

Relationship between Marital Satisfaction and Attachment Style: The Mediating Role of Mentalization and Boredom

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Abstract

Introduction: Couple satisfaction is a major and complicated aspect of marital life inside a family. Various factors are involved in it and affect it. The goal of the present study was to investigate the mediating role of boredom and mentalization in the relationship between attachment and marital satisfaction of women and men in the city of Bandar Abbas.

Method: The study method falls under descriptive and correlative research. The statistical population of the study consisted of all married people in the city of Bandar Abbas in 2021-2022, out of whom 350 people were selected via the convenience sampling method. To gather data, Pines' Marital Boredom Scale (1996), Fonagy's Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (2016), Attachment Questionnaire, and Olson's Marital Satisfaction Scale (1994). To evaluate the hypothetical model and indirect effects, the maximum likelihood estimation and Bootstrap test were used. To analyze data, SPSS (version 23) and LISREL (Version 8.8) Software were used.

Results: Secure and avoidant attachment styles with the standard coefficients of -0.37 and -0.24 were found to affect mentalization and marital boredom; mentalization and marital boredom with the standard coefficients of -0.17 and -0.14 affected marital satisfaction. In addition, secure and insecure attachment styles with the standard coefficients of 0.20 and -0.47 affected marital satisfaction (all effects were significant at $p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: According to the findings of the present study, it can be stated that couples' attachment (secure or avoidant) styles and other variables affecting attachment, i.e., mentalization and boredom can affect couples' marital satisfaction.

Keywords: Marital Satisfaction, Mentalization, Marital Boredom, Attachment Style

Introduction

In all societies, marriage is a major issue, and having a successful marital life is thought of as an ideal goal. A successful marriage produces higher marital satisfaction and mutual understanding; for this, marriages of this kind are stable [1]. The family has different functions. These functions require certain conditions, which if violated, could reduce marital satisfaction [2]. Marital satisfaction as a major and determining indicator helps consolidate families and refers to a state where the wife and husband feel happy, and are satisfied with each other most of the time [3]. Marital satisfaction refers to a complicated process that is affected by various factors such as social-economic classes, love, commitment and loyalty, marital communications, conflict, gender, children, sexual relations, and labor division at different times [4]. In fact, what is more important than marriage is the success of marriage and the satisfaction of couples, who enrich their lives with respect, loyalty, and responsibility [5, 6]. Marital satisfaction refers to having a happy life and feeling satisfied with life [7]. This satisfaction certainly affects couples' life quality [8]. Marital satisfaction is one of the most important factors that affect families and helps consolidate marital life. Marital satisfaction is also affected by such factors as peoples' characteristics, intellectual maturity, sexual

satisfaction, marital boredom, and childhood experiences [6]. Various dimensions of couples' marital relations are affected by their families, which may change their quality of lives [9]. Some research has answered the question: "How can the primary experiences of people during childhood affect their experiences in adulthood? [10]. One of the most influential perspectives in this regard is John Bowlby's Attachment Styles Theory. Attachment refers to deep emotional links established between special people in life; these are the people who create a sense of happiness in us when we interact with them and help us feel comfortable when we stay with them [11]. People with secure attachment styles experience fewer conflicts, more satisfaction and stability, and longer romantic periods in their lives, while people with insecure attachment styles have more conflicts and less satisfaction, and even shorter periods of love in their lives [12]. In a study, adults with secure attachment styles were found to experience happy and reliable intimate relations, and to enjoy a sense of empathy, support, and acceptance; these are the characteristics that help continue longer relations compared to avoidant and ambivalent styles. Adults with avoidant attachment styles are characterized by fear of intimacy and worries over amicable relations. Conversely, the adults with ambivalence styles were described to have obsessions and preoccupation with intimacy and efforts to identify with the other [13]. It has been demonstrated that attachment has a major role in peoples' mental and social adjustment [14]. Research has shown that attachment styles are one of the major predictors of marital satisfaction [11]. Hazen and Shaver [12] used the attachment theory as a basic structure to understand adulthood love [15]. They defined romantic love or a two-people relationship as an attachment process that follows an evolutionary process and individual outcomes in newborn-parent relations. Success and failure in marital life can be predicted from the variable of attachment style. For this, it is important to examine it [16].

Another variable affecting marital satisfaction and attachment is mentalization [17]. Actually, attachment is strongly related to peoples' mentalization capacity [18]. According to his classification of attachment, the mentalization capacity is a major determining role in self-organization and emotion adjustment; mentalization refers to an individual's ability to understand his internal states, including senses, feelings, beliefs, wants, and internal states of self and others [19]. Mentalization is a kind of individual's reflection and an interpersonal component that creates a capacity for the individual so that he discerns internal and external realities and distinguishes the mental and emotional processes through interpersonal interactions [18]. Thus, mentalization is not just a genetic variation; rather, it is a construct evolving from infancy to childhood and its evolution depends on mental interaction. In this connection, the secure attachment style is a verbal-emotional interaction style between the mother and the child. This style, in turn, advocates the expansion of one's ability in thinking about others' feelings and intentions (mentalization)[20].

Marital boredom is one of the components affected by attachment, as childhood attachment experiences affect the individual's internal functions [21], and cause such feelings as anger, hatred, hopelessness, and despair. On the other hand, the accumulation of these painful sentiments could over time cause dissatisfaction and unwillingness towards the spouse, and thus make living with him/her unbearable and produce marital boredom [22]. Marital boredom leads to loneliness in marital affairs and this loneliness reduces marital satisfaction [23]. Although love is a common cause of marriage, it is not enough for a successful marriage. If romantic expectations are not met, spouses will experience hopelessness, which directly reduces love and loyalty, thus resulting in marital boredom [24]. Marital boredom is composed of somatic signs (fatigue, lethargies, chronic headaches, etc.), emotional states (anxiety, grief, despair, and depression), and mental signs (meaninglessness, feeling vanity, suicidal ideation, etc.), thereby causing rift between expectations and realities [25]. Marital boredom is a variable that can probably mediate between childhood attachment and marital satisfaction [26]. It is a complex phenomenon that involves many couples and causes marital conflict and negatively affects marital satisfaction [27]. A previous study has demonstrated that backgrounds in childhood cause the individual to pay less attention to intimate feelings with others, especially his/her spouse, as this lack of attention causes dissatisfaction and boredom in marital affairs [28]. Since marital satisfaction is a consolidating element of families, and a healthy family can guarantee the growth and development of children with higher mental health, previous research has only investigated the effects of individual variables on marital satisfaction separately and failed to explore mediating variables in those relations. The present study aimed to investigate marital boredom and mentalization as a mediator between attachment styles and marital satisfaction to explore the effects of the mediation of each of those components on marital satisfaction. Due to the fact that various factors affect the longevity of marital satisfaction, the present study aimed to answer the question: "Do mentalization and marital boredom mediate the relationship between attachment styles and marital satisfaction?"

Method

This method has a fundamental goal and falls under descriptive-correlative research in terms of data gathering. The statistical population of this study consisted of all married men and women of Bandar Abbas City from 2022-2023. The sampling method was convenience. The minimum volume required for the study was calculated based on the widely-used Holter's critical indicator, which was obtained to be 142 for the hypothetical study model, and based on the latent and obvious variables. Hence, the entire sample consisted of 350 people. The study implementation method was first described for the subjects, who were ensured the data were only used for the study goals. After attracting the subjects' satisfaction, questionnaires were distributed,

and subjects' questions were answered when they were filling in the items. Data from 350 individuals were analyzed. The inclusion criteria of this study included being married, the passage of at least one year from the joint life, living together for the time being, having a junior school education, and tendency to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria included severing cooperation and incompleteness of the questionnaires. Before filling out the questionnaires, the subjects were explained about the confidentiality of the results and after obtaining informed consent, they were asked to fill in the questionnaire, if they desired. Ethical considerations were the confidentiality of the results and reception of the study's ethics code (IR.RUMS.REC.1401.112) from the Ethical Committee of the Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences. Data were analyzed by structural equation modeling and using SPSS and LISREL Software.

The tools used in this study were as follows:

Enrich Marital Satisfaction (EMS) Scale: The Enrich marital satisfaction scale was provided by Olson et al. [29]. The questionnaire includes 12 subscales of contractual responses, satisfaction, personal subjects, marital relationship, conflict solution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relations, parenting, relatives and friends, and roles of men and woman equality. The questionnaire has been scored on a five-degree Likert scale of completely agree (5), agree (4), neither agree nor disagree (3), disagree (2), and completely disagree (1). In items No. 47, 46, 45, 42, 41, 40, 3, 38, 37, 33, 32, 31, 30, 24, 23, 22, 21, 20, 19, 18, 15, 14, 13, 12, 11, 6, 8, and 4, scoring is reverse [30]. Scores of less than 30 indicate severe dissatisfaction with marital affairs, between 30-40 indicates dissatisfaction, between 40-60 indicates relative dissatisfaction and moderate, between 60-70 indicates high satisfaction and higher, and over 70 indicates very much satisfaction [31]. The validity of the scale was found to be 0.65 and was significant at 0.01 [32]. The correlation coefficient of the components of familial satisfaction and life satisfaction of the scale ranged from 0.41 to 0.60, and 0.32 to 0.41, respectively. Also, the retest coefficient after the re-administration of the scale was found to be 0.88 [17]. The internal consistency of the scale with Cronbach's alpha was 0.73 for the entire scale [20]. Ghasemina et al. [33] obtained Cronbach's alpha of 0.95 for the validity of the scale. Tarighi et al. [34] reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.79, 0.78, 0.82, 0.74, 0.64, 0.82, 0.72, 0.61, and 0.79 for each of the nine dimensions of the scale. Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.81.

Adult Attachment Questionnaire: This scale was developed by using Hazen and Shaver's [35] attachment test items. This is a 15-item scale that measures three attachment styles, including secure, avoidant, and ambivalent on a five-degree scale (0-4) including very low, low, moderate, much, and very much. The minimum and maximum scores on this scale are 5 and 25, respectively. Items 1-5 measure secure attachment styles, 6-10 avoidant, and 11-15 ambivalent-anxious styles. Hazen and Shaver obtained the general retest reliability of the scale, and its internal consistency coefficient to be 0.81, and 0.87, respectively. This questionnaire was standardized on

the Iranian general population and student samples, whose psychometric properties were confirmed [12]. Cronbach's alpha of the subcomponents of secure, avoidant, and ambivalent styles in a sample of 1480 students were 0.85, 0.84, and 0.85, respectively. The validity of the test using the retest method with an interval of four weeks was calculated to be 0.87, 0.83, and 0.84 for secure avoidant and ambivalent styles [36]. In the present study, the internal consistency of this questionnaire was 0.93 using Cronbach's alpha method.

Fonagy's Reflective Functioning (RFQ) Questionnaire:

This is a self-descriptive tool to measure mentalization ability. This questionnaire was developed in a three-stage format by Fonagy et al. The questionnaire has 26 items, and the scoring is based on a seven-degree Likert scale of completely agree to disagree. As for the component of uncertainty, the same items are reversely scored. Fonagy et al. reported the internal consistency for the components of certainty and uncertainty to be 0.63 and 0.67 in a non-clinical sample. The validity of the test using the test-retest method with a three-week interval was calculated to be 0.84 and 0.75 (20). In Iran, Cronbach's alpha was 0.88 for the confidence factor and 0.66 for the uncertainty factor. The confidence component had a significant relationship with anxiety-depression, ambivalent style and secure attachment and showed the convergent validity of this component. Uncertainty has a significant relationship with anxiety-depression and mindfulness, avoidant and ambivalent attachment style and shows convergent validity. The mentalizing questionnaire has acceptable validity and reliability in the student community and can be a valid tool for evaluating mentalizing ability [37]. The internal consistency of this scale was 0.87 using Cronbach's alpha.

Marital Boredom Questionnaire: It is a 21-item self-assessment tool developed by Pains [38]. This tool measures three main components of physical boredom (inertia, sleep disorders), emotional boredom (depression, hopelessness, entrapment), and mental boredom (worthlessness, frustration, anger toward spouse). It is scored based on a seven-degree Likert scale of 1 (never) to 7 (always), with the minimum and maximum scores being 21 and 147. Higher scores indicate higher burnout. An examination of the marital boredom scale validity indicates that this scale has an internal consistency rate ranging from 0.84 to 0.90. The questionnaire's validity was confirmed by examining negative correlations with such positive characteristics as conversation quality, emotional attraction to spouse, sense of security, self-actualization, and sense of purposiveness. Translated versions of this tool have been used in different cultures [39]. In Iran, Safipouriyani [40] reported the reliability coefficient to be 0.76 using Cronbach's alpha, with the internal consistency rate of 0.90.

Results

The demographic information of the participants regarding their gender, education, number of children and marriage duration has been presented in Table 1.

Descriptive statistics indices of mean, standard deviation, correlation, skewness, and kurtosis have been presented in Table 2.

Table 2 gives the correlation matrix between the current variables, the mean, and the standard deviation of the research variables. As shown, all the correlations include significant values ($-0.76 \geq r \geq -0.25$). Meanwhile, mentalization and secure attachment were found to have the lowest correlation ($r=0.25$) and secure attachment and avoidant attachment held the highest correlation ($r=0.357$).

The significant assumptions associated with structural equation modeling include Univariate Normality Multivariate normality and the absence of Multicollinearity, which were examined through the evaluation of the measurement model and the structural model. Calculating the skewness and kurtosis of each of the observed variables is a common way to test the normality of a single variable. In the present study, the skewness of the observable variables and their kurtosis were between -0.620 to 1.20 and -0.68 to 0.85 , respectively. Chou and Bentler [41] consider the cutoff point of ± 3 as suitable for skewness. Although there is low

agreement about the kurtosis cut point, in general, values greater than ± 10 are problematic for this measure, and values greater than ± 20 make the obtained results invalid [42]. In this study, the assumption of multivariate normality was tested by calculating the relative multivariate elongation index, and its value was 1.214 . [41]. Therefore, the distribution of combinations of variables is normal. The presumption of the absence of multicollinearity was examined by testing the correlation matrix between the observed variables. The analysis of this matrix indicates the absence of multicollinearity between them. The correlation coefficients are between -0.53 and $r \geq 0.44$. Correlation coefficients above 0.85 cause problems in the *consistent* estimation of the model [42]. In this case, one of the two variables should be excluded from the analysis. In the hypothetical model, mentalization and couple burnout mediate the effect of attachment styles on marital satisfaction. Mentalization and marital boredom affect marital satisfaction in the same way that attachment styles affect mentalization and couple burnout. The fit indices related to this model were shown to indicate a perfect fit for the hypothetical model (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample

		Gender		
		Woman	Man	Total
Education	Diploma	(5.71)20	(7.14)25	(12.85)45
	Associate's	(4.25)15	(2.85)10	(7.10)25
	B.A.	(37.42)131	(27.42)96	(64.84)226
	M.A. and higher	(8.57)30	(6.85)24	(15.42)54
Number of children	No children	8.85) 31	(9.71)34	(18.56)65
	Single child	(22.85)80	(21.42)75	(44.27)155
	Two children	(8.57)30	(14.28)50	(22.85)80
	Four children and higher	(6.57)23	(7.71)27	(14.28)50
Marriage duration (years)	1-5	(7.71)27	(11.14)39	(18.85)66
	6-10	(20.85)73	(19.42)68	(40.27)141
	11-20	(6)21	(10)35	(16)56
	20 and higher	(11.42)40	(13.42)47	(24.84)87

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Research Variables, Mean and Standard Deviation

		1	2	3	4	5	Mean (SD)	Kurtosis	Skewness
1	Secure attachment	1					(19.20) 50.52	-0.620	0.80
	Avoidant attachment	**-.076	1				(17.11) 48.23	-0.532	-0.751
2	Marital boredom	**-.044	**0.38	1			(21.92) 73.18	1.20	-0.68
3	Marital satisfaction	**0.53	**-.051	**-.047	1		(24.82) 16.19	0.73	0.85
4	Mentalization	**-.025	**0.31	**0.29	**-.041	1	(1.97) 91.19	0.066	-0.483

Table 3. Structural Model Fit Indices

Fit index	Acceptable domain	Value
Chi-square (χ^2)	-	180.24
Chi-square (χ^2) df	<5	1.91
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	>0.9	0.99
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	>0.9	0.99
Relative Fit Index (RFI)	>0.9	0.98
Normalized Fit Index (NFI)	>0.9	0.99
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	<0.1	0.022
Root mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	>0.08	0.066

The path analysis method has been used to investigate the direct and indirect effects of attachment style and marital satisfaction variables with the mediation of marital boredom and Mentalization (Figure 1). This Figure shows the hypothetical structural model along with standard coefficients. Secure attachment style affects mentalization and couple burnout with standard coefficients of -0.37 and -0.24, respectively, and mentalization and couple burnout affect marital satisfaction with standard coefficients of -0.17 and -0.14, respectively. Secure and insecure attachment styles affect marital satisfaction with standard coefficients of 0.20 and -0.47, respectively. All effects have a $P > 0.001$ level of significance. In the present research, the bootstrap statistical test was used to interpret mediating relationships. Bootstrap is one of the most powerful and the

most logical method to estimate indirect effects. The significance of each of these relationships can be evaluated with two methods. The first, by referring to the significance level, and the latter, by evaluating the confidence interval. The optimal path will be significant at the $p < 0.05$ level if the upper and lower bounds with a 95% confidence interval for the middle path have the same signs (both positive or both negative) or the value Zero is not between these two limits. Table 4 shows the indirect or mediating effects for the assumed model. Accordingly, the effect of insecure and secure attachment styles on marital satisfaction with the mediation of mentalization and couple burnout has a standard coefficient of -0.13 and 0.12 respectively ($p = 0.005$).

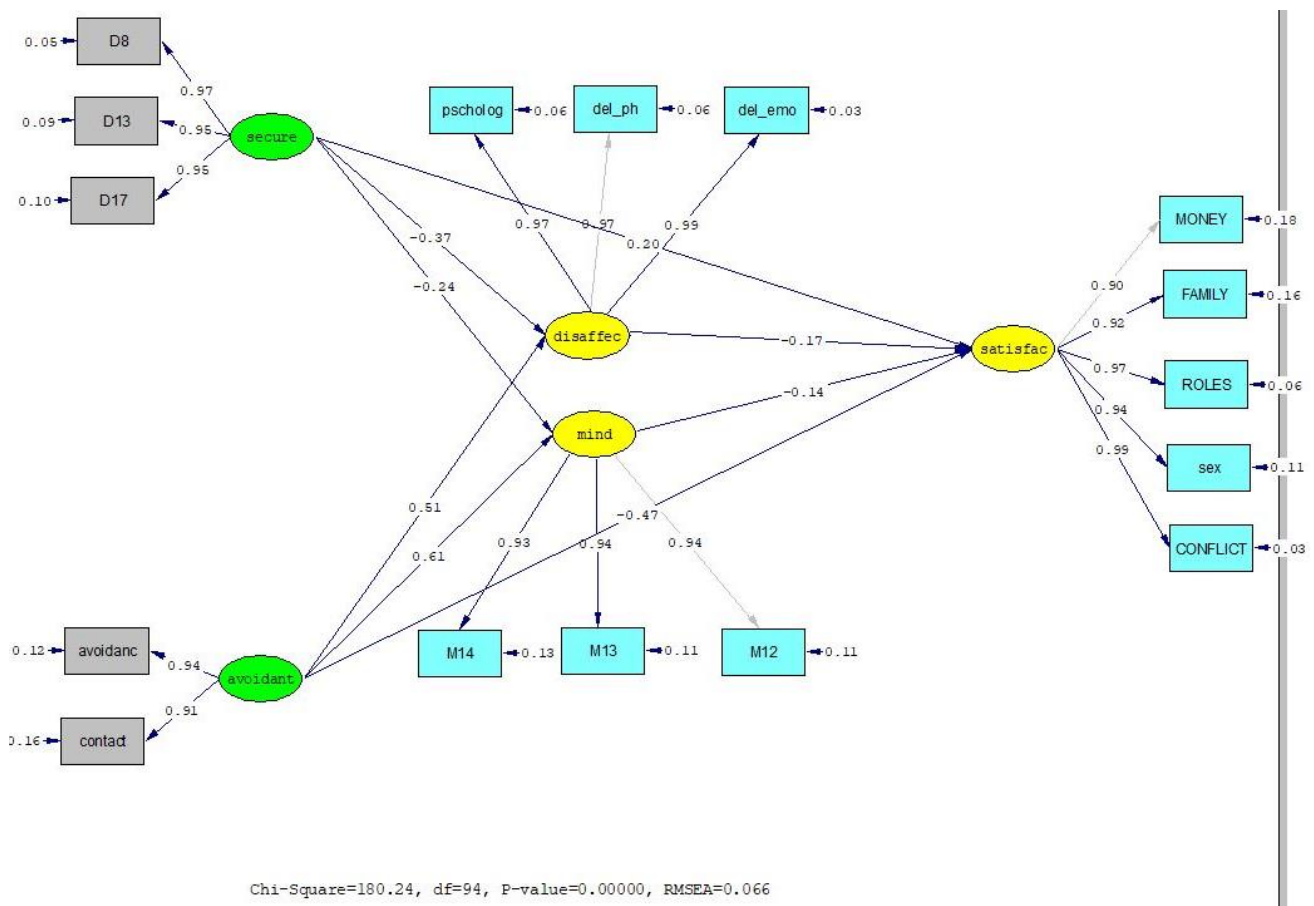


Figure 1. Structural hypothetical model with standard coefficients.

Table 4. Mediation Effects of the Hypothetical Model

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Mediator variable	Bootstrap limit		The significance level	Effect size	Standard error
			Upper limit	Lower limit			
Secure attachment	Marital Satisfaction	Moderator variable	0.009	0.167	0.031	0.129	0.084
Insecure attachment	Marital Satisfaction	Moderator variable	-0.746	-0.123	0.04	-0.134	0.104

Discussion

This study aimed to provide a model for predicting marital satisfaction based on attachment styles with the mediation of mentalization and couple burnout in men and women. The findings showed that the secure

attachment style has a direct positive and significant effect on the marital satisfaction of women and men. In contrast, the insecure attachment style has an inverse and significant effect on the marital satisfaction of women and men, which is consistent with previous studies [9, 43-45].

In support of the findings, it can be stated that people who have a secure attachment style seek to get social support from others, especially their spouses when facing marital problems and challenges. This develops a satisfying relationship, while people with an insecure attachment style choose to separate in other ways in the face of such challenges, which leads to unhealthy relationships between couples. In a relationship with a secure attachment style, couples are more likely to love each other, be sociable, and request support.

The results of structural modeling showed that attachment styles predict marital satisfaction in men and women directly or through the mediation of mentalization and couple burnout. Despite attachment behaviors such as accessibility, responsiveness, and empathy in married life, couples can become supportive and protective people and provide each other a sense of comfort, which can satisfy the psychological, emotional, and sexual needs of couples in the family focus and increase marital satisfaction [9]. On the other hand, couples who have insecure attachment styles trust each other less and pay less attention to satisfying each other's basic needs, such as physical and psychological comfort, care, and sexual needs. These couples in adult relationships are also afraid of abandonment and rejection and the lack of intimate relationships between themselves and others based on their mental models that originate from insecure attachment in early childhood relationships. Therefore, in the field of communication, they constantly pay attention to the signs that confirm their psychological structures. As a result, they misinterpret each other when there is negative behavior from the spouse, and this creates grounds for seclusion and causes couples to move away [43]. Attachment is a unique behavior pattern that is vitally important in most societies for healthy personality development and well-being. A secure attachment style develops and positive cognitions create when the attachment model is available and responsive. In the classical attachment theory, adults with secure attachment have a positive sense of self and a positive perception of others. These people have more social and self-confidence and are more successful. Adults with an avoidant attachment style see themselves as self-sufficient, deny vulnerability and claim that they do not need intimate relationships [18]. Adults with an anxious attachment style have less tendency to have a positive view of themselves. They often doubt their self-worth as a spouse and blame themselves for their spouse's lack of responsiveness [20].

The results also showed that couple burnout can mediate the relationship between attachment style (secure and insecure or avoidant) and marital satisfaction, which were consistent with other studies [39, 46, 47]. The results of path analysis showed that attachment styles affect marital satisfaction indirectly through the mediation of mentalization in addition to direct effects. In confirmation of the findings, it can be said that the requirement for a strong and positive family relationship depends on past experiences related to attachment styles. People with avoidant attachment styles through emotional distancing

from others get people to talk less with each other and interfere less in the *affairs of other* people, so they ignore the basic condition of empathy, which is to enter the other person's world [37]. This, in turn, provides grounds for couple burnout and causes distance between them. It develops grounds for marital boredom and ultimately marital dissatisfaction. On the other hand, people with an avoidant attachment style experience a type of discomfort and anxiety due to the nature of their emotional independence and emotional and *social* distance and romantic relationships. Therefore, the more the partner tries to make the relationship more intimate and get closer to his/her partner, the more this anxiety and dissatisfaction increases [3]. Marital burnout is the result of some irrational expectations, couples neglecting each other's needs, and physical, psychological, and emotional symptoms. People with these syndromes feel that their lives are ruined and have a negative view of their spouses. They feel that they cannot change this situation, so they decide to spend the remaining energy on themselves or their children. The distance between them has increased because they don't try to change the situation and ultimately it leads to marital dissatisfaction and conflicts. The results showed that mentalization can mediate the relationship between attachment style and marital satisfaction, and these findings are consistent with previous studies [4, 5, 6, 13, 19]. In confirmation of the findings, it can be stated that mentalization of a couple has a moderating role between marital satisfaction and insecure attachment and improves marital relationships. The relationship between insecure style and subjectivity is significant because it is possible to consider the more negative representation of attached and ambivalent people as incompetent and incompetent [19]. This negative mentalization in these people causes boredom and ultimately dissatisfaction and withdrawal in married couples. Mentalization in couples who have secure attachments leads to trust formation and brings close relationships between couples. On the other hand, it will cause abandonment and emotional distancing of the couples. Mentalization or reflective performance includes the ability of a person to interpret mental states such as wishes, feelings, goals, desires, and attitudes in his/her and the other [10], which is formed in a secure attachment relationship. On the other hand, dissociation in attachment relationships is specially related to environmental defects and genetic vulnerability; It is related to damage in mentalization [11]. The main goal of attachment is to create a representational system for self-states in the individual through mentalization [12] and a person's relationship with another is evaluated through the representation of these situations and affects subsequent relationships, especially marital relationships. The more enjoyable this representation is for the person, the better the marital satisfaction will be.

This research faced some limitations like other research. One of these challenges was the availability of the sample, which limits the generalizability of research findings. It is recommended to use other types of sampling in future studies. Another limitation is that it did not consider the

effects of socioeconomic status and cultural background on marital satisfaction. In this study, most of the participants (patients) had at least a high school diploma. The reason for that was the better cooperation of educated patients as well as the use of self-report tools for assessment and measurement (understanding the questions and answering them requires a relatively high level of literacy). Accordingly, it is difficult to generalize the results to unlearned and illiterate patients who usually have different socioeconomic statuses.

Conclusion

The results of this research identified three variables influencing marital relationships. One of these variables, called attachment, is related to a person's history and has a direct effect on marital satisfaction. Findings showed that couple burnout and mentalization are mediating variables that affect marital satisfaction through attachment style. Experts and families can develop and use the necessary training considering the effects of attachment style on adults.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

This article has been extracted from the master's thesis of the first author. It took into account all ethical principles under the supervision of the University of Rafsanjan research committee with the ethical code of: IR.RUMS.REC.1401.112. Researchers informed the participants about the study's objective. They were also assured that their information would remain confidential.

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