

The Mediating Role of Insecure Attachment Styles between Early Experienced Violence and Marital Adjustment in Women

Seyede-Fateme Hoseini-Hoseinabad¹ (PhD), Bagher Ghobari-Banab² (PhD), Maryam Mashayekh¹ (PhD), Noorali Farrokhi³ (PhD), Sheyda Sodagar¹ (PhD)

1. Department of Psychology, Faculty of psychology, Karaj Branch, Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran
2. Department of Psychology of Exceptional Children, Faculty of Exceptional Children, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran
3. Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran

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Corresponding Author:

Bagher Ghobari-Banab,
Department of Psychology of
Exceptional Children,
Faculty of Exceptional Children,
University of Tehran,
Tehran,
Iran
E-mail: bghobari@ut.ac.ir

Abstract

Introduction: The purpose of this research was to determine the mediating role of insecure attachment styles between early experienced violence and marital adjustment in married women.

Method: This research was a descriptive-correlational study, in which a structural equation modeling was used to analyze a conceptual model. The statistical population of the study included all the married women referring to counseling centers in Tehran in 2017. The sample size according to the Myers et al. consisted of 206 participants who were selected by accidental sampling method. The data collection tools included measures of conflict tactics scales, dyadic adjustment and attachment styles.

Results: Fit indices represented fitness of model with collected data. On the whole, the anxiety and avoidance and early experienced violence were able to explain marital adjustment. Also, the results showed that the direct and indirect effect of early experienced violence on marital adjustment is negative and significant ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: It can be concluded that the early relationship within the family environment supports a certain attachment style and the effects of the avoidant insecure and ambivalent insecure styles affect the interpersonal relations of the couples in adulthood. As attachment styles are contributory to marital adjustment, counselors can build a couple therapy approach to have an effective role in modifying the attachment styles of couples and solve their conflicts both before and after marriage.

Keywords: Early Violence, Insecure Attachment, Marital Adjustment

Introduction

Marriage, being the basis of a family, is considered as one of the most important interpersonal relationships in human life [1]. Spanier [2] defines marital adjustment as the partners' adaptation to the daily lives and the changing conditions within that life and changing consentaneously in a certain period [2]. Sabatelli [3] defines the marital adjustment as a marriage where the partners can communicate with each other, there are not much conflicts regarding the important areas in marriage or if there are any, they are solved in a way that satisfies each partner [3].

As a socio-emotional unit, family is the center of growth and development, soothing, evolution and change, the damages and harms for which the relation among family members is both a ground for development and an environment for tranquilization. As a result, it has a significant effect on mental, emotional and social balance. As the smallest socialization environment, it guarantees the acceptance of social roles and conformity to social norms. Moreover, family is the basic foundation and institution in the social structure

of communities, the healthiness or sickness of which leads to the consistency or collapse of the society [4]. The quality of marital relationship by influencing the genetic structure of a person can increase or decrease physical health. In fact, when marital adjustment and marital satisfaction are reduced, the likelihood of conflicts, emotional frustration and aggression between them increases. Tension between relationships and the disturbances causes physical and psychological discomfort, and as a result, decreases their level of health. Conversely, when couples have a high degree of marital adjustment, due to constructive exchanges and support received from each other, their general health is expected to increase [5]. The marital adjustment that plays such an important role in happy and satisfied marriages is influenced by many individual, situational and relational factors. Perceptions of the relationship, communication styles, and problem-solving skills are just some examples of such factors [6].

Low marital satisfaction is associated with the personality traits of each spouse, the stressors encountered by each couple, and the communication and behavior exchanged between the couple [7]. The association between adult attachment and different aspects of marital relationships has been the topic of an impressive body of research. Studies have consistently shown that individual differences in self-reported adult attachment are related to the functioning and the quality of marital relationships [8]. Attachment is the emotional bond which ties a child to his or her caregivers. Attachment theory focuses on the formation of these bonds, their nature, and their significance for the person's development through-out the life span [9]. Attachment theory not only provides such a framework, but it also explains how both healthy and unhealthy forms of love originate as reasonable adaptations to specific social circumstances [10]. According to the attachment theory, effective internal patterns affect relationships with important individuals and form the self and how the world experiences in adulthood [9].

Collins & Read [11] further distinguished adult attachment relationships by identifying specific dimensions that underlie Hazan & Shaver's [10] discrete attachment styles, arguing that examining the underlying dimensions of attachment styles can provide a better understanding of how attachment styles are related to other variables. These dimensions include one's comfort with closeness, ability to depend on others, and anxiety about being abandoned or unloved. Adults with a secure attachment style are comfortable in close relationships and feel they can depend on others in times of need. They feel they are worthy of love and tend not to be concerned about being abandoned or unloved. Adults with an insecure anxious style of attachment have a strong desire for closeness and generally believe that they can depend on others. However, they tend to worry a lot about being abandoned or rejected. Finally, adults with an insecure avoidant attachment style are uncomfortable with closeness and depending on others. They do not worry about being abandoned or unloved. Instead, they tend to

minimize the importance of intimate relationships.

Childhood violence (trauma) exposure is a significant public health problem. Adult mental health consequences of such experiences are well documented [12]. Childhood trauma can be defined as an important, stressful negative experience during early life such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, emotional neglect, loss of a parent or parents or separation from them [13]. In a study, the family-of-origin had a significant effect on the participant's romantic attachment patterns. Also, the effect of romantic attachment pattern on marital adjustment was significant [14]. In another study, child maltreatment was associated with insecure attachment. Insecure attachment was also associated with deficits in interpersonal functioning [15].

Adult attachment insecurity has been shown to mediate the association of adverse childhood experiences and mental health outcomes [16]. There are a few possible ways to explain the effect of childhood violence on adult marital life. In accordance with social learning and social control theories, parents are directly influenced by social and indirect motivation through the formulation of perceptions and attitudes about the social behaviors and emotions of their children. Disgust and disunity among family members, strict discipline, paradoxical and authoritarian parenting style are more likely to be related to bullying behavior [17]. Another possible way is attachment. One of the issues that can affect people's attachment is childhood violence, which may have a developmental effect on the capacity of an individual's close and intimate relationships in adulthood. The experience of people in the main family has a profound effect on life, especially romance and marriage [18, 19]. Based on Donnelly et al.'s [20] results, negative experiences such as violence will lead to negative interaction patterns in couples. Exposure to violence continuously leads to violent upheavals [21]. Based on Godbout et al. [22], the opinion of how childhood violence can affect marital adjustment is justifiable in the framework of the attachment theory.

According to the attachment theory, the anxiety over abandonment or rejection that is characteristic of insecure-anxious attachment styles may lead individuals to exaggerate negative emotions (e.g., sadness) in order to elicit a response from the attachment figure. Adults with an insecure-avoidant attachment style are uncomfortable with closeness and depending on others. They do not worry about being abandoned or unloved. Instead, they tend to minimize the importance of intimate relationships [23].

According to attachment perspective, marital conflicts can mainly be described as an emotional response in reaction to an unpleasant experience [24]. These differences in attachment styles and their associated affect regulation strategies have been shown to predict individuals' behavioral, psychological, and physiological responses to threats. Little research has investigated how the interplay between partners' attachment styles might shape these outcomes, yet this critical feature of the dyadic relationship context is likely to be an important

predictor of each partner's outcomes [25].

Family is considered to be the most important social foundation in all societies. Since the family institution generates manpower and is the channel to other social institutions, it is considered as one of the basic foundations and major institutions of each society [26]. Violence of any kind causes the victim to be deprived of human worth and human health, and the physical injuries and mental impacts resulting from it have many consequences for the victim's life [19]. Children who have experienced seriously adverse, neglectful caregiving environments have demonstrated clear increased risk for insecure attachment [27]. The establishment and reinforcement of a dialogue-based culture, as well as the compilation of practicable strategies aimed at finding certain feasible solutions in critical situations is the most challenging issue in a family life. Therefore, it is of great significance to identify the problems of couples who have faced a crisis in their marital life or who are on the verge of divorce. The next step is to offer therapeutic solutions,

using family therapy methods that will provide the grounds for peace and family preservation [4]. The aim of the current study is to prospectively identify psychological mechanisms in victims that underlie the link between childhood violence victimization and adjustment in marital relationship. Because childhood maltreatment is a risk factor for insecure attachment and insecure attachment is a risk factor for later mental and physical health outcomes, attachment may serve as one of the pathways between childhood maltreatment and adult health and adjustment outcomes. The present study had three major goals: (1) to determine whether individuals with documented histories of childhood physical abuse and neglect have different attachment styles in adulthood (2) to examine whether adult attachment styles predict subsequent marital adjustment outcomes and (3) to determine whether adult attachment styles mediate the relationship between childhood physical abuse and neglect and mental and physical health outcomes?

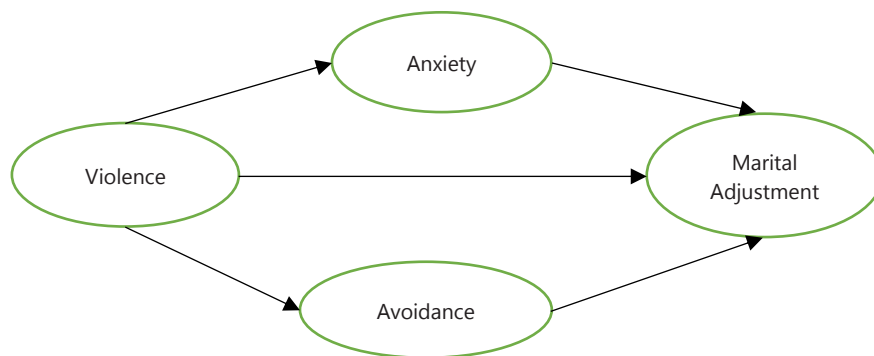


Fig 1. The conceptual model of research

This research was a correlational study, in which the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used for analyzing the relationships between the proposed model's variables. The statistical population of this study includes 206 married women referring to counselling centers in Tehran. This number of participants was chosen according to the recommendation of Myers et al., which suggested a ratio of 10 to 20 subjects per observed variable [28]. Each patient was initially screened to determine that he or she: 1) each partner was at least 18 years of age, 2) the couple had been married more than 6 months, and 3) had received psychological or drug treatments for mental or physical problems during the past year, and 4) they were no longer living with their spouses. Thus, based on the exclusion criteria 44 women were deleted.

The used materials in this study are as follows:

Dyadic Adjustment Scale Questionnaire (DAS): The DAS is a 32-item measure developed to measure dyadic adjustment. The 32 items are scored on a 4-point Likert scale and are summed to create a total score ranging from 0 to 151, with higher scores indicating more positive dyadic adjustment. There are four subscales: Dyadic Consensus (13 items; the degree to which the couple agrees on matters of importance to the relationship), Dyadic Satisfaction (10 items; the degree to which the couple is satisfied with their relationship), Dyadic

Cohesion (5 items; the degree of closeness and shared activities experienced by the couple), and Affective Expression (4 items; the degree of demonstrations of affection and sexual relationships) [2]. The reliability of this scale using Cronbach Alpha coefficient was obtained 0.80. Convergent validity was adequate in comparison to the Negotiation subscale (emotional and cognitive) from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2) [29]. In an Iranian study, the reliability of this scale using Cronbach Alpha coefficient was obtained 0.89 and the correlation between the Dyadic Adjustment Scale Questionnaire with Locke – Wallace Marital Adjustment Test was 0.90. In the present study, the reliability of this scale using Cronbach Alpha coefficient was obtained 0.86.

Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS): The CTS is an 18-item measure developed to measure physical and psychological maltreatment of children. The 18 items are scored on a 4-point Likert scale [30]. The reliability of this scale using Cronbach Alpha coefficient was obtained >0.58 and the correlation between the subscales of Conflict Tactics Scale Parent Child subscales were 0.04 to 0.56 [30]. In an Iranian study, the reliability of this scale using Cronbach Alpha coefficient was obtained 0.84 [31]. In the present study, the reliability of this scale using Cronbach Alpha coefficient was obtained 0.76.

Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS): The RAAS is an 18-item measure of adult attachment based on the

Adult Attachment Scale (AAS), which assesses close interpersonal relationships. The 18 items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1=not at all characteristic) to (5=very characteristic of me). There are three subscales: closeness, dependency, and anxiety. High scores on the anxiety dimension characterize individuals who worry about being unloved or abandoned by romantic partners. High scores on the closeness dimension characterize individuals who find closeness with others easy and high scores on the dependent dimension characterize individuals who feel that others are trustworthy and dependable. The reliability of this scale using Cronbach Alpha coefficient was obtained >0.58 and the subscale scores were correlated in expected directions with measures of self-esteem, social behavior, instrumentality, expressiveness, openness, and satisfaction in romantic relationships [11]. In a study, the secure and preoccupied attachment styles correlated with an avoidance dimension ($r=0.86$ and $r=0.79$, respectively) and the fearful and dismissing attachment styles correlated with an anxiety dimension of other self-report attachment scales ($r=0.74$) [32]. In an Iranian study, the reliability of this scale using test-retest coefficient was obtained 0.95 and the correlation between the ambivalence and secure subscales, the ambivalence and avoidant subscales and the avoidant and secure subscales were -0.31, -0.33 and 0.24 respectively [33]. In the present study, the reliability of the secure, ambivalent and avoidant subscales using Cronbach Alpha coefficient was obtained 0.76, 0.75 and 0.83 respectively.

Concerning ethical considerations, the participants were informed that their participation is voluntary and their identity and responses to the questionnaire would remain confidential. This was approved by the Ethics Committee.

The data of the present study were analyzed using structural equation modeling method, which included two measurement and structural patterns.

Results

In this study, the age mean and standard deviation of the participants were 24.46 and 6.7, respectively. The proportion of women who had experienced violence during their childhood was 39%. Approximately, half of the participants reported having experienced violence during their childhood.

Correlations between childhood trauma variables and insecure attachment are reported in Table 1. Childhood abuse was related to insecure attachment. Experiencing

violence was associated with anxious and avoidant attachment. Finally, psychological distress, anxiety about abandonment, avoidance of proximity, and dyadic adjustment were all related. Women who had experienced violence during their childhood were more likely to report abandonment anxiety in their close relationships.

Table 1 shows that there was a significant relationship between the childhood violence and marital adjustment, anxiety attachment and marital adjustment, avoidance attachment and marital adjustment. All correlation coefficients between variables were significant at the level of 0.05 and 0.01.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to evaluate hypothesizes that the data are normal in order to analyze the modeling of structural equations. According to the results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, in all cases, significant value were greater than the 0.05 error level (0.05). Therefore, there was no reason to reject the zero assumption and the distribution of the data was normal.

To determine the significance of the relationship between variables, t-value statistics were used. Since significance is checked at the error level of 0.05, if the t-value test statistic was greater than the critical value of 1.96, then the relationship was significant. Based on the results of the measurement indices of each of the scales used at the 0.05 confidence level, the value of the t-value statistic is greater than 1.96, which indicates that the observed correlations were significant. The next step was to test the goodness fit of the model. After verifying the structure of the research structures, structural equation modeling was used to study the relationships between variables. In this model, the relationships between the research variables in the output of the LISREL software can be observed.

As seen in Figure 2, the structural model of the relationship between violence and marital adjustment showed satisfactory fit indices (CFI=0.983, NFI=0.928, NNFI=0.978, RMSEA=0.034, and $\chi^2 /df=1.174$).

The path coefficients are generally significant. There is a significant relationship between childhood violence and marital adjustment. A hypothetical assumption of the present pattern was the existence of indirect mediations. The above structural model is saturated in three steps. Fit indicators show good values. The normal value of Xi-2 is also 1/174, which is within the accepted range of 1 to 5. Therefore, the structural model has a favorable fit.

Table 2 shows that the proposed model is a desirable model and is well fitted to empirical data.

Table 1. Correlations among child abuse, attachment, and marital adjustment

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Violence Victimization	-							
2. Marital Adjustment	-0.19**	-						
3. Dyadic Consensus	-0.15*	0.57*	-					
4. Dyadic Satisfaction	-0.017*	0.49**	0.65*	-				
5. Dyadic Cohesion	-0.23*	0.67*	0.56*	0.67*	-			
6. Affective Expression	-0.18**	0.59*	0.78*	0.78*	0.78*	-		
7. Anxious Attachment	0.23*	-0.3**	-0.15*	-0.14*	-0.34*	-0.21*	-	
8. Avoidant Attachment	0.29*	-0.011*	-0.24*	-0.015*	-0.41*	-0.24*	-0.20**	-

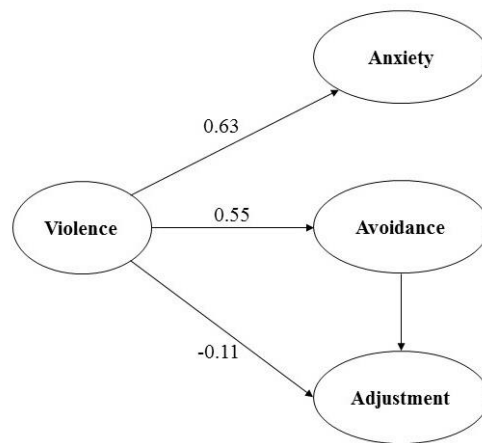


Fig 2. Structural models for relationships between violence and adult dyadic adjustment

Table 2. Goodness of fit indexes of structural model

Goodness fit indexes	SRMR	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	NNFI	IFI
Acceptable Values	0.05>	0.01>	0.9<	0.9<	0.9<	0.9<	0-1
Calculated Values	0.039	0.034	0.94	0.97	0.96	0.94	0.96

Table 3. Standard and non-standard regression coefficients

Path		β	B
Anxiety Attachment on Marital Adjustment	direct	-0.21	-1.19
Avoidance Attachment on Marital Adjustment	direct	-0.25	-1.76
Violence on Marital Adjustment	direct	-0.11	-1.65
Violence on Marital Adjustment	indirect	-0.31	-33.91
Anxiety Attachment on Marital Adjustment	indirect	-0.15	-
Avoidance Attachment on Marital Adjustment	indirect	-0.11	-

Table 3 shows that a significant amount of the effect of childhood violence on marital adjustment is due to the variables of anxiety and avoidance attachment style. With 95% confidence, it can be said that anxiety and avoidance insecure attachment plays a mediating role in the relationship between childhood violence and marital adjustment.

Discussion

The results of this study showed that the experience of childhood violence leads to the formation of insecure attachment styles and patterns of behavior that anticipates the use of violence in marital relationships. The results of this study are consistent with other studies in which there is a significant relationship between trauma, attachment and marital quality [14, 15, 20, 22].

As individuals grow in the family, they experience a wide variety of family situations. Some people belong to stable families that are characterized by love and healthy communication. Other people experience family conditions such as parental violence. Therefore, through these family experiences, individuals both directly and indirectly learn a wide variety of lessons about how their personal relationships should be [34].

Childhood abuse is often experienced within the complex social microsystems of families and peer relationships, as well as within the greater ecological environments that encapsulate families (e.g., communities, institutions) [35]. Childhood experiences of maltreatment affect parenting and have consequences for

a child’s social-emotional development [36]. Attachment theorists have posited that early relational experiences in childhood directly affects the organization of the attachment system, providing the working models on which later relationships will eventually be developed. In this context, exposure to childhood trauma, specifically trauma perpetrated by primary caretakers or under their care, can be detrimental to children's attachment. Insensitive caregiving and maltreating behaviors have been implicated in the development of attachment insecurity and disorganization [37].

Indeed, children are much more likely to have undergone several traumatic experiences of an interpersonal nature and therefore different types of expositions. As a consequence, traumatic experiences of abuse and maltreatment within the family are likely to produce deeper effects, since they impact the attachment system and the caregiving function of providing the child with regulatory strategies for stress [38].

Exposure to insensitive, maltreating, or neglectful caretaking can affect a child's sense of safety and security, essential to the development of secure attachment. In these contexts, a child can perceive their caretaker, their primary attachment figure, as a potential source of distress. Attachment working models have shown to remain generally constant over time, affecting attachment representations later on into adulthood. As a result, the attachment system is constantly activated resulting from different parent-child dynamics [37].

Early attachment styles, in turn, are suggested to

determine behavior, thoughts, and feelings in close interpersonal relationships in adulthood [39]. Secure attachment is a major resource and a potent source of individual growth, positive identity, and resilience in the face of stress. Secure attachment also provides a secure base from which individuals can explore and most adaptively respond to their universe. The presence of such a base encourages exploration and openness to new information. When relationships offer a sense of felt security, individuals can reach out to others and deal with conflict and stress positively. These relationships tend to be more stable and more satisfying [40]. All of these factors work together to increase marital adjustment. Couples distress is a dynamic of romantic love as an insecure attachment dynamic. The point of departure for each couple is an insecure attachment bond where they cannot reach clearly to one another for support in times of need. Insecure attachment from current relationship distress as well as from adverse childhood experiences leaves partners more vulnerable to seeking out pleasure or to comforting pain with addictive processes and are more likely to turn away from their partner to seek comfort [41].

With regard to insecure attachment, adults who experienced an aloof and distant parent in childhood are thought to develop an insecure, avoidant attachment style and as a result are more likely to typically distance themselves emotionally, preferring to be independent rather than close with a partner [42]. Individuals with an avoidant attachment style find it difficult to form deep social and emotional bonds with others [43]. Avoidance, reflects the degree to which individuals feel comfortable with closeness and emotional intimacy in relationships. People who score higher on avoidance claim to be less invested in their relationships, and they strive to remain psychologically and emotionally independent of their partners [44].

Adults who experienced an inconsistently responsive parent in childhood are thought to develop an insecure, preoccupied style and may be more likely to fear rejection from their partner and tend to be anxious and clingy [42]. People reporting high attachment anxiety have uncontrollable fears of abandonment and a persistent need for affirmation from others [45]. Anxiety attachment, assesses the degree to which individuals worry about being underappreciated and possibly abandoned by their romantic partners. Individuals who score higher on anxiety claim to be highly invested in their relationships (sometimes to the point of enmeshment), and they yearn to get closer to their partners and feel more secure in their relationships [44]. Overall, the marital relationship is influenced by what happens in the parent-child relationship.

The results of this study highlights the importance of early relationships in establishing manners of communication in adulthood. In other words, the attachment style of an individual is formed in childhood and is predictive of his/her future relationships. The findings of the current study indicate that couples who have experienced trauma in their family, tend to show

insecure attachment styles and as a result experience more maladjustment in marital relationship given the fact that attachment styles are predictive of marital adjustment. In consultations before marriage, it is possible to predict the degree of marital satisfaction through determining attachment styles and if necessary, instructions can be offered to have satisfaction and compatibility in matrimonial life.

Interpretation of these results is qualified by a few key considerations. Given the limitations to the current study, a number of areas in which further research is needed can be identified. This research has limitations of qualitative study such as a small sample size, which limits its generalizability to all Iranian women. Findings of the current study should be replicated in larger samples including non-clinical and non-help-seeking victims in order to gain more support. Second, a number of risk factors were assessed using long-term memory and may have been influenced by recall bias. Additional examination of these constructs using other methods is warranted in order to get a more complete picture of the dynamic relationships between the parent and children.

In future studies in regards to clinician educational projects for parents, appropriate manners of interaction with children must be trained. Also, preventive and therapeutic measures should be developed and applied in the context of attachment theory. Finally, it is best to assess the couples' attachment styles and evaluation of life during counseling sessions before marriage to help the couple with correct choices and improve marital adjustment.

Conclusion

To conclude, the current study advances the understanding of the dynamic nature of marital adjustment. The results of this study showed that the experiences of childhood and the type of relationship that each individual had experienced with his or her parent can affect the formation of attachment styles that influence interpersonal relationships in adulthood and marital adjustment. Also, childhood violence affects the formation of insecure attachment behaviors in current relationships and attachment behaviors predicted the problems in marital relationships.

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