

Investigating The Relationship between Interpersonal Sensitivity and Marital Conflict: The Moderating Role of Interpersonal Mindfulness

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Abstract

Aim: The present study investigated the moderating role of interpersonal mindfulness in the link between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict.

Method: The Research method is a descriptive-correlation type of structural equation modeling. The statistical population consists of married students of Alzahra and Tehran University, and 182 people were randomly selected by sampling by multi-stage cluster method. Questionnaires on interpersonal mindfulness (IMS), interpersonal sensitivity (ISS), and marital conflict (MCQ) were given them. Statistical data analysis at the descriptive and inferential levels was performed with SPSS and Smart-PLS 3.

Result: Partial least square-structural equation modeling showed a significant positive association between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict ($\beta = .43$, $t = 6.47 > 2.58$, $p < 0.001$) and the interaction effect of interpersonal mindfulness and interpersonal sensitivity had a significant relationship with marital conflict ($\beta = .15$, $T\text{-values} = 2.43$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, the moderating role of interpersonal mindfulness in the link between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict was confirmed.

Conclusion: couples with a high level of interpersonal sensitivity are likely to experience more marital conflict, and the predictive effect of interpersonal sensitivity on marital conflict is significantly weakened by increasing the level of interpersonal mindfulness, thus interpersonal mindfulness plays a moderating role in the link between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict. Therefore, interpersonal mindfulness training is suggested to family counselors to reduce conflicts and marital problems in couples who suffer from interpersonal sensitivity. In addition, The findings of this research can provide valuable information for families, psychologists, and society.

Keywords: Marital conflict, Interpersonal mindfulness, Interpersonal sensitivity.

Introduction

The family is the most basic and main part of society; the realization of a healthy society depends on the health of the family and the health of the family depends on the existence of people with mental health and the ability to communicate effectively, therefore marital problems and conflicts are very important in every family and society. In the interaction between people and family members, depending on the type of individuality and communication styles of people, there is a possibility of differences in expectations and demands. Having different goals and ideas (Zeidner & Kloda, 2013), severe and unresolved problems between couples cause anger, frustration, hatred, and marital conflict which has destructive effects on mental and physical health (Shrout et al., 2019) among its consequences can be depression, anxiety disorders (Majani et al., 2023), eating disorder (Bi et al., 2017), alcohol addiction (Ranjan et al., 2018), marital dissatisfaction and emotional divorce (Wang et al., 2023), poor parenting (Vaez et al., 2015) and the destruction of the family system (Xerxa et al., 2020). The rising statistics of divorce (one divorce out of every three marriages) caused by marital conflict in recent years shows the importance of this issue and the necessity of solving this problem in a specialized manner (Jalili et al., 2022). Marital conflict refers to any conflict in the field of the rights and power of the spouse, in which at least one of the spouses does not accept the customary relationship, ignores the position, personal interests, and rights of the spouse and only thinks about own rights (Boostanipoor & Sanai Zaker, 2016). One of the main causes of conflict in marriage is communication problems, such as lack of mutual understanding, lack of clear communication poor listening skills, and interpersonal sensitivity. Interpersonal sensitivity leads to disagreement, misunderstandings, and avoidance of interaction due to exaggeration and misinterpretation of interpersonal behavior, and is likely to increase marital conflict between spouses. Although interpersonal sensitivity is one of the most important psychological components, little research has been done about it (Georgiades et al., 2023).

Interpersonal sensitivity refers to an unnecessary and exaggerated sensitivity to rejection, being criticized and evaluated, and excessive sensitivity to behaviors and emotions of others, by which a person seeks to fulfill meeting the expectation of others to avoid criticism, negative judgment, and rejection (Boyce & Parker, 1989). Interpersonal sensitivity consists of five dimensions interpersonal awareness, need for confirmation, separation anxiety, shyness, and fragile self-esteem. This personality trait affects people's communication and sexual performance (Amini & Azarmi, 2023), it is also possibly the cause of many mental disorders such as depression (Ying et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023), anxiety (Xu, H et al., 2023; Abdollahi et al., 2015) paranoia (Boyce et al., 1991). One of the effective solutions to reduce the consequences of interpersonal sensitivity is interpersonal mindfulness as a component of mental health, which can lead to the reduction of interpersonal distress and the improvement of the quality of a romantic relationship in such a way with conscious response, presence in the moment and acceptance without judgment, the compatibility between couples increases (Pratscher et al., 2019; Tabatabaian et al., 2024).

Interpersonal mindfulness states to a person's ability to recognize thoughts, physical behaviors, and emotional experiences when interacting with others and paying attention to words and non-verbal signs (Pratscher et al., 2019), interpersonal mindfulness in marriage involves listening carefully to your partner during your interaction and communication knowing your feelings and your spouse's feeling, accepting your feelings and thoughts without judgment and responding more gently to your spouse's behavior. A person's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions are closely related to the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of others, this concept shows that a person's perception of himself and his relationship with others are mutual and interconnected. Awareness of these thoughts and feelings according to the signs of non-verbal communication can increase the harmony of one's thoughts and feelings with others and create healthy and satisfying relationships (Khouri et al., 2022). According to the literature review, mindfulness through conscious attention and listening to others, recognizing one's own and others' feelings, accepting the thoughts and feelings of others, reducing reactive behaviors towards misbehavior, and compassion for oneself and others (Mera et al., 2023; Abdollahi et al., 2020; Duncan et al., 2009). Spouses are more non-judgmental, empathetic, and compassionate when interacting more harmoniously compatible and intimate (mcgill et al., 2022) conscious response, presence at the moment and acceptance without judgment have a positive effect on the quality of interpersonal relationships (Pratscher et al., 2018) Despite many researches that have investigated mindfulness in the individual field, the background of the conducted research confirms that less research has been done in the field of mindfulness in the interpersonal field (Pratscher et al., 2019). The first goal of this study is to investigate the relationship between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict, the second goal is to investigate the relationship between interpersonal mindfulness and marital conflict, and the third goal is to examine the moderating role of interpersonal mindfulness in the link between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict. This research has three assumptions:

- 1) the relationship between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict is positive and significant.
- 2) there is a negative and significant relationship between interpersonal mindfulness and marital conflict,
- 3) interpersonal mindfulness plays a moderating role of interpersonal mindfulness in the link between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict.

This research is one of the first to examine the moderating role of interpersonal mindfulness in the link between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict. Not much attention has been given to this topic before. In this study interpersonal sensitivity is identified as one of the factors influencing marital conflict and interpersonal mindfulness possibly moderates the relationship between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict and reduces marital conflict through conscious attention and listening to others carefully, awareness of one's own and others feelings, acceptance of others thoughts and feelings, low reactivity to misbehavior, compassion for self and others (Abdollahi et al., 2021), conscious responsiveness presence in the moment and non-judgmental acceptance (Pratscher et al., 2018).

Methods

Participants

This research is a descriptive-correlation type and the modeling is structural equations the statistical community consists of married students of Alzahra and Tehran University. The statistical population was about 300 married students; By the calculation method using Cochran's formula The sample size was determined to be 168 people, and the number of random samples was increased to 182 for better sample coverage, who were randomly selected by the multi-stage cluster sampling method; first, by referring to university education a list of faculties of Alzahra and Tehran University was prepared; and five faculties of Alzahra and Tehran University were randomly selected, and eight classes were randomly selected from each faculty to the selected faculties and then the link of the questionnaire was provided to the married students. Then, Married students were asked to answer the questions if they wanted. By removing outlier data, 180 questionnaires were included in the statistical analysis.

Ethical considerations of research

Based on ethical principles, all participants participated in the research with informed consent. The participants answered the questionnaires anonymously and were assured of the confidentiality of the information. Participation in the study did not cost the participants any money. In terms of religion and culture, this study does not have any contradictions with the criteria of the participants and the society.

Instruments

Interpersonal Mindfulness Scale (IMS): The IMS was developed by Pratscher et al. (2019). This scale consists of 27 items based on a five-point Likert scale (almost never= 1, sometimes= 2, often= 3, almost always= 4 and always= 5). Items 5,10,13,17 and 21 are reversed. This scale consists of four subscales, it has been: presence, awareness of self and others, acceptance without judgment, and non-reactivity. The significant positive correlation of the interpersonal mindfulness scale with the five-faceted mindfulness questionnaire (FFMQ) and the significant negative correlation of this questionnaire with the emotional ataxia questionnaire indicates the acceptable concurrent validity of the questionnaire (Pratscher et al., 2019). Also, the total reliability of this scale by Cronbach's alpha was obtained at 0.88 (Pratscher et al., 2019). In the Persian version positive and significant correlation of interpersonal mindfulness with the Brown mindfulness scale ($r= 0.71$) indicates the acceptable convergent validity of the questionnaire, also had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.8, indicating the acceptable reliability of the questionnaire (Gholizadeh et al.,2022).In the present research, Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.74 which indicates the acceptable reliability of the questionnaire.

Interpersonal Sensitivity Scale (ISS): The ISS is designed by Boyce and Parker (1989). This scale consists of 36 items based on a four-point Likert scale (totally agree= 4, somewhat agree= 3, somewhat disagree= 2, and completely disagree= 1). This scale

includes five subscales, which are interpersonal awareness, need for confirmation, separation anxiety, shyness, and fragile self-esteem. Boyce and Parker (1989) obtained Cronbach's alpha for a whole of scale 0.86, which indicates the acceptable reliability of this questionnaire. The significant positive relationship of this scale with the clinical assessment scale of interpersonal sensitivity confirms the acceptable concurrent validity of the scale. In Iran, Cronbach's alpha of ISS for the whole scale was 0.81, which shows acceptable reliability (Vojudi et al., 2015). In the present research, Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.88 which indicates the good reliability of the questionnaire.

Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MSPSS software was used for statistical data analysis at a descriptive level to check MCQ): The MCQ was designed by Sanai Zaker and Barati (1996). This scale consists of 42 items based on a five-point Likert scale (always= 5, mostly= 4, sometimes= 3, rarely= 2 and never= 1). This scale measures seven aspects of marital conflicts, which are: decrease in cooperation, decrease in sexual relations, increasing emotional reactions, increasing child support, increasing the individual relationship with relatives, reducing the family relationship with spouse's relatives and friends, and separating financial affairs from each other. The Cronbach's alpha for the whole scale is 0.71, it has been found that the reliability of this scale is acceptable. This scale has acceptable construct and content validity (Darbani & Parsakia, 2022). In the present research, Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.85 which indicates the good reliability of the questionnaire.

Statistical Analysis

Skewness, Kurtosis, and frequency, Smart PLS 3 software was used for analyzing data at the level of inferential findings to analyze the research data, check the research hypotheses and fit the model (Ringle et al., 2015). Analyzing the proposed model with a small sample size, insensitivity to normal distribution of data, and enabling to analysis of the moderator model, and examining the moderator effect size, analyzing complex path models are advantages of the partial least square method (Sarstedt et al., 2018).

Results

The sample group of the research was 182 people, after removing outlier data, the responses of 38 males and 142 females in the age range of 20-50 years old with associate degree (34 people), bachelor's degree (121 people), master's degree (21 people) and doctorates (4 people) were included in the statistical analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of research participants

	Demographic variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	142	78/9
	Male	38	21.1
	Total	180	100
Age	20-30	42	23.3
	31-40	90	50
	41-50	48	26.7
Education	Association degree	34	18.9
	Bachelors degree	121	67.2
	Masters	21	11.7
	PHD	4	2.2

In this research, there was no missing data because the data was collected online. Mahalanobise was used to evaluate outlier data, two questionnaires were removed. Kurtosis and Skewness checked the normality of the data. Values of variables of this study were in the numerical range of ± 2 and ± 3 appointment, indicating the normality of the data (Tabachnick and Fidel, 2014). In evaluating factorial loads, Some items were removed because the value of their factor loading was less than 0.5. The value of the Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR) was 0.08, the value of Norm Fit Index (NFI) was 0.97 and the Chi-Square was 305.2 which indicated an acceptable fit of the model. The convergent validity was measured by Average Variance Extracted (AVE); in this study, according to Table 2, the values of AVE > 0.5 showed adequate convergence (Hair Jr. Et al.2006). Construct reliability (CR) was used to measure internal consistency between latent variables, and homogeneity reliability (rho), and Cronbach's alpha were used to evaluate reliability. According to Table 2, the numerical value of CR, rho, and Cronbach's alpha is greater than 0.7 which shows good internal consistency and reliability.

Table 2. Numerical value of the model analysis

	Cronbach's alpha	CR	Rho	AVE
Interpersonal mindfulness	0.74	0.83	0.79	0.57
Interpersonal sensitivity	0.88	0.91	0.92	0.68
Marital Conflict	0.85	0.89	0.89	0.55

Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) is used to evaluate discriminant validity. According to the numerical values of HTMT in Table 3, all the coefficients are less than 0.85, which shows the validity of acceptable differences between research variables. Colinearity was measured with the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The amount of VIF for the predictor

variable is 1.14 which is less than five, so there is no collinearity between predictor variables.

Table 3. HTMT

HTMT	Interpersonal sensitivity	Interpersonal mindfulness
Interpersonal mindfulness	0.44	
Marital Conflict	0.46	0.27

Structural model fit

The result of the structural model showed a significant positive association between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict ($\beta = .43$, $t = 6.47 > 2.58$, $p < 0.001$), and an insignificant negative association between interpersonal mindfulness and marital conflict ($\beta = -.06$, $t = 0.84 < 1.96$, $p > 0.05$) see Figure 1. The coefficient of the determination (R^2) value is 0.21, which indicates an acceptable coefficient of determination. The effect size (f^2) of interpersonal sensitivity on marital conflict is 0.20 and the value of interpersonal mindfulness on marital conflict is 0.005. Stone-Geisser's (Q^2) value is 0.001 for interpersonal mindfulness and 0.08 for the interpersonal sensitivity variable; according to the cutting line, it can be concluded that the exogenous variables have a small proportion because they are smaller than 0.15. The redundancy criterion is 0.004.

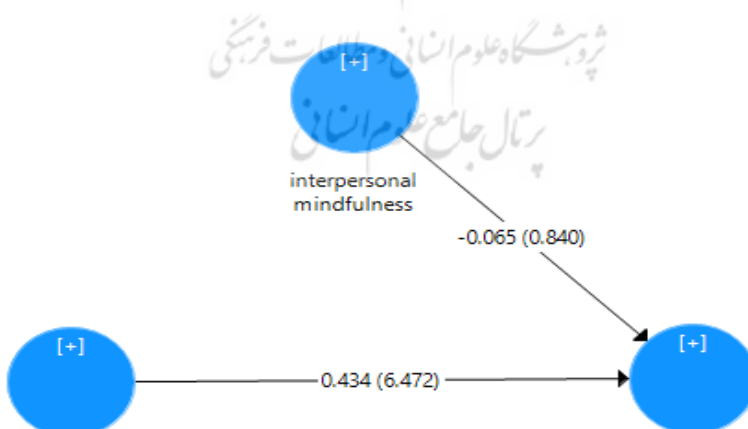


Figure 1: Structural model of the three variables of Interpersonal Mindfulness, Interpersonal Sensitivity, and Marital conflict.

The moderating effect of interpersonal mindfulness

The interaction-moderation method in Smart-PLS 3 software was examined to determine the moderating role of interpersonal mindfulness in the link between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict. The coefficient of the determination (R^2) value is 0.23, which indicates an acceptable coefficient of determination. The effect size (f^2) of interpersonal sensitivity on marital conflict is 0.23, and the value of interpersonal mindfulness on marital conflict is 0.01. The results of the interaction moderation show a positive relationship between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict ($\beta = .45$, T -values= 6.76 > 2.58, $p < 0.001$) and a negative relationship between interpersonal mindfulness and marital conflict ($\beta = -.10$, T -values= 1.24 < 1.96, $p > 0.05$). The interaction effect of interpersonal mindfulness and interpersonal sensitivity had a significant relationship with marital conflict ($\beta = .15$, T -values= 2.43, $p < 0.05$). This consequence shows the buffering role of interpersonal mindfulness in the link between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict.

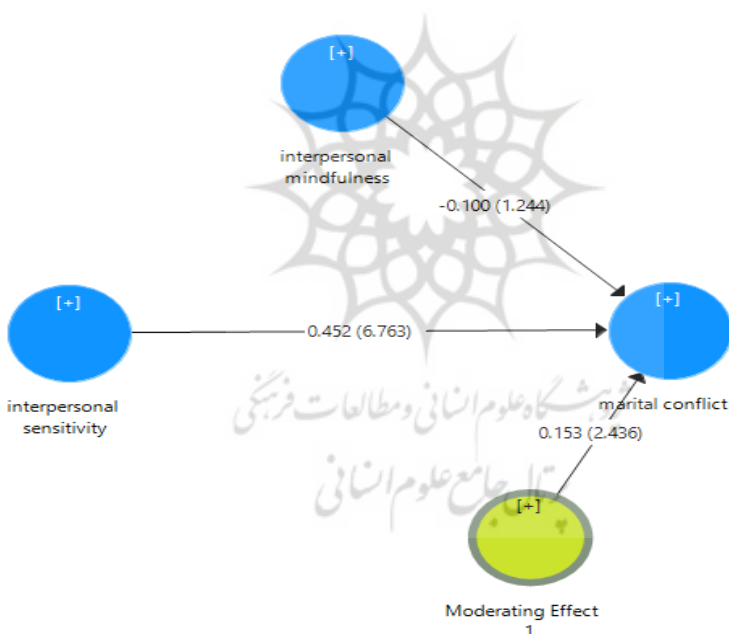


Figure 2: The moderating effect of Interpersonal Mindfulness

Discussion

The purpose of the research is to investigate the moderating role of interpersonal mindfulness in the link between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict. The findings of this research indicate that interpersonal mindfulness has an insignificant negative relationship with marital conflict. The finding is contrary to research that showed the components of non-reaction conscious behavior and non-judgment have a positive and significant relationship with the quality of the relationship and marital satisfaction of couples (mcgill et al.,2020).

The finding is parallel to the research of Prascher et al., in a study in which participants maintained a romantic relationship for at least three months, they found that there is a positive and weak relationship between interpersonal mindfulness and relationship satisfaction (Proscher et al.,2019).

This finding can be explained that interpersonal mindfulness through presence, and non-judgmental self-awareness may reduce marital conflict to some extent, but this reduction is not significant and strong.

Another finding of this research is that interpersonal sensitivity has a positive and significant relationship with marital conflict. This finding is parallel to the research of Amini and Azarmi (2023) which showed that high interpersonal sensitivity due to excessive interpersonal sensitivity weak self-concept and fear of criticism have a significant and negative relationship with marital satisfaction of people.

It is also consistent with researches that show people with high interpersonal sensitivity due to extreme reactions and sensitivities towards the behavior of others and any interpersonal interaction sensitive, these people worry too much, are criticized and rejected by others, and are unable to manage their relationships (Almuqrin et al., 2023).

This finding can be explained that couples with high interpersonal sensitivity interact with each other due to excessive sensitivity to each other's behaviors and emotions and misinterpretation of spouse's behaviors thoughts and emotions, separation anxiety, fragile self-esteem and fear of rejection may cause worry, anxiety, rumination and the occurrence of impulsive reactions in interaction and as a result, they cannot experience a proper couple relationship, and marital conflict may be created or intensified.

The result of this study indicates the moderating role of interpersonal mindfulness in the link between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict.

Therefore, it is predicted that there is a positive and meaningful relationship between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict in couples with a lower level of interpersonal mindfulness.

The effect of predicting interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict in people with higher levels of interpersonal mindfulness is significantly weaker.

The findings of this study are parallel to the studies that showed mindfulness through conscious attention and listening to others, recognizing one's own and others feelings, accepting the thoughts and feelings of others, reducing reactive behaviors towards misbehavior, compassion for oneself and others (Mera et al., 2023; Abdollahi et al.,2020; Duncan et al., 2009)

Spouses are more non-judgmental, empathetic, and compassionate when interacting more harmoniously compatible and intimate (mcgill et al., 2022) conscious response, presence

in the moment and acceptance without judgment have a positive effect on the quality of interpersonal relationships (Pratscher et al., 2018) studies have shown that non-judgment and conscious response is related to relationship satisfaction (Riahifar et al., 2024).

This finding can be explained that when couples are exposed to negative emotions such as anxiety, mindfulness help them to spontaneous thoughts, feelings, and habitual and unconscious reactive behaviors by accepting all the experiences of the present moment, and have a conscious reaction with self-esteem; therefore, it is possible that in couples with the high level of interpersonal sensitivity, a high level of interpersonal mindfulness acts as a buffer against impulsive reaction in interaction.

Thus, the high level of interpersonal mindfulness in couples may lead to a reduction in stress and anxiety in couples by not reacting, being in the moment, and not judging and reducing the consequences and symptoms of interpersonal sensitivity, and as a result, intimacy and compatibility between couples will increase and as a result, the marital conflict will decrease.

Limitations

Some limitations of this study are: 1) measuring variables by self-report instruments, which may be told by other factors (e.g., social utility biases). Thus, multiple assessment styles should be used in future research. 2) examining only the role of interpersonal mindfulness in the relationship between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict; it is suggested to investigate other variables such as emotional intelligence and problem solving styles in future researches. Smartpls3 software was used in this research, it is suggested to use the new version of smartpls4 software in future researches.

Conclusion

The present research shows that interpersonal sensitivity has a positive and significant relationship with marital conflict and indicates that couples with high interpersonal sensitivity are likely to experience more marital conflict. In addition, the results of this research indicates that interpersonal mindfulness specifically moderates the effect of interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict, so it is predicted that there is a positive relationship between interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict in people with low levels of interpersonal mindfulness. While the predictive effect of interpersonal sensitivity and marital conflict in individuals with high levels of interpersonal mindfulness is significantly weaker. This finding showed that a high level of interpersonal mindfulness in couples may lead to a reduction in stress and anxiety in couples by not reacting, being in the moment, and not judging and reducing the consequences and symptoms of interpersonal sensitivity, and as a result, intimacy and compatibility between couples will increase and as a result, the marital conflict will decrease. Based on the results of this study, interventions based on interpersonal mindfulness can help reduce marital conflict and the resulting injuries.

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