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Predictors of Relationship Autonomy: The Roles of Cognitive Flexibility and Psychological Capital

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the predictive roles of cognitive flexibility and psychological capital on relationship autonomy among couples.
Methods and Materials: A cross-sectional design was employed with a sample of 203 participants, determined based on the Morgan and Krejcie table. Participants, all in committed romantic relationships, were recruited from community centers and online platforms. Data were collected using the Relationship Autonomy Scale (RAS), the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI), and the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ). Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis were conducted using SPSS version 27 to examine the relationships between the variables.
Findings: The results indicated significant positive correlations between relationship autonomy and both cognitive flexibility ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$) and psychological capital ($r = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$). Multiple regression analysis revealed that cognitive flexibility ($B = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$) and psychological capital ($B = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$) were significant predictors of relationship autonomy, accounting for 34% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.34$, $F(2, 200) = 34.12$, $p < 0.001$).
Conclusion: The findings underscore the importance of cognitive flexibility and psychological capital in fostering relationship autonomy. These psychological resources enable individuals to navigate relational challenges effectively, supporting a balance between personal needs and relational interdependence.

Keywords: *Relationship Autonomy, Cognitive Flexibility, Psychological Capital, Couples.*

1. Introduction

The utonomy is a fundamental human need, integral to the development of healthy relationships and personal well-being. It involves the capacity to make choices aligned with one's values and interests while maintaining a sense of self-determination (Blin, 2004). In the context of romantic relationships, autonomy supports mutual respect, individual growth, and relational satisfaction (Anderson, 2019). Autonomy is not synonymous with independence; rather, it encompasses the ability to balance personal desires with

relational commitments (Bekkema et al., 2013). Autonomous relationships are characterized by mutual support for each partner's autonomy, leading to enhanced relationship satisfaction and stability (Deci et al., 2006). Relationship autonomy refers to the degree to which individuals feel volitional and self-endorsing in their romantic relationships, balancing personal needs with relational interdependence (Deci et al., 2006).

Studies have shown that autonomy support within relationships is linked to numerous positive outcomes, including greater emotional well-being and lower levels of psychological distress (Sawatsky et al., 2021). Autonomy also plays a pivotal role in various life stages and situations, from educational settings (Núñez & León, 2015) to end-of-life care (Bekkema et al., 2013). The ability to exercise autonomy in relationships is particularly critical in fostering resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms (Schipper et al., 2011).

Cognitive flexibility is the mental ability to switch between thinking about different concepts and to think about multiple concepts simultaneously (Mohammadkhani et al., 2022). It enables individuals to adapt to new and changing situations, which is essential for maintaining healthy relationships. Cognitive flexibility allows for the reappraisal of relational challenges and the generation of alternative solutions, promoting relational resilience and satisfaction (YaĞAn & Kaya, 2022).

Research has highlighted the importance of cognitive flexibility in managing emotional and psychological stress. For instance, Afrashteh and Hasani (2022) found that cognitive flexibility mediates the relationship between mindfulness and psychological well-being, suggesting its crucial role in emotional regulation (Afrashteh & Hasani, 2022). Similarly, Novaes et al. (2018) demonstrated that cognitive flexibility moderates the relationship between job demands and occupational well-being, underscoring its broader relevance across various life domains (Novaes et al., 2018).

Psychological capital, or PsyCap, encompasses four core components: hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (HERO). It represents a positive psychological state that influences individuals' attitudes and behaviors, particularly in challenging situations (Almurumudhe et al., 2024; Mohammadi et al., 2021; Saadati & Parsakia, 2023; Samroodh et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022; Xue et al., 2022). PsyCap is associated with numerous beneficial outcomes, including enhanced job performance, increased life satisfaction, and improved mental health (Emami Khotbesara et al., 2024; Samroodh et al., 2022).

PsyCap's role in relational contexts is increasingly recognized. Xue et al. (2022) identified psychological capital as a mediator in the relationship between perceived stress and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, indicating its protective effect against psychological distress (Xue et al., 2022). In the workplace, PsyCap has been linked to better coping strategies and reduced turnover intentions (Samroodh et al., 2022). This study aims to extend the understanding of PsyCap by examining its impact on relationship autonomy among couples.

This study is grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fundamental psychological needs that drive human behavior and well-being (Deci et al., 2006). SDT emphasizes the importance of supporting autonomy to foster intrinsic motivation and personal growth. In relational contexts, SDT suggests that autonomy-supportive behaviors enhance relationship quality and individual well-being (Anderson, 2019).

Another theoretical underpinning is the concept of psychological resilience, which involves the ability to adapt positively in the face of adversity. Cognitive flexibility and psychological capital are key components of resilience, enabling individuals to navigate relational challenges effectively (Mohammadkhani et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022).

Numerous studies have explored the relationship between autonomy and psychological well-being. For instance, Deci et al. (2006) found that autonomy-supportive relationships enhance mutual respect and personal growth (Deci et al., 2006). Similarly, Bekkema et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of autonomy in end-of-life care, demonstrating its impact on dignity and well-being (Bekkema et al., 2013).

Research on cognitive flexibility has shown its critical role in emotional regulation and adaptive coping. Afrashteh and Hasani (2022) identified cognitive flexibility as a mediator between mindfulness and psychological well-being (Afrashteh & Hasani, 2022), while Novaes et al. (2018) demonstrated its moderating effect on occupational well-being. These findings suggest that cognitive flexibility is essential for managing relational dynamics and promoting psychological resilience (Novaes et al., 2018).

Psychological capital has been widely studied in organizational settings, with findings indicating its positive impact on job performance and employee well-being (Sun et al., 2022). Xue et al. (2022) extended this research to healthcare professionals, showing that PsyCap mediates the

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relationship between stress and PTSD symptoms (Xue et al., 2022). Samroodh et al. (2022) further highlighted the role of PsyCap in enhancing work-life balance and reducing turnover intentions (Samroodh et al., 2022).

The present study aims to build on this body of research by examining the predictive roles of cognitive flexibility and psychological capital on relationship autonomy among couples. Specifically, we hypothesize that higher levels of cognitive flexibility and psychological capital will be associated with greater relationship autonomy. This research seeks to contribute to the understanding of how psychological resources influence relational dynamics and individual well-being.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional design to investigate the relationship between cognitive flexibility, psychological capital, and relationship autonomy among couples. A total of 203 participants were recruited, which was determined as an adequate sample size based on the Morgan and Krejcie table. Participants were selected using convenience sampling from various community centers and online platforms. Inclusion criteria required participants to be in a committed romantic relationship for at least one year. The sample comprised individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, ensuring a broad representation of the population. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the study was approved by the institutional review board.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Relationship Autonomy

To measure the dependent variable, Relationship Autonomy, we utilized the Relationship Autonomy Scale (RAS) developed by La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, and Deci in 2000. The RAS assesses the degree to which individuals feel autonomous in their romantic relationships, reflecting their sense of volition and self-endorsement within the relationship context. The scale consists of 15 items divided into three subscales: autonomy, control, and dependence. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 7 (very true). Higher scores indicate greater relationship autonomy. Previous studies have confirmed the RAS's validity and reliability, demonstrating strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85) and good construct validity through confirmatory factor analyses (Anderson, 2019; Waldinger et al., 2003).

2.2.2. Cognitive Flexibility

The independent variable, Cognitive Flexibility, was measured using the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI) developed by Dennis and Vander Wal in 2010. The CFI is designed to evaluate an individual's ability to adapt to new and changing situations, view problems from multiple perspectives, and generate alternative solutions. The inventory includes 20 items categorized into two subscales: Alternatives (viewing various aspects of a situation) and Control (perceived control over challenging situations). Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater cognitive flexibility. The CFI has demonstrated excellent reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91) and validity across diverse samples, with robust correlations to related constructs like psychological resilience and adaptability (Afrashteh & Hasani, 2022; Mohammadkhani et al., 2022; YaĞAn & Kaya, 2022).

2.2.3. Psychological Capital

To measure Psychological Capital, another independent variable, we employed the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ) created by Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio in 2007. The PCQ assesses four core components of psychological capital: hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (HERO). This 24-item instrument features six items per subscale, with responses measured on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher levels of psychological capital. The PCQ has been widely validated in organizational and clinical settings, showing high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.88 to 0.91 for the subscales) and strong construct validity through correlations with performance outcomes and well-being indicators (Samroodh et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022; Xue et al., 2022).

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were first calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample. Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine the bivariate relationships between the dependent variable (relationship

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autonomy) and each of the independent variables (cognitive flexibility and psychological capital). To further explore the predictive power of cognitive flexibility and psychological capital on relationship autonomy, linear regression analysis was performed with relationship autonomy as the dependent variable and cognitive flexibility and psychological capital as the independent variables. All statistical tests were two-tailed, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$. The results of these analyses provided insights into the strength and direction of the relationships among the study variables.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 203) revealed a diverse group of participants. The majority were female (n = 115, 56.7%), while males constituted 43.3% (n = 88) of the sample. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 65 years, with a mean age of 35.4 years (SD = 10.2). In terms of relationship status, 68.5% (n = 139) were married, 21.2% (n = 43) were in long-term committed relationships, and 10.3% (n = 21) were cohabiting. Regarding educational background, 49.8% (n = 101) held a bachelor's degree, 29.1% (n = 59) had a master's degree, 15.3% (n = 31) had completed high school, and 5.9% (n = 12) had a doctoral degree. The sample also reflected a range of socio-economic statuses, with 34.5% (n = 70) reporting an annual income below $50,000, 42.9% (n = 87) between $50,000 and $100,000, and 22.7% (n = 46) above $100,000.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Relationship Autonomy	5.21	1.02
Cognitive Flexibility	5.89	0.78
Psychological Capital	5.67	0.85

The descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 1. Participants reported a mean relationship autonomy score of 5.21 (SD = 1.02), indicating moderate to high levels of autonomy in their relationships. Cognitive flexibility had a mean score of 5.89 (SD = 0.78), suggesting a generally high ability among participants to adapt to changing situations and perspectives. Psychological capital had a mean score of 5.67 (SD = 0.85), reflecting a strong presence of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism in the sample.

Prior to conducting the main analyses, the assumptions of linear regression were thoroughly checked and confirmed. The assumption of normality was assessed through visual inspection of Q-Q plots and the Shapiro-Wilk test, which indicated no significant deviations from normality ($p > 0.05$). Homoscedasticity was evaluated by examining scatterplots of the standardized residuals, which showed no discernible pattern, indicating homoscedasticity. Multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, with all VIFs below 1.5, indicating no multicollinearity concerns. Additionally, the Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.98, suggesting no autocorrelation in the residuals. These diagnostics confirmed that the data met the necessary assumptions for conducting reliable Pearson correlation and linear regression analyses.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients (p-values)

Variable	Relationship Autonomy	Cognitive Flexibility	Psychological Capital
Relationship Autonomy	-	0.48**	0.53**
Cognitive Flexibility	0.48**	-	0.35**
Psychological Capital	0.53**	0.35**	-

**p<0.01

Table 2 displays the Pearson correlation coefficients and their significance levels. There was a significant positive correlation between relationship autonomy and cognitive flexibility ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$), and between relationship autonomy and psychological capital ($r = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, cognitive flexibility and psychological capital were significantly correlated ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$). These findings suggest that higher cognitive flexibility and psychological capital are associated with greater relationship autonomy.

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Table 3

Summary of Regression Analysis

Source	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Squares	R	R^2	R^2adj	F	p
Regression	120.67	2	60.34	0.58	0.34	0.33	34.12	< 0.001
Residual	233.23	200	1.17					
Total	353.90	202						

Table 3 provides a summary of the regression analysis. The regression model significantly predicted relationship autonomy, $F(2, 200) = 34.12$, $p < 0.001$, with an R^2 of 0.34, indicating that 34% of the variance in relationship autonomy can be explained by cognitive flexibility and psychological capital. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.33 further supports the model's goodness of fit.

Table 4

Multivariate Regression Analysis

Predictor	B	Standard Error (SE)	β	t	p
Constant	1.78	0.62	-	2.87	0.005
Cognitive Flexibility	0.34	0.09	0.29	3.78	< 0.001
Psychological Capital	0.47	0.08	0.43	5.88	< 0.001

Table 4 presents the results of the multivariate regression analysis. Both cognitive flexibility ($B = 0.34$, $SE = 0.09$, $\beta = 0.29$, $t = 3.78$, $p < 0.001$) and psychological capital ($B = 0.47$, $SE = 0.08$, $\beta = 0.43$, $t = 5.88$, $p < 0.001$) were significant predictors of relationship autonomy. These results indicate that increases in cognitive flexibility and psychological capital are associated with higher levels of relationship autonomy. The constant term ($B = 1.78$, $SE = 0.62$, $t = 2.87$, $p = 0.005$) provides the baseline level of relationship autonomy when the predictors are held at zero.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the predictive roles of cognitive flexibility and psychological capital on relationship autonomy among couples. The findings revealed significant positive correlations between relationship autonomy and both cognitive flexibility and psychological capital. Additionally, the regression analysis demonstrated that both cognitive flexibility and psychological capital significantly predicted relationship autonomy, accounting for 34% of the variance. These results align with existing literature on the importance of cognitive flexibility and psychological resources in fostering healthy relational dynamics.

The significant positive correlation between cognitive flexibility and relationship autonomy supports previous research highlighting the role of cognitive flexibility in adaptive functioning and emotional regulation (Mohammadkhani et al., 2022). Cognitive flexibility enables individuals to shift perspectives, consider multiple viewpoints, and generate alternative solutions, all of which are crucial in navigating relational challenges and maintaining autonomy. This aligns with findings from Afrashteh and Hasani (2022), who demonstrated that cognitive flexibility mediates the relationship between mindfulness and psychological well-being (Afrashteh & Hasani, 2022). In romantic relationships, such flexibility allows partners to adapt to each other's needs and circumstances, fostering a sense of mutual respect and autonomy (YaĞAn & Kaya, 2022).

Psychological capital also emerged as a significant predictor of relationship autonomy, underscoring its importance in relational contexts. PsyCap, encompassing hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, provides individuals with the psychological resources necessary to cope with relational stressors and maintain autonomy (Sun et al., 2022). The positive correlation between psychological capital and relationship autonomy is consistent with studies showing that high levels of PsyCap are associated with better coping strategies, lower psychological distress, and higher life satisfaction (Samroodh et al., 2022; Xue et al., 2022). For instance, Sun et al. (2022) found that teachers' psychological capital positively influenced their workplace well-being, suggesting that these resources are crucial for

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managing interpersonal dynamics and maintaining a positive outlook (Sun et al., 2022).

The integration of self-determination theory (SDT) and psychological resilience frameworks provides a comprehensive understanding of these findings. SDT posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fundamental psychological needs that drive human behavior and well-being (Deci et al., 2006). In the context of romantic relationships, autonomy-supportive behaviors enhance relationship quality and individual well-being by fostering an environment where partners feel valued and respected (Anderson, 2019). Psychological resilience, facilitated by cognitive flexibility and PsyCap, enables individuals to adapt positively to relational challenges, thereby supporting autonomous functioning (Mohammadkhani et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022).

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences. While the associations between cognitive flexibility, psychological capital, and relationship autonomy are significant, it is not possible to determine the directionality of these relationships. Longitudinal studies are needed to establish causal links and examine how these variables influence each other over time.

Second, the sample was obtained using convenience sampling, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The participants were primarily recruited from community centers and online platforms, which may not fully represent the broader population. Future research should aim to include more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the results.

Third, the study relied on self-report measures, which are subject to social desirability bias and may not accurately reflect participants' true experiences. While the instruments used have demonstrated good validity and reliability, incorporating other data collection methods, such as partner reports or observational data, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of relationship autonomy.

To build on the findings of this study, future research should consider several avenues. First, employing longitudinal designs would help to establish causal relationships between cognitive flexibility, psychological capital, and relationship autonomy. By following couples over time, researchers can examine how changes in cognitive flexibility and PsyCap influence relationship autonomy and overall relational satisfaction.

Second, future studies should aim to include more diverse and representative samples. Expanding the demographic diversity of participants will allow for a better understanding of how these variables operate across different cultural, socio-economic, and age groups. Additionally, examining these relationships in various types of relationships (e.g., same-sex couples, long-distance relationships) could provide further insights.

Third, incorporating mixed-methods approaches could enrich the findings. Qualitative data, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, could provide deeper insights into how cognitive flexibility and psychological capital manifest in relationships and influence autonomy. Combining quantitative and qualitative data would offer a more holistic view of the dynamics at play.

The findings of this study have several practical implications for relationship counseling and therapy. First, interventions aimed at enhancing cognitive flexibility and psychological capital could be beneficial for couples seeking to improve their relationship autonomy. Cognitive-behavioral strategies that promote flexible thinking and adaptive coping can help individuals navigate relational challenges more effectively.

Second, relationship education programs should emphasize the importance of autonomy-supportive behaviors. Educating couples about the benefits of supporting each other's autonomy can foster mutual respect and enhance relationship satisfaction. Practitioners can incorporate principles from self-determination theory to guide couples in creating environments that support both individual and relational well-being (Núñez & León, 2015).

Lastly, practitioners should consider assessing and developing PsyCap in couples as part of their therapeutic approach. Techniques that build hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism can equip individuals with the psychological resources needed to maintain autonomy and cope with relational stressors. By focusing on these positive psychological constructs, therapists can help couples build more resilient and autonomous relationships.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of cognitive flexibility and psychological capital in fostering relationship autonomy. The findings contribute to the understanding of how psychological resources influence relational dynamics and offer practical insights for enhancing relationship quality. Future research should continue to explore these relationships using diverse methodologies and samples to further elucidate the mechanisms underlying relationship autonomy.

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Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

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

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