



# Predicting Marital Conflicts through the Dark Triad of Personality with the Mediation of Ego Strength in Women Seeking Divorce

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between distress tolerance, Dark Triad personality traits, and marital conflict, with ego strength as a mediating variable, in women seeking divorce.

**Methods and Materials:** The study utilized a descriptive-correlational design and included a sample of women seeking divorce who visited marital counseling clinics in District 3 of Tehran during the spring of 2024. Data were collected using self-report questionnaires: the Marital Conflict Questionnaire, the Short Dark Triad Personality Questionnaire (SD3), and the Psychological Ego Strength Inventory (PIES). Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed for data analysis.

**Findings:** The results revealed that distress tolerance had an indirect and significant effect on marital conflict through the mediation of ego strength ( $\beta = -0.366$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Among the Dark Triad traits, Machiavellianism showed an indirect and significant effect on marital conflict ( $\beta = 0.170$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), while psychopathy and narcissism did not exhibit significant indirect effects. Narcissism had a direct positive effect on marital conflict ( $\beta = 0.275$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), whereas psychopathy and Machiavellianism did not have direct effects. Ego strength had a significant negative effect on marital conflict ( $\beta = -0.595$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ).

**Conclusion:** Machiavellianism indirectly influences marital conflict through the reduction of ego strength, while narcissism has a direct positive effect on conflict. Ego strength plays a key role in reducing marital conflict, suggesting that interventions aimed at enhancing ego strength and addressing manipulative personality traits may be effective in mitigating marital conflict among women.

**Keywords:** Marital conflicts, Dark Triad personality traits, ego strength, women, divorce.

## 1. Introduction

Marital conflicts significantly affect the mental health and well-being of couples (Eidelson & Epstein, 2018). Women, due to social expectations and norms in patriarchal systems, experience more emotional distress than men (Fowers et al., 2020). Women often carry the emotional burden in relationships due to gender expectations and norms, which leads to fatigue and resentment (Fowers et al., 2020). Additionally, they may feel powerless when their opinions and desires are ignored, limiting their ability to make decisions. These factors contribute to women's increased vulnerability in marital conflicts and highlight the need for targeted interventions to support them in challenging relationship situations (Knobloch & Theiss, 2018). Thus, in the context of women experiencing marital conflicts, understanding the influential factors is essential for developing targeted interventions and supporting them in the challenging process of seeking divorce (Waseem et al., 2020).

Personality traits appear to be significant factors influencing couple separation (Spikic & Mortelmans, 2021). Among various personality aspects, the Dark Triad—a set of personality traits including narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—plays a crucial role in the development and escalation of marital conflicts (Lisman & Holman, 2023). Additionally, distress tolerance, the capacity to endure negative emotions and stressful situations, has been identified as an important factor in marital conflicts. On the other hand, individuals with higher ego strength may be more resilient in managing conflicts and maintaining stable relationships, while those with lower ego strength may be more vulnerable to the destructive effects of these factors, leading to increased conflicts (Johnson & Moore, 2022).

Therefore, understanding the complex interaction between these personality traits can offer valuable insights for both researchers and psychologists working in the field of marital therapy and conflict resolution. By identifying specific factors influencing marital conflicts in women seeking divorce, targeted interventions can be developed to address these issues and improve the well-being of those involved. Furthermore, this research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological factors underlying marital dissatisfaction and assist in developing effective strategies for promoting healthy and stable relationships.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The research method, given its objective and nature, was descriptive-correlational and based on model building. The statistical population of the present study consisted of all women seeking divorce who referred to marital counseling clinics in District 3 of Tehran during the spring of 2024. Sampling was conducted using the convenience sampling method, and the sample size was determined based on the Klein formula, which requires 2.5 to 5 times the number of items in the instruments. The minimum sample size should be 200 (Klein, 2016). In this study, the total number of items was 145, including 54 items from the Marital Conflict Questionnaire by Sanaei (1996), 12 items from the Dark Triad Personality Questionnaire by Johnson and Webster (2010), and 64 items from the Psychological Ego Strength (PIES) Questionnaire by Markstrom et al. (1997). Thus, the minimum sample size was 362 participants, and to ensure reliability, a sample size of 370 participants was considered. Inclusion criteria for the study were being a woman seeking divorce, female gender, and having at least basic literacy. Exclusion criteria included incomplete responses to the questionnaires and withdrawal from the study. After obtaining ethical approval and reviewing the theoretical framework through a library-based method, the researcher prepared the research instruments and obtained the necessary permissions. The questionnaires were distributed individually in paper-pencil format to women seeking divorce who were willing to participate. Ethical principles were outlined at the beginning of the questionnaire, explaining voluntary participation and confidentiality. The principles were read to the participants, and verbal consent for participation was obtained. Participants were instructed to carefully read all the questions and answer as completely as possible. The researcher supervised the administration of the questionnaires. After data collection, responses were analyzed using appropriate statistical methods.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Marital Conflict

The Marital Conflict Questionnaire was designed by Torabi and Sanaei (1996) to measure marital conflicts. This questionnaire consists of 54 items and includes eight components: decreased cooperation, decreased sexual relations, increased emotional reactions, increased support-

seeking from children, increased personal relationships with one's relatives, decreased family relations with spouse's relatives and friends, separation of financial matters, and decreased effective communication. The questionnaire uses a four-point Likert scale, with items like "When I fight with my spouse, my relationship with his/her family gets cut off." Each item has five response options, with scores ranging from 1 to 5. The maximum total score is 270, and the minimum is 54. A higher score indicates greater conflict, while a lower score indicates better relations and less conflict. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this questionnaire was reported to be above 0.70 in a study by Loaf et al. (2014). The reliability coefficients for the subscales were as follows: decreased cooperation ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ), decreased sexual relations ( $\alpha = 0.61$ ), increased emotional reactions ( $\alpha = 0.70$ ), increased support-seeking from children ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ), increased personal relationships with relatives ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ), decreased family relations with spouse's relatives and friends ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ), separation of financial matters ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ), and decreased effective communication ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ) (Afkhani-Poostchi & Alidoosti, 2023). In the present study, the reliability of this questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, which was calculated at 0.81.

### 2.2.2. Dark Triad Personality

The 12-item Short Dark Triad (SD3) by Johnson and Webster (2010) includes three subscales: Machiavellianism (assessed with items 1–4), narcissism (items 9–12), and psychopathy (items 5–8). The scoring is based on a Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 9. Higher scores indicate higher levels of the respective traits. Qamarani, Samadi, Taqinezhad, and Shamsi (2015) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 for this instrument and showed significant correlations between the items and the overall score, as well as the subscales with the overall score, at the 0.01 level. The three factors of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism together explained 63.30% of the variance in dark personality traits. In a study by Mirzaei Jahed and Saberi (2019), Cronbach's alpha for the subscales of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism were

0.69, 0.72, and 0.70, respectively (Alavi et al., 2018). In the present study, the reliability of this questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, which was calculated at 0.83.

### 2.2.3. Psychological Ego Strength

The Psychological Ego Strength Inventory (PIES) was developed by Markstrom, Sabino, Turner, and Berman (1997) to measure eight aspects of ego strength (hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom). The inventory consists of 64 items scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true, 5 = completely true). The highest score an individual can obtain is 320, and the lowest is 64. Higher scores indicate stronger ego strength, while lower scores indicate weaker ego strength. The total score for each subscale is the sum of the scores for the items in that subscale. Markstrom et al. (1997) reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.68 for the overall inventory. In a study by Altafi (2009), Cronbach's alpha was 0.91 for the Iranian sample, with split-half reliability of 0.77 (Akbari et al., 2023). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was calculated at 0.78.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, and inferential statistics, including path analysis, were used to analyze the data using SPSS-24 and AMOS-20.

## 3. Findings and Results

Skewness and kurtosis are statistical tests used to evaluate the dispersion and frequency distribution of data, as well as to assess whether the distribution is normal. In statistics, skewness measures the symmetry or asymmetry of a distribution, while kurtosis reflects the height of the distribution. For a normal distribution, the kurtosis value is equal to 3. A variable is considered to have a normal distribution if its skewness lies between -2 and 2 and its kurtosis lies between -3 and 3.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and Examination of Main Research Variables*

Variable	Subscale	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Marital Conflict	Decreased Cooperation	12	36	22.27	4.60	0.414	0.525
	Decreased Sexual Relations	3	15	23.57	3.95	1.074	3.162
	Increased Emotional Reactions	7	24	15.24	3.57	0.175	-0.247
	Increased Support Seeking from Children	12	29	21.24	3.99	-0.128	-0.530

	Increased Personal Relations with Relatives	12	33	21.72	4.60	0.137	-0.400
	Decreased Family Relations with Spouse's Relatives and Friends	6	27	16.23	4.16	-0.044	0.023
	Separation of Financial Matters	15	39	24.04	4.84	0.652	0.617
	Decreased Effective Communication	18	42	27.72	4.74	0.476	0.410
	Total Marital Conflict	105	246	171.30	26.32	0.274	0.748
Ego Strength	Hope	11	38	24.16	5.19	0.203	0.601
	Willpower	11	33	22.28	4.76	0.000	-0.371
	Purpose	14	36	24.54	4.85	-0.202	-0.146
	Competence	11	36	21.93	4.62	0.587	1.023
	Fidelity	8	35	16.95	5.66	0.744	0.788
	Love	8	24	15.68	4.06	0.087	-0.753
	Care	8	35	17.29	5.42	0.795	1.108
	Wisdom	8	24	16.16	4.16	-0.097	-0.771
	Total Ego Strength	88	224	158.87	25.35	0.122	0.557
Dark Triad Personality	Narcissism	4	33	22.58	7.34	-1.136	0.624
	Machiavellianism	5	36	22.23	7.61	-0.800	0.045
	Psychopathy	8	34	22.22	5.39	-0.044	0.354

As seen in Table 1, the skewness and kurtosis values of all research variables fall within these ranges, indicating that the variables have a normal distribution. One of the most important assumptions for conducting structural equation

modeling (SEM) is the normal distribution of research variables, which was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

**Table 2**

*Normality Test of Research Variables*

Variables	K-S Statistic	p-value
Marital Conflict	0.089	0.105
Ego Strength	0.101	0.098
Narcissism	0.190	0.078
Machiavellianism	0.209	0.106
Psychopathy	0.095	0.074
Distress Tolerance	0.070	0.092

Based on the results in Table 2, the significance levels for the main research variables are greater than the 5% error

level. As a result, the variables are considered to have a normal distribution according to inferential statistics.

**Table 3**

*Correlation Between Research Variables*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Marital Conflict	1				
2. Ego Strength	-0.788**	1			
3. Narcissism	0.488**	-0.382**	1		
4. Machiavellianism	0.540**	-0.476**	0.513**	1	
5. Psychopathy	0.167**	-0.269**	-0.022	0.115*	1

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01

Table 3 shows the Pearson correlation results between exogenous, endogenous, and mediating variables. The results indicate that Dark Triad personality traits—narcissism (r = 0.488), Machiavellianism (r = 0.540), and psychopathy (r = 0.167)—and the mediating variable of ego strength (r = -0.788) have a significant correlation with marital conflict among women at the 0.01 error level. This

suggests that increases in the Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) are associated with increased marital conflict. Additionally, the results show that the Dark Triad traits—narcissism (r = -0.382), Machiavellianism (r = -0.476), and psychopathy (r = -0.269)—are significantly negatively correlated with ego

strength at the 0.01 level, indicating that as Dark Triad traits increase, ego strength decreases.

Another key assumption in structural equation modeling is the absence of multicollinearity among predictor variables in the regression model. This was tested using the tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics. The findings show that the tolerance values for predictor variables were above 0.1, and the VIF values were below 10, confirming the absence of multicollinearity.

Moreover, the findings indicate that the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (CMIN/DF) is 4.376, which is less than 5, confirming the adequacy of this index. The NFI (0.975), CFI (0.991), and PNFI (0.928) are all above 0.90, indicating that these indices are also acceptable. The RMSEA (0.057) is less than 0.08, further confirming that the model fit indices are acceptable.

**Table 4**

*Direct Effects of Standardized and Unstandardized Coefficients for Research Variables*

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficient (b)	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (S/E)	t-value	p-value
Machiavellianism → Ego Strength	-0.074	-0.285	0.014	-5.425	0.000
Ego Strength → Marital Conflict	-1.004	-0.595	0.137	-7.328	0.000
Narcissism → Marital Conflict	0.125	0.275	0.016	7.663	0.000

Table 4 shows the results of the standardized and unstandardized coefficients. The exogenous variable of Machiavellianism has a significant negative effect on the mediator variable ego strength ( $\beta = -0.285, p < 0.05$ ), indicating that as Machiavellianism increases, ego strength decreases. The mediator variable ego strength has a

significant negative effect on marital conflict ( $\beta = -0.595, p < 0.05$ ), meaning that as ego strength increases, marital conflict decreases. Additionally, narcissism has a significant positive effect on marital conflict ( $\beta = 0.275, p < 0.05$ ), showing that as narcissism increases, marital conflict increases.

**Table 5**

*Bootstrapping Results for Indirect Effect of Dark Triad Personality on Marital Conflict with Ego Strength as Mediator*

Variables	Standardized Indirect Effect	p-value	Standard Error	Upper Limit	Lower Limit
Machiavellianism → Marital Conflict	0.170	0.001	0.058	0.285	0.060

Table 5 presents the bootstrapping results for the indirect effect of the Dark Triad personality traits on marital conflict, mediated by ego strength. The results show that Machiavellianism has an indirect effect on marital conflict

( $\beta = 0.170, p = 0.001$ ), indicating that as Machiavellianism increases, ego strength decreases, and as ego strength decreases, marital conflict increases.

**Table 6**

*Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of Research Variables*

Variables	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects
Machiavellianism → Ego Strength	-0.285	.....	-0.285
Ego Strength → Marital Conflict	-0.595	.....	-0.595
Narcissism → Marital Conflict	0.275	....	0.275
Machiavellianism → Marital Conflict	.....	0.170	0.170

Table 6 shows the standardized direct, indirect, and total effects of the relationships among the research variables. The results indicate that Machiavellianism has an indirect effect ( $\beta = 0.170$ ) on marital conflict through ego strength. The determination coefficients show that 79% of the variance in marital conflict and 46% of the variance in ego

strength are explained by the predictor variables of the Dark Triad personality traits and ego strength.



#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results showed that the exogenous variable of distress tolerance, mediated by ego strength, had an indirect and significant effect on marital conflict, with a standardized coefficient of -0.366 and a significance of 0.001. Additionally, among the Dark Triad personalities, Machiavellianism had an indirect and significant effect on marital conflict, with a coefficient of 0.170 and a significance of 0.001. However, the other two personality traits, psychopathy and narcissism, did not have an indirect effect on marital conflict. As Machiavellianism increased, the level of marital conflict in women also increased. The results indicated that only narcissism had a direct and positive effect on marital conflict, with a standardized coefficient of 0.275 and a significance of 0.000. In contrast, psychopathy (coefficient = 0.035,  $p = 0.316$ ) and Machiavellianism (coefficient = 0.026,  $p = 0.496$ ) did not have direct and significant effects on marital conflict. Thus, it can be concluded that as narcissism increases, marital conflict also increases in women.

Among the Dark Triad personalities, Machiavellianism, with a standardized coefficient of 0.170 and a significance of 0.001, had an indirect and significant effect on marital conflict, mediated by ego strength. This suggests that as Machiavellianism increases, marital conflicts also increase. The mediating variable, ego strength, had a negative and significant effect on marital conflict, with a coefficient of -0.595 and a significance of 0.000. This indicates that as ego strength increases among women, their marital conflict decreases. Machiavellianism, with a standardized coefficient of -0.285 and a significance of 0.000, also had a negative and significant effect on the mediating variable, ego strength, while narcissism ( $p = 0.543$ , coefficient = 0.027) and psychopathy ( $p = 0.166$ , coefficient = 0.063) did not have direct effects on ego strength. Therefore, it can be concluded that as Machiavellianism increases, ego strength decreases among women.

The results suggest that among the Dark Triad personalities, only Machiavellianism had an indirect and significant effect on marital conflict. In contrast, psychopathy and narcissism did not have indirect effects on marital conflict. These findings are consistent with prior studies (Ara et al., 2017; Doorley et al., 2019; Plouffe et al., 2022; Sabouri, 2022; Yousefi & Sefarzadeh, 2023; Yu et al., 2020).

The findings of this study indicate that the indirect and significant effect of Machiavellianism on marital conflict is

noteworthy. It suggests that individuals with high levels of Machiavellian personality traits have lower ego strength, which in turn leads to an increase in marital conflict. This is likely because individuals with Machiavellian traits engage more in manipulative and dishonest behaviors, which can erode trust and intimacy in their relationships and result in increased conflict. The absence of a relationship between psychopathy and narcissism and marital conflict through the mediation of ego strength is interesting. These traits may be more related to external factors such as social status and power rather than internal emotional regulation, which is the focus of ego strength. Additionally, the underlying mechanisms of these traits may differ from those of Machiavellianism, such as the focus on grandiosity and entitlement in narcissistic traits.

#### 5. Limitations and Suggestions

The sample population in this study only included women seeking divorce who visited marital counseling clinics in District 3 of Tehran during the spring of 2024, and caution should be exercised when generalizing these results to other age groups and cities. The study focused exclusively on women, and the results may not be generalizable to men or other populations. Moreover, demographic characteristics such as socio-economic status and cultural differences among women were not examined. The study relied solely on self-reported measures, which may be subject to response bias or social desirability bias. Generalizability of the findings requires further research in this area. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies be conducted in other cities and with other age groups. Future studies should also examine the current research variables in relation to men. Additionally, it is recommended that future studies consider demographic characteristics such as socio-economic status and cultural differences in relation to the research variables.

It is suggested that couples therapy programs focus on enhancing ego strength and addressing the Dark Triad personalities in both partners to reduce marital conflicts. The findings should inform the development of screening tools for couples therapy that assess distress tolerance, the Dark Triad personalities, and ego strength. The findings should also inform the development of prevention programs for couples at risk of marital conflict due to low ego strength and high levels of Dark Triad personalities.

#### 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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