# Examining the Mediating Role of Parental Bonding in the Relationship Between Early Maladaptive Schemas and Marital Quality in Women

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**Objective:** The aim of this study was to examine the mediating role of parental bonding in the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and marital quality among women in the city of Shiraz.

**Methods and Materials:** The research method was descriptive-correlational using structural equation modeling. The statistical population of the study included all women in Shiraz in 2023, from which 250 were selected using the convenience sampling method. Data were collected using Young's Early Maladaptive Schema Questionnaire (2005), Fletcher et al.'s Marital Quality Questionnaire (2000), and Parker et al.'s Parental Bonding Instrument (1979). Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling.

**Findings:** The findings of the study indicated that early maladaptive schemas have a significant direct effect on marital quality (P<0.05). Additionally, parental bonding has a significant direct effect on marital quality (P<0.05). The results also showed that early maladaptive schemas indirectly affect marital quality through parental bonding.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, it can be concluded that in order to enhance marital quality, focus should be placed on reducing early maladaptive schemas and improving parental bonding.

*Keywords: Parental Bonding, Early Maladaptive Schemas, Marital Quality.*

## 1. Introduction

Marriage is considered the most important contract in an individual's life. People marry for various reasons. In addition to sexual desires, which are primary issues, factors such as love, economic security, protection, emotional security, a sense of peace, and escaping loneliness also drive people towards marriage (Yoo & Joo, 2022). One of the crucial variables in marital life is its quality. Spanier (1976) described marital quality as the success and functioning of a marriage (Viegas et al., 2023). Marital quality is a dynamic concept because the nature and quality of relationships among individuals change over time, which allows for the identification of factors influencing the quality of a relationship (Chiang & Bai, 2022). Marital quality is more closely related to marital stability (Barton et al., 2022), so that low quality in marital relationships increases the instability of marital life and thoughts and behaviors related to divorce (Yang et al., 2023).

Research shows that there is a relationship between marital quality and early maladaptive schemas (Körük & Özabacı, 2023). Early maladaptive schemas are self-defeating emotional and cognitive patterns that develop early in life and persist into adulthood (Zoodkhizi & Sedaghat, 2020). According to Young (2004), the developmental roots of schemas are found in the unmet core emotional needs of childhood. These core needs include: 1- the need for secure attachment to others; 2- the need for autonomy, competence, and identity; 3- freedom to express valid needs and emotions; 4- the need for spontaneity and play; and 5- the need for realistic limits and self-control (Pilkington et al., 2021; Pilkington et al., 2022). Young (1999) posited that some individuals, due to negative childhood experiences, develop early maladaptive schemas that influence their thinking, feelings, behavior, and other aspects of life (Talarowska et al., 2022), leading to biases in interpreting events. These biases affect how couples communicate (Bach et al., 2018; Seyfizadeh et al., 2019). Research (Başer Baykal & Erden Çınar, 2023; Janovsky et al., 2020) also showed that quality of life and early maladaptive schemas are related.

One of the most important factors affecting marital quality is parental bonding (Yaakov et al., 2023). Parental bonding is a child-rearing style that includes three factors: care, overprotection, and maternal and paternal authoritarianism. In other words, parental bonding refers to the child's assessment of the quality and nature of their attachment to their parents (Gong et al., 2022). These factors include maternal and paternal care, which relates to the positive and desirable relationship between parents and child, meaning the parents have a warm and intimate relationship with their child; maternal and paternal overprotection, which indicates the parents' excessive protection of the child; and maternal and paternal authoritarianism, where the parents do not encourage the child's autonomy and independence (Kidd et al., 2022).

The systemic theory approach shows how the quality of parental bonding affects and is affected by the nature of communication between and within other family subsystems. This approach also explains why disturbances in one intrafamilial relationship (such as the marital dyad) can negatively affect other relationships within the system (such as parent-child dyads) (Jalali et al., 2016). A dysfunctional relational pattern in the family, such as triangulation, where the child is drawn into conflicts between parents to reduce tension and restore stability to the stressed marital subsystem, can exacerbate the negative effects of marital conflicts on children and affect their future relationships with spouses (Khakpour et al., 2014). Empirical evidence shows that regardless of whether parents remain married or divorce, parental conflict impacts children's emotional, behavioral, social, academic, and future interpersonal relationships (Bean et al., 2020). Parental conflict, even without verbal and physical violence, creates an unpleasant environment that jeopardizes children's mental health and normal development, as well as their future relationships (Li et al., 2020).

Although many researchers have separately studied each of these variables, no study has examined the mediating role of parental bonding in the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and marital quality among women in Shiraz. Given this research gap and the importance of understanding the role of marital quality in helping families and reducing the harms associated with marital conflicts in women, it is essential to investigate this scientifically. It can be said that understanding couples' relationships depends on factors such as early maladaptive schemas and parental bonding; however, studies have not included analytical models. To fill these gaps, a suitable explanatory model must be developed. Thus, the aim of the present study is to answer the question: Do early maladaptive schemas and marital quality relate with the mediating role of parental bonding in women?

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

The statistical method was descriptive-correlational using structural equation modeling. The statistical population included all women living in Shiraz in 2023. Due to the high sample size in modeling studies, the convenience sampling method was used. The sample size was calculated based on Kline's (2011) guidelines, which consider the sample size to parameter ratio in structural equations, with a minimum of 20:1. Therefore, 250 women were selected as the sample. The inclusion criteria were age range 20 to 60 years, at least a high school diploma, being married and living together, not seeking a divorce, and willingness to participate in the study. The exclusion criterion was leaving 5% of the questions unanswered.

Each questionnaire included a comprehensive explanation of how to respond to the questions, and participants were assured of the confidentiality of the results and that the information would not affect their personal or social lives.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Early Maladaptive Schema

The 75-item Young Schema Questionnaire (2005) was used to measure early maladaptive schemas, with a 6-point Likert scale (1 = completely untrue to 6 = completely true) and 15 subscales including emotional deprivation, abandonment, mistrust/abuse, social isolation, defectiveness/shame, failure, dependence/incompetence, vulnerability to harm, entrapment, self-sacrifice, emotional inhibition, unrelenting standards, entitlement, insufficient self-control, and self-discipline. The Cronbach's alpha for the entire test in Besharat et al.'s (2018) study was 0.96, and for the subscales, it was above 0.80. Wilburn et al.'s (2009) factor analysis strongly supports the questionnaire's internal structure. The Young Schema Questionnaire correlates highly with Kessler et al.'s Psychological Distress Questionnaire, with results of 0.45 and 0.56 respectively (Pilkington et al., 2022). In Ghayathi's (2009) study, concurrent validity with the Dysfunctional Attitudes Scale was 0.65. The Cronbach's alpha for the subscales ranged from 0.60 to 0.90, with an overall alpha of 0.94 (Seyfizadeh et al., 2019; Zoodkhizi & Sedaghat, 2020). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.898.

#### 2.2.2. Marital Quality

Fletcher et al. (2000) developed this tool to assess marital quality, consisting of 18 items covering satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, sexual passion, and love. Participants respond on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely). Scores range from 18 to 126, with lower scores indicating lower marital quality and higher scores indicating better marital quality across various dimensions. Cronbach's alpha for the entire questionnaire was 0.85, with subscale alphas ranging from 0.78 to 0.96. The creators reported good validity (Fletcher et al., 2000). In the Iranian context, the questionnaire's validity and reliability were confirmed through convergent and divergent validity, confirmatory factor analysis, and internal consistency (Saadati & Parsakia, 2023). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.781.

#### 2.2.3. Parental Bonding

Developed by Parker et al. in 1979, this 25-item scale assesses individuals' perceptions of maternal and paternal care and control. It uses a 4-point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 3 (always). High scores on the care scale indicate warm, empathetic parenting, while low scores suggest cold, rejecting parenting. High control scores reflect controlling, intrusive parents who prevent their children from gaining independence, while low control scores indicate parents who allow autonomy. Cronbach's alpha for the care and control subscales was 0.81 and 0.90 for patients, and 0.91 for healthy subjects, indicating good internal consistency (Parker et al., 1979). In Iran, Besharat et al. reported alpha coefficients of 0.83 and 0.91 for the care and control subscales, respectively (Mahmoudiyandastnaee et al., 2019). In this study, the overall reliability coefficient was 0.81.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using structural equation modeling with SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 24.

## 3. Findings and Results

The mean age reported for the research sample was $37.6 \pm 9.47$ years. The minimum age of participants was 24, and the maximum age was 57. Additionally, the mean reported duration of marriage was $16.1 \pm 6.60$ years, with a minimum of 2 years and a maximum of 25 years. The educational levels were reported as follows: 28% (below diploma and diploma), 48% (associate degree), 19.6% (bachelor's

degree), and 4.4% (master's degree and above). 64.4% of the participants were women, and 35.6% were men. 40% of the participants had no children, 34.8% had one child, 20.4% had two children, and 4.8% had three or more children. Descriptive statistics of the variables studied are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Correlation Matrix, Mean, and Standard Deviation of Research Variables*

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Disconnection and Rejection | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Impaired Autonomy and Performance | .80 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Other-Directedness | .58 | .65 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Hypervigilance and Inhibition | .45 | .41 | .42 | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Impaired Limits | .55 | .44 | .38 | .50 | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Care | -.14 | -.32 | -.25 | -.27 | -.37 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| 7. Control | -.43 | -.22 | -.30 | -.48 | -.41 | .34 | 1 | | | | | | |
| 8. Satisfaction | -.25 | -.24 | -.23 | -.11 | -.33 | .31 | .24 | 1 | | | | | |
| 9. Commitment | -.11 | -.10 | .12 | -.16 | -.26 | .14 | .26 | .19 | 1 | | | | |
| 10. Intimacy | -.13 | -.12 | -.23 | -.15 | -.17 | -.18 | -.19 | -.13 | -.11 | 1 | | | |
| 11. Trust | -.15 | -.17 | -.14 | -.11 | -.20 | .16 | -.14 | .15 | -.14 | -.11 | 1 | | |
| 12. Sexual Passion | -.14 | -.13 | -.28 | -.13 | -.33 | -.19 | .15 | -.12 | -.16 | -.19 | .31 | 1 | |
| 13. Love | -.18 | -.28 | -.22 | -.10 | -.13 | .30 | -.29 | .42 | -.37 | -.17 | -.22 | .36 | 1 |
| Mean | 74.2 | 58.6 | 29.8 | 27.2 | 29.4 | 28.8 | 12.3 | 16.09 | 16.1 | 16.9 | 17.3 | 15.08 | 16.1 |
| Standard Deviation | 12.6 | 15.8 | 7.77 | 8.42 | 7.57 | 6.58 | 6.50 | 3.11 | 2.87 | 17.3 | 2.06 | 2.47 | 2.64 |
| Skewness | .86 | .20 | .38 | .77 | 1.21 | .29 | .44 | .87 | .40 | 1.31 | .82 | .31 | -.41 |
| Kurtosis | 1.09 | -.10 | -.44 | .56 | -.34 | .69 | -.70 | .55 | .23 | .21 | .61 | .62 | -.67 |

All correlations are significant (p<0.01).

As shown in Table 1, all variables are significantly correlated with each other. The means for Disconnection and Rejection (74.2), Impaired Autonomy and Performance (58.6), Other-Directedness (29.8), Hypervigilance (27.2), Impaired Limits (29.4), Care (28.8), Control (12.3), Satisfaction (16.09), Commitment (16.1), Intimacy (16.9), Trust (17.3), Sexual Passion (15.08), and Love (16.1) were obtained. To test the proposed research model, the assumptions were examined. In the present study, the missing data were replaced using the mean, and the normality of the variables was checked using skewness and kurtosis indices. The skewness and kurtosis coefficients ranged between -2 and 2, indicating that none of the observed variables had a significant deviation from the normal distribution. Multivariate outliers were checked using Mahalanobis distance, which did not show significant deviations from the normal distribution. The Mahalanobis distance for the exogenous variables in the model was calculated. The Mahalanobis distance between a particular individual's scores and the group mean scores of all variables is called the Mahalanobis distance (Giles, 2002). If the largest Mahalanobis distance is greater than the critical chi-square value with a certain degree of freedom (number of predictor variables) at the 0.05 level, multivariate outliers are present. In the present study, the minimum and maximum Mahalanobis distances were 0.021 and 18.5, respectively. Given that the critical chi-square value at the 0.01 level is 19.5, there were no multivariate outliers.

**Table 2**

*Standardized Path Coefficients of Research Variables*

| Path | Standardized Coefficients | Unstandardized Coefficients | Critical Ratio | Significance Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Early Maladaptive Schemas → Marital Quality | -0.57 | 0.59 | 5.89 | 0.001 |
| Early Maladaptive Schemas → Parental Bonding | -0.54 | -0.33 | 3.39 | 0.001 |
| Parental Bonding → Marital Quality | 0.30 | -0.42 | 2.67 | 0.001 |

Based on the results in Table 2, early maladaptive schemas have a direct effect on marital quality (-0.57). Early maladaptive schemas have a direct effect on parental bonding (-0.54), and parental bonding also has a direct effect on marital quality (0.30). Given the significance level of less than 0.01, these values are significant. Table 3 shows the results of the bootstrap method for the mediating relationships.

For validation, a researcher-developed questionnaire using a five-point scale was administered to 18 experts in the field. The collected data were then evaluated using a one-sample t-test, and the results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Indirect Path Coefficient of the Final Model Using Bootstrap Method*

| Path | Data | Bootstrap Value | Lower Limit | Upper Limit | Standard Error | P |
|------|------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|---|
| Early Maladaptive Schemas → Marital Quality through Parental Bonding | 0.048 | 0.066 | 0.029 | 0.128 | 0.33 | 0.001 |

The results in Table 3 show that since zero is outside the confidence interval, the indirect effect of early maladaptive schemas on marital quality through parental bonding is significant.

The fit indices for the initial proposed model showed a $\chi^2$ of 35.7 with 12 degrees of freedom ($\chi^2/df = 2.51$), a GFI of 0.959, an AGFI of 0.788, an IFI of 0.953, a TLI of 0.932, a CFI of 0.952, an NFI of 0.924, and an RMSEA of 0.064. For the final modified model, the fit indices improved significantly with a $\chi^2$ of 0.055 and 1 degree of freedom ($\chi^2/df = 0.055$), a GFI of 1.00, an AGFI of 0.987, an IFI of 0.999, a TLI of 1.00, a CFI of 0.999, an NFI of 0.999, and an RMSEA of 0.01. These results indicate that the final modified model has a good fit, as evidenced by the high GFI and CFI values above 0.90 and an RMSEA value below 0.08.

## 4.    Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the mediating role of parental bonding in the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and marital quality among women in Shiraz. The results indicate a relationship between early maladaptive schemas and marital quality. This finding aligns with the results of prior researchers (Başer Baykal & Erden Çınar, 2023; Janovsky et al., 2020; Körük & Özabacı, 2023; Seyfizadeh et al., 2019).

In explaining the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and marital quality, it can be said that schemas are one of the core factors in personality structure and drive individuals towards various relationships, the most evident of which can be seen in marital life and conflicts between spouses, as each partner brings their past baggage into the shared life (Başer Baykal & Erden Çınar, 2023). Early maladaptive schemas are self-destructive cognitive, emotional, and physical reactions formed in early childhood and repeated throughout life. Since marriage and establishing a shared life are significant life cycles, these schemas become active during this period (Janovsky et al., 2020).

Early maladaptive schemas are presented as dysfunctional cognitive strategies that lead to dissatisfaction in marital relationships and set the stage for separation. Individuals with early maladaptive schemas do not receive sufficient emotional and protective support from their spouses and feel abandoned by them. They may sometimes perceive themselves as inferior or superior to their spouses, leading to estrangement and reduced effective marital communication (Chiang & Bai, 2022). It can also be added that schemas are structures for retrieving stored general concepts from memory or an organized set of information, beliefs, and assumptions that play a role in activating negative interpretations and beliefs in individuals with childhood trauma. The result is increased stress and psychological distress, which can disrupt their marital relationships (Chiang & Bai, 2022).

The present study showed a relationship between parental bonding and marital quality in couples. This result aligns with the findings of prior researchers (Gong et al., 2022; Kidd et al., 2022; Yaakov et al., 2023). In explaining this finding, Freud's deferred action theory can be referenced, where a secondary event reactivates inappropriate parental behaviors repressed in memory (Yaakov et al., 2023). Essentially, a secondary event in a person's life can trigger their primary trauma and rekindle an unresolved conflict or issue. Therefore, later life events, such as marital conflicts, can activate childhood traumas. These traumas reflect severe deficiencies in the attachment relationship between the caregiver and the child, hindering the normal development of basic capacities such as self-efficacy, self-sufficiency, and emotional regulation, leading to inappropriate relationships with spouses (Kidd et al., 2022).

In other words, childhood relationships impact an individual's adult relationships. This relational pattern generalizes in later life, increasing the likelihood of marital conflicts. A person may either play the role of abuser or

victim, compulsively repeating past traumas. Therefore, by correcting emotional deficiencies and increasing healthy coping styles, it is expected that these pathological components resulting from various attachment traumas in childhood will lead to future life problems (Gong et al., 2022).

## 5. Limitations and Suggestions

One limitation of the present study was that the research design was structural equation modeling, which is a subset of correlational designs. Therefore, causal relationships between variables cannot be demonstrated. Future research should use methods that show causal relationships. Additionally, the present study used convenience sampling, so caution should be exercised in generalizing the results. Future research should use random sampling methods to determine the sample. Given that the research sample consisted of women from Shiraz, generalizing the results to all women is limited. Future research should examine these variables in other cities as well.

## 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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