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Research Paper

The mediating role of triangulation with children in the relationship between attachment style and marital relationship quality in conflicted couples



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Marital relationship quality is a very important aspect in the relationship of couples and plays an important role in marital conflicts. Therefore, the present study was conducted to determine the mediating role of triangulation with children in the relationship between attachment style and marital relationship quality.

Methods: The research method was descriptive, which was carried out in the form of path analysis. In order to conduct this research, 180 married people were selected from the counseling centers of Ardakan city by simple random sampling and the research tools included marital relationship quality questionnaire, adult attachment style scale and triangulation questionnaire. They answered the collected data were analyzed through AMOS software.

Results: The results of the research showed that ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles have a positive and significant relationship with triangulation and triangulation also has a negative and significant relationship with the marital relationship quality. Also, secure (0.567), ambivalent (-0.454) and avoidant (-0.433) attachment style have a significant relationship with the marital relationship quality. The results of investigating indirect relationships also indicated that the mediating role of triangulation with children was significant in the relationship between avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles with marital relationship quality.

Conclusion: attachment style can affect the quality of marital relationship in conflicted couples by influencing triangulation with children. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the underlying factors of psychological separation between couples.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, experts in the field of family have been interested in studying effective mechanisms in creating a marriage with high marital quality. The quality of married life not only makes people live happier, more energetic and healthier, but also has a major contribution to the health of parents, education

of the next generations and longevity. Marital relationship quality is a multi-dimensional concept that includes various aspects of couples' relationship, such as compatibility, sexual satisfaction, happiness, cohesion and commitment (Sanford, 2006).

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In general, there are several theoretical models about the quality of marital relationship and the factors affecting it. Attachment is a special emotional relationship that requires the exchange of pleasure, care and comfort and includes three styles of avoidant, ambivalent and secure (Bashirgonbadi, Dargahi, Ahmadboukani & Fadakar, 2021). According to this theory, adults with secure attachment tend to have positive views of themselves and their spouses. These people feel comfortable with both belonging and independence (Khoo & Yueh, 2022). People with insecure attachment style are divided into two categories: 1- People with avoidant attachment 2- People with ambivalent attachment. Adults with an avoidant attachment style see themselves as self-sufficient, and people with this style deny vulnerability and claim that they do not need close relationships and tend to avoid intimacy. Adults with an ambivalent attachment style tend to have a less positive view of themselves. They often doubt their own worth as a spouse and blame themselves for their spouse's lack of responsiveness (Ghezelseflo, 2020). Attachment style is the starting point of the couple's communication system and is considered the basis of other patterns and processes such as intimacy and communication (Ehsannia, A., Heidari, H., Zare Bahramabadi, M., & Davoodi, 2020). On the other hand, sometimes inappropriate communication between couples and their dissatisfaction with this relationship leads to the creation of triangulation in the family, which means bringing a third person into the relationship. Creating a triangle can affect marital satisfaction (Bashirgonbadi et al., 2021). Couples who form a triangle usually strongly deny the existence of any differences in their relationship and there is no intimacy between them (Fosco, G. M., & Grych, 2010), on the other hand, sometimes problems arise in marital relationships. In order to solve them, couples triangulate with their children. Triangulation with a child is a process in which one of the couples brings a child into their relationship with their spouse, which reduces the tension between husband and wife (Bokek-Cohen, 2008). In marital conflict, the most common triangles lead to children's problems. Because the child is usually the most vulnerable person to be dragged into marital disputes (Khakpour, Nazari, A. M., & Zahra Kar, 2014). Creating a triangle affects not only the marital relationship (Bashirgonbadi et al., 2021), but also other dimensions, such as reducing the parent-child relationship and preventing the development of children (Bell, L. G., Bell, D. C., & Nakata, 2001). Also, the results of research (Ross, Hinshaw & Murdock, 2016) has shown the relationship between

attachment styles, differentiation and triangulation in relationships.

According to the contents mentioned, there is a possibility that the attachment styles indirectly and have an effective role in predicting the marital relationship quality of the couples through triangulation done with the children by them. Considering that less researches have investigated the mediating role of triangulation with children, especially in conflicted couples, this study was conducted to determine the mediating role of triangulation with children in the relationship between attachment style and marital relationship quality in conflicted couples.

2. Materials and Methods

The method of the current research was correlation of the path analysis type. The research population was all married people who had referred to counseling centers in Ardakan city due to marital conflicts. 180 people were selected by simple random sampling and responded to the research tools. Regarding the sample size in the structural equation modeling, it had been suggested that the sample size should always be ten times the number of parameters calculated in the model. Considering the existence of 5 variables for the research, the calculation parameters are calculated as follows (number of paths + number of exogenous variable variances + number of covariances + number of error variances); Therefore, the number of calculated parameters in the present model was equal to 15 and the smallest sample size was obtained from the multiple of these parameters in the number 15 ($150=10*150$), that is, at least a sample size of 150 was necessary to perform the analysis (Mahmoudpour, Shiri, Ahmadbokani, & Naeimi, 2021). In this study, 180 people were considered with the possible drop rate.

Marital Relationship Quality Questionnaire: This questionnaire was designed by Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas (2000). It contains 18 questions in six dimensions (satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, sexual excitement and love) which each one is measured with 3 questions. The minimum score is 18 and the maximum score is 108, which is obtained from the sum of scores. Lower scores indicate lower quality and higher scores indicate better quality of marital relationship in different dimensions. Cronbach's alpha coefficient by Fletcher et al. (2000) has been reported favorable. The reliability of this questionnaire has been reported and confirmed through internal consistency as 0.86 and retesting as 0.84 (Nilforooshan, Ahmadi, Fatehizadeh, Reza Abedi & Ghasemi, 2014). In the present study, the reliability of the scale Cronbach's alpha was reported 0.76.

Adult Attachment Style Scale (AAS): This scale was designed by [Besharat \(2006\)](#) through using Hazen and Shiver (1987) test materials. This scale has 15 questions and measures three attachment styles of secure, avoidant, and ambivalent on a 5-point Likert scale (1=very low to 5=very high). Each scale has 5 questions. Correlation coefficients were calculated between the scores of a sample of 300 subjects on two situation with an interval of four weeks to measure retesting. These coefficients were calculated for secure, avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles for all subjects, respectively, 0.87, 0.83, 0.84, which is a sign of acceptable retest validity of the scale ([Besharat, 2006](#)). In the present study, the reliability of the scale Cronbach's alpha for secure, avoidant and ambivalent

attachment styles was reported as 0.86, 0.85, 0.89.

Triangulation Questionnaire: This questionnaire (by Behzadi, 2008) measures parents' opinions about the occurrence of triangulation in the family. Two subscales were used to evaluate triangulation in family through 13 questions. Triangulation with the child measures parents' perception of the spouse's efforts to triangulate with the child and includes 13 questions. Cronbach's alpha of triangulation with children in the research of [Bashirgonbadi et al., 2021](#) was reported 0.90, which indicated its adequate reliability. In the present study, the reliability of the scale Cronbach's alpha was calculated as 0.89.

3. Results

Table 1. Descriptive indices and correlation between research variables

variables	M	Sd	1	2	3	4	5
Marital Relationship Quality	120.05	17.76	1				
secure	11.10	4.16	.567**	1			
avoidant	12.68	4.76	-.433**	.02	1		
ambivalent	11.04	4.19	-.454**	-.11*	.431**	1	
triangulation with children	38.89	9.49	-.684**	-.10*	.364**	.391**	1

*p<0.05 **p<0.001

To check the research hypotheses, the output graphs of the AMOS software were presented in standard

coefficient mode, and then research hypotheses would be confirmed and rejected.

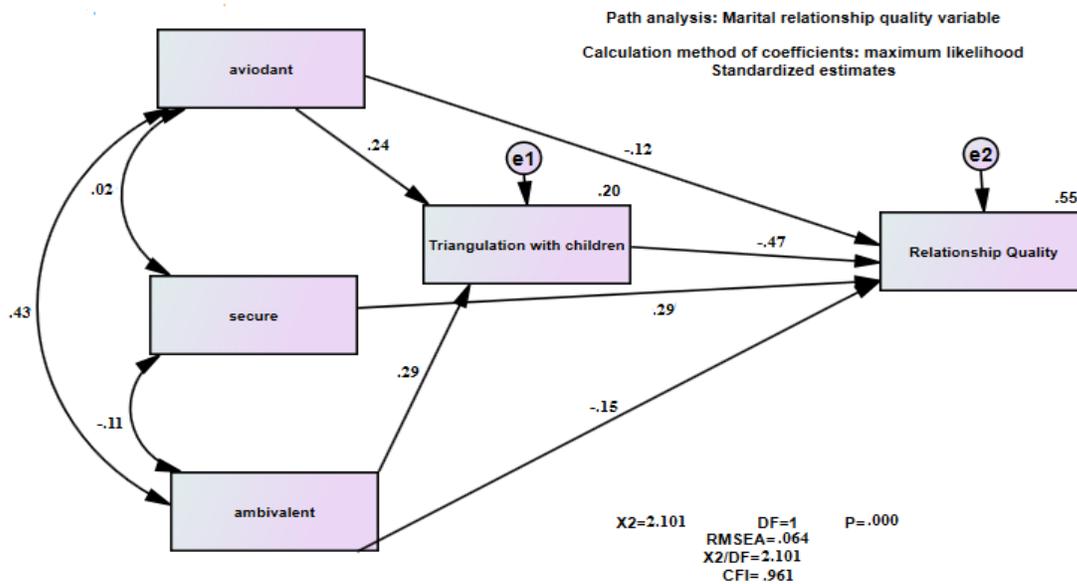


Figure 1. Standard estimation coefficients of the final model of marital satisfaction

Table 2 shows the goodness of fit of the proposed research model.

Table 2. Model fit indices with data

Fit indices	Fit Model	value	Ideal values	Condition
Chi-Squared	X ²	2.101	> .05	Optimal
Degrees of freedom	df	1	-	-
Chi-Squared/Degrees of freedom	X ² /df	2.101	< 3	Optimal
The square root of the approximation error	RMSEA	.064	<0.08	Optimal
Goodness Fit	GFI	.94	> .90	Optimal
Adjusted goodness Fit	AGFI	.92	> .90	Optimal
Tucker and Lewis	TLI	.93	> .90	Optimal
Comparative fit	CFI	.96	>.90	Optimal
Incremental fit	NFI	.91	>.90	Optimal

The validity of a model can be evaluated by using criteria called goodness of fit. Two levels covered by the chi-square statistic and the root mean square of the residual error are considered more than other indicators in fitting a measurement model. In structural equation modeling and path analysis, the chi-square index is a traditional method to evaluate the fit of the whole model. Based on this statistic, the null hypothesis indicates the fit of the model with the data of the statistical population. When the chi-square is significant, it leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis, so here, contrary to conventional hypotheses, the goal was not to reject the null hypothesis. The fit indices are presented in Table 2. According to Table 2, the chi-square value in the present study is equal to 2/101 (p<0.05), so the null hypothesis that the model fits the data is rejected. But since the value of this index is affected by the sample size, if the sample size is large, its significance can be ignored (29). Also, the normalized chi-square value is obtained by dividing the chi-square value by the degree of freedom (X/df). For proper fit, some experts consider the value of this index to be between 1 and 3

(27). The value of this index for research data is more than 2.101. The value of root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), which is interpreted as a function of the covariance value, is expected to be less than 0.08 for a proper fit. The status of this index (RMSEA) in the output of the model is equal to .064, which indicates the appropriate fit of the model.

Bentler-Bonnet's normalized fit index (NFI), incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker Lewis index (TLI) and comparative fit index (CFI) are all close to one. The closer these indices are to one, the better fit of the model (28). Three other criteria for model fit, which are known as absolute fit indices, are goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) and Amsak goodness-of-fit index (PGFI). The value of GFI and AGFI is greater than 0.90, which indicates the acceptable fit of the model (30). Finally, the results related to these indicators show the appropriate fit of the model. Based on the fit indices, the path coefficients of the direct relationships of the research variables in the proposed model were examined. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Standard regression coefficients and t-values of direct and indirect effects of variables

variables	β	T
avoidant	.24	**5.94
ambivalent	.29	7.11**
secure	-.01	-.98
triangulation with children	-.47	** -15.43
avoidant	-.12	** -3.67
ambivalent	-.15	** -4.59
secure	.29	**9.65

According to the results of Table 3, the T value was calculated for the effect of avoidant attachment (5.94), ambivalent attachment (7.11) and secure attachment (-0.98) styles on triangulations with children. The T value calculated in relation between triangulation with marital relationship quality, avoidant attachment style and marital relationship quality and ambivalent attachment style and marital satisfaction were -15.43, -3.67 and -4.59, respectively. All these items were

negative and significant. Regarding the relationship between secure attachment style and marital satisfaction, T value was equal to (9.65), which indicates a positive and significant relationship. In the relationship between attachment styles and marital satisfaction, in addition to a direct relationship, there was also an indirect relationship with the mediation of triangulation with children, which was tested through the Bootstrapping method.

Table 4. Bootstrap results related to the indirect flow of variables in the modified model

Variables		β	P	Lower Bounds (BC)	Upper Bounds	Two Tailed Significance (BC)	R ²	
							triangulation with children	Marital Relationship Quality
avoidant	triangulation with children	marital relations	-.114	-.210	-.152	-.070	.012	
ambivalent	triangulation with children	hip quality	-.136	-.050	-.195	-.097	.001	
							.20	.55

According to Table 4, the coefficient of determination of the variable of marital satisfaction is 55, which shows that predictive and mediating variables can predict 55% of changes in marital satisfaction in married people. The coefficient of triangulation of children was equal to 0.20%. As can be seen in Table 4, in the relationship between avoidant attachment style and marital satisfaction, the indirect effect of triangulation with children is significant at the .05 level, so it can be said that this variable plays a mediating role on the relationship between avoidant attachment style and marital satisfaction. Also, the mediating role of triangulation with children in the relationship between ambivalent attachment style and marital satisfaction was significant at the .01 level.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the research showed that attachment styles and marital relationship quality were related, until ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles have a negative relationship and secure attachment style has a positive relationship with marital relationship quality in conflicted couples, as well as ambivalent and avoidant attachments styles have a positive relationship with triangulation with children in couples. Consequently, triangulation has a negative and significant relationship with marital quality. The results of investigating indirect relationships also indicated that in the relationship between attachment styles and marital relationship quality, in addition to direct relationships, there is also an indirect relationship with the mediation of triangulation with children. In fact, it was found that the mediating role of triangulation with children was significant in the relationship between avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles with marital relationship quality. In this regard, the findings of the present research regarding the relationship between attachment styles and marital satisfaction are consistent with results of some studies such as [Bashirgonbadi et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Teimourpour, Bidokhti Moshtagh & Pourshahbaz \(2010\)](#). People with insecure attachment style are usually worry of being rejected and ignored their feelings in relationships. So, they often do not want to

get close to others ([Azizi, A., & Beyranvand, 2018](#)). Regarding the relationship of triangulation with children and marital satisfaction, the findings of this research are in line with studies of [Khakpour and et al. \(2014\)](#). An important internal factor in family processes is the ability of couples to solve problems within their own relationship. Sociologists have often stated that the dual relationship is short-lasting in the facing of stress and conflict. The stability of the dual relationship is achieved with the entry of the third person. The determining factor in the involvement of the third person is the inability of the couple to face the injury, overcome the stress or their weak ability to solve the problem ([Bell and et al., 2001](#)). Presence of third person in marital relationship of conflicted couples with insecure attachment style can make it confidently. A healthy couple can talk to each other about all their personal problems and feelings without experiencing anxiety. Couples who form a triangulation with children usually deny the existence of any real differences and incompatibility their relationship, strongly. It's considered the closeness between them but in fact, it is not real. When a girl or a boy enters the parents' relationship as a mediator, it can be said that the generational boundary between parents and children is violated and a weak and fragmented intergenerational boundary is formed. Such boundaries make parents turn to their children instead of relying, trusting and helping their spouse ([Fosco, G. M., & Grych, 2010](#)). In fact, it can be said that bringing a third person into the marital relationship (child) causes the couple to not be able to specifically address their problems and improve their relationship with each other. Instead, they focus on the child and put their communication and emotional problems as the next priority. Among the limitations of this research, it can be said that since in the current study, the research sample was selected only from Ardakan city, therefore caution should be used in generalizing of these findings to the entire Iranian society. So, it is suggested be done by sampling from different societies of Iran in future researches. The limitation of tools and biases related to it were another limitations of this research.

5. Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

The purpose of the research was explained to the participants and the information was received confidentially and used only for research purposes.

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Authors' contributions

All authors participated in all stages of writing and conducting research.

Conflicts of interest

The authors had no conflict of interest.

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