




Predicting the Level of Marital Conflicts Based on Anxious-Insecure Attachment Style: The Mediating Role of Interpersonal Mindfulness

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Various studies have examined the multiple factors through which couples' attachment styles can play a role in creating marital conflicts. In the present study, the mediating role of interpersonal mindfulness is investigated as a factor that may explain part of the role of anxious-insecure attachment style in creating marital conflicts among couples.

Methods and Materials: In this correlational-descriptive study, a total of 402 couples who visited counseling centers in Tehran in 2023 were selected using convenience sampling. They responded to the Interpersonal Mindfulness Scale (Pratscher et al., 2019), the Revised Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (Fraley et al., 2000), and the Kansas Marital Conflict Scale (Eggman et al., 1985). Data analysis was done using structural equation modeling.

Findings: Findings indicated that anxious-insecure attachment style affects marital conflict both directly and indirectly through interpersonal mindfulness. Additionally, anxious-insecure attachment style and interpersonal mindfulness explain 20% and 16% of the variance in marital conflict, respectively.

Conclusion: The findings of this study indicated that interpersonal mindfulness mediates the relationship between anxious-insecure attachment style and marital conflicts among couples. The results of this research suggest that couples with an anxious-insecure attachment style experience more marital conflicts due to a lack of interpersonal mindfulness.

Keywords: Marital Conflict, Interpersonal Mindfulness, Anxious-Insecure Attachment, Couples

1. Introduction

The presence of conflicts in marital life, like any other close relationship, is part of life that arises from differing needs, goals, desires, and interests (Wilmot &

Hocker, 2017). Interaction and communication, as one of the important features of all close relationships, make the occurrence of conflict in marital life inevitable. The ability to resolve conflict and consequently reduce the level of conflict among individuals involved in romantic

relationships greatly contributes to satisfaction, stability, and quality of the relationship (Saavedra et al., 2010).

Considering the implicit consequences of marital conflicts on the mental and physical health of family members, the importance of paying attention to this issue is understandable. Marital conflicts are associated with mental health problems (Choi & Marks, 2008), eating disorders in adolescent children, depression in couples (Choi & Marks, 2008; Sbarra et al., 2013), addiction to virtual networks in adolescent children (Yang et al., 2016), and alcohol-related problems in both men and women (Windle & Windle, 2019). Behavioral marriage theories suggest that conflict behaviors have significant consequences on how couples evaluate marriage and separation. Destructive conflict behaviors lead to negative evaluations of marriage and decreased marital satisfaction and stability, while constructive behaviors improve marital evaluations and increase satisfaction and stability (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

One way to examine why conflicts remain unresolved in relationships is to observe individual behavioral patterns during conflict. Research indicates that adult attachment style can predict specific behavioral patterns when engaging with a partner (Parsakia et al., 2023; Shi, 2003). Bowlby (1969) described attachment styles as internal working models that create representations of the relationship between self and others. It is likely that individuals with an anxious attachment style display behaviors that increase conflict during disputes (Fall & Shankland, 2021; Fraley et al., 2015; Fraley et al., 2000; Mohammadi et al., 2023). Attachment styles are reinforced through various interactions with others, particularly those perceived as stressful or threatening (Fraley et al., 2015; Fraley et al., 2000; Mohammadi et al., 2023; Shi, 2003). It can be said that when an issue arises between couples, their problem-solving behaviors may be dominated by their attachment style characteristics. Each individual's unique attachment style may play a role in the final outcome of conflict resolution.

Attachment orientation is conceptualized in two dimensions of attachment insecurity: anxiety about abandonment and avoidance of intimacy (Stevenson et al., 2021). In the present study, the dimension of anxious-insecure attachment in couples was examined. Individuals with anxious attachment may exhibit submissive or domineering behavioral patterns when addressing a conflict. Anxious individuals are likely to communicate with their partner but do so in an excessive or maladaptive manner (Berg et al., 2011).

Research has shown that individuals' attachment style is a general vulnerability factor that can affect psychological aspects through various variables, such as perceived coping strategies (Wei et al., 2003), emotion regulation (Malik et al., 2015), attention and executive functions (Low & Webster, 2016), and negative perfectionism (Wei et al., 2004).

In the present study, the variable of interpersonal mindfulness was examined as a factor through which anxious-insecure attachment style might influence marital conflicts among couples. Various studies have identified a strong relationship between adult attachment and various aspects of mindfulness (Dixon et al., 2023; Vieira, 2023). Additionally, in the context of anxious-insecure attachment relationships, rumination defends against individual and interpersonal deficiencies by hyperactivating the attachment system (in the case of anxiety). These habitual defensive patterns may create significant links between adult attachment orientations and mindfulness (Caldwell & Shaver, 2013).

Mindfulness means focusing one's attention on specific issues, thereby increasing awareness as a result of such focus (Brown & Ryan, 2003). High levels of mindfulness are associated with high levels of satisfaction in interpersonal relationships (Barnes et al., 2007), marital satisfaction (Jones et al., 2011), and relationship and marriage quality (Williams & Cano, 2014). Recent research shows that mindfulness is examined in two separate categories: intrapersonal mindfulness and interpersonal mindfulness. Intrapersonal mindfulness refers to the unconditional acceptance of the individual, attention to inner life, and awareness of the present moment without reacting to conflicts and problems (Kohlenberg et al., 2015). On the other hand, interpersonal mindfulness refers to an individual's ability to maintain awareness of their thoughts, bodily reactions, and internal experiences while interacting with others, and to continuously focus on others' words, behaviors, feelings, tone of voice, and body language (Pratscher et al., 2019).

How interpersonal mindfulness affects relationships has become a topic of recent research interest (Pratscher et al., 2019). Interpersonal mindfulness improves relationship quality. Romantic relationships enhance other aspects of an individual's life, such as professional life (Stahl & Goldstein, 2019). Research has also found that interpersonal mindfulness increases relationship quality in bilateral relationships (Kim et al., 2019; Kohlenberg et al., 2015; Pratscher et al., 2018). Erus (2019) explained interpersonal

mindfulness in marriage in relation to interpersonal mindfulness in parenting, characterized by behaviors such as listening attentively to the spouse during interaction and communication, being aware of one's own and the spouse's feelings, accepting feelings and thoughts without judgment, and responding to the spouse's behaviors through self-regulation rather than intuition. Eros's (2019) study showed that interpersonal mindfulness in marriage increases marital adjustment (Erus & Deniz, 2020).

Although these studies show favorable findings regarding the role of mindfulness in general communication between couples, no research has yet been conducted on behavioral patterns of interpersonal mindfulness and conflict resolution. Previous research on mindfulness in relationships has measured mindfulness in the context of present-moment awareness and intrapersonal aspects. Another aspect of mindfulness that is worth researching and likely has more effectiveness in interpersonal relationships is interpersonal mindfulness (Pratscher et al., 2019).

This characteristic likely plays a role in conflict resolution outcomes, as the ability to accept and refrain from judging others while listening to a partner's viewpoint may reduce the likelihood of negative reactions and criticism. Described limitations in other research on mindfulness in romantic relationships indicate the need to examine the characteristics of acceptance and non-judgment in interpersonal relationships (Pratscher et al., 2019). If there is a significant positive relationship between the characteristics of interpersonal mindfulness and marital conflicts, mental health professionals may find new ways to teach conflict resolution skills and improve individual functioning to clients.

Given the mentioned points, examining the relationship between adults' anxious attachment style and marital conflicts, considering the mediating role of interpersonal mindfulness, is highly important. Since research on attachment styles is well-established, examining the role of interpersonal mindfulness based on anxious-insecure attachment style in marital conflicts can provide more insights for mental health professionals in helping clients with interpersonal issues. For instance, increasing interpersonal mindfulness characteristics in individuals with anxious attachment styles may act as a buffer against reactive, defensive, or critical behaviors during arguments. Therefore, the main aim of the present study is to answer whether interpersonal mindfulness mediates the relationship between anxious-insecure attachment style and marital conflicts.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study is fundamental in terms of its aim and correlational in nature, using structural equation modeling. The statistical population included all individuals who visited counseling centers in districts 2 to 7 of Tehran for marital conflicts between 2022 and 2023. Convenience sampling was used in this study. Considering the research design and the limited size of the statistical population, sample size calculation was based on Kline's (2012) suggestion of 10 to 20 participants per parameter in the model. Given the 27 parameters in the hypothetical model, the sample size was set at 540 participants, which was eventually reduced to 402 after removing incomplete questionnaires. According to demographic data, the average age of participants was 32.4 years. Initially, three counseling and psychology centers in Tehran that agreed to collaborate were selected. After discussions with the center managers, they were asked to refer individuals who visited the center for marital conflict resolution if they consented. In the next step, after obtaining informed consent and ensuring the confidentiality of information, the assessment package was provided to the participants. Inclusion criteria were willingness to participate, a minimum education level of middle school diploma, and an age range of 18 to 50 years. Exclusion criteria were incomplete responses to the questionnaires and unwillingness to continue cooperation.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Conflict

A self-assessment tool designed to differentiate distressed from non-distressed couples, consisting of 27 items and three factors: planning, argument, and negotiation. This three-part questionnaire includes 11 items in the first section, 5 items in the second, and 11 items in the third. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (never = 1 to almost always = 5). The minimum and maximum scores are 27 and 135, respectively, with higher scores indicating more conflict. The questionnaire has good internal consistency, with alpha ranges from 0.91 to 0.95 for men and from 0.88 to 0.95 for women. Test-retest correlations for all three sections ranged from 0.64 to 0.96. Campbell and Moroz (2014) reported Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of 0.87 for men and 0.89 for women for the planning factor. Liagat (2017) reported a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.62

and a divergent validity coefficient of 0.41 with the Life Satisfaction Scale (Kashmari et al., 2024). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.76.

2.2.2. Attachment

This tool is a 36-item scale assessing individuals' attachment orientation. The anxiety subscale consists of 18 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Items 1 to 18 pertain to anxiety, and the mean of these items provides the anxiety score, with a minimum score of 1 and a maximum of 7, where higher scores indicate higher anxiety levels. Fraley et al. (2015) found two distinct yet related subscales of anxiety and avoidance that align with theoretical foundations. Research indicates high reliability for the anxiety and avoidance scales (ECR-R). Fraley et al. (2015) reported test-retest reliability coefficients of 0.94 for anxiety and 0.95 for avoidance. In the Iranian version, Panahi et al. (2013) reported internal consistency coefficients of 0.83 for avoidance and 0.89 for anxiety, and test-retest reliability coefficients over two weeks of 0.83, 0.81, and 0.89, respectively. In this study, Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.85 (Parsakia et al., 2023).

2.2.3. Interpersonal Mindfulness

Developed by Pratscher et al. (2019), this questionnaire comprises 27 items and four subscales. Respondents rate items on a 5-point Likert scale (almost never = 1 to almost always = 5). The minimum score is 27, and the maximum is 135. Items 2, 5, 10, 13, 17, 21, and 25 assess presence, items 1, 7, 15, 16, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, and 27 assess self-other awareness, items 3, 9, 14, 20 assess non-judgmental

acceptance, and items 4, 6, 8, 11, 12, 22 assess non-reactivity. Pratscher et al. (2019) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 for the overall scale at a significance level of 0.01. Subscale reliability was 0.87 for presence, 0.68 for self-other awareness, 0.74 for non-judgmental acceptance, and 0.67 for non-reactivity, indicating satisfactory reliability. Eros and Tekal (2020) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 for the Interpersonal Mindfulness Questionnaire. In the psychometric evaluation of the Persian version, confirmatory factor analysis supported the four-factor model (presence, self-other awareness, non-judgmental acceptance, and non-reactivity). Convergent validity with the Brown (2003) Mindfulness Scale was satisfactory (0.71). Additionally, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the overall mindfulness scale were 0.84, and for the four subscales (presence, self-other awareness, non-judgmental acceptance, non-reactivity), they were 0.83, 0.83, 0.88, and 0.77, respectively (Pratscher et al., 2019). The tool's reliability was assessed through one-month test-retest, yielding 0.88, and internal consistency was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79.

2.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS-26 and AMOS-21 using SEM method.

3. Findings and Results

To achieve the research goal, data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and structural equation modeling. Table 1 shows the descriptive indices and correlation coefficients of the research variables.

Table 1

Descriptive Indices and Correlation Matrix of Research Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Presence in the moment	25.21	4.54	1							
2. Self and others awareness	31.11	8.26	.53**	1						
3. Non-judgmental acceptance	13.21	3.56	.44**	.49**	1					
4. Non-reactivity	20.59	4.61	.47**	.48**	.60**	1				
5. Anxious attachment	3.81	1.13	-.33**	-.30**	-.16**	-.19*	1			
6. Argument	26.73	5.45	-.33*	-.27**	-.19*	-.22**	.20*	1		
7. Lack of negotiation	26.92	5.61	-.39*	-.24**	-.16*	-.21**	.25**	.38**	1	
8. Lack of planning	25.96	6.06	-.30**	-.20*	-.001	-.14*	.29**	.39**	.40**	1

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Examining the assumptions of structural equation modeling is crucial. The obtained values for skewness and

kurtosis of the variables indicate the fulfillment of the univariate normality assumption. Also, the correlation

matrix among observed variables indicates no multicollinearity. Correlation coefficients for the hypothetical model range from $-.39$ to $.60$. Correlation coefficients above $.85$ can create multicollinearity issues, affecting accurate model estimation. Thus, the assumption of no multicollinearity is fulfilled.

Anxious attachment affects marital conflict and interpersonal mindfulness with standardized coefficients of $.18$ and $-.17$, respectively, and interpersonal mindfulness

affects marital conflict with a standardized coefficient of $-.34$. All effects are significant at $p < .001$. Additionally, the path coefficients explain 20% and 16% of the variance in marital conflicts for anxious-insecure attachment and interpersonal mindfulness, respectively, indicating that these factors explain 20% and 16% of the variance in marital conflicts. The model fit indices are shown in Table 2, indicating an excellent fit for the hypothetical model.

Table 2

Fit Indices of the Structural Model

Fit Index	Acceptable Range	Value
Chi-square (χ^2)	-	90.372
Chi-square (χ^2) / df	< 5	3.92
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	> .90	.94
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	> .90	.94
Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	> .90	.94
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	> .90	.92
Standardized RMR (SRMR)	< .10	.093
RMSEA	< .08	.085

In this study, bootstrapping was used to assess mediating relationships. As shown in Table 3, the path from anxious attachment to marital conflict, mediated by interpersonal

mindfulness, is significant with standardized coefficients of $.058$ and $.090$ at $p < .05$.

Table 3

Bootstrap Results for Mediating Effects

Independent Variable	Mediator	Dependent Variable	Upper Limit	Lower Limit	Estimate Error	Effect Size	p
Anxious Attachment	Interpersonal Mindfulness	Marital Conflict	.158	.009	.032	.058	.026

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In the present study, a hypothetical structural model was used to test the relationship between anxious-insecure attachment and marital conflicts, with the mediating role of interpersonal mindfulness. As hypothesized, the findings supported a model in which interpersonal mindfulness mediates the relationship between anxious-insecure attachment and marital conflict. The findings indicate that the anxious-insecure attachment style affects marital conflicts through interpersonal mindfulness. In other words, individuals experiencing higher levels of anxious attachment may have lower abilities in interpersonal mindfulness, leading to less effective conflict resolution through presence in the moment, self and other awareness, non-judgmental acceptance, and non-reactivity.

These results align with prior findings (Dixon et al., 2023; Fall & Shankland, 2021; Vieira, 2023). Attachment theory provides a useful framework for understanding responses in interactive processes, such as marital conflict (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010) and changes in relationship satisfaction (Cooper et al., 2017). Differences in romantic attachment can be explained by two dimensions: avoidance (of intimacy) and anxiety (about abandonment). Individuals scoring high in avoidant attachment are described as needing more independence and emotional distance from their partner for comfort. In contrast, those scoring high in anxious attachment are characterized by excessive preoccupation and fear of being abandoned by their partner (Fournier et al., 2010). Conflicting situations activate the attachment system, influencing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. Individual differences in attachment explain the variability in responses during conflict (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010).

One missing link between attachment styles and marital conflicts, addressed in this research, is interpersonal mindfulness. Secure attachment and mindfulness share commonalities, both positively impacting well-being, mental and physical health, successful relationships, adaptive coping in the face of threats, higher self-esteem, and increased self-regulation. Additionally, neuroscientific studies have reported similar neural pathways for secure attachment, emotional self-regulation, and mindfulness (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). Existing literature indicates that the neural structures governing executive function, emotion regulation, and attention are related to attachment and mindfulness constructs (Siegel, 2007).

When considering anxious-insecure attachment, it is clear that anxiety is incompatible with effective mindfulness practice. While mindfulness represents an open, accepting view with direct observations and a non-centralized approach to thoughts and feelings, anxious attachment leads to feelings of inadequacy, hypervigilance with hypersensitivity to rejection, and increased rumination. Shaver and Mikulincer (2007) liken anxious attachment to "clinging" or obsessive meditation practice. However, secure attachment should enable individuals to approach their thought processes more balanced and forgivingly (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007).

Interpersonal mindfulness facilitates the perception of one's own and the partner's feelings, including awareness and acceptance of reactions, opinions, desires, emotions, pain, and pleasure during conflict resolution. Additionally, maintaining dialogue in the present moment, active listening (without invalidation through judgments or reactions), perceiving the spouse's statements and experiences, perspective-taking, and reducing the partner's experienced pain and suffering are characteristics of interpersonal mindfulness (Pratscher et al., 2019). Therefore, interpersonal mindfulness, influenced by individual attachment styles, can affect marital conflict resolution.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

This research faced limitations, such as its cross-sectional nature, preventing causal inferences and precise understanding of the actual relationships between variables. Another limitation is the exclusive use of self-report measurement tools. The sample included married individuals from specific regions in Tehran, cautioning against generalizing the results to other populations. Future studies should use other self-report tools and interviews to

evaluate the variables and conduct longitudinal studies to infer causal relationships and clarify the temporal sequence of the variables.

Ultimately, the results can provide valuable guidance for psychologists and therapists in improving the quality of relationships among highly conflicted couples with anxious-insecure attachment styles. Therapists can prioritize assessing attachment behaviors in their treatment plans and implement interventions if necessary. In treating marital conflicts, especially among individuals with anxious-insecure attachment, these results can inform the development of educational packages based on interpersonal mindfulness. Given the study's findings, structured and targeted training in interpersonal mindfulness can significantly improve the quality of these individuals' relationships.

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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.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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