

Early Maladaptive Schemas and Marital Satisfaction as Predictors of Marital Commitment

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Abstract

Introduction: The present study was conducted to predict the degree of marital commitment based on early maladaptive schemas and marital satisfaction.

Method: The present descriptive correlational study used convenience sampling to select 454 subjects (including 230 women and 224 men) from the entire population of couples who had been married for one to ten years and were residing in Tehran, Iran. The subjects completed the ENRICH Couple Scales and the Early Maladaptive Schema Questionnaire-Short Form (YSQ-Sf2) along with the Dimensions of Commitment Inventory (DCI). The data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient and stepwise multiple regression.

Results: The results showed a significant positive relationship between early maladaptive schemas and marital commitment. Among the five components of early maladaptive schemas, impaired autonomy and performance, impaired limits and over-vigilance/inhibition ($P < 0.01$), could predict marital commitment. Moreover, a significant positive relationship was observed between marital commitment and marital satisfaction, and of the components of the latter, conflict resolution and idealistic distortion ($P < 0.01$), could predict marital commitment. Overall, marital commitment could be predicted by components of marital satisfaction (24% of the variance) and also early maladaptive schemas (13% of the variance)

Conclusion: Based on the findings, the degree of marital satisfaction and consequently marital commitment are recommended to be enhanced through the identification and modification of early maladaptive schemas along with the use of couple therapy and teaching problem-solving skills to couples so as to prevent potential extramarital relationships or divorce.

Keywords: Early Maladaptive Schemas, Marital Satisfaction, Marital Commitment, Couples, Family

Introduction

The number of studies conducted to identify and understand the factors affecting couple relationships has dramatically increased in the recent decades [1]. Since a community is made up of families and community health thus depends on family health, it can be assumed that family health is itself dependent on the health of the family members. This means the individuals' health is therefore affected by their relationships. Marriage is the first step in forming a family, and assessing the degree of marital health and satisfaction necessitates the investigation of the components affecting them [2].

To date, most discussions about a healthy marriage has revolved around the presence of components such as marital commitment, marital satisfaction and marital relationships and the absence of behaviors such as violence and infidelity [3]. Numerous studies have confirmed that marital commitment is a significant predictor of stable and satisfactory marriages [4]. Researchers believe that closeness, commitment, emotional connection, conflict resolution skills and spirituality are significant factors contributing to stable marital

relationships [3]. Understanding the nature of commitment and its role in a marriage is also crucial [3]. Marital commitment is defined as "the individual's desire to maintain the marital relationship". A basic presumption is that people living in families with a strong marital union enjoy a better psychological health and well-being [5]. The three pillars of a successful marriage include commitment, attraction and understanding, and marital commitment is the strongest and most stable predictor of the quality and stability of a marital relationship [6]. In Johnson's proposed framework, marital commitment has three components: personal commitment, moral commitment and structural commitment. Personal commitment refers to the individual's desire and willingness to stay in the marital relationship. Moral commitment refers to the individual's sense of moral obligation to stay in the relationship. Structural commitment refers to the limitations and barriers of breaking up the relationship and the constraint to stay in it [7]. Commitment to the spouse and the family unit appear crucial for a successful marriage [3]. Husbands and wives who are more committed to resolve their marital problems experience fewer problems in life and enjoy a longer-lasting marriage owing to their greater efforts to preserve their relationship [8],[9]. The high divorce rates also show that marital satisfaction, which is a significant determinant of the psychological well-being of a couple, is not a matter that can be easily achieved [10,11].

Schemas are significant interpersonal and cognitive factors that help gain a better understanding of marital relationships [12]. These mental frameworks can be considered as information processing structures that determine feelings, behaviors, thoughts and deep strong beliefs about oneself and the world [13]. According to Young et al. [14], schemas refer to a self-sustaining pattern of memories, emotions, cognitions, feelings and perceptions that guide behavior and therefore resist change. These persistent and long-term subjects are developed during childhood and continue into adulthood and are dysfunctional to a great extent [15]. Early maladaptive schemas predict interpersonal maladaptation. The maladaptive nature of schemas often manifests itself when the individual acts in such a way in life and in interactions with others, especially in his marital relationship, that confirms his schemas, even if their initial interpretation has been inaccurate [16]. The results of studies [17] conducted in Iran and India, including one on the predictive role of early maladaptive schemas in marital dissatisfaction, found that abandonment, dependence and subjugation schemas are significant predictors of marital dissatisfaction in Iranian couples while emotional deprivation is a significant predictor of marital dissatisfaction in Indian couples. The results of another study showed that marital satisfaction decreases with an increase in the degree to which the individual possesses early maladaptive schemas [18]. Since there were many gaps in former research to understand the relation between early maladaptive schemas and marital commitment, the present study was conducted to find the factors that contribute to a long-lasting marriage or that

predict marital commitment to understand whether or not the schemas developed during childhood and brought into the marriage can predict marital commitment, and to examine how and the extent to which marital satisfaction increases marital commitment.

Methods

The present descriptive correlational study was conducted on a statistical population of all the couples married for one to ten years and who were residing in Tehran, Iran. Given the number of variables examined and the statistical methods used, convenience sampling was used to select 500 subjects and to collect their data through questionnaires. With the elimination of the incomplete questionnaires, 454 subjects ultimately remained in the study, including 230 women and 224 men. The data collection tools used included:

Dimensions of Commitment Inventory (DCI)

This scale was developed in 1997 by Adams and Jones to measure individuals' level of commitment to their spouse and marriage and assesses three dimensions of marital commitment, including personal commitment, moral commitment and structural commitment [19]. The scale consists of 45 items, which are scored based on a five-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' and scores ranging from 1 to 5. Adams and Jones (1997) confirmed the validity of all the subscales of this scale (personal commitment, 0.91; moral commitment, 0.89; structural commitment, 0.86)[20]. An Iranian study [21] also confirmed the validity of this scale by calculating the Cronbach's alpha (0.85) and using the test-retest method (0.86). The present study also assessed the validity of this scale by calculating the Cronbach's alpha for the three subscales of personal commitment (0.88), moral commitment (0.78), structural commitment (0.79), for the overall scale of marital commitment (0.9), and the scale can thus be said to have a relatively high validity.

ENRICH Couple Scale

Fowers and Olson (1989), used this scale to examine marital satisfaction and believe it to be sensitive to changes in the family. David Olson and Emmy Olson (2000) used this scale on 25,501 married couples. The scale consists of 35 items in four subscales, including marital satisfaction, communication, idealistic distortion and conflict resolution. The items are scored based on a five-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 'totally disagree' (1 point) to 'strongly agree' (5 points). Olson measured the Cronbach's alpha of the subscales of marital satisfaction (0.86), communication (0.81), conflict resolution (0.90) and idealistic distortion (0.92)[22]. An Iranian study [23] also measured this coefficient in a sample of 365 couples (marital satisfaction (0.67), communication (0.78), conflict resolution (0.62) and idealistic distortion (0.77). The present study also calculated the Cronbach's alpha of the four subscales and confirmed the scale to have a relatively high validity (marital satisfaction (0.78), communication (0.8), conflict resolution (0.66) and idealistic distortion (0.82).

Young Schemas Questionnaire Short Form (YSQ- SF2)

Based on Smith's findings (1995), this questionnaire consists of 75 items. It was developed by Young (1998) to evaluate 15 early maladaptive schemas. In one study, Smith calculated the Cronbach's alpha of each maladaptive schema (between 0.83- 0.96) and examined the test-retest reliability coefficient of the schemas in a non-clinical population (between 0.5- 0.82)[24]. An Iranian study[25] used the Young's Early Maladaptive Schema Questionnaire-Short Form on 70 couples and measured the consistency coefficient of the questionnaire by calculating the Cronbach's alpha of the whole scale was 0.94 and its five domains (disconnection/rejection, 0.91; Impaired autonomy/performance, 0.90; Other-Directedness, 0.67; Impaired limits, 0.73; Over vigilance/inhibition, 0.78). The present study also calculated the Cronbach's alpha of each of the five domains in order to measure the validity of the questionnaire results (disconnection/rejection, 0.87; Impaired autonomy/performance, 0.86; Other- Directedness, 0.80; Impaired limits, 0.74; Over vigilance/ inhibition, 0.76), which was pertinent enough. The questionnaire items are scored based on a six-point scale with responses ranging from 'completely untrue of me' (1 point) to 'describes me perfectly' (6 points)[14].

Given that all the assumptions were met, Pearson's correlation coefficient, the simultaneous multiple regression and the one-way ANOVA were used to analyze the data.

Results

Table 1 presents the demographic details of the participants.

The descriptive indicators of the main variables (marital satisfaction, early maladaptive schemas and marital commitment) are presented in table 2.

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship of marital satisfaction and early maladaptive schemas with marital commitment and its components in the couples (Table 3). As shown in the table, all the components of marital satisfaction have an overall significant positive relationship with personal commitment, moral commitment (except for the component of conflict resolution) and marital commitment, but a significant negative relationship with structural commitment. Among the early maladaptive schemas, the disconnection/rejection and over-vigilance/inhibition schemas were found to have a significant negative relationship with structural commitment, and impaired autonomy and performance had a significant positive relationship with moral commitment. All the schemas had a significant positive relationship with personal commitment and marital commitment.

Other early maladaptive schemas, including emotional deprivation, insufficient self-control/self-discipline, defectiveness/shame and entitlement/grandiosity, were found to be significantly and negatively related to personal commitment, while mistrust/abuse, social isolation/alienation and subjugation were significantly and positively related to personal commitment. Social isolation/alienation, self-sacrifice and unrelenting standards/ hypocriticalness were significantly and positively related to moral commitment. All the early maladaptive schemas were significantly and positively related to structural commitment. Moreover, an overall significant and positive relationship was observed between marital commitment and the early maladaptive schemas, except for social isolation/alienation, entitlement/grandiosity and insufficient self-control/self-discipline (table 4).

Table 1. Demographic data table

| Variable | Percentage | Number | Group |
|-----------|------------|--------|---------|
| Sex | 50.7 | 230 | women |
| | 49.3 | 224 | men |
| Age | 27.5 | 125 | 21-30 |
| | 54.4 | 247 | 31- 40 |
| | 18.1 | 82 | 41-50 |
| | 36.5 | 166 | Diploma |
| Education | 50 | 227 | B.A |
| | 13.4 | 61 | M.A |

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of predictor variables

| Main variables | Components | Index of dispersion | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|--------|
| | | Standard deviation | mean |
| Marital commitment | Marital satisfaction | 6.41 | 35.85 |
| | communication | 7.04 | 32.02 |
| | Conflict resolution | 5.56 | 31.57 |
| | Idealistic distortion | 4.25 | 17.61 |
| | Disconnection/rejection | 16.73 | 50.48 |
| Early maladaptive schemas | Impaired autonomy and performance | 12.99 | 35.87 |
| | Other- directedness | 8.60 | 30.18 |
| | Impaired limits | 8.52 | 32.01 |
| | Over vigilance/ inhibition | 8.66 | 28.34 |
| | Personal commitment | 12.4 | 74.66 |
| Marital commitment | Moral commitment | 8.22 | 43.18 |
| | Structural commitment | 7.39 | 22.37 |
| | Total commitment | 19.41 | 140.21 |

Table 3. Correlation among marital satisfaction, early maladaptive schemas and marital commitment

| Main variables | components | Marital commitment | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| | | Total commitment | Structural commitment | Moral commitment | Personal commitment |
| Marital commitment | Marital satisfaction | 0.37** | -0.32** | 0.28** | 0.59** |
| | Communication | 0.24* | 0.32** | 0.20** | 0.46** |
| | Conflict resolution | 0.11** | -0.29** | 0.07 | 0.31** |
| | Idealistic distortion | 0.45** | -0.20** | 0.35 | 0.6** |
| Early maladaptive schemas | Disconnection/rejection | 0.22** | 0/81** | 0.02 | -0.2** |
| | Impaired autonomy and performance | 0.32** | 0.73** | 0.09* | -0.04 |
| | Other directedness | 0.23** | 0.47** | 0.09 | -0.02 |
| | Impaired limits | 0.24** | 0.51** | 0.1 | - 0.03 |
| | Over vigilance/inhibition | 0.09* | 0.47** | -0.02 | -0.16** |

*P<0.05 ** P<0.01

Table 4. Correlation among early maladaptive schemas and marital commitment

| Early maladaptive schema | Marital commitment | | | |
|--|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| | Total commitment | Structural commitment | Moral commitment | Personal commitment |
| emotional deprivation | 0.10** | 0.53** | 0.01 | -0.16 |
| Abandonment/ instability | 0.21** | 0.55** | 0.55 | -0.02 |
| mistrust/abuse | 0.20** | 0.65** | 0.03 | 0.1* |
| social isolation/alienation | 0.04 | 0.63** | 0.11* | 0.22** |
| defectiveness/shame | 0.13** | 0.5** | 0.01 | -0.09 |
| failure | 0.15** | 0.39** | 0.08 | -0.05 |
| Dependence/ Incompetence | 0.17** | 0.42** | 0.05 | -0.01 |
| Vulnerability to harm or illness | 0.21** | 0.64** | 0.03 | -0.07 |
| insufficient self-control/self-discipline | 0.26** | 0.6** | 0.05 | 0.01 |
| subjugation | 0.14** | 0.6** | -0.01 | 0.13** |
| Self-sacrifice | 0.13** | 0.16** | 0.1** | 0.04 |
| Emotional inhibition | 0.14** | 0.44** | 0.04 | - 0.05 |
| Unrelenting standards/ hyper criticalness | 0.18** | 0.35** | 0.09* | 0.008 |
| entitlement/self- centeredness | 0.07 | 0.4** | -0.01 | - 0.11 |
| Insufficient self- control/ self- discipline | 0.06 | 0.41** | -0.02 | -0.12** |

*P<0.05 **P<0.01

To assess whether or not marital satisfaction can predict marital commitment, after checking the assumptions, a simultaneous multivariate regression was applied. Tables 4 to 6 present the results. According to Table 5, 24% of the variance in marital commitment is explained by marital satisfaction and 13% by the variable of early maladaptive schemas.

In order to understand whether marital satisfaction and early maladaptive schemas are suitable variables to predict marital commitment, the analysis variance were used. Based on the results for marital satisfaction (F=34.66, P=0.001) and for early maladaptive schemas (F=12.80, P=0.001) it can be mentioned that these variables are good enough to predict marital commitment.

Table 5. Regression model and coefficient of determination of marital satisfaction and early maladaptive schemas

| Model | Standard errors of estimate | ModeratedR2 | R2 | R |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|-------|-------|
| Marital commitment | 15.523 | 0.232 | 0.239 | 0.489 |
| Early maladaptive schema | 16.574 | 0.117 | 0.127 | 0.356 |

Table 6. Variance analysis between marital commitment and early maladaptive schemas

| variables | Source of variation | sig | F | Mean of squares | Degree of freedom | Sum of squares |
|---------------------------|---------------------|-------|-------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Marital commitment | regression | | | 8352.02 | 4 | 33408.07 |
| | Residual | 0.001 | 34.66 | 240.96 | 442 | 106505.56 |
| | Total | | | - | 446 | 139913.63 |
| Early maladaptive schemas | regression | | | 3515.9 | 5 | 17597.45 |
| | Residual | 0.001 | 12.8 | 247.7 | 440 | 120869.84 |
| | Total | | | - | 445 | 138449.3 |

The beta and t-values in the regression analysis (table 7) shows that conflict resolution and idealistic distortion can predict marital commitment at a significance level of 0.01. In other words, the higher are conflict resolution and idealistic distortion, the higher is marital commitment. The beta regression analysis shows that idealistic distortion has the greatest effect on marital commitment. The regression equation can therefore be expressed as follows:

$$117.62) + \text{idealistic distortion} (2.19) + \text{conflict resolution} (0.62) = \text{marital commitment}$$

The results of the regression analysis (table7) and the

beta and t-values show that impaired autonomy and performance, impaired limits and over-vigilance/inhibition are significant predictors of marital commitment. In other words, the higher are impaired autonomy and performance, impaired limits and over-vigilance/inhibition, the higher is marital commitment. The impaired autonomy and performance component has the greatest effect on marital commitment. The regression equation can therefore be expressed as follows:

$$(120.64) + \text{over-vigilance/inhibition} (0.24) + \text{impaired limits} (0.29) + \text{impaired autonomy and performance} (0.344) = \text{marital commitment}$$

Table 7. Regression coefficient and t of predicting variables of marital commitment

| Criterion variable | Predictor variables | sig | t | Beta | Std error | B |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-----------|--------|
| Marital commitment | Y- intercept | 0.001 | 24.19 | - | 4.86 | 117.62 |
| | Marital satisfaction | 0.15 | 1.44 | 0.11 | 0.22 | 0.32 |
| | communication | 0.247 | -1.16 | -0.08 | 0.17 | -0.2 |
| | conflict resolution | 0.001 | 3.53 | 0.19 | 0.17 | 0.62 |
| | Idealistic distortion | 0.001 | 7.24 | 0.52 | 0.3 | 2.19 |
| Early maladaptive schemas | Y- intercept | 0.001 | 33.48 | - | 3.6 | 120.64 |
| | Disconnection and rejection | 0.403 | 0.84 | 0.05 | 0.06 | 0.05 |
| | impaired autonomy and performance | 0.001 | 4.34 | 0.25 | 0.08 | 0.34 |
| | Other-directedness | 0.334 | 0.97 | 0.05 | 0.11 | 0.11 |
| | impaired limits | 0.015 | 2.44 | 0.14 | 0.12 | 0.29 |
| | over-vigilance/inhibition | 0.03 | 2.18 | 0.12 | 0.11 | 0.25 |

Discussion

The present study was conducted to predict marital commitment based on early maladaptive schemas and marital satisfaction. Results reveal a significantly positive relationship between marital commitment and marital satisfaction. Among the components of marital satisfaction, conflict resolution and distortion had the greatest effect on the prediction of marital commitment.

Researchers used to believe that couples stay together regardless of being unhappy with their relationship because of loyalty (sentiment and devotion) and allegiance (feeling obliged or forced to stay with the spouse or in the relationship). Schoebiand et al. [26], argued that allegiance and loyalty are not always relationship sustaining behaviors and that commitment can involve a willingness and desire to continue the relationship – a construct that is significantly related to relationship satisfaction. The components of marital satisfaction were found to be positively and significantly related to personal commitment, which, in a marriage, refers to the individual's full desire to stay in the relationship without feeling any obligations or pressures. This type of commitment is associated with an attraction to the relationship and interest in the partner and the identity associated with that relationship and is an internal self-imposed commitment that is not necessarily caused by external social pressures. Structural commitment refers to the type of commitment experienced as a result of financial (property and assets) or irreversible (time and social status) investments or the pressures exerted by the family, friends and children to stay in the relationship. Moral commitment is another component of marital commitment that refers to a commitment to the holiness

of matrimony, moral loyalty to the marital relationship, values and moral principles and the sense of obligation toward the spouse [27]. The obtained results showed that personal commitment is positively related to all the dimensions of marital satisfaction. In other words, the higher is the individuals' score in the components of marital commitment, the higher are the spouse's and the relationship's attraction and the stronger is the marital identity. For example "communication" (which means indicating better communication between the couple and with the spouse's family, also more appropriate way of talking besides expressing emotions and a good mutual understanding between the couple). Likewise in marital satisfaction (which means indicating satisfaction with the ways of decision-making and conflict resolution, the division of tasks at home and outside, the leisure activities performed, sexual relations and parental responsibilities). Also in idealistic distortion (which means indicating a conformity between one's assumptions and expectations of one's spouse and what one sees of one's spouse and their behaviors in real life). Finally in conflict resolution (which means indicating satisfaction with the ways of solving problems, disagreements and disputes with each other). In line with the results obtained by McNulty et al. [28], the present study found that women (and *not* men) who show more frequent problem-solving behaviors are more inclined to stay in a long-term supportive relationship; this problem-solving behavior was mostly linked to the subjects' satisfaction with their relationship. McNulty et al. also showed that challenging problems are useful for long-term relationships in short terms. In contrast, couples put their relationship at the risk of separation by not making efforts to resolve their problems

and conflicts. The findings of McNulty's study are consistent with the results of the present study regarding the prediction of marital commitment by conflict resolution. These findings are also consistent with the results of some other studies [10], [29], [30], [31], [32], regarding the positive and significant relationship between marital commitment and marital intimacy.

Early maladaptive schemas are positively related to marital commitment, with impaired autonomy and performance (dependence/incompetence, vulnerability to harm or illness, enmeshment/undeveloped self and failure) being the strongest predictor of marital commitment. Given that most of the items in Adams and Jones' marital commitment scale revolves around moral commitment and structural commitment, the obtained results show an overall positive and significant relationship between maladaptive schemas and marital commitment. In other words, maladaptive schemas trigger or exacerbate the negative feelings brought from bitter childhood experiences with one's parents into the marriage. This will eventually reduce personal or marital commitment will increase the perception of obligation and pressure to stay in the relationship and thus signify an increased structural commitment. Moreover, the over-vigilance schema increases moral commitment, signifying a strict conscience in the marriage and adherence to moral obligations. Yousefi [33] identified mistrust/abuse, unrelenting standards and emotional inhibition as the predicting schemas of divorce, which is consistent with the present findings.

The results of this study are also consistent with those obtained by Lalezadeh [29] and Navaei [34]. As maladaptive schemas are dysfunctional, they cause dissatisfaction with the marital relationship and pave the way for separation.

Conclusion

Examining the relationship between marital commitment, marital satisfaction and the maladaptive schemas in this study showed that a higher marital satisfaction contributes to the couple's greater attempts at resolving marital problems, and that maladaptive schemas can predict the degree of marital commitment. A limitation of this study is that it was conducted on a sample of couples only residing in Tehran and the generalization of its results should thus be pursued with caution. The study findings can be a guideline for further research on this subject. For the practical application of the findings in real life, the researchers recommend that individual schemas be further addressed in premarital counseling and more training be provided on marital conflict resolution and problem-solving skills so as to improve marital satisfaction and subsequently marital commitment among couples.

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