

Childhood Emotional Maltreatment and Spousal Violence: Mediating Role of Interpersonal Schemas

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Abstract

Introduction: Spousal violence is among the main causes of divorce; hence, identifying its predictors is essential. This study examined the relationship between childhood emotional maltreatment and spousal violence, mediated by interpersonal schemas.

Method: In this descriptive-correlational study, the statistical population included all divorce seekers who were referred to the counseling centers under the contract with Isfahan Court of Law Between May and July 2021. For this purpose, 211 individuals who were selected using the convenience sampling method completed the Strauss et al.'s Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2), Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) and Interpersonal Schema (ISQ). Data were analyzed using path analysis by SPSS-22 and AMOS-22 software.

Results: The findings of the path analysis indicated that emotional abuse, through a decrease in the affiliation dimension of the interpersonal schema (mother, father, and spouse forms), increased spousal violence (Indirect effect: 0.11, $p < 0.01$). Likewise, emotional neglect, through a decrease in the affiliation dimension of the interpersonal schema (mother and father forms), also increased spousal violence (Indirect effect: 0.09, $p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: Childhood emotional maltreatment increases spousal violence through the formation of interpersonal schemas. The findings highlight the need for preventive and therapeutic interventions that enhance parental emotional responsiveness and reconstruct interpersonal schemas to reduce intergenerational transmission of violence.

Keywords: Childhood Emotional Maltreatment, Divorce Seekers, Interpersonal Schemas, Spousal Violence

Introduction

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a widespread issue that affects both current and former spouses and partners [1, 2]. IPV encompasses various forms of abuse, including physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression [2]. Among these forms of abuse, physical and psychological violence are particularly significant. Physical violence involves the use of force or power to inflict harm, pain, disability, or even death [3]. In contrast, psychological violence includes statements or behaviors that damage an individual's self-perception and social esteem. These actions may include criticism, humiliation, insult, blame, envy, threats, ignoring, disapproval, and rejection [4].

A major contributing factor to IPV is childhood maltreatment, which includes emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect [5, 6]. Research suggests that individuals who

experience emotional maltreatment in childhood are at greater risk of engaging in or experiencing IPV in adulthood, perpetuating a cycle of violence across generations [7]. Emotional maltreatment is one of the most pervasive and harmful forms of childhood maltreatment [8]. Notably, all other types of maltreatment often involve some degree of emotional abuse or emotional neglect [9]. Emotional maltreatment consists of both acts of commission (emotional abuse) and acts of omission (emotional neglect) [10]. Emotional maltreatment occurs when a child's fundamental needs for love, belonging, and support are disregarded or when they are subjected to verbal aggression and humiliating behaviors that harm their self-worth and psychological well-being [11].

Despite its high prevalence, emotional maltreatment—particularly emotional abuse and emotional neglect—remains underexplored compared to physical and sexual abuse, despite its profound long-term effects on adult relationships and behavior [8, 12]. Furthermore, most studies on emotional maltreatment have either focused on a single subtype or have combined emotional abuse and emotional neglect into a single category [10]. Some findings indicate that both childhood emotional abuse [13] and childhood emotional neglect [14] contribute to aggression and violent behavior in adulthood. Given the evidence that emotional abuse and emotional neglect are distinct yet interrelated components of emotional maltreatment, it is essential to examine their unique effects, as each may predict different outcomes [15].

Although childhood emotional maltreatment is strongly associated with later psychopathology, not all affected children develop adverse consequences [16]. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms that place some individuals at greater risk than others is critical. According to cognitive theories, childhood maltreatment contributes to later psychopathology by fostering cognitive vulnerabilities, such as maladaptive attributional styles and schemas [17].

In this context, interpersonal schemas play a crucial role in shaping social relationships. Safran defines interpersonal schemas as generalized self-other representations that emerge from early attachment experiences [18]. These schemas influence expectations about social interactions, such as: If I do X, others will do Y [19]. While interpersonal schemas are initially adaptive, they may become rigid and maladaptive if formed under adverse conditions, such as childhood emotional maltreatment [20]. These schemas bias perceptions, causing individuals to interpret neutral or positive interactions as threatening, thereby increasing the risk of maladaptive behaviors such as IPV [13, 20]. Studies indicate that childhood trauma is associated with the development of cognitive schemas [16, 21]. Furthermore, these cognitive schemas significantly influence violent behavior and interpersonal difficulties [22, 23].

In general, Borges and DellAglio [24] found that childhood maltreatment indirectly leads to violent behavior through the mediating role of early maladaptive schemas. Similarly, Atkins [25] emphasized the

development of such schemas among victims of childhood abuse and highlighted their mediating effect on the relationship between childhood abuse and various forms of adult aggression, including physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. Moreover, other studies have specifically supported the mediating role of interpersonal schemas in the association between childhood maltreatment and adult violence [26, 27]. For example, findings by Tezel et al. indicate that individuals exposed to childhood emotional maltreatment are more likely to develop unhelpful interpersonal schemas, leading to increased interpersonal difficulties [16]. Similarly, Crawford and Wright [13] found that childhood maltreatment survivors often develop schemas centered around fear of abuse, which heightens their likelihood of either experiencing victimization or exhibiting aggressive behavior in adulthood.

Empirical and theoretical evidence suggests a link between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult IPV [5]. However, the mechanisms underlying this association remain insufficiently understood. Identifying potential mediators is crucial for explaining how and why childhood emotional maltreatment influences spousal violence. Interpersonal schemas may serve as one such mediating factor [13].

Thus, this study aims to investigate whether interpersonal schemas mediate the relationship between childhood emotional maltreatment and spousal violence, particularly among individuals seeking divorce. This research uniquely distinguishes between emotional abuse and emotional neglect, examining their distinct pathways to spousal violence via interpersonal schemas. Given evidence that emotional abuse and neglect have differential effects on interpersonal and psychological outcomes, this study explores their independent contributions to the development of spousal violence.

Method

The present study used a descriptive correlational design. The statistical population of this study consisted of all male and female divorce seekers who were referred to counseling centers under contract with the Isfahan Court of Law. Between May and July 2021, a total of 2,591 individuals registered on an online divorce platform called Tasmim. After a research cooperation agreement was signed with the Social and Crime Prevention Department of the Isfahan General Justice Department, the questionnaires were distributed to divorce clients at the department's counseling centers by the first author. For this study, the sample was selected using the convenience sampling method. Since the minimum recommended sample size for path analysis is 200 [28], individuals with a 10% attrition rate were taken into account. Finally a total of 220 participants were initially chosen. After removing nine incomplete questionnaires, the final sample size was 211 individuals. The study inclusion criteria included registration in the Tasmim Justice platform for divorce, at least one year after the official registration of the marriage, informed consent to participate in the study, lack of acute or chronic psychological disorders, not

receiving psychiatric medications and psychotherapy services. The study exclusion criteria included refusal to complete the research instruments and failure to respond to more than ten percent of the items.

Data was collected through a questionnaire. No ethics code was obtained, as the research did not involve human intervention or the collection of sensitive personal data. All participants voluntarily took part in the study and were informed about its objectives before completing the questionnaire. Additionally, participant confidentiality and anonymity were ensured.

The tools used in this study were as follows:

Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2): The Conflict Tactics Questionnaire (CTS2) created by Strauss et al. is used to measure the physical and psychological violence between couples over the last 12 months. The questionnaire was translated into Persian by Panaghi et al. in 2011. The Persian version has 52 questions and three sections: negotiation (6 items), psychological violence (8 items), and physical assault (12 items). Half of the questions describe the aggressive acts (aggressive form), while the other half assesses the victim's response to the aggressive behavior (victim form). The questionnaire asks respondents to rate their level of agreement on a scale of 0-7, indicating how frequently the behavior occurred in the past year, with 0 being "never" and 7 being "more than 20 times."

Given the aim of the present study—to assess spousal violence—only the psychological and physical violence subscales of the aggression form were used. Accordingly, the total score ranged from 0 to 182, with higher scores indicating greater levels of intimate partner violence. Several researchers have also used the combined score of these two subscales to measure intimate partner violence [29, 30].

Several studies have provided evidence of acceptable reliability and validity of this questionnaire. Strauss et al. examined the reliability of the questionnaire subscales in a sample of students and showed that internal consistency ranged from 0.79 to 0.95 [31]. Adams et al., [32] reported the overall reliability of the scale to be 0.95. Studying the validity and reliability of this scale, Panaghi et al. [33] specified that a three-factor analysis using three subscales of negotiation, psychological violence, and physical assault is more appropriate than other analyses in the Iranian sample. Besides, this scale and its subscales have good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha of subscales in aggressive form, respectively 0.74, 0.81, and 0.77). Cronbach's alpha of this questionnaire in the current study was 0.76 for the subscales of physical violence and 0.79 for the subscales of psychological violence.

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ): The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) was developed by Bernstein et al. in 2003 to assess experiences of childhood trauma and maltreatment. It serves as a screening tool for identifying individuals with histories of abuse and neglect during childhood. The questionnaire can be administered to adults and includes five subscales measuring different types of childhood maltreatment: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, and emotional

neglect. Given the aim of the present study, only the emotional abuse and emotional neglect subscales were used.

The CTQ consists of 28 items, 25 of which assess the main components of childhood maltreatment, while three items form a minimization/denial scale to detect underreporting of adverse experiences. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never true) to 5 (very often true). Each subscale scores range from 5 to 25, with higher scores indicating greater levels of trauma.

In Bernstein et al.'s Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire on a group of adolescents for the dimensions of emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect were equal to 0.87, 0.86, 0.95, 0.89, and 0.78 respectively. Also, its concurrent validity with the therapists' rating of childhood traumas has been reported within the range of 0.59 to 0.78 [11]. Feyzioğlu et al. [34] reported the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the entire scale to be 0.85. In Iran, Ebrahimi et al. [35] during the translation and validation of the questionnaire, reported the reliability of the questionnaire subscales using Cronbach's alpha from 0.81 to 0.98, and its test-retest reliability was also reported as 0.94. The subscales of emotional abuse and emotional neglect were used in the current study and Cronbach's alpha was 0.73 and 0.79 respectively.

Interpersonal Schema Questionnaire (ISQ): Hill and Safran developed the Interpersonal Schema Questionnaire (ISQ) in 1994 to assess participants' expectations about the responses of significant others in certain situations. The questionnaire contains 16 scenarios assessing participants' expectations about three significant others: mother (or mother figure), father (or father figure), and friend (romantic partner or close friend). In this way, in each scenario, the person is asked to imagine that they are behaving in a way. Then they are asked how they thought these three significant others would respond to your behavior. The answer is chosen from eight options. The ISQ can be scored in different ways depending on the objectives of the study. In the present study, scoring was conducted to reflect two key interpersonal dimensions: control and affiliation. For the control dimension, positive scores were assigned to responses located at or near the top of the interpersonal circle, representing dominant behaviors, whereas negative scores were assigned to responses located at or near the bottom of the circle, representing submissive behaviors. For the affiliation dimension, positive scores were assigned to responses located on or near the right side of the horizontal axis, representing friendly behaviors, while negative scores were assigned to responses located on or near the left side, representing hostile behaviors. Accordingly, each participant received a score for every expected response based on its degree of control and affiliation. The assigned scores were as follows: ± 0.12 , ± 0.37 , ± 0.62 , and ± 0.87 , with positive values indicating higher control or affiliation and negative values indicating lower levels (i.e., submissive or hostile tendencies).

Findings of the research on the psychometric properties of ISQ showed that the Turkish form of the ISQ for university students has acceptable validity and reliability [36]. The content validation of the questionnaire is supported by factor analysis, which shows that interpersonal situations have powerful factorial patterns in line with theoretical expectations. In addition, construct validity using discriminant analysis showed that interpersonal situations can distinguish between groups with high, low, and middle depression [20]. Hill and Safran [19] stated that the control dimension showed lower levels of reliability (Cronbach's alpha for the control dimension was 0.62 and 0.81 for affiliation), however it may provide useful information about interpersonal schemas of specific individuals and populations. Uluyol et al. [26] reported the internal consistency coefficients of the subscales to be 0.54 to 0.75 for the wives and 0.53 to 0.72 for the husbands. Since an Iranian version of this questionnaire was not available, it was first translated into Persian by two individuals proficient in English. After resolving discrepancies, the final Persian version was back-translated into English by another translator, and the original questionnaire and the back-translated version were compared by an expert. Following the necessary revisions, the final Persian version was prepared. Subsequently, the questionnaire was administered to a pilot sample of 100 students from Yazd University, selected through convenience sampling, in order to assess its preliminary reliability [37]. The reliability of the Persian version of the questionnaire in the present study was 0.89, 0.91, and 0.83 for the affiliation dimension of mother, father, and spouse form respectively. Also cronbach alpha for the control dimension of mother, father, and spouse form respectively was 0.58, 0.58, and 0.57.

Data analysis was performed by SPSS 22 and AMOS 22 software. Considering that the study aimed to find the prediction model and direct and

indirect paths between the research variables, the path analysis was used to investigate the fit of the model.

Results

The demographic analysis of the sample showed that the participants' average age was 35.7 years. In terms of gender distribution, 124 participants (58.8%) were female, while 87 participants (41.2%) were male. Regarding educational background, 15.2% of the participants had less than a high school diploma, 43.6% held a high school diploma, and 6.2% had an associate degree. Additionally, 28.4% of the participants held a bachelor's degree, while 6.6% had a master's degree or higher. Furthermore, 46% of the participants were childless, around 25% had one child, and about 30% had two or three children. Approximately 34% had been married for one to five years, 26% for six to 10 years, and about 40% for more than 10 years.

Path analysis was used to test if the model fits the data. The indices of the initial structural model indicated that the hypothesized model was not supported by the research data. Therefore, to achieve more accurate results, after modifying the model and removing non-significant relationships in the initial model, the model was re-estimated, and in the modified model, the interpersonal schema of the control dimension was removed. After modification, the fit indices of the structural model were in the desired range of these indices (CMIN/DF=1.04, NFI=0.98, CFI=0.99, GFI=0.99, AGFI=0.96, RMSEA=0.015). This shows that the hypothesized model, after the modification of the initial model, is supported by the research data. Unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients from the model have been shown in Table 1.

The mean and standard deviation of the research variables and the correlation among them have been presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Unstandardized and Standardized Regression Coefficients from the Model

Predictor	Mediator	Outcome	B	β	SE	p
Emotional neglect	affiliation schema of mother		-0.26	-0.24	0.08	0.001
	affiliation schema of father		-0.51	-0.41	0.08	0.001
Emotional abuse	affiliation schema of mother		-0.39	-0.23	0.13	0.002
	affiliation schema of father		-0.53	-0.27	0.13	0.001
	affiliation schema of spouse		-0.23	-0.15	0.10	0.023
		Spousal Violence	1.78	0.41	0.27	0.001

Table 2. Mean, SD and Correlation among the Research Variables

Research variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.emotional neglect	1								
2.emotional abuse	0.58**	1							
3.affiliation schema of mother	-0.38**	-0.38**	1						
4.affiliation schema of father	-0.56**	-0.51**	0.45**	1					
5.affiliation schema of spouse	0.05	-0.15*	0.02	-0.01	1				
6.control schema of mother	0.03	0.07	-0.14*	0.004	0.07	1			
7.control schema of father	0.01	0.04	-0.10	-0.16*	0.17*	0.41**	1		
8.control schema of spouse	0.16*	-0.04	0.04	0.03	0.19**	0.24**	0.21**	1	
9. spousal violence	0.47**	0.59	-0.46**	-0.45**	-0.17**	0.06	-0.03	-0.06	1
Mean	10.33	7.25	4.74	2.95	-4.56	-1.57	-1.52	-0.09	14.84
Standard Deviation	4.65	2.98	5.06	5.83	4.45	2.81	2.96	2.77	12.92

**p < 0.01 *p < 0.05

Figure 1 shows the final model, after applying the changes. As presented in Figure 1, in the final model, all the direct

paths, except the direct effect of emotional neglect on spousal violence, are significant. To investigate the mediating role of

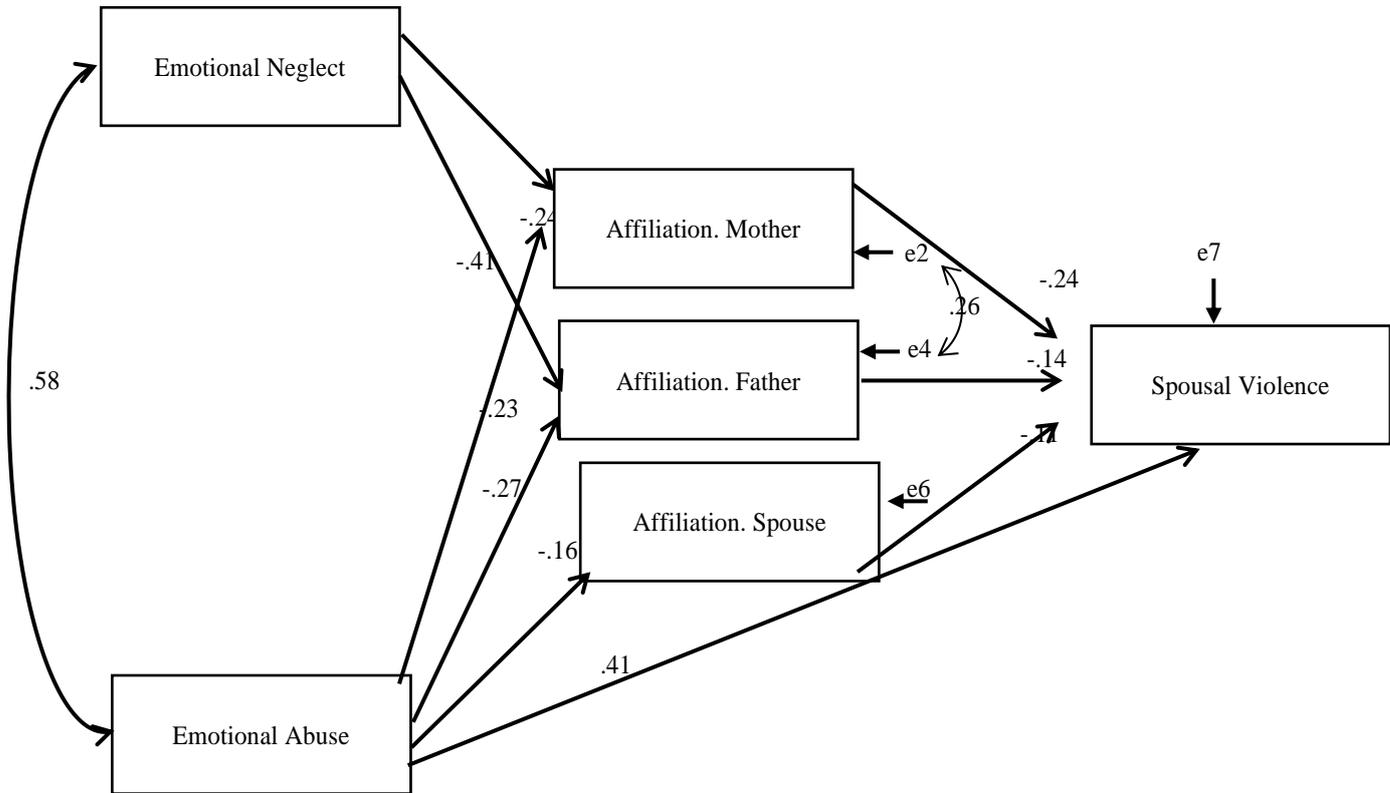


Figure 1: Path analysis for predicting spousal violence through childhood emotional maltreatment and interpersonal schemas.

Table 3. Standard Direct, Indirect and Total Effects with Bootstrapping Method

Path	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effects
Emotional neglect→ Spousal Violence	-	0.11**	0.11**
Emotional abuse→ Spousal Violence	0.43**	0.09**	0.53**

**p < 0.01

Discussion

The present study investigated the mediating role of interpersonal schemas in the relationship between two types of childhood emotional maltreatment—emotional neglect and emotional abuse—and spousal violence in adulthood. The results indicated that although both types of adverse childhood experiences are associated with later spousal violence, they operate through distinct psychological mechanisms within the interpersonal schema.

The findings indicated that childhood emotional neglect—characterized by a lack of emotional responsiveness, warmth, and validation—predicts marital violence through the internalization of interpersonal schemas related to the affiliation dimension in relationships with parents. This indicates that early relational experiences shape the cognitive and emotional templates individuals use to interpret and respond to their partners’ behaviors in adulthood. In other words, individuals who experienced emotional neglect in childhood may internalize beliefs of being unworthy of care or love, which later influence how they perceive and interact with their spouses. When their interpersonal

schemas are activated in conflict situations, these individuals may misinterpret neutral or ambiguous cues from their partner as rejection or hostility, which can escalate into violent responses.

This finding extends previous research [24, 25] by demonstrating that not only early maladaptive schemas but specifically interpersonal schemas play a critical mediating role in translating childhood emotional neglect into spousal violence. Within the cultural context of the present sample, where family structures may emphasize obedience and emotional restraint, emotional neglect might be normalized, making its long-term interpersonal consequences less visible but more deeply ingrained. This could explain why emotional neglect, rather than overt abuse, emerged as a stronger predictor of spousal violence through interpersonal schemas.

From the perspective of attachment theory, neglect undermines a child’s sense of emotional safety and competence, depriving them of crucial opportunities to develop skills such as emotional awareness and regulation [15, 38]. Consequently, individuals who have been emotionally neglected may enter adulthood with limited ability to identify, label, and manage their own emotions

or recognize those of their partner. During marital conflicts, these dysregulated affective states interact with rigid interpersonal schemas, leading to impulsive or aggressive behaviors toward the spouse.

Moreover, the results indicated that interpersonal schemas associated with both parents and spouses mediated the relationship between emotional abuse and spousal violence. This suggests that individuals who experienced humiliation, criticism, or emotional hostility from their parents may internalize schemas that lead them to anticipate or tolerate similar treatment from significant others in adulthood. Consequently, they may behave defensively or aggressively to preempt perceived rejection, which paradoxically elicits the very hostility they fear (reinforcing their negative interpersonal beliefs). This reciprocal dynamic aligns with the complementarity principle, where hostile behavior from one partner provokes similar reactions from the other, thus confirming and sustaining schemas [18].

These findings are consistent with previous research, such as Erturk et al.'s study on the indirect impact of childhood emotional abuse on adult aggression, which was mediated by early maladaptive schemas [27]. Additionally, Crawford and Wright [13] also found that childhood emotional abuse indirectly affects adult aggressive behavior through the mediating role of interpersonal schemas. Also, Uluyol and Özen-Çıplak [26] in a research pointed the mediating role of interpersonal schemas in the affiliation dimension of spouse's in the relationship between attachment styles and marital adjustment.

Emotional abuse in childhood (manifested through humiliation, threats, or persistent criticism) contributes to spousal violence through a different cognitive-interpersonal pathway. According to schema theory, abusive parenting fosters deeply ingrained cognitive structures that teach the child that interpersonal relationships are inherently hostile and unsafe. These schemas of hostility and mistrust become generalized to other close relationships, including marriage. As a result, adults who experienced emotional abuse tend to interpret even neutral or ambiguous behaviors of their partners as threatening or rejecting. Such hostile attribution biases elicit defensive or aggressive reactions that, in turn, provoke real hostility from the partner and reinforce the individual's core belief that "others are unkind or dangerous." This cyclical cognitive process sustains a self-perpetuating interpersonal loop of mistrust and conflict.

These results should also be interpreted within the cultural context of the sample. In collectivist societies such as Iran, emotional expression within families is often constrained by social norms that prioritize obedience, respect, and emotional restraint [39]. Such norms may intensify the long-term effects of emotional neglect or abuse by discouraging the open acknowledgment or communication of emotional needs. As a result, individuals may internalize their emotional distress and later express it indirectly through marital tension or aggression—particularly in contexts where emotional communication remains limited or socially discouraged.

Overall, the findings emphasize that spouse violence cannot be understood merely as a behavioral consequence of childhood maltreatment, but rather as a manifestation of enduring interpersonal representations shaped by early emotional experiences. From an applied standpoint, the results highlight the necessity of preventive and therapeutic interventions that address deeper cognitive-emotional structures rather than focusing solely on behavioral control. Schema-focused therapeutic approaches may be particularly effective in helping individuals identify, understand, and modify maladaptive interpersonal schemas. Furthermore, parent training and psychoeducational programs designed to enhance emotional responsiveness and sensitivity in parenting could serve as early preventive strategies to reduce the intergenerational transmission of violence.

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this study has several limitations. Its cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences, and the use of self-report measures may have introduced recall bias. Moreover, the convenience sampling method limits the generalizability of the findings and increases the risk of sampling bias. Recruiting participants through the counseling centers of the Social and Crime Prevention Department may have excluded certain groups, particularly individuals who had not yet initiated the divorce process through the Tasmin system or who do not seek counseling services. Another implication of this study concerns the relatively low reliability of the control dimension of the Interpersonal Schema Questionnaire. However, Hill and Safran [19] emphasized that this dimension should not be eliminated, as it provides valuable information about interpersonal schemas at both the individual and social levels. In addition, this study has some limitations related to cultural and social factors. In the Iranian society, which is largely collectivist, social norms often restrict emotional expression and discourage open discussion of family conflicts. These norms may have influenced participants' willingness to report sensitive experiences, such as emotional maltreatment or spousal violence, potentially leading to underreporting. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution, considering the cultural context and the possibility that certain behaviors or experiences may be underrepresented. Future longitudinal research is recommended to investigate gender differences and cultural variations in the formation of interpersonal schemas and their relationship with intimate partner violence, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics.

Conclusion

It has been observed that individuals who experience emotional maltreatment, including neglect and abuse during childhood, tend to develop interpersonal schemas shaped by their early interactions with parents. These schemas, as cognitive structures, generalize to other types of relationships, leading individuals to expect hostile or unfriendly responses in interpersonal situations and to interpret others' behaviors through a negative bias. Because schemas influence thinking, feeling, and

behavior, individuals may become trapped in maladaptive cognitive–emotional cycles that contribute to relationship distress and, ultimately, spousal violence.

The findings of this study have practical implications for preventive and therapeutic interventions. Specifically, they can inform the design of schema-focused and interpersonal-based couple therapy programs, aiming to identify and modify maladaptive interpersonal schemas that underlie conflict and violence. Additionally, the results can be used to develop training for counselors and psychologists, helping them recognize the role of early emotional experiences in adult relationship patterns.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethical Approval

The ethical principles in writing this article have been observed according to the instructions of the National Ethics Committee and the COPE regulations.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work the authors did not use any AI tools.

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