



## **Marital Disturbance and Object Relations in Mothers of Children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): The Mediating Role of Psychological Coherence**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Background and Purpose:** Mothers of children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are more likely to be at risk of anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic, phobias, mood disorders, depression, psychological cohesion, low object relations, and marital disturbance in the family, which generally starts before their children's birth; hence, the presents research aimed to investigate the marital disturbance and object relations in mothers of children with spectrum disorder with the mediating role of psychological cohesion.. **Methods:** The research method was cross-sectional and correlational. The statistical population consisted of all the mothers of children with autism in Tehran in 2020 among whom 457 mothers were selected by the convenience sampling method. The research tools included the marital disturbance questionnaire (Schneider, 1997), object relations questionnaire (Bell, 1995), and psychological coherence questionnaire (Kimiaei et al., 2014) all of which had acceptable validity and reliability. SPSS V.23 and LISREL V7.8 were used to analyze data. Structural equation modeling was utilized to respond to the research hypotheses. **Results:** The research results indicated that the model had a good fit, and there was a relationship between object relations and marital disturbance in mothers of children with an autism spectrum disorder. There was also a relationship between psychological cohesion and marital disturbance in mothers of children with an autism spectrum disorder. There was an indirect effect of object relations on marital disturbance through the mediating role of psychological cohesion in mothers of children with an autism spectrum disorder ( $p < 0.05$ ). **Conclusion:** Paying attention to the above-mentioned variables helps researchers and therapists to prevent and design more suitable treatments.



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## Introduction

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder with behavioral syndromes characterized by social and communication deficits, stereotyped behaviors, and special interests (Siller & Morgan, 2018). No specific biochemical index or neuroanatomical abnormality defines autism, and the diagnosis is based on clinical and behavioral assessment (Goldstein & Uzonoff, 2018). The severity of these symptoms can vary from mild, in which a person has a high intellectual ability, to severe, in which mental retardation and lack of speech occur (Cruz, Camargos Jr., & Rocha, 2013). The conceptualization of autism has changed a lot in the last 20 years. Today, autism spectrum disorder is highly variable. It was thought that 70% of people with autism also have an intellectual delay, but today it has been shown that almost half of people with autism spectrum disorders have average or above-average intelligence (Chistol, Bandini, Must, Phillips, Cermak, & Curtin, 2018). In addition, mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder are more likely to be at risk of developing anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety, panic, and phobias (Mazurek & Sohl, 2016) and mood disorders and depression, psychological cohesion, and low object relations and Marital disturbances are located in the family, which generally started before the birth of their child (Ingersoll, Meyer & Baker, 2011). However, the high rate of these problems may be due to the environment created by the presence of a child with autism, but they usually are interpreted from a genetic point of view (Neff & Faso, 2015). On the other hand, family history variables, as well as the presence of maladaptive behavior in the child, are both related to the level of sociability of each family member, and the presence of depression and embarrassment in the family members is a significant predictor. In other words, family variables affect the child's social performance more effectively than the child's intelligence (Rezaei, 2014).

The theorists of object relations, as they accepted many concepts of the classical approach, paid attention to interpersonal relationships and

especially the disturbing relationships of early childhood with parents, which lead to the formation of defective internal psychological structures of self and others and talent. they lead to a range of mental illnesses (Erasmus, 2016). Object relations are changeable intrapsychic states during the emotional nature of experiences during development, leading to both healthy and pathological object relations (Herner, 1984; cited in Masterson, 2013). Several factors influence the behavior of mothers of children with autism. One of these important factors is their sense of cohesion. Psychological cohesion is a personality structure with three components of comprehensibility, management ability and meaningfulness. Understandability refers to a person's ability to understand that the situation he is in is understandable or predictable. The component of management ability deals with a person's understanding of his abilities to deal with complex and anxiety-provoking situations. Finally, feeling meaningful is the ability to find meaning in everyday life and the problems ahead. People equipped with this ability can stay healthy when faced with problems and crises (Ferguson, Brown, Taylor, and Davis, 2016).

Therefore, just as parents affect the child's growth, the child's growth and characteristics also affect the functioning of the family (Kawada, Mimori, Okuma, & Nomura, 2018). What comes out from the previous research is that parents of autistic children are exposed to high psychological suffering, low object relations, and more marital disturbance (Abdullahi Bagharabadi, 2017). High levels of confusion in the parents of these children make them more inclined to use inflexible, aggressive and threatening parenting methods and less benefit from the child's treatment programs, thus failing to decide on the most appropriate treatment strategies for the child to eat. This negatively affects the child's development and leads to more disruptive behaviors (Akas, Pruitt, & McKee, 2016). Considering this fact, parents' object relations and psychological cohesion significantly impact the child's development process. It seems that providing early

interventions to support children and their families effectively, prevent the negative consequences of this disorder, and the rich energy of the family before being suppressed, leads in the right direction (Adibi Sadeh, Sepahvandi and Gholamrezaei, 2018). Thus, according to the cases stated in this research, the main issue is: What is the relationship between marital disturbance in mothers of children with autism based on object relations and the mediating role of psychological cohesion?

### Method

The present research method is descriptive-correlational in terms of data collection through structural equation modeling. The statistical population was all the mothers of children with autism in Tehran who enrolled their children in exceptional schools and had a case in Tehran Autism Association in 2019. In this research, 457 autistic children's mothers were selected from among all the mothers of children with autism in Tehran using the available sampling method who participated in the research.

### Tools

**1. Schneider Marital Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (1997):** In this research, the amount of marital dissatisfaction will be measured by the revised form of Schneider's Marital Dissatisfaction Questionnaire. This questionnaire, created by Schneider (1997), is a 150-question self-report tool that is used to identify the nature and extent of disturbance (dissatisfaction) in marital relationships (Mains, Schneider, & Nagy, 2003). The questions are scored as zero and one, and the scores for each subscale are added together. In this questionnaire, a high score is a sign of more confusion and a lower score is a sign of more satisfaction or less confusion. Schneider (1997) stated two types of validity, including internal consistency and retesting, for marital disturbance (dissatisfaction) questionnaire, and the results of internal consistency validity according to Cronbach's alpha indicate high validity (mean, 0.82) for this test and the range of alpha results It was from 0.93 to 0.70 for different scales. He has also used

five types of empirical, factorial, predictive, diagnostic or divergent, and convergent validity for the questionnaire. The results related to the validity of the retest of this questionnaire, which was implemented by Soleimaniyan (1384) on a sample of 20 people from the statistical population, have a range between 0.81 and 0.86 and an average of 0.78. Five counseling professors confirmed its content validity. Revalidation of the questionnaire on a sample of 480 people from the statistical population has a range of 0.80 and an average of 0.77.

**2. Bell's Object Relations Inventory (1995) (BORI):** This tool is a self-report questionnaire and contains 45 true and false questions that include patterns of object relations and interpersonal beliefs (Bell et al., 1986). This questionnaire has four subscales (Bell, 1995): 1) alienation; 2) insecure attachment; 3) self-centeredness, and 4) social incompetence (Bell, 1995). In a research conducted by Bell et al. to check this tool's validity and reliability, the results indicated the internal consistency and reliability of the two halves in all four subscales (Bell et al., 1986). In Jamil et al.'s research (2014), Cronbach's alpha coefficient for four scales of alienation, insecure attachment, self-centeredness, and social incompetence was obtained as 0.90, 0.82, 0.78, and 0.79, respectively. In Iran, a preliminary investigation of the validity and reliability of this questionnaire was done by Hadinejad et al. (2013). They reported Cronbach's alpha coefficient for social incompetence, self-centeredness, insecure attachment, and alienation as 0.68, 0.74, 0.74, and 0.85, respectively. Also, the correlation between the 90-question list of symptoms-revised form and the subscales of this questionnaire was between 0.31 and 0.68.

**3. Questionnaire of psychological coherence of Kimiaei et al. (2014):** It is a questionnaire of 50 questions made by Kimiaei, Arghbaei, and Jozi (2014). This questionnaire has three components to measure the degree of 1. comprehensibility, 2. manageability, and 3. meaningfulness of events from the person's point of view. The meaningfulness scale includes 24 questions, the

manageability scale of 6 questions, and the comprehensibility scale of 20 questions, and it is graded on a 5-point scale from very low (1) to very high (5) using the Likert method. Higher scores indicate more internal coherence (250), and lower scores indicate less internal coherence (50). In the standardization of this questionnaire, 404 questionnaires were obtained from 410 subjects who were sampled in a multi-stage cluster method, with an age range of 18 to 40 years and an average of 22.5 years. The psychological coherence questionnaire has good internal consistency, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the whole scale is 0.935, for the

significance subscale is 0.927, for the manageability subscale is 0.650, and for the comprehensibility subscale is 0.886.

### Results

This section uses central indicators, dispersion, and graphs to describe the research variables.

According to the values of skewness and kurtosis, which are in a reasonable range to guess the normality of the data, the assumption of the data can be accepted. In order to investigate the relationship between "object relations" and "marital disturbance", the confirmatory structural equation model was used.

**Table 1. Path coefficients and t values for the research hypothesis**

Path	Path coefficient	t	Status
Object relations → Marital disturbance	.087	18.01	Accepted

Therefore, it can be concluded that the hypothesis of the relationship between object relations and marital disturbance in mothers of children with autism spectrum is accepted.

### Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of marital disturbance and object relations in mothers of children with autism spectrum with the mediating role of psychological cohesion. The results showed that there is a relationship between object relations and marital disturbance in mothers of children with autism spectrum. The research results align with Yazdani Hematabadi's findings (2017). In the explanation of this finding, it can be said that object relations are representations of a person from others and his environment. These representations are stable internal patterns activated in communication situations and determine how a person relates to others. In fact, these stable internal patterns are considered an important pillar for people's success in all fields, including married life, and reduce marital disturbance in couples. Also, in justifying this finding, it can be said that theorists of object relations interpret the later problems in married life as affected by the child's early relationships. From the point of view of object

relationships, the ability to establish mutually satisfying relationships is partly due to the internalized pattern resulting from the initial interactions, which will affect the individual's family relationships in the future. Object relations are a fundamental structure that plays a fundamental role in explaining married life in couples. These internal relationships shape the individual's relational models with others. Object relations can be defined as a person's representations of himself and others and the emotions associated with those representations, and in fact, the capacity of people to establish human relations and the quality of these relations. On the other hand, since internalized representations dictate a set of predetermined expectations about the feedback and behaviors of others, the existence of representations represents past stable and satisfying themes in emotion formation. Security and threat protection are effective. On the other hand, disturbances in object relationships shake the foundations of personal security and lead to increased vulnerability to anxiety.

Also, the results showed an indirect effect of object relations through the mediating role of psychological cohesion with marital disturbance



in mothers of children with autism spectrum. In order to explain the results, it can be mentioned by quoting Winnicott (1963) that inadequacies in child care may not be tangible, spontaneous, or coherent, and in this case, the child will be filled with various anxieties. These results are in line with the assumptions of object relations theorists and the results of past studies (Gobut et al., 2020; Yazdani Hematabadi, 2018).

According to the study, according to the results obtained in the present study, supporting the parents of children with autism from the time of initial diagnosis is of particular importance. It is also suggested to plan therapeutic discussions for children with autism and their parents. In many programs, parents play an important role in the decision-making process and have the most interaction with their children. Therefore, parents need emotional support, guidance, and education about their children. They also need access to accurate and up-to-date information about available treatments and services. It is necessary to design and implement special programs for parents, including reducing marital disturbance and improving their psychological cohesion.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article have no conflict of interest in conducting and writing it.

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