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The mediating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between marital conflicts and tendency to marital infidelity in couples

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ABSTRACT

Objective: 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 relationship and the growth of the next generations. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the mediating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between marital conflicts and the tendency to marital infidelity.

Method: This research is descriptive-correlation type. The statistical population of the present study included all the couples referred to the counseling centers of the 1st to 5th districts of Tehran in 2022. Among these people, 100 couples (200 people) were selected by the available sampling method. In order to collect data, Bar-on's Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (1980), Marital Conflicts Questionnaire (2008), and Bashirpour et al. (2018) Tendency to Marital Infidelity Questionnaire were used. Moreover, Pearson's correlation coefficient and path analysis were used for statistical data analysis.

Results: The findings showed an insignificant relationship between marital conflicts and the tendency to marital infidelity. Also, the results showed that emotional intelligence plays a significant role as mediator in the relationship between marital conflicts and the tendency to marital infidelity so that the indirect relationship between marital conflicts and the tendency to marital infidelity is significant by mediating emotional intelligence while the direct effect is insignificant.

Conclusion: Based on the findings, it can be concluded that people whose emotional intelligence plays a mediating role in the relationship between marital conflicts and the tendency to marital infidelity.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Marital conflicts, tendency to marital infidelity, 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, 2022a).

Conflict is the lack of agreement and disagreement between two people, it is the incompatibility of opinions and behavioral goals that is done in the direction of opposing the other. Conflict is a set of events and incidents imposed on one or more family members or all of them or together and affect all family members (Sehat et al., 2014). It is natural for differences and conflicts to arise between husband and wife. Due to the nature of spouses' activities, it sometimes happens that differences of opinion occur or needs are not met; As a result, spouses feel angry, disappointed and unhappy towards each other. Conflict is not always negative, but it is a method couples use to manage their defective relationship, which can harm the relationship. *Marital conflict* (MC) endangers the safety of the entire family system. Also, the energy used to regain emotional safety limits the physical resources necessary to continue the transformational needs (Darbani & Parsakia, 2022b). In other words, the precursor to the separation of couples is MC, which starts from simple gossip and can expand to verbal conflicts, fights and beatings, and sometimes separation. MC rises when spouses show different degrees of independence or dependence for cooperation and decision-making. The degree of differences can arise due to sensitivities and cause superficial differences to severe conflicts (Oh & Hwang, 2018). Glasser (2000) believes that MC is caused by inconsistency between husband and wife in the type of needs and how to satisfy them, self-centeredness, differences in desires, behavioral schemas, and irresponsible behavior toward marital relationships and marriage. Conflict in the family indicates that the qualitative world of the members of that family is inconsistent with each other and at least one family member is trying to make the other family members harmonize with his qualitative world (Glasser, 2000).

Marital infidelity is one of the worst events in a couple's relationship and can cause the family unit to break up and couples to separate from each other (Bababkhani, 2020). Infidelity in marriage means unfaithfulness and lack of commitment to the committed relationship of the couple and establishing any emotional and sexual relationship with the opposite sex outside of said commitment (Moradi, Maleki, & Namjoo, 2020). Infidelity in marriage is considered the main cause of marital dissatisfaction (Bagarozzi, 2014), the main reason for MC and disputes, and one of the most important problems in marital relationships and the most

important reason for divorce and separation of couples (Pirzadeh, Benisi, & Vatankhah, 2019). Marital infidelity can have disastrous consequences for the person who cheated, their spouse, marital relationship, immediate family, and extended family (Snyder, Baucom, & Gordon, 2017). Marital infidelity, in addition to questioning the basic beliefs about the relationship, the spouse and the individual (Saffarinia et al., 2017).

Today, *emotional intelligence* (EI) is the subject of discussion in many studies related to the investigation of individual differences and has added to the studies related to EI (Shayesteh Fard, Sobhi Gharamaleki, & Zargham Hajabi, 2022). EI is the ability to understand, describe, receive and control emotions; In other words, EI includes a set of abilities, capabilities and skills that equip a person to adapt to the environment and achieve success in life (Bar-On, 2010). EI can be effective in creating and maintaining 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). EI 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). Lack of emotional expression leads to problems in marital relationships (Abbasi et al., 2016; Jensen, Chassin, & Gonzales, 2018); The components of optimism, empathy, emotional expression, emotional self-awareness and impulse control play an important role in marital relationships (Batool, 2009). The role of EI in married life has been examined in various studies (Mehdigholi, Dokanei fard, & Jahangir, 2022) and studies show the important role of this variable in marital relationships. For example, Bagheri & Albeheshti (2020) showed in their research that EI has a significant relationship with marital frustration and attitude toward extramarital relationships (Bagheri & Albeheshti, 2020). Also, in his study, Batool (2009) investigated the role of EI in the quality of marital relationships. He concluded that EI could predict the quality of marital relationships (Batool, 2009). Also, Salovey et al. (1999) and Goleman (1995) showed in their studies that finding signs of emotional incompetence, wrong lines of thought or behavior can lead a couple to conflict or separation. It proves the vital role of EI in the survival of marriage and marital relationships

(Goleman, 1995; Salovey et al., 1999; Sevari & Talaeezadeh, 2015).

According to the mentioned materials, EI plays an important role in relation to various variables, especially marital variables. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of EI in the relationship between MC and the tendency to commit marital infidelity.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

The current research is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive and correlational methodology. This research's statistical population includes all couples referred to family counseling centers in 1st to 5th districts of Tehran in 2022. According to Kline (2011), the sample size of this study was determined to be 200 people (100 couples) (Kline, 2011). For sampling, counseling centers were first selected through the cluster sampling method. Then, the research participants were selected by the available sampling method. SPSS and AMOS software were used for the statistical data analysis. Therefore, Pearson's correlation coefficient and path analysis were used.

2.2. Measurements

In order to collect data, Bar-on's Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (1980), Marital Conflicts Questionnaire (*MCQ*) (2008), and Bashirpour et al. (2018) Tendency to Marital Infidelity Questionnaire were used.

2.2.1. Tendency to marital infidelity

The questionnaire was designed and compiled by Bashirpour, Shafiabadi & Dokaneifard (2018) to measure the tendency to marital infidelity (TMI) according to the criteria of local culture. This questionnaire has 45 questions and three family, individual and social components. The scoring of this questionnaire is based on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 to 5. Therefore, the range of scores of this questionnaire is between 45 and 225. The higher the obtained score, the higher the TMI. This questionnaire's content, form and criterion validity has been confirmed in the study of Bashirpour, Shafiabadi, & Dokaneifard (2018). Also, the reliability of this questionnaire was obtained 0.70 by Cronbach's alpha method by questionnaire creators (Bashirpour, Shafiabadi, & Dokaneii, 2018; Bashirpour, Shafiabadi, & Doukaneifard, 2020). In this study, alpha

value of 0.81 was obtained, which indicates the good reliability of the questionnaire.

2.2.2. Emotional Intelligence

Bar-On's Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire has 90 questions that measure 15 components of EI. Bar-On first developed this test to show its greater importance than the cognitive intelligence test. In this questionnaire, EI is divided into 5 subscales: intrapersonal skills scale, which includes the components of emotional awareness, self-expression, self-respect, self-improvement and independence. Interpersonal skills subscale including empathy components, social responsibility and interpersonal relationships, coping with pressure scale including; Stress tolerance and impulse control. The adaptability subscale includes flexibility, problem-solving, and realism. The general mood subscale includes the components of happiness and optimism (Bar-On, 2010). In the Raghibi & Gharehchahi's (2013) study, the reliability of this test was done 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).

2.2.3. Marital conflicts

The MCQ was prepared and adjusted in 2015 by Torabi under the supervision of Sanai, which measures the amount of MC and its dimensions, which are: 1) reduction of cooperation; 2) reduction of sex; 3) increasing emotional reactions; 4) increasing the support of children; 5) increasing personal relationship with relatives; 6) reduction of family relationship with spouse's relatives and friends; 7) Separate financial affairs from each other. This questionnaire contains 42 items, each of which is graded on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. Therefore, the lowest score is 42, the highest score is 210, and a higher score means more conflict. In his research, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.30 for reducing cooperation; for sex 0.50; for emotional reaction 0.73; for getting the support of children 0.60; for increasing strong relationships with relatives 0.64; for separating financial affairs 0.51 and whole test 0.52. Dehghan (2001) also reported this coefficient as 0.71 in normalization (Darbani & Parsakia, 2022b); and in this study, the alpha value was 0.77, which indicates the appropriate reliability of this questionnaire.

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2.3. Data Analysis

SPSS and AMOS software were used for the statistical data analysis. In this case, Pearson's correlation coefficient and path analysis were used.

3. Findings and Results

In terms of demographic data, the average and standard deviation of the age of the participants in the statistical sample of the research was 29.31 (5.44) years. Also, in terms of level, 22 people (11%) had diplomas and lower degrees, 31 people (15.5%) had Associate degrees, 102 people (51%) had Bachelor's degrees, 30 people (15%) had Master's degrees and 15 people (7.5%) had a Ph.D.

Table 1

Findings of descriptive statistics of research variables

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
tendency to marital infidelity	168.59	16.80	1.23	-0.84
marital conflict	159.15	13.40	0.56	-0.64
emotional intelligence	271.69	25.93	1.08	0.79

The descriptive data of the research variables are given in the Table 1. Considering that the skewness and kurtosis are in the range of -2 to 2, it can be concluded that the data has a normal distribution. Therefore, Pearson's correlation coefficient can be used. The following is the matrix of correlation coefficients of research variables.

Table 2

Results of correlation coefficients of research variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. tendency to marital infidelity	1		
2. marital conflict	0.09*	1	
3. emotional intelligence	-0.419**	-0.517**	1

* p > 0.05, ** p < 0.05

The Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients between research variables. Considering the error of 5%, it can be concluded that the correlation between MC and the TMI is not significant (p < 0.05). On the other hand, there is a significant negative correlation between EI and two other variables: TMI and MC (p < 0.05).

Table 3

Goodness indices of model fit

Index	χ2/df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI	NNFI
Model	2.71	0.079	0.93	0.97	0.91	0.95	0.92

In order to check the fit of the model, the indices listed in the Table 3 were used. 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. According to the findings, it can be concluded that this model has a good fit.

Table 4

Estimation of coefficients of direct effects between research variables

	Estimation Variable	Standardized parameter	Std. error	t	P
tendency to marital infidelity	emotional intelligence	-0.23	0.05	2.38	< 0.05
	marital conflict	0.08	0.09	0.46	> 0.05
emotional intelligence	marital conflict	-0.41	0.06	3.27	< 0.05

In the Table 4, the standardized parameter, the standard error of estimation and the results of the t-test are given. The findings indicate that the direct effect of TMI on EI (β =-0.23 and t = 2.38) is significant. Also, the direct effect of EI on MC (β = -0.41 and t = 3.27) is significant. On the other hand, the direct effect of TMI and MC (β = 0.08 and t = 0.46) is not significant.

Table 5

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

From variable	To variable	Effects			p
		Direct	Indirect	Total	
tendency to marital infidelity	emotional intelligence	-0.23	-	0.23	< 0.05
	marital conflict	0.08	0.09	0.17	< 0.05
emotional intelligence	marital conflict	-0.41	-	-0.41	< 0.05

Based on the contents of the Table 5, although the direct effect of TMI on MC is not significant, considering the variable of EI as a mediating variable, this effect is indirectly significant. Finally, it can be concluded that the general effect of the TMI with the mediation of EI on MC is negative and significant (p < 0.05). In other words, EI plays an inhibitory role in the relationship between the TMI and MC. In the Figure 1, the final model obtained from the data analysis is displayed.

Figure 1

Final model including direct effects
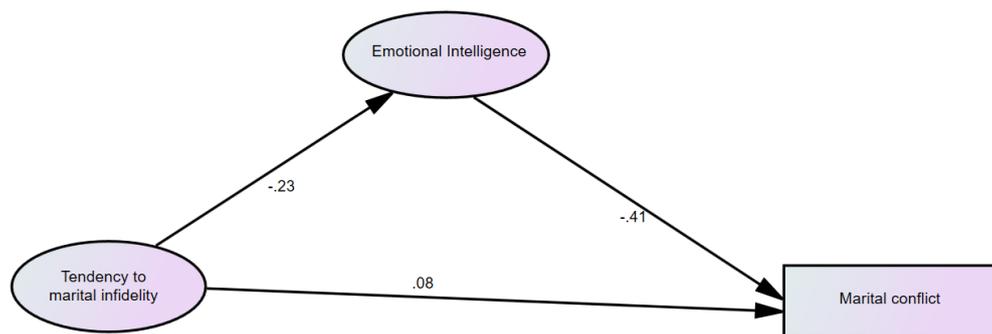
4.   Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of EI in the relationship between MC and the TMI. The results of the statistical analysis of the data showed that the mediating role of EI in the relationship between the TMI and MC is significant. Also, the findings indicated that the TMI and MC do not have a significant relationship. However, the relationship between these two variables is significant by the mediation of EI. The results of this research are in line with many studies (Bashirpour, Shafiabadi, & Dokaneii, 2018; Bashirpour, Shafiabadi, & Doukaneifard, 2020; Batool, 2009; Batool & Khalid, 2012; Eslami, Hasanzadeh, & Jamshidi, 2014; Hadian & Amini, 2019; Jensen, Chassin, & Gonzales, 2018; Sevari & Talaeezadeh, 2015). On the other

hand, the results obtained are inconsistent with the results of Bagheri and Albeheshti (2020).

In explaining the findings, people with high EI activities 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, EI, by providing positive emotional feelings and experiences, provides the basis for low MC and reduces the TMI. On the other hand, EI is an ability that has an important effect on other abilities of a person. People with high EI have more adaptability, self-confidence, and self-awareness, which is necessary for a dynamic relationship (Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010). In fact, EI is the meeting point of

a person's abilities, skills, and emotional and social facilitators that are mutually related. This set indicates how effective we are in understanding and expressing ourselves, understanding others, communicating with them, and dealing with the needs and problems of daily life (Hadian & Amini, 2019). Therefore, EI's capital for the marital relationship can prevent the tendency to high marital infidelity from leading to MC. In other words, when a person's EI is high, this desire is less likely to lead to marital infidelity, and through managing the emotions of couples, they can prevent the formation of conflict in the marital relationship.

In further explanation of the findings, it can be said that if one or both of the couples have certain deficiencies in the components of EI, the possibility of deepening emotional gaps between them increases and ultimately leads to vulnerability and breaking of their bond (Sevari & Talaeezadeh, 2015). In other words, low EI in couples increases the probability of MC. When couples cannot manage their emotions and have little self-awareness, they become vulnerable to conflict. In addition, high EI means high mutual understanding and empathy. In this case, when one of the spouses notices the TMI in the other, they can prevent conflict with their understanding and empathy.

In further explanation of the findings, couples with higher EI will be able to understand their spouses in situations of conflict and disagreement. Also, they express their emotions and feelings more easily, and in the event of a conflict, they prevent it from prolonging (Salahian et al., 2010). When the TMI is strong and couples have low EI, both experience negative feelings and emotions, which causes MC. On the other hand, when they have high EI, they can avoid conflict by understanding others and themselves, using correct interpersonal communication skills and managing emotions. In fact, EI can determine the consequences of the TMI. Therefore, the TMI does not have a significant relationship with MC and this relationship is significant with the presence of the EI variable as a mediating variable.

5. Limitations

Every research has limitations, and the current research is no exception to this rule. One of the limitations of the present study was using a questionnaire as a data collection tool, which can reduce the accuracy of the findings due to possible biases in filling out the questionnaire. Also, the available sampling method can cause problems in generalizing the findings.

6. Suggestions and Applications

In general, in order to be more sure of the results of this research, other researchers should conduct more research on the variables of that study in different statistical communities and consider the role of other variables. In addition, it is emphasized that caution should be observed in order to apply the results obtained from this research in generalizing the findings of those aspects. Finally, counselors and specialists in the field of family and couple therapy are suggested to use the EI questionnaire in their evaluations.

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