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A Structural Model of the Relationship between Big Five Personality Traits and Marital Conflict in Married Women: The Sequential Mediating Role of Self-Esteem and Sexual Satisfaction

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Abstract

Abstract

Marital conflicts constitute fundamental challenges that threaten the stability and quality of couple relationships, potentially posing substantial consequences for psychological well-being and family functioning. Although the influence of personality traits on marital conflicts has been empirically documented, the mediating processes and pathways that elucidate this relationship remain insufficiently explored. The present study aimed to examine the sequential mediating role of self-esteem and sexual satisfaction in the relationship between the Big Five personality factors and marital conflicts among married women. This research study employed a correlational design utilizing structural equation modeling. The study sample comprised 305 married women residing in Isfahan with 5 to 15 years of marital duration, recruited through convenience sampling method. Data were collected using validated instruments, including the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992), the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (Barati & Sanai, 1996), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and the Sexual Satisfaction Scale for Women (Meston & Trapnell, 2005), and subsequently analyzed using Mplus software. Findings demonstrated that the proposed model exhibited satisfactory fit indices (CFI=1.000, RMSEA=0.057). Results confirmed that personality traits demonstrated significant relationships with marital conflicts through the sequential mediating role of self-esteem and sexual satisfaction. Neuroticism (β=0.062, $p<0.001$) and agreeableness (β=0.023, p=0.033) exhibited positive relationships with marital conflicts through this pathway. Conversely, extroversion (β=−0.044, $p<0.001$), openness to experience (β=−0.024, p=0.004), and conscientiousness (β=−0.037, $p<0.001$) demonstrated negative relationships with marital conflicts. Consequently, self-esteem and sexual satisfaction served as critical mediating mechanisms in elucidating the association between personality traits and marital conflicts. The findings of this research underscore the necessity of incorporating self-esteem enhancement and sexual satisfaction improvement into clinical couple therapy interventions as protective factors against marital maladjustment.

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Introduction

Marital conflict is a complex challenge in family psychology that has broad consequences for couples' health. Chronic marital conflict is associated with increased risk of depression, anxiety, decreased life satisfaction, and family breakdown (Whisman & Collazos, 2023). Therefore, identifying the predictors and causal pathways of these conflicts is of great theoretical and clinical importance. Among the individual factors affecting the quality of marital relationships, personality traits occupy a prominent position. The Big Five personality model (including neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) is a valid framework for explaining individual differences in the quality of intimate relationships (McCrae & Sutin, 2018). These personality traits can predict communication patterns, conflict resolution styles, and the quality of couple interactions (Joel et al., 2020; Allen & Walter, 2018). However, what has received less attention are the mediating pathways through which personality traits affect marital conflict. Self-esteem, as one of the most fundamental psychological constructs, plays a central role in emotion regulation, self-evaluation, and the quality of interpersonal relationships (Rosenberg, 1965). People with higher self-esteem are more likely to use cognitive and emotional resources in the face of relationship challenges. They have richer and less negative biases in interpreting their spouse's behavior. Moreover, sexual satisfaction, as one of the most important dimensions of marital intimacy, has a close relationship with the overall quality of marriage (Weber et al., 2024). In addition, sexual dissatisfaction can act as a hidden but powerful source for the emergence and intensification of marital conflicts (Allen & Walter, 2018). Despite the theoretical importance of this path, research that simultaneously tests the sequential mediating role of self-esteem and sexual satisfaction in the relationship between the Big Five personality factors and marital conflicts using a structural model is not available. This research gap is doubly important, especially in the cultural context of Iran, where gender and religious norms can create specific dynamics in marital relationships. Accordingly, the present study aims to test the structural model of the relationship between the Big Five personality factors and marital conflicts in married women, with an emphasis on the sequential mediating role of self-esteem and sexual satisfaction.

Method

The present study was correlational and based on Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The statistical population included all married women living in Isfahan with a marriage history of 5 to 15 years. Based on Kline's (2016) perspective and considering the statistical power, 305 individuals were selected using convenience sampling method. Inclusion criteria were age 25 to 45 years, 5 to 15 years of marital duration, no history of severe psychiatric disorders (e.g., psychosis, active bipolar disorder, severe depression), and no substance abuse in the last three months, which were assessed through self-report. Data were collected in a quiet environment with privacy. The research instruments included (a) NEO Five-Factor Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992) with 60 items in five subscales, whose Cronbach's alpha reliability in the present study for the neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness subscales was 0.73, 0.75, 0.81, 0.60, and 0.83, respectively; (b) Marital Conflict Questionnaire (Barati & Sanai, 1996) with 42 items and six subscales with a reliability of 0.92; (c) the Sexual Satisfaction Scale for Women (Meston & Trapnell, 2005) with 30 items and a reliability of 0.88; and (d) Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) with 10 items and reliability of 0.79. Data analysis was performed using SPSS (version 26) and Mplus software. Model fit was examined with χ^2, CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR indices, and the significance of indirect effects was tested through bootstrap with 5000 samples. The significance level in all tests was 0.05.

Findings

The present study was conducted with 305 participants, 81.9% of whom had children and 50.4% were employed. Before the main analysis, the assumption of normal distribution of the data was examined and the results showed that the data were suitable for the use of structural equation modeling (SEM). Correlation analysis revealed significant relationships between the research variables. Among them, neuroticism was the only trait that had a positive relationship with marital conflict (r=0.39). In contrast, other personality dimensions showed a negative correlation with marital conflict: extroversion (r=-0.28), openness to experience (r=-0.13), agreeableness (r=-0.33), and conscientiousness (r=-0.25). In addition, self-esteem (r=-0.31) and sexual satisfaction (r=-0.54) had a negative and significant relationship with marital conflict, and all of these coefficients were significant at the significance level of $p < 0.01$. The structural model fit indices confirmed its desirable quality. The value of $\chi^2(412.18)$, the comparative fit index (CFI=1.00), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA=0.057), and the standardized root mean residual (SRMR=0.015) indicated a very good fit of the model with the collected data.

Table 1. *Standardized coefficients of direct paths in the model*

Path	*β*	Standard error	Critical ratio	Sig.
Neuroticism→ Self-esteem	-.37	.055	-6.79	.000
Extroversion → Self-esteem	.26	.06	4.419	.000
Openness to experience → Self-esteem	.14	.043	3.37	.001
Agreeableness → Self-esteem	-.14	.05	-2.84	.004
Conscientiousness→ Self-esteem	.22	.05	4.36	.000
Self-esteem ← Sexual satisfaction	.37	.05	7.77	.000
Agreeableness → Sexual satisfaction	.26	.05	5.06	.000
Sexual satisfaction → Marital conflict	-.45	.05	-9.46	.000
Neuroticism→ Marital conflict	.17	.057	3.153	.002
Agreeableness → Marital conflict	.11	.054	-2.04	.039

According to Table 1, examining the direct paths provided a more accurate picture of the causal relationships. Neuroticism, on the one hand, had a negative effect on self-esteem (β=-0.37) and a positive effect on marital conflict (β=-0.17). In contrast, extroversion (β=-0.26), openness to experience (β=-0.14), and conscientiousness (β=-0.22) all showed a positive effect on self-esteem. Agreeableness had a more complex pattern; this trait had a negative effect on self-esteem (β=-0.14), a positive effect on sexual satisfaction (β=-0.26), and a negative effect on marital conflict (β=-0.11). Continuing the causal chain, self-esteem had a positive effect on sexual satisfaction (β=-0.37). Sexual satisfaction also showed the strongest direct effect on marital conflict (β=-0.45). All these paths were significant at the significance level of 0.05. Finally, the results of the bootstrap test confirmed the sequential mediating role of self-esteem and sexual satisfaction in the relationship between personality traits and marital conflict.

Table 2. *Indirect effects of personality traits on marital conflict through self-esteem and sexual satisfaction*

Predictor variable	*β*	SE
Neuroticism	.062	.014
Extroversion	-.044	.013
Openness to experience	-.024	.008
Agreeableness	.023	.011
Conscientiousness	-.037	.010

The results in Table 2 show that neuroticism had a positive indirect effect (β=0.062) on marital conflict, while extroversion (β=-0.044), openness to experience (β=-0.024), and conscientiousness (β=-0.037) showed negative indirect effects. The most interesting finding was related to agreeableness, which despite having a negative direct effect on marital conflict, had a positive indirect effect (β=0.023) through the sequential mediation path. This finding highlights the paradoxical nature of agreeableness and suggests that the overall effect of this trait on marital conflict is the result of a complex interaction of direct and indirect paths.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study provide a structural and process-oriented model for explaining marital conflicts, the most important theoretical finding of which is the support of the sequential mediating role of self-esteem and sexual satisfaction in the relationship between the Big Five personality factors and marital conflicts; a path that has not been tested in an integrated manner in the literature. These findings have theoretical consistency with the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) because in this framework, personality traits act as vulnerable or stable individual resources that shape the path of marital quality development through intrapersonal (self-esteem) and interpersonal (sexual satisfaction) adaptation processes. Neuroticism, by weakening self-esteem and reducing sexual satisfaction, decreases the relationship quality. However, conscientiousness, extroversion, and openness to experience play an indirect protective role. Agreeableness, when

accompanied by low self-esteem, can also lead to hidden dissatisfaction by weakening self-esteem. From a clinical perspective, these findings emphasize the need for assessing personality traits in couples therapy and designing interventions that simultaneously strengthen self-esteem and improve the quality of sexual intimacy. In this vein, cognitive-behavioral approaches, sex education, and emotion regulation are recommended, especially for women with high neuroticism. However, limitations such as the convenience sampling of married women in Isfahan, the correlational design, the use of self-report instruments, and the lack of participation of male partners limit the generalizability of the results. Therefore, the use of longitudinal designs, probability sampling, and mixed methods is recommended for future research.

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Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there was no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.

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