

## Investigating the mediating role of psychological flexibility in the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being of couples

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Researchers believe that emotional intelligence is an important factor in determining a person's success in life and directly affects the variables related to a person's "self". Emotional intelligence causes the appropriate processing of information that has an emotional charge and its use is necessary to guide cognitive activity. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the mediator role of psychological flexibility in the relationship between emotional intelligence and the psychological well-being of couples.

**Method:** The current research is descriptive and correlational in terms of applied purpose and study method. The statistical population of this research included all the couples referred to couples therapy and counseling centers in Tehran's 7th district in 2022, and 150 people were selected as the statistical sample. Then, the participants completed the questionnaires mentioned in the research tool section. Finally, SPSS and AMOS software and Pearson correlation coefficient and structural equation path analysis were used for statistical data analysis.

**Results:** The findings showed that the direct effect of emotional intelligence on psychological flexibility is significant ( $\beta = 0.28$  and  $t = 3.82$ ). Also, the direct effect of emotional intelligence on psychological well-being ( $\beta = 0.36$  and  $t = 3.40$ ) is significant. The direct effect of psychological flexibility on psychological well-being ( $\beta = 0.40$  and  $t = 4.14$ ) is also significant. Finally, the indirect effect of emotional intelligence on psychological well-being is 0.29 and the total effect is 0.65.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, it can be concluded that in the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being, the variable of psychological flexibility as a mediator can strengthen this relationship.

**Keywords:** Emotional intelligence, psychological well-being, cognitive flexibility, couples.

## 1. Introduction

Family is the most important institution of human society, which is the most fundamental and the first institution of society, and the first step to establishing this social institution is marriage. Marriage is considered an important issue in all societies, and having a successful married life is considered a major and ideal goal for most people. In other words, the family is known as the most important unit of societies, and marriage is the most basic human relationship; because it forms the primary structure of family relationships and the growth of the next generations (Darbani & Parsakia, 2022). Therefore, it is important to study different psychosocial variables and find the relationship between them in the study of couples.

Today, *emotional intelligence* (IE) is the topic of discussion in many studies related to the investigation of individual differences and has added to the studies related to IE. IE is understanding, describing, receiving, and controlling emotions (Navabinejad, Rostami, & Parsakia, 2023). Salovey et al. (1999) believe that IE is an important factor in determining a person's success in life and directly affects the variables related to a person's "self." IE causes the appropriate processing of information with an emotional charge, and its use is necessary to guide cognitive activity (Hoshmandi, Fatolahzadeh, & Rostami, 2019; Salovey et al., 1999). IE can effectively create and maintain personal relationships between couples (Mehdigholi, Dokanei fard, & Jahangir, 2022). Skills or abilities that enable awareness of self and others' emotional states and the ability to regulate or use emotions to positively influence one's performance and role (Mattingly & Kraiger, 2019). IE is theoretically and empirically related to the ability to manage and regulate personal emotions (Zysberg & Raz, 2019). In fact, mutual understanding is one of the most important factors contributing to couples' long-term happiness (Mulay & Jaganathan, 2020). The role of IE in married life has been examined in various research (Mehdigholi, Dokanei fard, & Jahangir, 2022), and studies show the important role of this variable in marital relationships.

Another important variable that has received many studies today is *psychological flexibility* (PF). PF as the ability to choose the most suitable actions from among different options and not actions that are chosen only to avoid disturbing thoughts, feelings, memories, or tendencies or are actually imposed on a person, is one of are variables that can be effective in the relationship between couples (Østergaard et al., 2020). The more people accept the

problem, the more PF they show (Rahimzadegan & Atadokht, 2020). People with flexible thinking use alternative justifications, positively reconstruct their thinking framework, accept stressful events in challenging situations, and are psychologically more tolerant and tolerant than inflexible people (Gloster, Meyer, & Lieb, 2017). These people have less psychological resilience, and it can be said that when inflexible people are in chaotic and stressful situations, they need psychological interventions more than ever (Ravanpoor et al., 2022).

In addition, *psychological well-being* (PW) is an important variable in evaluating mental health and quality of life. PW means having a positive feeling in life in which a person tries to develop his talents and potential (Lee & Park, 2016). Ryff & Singer (1998) presented the theory of PW. According to Ryff's model, PW consists of six factors: self-acceptance (having a positive attitude towards oneself), positive relationship with others (establishing warm and intimate relationships with others and the ability to empathize), autonomy (a sense of independence and the ability to stand up to pressures) social), purposeful life (having a purpose in life and giving it), personal growth (feeling of continuous growth) and environmental mastery (the ability of a person to manage the environment) (Ryff & Singer, 2014; Ryff & Singer, 2006; Seligman, 2015). The feeling of well-being has both emotional and cognitive components. Abused couples with a high sense of well-being mainly experience positive emotions and have a positive self-evaluation of the surrounding incidents and events, while couples with a low sense of well-being evaluate the events and their life situation as unfavorable and most negative emotions such as; They experience anxiety, depression and anger (Roepke & Seligman, 2015). PW is the objective feeling of satisfaction, satisfaction, and pleasure experienced by men and women concerning all aspects of the marital relationship. PW is one of couples' most important components of emotional stability (Galla & Duckworth, 2015). Studies have shown that an unsuccessful marriage and divorce, whose characteristics include anger, stress, and incompatibility, negatively affect PW, so people who have had a successful marriage have more PW than those who have not been married. and have (Pagnini et al., 2015).

Research has shown that IE can predict PW (Augusto-Landa, Pulido-Martos, & Lopez-Zafra, 2011; Augusto Landa, Martos, & Lopez-Zafra, 2010; Carmeli, Yitzhak-Halevy, & Weisberg, 2009) and there is a high correlation between these two variables (Ahmadi et al., 2014; Augusto-

Landa, Pulido-Martos, & Lopez-Zafra, 2011; Augusto Landa, Martos, & Lopez-Zafra, 2010; Guerra-Bustamante et al., 2019; Lucas-Mangas et al., 2022; Prasetyo, Zulaika, & Marsenn, 2023). In addition, PF is also related to well-being, mental health, and IE (Østergaard et al., 2020). According to the mentioned research background and theoretical foundations, it seems that variables can mediate the relationship between IE and PW. Therefore, according to what was said and the statistical population of the current study, this research was conducted to investigate the mediating role of PF in the relationship between IE and PW.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

The current research is descriptive and correlational in terms of applied purpose and study method. The statistical population of this research included all the couples who were referred to couples therapy and counseling centers in the 7th district of Tehran in 2021. According to Kline (2011), the research sample size was determined to be 150 people (75 couples) (Kline, 2011). For sampling, counseling centers were first selected using the cluster sampling method and then the statistical sample was selected using the available sampling method. Then, the participants completed the questionnaires mentioned in the research tool section.

### 2.2. Measurements

In order to collect data, Ryff's (1998) *Psychological Well-being Scale*, Dennis & Vander Wal's (2010) *Psychological Flexibility Scale*, and Bar-On's (2010) *Emotional Intelligence Inventory* were used.

#### 2.2.1. Psychological Well-being

Psychological well-being scale was created by Ryff (1998). This questionnaire has 18 questions and its purpose is to evaluate and examine psychological well-being from different dimensions (independence, control over the environment, personal growth, positive relationship with others, purposefulness in life, self-acceptance). The scoring of this questionnaire is based on a six-point Likert scale and the range of scores is between 18 and 108. This questionnaire has 6 dimensions (independence, control over the environment, personal growth, positive relationship with others, purposefulness in life and self-acceptance). In order to standardize the scale of psychological well-being, the creators of this questionnaire conducted this test on a sample

of 321 people. They reported the similarity coefficient of the subscales of this questionnaire as follows: autonomy 76%, mastery of the environment 90%, personal growth 87%, communication Positive with others 91%, purposeful life 90% and self-acceptance 93%, the reliability of the retest method of the subscales was also between 81% and 85% in a sample of 117 people and within 6 weeks (Ryff & Singer, 2014; Ryff & Singer, 2006). Also, Cronbach's alpha for the entire questionnaire in the present study was 0.80.

#### 2.2.2. Psychological Flexibility

Psychological Flexibility Scale was created by Dennis & Vander Wal in 2010. This questionnaire consists of 20 questions. The scoring of this questionnaire is based on a seven-point Likert scale. This questionnaire is used to evaluate a person's progress in clinical and non-clinical work and to evaluate a person's progress in developing flexible thinking in the cognitive-behavioral treatment of depression and other mental illnesses. In the research, the creators of the questionnaire obtained the concurrent validity of this questionnaire with the Beck depression questionnaire equal to 0.39 and its convergent validity with the Martin & Robin's cognitive flexibility scale of 0.75 (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010).

#### 2.2.3. Emotional Intelligence

Bar-On's (2010) Emotional Intelligence Inventory has 90 questions that measure 15 components of emotional intelligence. Bar-On (2010) first developed this test to show its greater importance than the cognitive intelligence test. In this questionnaire, emotional intelligence is divided into 5 subscales: the scale of intrapersonal skills, which includes the components of emotional awareness, self-expression, self-respect, self-improvement, and independence. The interpersonal skills subscale includes the components of empathy, social responsibility and interpersonal relationships, the coping with pressure scale includes; Stress tolerance and impulse control. The adaptability subscale includes flexibility, problem solving and realism. The subscale of general mood includes components of happiness and optimism (Bar-On, 2010). In the research of Raghibi & Gharehchahi (2013), the reliability of this test was conducted using the even-odd method of 88 for 95 people, and the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach's alpha method and the coefficient was 88% (Raghibi & Gharehchahi, 2013).

2.3. Data Analysis

SPSS and AMOS software and Pearson correlation coefficient and structural equation path analysis were used for statistical data analysis.

3. Findings and Results

In terms of the demographic variables of the present study, the mean (standard deviation) of the age of the participants of the present study was 36.37 (6.23) years. The Table 1 below shows the descriptive findings from the data collected by the questionnaires.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive findings*

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
IE	50.43	5.92	-.062	0.50
PW	261.52	30.19	1.14	-1.01
PF	70.20	7.64	1.19	0.33

Based on the contents of the Table 1, the mean (standard deviation) scores of PW are 50.43 (5.92), IE 261.52 (30.19) and PF 70.20 (7.64). Also, the kurtosis and skewness values showed that the collected data have a normal distribution.

**Table 4**

*Estimation of coefficients of direct effects*

From variable	On variable	Standardized parameter	Std. error	t	P
IE	PF	0.28	0.01	3.82	< 0.05
	PW	0.36	0.04	3.40	< 0.05
PF	PW	0.40	0.03	4.14	< 0.05

In the Table 4, the standardized parameter, the standard error of estimation and the results of the t-test are reported. As shown, the direct effect of IE on PF ( $\beta = 0.28$  and  $t =$

**Table 2**

*Results of correlation coefficients*

Variable	1	2	3
1. IE	1		
2. PW	0.36*	1	
3. PF	0.41*	0.32*	1

\*  $p < 0.05$

The Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients between the research variables. The results showed a significant positive correlation between IE and PW, PW and PF, and IE and PF ( $P < 0.05$ ). In the Table 3 fit indices were used to check the model's fit.

**Table 3**

*Model fit indices*

Index	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI	NNFI
Model	2.82	0.090	0.91	0.93	0.94	0.93	0.92

If the index of chi-square ratio to the degree of freedom is less than 3 and the GFI, AGFI, CFI, NFI indices are higher than 0.9 and the RMSEA index is less than 0.1, it can be said that the model has a very good fit. Based on the findings reported in the Table 3, the proposed model has a good fit.

3.82) is significant. Also, the direct effect of IE on PW ( $\beta = 0.36$  and  $t = 3.40$ ) is significant. Finally, the direct effect of PF on PW ( $\beta=0.40$  and  $t=4.14$ ) is also significant.

**Table 5**

*Standardized coefficients of direct effects, indirect effects and total effects*

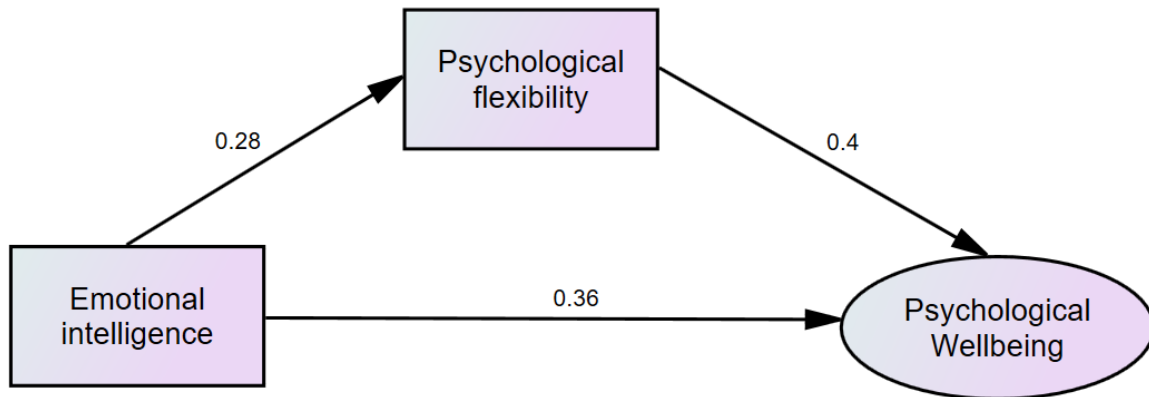
From variable	On variable	Effects			P
		Direct	Indirect	Total	
IE	PF	0.28	-	0.28	< 0.05
	PW	0.36	0.11	0.47	< 0.05
PF	PW	0.40		0.40	< 0.05

As seen in the Table 5, the indirect effect of IE on PW is 0.29 and the total effect is 0.65. Therefore, in the relationship

between IE and PW, the variable of PF as a mediator can strengthen this relationship (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Final model with direct effects



#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of IE in the relationship between marital conflicts and the desire for marital infidelity. The results of the statistical analysis of the data showed that PF can strengthen the relationship between IE and PW as a mediating variable. The results obtained from this research were aligned with the findings of many studies (Asghari Ebrahimabad & Mamizade, 2018; Augusto-Landa, Pulido-Martos, & Lopez-Zafra, 2011; Augusto Landa, Martos, & Lopez-Zafra, 2010; Carmeli, Yitzhak-Halevy, & Weisberg, 2009; Fathi-Ashtiani & Sheikholeslami, 2019; Ghorbani et al., 2022; Guerra-Bustamante et al., 2019; Lucas-Mangas et al., 2022; Prasetyo, Zulaika, & Marsenn, 2023; Salehi, Hoseinian, & Yazdi, 2021).

In explaining the findings, IE is the meeting point of a person's abilities, skills, and emotional and social facilitators that are mutually related. This set determines how effective we are in understanding and expressing ourselves, understanding others, communicating with them, and coping with the needs and problems of daily life (Navabinejad, Rostami, & Parsakia, 2023). People with high IE act in a way that leads to positive experiences and prevents negative emotional experiences. In fact, these people have more skills in managing emotional problems and thus experience fewer marital problems (Hadian & Amini, 2019). In fact, IE provides PW by providing positive emotions and experiences. On the other hand, IE is an ability that has an important effect on other abilities of a person. People who

have high IE have more adaptability, self-confidence, and self-awareness, which are necessary to achieve PW (Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010). Although IE can predict PW, PF indicates an individual's effort to perceive difficult situations and circumstances as situations under control (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). PF, where high IE does not have enough power to achieve PW, can help achieve PW as a mediator. In other words, people with high IE but a lack of PF are more likely to fail in difficult and stressful situations. In this case, high PF can help and lead to PW. In addition, the well-being of PF as the ability to adapt, find alternative solutions for difficult situations, discover different justifications to interpret each situation and try to control difficult situations, and master the environment, paves the way to achieve PW. In general, people who can think flexibly, use alternative justifications, positively reconstruct their thinking framework, and accept challenging situations or stressful events have more PW than people who are not flexible. (Asghari Ebrahimabad & Mamizade, 2018).

#### 5. Limitations

The current research had limitations like any other study. One of the current research's limitations was using a questionnaire as a means of data collection. Since the respondents may need to be more accurate and honest in completing the questionnaires, the collected data may need to be validated. Also, the available sampling method lowers the generalization power of the findings.

## 6. Suggestions and Applications

According to the obtained results, it is suggested that counselors and psychotherapists use emotional intelligence and PF training in their treatment protocols.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethics principles

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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