

# The relationship between personality factors, self-control and marital coping strategies with marital conflict

Omid Isanejad<sup>1</sup>, Ahmad Amani<sup>1</sup>, Arman Azizi<sup>1</sup>, Shirin Azimifar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Counseling, University of Kurdistan, Kurdistan, Iran

<sup>2</sup>Department of Counseling, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

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## Corresponding Author:

Omid Isanejad, PhD  
Department of Counseling,  
University of Kurdistan,  
Kurdistan, Iran.  
E-mail: farhangmad@gmail.com

## Abstract

**Introduction:** Conflict is inevitable in intimate relationships. It usually appears in the form of disagreements, dislikes, arguments or tensions. It can cause relationship problems if managed poorly. The aim of this descriptive- correlation study was to investigate the effects of marital coping strategies, personality and self-control on the marital conflict in a propositional structured model.

**Method:** The research population consisted of all parents of elementary school children of Kurdistan in 2014. The two-stage cluster sampling was used. The research instruments were the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ), NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI, short form), Self-control questionnaire and Marital Coping Inventory (MCI). The required data was collected through research instruments. Correlation analysis, multiple regression and structural equation model was done using AMOS22.

**Results:** The results showed that self-control, personality factors and marital coping strategies have effects on marital conflict and can predict it. Marital coping strategies have the strongest effect on marital conflict among these variables. Conceptual model showed that personality factors had strong effects on marital coping strategies and self-control.

**Conclusion:** Besides specifying the relationship among research variables, the results indicated that personality factor can affect marital conflict through self-control and marital coping strategies. Considering that personality traits are resistant to change and modification, it seems that family therapists can moderate the effects of personality and reduce marital conflict by intervening on self-control and marital coping strategies.

**Keywords:** Personality, Self-control, Marital Coping Strategies, Marital Conflict, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

## Introduction

Marriage is a stage of transition in human life. Married couples enter this institution with a thought to start a family which demands excessive responsibility on part of both husband and wife. Marriage is not only a source of fulfillment for many desires, but it also requires constant attention from both spouses. Married couples experience many ups and downs in their life. There can never be perfection in any area of life, so is marriage. Conflicts are unavoidable and somewhat essential for a continuous marriage. When these conflicts are mishandled, it may lead to unfulfilled desires, dissatisfaction and psychological problems like depression, anger, worry and etc. It is important to handle marital conflicts in a way to continue life smoothly [1].

Conflict is inevitable in intimate relationship in the form of disagreements, dislikes, arguments and tensions. It may result in renovation if handled properly or deterioration of relationship if managed poorly. Based on empirical evidences it is assumed that conflict occurs in both satisfied and dissatisfied marriages but the behaviors to manage these conflicts vary considerably between these two groups. Constructive ways to handle conflicts in relationship may facilitate intimacy, while destructive ways may aggravate dysfunction and distress in marriage [2- 4].

*Kurdek* in 1999 identified that specific conflict resolution styles are linked with couple's marital satisfaction [5, 6]. Conflict and health are closely related [3]. *Gottman* suggested that the manner in which a couple handles negative effects in a conflict determines whether the marriage succeeds or fails [3, 7, 8].

By strict definition, dyadic coping involves both partners and is the interplay between the stress signals of couples and their coping reactions to each other. The construct of dyadic coping can be interpreted differently based on processes such as daily communication, interpersonal conflict, joint problem solving, interchanging of emotional support, and dealing with stressful situations of life with the perspective of "we" approach [9]. A "we" approach underlies common dyadic coping, whereby both partners try to maintain their relationship and manage their shared stress together [10]. According to systemic-transactional perspective, positive or negative dyadic coping and problem or emotion focused dyadic coping have some differences. Although all of these theoretical approaches defined dyadic coping as a novel construct which is distinguished from social support, there are some differences between these two. For example, dyadic coping provides a kind of spousal support, which differs from the kind of support provided by others. Moreover, in dyadic coping both partners make commitment to ensure satisfaction and wellbeing of each other as well as themselves. Finally, the concept of dyadic coping includes stress management behaviors of partners in shared stressful situations beyond the support that they provide for each other [11]. Findings from a meta-analysis conducted by *Bodenmann* indicated that dyadic coping and satisfaction have positive relationship among both community-based and clinical populations [12].

*Isanejad* examined the effects of the Relationship Enhancement program (RE) on marital coping strategies improvement [9]. The results showed that the relationship enhancement program have increased productive coping strategies and decreased negative coping strategies such as conflict, self-blaming, self-interest and avoidance. *Herzberg* conducted a research which showed that dyadic coping strategies predict marital satisfaction better than individual coping strategies do [10].

Personality includes enduring traits which are revealed in various situations. Global assessments of personality have shown that personality characteristics of satisfied couples and dissatisfied couples are different from each other [11, 12].

The behaviors associated with specific personality characteristics can contribute to tranquility or conflict in the relationship [13]. Recent development in the field of personality psychology has indicated that personality traits may be a powerful influence over our satisfaction within relationships and perhaps

even predictive of whom we are attracted to as a couple [14].

Several researches indicated that personality traits have the most important effect on marital satisfaction and marital conflicts [15 - 18]. Some personality traits and psychological disorders increase marital conflicts and tensions and also threaten the stability of couple's relationship [19, 20].

One of the factors that can decrease marital conflict is self-control. conscientiousness and its aspects including self-control have negative relationship with many health-risk behaviors such as physical inactivity, attempted suicide, risky sexual relations, unhealthy diet, substance abuse, risky driving and violence [21]. So, self-control can have an undeniable role on minimizing marital conflict. *Roshan* and his colleagues examined the effects of self-regulation based couple therapy on marital adjustment. The results showed that marital adjustment decreased significantly in experimental group [22]. Although researchers have studied the relation between marital conflict and many factors, but it seems that the relation of personality traits, marital coping strategies and self-control with marital conflict is not specifically studied yet. Moreover, path analysis has not been used in previous researches and it is not clear that which factor has a more effect on marital conflict. So, the present study aims to evaluate whether these three factors are good predictors of marital conflict and which factor can predict marital conflict better.

## Method

The aim of this descriptive- correlation study was to investigate the effects of marital coping strategies, personality and self-control on marital conflict in a propositional structural model. The research population consisted of all the parents of elementary school children of Kurdistan in 2014. The two-stage cluster sampling was used. At first, elementary school was selected among 3 levels (elementary school, guidance school and high school) and then 2 elementary schools were selected among all the elementary schools of the city by random. A meeting session was held and 764 people (382 couples) were willing to cooperate and completed the questionnaires. No information was revealed about parents' identification in the session and their information was kept secret. Data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS software.

**Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ)**: The Marital Conflicts Questionnaire has 42 items that measure seven dimensions of marital conflict including reduction of cooperation, reduction of sexual intercourse, increasing in emotional reactions, child support, personal relationships with relatives, reduction of family relationship with the spouse's relatives, and separating finances [23]. The Cronbach's coefficient reported by providers is 0.73.

In the present study, the questionnaire’s reliability (Cronbach’s coefficient = 0.93) and the Cronbach’s coefficients of sub scales (reduced cooperation = 0.71, reduced sexual intercourse =0.68, increased emotional reactions = 0.64, increased child support =0.69, reduced family relationship with the spouse’s relatives and separating finances = 0.56) were evaluated.

**NEO Big Five Factor Personality Inventory (NEO-FFI):** This questionnaire has 60 items that are rated on a five-point Likert- type scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Its items assess five aspects of personality: neuroticism, extroversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and agreeableness. *Costa* and *McCrae* have reported Cronbach’s coefficients of these sub scales: Neuroticism= 0.93, Extroversion =0.90, openness = 0.89, agreeableness =0.95 and Conscientiousness = 0.92 [24]. In the present study, the questionnaire’s reliability (Cronbach’s coefficient = 0.68) and the Cronbach’s coefficients of sub scales (neuroticism= 0.68, extroversion =0.61, openness = 0.21, agreeableness =0.58 and conscientiousness = 0.84) were evaluated.

**Self- Control Questionnaire (abbreviated form):** This questionnaire was developed by Tangney and his colleagues in order to assess the degree of self-control as a trait [25]. This self-reporting questionnaire has 13 items that are rated on a five-point Likert-type scale. Its scores were rated from 13 to 65 which the higher scores indicated higher rates of self-control. This questionnaire has two subscales named dissuasive self- control and primary self-control. In the present study the questionnaire’s reliability (Cronbach’s coefficient = 0.70) and the Cronbach’s coefficients of sub scales (dissuasive self-control=0.50, primary self-control= 0.56) were evaluated.

**Marital Coping Inventory (MCI):** This instrument was developed by Bowman in 1990 to assess the coping strategies in marital dynamics. Coping strategies operate in order to reconstruct and maintain individual relations of couples and also improve

couples’ relationship through decreasing the level of stress and improving function based on mutual confidence, closeness and intimacy. This inventory has 64 items that are rated on a five-point Likert-type scale. Five factors have been determined through explanatory factor analysis done by Bowman. These main factors include conflict (15 items), self-blaming (15 items), positive approach (14 items), self- interest (9 items) and avoidance (11 items). Cronbach’s coefficients for each factor have been reported: conflict = 0.80, introspective self – blame = 0.88, positive approach = 0.82, self-interest = 0.82 and avoidance = 0.77. This inventory was translated into Persian and its content validity was approved by professors of the counseling department of the University of Isfahan[26]. In the present study the questionnaire’s reliability (Cronbach’s coefficient = 0.83) and the Cronbach’s coefficients of sub scales (conflict= 0.51, self-blame =0.55, positive approach = 0.32, self-interest =0.80 and avoidance= 0.71) were evaluated.

The required data was collected through research instruments. Correlation analysis, multiple regression and structural equation model was done using SPSS and AMOS software.

**Results**

The research population of this research was the parents of elementary school children. The percentages of men and women in the research sample were equal (50%- 50%). Subjects were at least 21 and at last 68 years old (Mean=34.7, SD=5.12). It was seen that 31.4% of them were without high school diploma, 35.9% of them had diploma to bachelor degree, 28.7% of them had bachelor degree and 4.1% of them had higher education degree. The means (and standard deviations) of variables were as follows:

Self- control 38.18 (6.08), personality 135.69 (16.07), marital coping strategies 141.20 (22.11) and marital conflict 77.71 (25.03).

**Table 1.** The correlation matrix of the model variables

variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	4	8	9	10	11	12	
Self-control	1. disincentive	1											
	2. primary	.56**	1										
	3.neuroticism	-.35**	-.43**	1									
	4.extroversion	.35**	.48**	-.55**	1								
Personality	5.openness	.27**	.23**	-.15**	.20**	1							
	6.agreeableness	.37**	.48**	-.49**	.42**	-.16**	1						
	7.conscientiousness	.55**	.65**	-.43**	.63**	.33**	.56**	1					
	8.conflict	.23**	.25**	-.14**	.17**	.06	.12*	.27**	1				
Marital coping	9.self-blame	.34**	.29**	-.28**	.25**	.05	.19**	.28**	.60**	1			
	10.positive approach	.29**	.48**	-.26**	.25**	.06	.24**	.30**	.43**	.54**	1		
	11.self interest	.42**	.52**	-.46**	.46**	.14*	.42**	.53**	.47**	.57**	.64**	1	
	12.avoidance	.31**	.35**	-.46**	.43**	.08	.28**	.38**	.38**	.41**	.31**	.52**	1
conflict	13.marital conflict	-.37**	-.45**	.36**	-.41**	-.22**	-.35**	-.50**	-.42**	-.45**	-.56**	-.72**	-.44**
Multivariable normality		34.87											
Critical point		71.29											

\*\*p< 0.01, \*p< 0.05

As shown in table 1, all subscales of self- control, marital coping strategies and personality type except neuroticism, were negatively correlated with marital conflict. Neuroticism was positively correlated with marital conflict. It indicates that neurotic people have more marital conflict.

The main aim of this study was to investigate direct

and indirect effects of variables on marital conflict and propose a model to predict effective variables on marital conflict. This is why the structural equation model was used to investigate causative relations among variables. Before structuring the model, factor analysis was used for all the variables and fit indices were evaluated.

**Table 2.** Goodness of fit indices for conceptual model compared to primary model and revised model

MODEL	PNFI	RMSEA	TLI	CFI	AGFI	DF	CMIN/DF
Primary model	0.77	0.80	0.90	0.91	0.85	146	6.43
Revised model	0.75	0.07	0.93	0.94	0.89	140	4.85

As shown in Table 2, the SEM analyses on the conceptual model of the structural relationships among self-control, personality and marital coping strategies with marital conflict were resulted in satisfactory indices (RMSEA= 0.07, AGFI= 0.89, CFI> 0.90, TLI=0.93, RMSEA= 0.07, PNFI=0.75). Results showed the well fitness of the conceptualized model for the structural relationships among self-control, personality and marital coping strategies with marital conflict.

Figure1 shows the validated structural model for

relationships among self-control, personality and marital coping strategies with marital conflict. In this model, personality variables were considered as a factor. Several researchers [27, 28], also considered big-five factors as one general factor and have found the same results. These findings indicate that we can consider big- five factors of personality as one general factor. The results showed that self- control, personality and marital coping strategies had effects on marital conflict and can be used as its predictors. Marital coping strategies have the strongest effect on marital conflict among these variables (-0.74).

**Table 3.** Direct standardized and unstandardized coefficients and indirect standardized and unstandardized coefficients of latent variables

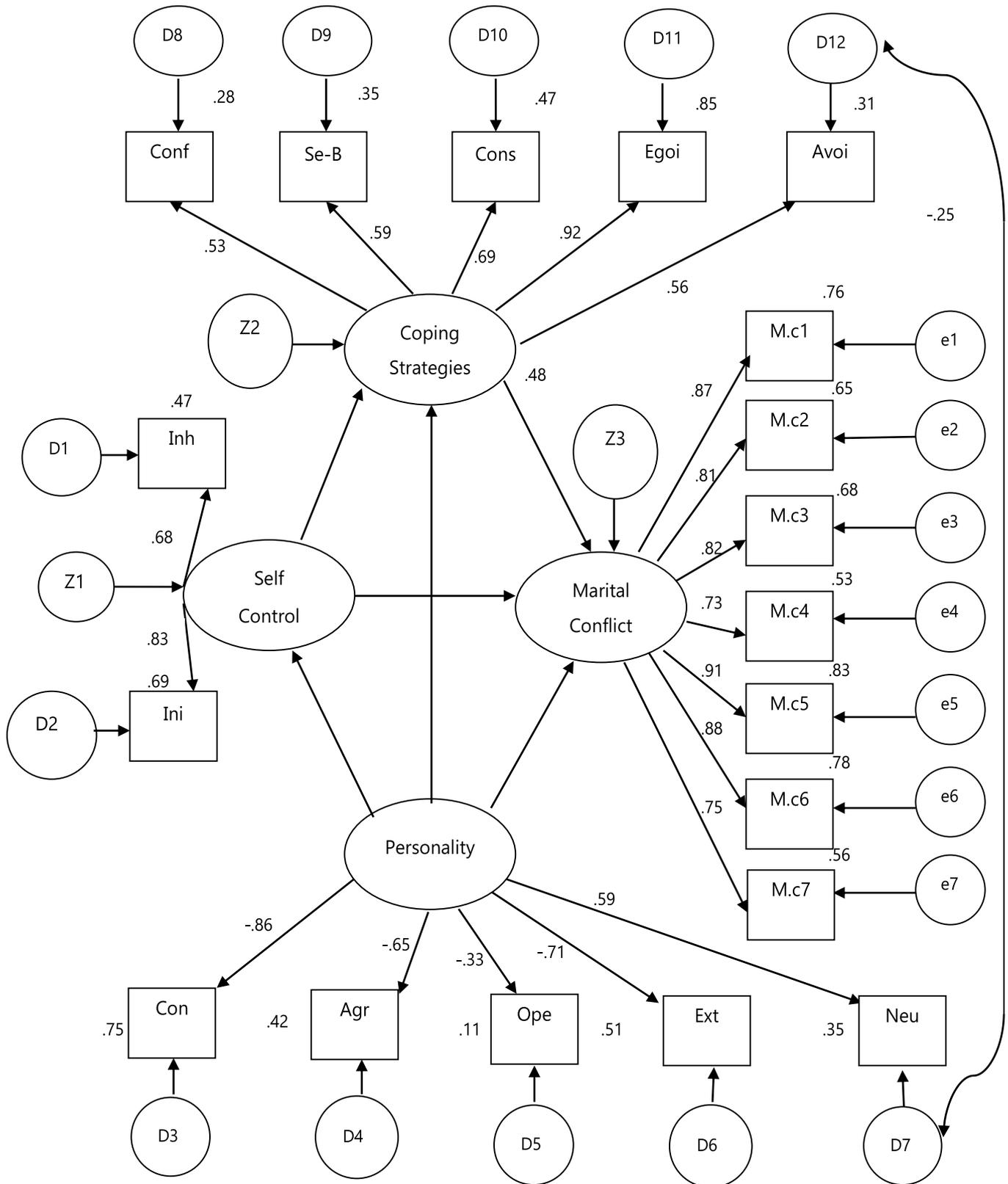
Predictors	Dependents	Total effects		Indirect effects		Direct effects	
		Unstandardized	standardized	unstandardized	standardized	unstandardized	standardized
personality	Self- control	-0.559	-0.886	-	-	-0.559	-0.886
	Coping	-0.545	-0.689	-0.198	-0.27	-0.349	-0.432
	Marital conflict	0.463	0.607	0.373	0.49	0.090	0.117
Self- control	Coping	0.355	0.279	-	-	0.355	0.279
	Marital conflict	-0.231	-0.191	-0.25	-0.207	0.019	0.015
Coping	Marital conflict	-0.705	-0.742	-	-	-0.705	-0.742

As shown in table 3, the conceptual model personality factor had strong effects on marital coping strategies (-0.43) and self- control (-0.89). Among subscales, the fifth one ( more individual relationship with one’s relatives) had the most effect (0.91) on marital conflict, the conscientiousness subscale had the most effect on personality factor (-0.86), the primary self –control(second subscale) had the most effect on self – control (0.83) and the self-interest subscale (fourth subscale ) had the most effect on marital coping strategies (0.92).

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to determine the factors that affect marital conflict. As we know marital conflict and its consequences (such as divorce) have negative effects on couples’ psychological health. Particularly, it seems that couples who are at the first stages of the break up process have worse condition

and lower psychological health than others. Moreover, many researchers have indicated negative effects of marital conflict on children. Determining these factors can reduce marital conflict and the rate of divorce. The results of this research showed that personality type, self- control and marital coping strategies are good predictors of marital conflict. As shown in table 1, the correlation between self-control and marital conflict was equal to -0.46. It indicates that couples with higher self- control have less marital conflicts. Based on previous researches [29], people with high self-control use compromise for solving problems. Self- control is a unique personality trait and differs in each person. It means that people with high self-control have different behaviors and reactions based on their level of self-control. The correlation between personality type and marital conflict was equal to -0.45. It indicates that personality type and marital conflict are negatively correlated.



Self-control = (Inh=inhibitory, Ini=initiatory).  
Personality = (Neu= Neuroticism, Ext= Extraversion, Ope= Openness to experience, Agr=Agreeableness, Con= Conscientiousness)  
Coping strategies = (Conf= conflict, Se-b= self-blaming, Cons= constructive approach, Egoi= egoism, Avoi= avoidance)  
Marital conflict = (M.c1 = decrease partnership, M.c2 = decrease sex, M.c3 = increase emotional reactions, M.c4 = increase personal relationship with their relatives, M.c5 = decrease family ties wife's relative and friend, M.c6 = separate financial, M.c7 = increase cooperation with children)

Figure 1. Structural model and standardized direct effect coefficients

The correlations between subscales of personality type and marital conflict were evaluated (neuroticism=0.36, extroversion= -0.41, openness= -0.22, agreeableness= -0.35 and conscientiousness= -0.50). According to these data, neuroticism and marital conflict are positively correlated whereas; the other subscales have negative correlation with marital conflict. Previous researches [20, 30] have found the same results. From a theoretical perspective, neurotic people predispose to irrational beliefs and thoughts that are among the most important causes of marital conflict. Neuroticism undermines the ability of coping with psychological distress and increases the probability of divorce among couples [31 - 33]. Conscientiousness has the most negative correlation with marital conflict. It seems that conscience people have personal commitment and purposefully try to keep their marital relationship stable. Moreover, according to *Kurdek's* theory, high levels of conscientiousness makes couples avoid showing aggressive behaviors and help them control their impulses [31]. According to research results, marital coping strategies and marital conflicts are negatively correlated (-0.67). It indicates that if couples use efficient strategies, they can lessen their marital conflict and get the control of their life. Several researches have been conducted about marital coping strategies. The results showed that these strategies are the most important predictors of marital quality [32]. Previous researches [33, 34] have also shown that using effective marital coping strategies leads to less marital conflict and more marital adjustment. Marital coping strategies determine how couples deal with distress and problems of marital relationship. In the present study, structural equation model showed that there are significant relations between self- control and personality type (0.59), self- control and marital coping strategies (0.48), as well as personality type and marital coping strategies (0.36). These results are also supported by previous researches [35].

## Conclusion

According to the research findings, giving information to couples about these three predictors of marital conflicts may result in less conflicts and more adjustment. The most important point is that, although marital conflicts and distresses are unavoidable, but we can manage these factors by using efficient coping strategies and methods to increase self-control. Also, it is important to consider the personality type of the couples in premarital counseling, because it is a good predictor of marital conflicts.

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