




# The Mediating Role of Frustration Tolerance in the Relationship Between Early Maladaptive Schemas, Self-Differentiation, and Marital Conflict in Individuals Applying for Divorce

Samira. Hosseini<sup>1</sup>, Said Ali Mohammad Mousavi<sup>2\*</sup>, Arezoo Shomalyoskoei<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, Ro.C., Islamic Azad University, Roudehen, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin, Iran

\* Corresponding author email address: mousavi1957@yahoo.com

### Article Info

#### Article type:

Original Article

#### How to cite this article:

Hosseini, S., Mousavi, S. A. M., & Shomalyoskoei, A. (2026). The Mediating Role of Frustration Tolerance in the Relationship Between Early Maladaptive Schemas, Self-Differentiation, and Marital Conflict in Individuals Applying for Divorce. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 7(4), 1-12.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.5231>



© 2026 the authors. Published by KMAN Publication Inc. (KMANPUB), Ontario, Canada. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The present study aimed to determine the fit of a structural equation model examining the mediating role of frustration tolerance in the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and self-differentiation with marital conflict among individuals applying for divorce.

**Methods and Materials:** This study employed a fundamental, descriptive-correlational design using structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population consisted of individuals applying for divorce who had active cases in family counseling centers affiliated with the judiciary in Karaj and Hashtgerd between February 2025 and October 2025. A sample of 250 participants (139 women and 111 men) was selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Revised Marital Conflict Questionnaire (Sanaei et al., 2008), the Young Schema Questionnaire (Young, 2005), the Self-Differentiation Inventory (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), and the Frustration Discomfort Scale (Harrington, 2005). Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 26 with maximum likelihood estimation.

**Findings:** The results indicated that the proposed structural model demonstrated an acceptable fit with the data ( $\chi^2/df = 1.49$ , GFI = 0.908, CFI = 0.958, RMSEA = 0.044). Early maladaptive schemas had a positive and significant effect on marital conflict ( $\beta = 0.412$ ,  $p = .001$ ), whereas self-differentiation had a negative and significant effect ( $\beta = -0.374$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Frustration tolerance (operationalized as intolerance) showed a positive and significant relationship with marital conflict ( $\beta = 0.424$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Moreover, frustration tolerance significantly mediated the relationships between early maladaptive schemas and marital conflict ( $\beta = 0.157$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and between self-differentiation and marital conflict ( $\beta = -0.138$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The model explained 57% of the variance in marital conflict ( $R^2 = 0.57$ ).

**Conclusion:** The findings suggest that early maladaptive schemas and self-differentiation are significant predictors of marital conflict, both directly and indirectly through frustration tolerance.

**Keywords:** marital conflict, early maladaptive schemas, self-differentiation, frustration tolerance, structural equation modeling

## 1. Introduction

Marital conflict is one of the most pervasive and multifaceted challenges within intimate relationships and has long been recognized as a central determinant of individual psychological well-being, family functioning, and social stability. Contemporary psychological research conceptualizes marital conflict not merely as episodic disagreement but as a complex interactional pattern influenced by cognitive, emotional, and relational variables that unfold over time. Empirical findings consistently demonstrate that unresolved marital conflict is associated with a wide range of adverse outcomes, including reduced marital satisfaction, increased psychological distress, and a higher likelihood of divorce (Montazer & Razavi Nematollahi, 2024; Rauf et al., 2023). In particular, couples experiencing persistent conflict often exhibit maladaptive communication patterns, emotional dysregulation, and deficits in problem-solving abilities, all of which contribute to the escalation and chronicity of relational discord (Arini, 2023; Ramzy, 2023). Given the growing prevalence of divorce and marital dissatisfaction in modern societies, identifying the underlying psychological mechanisms that contribute to marital conflict has become a critical priority for both researchers and clinicians.

Among the key psychological constructs implicated in marital conflict, early maladaptive schemas have received considerable empirical attention. Rooted in schema theory, early maladaptive schemas are defined as pervasive and dysfunctional cognitive-emotional patterns that originate in childhood and are elaborated throughout life, shaping individuals' perceptions, emotions, and interpersonal behaviors. These schemas influence how individuals interpret relational experiences, often leading to biased information processing and maladaptive responses in intimate relationships. Studies have shown that individuals with stronger maladaptive schemas are more prone to experiencing marital dissatisfaction, emotional disconnection, and conflict escalation (Alizadeh et al., 2024; Khorrami Nobandi & Yaghoubi Pour, 2024). For instance, schemas related to abandonment, mistrust, and emotional deprivation may lead individuals to misinterpret their partner's behaviors as threatening or rejecting, thereby intensifying conflict dynamics. Moreover, research has demonstrated that early maladaptive schemas are significantly associated with marital conflict and can predict maladaptive relational outcomes even after controlling for

other psychological variables (Moradi Davijani et al., 2024; Sharif Nia et al., 2023).

Another critical construct in understanding marital conflict is self-differentiation, a concept derived from Bowen's family systems theory. Self-differentiation refers to an individual's ability to maintain emotional autonomy while remaining emotionally connected to others. Highly differentiated individuals are capable of regulating their emotional responses, maintaining a clear sense of self, and engaging in constructive communication during interpersonal stress. In contrast, individuals with low levels of self-differentiation tend to exhibit emotional reactivity, fusion with others, and avoidance behaviors, all of which can exacerbate marital conflict. Empirical evidence supports the significant role of self-differentiation in marital functioning, indicating that higher levels of differentiation are associated with greater marital satisfaction and lower levels of conflict (Jo & Lee, 2025; Sadeghi et al., 2022). Furthermore, studies have highlighted that self-differentiation not only directly influences marital outcomes but also interacts with other psychological variables, such as attachment styles and communication skills, to shape relational dynamics (Rahiman, 2024; Sarhani & Homaei, 2023). In the context of couples facing divorce, deficits in self-differentiation may lead to heightened emotional reactivity and ineffective conflict management strategies, thereby increasing the likelihood of relationship dissolution (Habibi Kordabad & Darbani, 2023).

In addition to cognitive schemas and relational capacities, emotional regulation constructs such as frustration tolerance (distress tolerance) play a pivotal role in marital interactions. Frustration tolerance refers to an individual's capacity to endure emotional discomfort and persist in goal-directed behavior despite obstacles or stressors. Individuals with low frustration tolerance are more likely to respond impulsively, exhibit heightened emotional reactivity, and struggle with adaptive coping strategies, which can intensify interpersonal conflicts. Research has demonstrated that lower levels of distress tolerance are associated with poorer mental health outcomes and reduced marital satisfaction (Rauf et al., 2023). Moreover, distress tolerance has been identified as a significant predictor of marital conflict, as individuals who are unable to manage emotional distress effectively may resort to maladaptive behaviors such as withdrawal, aggression, or avoidance during conflicts (Shahabi et al., 2021). Interventions aimed at enhancing distress tolerance have been shown to improve marital outcomes by fostering

emotional resilience and adaptive coping strategies (Emadoleslami et al., 2021; Gholipour et al., 2022).

The interplay between early maladaptive schemas, self-differentiation, and frustration tolerance provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying marital conflict. While each of these constructs has been independently associated with marital outcomes, recent research suggests that their relationships are more complex and may involve mediating and moderating processes. For instance, early maladaptive schemas may influence individuals' emotional responses and coping strategies, thereby affecting their level of frustration tolerance. Similarly, self-differentiation may serve as a protective factor that mitigates the negative impact of maladaptive schemas on marital relationships. Studies have begun to explore these interrelationships, indicating that frustration tolerance may mediate the relationship between cognitive vulnerabilities and marital outcomes (Montazer & Razavi Nematollahi, 2024; Nosrat Talab Haghi et al., 2024). However, the empirical evidence in this area remains limited, particularly in populations experiencing severe relational distress, such as individuals applying for divorce.

The significance of examining these variables is further underscored by intervention-based research. Schema therapy, for example, has been shown to effectively reduce psychological distress and improve relational functioning by targeting maladaptive schemas (Kamali et al., 2025; Zerang et al., 2025). Similarly, therapeutic approaches that enhance emotional awareness, cognitive flexibility, and coping strategies have demonstrated efficacy in reducing marital conflict and improving relationship quality (Yaghoubi Nejad, 2023; Yarian & Khalilian, 2023). These findings highlight the importance of identifying the underlying psychological mechanisms that contribute to marital conflict, as such insights can inform the development of more targeted and effective interventions. In particular, understanding the mediating role of frustration tolerance may provide valuable insights into how cognitive and relational factors translate into behavioral outcomes within marital relationships.

Despite the growing body of literature on marital conflict, several gaps remain in the existing research. First, many studies have focused on general populations or non-clinical samples, limiting the generalizability of findings to individuals experiencing severe relational distress. Second, the majority of research has examined the direct effects of individual variables on marital conflict, with relatively few

studies exploring the complex interplay between cognitive schemas, emotional regulation, and relational capacities. Third, cultural and contextual factors may influence the manifestation of these variables, highlighting the need for research in diverse populations. Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing theoretical understanding and improving clinical practice in the field of marital and family psychology (Rostaei & Mostafaei, 2023).

In light of these considerations, the present study seeks to integrate the constructs of early maladaptive schemas, self-differentiation, and frustration tolerance within a structural equation modeling framework to better understand their relationships with marital conflict. By focusing on individuals applying for divorce, this study aims to examine these variables in a population characterized by high levels of relational distress, thereby providing more nuanced insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying marital conflict. Furthermore, by investigating the mediating role of frustration tolerance, the study contributes to the growing literature on the dynamic interplay between cognitive, emotional, and relational factors in shaping marital outcomes.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to determine the fit of a structural equation model examining the mediating role of frustration tolerance in the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and self-differentiation with marital conflict among individuals applying for divorce.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was fundamental in terms of purpose and descriptive-correlational in terms of data collection method. In this study, the relationships among variables were examined without any manipulation using structural equation modeling (SEM). Accordingly, self-differentiation was considered as the exogenous variable, frustration tolerance as the mediating variable, and marital conflict as the endogenous variable, all of which were analyzed. The statistical population consisted of all individuals applying for divorce in the cities of Karaj and Hashtgerd whose divorce cases were registered and under review in family counseling centers affiliated with the judiciary between February 2025 and October 2025. The study sample included 250 individuals (men and women) applying for divorce who had active cases in the family counseling centers of the judiciary in Karaj and Hashtgerd during the

specified period and who voluntarily and with full consent completed the research instruments. Participation in the study was completely confidential, and no personally identifiable information (such as name, national identification number, or case number) was collected from participants. No restrictions were imposed regarding age, gender, or educational level, as the aim was to capture the actual diversity present in the population of individuals applying for divorce. To ensure participants' rights, data confidentiality was guaranteed, and the questionnaires were used solely for scientific purposes. Given the field nature of the study, administrative and ethical requirements, collaboration with official judicial centers, and limited access to the entire population, a convenience sampling method was employed. In this approach, due to practical limitations (such as lack of access to a complete population list, the need for coordination with the judicial system, and voluntary participation), sampling was conducted among individuals who were present at counseling centers during the specified time frame and were willing to participate. Inclusion criteria included having an active divorce case in family counseling centers in Karaj and Hashtgerd during February 2025 to October 2025, having at least one child, absence of substance addiction, voluntary participation, and informed consent. Given the nature of the instruments and variables under investigation, eligibility also required the absence of active addiction to narcotic or psychotropic substances. The requirement of having a child was due to the presence of child-related items in the marital conflict questionnaire, and the absence of addiction was considered to control its potential effects on frustration tolerance and other emotional variables. These criteria were verified through participants' self-reports, review of case records, and consultation with counselors at the family counseling centers affiliated with the judiciary.

The sample size of the present study consisted of 250 individuals applying for divorce. Considering the use of structural equation modeling and based on the recommendations of Tabachnick and Fidell (2019), the minimum sample size required to obtain stable and reliable estimates should be 5 to 10 participants per model parameter and at least 200 participants for complex models. Furthermore, this sample size is consistent with the guidelines proposed by Stevens (1996) regarding the ratio of observations to parameters and provides adequate conditions for model estimation and evaluation of model fit. The use of smaller sample sizes may result in non-convergence,

improper solutions, or low precision in parameter estimates, particularly in standard errors.

## 2.2. Measures

Revised Marital Conflict Questionnaire (Sanaei et al., 2008): This instrument is a 54-item questionnaire designed to assess marital conflicts. It measures eight dimensions of marital conflict, including decreased cooperation, decreased sexual relations, increased emotional reactions, increased seeking of children's support, increased individual relationships with one's own relatives, decreased family relationships with the spouse's relatives and friends, financial separation, and reduced effective communication. Counselors and other clinical professionals can use this questionnaire to assess marital conflicts and their dimensions. Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. The total score ranges from 54 to 270. Subscale items are distributed as follows: decreased cooperation (Items 4, 12, 18, 25, 34); decreased sexual relations (Items 5, 13, 19, 35, 40); increased emotional reactions (Items 6, 14, 20, 27, 36, 42, 49, 51); increased seeking of children's support (Items 9, 22, 31, 38, 44); increased individual relationships with one's own relatives (Items 8, 15, 21, 29, 37, 43); decreased relationships with spouse's relatives and friends (Items 1, 23, 32, 46, 50, 53); financial separation (Items 2, 10, 17, 24, 33, 39, 48); and reduced effective communication (Items 3, 7, 11, 16, 26, 28, 30, 41, 45, 47, 52, 54). The maximum score for each subscale equals the number of items multiplied by 5. Higher scores indicate greater marital conflict, while lower scores indicate better relationships and less conflict. Response options are scored as follows: never (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), always (5). Items 3, 11, 14, 26, 30, 33, 45, 47, and 54 are reverse scored. The Cronbach's alpha for the total questionnaire was 0.96 in a sample of 270 individuals, and for the eight subscales, it was as follows: decreased cooperation (0.81), decreased sexual relations (0.61), increased emotional reactions (0.70), increased seeking of children's support (0.63), increased relationships with one's own relatives (0.86), decreased relationships with spouse's relatives and friends (0.89), financial separation (0.71), and reduced effective communication (0.69). The questionnaire demonstrated good content validity. In the content analysis phase, after preliminary administration and calculation of item-total correlations, no items were removed due to adequate correlations. Content and construct validity

were also confirmed by experts in psychology and family studies (Sanaei et al., 2008).

**Self-Differentiation Inventory (DSI):** This 46-item questionnaire was developed by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) and includes four subscales: emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. It is rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 6 (completely true of me). Total scores range from 46 to 276, with lower scores indicating lower levels of self-differentiation. In the study by Skowron and Friedlander (1998), the subscales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.88 for the total score, 0.84 for emotional reactivity, 0.83 for I-position, 0.82 for emotional cutoff, and 0.74 for fusion with others (as cited in Sanaei et al., 2008). In a study by Jahanbakhsh et al. (2011), the overall reliability was 0.69, and for the subscales of emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others, it was 0.73, 0.64, 0.61, and 0.75, respectively. Construct validity, assessed through factor analysis, supported the four-factor structure of emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others (Amani et al., 2015). In another study by Rezaeian et al. (2016), Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.56, 0.64, 0.53, and 0.72 for the respective subscales, and 0.81 for the total scale. Content validity, assessed via internal consistency, was reported as 0.83.

**Frustration Tolerance Questionnaire:** This instrument was developed by Harrington (2005) to assess individuals' tolerance for frustration in achieving goals. It is a four-factor scale rated on a Likert continuum ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The first factor represents emotional intolerance (e.g., intolerance of stress; Items 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25), the second factor represents discomfort intolerance (e.g., intolerance of problems and difficulties; Items 3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27), the third factor represents achievement intolerance (e.g., intolerance of achievement-related demands; Items 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28), and the fourth factor represents entitlement (e.g., intolerance of unfairness and dissatisfaction; Items 2, 6, 10, 14, 18, 26, 29–35). Lower total scores indicate higher frustration tolerance, whereas higher scores indicate lower tolerance; therefore, lower scores are considered desirable. In a study by Baba Raeisi and Alimahdi (2014), the scale was administered to 454 university students. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.84 for the total scale, 0.50 for emotional intolerance, 0.61 for discomfort intolerance, 0.52 for achievement intolerance, and 0.71 for entitlement. For validity, confirmatory factor analysis and correlations between components and the total

score were used. The results indicated that all items loaded above 0.30 on their respective factors, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was approximately 0.04, indicating acceptable model fit for the four-factor structure proposed by Harrington (2005).

**Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ):** The original version of the schema questionnaire was developed by Young (1994) to assess early maladaptive schemas. The short form consists of 90 items designed to measure 18 early maladaptive schemas, with five items allocated to each schema (Young, 2005). These schemas include emotional deprivation, abandonment/instability, mistrust/abuse, social isolation/alienation, defectiveness/shame, failure, dependence/incompetence, vulnerability to harm or illness, enmeshment/undeveloped self, subjugation, self-sacrifice, emotional inhibition, unrelenting standards, entitlement/grandiosity, insufficient self-control/self-discipline, approval-seeking/recognition-seeking, negativity/pessimism, and punitiveness (Young, 2005). Items are rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely untrue) to 6 (completely true). Scores of 5 or 6 on three or more items within a schema indicate the presence of that schema. Reliability and validity of the questionnaire have been examined by Young et al. (2005), with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92 reported for internal consistency. Confirmatory factor analysis supported the factorial structure of the instrument. Numerous psychometric studies have demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha for the total scale reported at approximately 0.97 and subscale alphas ranging from 0.67 to 0.89, indicating acceptable to good reliability across schemas (González-Cifuentes et al., 2024). Research findings indicate that the questionnaire demonstrates clinical validity in Iranian samples consistent with Young's findings. Test-retest reliability coefficients include 0.83 for dependence and failure, 0.80 for social isolation and defectiveness/shame, 0.78 for emotional deprivation and abandonment, 0.76 for insufficient self-control, subjugation, and vulnerability, 0.85 for unrelenting standards and entitlement, 0.77 for enmeshment/undeveloped self, 0.65 for mistrust/abuse, and 0.69 for self-sacrifice (Dehghan, 2001). Overall, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for individual schemas ranged from 0.63 to 0.92, and 0.94 for the total scale.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using structural equation modeling (SEM) in SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 26.

3. Findings and Results

In the present study, 250 applicants for divorce participated, including 139 women and 111 men. Of these, 47 participants (18.8%) were younger than 30 years, 63 (25.2%) were between 31 and 35 years, 56 (22.4%) were between 36 and 40 years, 53 (21.2%) were between 41 and 45 years, and 31 (12.4%) were older than 45 years.

Regarding educational attainment, 39 participants (15.6%) had less than a high school diploma, 97 (38.8%) had a high school diploma, 19 (7.6%) had an associate degree, 72 (28.8%) had a bachelor's degree, and 23 (9.2%) had a master's degree or higher. Finally, 89 participants (35.6%) had less than 5 years of shared marital life with their spouse, 73 (29.2%) had 6 to 10 years, 51 (20.4%) had 11 to 15 years, and 37 (14.8%) had more than 15 years of marital life. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients among early maladaptive schemas, self-differentiation, frustration tolerance, and marital conflict.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Matrix Among the Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1	—																		
2	.61**	—																	
3	.58**	.43**	—																
4	.60**	.51**	.47**	—															
5	.63**	.53**	.49**	.56**	—														
6	-.17**	-.28**	-.21**	-.29**	-.23**	—													
7	-.28**	-.14*	-.25**	-.36**	-.31**	.44**	—												
8	-.24**	-.17**	-.23**	-.33**	-.28**	.48**	.51**	—											
9	-.20**	.10	-.20**	-.31**	-.26**	.56**	.46**	.56**	—										
10	.24**	.15*	.28**	.27**	.30**	.24**	-.30**	-.23**	-.30**	—									
11	.28**	.24**	.30**	.35**	.33**	.17**	-.28**	-.18**	-.24**	.58**	—								
12	.35**	.27**	.34**	.31**	.37**	.25**	-.32**	-.20**	-.31**	.63**	.54**	—							
13	.31**	.26**	.32**	.37**	.40**	.28**	-.35**	-.31**	-.33**	.65**	.59**	.61**	—						
14	.24**	.29**	.36**	.29**	.32**	-.29**	-.37**	-.22**	-.30**	.38**	.42**	.39**	.48**	—					
15	.17**	.15*	.22**	.17**	.25**	-.20**	-.27**	-.33**	-.21**	.25**	.31**	.32**	.35**	.44**	—				
16	.27**	.21**	.27**	.23**	.29**	-.27**	-.32**	-.28**	-.24**	.30**	.29**	.38**	.33**	.30**	.31**	—			
17	.30**	.29**	.34**	.28**	.33**	-.25**	-.34**	-.28**	-.24**	.28**	.32**	.36**	.30**	.42**	.36**	.41**	—		
18	.33**	.26**	.33**	.25**	.27**	-.18**	-.27**	-.25**	-.22**	.22**	.29**	.33**	.35**	.46**	.22**	.35**	.56**	—	
19	.25**	.20**	.26**	.23**	.20**	-.14*	-.20**	-.22**	-.25**	.29**	.35**	.30**	.38**	.44**	.38**	.34**	.41**	.41**	—
M	61.54	45.24	39.40	37.53	34.76	40.72	39.28	38.02	41.28	19.86	20.27	18.33	37.16	11.02	14.00	12.98	13.82	14.30	18.43
SD	13.68	9.81	9.13	8.19	7.35	10.61	9.19	9.60	10.59	4.54	4.08	4.88	9.29	3.26	3.67	3.30	3.61	3.66	4.68

1 = Schema: Disconnection and Rejection; 2 = Schema: Impaired Autonomy and Performance; 3 = Schema: Impaired Limits; 4 = Schema: Other-Directedness; 5 = Schema: Overvigilance/Inhibition; 6 = Differentiation: Emotional Reactivity; 7 = Differentiation: I-Position; 8 = Differentiation: Emotional Cutoff; 9 = Differentiation: Fusion with Others; 10 = Frustration Tolerance: Emotional Intolerance; 11 = Frustration Tolerance: Discomfort Intolerance; 12 = Frustration Tolerance: Achievement Goal Intolerance; 13 = Frustration Tolerance: Intolerance of Injustice; 14 = Marital Conflict: Decreased Cooperation; 15 = Marital Conflict: Decreased Sexual Relationship; 16 = Marital Conflict: Increased Seeking of Child Support; 17 = Marital Conflict: Increased Relationship with Own Relatives; 18 = Marital Conflict: Decreased Relationship with Spouse's Relatives; 19 = Marital Conflict: Financial Separation. \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01.

Based on the results presented in Table 1, the correlation coefficients among the variables were in the expected direction and consistent with the theoretical framework of the study. It should be noted that, according to the scoring instructions of the questionnaire used to assess frustration tolerance, higher scores indicate lower frustration tolerance and vice versa; therefore, the direction of the obtained correlations is logical and interpretable. In this study, in order to evaluate whether the assumption of univariate normality was met, the skewness and kurtosis values of each

variable were examined individually. The results showed that the skewness and kurtosis values for all components were within the range of ±2. This finding indicates that the assumption of univariate normality was satisfied in the data {Kline, 2016}. In addition, the assumption of multicollinearity was assessed using the variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance coefficient. The results showed that the assumption of no multicollinearity was met in the present data, because the tolerance values of the predictor variables were greater than 0.10 and the VIF values for each

of them were less than 10. According to Meyers et al. (2006), a tolerance coefficient smaller than 0.10 and a VIF value greater than 10 indicate violation of the multicollinearity assumption. Furthermore, to examine the assumption of multivariate normality, information related to the Mahalanobis distance was analyzed. The skewness and kurtosis values of the Mahalanobis distance data were 0.90 and 1.06, respectively, indicating that both indices were within the range of  $\pm 2$ ; therefore, the assumption of multivariate normality was also satisfied. Finally, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was assessed through inspection of the scatterplot of standardized error variances, and the results indicated that this assumption was also met in the study data.

After evaluation of the assumptions, the data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. For this purpose, AMOS 26.0 software and maximum likelihood (ML) estimation were used. In the proposed model, it was assumed that frustration tolerance mediated the relationship of early maladaptive schemas and self-differentiation with

marital conflict among individuals applying for divorce. As shown in Figure 1, early maladaptive schemas, self-differentiation, frustration tolerance, and marital conflict were treated as latent variables. It was assumed that early maladaptive schemas were measured by the indicators of disconnection and rejection, impaired autonomy and performance, impaired limits, other-directedness, and overvigilance/inhibition; self-differentiation was measured by the indicators of emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others; frustration tolerance was measured by the indicators of emotional intolerance, discomfort intolerance, achievement goal intolerance, and intolerance of injustice; and marital conflict was measured by the indicators of decreased cooperation, decreased sexual relationship, increased seeking of child support, increased relationship with one's own relatives, decreased relationship with spouse's relatives, financial separation, reduced effective communication, and increased emotional reactions. Table 2 presents the fit indices of the research model.

**Table 2**

*Fit Indices of the Research Model*

Fit Index	Research Model	Cutoff Point
Chi-square	271.86	—
Model degrees of freedom	183	—
$\chi^2/df$	1.49	Less than 3
GFI	0.908	Greater than 0.90
AGFI	0.884	Greater than 0.85
CFI	0.958	Greater than 0.90
RMSEA	0.044	Less than 0.08

Table 2 shows that the fit indices obtained from the analysis support an acceptable fit of the model to the collected data. Table 3 presents the total and direct path

coefficients among the study variables in the proposed model.

**Table 3**

*Total, Direct, and Indirect Path Coefficients Among the Study Variables in the Research Model*

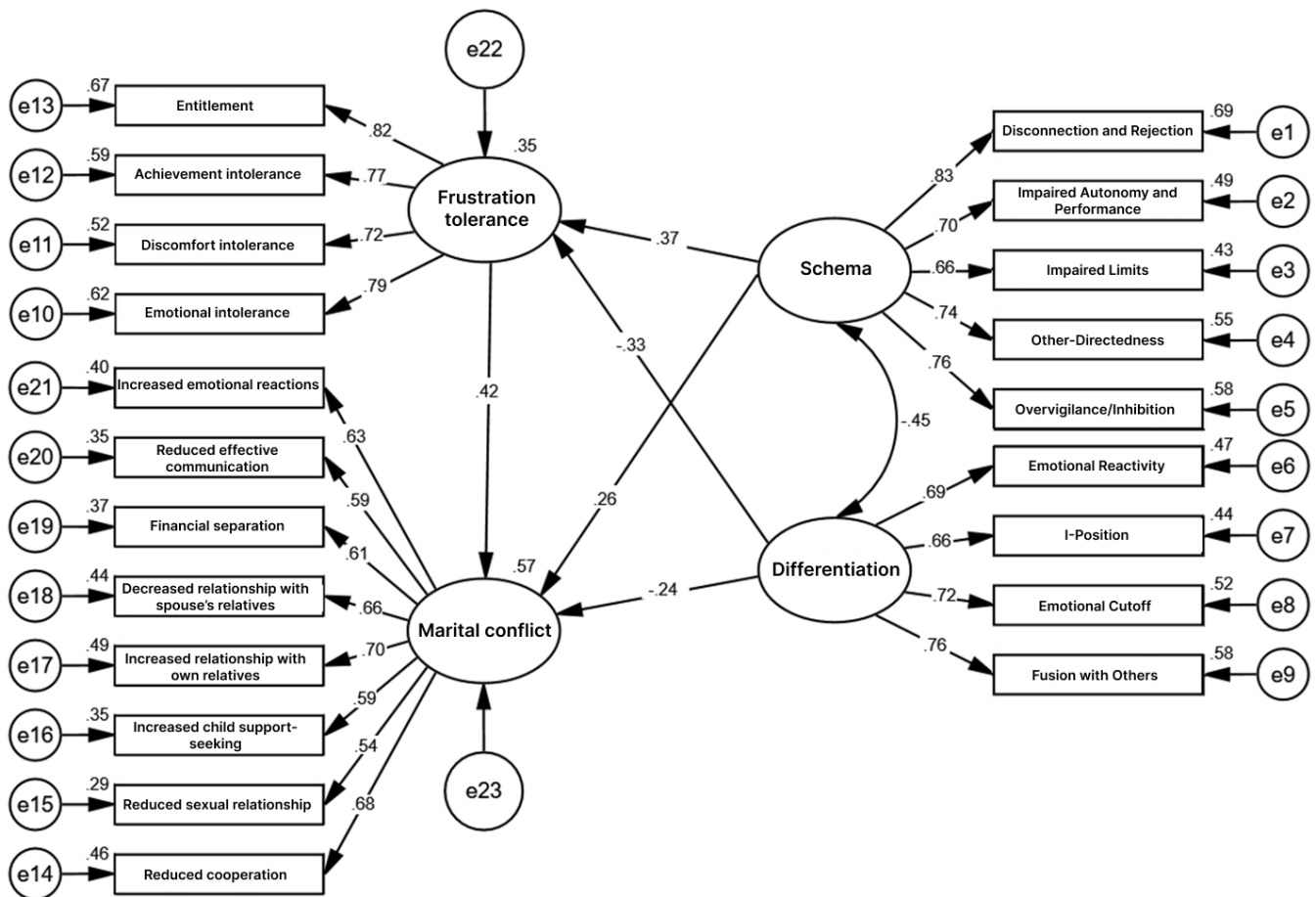
Effect	Path	b	S.E.	$\beta$	p
Direct	Self-differentiation → Frustration tolerance	-0.230	0.060	-0.326	.001
Direct	Early maladaptive schemas → Frustration tolerance	0.110	0.024	0.369	.001
Direct	Frustration tolerance → Marital conflict	0.164	0.038	0.424	.001
Direct	Self-differentiation → Marital conflict	-0.064	0.026	-0.236	.008
Direct	Early maladaptive schemas → Marital conflict	0.030	0.009	0.256	.001
Indirect	Self-differentiation → Marital conflict	-0.038	0.012	-0.138	.001
Indirect	Early maladaptive schemas → Marital conflict	0.018	0.006	0.157	.001
Total	Self-differentiation → Marital conflict	-0.102	0.029	-0.374	.001
Total	Early maladaptive schemas → Marital conflict	0.048	0.010	0.412	.001

Table 3 shows that the total path coefficient between self-differentiation and marital conflict was negative and significant ( $\beta = -0.374, p = .001$ ), whereas the total path coefficient between early maladaptive schemas and marital conflict was positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.412, p = .001$ ). In addition, the path coefficient between frustration tolerance and marital conflict was positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.424, p = .001$ ). It should be noted that, according to the scoring instructions of the questionnaire used to assess frustration tolerance, higher scores indicate lower frustration tolerance and vice versa; therefore, the obtained findings were logical and interpretable. Finally, the indirect path coefficient

between self-differentiation and marital conflict was negative and significant ( $\beta = -0.138, p = .001$ ), whereas the indirect path coefficient between early maladaptive schemas and marital conflict was positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.157, p = .001$ ). Accordingly, it was concluded that frustration tolerance significantly mediated the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and marital conflict in a positive direction and the relationship between self-differentiation and marital conflict in a negative direction among applicants for divorce. Figure 1 presents the research model based on standardized data.

**Figure 1**

*Standardized Parameters in the Research Model*



The above figure shows that the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) for the marital conflict variable was 0.57, indicating that early maladaptive schemas, self-differentiation, and frustration tolerance jointly explained 57% of the variance in marital conflict among individuals applying for divorce.

**4. Discussion**

The present study aimed to examine the structural relationships among early maladaptive schemas, self-differentiation, frustration tolerance, and marital conflict in individuals applying for divorce, with a particular focus on

the mediating role of frustration tolerance. The findings indicated that the proposed structural model demonstrated an acceptable fit with the empirical data, suggesting that the conceptual framework underlying the study is both theoretically and empirically supported. Specifically, the results showed that early maladaptive schemas had a positive and significant effect on marital conflict, self-differentiation had a negative and significant effect on marital conflict, and frustration tolerance significantly mediated these relationships. Moreover, frustration tolerance itself emerged as a significant positive predictor of marital conflict, considering that higher scores reflect lower tolerance. Collectively, these findings highlight the central role of cognitive-emotional vulnerabilities and relational capacities in shaping conflict dynamics among couples facing divorce.

The positive and significant association between early maladaptive schemas and marital conflict is consistent with a substantial body of prior research emphasizing the role of deep-seated cognitive schemas in interpersonal dysfunction. Early maladaptive schemas, as enduring cognitive-affective structures formed during childhood, influence how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to relational situations. The current findings align with studies demonstrating that maladaptive schemas are strongly associated with heightened marital conflict, emotional dysregulation, and dysfunctional communication patterns (Alizadeh et al., 2024; Khorrami Nobandi & Yaghoubi Pour, 2024). Individuals with dominant schemas such as abandonment, mistrust, or defectiveness may exhibit hypersensitivity to perceived rejection or criticism, which can trigger maladaptive emotional responses and escalate conflicts. Furthermore, the present results corroborate findings indicating that maladaptive schemas play a predictive role in marital conflict even when other relational variables are considered (Moradi Davijani et al., 2024; Sharif Nia et al., 2023). This suggests that schemas function as foundational cognitive filters that shape relational experiences, thereby contributing to persistent patterns of conflict in intimate relationships.

The negative and significant relationship between self-differentiation and marital conflict observed in this study provides further support for the theoretical propositions of Bowen's family systems theory. Self-differentiation reflects an individual's capacity to balance emotional intimacy with autonomy, regulate emotional reactivity, and maintain a stable sense of self in the face of relational stress. The findings indicate that individuals with higher levels of self-differentiation experience lower levels of marital conflict,

which is consistent with prior empirical evidence (Jo & Lee, 2025; Sadeghi et al., 2022). Highly differentiated individuals are better equipped to engage in constructive communication, manage emotional arousal, and respond adaptively to conflict situations, thereby reducing the likelihood of escalation. Conversely, low differentiation is associated with emotional fusion, reactivity, and avoidance, all of which contribute to maladaptive interaction patterns. These results are also in line with studies demonstrating that self-differentiation is inversely related to marital conflict and plays a critical role in promoting relational stability (Habibi Kordabad & Darbani, 2023; Sarhani & Homaei, 2023). The findings further suggest that enhancing self-differentiation may be a key target for interventions aimed at reducing marital conflict and improving relationship quality.

Another important finding of the present study is the significant positive relationship between frustration tolerance (as operationalized by intolerance of frustration) and marital conflict. This result indicates that individuals with lower capacity to tolerate emotional distress are more likely to experience higher levels of conflict in their marital relationships. This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the role of distress tolerance in emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning (Rauf et al., 2023). Individuals with low frustration tolerance tend to exhibit heightened emotional reactivity, impulsivity, and difficulty coping with stress, which can exacerbate conflict situations. The present findings also align with studies demonstrating that distress tolerance is a key predictor of marital satisfaction and conflict, as individuals with higher tolerance are better able to manage negative emotions and engage in constructive problem-solving (Shahabi et al., 2021). Furthermore, interventions designed to enhance distress tolerance have been shown to improve marital outcomes by promoting emotional resilience and adaptive coping strategies (Emadoleslami et al., 2021; Gholipour et al., 2022). These findings underscore the importance of emotional regulation capacities in shaping marital interactions and highlight frustration tolerance as a critical factor in understanding marital conflict.

One of the most significant contributions of the present study is the demonstration of the mediating role of frustration tolerance in the relationships between early maladaptive schemas, self-differentiation, and marital conflict. The results indicated that frustration tolerance partially mediated the positive relationship between maladaptive schemas and marital conflict, as well as the negative relationship between self-differentiation and

marital conflict. This suggests that cognitive schemas and relational capacities influence marital conflict not only directly but also indirectly through their impact on individuals' ability to tolerate emotional distress. These findings are consistent with theoretical models that emphasize the interplay between cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes in shaping interpersonal outcomes. For instance, individuals with maladaptive schemas may be more prone to experiencing intense negative emotions in response to relational stressors, which, in the absence of adequate frustration tolerance, can lead to maladaptive coping behaviors and increased conflict. Similarly, individuals with higher self-differentiation may be better able to regulate their emotional responses, thereby enhancing their frustration tolerance and reducing conflict. These results are in line with studies suggesting that emotional regulation constructs mediate the relationship between cognitive vulnerabilities and relational outcomes (Montazer & Razavi Nematollahi, 2024; Nosrat Talab Haghi et al., 2024).

The findings of this study also have important implications for understanding the psychological processes underlying marital conflict in individuals applying for divorce. This population is characterized by high levels of relational distress, making it particularly relevant for examining the interplay of cognitive, emotional, and relational factors. The results suggest that maladaptive schemas, low self-differentiation, and poor frustration tolerance collectively contribute to the escalation of marital conflict, thereby increasing the likelihood of relationship dissolution. These findings are consistent with research indicating that couples experiencing severe conflict often exhibit multiple psychological vulnerabilities that interact in complex ways to maintain dysfunctional patterns of interaction (Rahiman, 2024; Rostaei & Mostafaei, 2023). Moreover, the results highlight the importance of adopting an integrative approach to understanding and addressing marital conflict, one that considers the interrelated roles of cognitive schemas, emotional regulation, and relational capacities.

From a clinical perspective, the findings of the present study provide valuable insights for the development of targeted interventions aimed at reducing marital conflict. Schema-focused interventions, for example, may help individuals identify and modify maladaptive cognitive patterns that contribute to relational dysfunction (Kamali et al., 2025; Zerang et al., 2025). Similarly, interventions that enhance self-differentiation can promote emotional

autonomy and improve communication skills, thereby reducing conflict. In addition, training programs aimed at increasing frustration tolerance may help individuals develop more adaptive coping strategies and improve their ability to manage emotional distress. The integration of these approaches may be particularly effective in addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of marital conflict. Furthermore, the findings support the use of therapeutic approaches that target both cognitive and emotional processes, such as schema therapy and emotionally focused therapy, which have been shown to improve relational outcomes (Yaghoubi Nejad, 2023; Yarian & Khalilian, 2023).

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, the present findings contribute to the broader theoretical literature on marital conflict by providing empirical support for models that emphasize the interaction of multiple psychological processes. The results highlight the importance of considering both direct and indirect pathways in understanding the determinants of marital conflict, as well as the role of mediating variables such as frustration tolerance. This integrative perspective is consistent with contemporary approaches in psychology that emphasize the dynamic interplay between cognitive, emotional, and relational factors in shaping human behavior. Moreover, the use of structural equation modeling in this study allows for a more nuanced understanding of these relationships, providing insights into the underlying mechanisms that contribute to marital conflict.

## 6. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite the strengths of the present study, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of a convenience sampling method limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations, as the sample may not be representative of all individuals experiencing marital conflict. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study precludes causal inferences, as the observed relationships may be influenced by unmeasured variables or reciprocal effects. The reliance on self-report measures also introduces the possibility of response bias, as participants may have provided socially desirable responses or may not have accurately reported their experiences. Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on individuals applying for divorce, which, while relevant, may limit the applicability of the findings to less distressed populations.

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to examine the causal relationships among the variables and to explore how these relationships evolve over time. Expanding the sample to include diverse populations, including couples at different stages of relationship development and from various cultural backgrounds, would enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, future studies could incorporate multi-method approaches, such as observational data and partner reports, to provide a more comprehensive assessment of marital conflict and related variables. Further research is also needed to explore potential moderating variables, such as gender, cultural factors, and personality traits, that may influence the relationships among maladaptive schemas, self-differentiation, frustration tolerance, and marital conflict.

From a practical standpoint, the findings of this study suggest that interventions aimed at reducing marital conflict should adopt a multidimensional approach that addresses cognitive, emotional, and relational factors. Clinicians working with couples, particularly those at risk of divorce, may benefit from assessing and targeting maladaptive schemas, enhancing self-differentiation, and improving frustration tolerance. Psychoeducational programs and therapeutic interventions that focus on these areas may help couples develop more adaptive patterns of interaction, improve communication, and reduce conflict. Additionally, incorporating skills training in emotional regulation and distress tolerance into marital counseling programs may enhance their effectiveness and contribute to more sustainable improvements in relationship quality.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

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

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

### Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

### Authors' Contributions

All authors have equally contributed 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.

### References

- Alizadeh, S., Aryan, R., & Moradi, S. (2024). Investigating the relationship between emotional alexithymia and maladaptive schemas with marital conflict in married female students. *Journal of Cognition, Behavior, and Learning*, 1(4), 106-116. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jcbl.1.4.9>
- Arini, D. U. (2023). Intolerance of Marriage Relations Between Husband and Wife (Psychological Case Study of Marital Rape). *East Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 2(5), 2111-2122. <https://doi.org/10.55927/eajmr.v2i5.4046>
- Emadoleslami, V., Ahmadi Ragh-Abadi, A., & Rahimi, A. (2021). Investigating the relationship between marital burnout, cognitive flexibility, and distress tolerance in graduate students of Khorasan. Seventh International Conference on Knowledge and Technology in Educational Sciences, Social Studies, and Psychology of Iran, Tehran.
- Gholipour, E., Akbari, H., & Shariatnia, K. (2022). The Effectiveness of Marital Relationship Enrichment Training on Emotional Literacy, Couple Compatibility, Marital Boredom and Distress Tolerance in Couples. *Aftj*, 3(1), 632-653. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.3.1.31>
- Habibi Kordabad, N., & Darbani, S. A. (2023). The Mediating Role of Triangulation in the Family on the Relationship Between Differentiation and Marital Conflict in Parents with Disabled Children. *KMAN Counseling & Psychology Nexus*, 1(2), 164-171. <https://journals.kmanpub.com/index.php/psychnexus/article/view/1936>
- Jo, M., & Lee, S. (2025). The Effects of Self-Differentiation on Newly-Wedded Couples' Marital Satisfaction: The Moderated Mediating Effect of Conflict Management Style According to Gender. *Korean Assoc Learner-Centered Curric Instr*, 25(12), 573-590. <https://doi.org/10.22251/jlcci.2025.25.12.573>
- Kamali, Z., Fani, H., Molaei, E., & Amiri, S. (2025). The effectiveness of schema therapy with emphasis on imagery rescripting on marital intimacy in couples with marital conflicts. The 1st National Conference on Quality Living from

- the Perspective of Psychology, Counseling and Social Work, Khomeinishahr.
- Khorrami Nobandi, S., & Yaghoubi Pour, A. (2024). Structural Model of Predicting Marital Commitment Based on Attachment Styles and Early Maladaptive Schemas in Individuals with Emotional Extramarital Relationships. 8th International Conference on Law, Psychology, Educational and Behavioral Sciences, Tehran.
- Montazer, R., & Razavi Nematollahi, V. S. (2024). Investigating the relationship between psychological flexibility and marital adjustment with the mediating role of ambiguity tolerance. *Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on Psychology, Educational Sciences and Lifestyle*. <https://www.sid.ir/paper/1387266/fa>
- Moradi Davijani, H., Karami, J., & Yazdanbakhsh, K. (2024). The mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and marital conflict. *Family Research*, 20(2), 23-46. [https://jfr.sbu.ac.ir/article\\_105060.html](https://jfr.sbu.ac.ir/article_105060.html)
- Nosrat Talab Haghi, A., Jajarmi, M., & Bakhshipour, A. (2024). Comparing the Effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy and Schema Therapy on Marital Forgiveness and Cognitive Emotion Regulation in Conflicting Couples. *Rooyesh-e-Ravanshenasi Journal*, 13(12), 157-166. [https://frooyesh.ir/browse.php?a\\_id=5917&slc\\_lang=en&sid=1&printcase=1&hbnr=1&hmb=1](https://frooyesh.ir/browse.php?a_id=5917&slc_lang=en&sid=1&printcase=1&hbnr=1&hmb=1)
- Rahiman, R. (2024). Development of a Structural Model With a Mediating Role of Maladaptive Schema in Relation to Personality Dimensions and Attachment Styles With Communication Skills and Marital Conflicts Among Couples Facing Divorce. *PST*, 48(2), 842-857. <https://doi.org/10.52783/pst.599>
- Ramzy, L. (2023). Predicting resilience based on marital adjustment and tolerance for ambiguity among women referring to the Jahrom City Counseling Center. *Iranian Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences*, 25(3), 73-83. <https://www.psyj.ir/user/articles/2965>
- Rauf, U., Fatima, H., & Mushtaq, M. (2023). Distress tolerance, mental health problems and marital satisfaction among married couples. *Pakistan Journal of Social Research*, 5(01), 559-567. <https://doi.org/10.52567/pjsr.v5i01.1377>
- Rostaeei, F., & Mostafaei, S. (2023). The impact of schema therapy on marital conflict resolution. *Journal of Psychological Studies*, 42(1), 97-112. <https://nmcjournal.zums.ac.ir/article-1-875-fa.html>
- Sadeghi, I., Salahian, A., & Salehi, M. (2022). Modeling Marital Conflicts based on Self-Knowledge, Love and Emotional Intelligence Mediated by Differentiation. *Journal of Family Research*, 18(2), 309-332. <https://doi.org/10.48308/jfr.18.2.309>
- Sarhani, Z., & Homaei, R. (2023). Association Between Marital Infidelity Based on Fear of Intimacy and Self-Differentiation Through the Mediating Role of Sexual Satisfaction in Women With Marital Conflict. *Archives of Hygiene Sciences*, 12(1), 50-55. <https://doi.org/10.34172/ahs.12.1.1.386>
- Shahabi, S., Jenaabadi, H., & Tamini, B. K. (2021). The Mediating Role of Marital Intimacy in the Relationship Between Distress Tolerance and Sexual Self-Concept Among Couples With Marital Conflict. *Aftj*, 2(3), 361-380. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.2.3.18>
- Sharif Nia, M., Heshmati, R., & Hashemi, T. (2023). The Mediating Role of Schema Modes in the Relationship Between Childhood Adversities and Marital Conflicts in Individuals with Symptoms of Psychopathology. *Rooyesh-e-Ravanshenasi Journal*, 12(11), 11-20. <https://frooyesh.ir/article-1-4781-fa.html>
- Yaghoubi Nejad, M. S. (2023). The effectiveness of schema therapy on marital conflicts, resilience, and reduction of emotional breakdown symptoms in divorcing couples. 2nd National Conference on Social and Psychological Damages with an Emphasis on Behavioral Sciences, Shiraz.,
- Yarian, M., & Khalilian, P. (2023). Comparison of the effectiveness of choice theory-based training and schema therapy on marital self-efficacy and desire for marriage in girls of Isfahan. 19th International Conference on Research in Psychology, Counseling and Educational Sciences,
- Zerang, M., Ahangari, S. K., Saberi, F., Iraninezhad, Z. S. J., & Abbasimofrad, P. (2025). Effectiveness of Schema Therapy on Psychological Distress and Life Engagement in Couples Experiencing Marital Conflict. *Ijbmc*, 12(1), 244-249. <https://doi.org/10.61838/ijbmc.v12i1.975>