, including factor loadings onto a single overarching construct. The cut-off score for this tool is 90. Previous research reported Cronbach's alphas above .70 for all six needs, and in this study, the internal consistency coefficient was .81, supporting the reliability of the instrument.

2.3. *Data Analysis*

Data analysis was conducted in two main phases: descriptive and inferential. In the descriptive phase, demographic characteristics and key distribution indicators such as central tendency and dispersion metrics were explored. In the inferential phase, Pearson correlation and regression analyses were conducted to test the research hypotheses. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to evaluate the direct and indirect relationships among early maladaptive schemas, gender stereotypes, emotional needs, coping styles, and marital conflicts. The analysis was carried out using PLS (Partial Least Squares) software, which enables visual modeling of complex multivariate relationships and is particularly suitable for studies with latent constructs and multiple indicators.

3. *Findings and Results*

The demographic profile of the participants in this study included a total of 500 married individuals experiencing marital conflict. Among them, 118 participants (23.6%) were men and 382 (76.4%) were women. Regarding age distribution, 7 individuals (1.4%) were under 20 years old, 132 (26.4%) were between 20 and 25, 130 (26%) were aged 25 to 30, and the largest group, 231 participants (46.2%), were over 30 years old. In terms of educational attainment, 205 participants (41%) held a diploma or less, 220 (44%) had an associate or bachelor's degree, 59 (11.8%) held a master's degree, and 16 individuals (3.2%) had a doctoral degree. With respect to marital duration, 67 individuals (13.4%) had been married for less than one year, 89 (17.8%) had been married between one to three years, 51 (10.2%) for three to five years, 68 (13.6%) for five to ten years, and the majority, 225 participants (45%), had been married for more than ten years.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Main Variables of the Study (N = 500)

Variable	Subscale	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Marital Conflicts	Reduced Effective Communication	14	33	22.27	3.12	0.481	0.324
	Reduced Cooperation	5	22	9.76	3.61	0.703	-0.204
	Decreased Sexual Relations	5	19	7.72	3.04	1.381	1.414
	Increased Emotional Reactions	8	27	13.72	3.22	0.847	0.730
	Closer Individual Ties with Own Relatives	5	17	8.41	3.01	0.920	0.199
	Reduced Family Relations with Spouse's Relatives	3	14	8.58	2.34	0.907	0.430
	Financial Separation	7	25	14.58	3.23	0.417	-0.076
	Increased Seeking of Children's Support	4	17	7.41	2.67	0.698	-0.014
	Total Marital Conflicts Score	62	135	89.48	16.93	0.754	-0.180
Early Maladaptive Schemas	Disconnection and Rejection	25	137	60.26	23.56	0.715	-0.123
	Impaired Autonomy and Performance	20	113	40.77	19.21	0.987	0.276
	Other-Directedness	10	59	28.59	9.53	0.231	-0.422
	Over-Vigilance and Inhibition	10	60	31.08	10.49	0.152	-0.224
	Impaired Limits	10	58	30.25	10.07	0.275	-0.232
Gender Stereotypes	Masculinity	21	70	48.50	8.02	-0.126	-0.233
	Femininity	15	70	57.84	9.18	-1.174	1.447
	Neutral/Social Desirability	21	70	51.39	6.16	-0.418	1.984
Coping Style – Avoidance	Total Avoidance Strategy Score	50	235	129.22	23.94	1.168	3.438
Coping Style – Overcompensation	Total Overcompensation Strategy Score	47	256	154.05	32.37	-0.068	0.730
Primary Emotional Needs	Total Emotional Needs Score	36	216	101.70	37.58	0.292	-0.663

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the key variables of the study. The average total score for marital conflicts among the sample was 89.48 with a standard deviation of 16.93, suggesting a moderate level of marital conflict overall. Among early maladaptive schemas, the mean score for disconnection and rejection was highest at 60.26, followed by impaired autonomy and performance at 40.77, over-vigilance and inhibition at 31.08, impaired limits at 30.25, and other-directedness at 28.59, indicating moderate levels of schema endorsement. Regarding gender stereotypes, femininity had the highest mean score (57.84), followed by neutral/social desirability (51.39) and masculinity (48.50), implying a greater presence of traditionally feminine traits among participants. Coping style scores revealed a higher-than-average reliance on avoidance strategies ($M = 129.22$, $SD = 23.94$) and overcompensation strategies ($M = 154.05$, $SD = 32.37$). Lastly, the total emotional needs score averaged at 101.70 with a standard deviation of 37.58, pointing to a moderate level of unmet emotional needs among participants.

Based on the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test used to assess the normality of the research variables, most of the main variables in this study had significance levels below 0.05. This indicates that these variables do not follow a normal distribution from the perspective of inferential statistics. Specifically, total marital conflicts, most subscales of early maladaptive schemas (such as disconnection and rejection, impaired autonomy and performance, other-directedness, and impaired limits), the femininity and neutrality dimensions of gender roles, the total avoidance

coping score, and the total emotional needs score all demonstrated significant deviations from normality. Only two variables—overcompensation coping and masculinity—showed significance levels above 0.05, suggesting approximate normality. Given these findings, it is appropriate to employ Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS software, which is robust to violations of normality and allows for accurate estimation of structural relationships in non-normally distributed data.

Additionally, to ensure construct validity within the structural equation model, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all latent constructs were calculated. All AVE values ranged between 0.391 and 0.490, which, while slightly below the conventional threshold of 0.50 for some variables, are still acceptable in exploratory studies, particularly when other reliability indices support the construct. For example, constructs such as avoidance coping, disconnection and rejection, and overcompensation coping strategies had AVE values close to or above the 0.47 mark, indicating moderate convergent validity.

To further confirm discriminant validity, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was applied. This method compares the square root of the AVE for each construct with the correlations between that construct and others. The results showed that for all constructs, the square root of the AVE was greater than the inter-construct correlations, thus satisfying the Fornell-Larcker condition. This means that each construct shares more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs in the model, supporting the

distinctiveness of each latent variable. Together, these results confirm the model's structural integrity and the

adequacy of the measurement model for subsequent hypothesis testing using PLS-SEM.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Research Variables (N = 500)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	1											
2	.535**	1										
3	.470**	.785**	1									
4	.415**	.637**	.648**	1								
5	.310**	.580**	.494**	.627**	1							
6	.365**	.632**	.574**	.622**	.686**	1						
7	-.105*	-.093*	-.170**	-.115**	-.024	-.044	1					
8	-.327**	-.337**	-.378**	-.106*	-.114*	-.157**	.422**	1				
9	-.216**	-.054	-.104*	-.022	-.034	-.062	.561**	.634**	1			
10	.138**	.258**	.257**	.200**	.204**	.206**	-.024	-.148**	-.057	1		
11	.343**	.515**	.473**	.450**	.511**	.573**	.127**	-.137**	.129**	.138**	1	
12	.447**	.695**	.566**	.530**	.424**	.527**	-.103*	-.272**	-.086	.265**	.508**	1

1. Marital Conflicts, 2. Disconnection and Rejection, 3. Impaired Autonomy, 4. Other-Directedness, 5. Over-Vigilance and Inhibition, 6. Impaired Limits, 7. Masculinity, 8. Femininity, 9. Neutrality, 10. Avoidance Coping, 11. Overcompensation Coping, 12. Emotional Needs

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

The Pearson correlation analysis indicated several significant relationships between the core variables of the study. Marital conflict showed a strong positive correlation with the early maladaptive schema dimensions, including disconnection and rejection ($r = .535$), impaired autonomy ($r = .470$), other-directedness ($r = .415$), over-vigilance and inhibition ($r = .310$), and impaired limits ($r = .365$), all at the $p < .01$ level. This indicates that as the intensity of early maladaptive schemas increases, the severity of marital conflict also tends to rise among married men and women.

Furthermore, coping strategies were also significantly related to marital conflicts. Avoidance coping correlated positively with marital conflict ($r = .138$), as did overcompensation coping ($r = .343$), both at the $p < .01$ level. Emotional needs also had a significant positive relationship with marital conflict ($r = .447$), suggesting that unmet emotional needs play a role in escalating relational difficulties. Conversely, gender role orientations showed inverse relationships with marital conflict: masculinity ($r = -.105$, $p < .05$), femininity ($r = -.327$, $p < .01$), and neutrality ($r = -.216$, $p < .01$), suggesting that stronger adherence to gender role traits—especially femininity—was associated with reduced conflict in marital relationships.

In terms of the correlates of avoidance coping, this strategy was significantly positively related to several schema dimensions—disconnection and rejection ($r = .258$), impaired autonomy ($r = .257$), other-directedness ($r = .200$), over-vigilance ($r = .204$), and impaired limits ($r = .206$)—as well as emotional needs ($r = .265$), all at $p < .01$. Femininity, on the other hand, was negatively correlated with avoidance coping ($r = -.148$), indicating that individuals with higher feminine traits tend to use avoidance strategies less frequently.

Overcompensation coping was also positively associated with all schema domains, including disconnection and rejection ($r = .515$), impaired autonomy ($r = .473$), other-directedness ($r = .450$), over-vigilance ($r = .511$), and impaired limits ($r = .573$), all at $p < .01$. Additionally, emotional needs were positively correlated with overcompensation coping ($r = .508$). Among gender roles, masculinity ($r = .127$) and neutrality ($r = .129$) had positive correlations with overcompensation, whereas femininity ($r = -.137$) had a negative correlation, all statistically significant at $p < .01$.

Table 3

Direct and Indirect Effects of Research Variables on Marital Conflict and Coping Strategies (N = 500)

Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
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Avoidance Coping → Marital Conflict	0.217	2.651	0.000	Confirmed
Disconnection and Rejection → Marital Conflict	0.413	8.406	0.000	Confirmed
Overcompensation Coping → Marital Conflict	0.122	2.571	0.010	Confirmed
Other-Directedness → Marital Conflict	0.214	2.851	0.000	Confirmed
Neutral Gender Stereotype → Marital Conflict	-0.229	5.325	0.000	Confirmed
Neutral Gender Stereotype → Overcompensation	0.141	2.755	0.006	Confirmed
Impaired Autonomy → Avoidance Coping	0.158	2.463	0.014	Confirmed
Impaired Autonomy → Overcompensation Coping	0.107	2.007	0.045	Confirmed
Femininity → Overcompensation Coping	-0.122	2.491	0.013	Confirmed
Impaired Limits → Overcompensation Coping	0.219	3.928	0.000	Confirmed
Masculinity → Overcompensation Coping	0.138	3.069	0.002	Confirmed
Emotional Needs → Avoidance Coping	0.175	2.463	0.014	Confirmed
Emotional Needs → Overcompensation Coping	0.246	3.922	0.000	Confirmed
Over-Vigilance → Overcompensation Coping	0.188	4.020	0.000	Confirmed
Impaired Autonomy → Marital Conflict (via Avoidance Coping)	0.034	2.124	0.041	Confirmed
Emotional Needs → Marital Conflict (via Avoidance Coping)	0.037	2.317	0.015	Confirmed
Neutral Gender Stereotype → Marital Conflict (via Overcomp.)	0.017	1.639	0.101	Rejected
Impaired Autonomy → Marital Conflict (via Overcomp.)	0.013	1.596	0.111	Rejected
Femininity → Marital Conflict (via Overcomp.)	-0.015	1.611	0.107	Rejected
Impaired Limits → Marital Conflict (via Overcomp.)	0.027	2.031	0.042	Confirmed
Masculinity → Marital Conflict (via Overcomp.)	0.017	1.899	0.058	Rejected
Emotional Needs → Marital Conflict (via Overcomp.)	0.030	2.174	0.030	Confirmed
Over-Vigilance → Marital Conflict (via Overcomp.)	0.023	2.155	0.031	Confirmed

The final stage of analysis involved testing both the direct and indirect paths within the proposed structural equation model using the Partial Least Squares method. The findings revealed several statistically significant direct effects. Among the predictors of marital conflict, avoidance coping had a significant positive path coefficient ($\beta = 0.217$, $t = 2.651$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that increased reliance on avoidance strategies is associated with greater marital conflict. Disconnection and rejection, as a key early maladaptive schema, showed the strongest direct effect on marital conflict ($\beta = 0.413$, $t = 8.406$, $p < 0.001$). Overcompensation coping also emerged as a significant positive predictor ($\beta = 0.122$, $t = 2.571$, $p = 0.010$), as did other-directedness ($\beta = 0.214$, $t = 2.851$, $p < 0.001$). Notably, the neutral gender stereotype dimension had a negative and significant effect on marital conflict ($\beta = -0.229$, $t = 5.325$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that greater adherence to socially neutral traits may serve as a protective factor.

Several predictors also demonstrated significant direct relationships with the two coping strategies. Neutral gender stereotypes positively predicted overcompensation ($\beta = 0.141$, $t = 2.755$, $p = 0.006$), while impaired autonomy significantly predicted both avoidance ($\beta = 0.158$, $t = 2.463$, $p = 0.014$) and overcompensation ($\beta = 0.107$, $t = 2.007$, $p = 0.045$). Femininity negatively predicted overcompensation ($\beta = -0.122$, $t = 2.491$, $p = 0.013$), whereas masculinity had a positive influence on this strategy ($\beta = 0.138$, $t = 3.069$, $p = 0.002$). Impaired limits and over-vigilance both had

significant positive effects on overcompensation ($\beta = 0.219$ and $\beta = 0.188$ respectively; both $p < 0.001$). Emotional needs also positively predicted both avoidance ($\beta = 0.175$, $t = 2.463$, $p = 0.014$) and overcompensation ($\beta = 0.246$, $t = 3.922$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the motivational role of unmet emotional needs in shaping maladaptive coping behaviors.

Regarding mediation effects, several significant indirect paths were confirmed. Impaired autonomy had an indirect effect on marital conflict via avoidance coping ($\beta = 0.034$, $t = 2.124$, $p = 0.041$), suggesting that this schema domain increases conflict indirectly by promoting avoidance. Similarly, emotional needs had significant indirect effects on marital conflict through both avoidance ($\beta = 0.037$, $t = 2.317$, $p = 0.015$) and overcompensation coping ($\beta = 0.030$, $t = 2.174$, $p = 0.030$). Impaired limits also affected marital conflict indirectly via overcompensation ($\beta = 0.027$, $t = 2.031$, $p = 0.042$), and over-vigilance showed a similar mediation effect ($\beta = 0.023$, $t = 2.155$, $p = 0.031$).

On the other hand, several hypothesized mediating effects were not supported. The indirect paths from neutral gender stereotypes, femininity, and masculinity to marital conflict through overcompensation were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$), indicating that these personality traits did not significantly impact conflict levels via overcompensatory strategies. Similarly, the indirect effect of impaired autonomy on marital conflict through overcompensation was also non-significant.

Figure 1

Model with T-Values

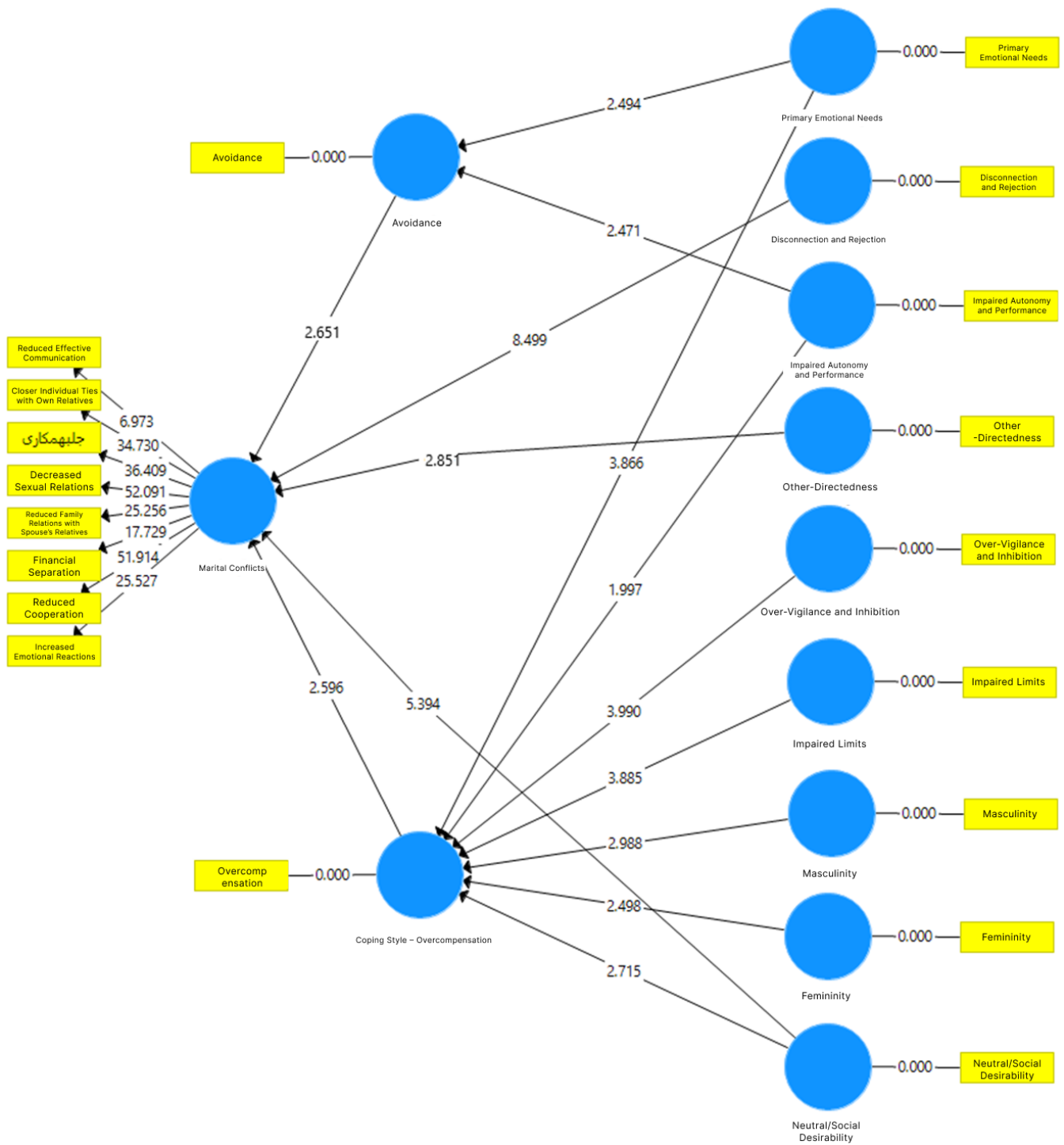
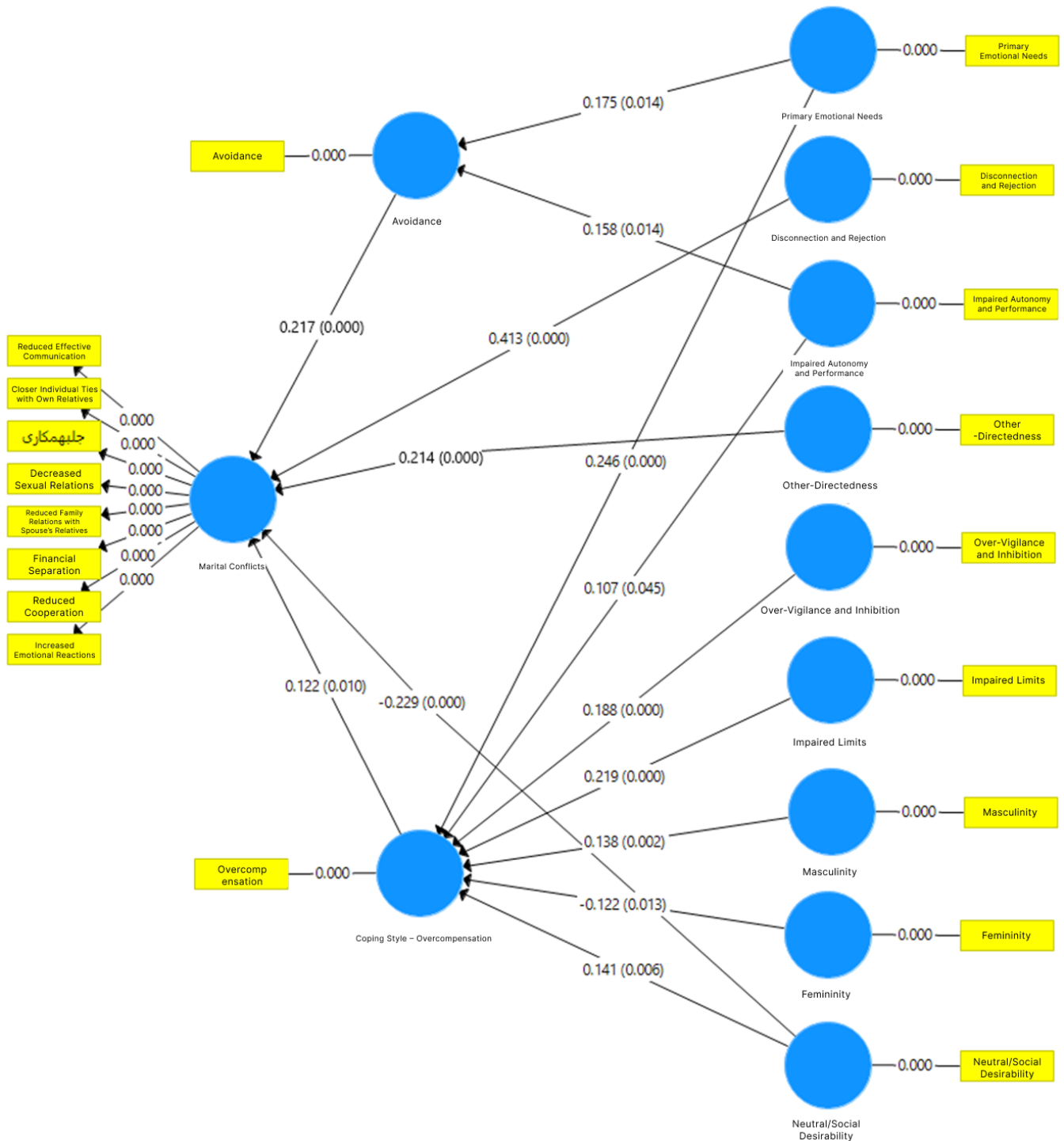


Figure 2

Model with Beta Values



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to develop a structural equation model to predict marital conflict based on early maladaptive schemas, gender stereotypes, and emotional needs, with the mediating role of coping strategies (avoidance and overcompensation). The findings supported the proposed model, revealing a complex network of direct and indirect relationships among the psychological constructs.

Specifically, the results demonstrated that early maladaptive schemas—particularly disconnection and rejection, impaired autonomy, and other-directedness—had significant positive effects on marital conflict, both directly and through the mediation of maladaptive coping styles. Avoidance and overcompensation coping styles emerged as pivotal mediators, confirming that the manner in which individuals cope with schema activation significantly shapes the intensity of marital conflict. In addition, gender stereotypes

and unmet emotional needs played significant roles in predicting both coping styles and conflict outcomes, underscoring the multifaceted nature of marital dynamics.

The strongest direct predictor of marital conflict was the disconnection and rejection schema. This is consistent with prior studies that highlight how schemas rooted in early emotional deprivation and rejection heighten sensitivity to perceived neglect and criticism within marriage (Afshin et al., 2024; Grabowski, 2023). These schemas predispose individuals to interpret neutral or ambiguous partner behavior as abandonment, fueling distress and reactivity (Karimi et al., 2023). The findings align with the work of Mirzaei et al. (2023), who found that disconnection-related schemas were negatively associated with marital quality, particularly when early bonding with caregivers was insecure or inconsistent (Mirzaei et al., 2023). Similarly, Chaharrahi et al. (2023) argue that social trauma and disrupted attachment histories reinforce schema intensity, which in turn amplifies relational vulnerability (Chaharrahi et al., 2023).

The current findings also reinforce the mediating role of avoidance and overcompensation coping in schema activation and marital conflict. Avoidance coping significantly mediated the effects of impaired autonomy and unmet emotional needs on conflict, supporting prior evidence that individuals who lack confidence in their ability to function independently often withdraw emotionally in times of relational distress (Ghiasi et al., 2024; Selvi, 2022). This withdrawal perpetuates distance and miscommunication, ultimately exacerbating conflict. Ramezani et al. (2022) observed that couples who rely heavily on avoidance coping report diminished marital trust and satisfaction, especially when emotional expression is stifled (Ramezani et al., 2022).

Overcompensation coping also significantly mediated the effects of several variables, including impaired limits, over-vigilance, and emotional needs. This form of coping is typically characterized by behaviors such as control, criticism, or exaggerated self-sufficiency—all of which may provoke defensiveness or withdrawal in the partner, leading to a destructive interaction cycle (Joshua et al., 2023; Moghaddam et al., 2024). The results are supported by Akkol (2017), who reported that overcompensation strategies often deteriorate partner responsiveness, reinforcing maladaptive patterns of interaction (Akkol, 2017). Furthermore, the significant indirect effects of impaired autonomy and unmet emotional needs on marital conflict via these coping styles highlight the importance of

addressing schema-driven behaviors in therapeutic interventions.

Another notable result was the direct and indirect role of emotional needs in marital conflict. Individuals with heightened unmet emotional needs were more likely to use both avoidance and overcompensation coping, which in turn increased their likelihood of experiencing conflict. These findings are consistent with the theoretical premises of schema therapy, which posits that unmet emotional needs form the core of maladaptive schema development and are subsequently expressed through coping behaviors that distort relational dynamics (Stroian, 2021). Estebarsari and Abolghasemi (2024) further support this view, showing that deficits in emotional fulfillment predict negative attitudes toward relational commitment and fidelity (Estebarsari & Abolghasemi, 2024). Similarly, Pour et al. (2020) found that emotional neglect and unmet needs were key predictors of distress and conflict in marital relationships, particularly among women working in high-stress environments (Pour et al., 2020).

The role of gender stereotypes, especially neutrality and femininity, provided further depth to the model. Neutral gender roles were inversely associated with marital conflict, suggesting that individuals who adopt a balance of traditionally masculine and feminine traits may experience fewer conflicts. This supports previous findings indicating that flexibility in gender role expression is associated with better communication and empathy in relationships (Chen, 2024; Osmonova et al., 2024). Conversely, traditional and rigid gender roles often exacerbate power imbalances and emotional disconnect in marriage. For example, individuals who internalize masculine norms emphasizing emotional control and dominance may be less attuned to their partner's emotional needs, perpetuating conflict cycles (Olave et al., 2024). Chen (2024) noted that gender stereotypes significantly impact emotional expressivity, often leading to misattunement and suppression of vulnerability within relationships.

Moreover, the significant association between masculinity and overcompensation coping in this study suggests that individuals who identify more strongly with traditional masculine roles may be more likely to adopt controlling or dominant behaviors when faced with relational stress. This is supported by findings from Rahiman et al. (2023), who found that gender-role rigidity and low emotional awareness were correlated with high schema activation and conflictual coping in couples facing divorce (Rahiman et al., 2023). Similarly, femininity was negatively

associated with overcompensation coping, indicating that those with more nurturing, emotionally expressive tendencies may be less likely to resort to control-oriented behaviors when schemas are triggered.

The structural model developed and tested in this study offers a cohesive understanding of how maladaptive schemas, coping styles, gender roles, and emotional needs interact to predict marital conflict. Consistent with Rahiman's (2024) integrated model, the current research underscores that maladaptive schemas do not operate in isolation but are part of a broader psychosocial system shaped by early experience, emotional regulation capacity, and socio-cultural conditioning (Rahiman, 2024). Moghaddam et al. (2024) also emphasized the mediating role of coping behaviors in schema-driven relational dysfunction, reinforcing the importance of therapeutic attention to both cognitive and behavioral components of couple interactions.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

While the present study offers a comprehensive model of marital conflict prediction, it is not without limitations. First, the sample consisted solely of married individuals in Tehran who were seeking counseling services, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations or cultural contexts. Second, all data were collected through self-report instruments, which may be subject to social desirability or memory biases. Third, the study employed a cross-sectional design, which precludes any conclusions about causal relationships among variables. Although structural equation modeling can assess indirect effects, it cannot fully capture the temporal dynamics of schema activation and coping. Lastly, certain variables such as partner responsiveness or communication patterns were not directly measured, though they may play a critical role in understanding conflict escalation.

Future research should consider employing longitudinal designs to examine how early maladaptive schemas and coping styles develop and change over time in marital relationships. Including both partners in dyadic analyses would also enhance the ecological validity of the model and allow for the investigation of interactional effects. Expanding the sample to include couples from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds would improve the generalizability of findings. Additionally, incorporating qualitative components—such as interviews or observational data—could enrich the understanding of how

these internal processes manifest in real-life marital dynamics. Future studies could also explore the moderating role of contextual stressors (e.g., parenting, financial strain) and protective factors such as emotional intelligence, social support, or spirituality.

The findings from this study have direct implications for marital therapy and psychoeducational interventions. Therapists working with couples should assess for the presence of early maladaptive schemas and explore how these influence current coping patterns and relational expectations. Schema-focused cognitive-behavioral strategies can be used to help clients identify and reframe maladaptive beliefs. Interventions that promote flexible gender role expression and emotional need fulfillment may also mitigate conflict and enhance relational satisfaction. Psychoeducation about coping styles and their relational impact can empower couples to adopt healthier communication strategies. Finally, integrating schema therapy principles with couple-based formats can provide a comprehensive framework for fostering long-term relational growth.

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

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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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