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The Mediating Role of Mothers' Codependency in the relationship between Marital Relationship Quality and Behavioral Problems in Children

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Abstract

Abstract

The type of parent-child relationship can have a role on the child's quality of life and codependency, as an unhealthy relationship pattern, can cause behavioral problems in children. The marital relationship quality also affects the functioning of the couple and the whole family system. The aim of the present study was to investigate the mediating role of mothers' dependency in the relationship between marital relationship quality and behavioral problems in children. The research design was cross-sectional and structural equation modeling was used for analysis. The statistical population of the present study consisted of mothers of elementary school students in Khorramabad city that 214 people were selected using voluntary sampling method. The oppositional defiant and conduct disorder questionnaire (ODCDQ), the codependency scale (CS) and the relationship quality scale (QRS) were used to collect data. Data were analyzed using Spss and Amos. The results showed that marital relationship quality had a direct effect on behavioral problems in children ($p<0.001$, $\beta=-0.43$). Also, codependency in mothers played a mediating role in the relationship between marital relationship quality and behavioral problems in children ($p<0.001$, $\beta=-0.07$). The results of the study indicated a significant role of marital relationship quality on children's behavioral problems, directly and indirectly through codependency. Therefore, as the quality of the marital relationship increases, the level of codependency in mothers decreases, and as a result, children report fewer behavioral problems. The findings of the present study have important implications for family counselors and systemic therapists in improving couples' functioning and reducing children's behavioral problems.

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Introduction

Behavioral problems may occur in childhood (Lulla et al., 2019) and if not managed, they become severe; especially if other destructive conditions such as family dysfunction are also present, the health of the child and the family system is threatened (Jetiyanuwat et al., 2024). The quality of the marital relationship refers to the level of satisfaction with the marriage and the positive attitude towards the spouse (Kim, 2021). According to theories based on a systems approach (e.g., the theory of structural family therapy), behavioral problems of a family member can be a sign of dysfunction in the marital subsystem. Therefore, in diagnosing and treating children's problems, it is better to assess the family structure as well (Minuchin, 1974). Codependency is a concept that was first used in the literature on addiction to describe individuals who were involved with addiction (e.g., to describe someone whose spouse was addicted to drugs or a child who was under the influence of an addicted parent) (Dear & Roberts, 2000). However, codependency has a broader meaning (Fischer & Spann, 1991) and is considered an unhealthy relationship pattern (Fischer & Spann, 1991). It hurts the quality of life of family members, especially children who are in a more vulnerable position than their parents (Poursharifi et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2023). Moreover, individuals with higher codependency describe their relationships as more problematic (Happ et al., 2023). In addition, low codependency has been reported to be associated with relationship satisfaction (Zaidi, 2015). Studies have shown that levels of behavioral problems are prevalent among children (Ginige et al., 2014; Jari et al., 2016); conducting studies on the factors affecting children's behavioral problems is necessary because they provide the required knowledge to family counselors to take beneficial measures for children's mental health. This study examined if codependency in mothers mediates the relationship between marital relationship quality and children's behavioral problems.

Method

The present research design was cross-sectional and structural equation modeling was used to analyze data. The statistical population included mothers of elementary school students living in Khorramabad in 2024. The data collection procedure was as follows: The link to the questions was provided virtually to mothers with elementary school children. The inclusion criteria for this study were informed consent and having elementary literacy. In addition, the exclusion criterion was an incomplete response to the questionnaires. It should be noted that before sending the link, the participants were provided with sufficient explanations about the research nature of the questions and compliance with the principle of confidentiality so that they could participate in the research with informed consent; ethical considerations were also observed. The participants responded to the Oppositional Defiant and Conduct Disorder questionnaire (Motamedin et al., 2021), the Codependency Scale (Fischer & Spann, 1991), and the Relationship Quality Scale (Chonody et al., 2018). The data were analyzed using SPSS and Amos (version 24) software at a significance level of 0.01.

Findings

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

SD	M	SD	Skewness	kurtosis	1	2	3	4	5
1. Children's behavioral problems	27.28	8.19	1.09	1.15	1				
2. conduct	8.76	2.59	1.97	4.13	**.78	1			
3. argumentative/defiant Behavior	8.06	2.93	1.68	3.26	**.86	**.63	1		
4. angry/irritable mood	10.46	4.22	.53	-.56	**.87	**.46	**.58	1	
5. Codependency	50.69	12.90	-.18	-.80	**.36	**.24	**.28	**.36	1
6. Marital relationship quality	36.35	6.93	-1.05	1.48	**-.46	**-.32	**-.43	**-.40	**-.34

According to Table 1, the skewness and kurtosis of most variables were in the range of -2 and 2, which indicates the normal distribution of the data. Furthermore, the kurtosis of the two variables was in the range of -7 and 7, which is acceptable (West et al., 1995, cited in Kim, 2013). The assumption of multivariate normality was also examined using the Mardia coefficient, which was calculated as 10; since it was less than the value of 35 (obtained from (P + 2) p; p is equal to the number of obvious variables), this assumption is also valid (Bollen, 1989). Moreover, according to Table 1, there is a correlation between the predictor, mediator, and criterion variables at a significance level of 0.01, indicating a linear relationship between the research variables. Multiple collinearity was also examined using the tolerance statistic and the variance inflation factor. Obtaining values greater than 0.40 for the tolerance index and values less than 2.5 for the variance inflation factor indicated no multiple collinearity between the predictor and mediator variables (the tolerance index value was calculated as 0.88 and the variance inflation factor value was calculated as 1.13). Table 2 shows the goodness-of-fit indices of the model.

Table 2. Model goodness of fit indices

Model	**X^2**	**Df**	**X^2/df**	**GFI**	**AGFI**	**CFI**	**NFI**	**IFI**	**TLI**	**RMSEA**
Research model	9.36	4	2.34	.98	.93	.98	.96	.98	.95	.07
Acceptable	-	-	<5	>.90	>.90	>.90	>.90	>.90	>.90	<.08

Based on Table 2, the X2/df index, which is the ratio of the chi-square to the degree of freedom, was reported to be 2.34 (i.e., less than 5). The goodness-of-fit index (GFI) adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), comparative fit index (CFI), normalized fit index (NFI), incremental fit index (IFI), and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) were reported to be higher than 0.90, and the root mean square error of estimation (RMSEA) was also estimated to be less than 0.08 (i.e., equal to 0.07), all of which indicate that the research model had a good fit. Table 3 shows the findings related to direct effects.

Table 3. Direct paths

Predictor variable	Criterion variable	Unstandardized coefficient	Standard coefficient	Standard error	P
Marital relationship quality	Children's behavioral problems	-.11	-.43	.02	<.001
Marital relationship quality	Codependency	-.64	-.34	.12	<.001
Codependency	Children's behavioral problems	.03	.21	.01	<.001

Table 3 showed that the direct path of marital relationship quality to the child behavioral problems was significant with a beta of -0.43 ($P < 0.001$); the direct path of marital relationship quality to the codependency was significant with a beta of -0.34 ($P < 0.001$), and the direct path of codependency to the child behavioral problems was significant with a beta of 0.21 ($P < 0.01$). Table 4 shows the findings on the indirect effects.

Table 4. Indirect Path

Predictor variable	Mediating variable	Criterion variable	Standardized coefficient	Min	Max	Standard error	P
Marital relationship quality	Codependency	Children's behavioral problems	-.07	-.14	-.03	.0 3	<.001

The bootstrap method in Table 4 showed that the indirect path of codependency in the relationship between marital relationship quality and child behavioral problems was significant with a beta of -0.07 ($P < 0.001$).

Conclusion

High quality marital relationships reduce codependency in mothers. As a result, children's behavioral problems are reduced. Studies have also shown that constructs related to marital relationship quality are indirectly effective in improving children's psychological health (Lavner et al., 2020; Peng & Wang, 2020; Saberi et al., 2024). Therefore, if the quality of the marital relationship is not desirable and the spouse cannot satisfy vital needs (e.g., love and intimacy) that are rooted in attachment in a safe and reliable relationship with the partner, he or she may seek satisfaction in a context outside the marital relationship; in this case, according to the theory of structural family therapy (Minuchin, 1974), detour occurs. Thus, the mother diverts her attention from the relationship with her spouse to the child and approaches him or her intending to pay attention to the child's needs (Kerig, 1995). This closeness to the child is not based on a constructive relationship model and an effective parenting style, but the goal of triangulation and deviation from the main problem and excessive attention to another family member who is also in a weaker position in terms of hierarchy (Minuchin, 1974). In fact, codependency as an unhealthy relationship pattern is affected by the quality of the marital relationship. Since the mother usually has the deepest relationship with the child, it can also negatively affect the quality of this relationship and create or strengthen behavioral problems in the child. It is suggested that family counselors consider the role of the family and systemic dynamics in the assessment and interventions related to children's behavioral problems and do not simply take an

individual view of the counseling process. Since the child is a member of the family system, systemic reasons related to behavioral problems should be considered and used in counseling and treatment.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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