Exploring the Mediating Effect of Defensiveness and Relationship Mindfulness on the Link Between Childhood Emotional Maltreatment and Marital Quality

Rahele Sadeghi[1]؛ ahmadreza Kiani*[2]؛ Ali Rezaei Sharif[2]؛ Esmaeil Sadri Damirchi[3]

1. Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.
2. Department of Counseling, Faculty of educational Science and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran. Corresponding Author: a.kiani@uma.ac.ir
3. Professor of Counseling Department, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.

Abstract

Aim: This research was conducted with the aim of investigating the relationship between childhood emotional maltreatment and marital quality with the mediating role of defensiveness and relationship mindfulness.

Method: The current research was descriptive and correlational using the structural equation modeling method. The statistical population of the present study consisted of all the married people of Tehran city in the fall of 2023, and 420 of them were selected from four psychology centers through an online call by the convenience sampling method. The tools of this research include relational-connectivity (R-C S, Galovan, 2021), relationship sabotage scale (RSS, Peel and Caltabiano, 2021), relationship mindfulness measure (RMM, Kimmes et al., 2017) and childhood trauma questionnaire (CTQ, Bernstein et al., 2003). The data were analyzed using the structural equation modeling method with AMOS-24.

Findings: The results indicated the appropriate fit of the model. The findings indicated that defensiveness and relationship mindfulness could predict the quality of marital relationship indirectly through neglect (p > 0.001). However, defensiveness and mindfulness in relation to emotional abuse did not predict the quality of marital relationships (p < 0.001).

Conclusion: Relationship mindfulness and defensiveness play important roles in how childhood neglect impacts relationship quality. These findings underscore the necessity for interventions in marital relationships where childhood emotional neglect has occurred, as these couples may exhibit lower levels of relationship mindfulness and a greater tendency towards defensive behaviors. Therefore, therapy and support programs that target these areas may be particularly beneficial for enhancing relationship quality.

Keywords: Emotional Abuse, Emotional Neglect, Defensiveness, Mindfulness Relationship, Marital quality, Relational-Connectivity.

Introduction

Relationships and marriage are fundamental aspects of adulthood (Gabb et al., 2023), significantly influencing the happiness, mental health, and well-being of families, adults, and children (Umbruson & Thomeer, 2020). Various terms have been used to define marital quality, including marital happiness, satisfaction, stability, success, compatibility, and friendship (Nurhayati et al., 2019). The lack of precise conceptualization in the literature on relationship quality, along with the diverse tools available, has prompted researchers to pursue further theoretical and methodological advancements in this area. Galovan and Schramm (2018) proposed an integrative framework known as the strong relationality model of flourishing, suggesting that relational-connectivity—a deep connection with another individual—is a key outcome in this context (Galovan et al., 2022). In line with Johnson (Macvey & Kasper, 2023), they introduced a structure comprising knowledge and intimate communication, defining relationality-connectivity as a multidimensional structure encompassing mutual friendship, intimacy, and belongingness, which offers a new perspective on relationship quality that distinguishes it from traditional assessments of marital satisfaction.

Marriage is closely linked to physical and psychological well-being, with studies indicating that being married predicts various indicators of mental health, including symptoms of depression and life satisfaction (Kahl Joyce, 2020). Furthermore, the quality of marital relationships serves as a better predictor of happiness and overall well-being than marital status alone (Krys et al., 2021). In light of this, relationship science has focused on identifying factors that contribute to the success or failure of marriages. Among these factors, early childhood experiences, particularly those involving parental interactions, play a crucial role in shaping intimate relationships in adulthood (Borchet et al., 2020).

Research consistently demonstrates that childhood maltreatment has a multifaceted impact on adult relationships. According to attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) and developmental trauma theory (Widom, 2017), experiences of maltreatment and neglect during childhood significantly influence adult attachment patterns. Individuals who endure childhood maltreatment often develop insecure attachment styles, leading to increased conflict and diminished intimacy in romantic relationships. This can result in maladaptive coping strategies and emotional regulation difficulties that further complicate adult relationships. Quantitative and qualitative research (Colman & Widom, 2017; Smith et al., 2019) reveals a dual effect of childhood maltreatment: it heightens negative relational dimensions, such as conflict, while simultaneously reducing positive aspects like intimacy (Fitzgerald, 2021). Understanding how childhood maltreatment contributes to this dichotomy in adult intimate relationships is crucial, particularly given the established link between intimate romantic relationships and mental and physical health (Robles et al., 2014). Identifying pathways that connect childhood maltreatment to relationship quality is essential for informing targeted clinical interventions (Gil et al., 2023).

Recent studies have indicated that mindfulness—defined as the ability to focus attention on the present moment without judgment—can effectively mitigate psychological damage in individuals who have experienced childhood maltreatment (Joss et al., 2019). While quantitative research has predominantly focused on mindfulness's positive effects on marital relationships among those with a history of childhood maltreatment, relationship mindfulness (RM)—the ability to be attentive within romantic relationships—has emerged as a more significant determinant of marital quality than individual mindfulness (Kimmes et al., 2018). Research suggests that childhood maltreatment impairs mindfulness capabilities, posing challenges to RM (Fitzgerald, 2022). For instance, adults who experienced maltreatment in childhood often report heightened levels of fear, anxiety, and negative emotions in romantic contexts (Dorahy et al., 2013). These negative emotional and cognitive states may stem from childhood experiences, manifesting as impulsive behaviors and less attentive communication in adult relationships (Kimmes et al., 2020; Kozlowsky, 2013; McGill & Adler-Baeder, 2019). Consequently, this study aims to examine the mediating role of RM in the relationship between childhood maltreatment and marital relationship quality.

While existing research on mindfulness in the context of couples and childhood maltreatment is limited, emerging empirical studies suggest that mindfulness can enhance marital relationships. Research demonstrates that mindfulness is associated with improved relationship quality (Yang et al., 2023), fewer negative attributions (Kimmes et al., 2017), more fulfilling sexual experiences (Godbout et al., 2020), greater responsiveness to partners, and increased relationship stability (Winter et al., 2010). Individuals who practice mindfulness may experience stronger romantic relationships due to reduced psychological distress, heightened empathy and compassion, and decreased emotional reactivity toward their partners (Kozlowsky, 2013). Pratcher et al. (2019) proposed that relational mindfulness comprises distinct domains, including presence, self- and other-awareness, nonjudgmental acceptance, and nonreactivity. It involves listening attentively to one's partner and being attuned to one's bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts while considering the partner's tone, mood, and body language. Effective communication in romantic relationships necessitates attention to what one's partner expresses and thoughtful, nonjudgmental responses (Pratcher et al., 2019).

Examining variables that contribute to relationship deterioration is crucial for understanding relationship stability. The theoretical literature on destructive patterns in intimate relationships indicates that relationship sabotage encompasses self-destructive attitudes and behaviors that hinder success or justify avoidance (Peel et al., 2019). Individuals exhibiting these patterns often hold insecure views of romantic relationships, leading to expectations of failure despite their efforts to initiate and maintain connections. Relationship sabotage frequently manifests as defensiveness, characterized by contempt and criticism—behaviors described as desperate attempts to gain attention from a partner (Peel et al., 2019). Understanding these sabotaging behaviors aligns with John Gottman's research on divorce predictors, particularly the "Four Horsemen" of criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (Gottman et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that individuals who resort to controlling or overly pursuing behaviors may inadvertently alienate their partners, ultimately undermining their relationships (İyiaydın & Sumer,

2023). Peel (2019) highlighted the influence of attachment on relationship sabotage and its significant role in stress perception and marital quality.

In summary, while childhood emotional maltreatment (CEM) is a significant risk factor for long-term emotional and relational issues, the mechanisms through which it affects marital quality remain poorly understood. This study aims to investigate how psychological factors, particularly defensiveness and relationship mindfulness, mediate the relationship between CEM and marital quality. Understanding these mediators is essential, as defensiveness can impede communication and intimacy, whereas relationship mindfulness may enhance emotional attunement and conflict resolution. Given the scarcity of research on these variables both in Iran and internationally, and in light of increasing divorce rates linked to declining marital quality, exploring these influencing factors is vital. The study will focus on the impact of early family experiences, especially emotional abuse, on relationship quality.

Methods

The present study employed a descriptive-correlational approach using structural equation modeling. The exogenous variable in this research was childhood emotional maltreatment (neglect and abuse), the mediating variables were defensiveness and relationship mindfulness (endogenous), and the dependent variable was marital relationship quality. The population of this study consisted of all married individuals in Tehran in the summer of 2023 who participated in the research through an online questionnaire by the convenience sampling method from four psychology centers located in districts 2, 5 and 13 of Tehran. The questionnaire link was sent to individuals via SMS, email, and social media platforms. Inclusion criteria included: being married, age range 18 to 45 years, having consent to complete the questionnaire, at least one year has passed since the beginning of cohabitation. exclusion criteria included: having previous marriage experience, temporary marriage, and divorce. The sample size was determined based on Westland's recommendation (2010), which provides an algorithm for determining the minimum sample size in structural equation modeling studies based on the assumption of normality of data. The sample size recommendation was calculated to be 420 participants considering an anticipated effect size (0.19) (as suggested by Chin, 1998), a desired statistical power level (0.80), and a probability level (0.05). Out of 420 completed questionnaires, 43 people were excluded from the sample in data screening such as unengaged cases, outlier data and due to not meeting the research conditions, including remarriage, cohabitation, temporary marriage, age over 45 years; A total of 378 people were included in the final analysis. To analyze the collected data, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to check the normality of study variables. Therefore, the study variables are not normally distributed because this test is significant for the study variables. Finally, Data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS version 24 software. Statistical results are considered significant at the 0.05 level

Relational-connectivity scale (R-C S): This scale desined by Galovan et al. in 2022, to measure marital quality will be used, which includes three elements of sense of belonging, friendship and intimacy (Galovan et al., 2022). It consists of 12 items and is scored on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). In this scale, the lowest score will be 12 and the highest score will be 144. A higher score indicates good relationship quality. Cronbach's alpha coefficient reported sense of belonging (0.88 for men, 0.86 for women), friendship (0.90 for men and 0.89 for women) and intimacy (0.90 for men and 0.88 for women). Considering that this scale has not been validated in Iran, for this purpose, the questionnaire was first translated into Farsi by two English language experts and two psychology and counseling experts. Then, the back translation was done in English. After face validity and forward-backward translations, in the next step content validity was checked with two forms of content validity index and content validity ratio. Fifteen psychologists and counselors answered both forms. Two items in the content validity index were less than 79% and were corrected by two translation experts. Checking the content validity ratio index for all items is above 60%, which did not need to remove any items. Then, in a preliminary study, the questionnaire was given to 20 married people, and after collecting the questionnaire, words that were not understandable were rewritten. Cronbach's alpha of relational-connectivity scale was 0.954 and the results of confirmatory factor analysis showed a good fit with the data ($\chi=2.90$, DF=36, x2/df=2.50, RMSEA=0.06, 0.98 = IFI, GFI = 0.95, NFI = 0.97, CFI = 0.98).

Relationship sabotage scale (RSS): This scale was designed in 2021 by Peel and Caltabiano to measure self-destructive (defeat) attitudes and behaviors in a relationship that a person uses to prevent success, attempt to be excluded, or justify failure in a relationship. It consists of 12 items and three subscales defensiveness, trust difficulty, and lack of relationship skills. Scoring is on a 7-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for these three subscales are reported as 0.85, 0.60, and 0.75. only the subscale of defensiveness was used. The results of confirmatory factor analysis showed a good fit with the data ($2\chi=90.86$, DF=40, x2/df=2.27, RMSEA=0.058, IFI=0.96, GFI=0.96, DF=0.93 NFI = 0, CFI = 0.96).

Relationship Mindfulness Measure (RMM): kimmes et al. in 2017 designed this measure to assess degree to which one tends to be mindful in the context of his or her romantic relationship. It consists of 5 items scored on a 6-point Likert scale from almost never (1) to almost always (6). In this scale, the lowest score will be 5 and the highest score will be 30. Higher scores indicate higher levels of mindfulness in romantic relationships. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was reported as 0.86 in the initial study and 0.93 in a subsequent study. Additionally, in another report, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.87 for women and 0.89 for men (Kimmes et al., 2019). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha for this scale was found to be 0.744.

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ): The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, developed by Bernstein et al. (2003), is designed to assess trauma experienced during childhood and adolescence through self-report. It consists of 5 subscales: emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect. Considering the study objectives, only the emotional abuse and emotional neglect subscales were used to assess childhood emotional maltreatment, following the recommendation of English et al. (2018). Scoring is done on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Never True (1) to Very True (5) for me. Struck et al. (2020) reported the reliability of emotional abuse and emotional neglect as 0.91 and 0.86, respectively. In Iran, Ebrahimi et al. (2014) estimated its Cronbach's alpha for subscales from 0.98-0.81, which shows that it has very good internal consistency. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found to be 0.721 for emotional neglect and 0.813 for emotional abuse during childhood.

Results

The demographic characteristics of the research sample showed that participants' ages ranged from 23 to 45 years, 63.4% female and 36.6% male. Among them, 62.5% had children, while 37.5% did not. Additionally, 5.4% reported using psychiatric medications, and 6.5% had utilized counseling services. Regarding level of education, 1.16% had below high school education, 1.8% had a high school diploma, 4.38% had an associate degree, 27% had a bachelor's degree, and 3.9% had a doctorate. Table 1 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients and descriptive statistics of the research variables.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and Correlation coefficient of the variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. emotional neglect	-				
2. emotional abuse	0.44**	-			
3. defensiveness	0.26**	0.22**	-		
4. relationship mindfulness	-0.21**	-0.15**	-0.32**	-	
5. relational-connectivity	-0.26**	-0.14**	0.65**	0.27**	-
mean	12.43	6.94	67.13	20.13	85.12
SD	4.98	3.09	6.75	3.34	21.54
Skewness	0.32	1.98	0.4	-0.78	-1.23
Kurtosis	-0.85	3.45	-0.92	0.82	1.12

**P<0/01

As seen in Table 1, there was a significant positive relationship between emotional neglect (r = -0.26), emotional abuse (r = -0.14), defensiveness (r = 0.65), and relationship mindfulness (r = -0.32) with relational-connectivity. Additionally, the mean and standard deviation of the research variables along with skewness and kurtosis were examined. Before conducting the analysis, the normality of variables, independence of errors, and multicollinearity of predictor variables were assessed. The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated the normal distribution of research variables (P > 0.05). The Durbin-Watson statistic (1.75) fell within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5, indicating independence of errors. The tolerance and variance inflation factor for all predictor

variables were less than 10, indicating no multicollinearity among variables. Path analysis was used to test the model, examining the mediating role of defensiveness and relationship mindfulness.

In AMOS software, the research measurement model was first implemented and analyzed based on statistical rules. The factor loadings of all variables were greater than 0.5 and the validity and reliability indices were evaluated, which can be seen in the table below.

Table 2. Reliability and validity indicators of the measurement model

	CR	AVE	MSV	Relational-connectivity	Defensive-ness	Emotional neglect	Relationship mindfulness	Emotional abuse
Relational-connectivity	0.96	0.68	0.56	**0.82**				
defensiveness	0.87	0.64	0.56	-0.75***	**0.80**			
Emotional neglect	0.81	0.60	0.16	-0.30***	0.33***	**0.77**		
Relationship mindfulness	0.70	0.57	0.09	0.24***	-0.30***	-0.25***	**0.61**	
Emotional abuse	0.74	0.59	0.16	-0.15*	0.25***	0.40***	-0.09	**0.70**

According to Henseler et al (2015) the necessary conditions for examining convergent validity are: composite reliability (CR) is greater than 0.7, average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than 0.5, and composite reliability (CR) is greater than the average variance extracted (AVE). Also, the necessary conditions for divergent or discriminant validity are: the average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than the maximum shared variance (MSV) and the average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than the maximum shared variance (ASV) (Henseler et al., 2015). As can be seen in Table 2, all conditions of convergent validity and divergent validity are established. Another indicator of divergent validity is the use of the Fornell-Larker matrix, so that the average square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) of each variable must be greater than the correlation of that variable with other variables. According to the correlation matrix in Table No. 2, the AVE root of each variable is greater than the row and column in which it is located; Therefore, the Fornell-Larker test is valid.

To execute the structural equation model, it is necessary to first examine the model fit indices. For this purpose, fit indices, their values, and acceptable thresholds are provided in Table 2. After model modification, all fit indices indicated excellent fit.

Table 3. model fit

Measure	Estimate	Threshold	Interpretation
CMIN	566.634	--	--
DF	255.000	--	--
CMIN/DF	2.222	Between 1 and 3	Excellent
CFI	0.952	>0.95	Excellent
SRMR	0.066	<0.08	Excellent
RMSEA	0.057	<0.06	Excellent
PClose	0.035	>0.05	Acceptable

The model in Figure 1 and the measurement parameters of direct and indirect relationships are presented in Tables 4 and 5.
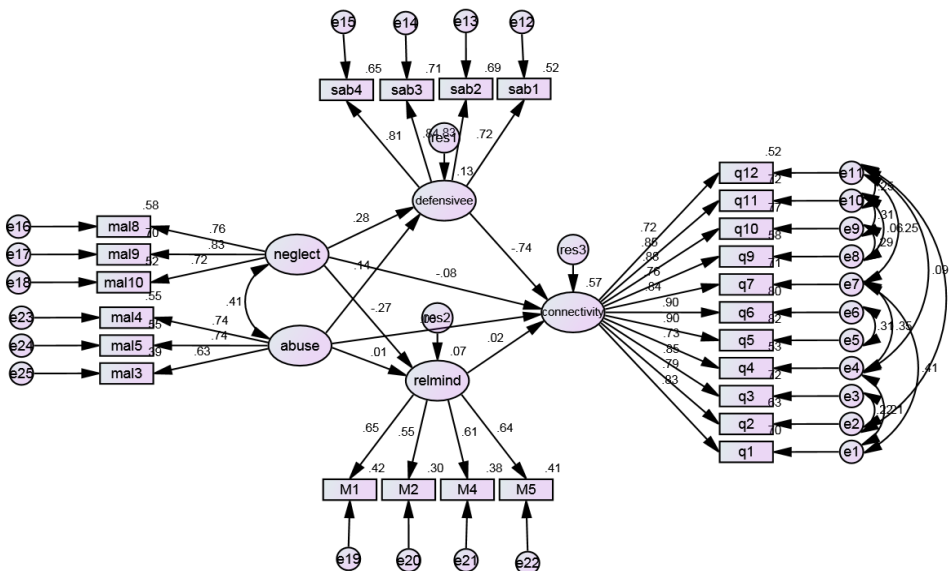

Figure 1. mediation pathway for emotional neglect, emotional abuse, defensiveness, relationship mindfulness and relational-connectivity

As depicted in Figure 1, the current research model is illustrated. Direct and indirect paths between research variables and relational-connectivity are detailed in Tables 4 and 5. To assess the significance of research hypotheses, critical ratio (t) was utilized. Any variable with t values greater or less than ±1.96 indicates a significant (P < 0.001) direct impact on the criterion variable. The presented results demonstrate a significant direct and positive effect of emotional neglect on defensiveness (P = 0.001, β = 0.39). Additionally,

a significant direct and positive effect of emotional abuse on defensiveness (P = 0.04, β = 0.33), a significant direct negative effect of emotional neglect on relationship mindfulness (P = 0.001, β = -0.15), and no significant effect of emotional abuse on relationship mindfulness (P = 0.92, β = 0.007) were observed. Furthermore, there was no significant effect of emotional neglect (P = 0.110, β = 0.12) or emotional abuse (P = 0.20, β = 0.15) on relational-connectivity. A significant direct negative effect of defensiveness on relationship quality (P = 0.001, β = 0.76) and no significant effect of relationship mindfulness on relational-connectivity (P = 0.68, β = 0.04) were also evident. Results in Table 4 illustrate that emotional neglect has a significant indirect effect on relational-connectivity through defensiveness and relationship mindfulness, in addition to its direct effect. The magnitude of the indirect effect of emotional neglect on relational-connectivity is 0.31. To assess the significance of indirect effects, bootstrapping with bias-corrected confidence intervals was employed. When confidence intervals do not include zero, or in other words, zero is not between the lower and upper bounds, it can be inferred that the indirect effect is significantly different from zero. Bootstrapping is a robust alternative to the Sobel test and has greater power. Therefore, the upper and lower bounds in the results indicate significance only for the indirect path from emotional neglect to relational-connectivity.

Table 4. Direct effect coefficients of research variables

Predictor variable	Dependent variable	Path coefficients	Standard deviation	T-value	p
Emotional neglect	defensiveness	0.39	0.09	4.15	0.001
Emotional abuse	defensiveness	0.33	0.16	2.04	0.04
Emotional neglect	Relationship mindfulness	-0.15	0.04	-3.38	0.001
Emotional abuse	Relationship mindfulness	0.007	0.07	0.008	0.92
Emotional neglect	Relational-connectivity	_0.12	0.07	-1.59	0.11
Emotional abuse	Relational-connectivity	_0.15	0.12	1.26	0.20
defensiveness	Relational-connectivity	_0.76	0.06	-11.74	0.001
Relationship mindfulness	Relational-connectivity	0.04	0.11	0.41	0.68

Table 4. indirect effect coefficients of research variables

Relationship variables	Direct effect	Indirect effect	p	Lower bound	Upper bound
Emotional neglect→relational-connectivity	-0.12	-0.31	0.001	-0.49	-0.14
Emotional abuse→relational-connectivity	0.15	-0.25	0.070	-0.52	0.02

squred multiple correlation (R²): relationship mindfulness (0.06), defensiveness (0.13) and relational connectivity (0.57)

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the mediating roles of defensiveness and relationship mindfulness in the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and emotional abuse with marital quality. This model was able to predict 57% of relationship quality, According to Hair (2010), this is a good prediction for the model. The findings indicate that emotional neglect, rather than emotional abuse, indirectly predicts marital quality through its impact on defensiveness and relationship mindfulness. These results provide important insights into how childhood experiences shape adult relational patterns and highlight the significant role that defensiveness and mindfulness within relationships play in mediating the long-term effects of early emotional maltreatment on marital satisfaction. These results align with studies by Kimmes et al. (2020), McGill and Adler-Baeder (2019), and Kozlowsky (2013), regarding the mediating role of defensiveness and relationship mindfulness in the association between childhood emotional maltreatment and marital relationship quality. The results can be explained in light of attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), which suggests that individuals exposed to emotional neglect during childhood are more likely to develop insecure attachment styles. These attachment styles, characterized by anxious or avoidant behavior, often manifest in adulthood as maladaptive relational behaviors such as defensiveness. Defensiveness, defined as a self-protective strategy involving criticism, contempt, or avoidance, is a well-established predictor of poor relationship outcomes. Consistent with Gottman's Four Horsemen model (Gottman et al., 2020), defensiveness is one of the key behaviors that erode relational satisfaction by creating barriers to effective communication and emotional intimacy. The current study confirms this theory by showing that defensiveness serves as a critical mediator in the pathway between childhood neglect and lower marital quality, suggesting that unresolved attachment issues from childhood carry over into adult relationships, where they hinder emotional attunement and connection.

Moreover, the study's findings contribute to the growing body of research on relationship mindfulness—the ability to be fully present and non-judgmental in one's interactions with a romantic partner. The results show that individuals who experienced emotional neglect in childhood tend to have lower levels of mindfulness within their romantic relationships, which in turn diminishes relationship quality. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Kimmes et al., 2018; Fitzgerald, 2022) that demonstrate how early maltreatment disrupts emotional regulation and reduces the capacity for mindfulness in adulthood. Adults who were neglected as children often experience heightened levels of fear, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation in romantic contexts (Dorahy et al., 2013), making it difficult for them to engage in mindful and present interactions with their partners. This is in line with developmental trauma theory (Widom, 2017), which suggests that

childhood maltreatment interferes with the development of core emotional and cognitive skills, such as self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation, all of which are crucial for practicing mindfulness within relationships.

Interestingly, while defensiveness showed a significant negative impact on marital quality, relationship mindfulness alone did not emerge as a strong predictor of marital quality in this study. This finding diverges from previous research that suggests mindfulness generally improves relationship satisfaction (Godbout et al., 2020; Kimmes et al., 2017). One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that mindfulness may not directly influence overall relationship quality, but instead may work indirectly by improving communication patterns or reducing emotional reactivity, as suggested by Pratscher et al. (2019). Furthermore, the context of childhood trauma might complicate the effects of mindfulness on relationship outcomes. Individuals with a history of emotional neglect may struggle to fully engage in mindfulness practices due to deeply ingrained trust issues or emotional withdrawal, which could explain why relationship mindfulness did not significantly enhance marital quality in this sample.

The significant mediating role of defensiveness in this study highlights the importance of addressing self-destructive relational behaviors in therapeutic settings, particularly for individuals who have experienced childhood neglect**.** Peel and Caltabiano (2019) describe defensiveness as a key element of relationship sabotage—a pattern of behavior where individuals, often unconsciously, undermine their own relationship success due to feelings of insecurity or fear of vulnerability. Insecure attachment styles, resulting from emotional neglect, predispose individuals to use defensive behaviors as a form of emotional self-preservation, although this often leads to the opposite effect: relational disconnection and conflict. Addressing defensiveness through interventions such as Gottman's couple therapy, which focuses on reducing destructive communication (Turan & Iyldirim, 2023) patterns like criticism and contempt, may be particularly effective for couples where childhood neglect is a significant factor (Gottman et al., 2020).

Additionally, while relationship mindfulness did not directly predict marital quality, it remains a promising target for therapeutic interventions. Increasing mindfulness within relationships has been shown to enhance emotional attunement, improve communication, and reduce stress responses in romantic contexts (Kimmes et al., 2020; McGill & Adler-Baeder, 2019; Kozlowsky (2013). Mindfulness-based interventions could help individuals who experienced emotional neglect to become more aware of their automatic reactions to relationship stressors, promoting greater emotional regulation and empathy within their romantic relationships. For example, teaching mindfulness skills in therapy could allow individuals to develop more adaptive emotional responses, reduce impulsive behaviors, and foster a deeper emotional connection with their partners (Karremans et al., 2017).

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings. The sample

consisted of married individuals from Tehran, which restricts the applicability of the results to other regions or populations with different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Second, the self-report nature of the data collection introduces the potential for biases such as social desirability and inaccurate self-perception, which may have affected the participants' responses. Third, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to infer causality between childhood emotional maltreatment, defensiveness, mindfulness, and marital quality. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial in establishing the direction of these relationships over time.

Additionally, the study focused solely on emotional neglect and emotional abuse as forms of childhood maltreatment, omitting other forms such as physical or sexual abuse that could also impact marital quality. Finally, the exclusion of individuals with previous marriages or temporary marriages may have limited the study's scope, as these factors can introduce unique dynamics into marital relationships that were not explored.

Future research should address these limitations by using more diverse samples, employing longitudinal designs, and exploring other forms of childhood maltreatment and relationship dynamics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides important insights into the long-term relational impacts of childhood emotional neglect. Defensiveness emerged as a key mediator between childhood neglect and lower marital quality, emphasizing the role of maladaptive relational patterns in shaping adult relationships. Although relationship mindfulness did not directly predict marital quality, its relationship with emotional neglect suggests that improving mindfulness could still offer benefits for couples struggling with the residual effects of childhood trauma. Interventions aimed at reducing defensiveness and promoting mindfulness within relationships may be particularly beneficial for couples with histories of emotional neglect, potentially improving both communication and emotional intimacy. Understanding how early life experiences continue to influence relational dynamics in adulthood is crucial for developing targeted therapeutic approaches that can enhance marital satisfaction and relationship stability.

Disclosure Statements

ORCID
0000-0001-6035-6752

References

Baucom, D. H., Whisman, M. A., & Paprocki, C. (2012). Couple-based interventions for psychopathology. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 34(3), 250–270. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6427.2012.00600.x

Bernstein, D. P., Stein, J. A., Newcomb, M. D., Walker, E., Pogge, D., Ahluvalia, T., ... & Zule, W. (2003). Development and validation of a brief screening version of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire. Child abuse & neglect, 27(2), 169-190. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(02)00541-0

Bolduc, R., Bigras, N., Daspe, M. E., H ebert, M., & Godbout, N. (2018). Childhood cumulative trauma and depressive symptoms in adulthood: The role of mindfulness and dissociation. Mindfulness, 9(5), 1594–1603. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-018-0906-3

Borchet, J., Lewandowska-Walter, A., Połomski, P., Peplińska, A., & Hooper, L. M. (2020). We are in this together: Retrospective parentification, sibling relationships, and self-esteem. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *29*, 2982-2991. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-020-01723-3

Cox, C. C., Adler-Baeder, F., McGill, J., & Cooper, E. (2020). The influence of anxiety and mindfulness on relationship quality: An investigation of comparative and dyadic effects. *Mindfulness, 11*(8), 1956–1966. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01404-8

Dorahy, M. J., Corry, M., Shannon, M., Webb, K., McDermott, B., Ryan, M., & Dyer, K. F. (2013). Complex trauma and intimate relationships: The impact of shame, guilt and dissociation. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 147(1–3), 72–79. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2012.10.010

Ebrahimi H, Dejkam M, Seghatoleslam T. (2014). Childhood Traumas and Suicide Attempt in adulthood . *IJPCP* .19(4) :275-282. http://ijpcp.iums.ac.ir/article-1-2090-fa.html

English, L. H., Wisener, M., & Bailey, H. N. (2018). Childhood emotional maltreatment, anxiety, attachment, and mindfulness: Associations with facial emotion recognition. *Child abuse & neglect*, *80*, 146-160. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.02.006

Fitzgerald, M. (2021). Developmental pathways from childhood maltreatment to young adult romantic relationship functioning. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, *22*(5), 581-597. https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2020.1869653

Fitzgerald, M. (2022). Childhood maltreatment is associated with adult psychopathology through decreased dispositional mindfulness. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, *31*(10), 1263-1278. https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2022.2043971

Gabb, J., Aicken, C., Di Martino, S., Witney, T., & Lucassen, M. (2023). More–than–relationship quality: A feminist new materialist analysis of relationship quality and the potential of digital couple interventions. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12509

Galovan, A. M., Carroll, J. S., Schramm, D. G., Leonhardt, N. D., Zuluaga, J., McKenadel, S. E., & Oleksuik, M. R. (2022). Satisfaction or connectivity?: Implications from the strong relationality model of flourishing couple relationships. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *48*(3), 883-907. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12559

Galovan, A. M., & Schramm, D. G. (2018). Strong relationality and ethical responsiveness: A framework and conceptual model for family science. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10(1), 199–218. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12238

Gil, M., Kim, S. S., Kim, D., Han, H., Lim, B., & De Gagne, J. C. (2023). Couple-Oriented Interventions for Mental Health: A Scoping Review. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 10748407231198249. https://doi.org/10.1177/10748407231198249

Godbout, N., Bakhos, G., Dussault, E., & Hebert, M. (2020). Childhood interpersonal trauma and sexual satisfaction in patients seeing sex therapy: Examining mindfulness and psychological distress as mediators. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 46(1), 43–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2019.1626309

Gottman, J. M., Gottman, J. S., Cole, C., & Preciado, M. (2020). Gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples about to begin couples therapy: An online relationship assessment of 40,681 couples. *Journal of marital and family therapy*, *46*(2), 218-239. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12395

İyiaydın, A. A., & Sümer, Z. H. (2023). The mediational role of intimate partner acceptance and psychological adjustment in the relationship between intimate partner control and marital adjustment. *Current Psychology*, *42*(2), 1598-1608.

Joss, D., Khan, A., Lazar, S. W., & Teicher, M. H. (2019). Effects of a mindfulness-based intervention on self-compassion and psychological health among young adults with a history of childhood maltreatment. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2373. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02373

Kahl Joyce, M. (2020). Wellbeing and marriage: does marriage improve mental health?. *Undergraduate economic review*, *16*(1), e16-e16. https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/uer/vol16/iss1/16

Karremans, J. C., Schellekens, M. P., & Kappen, G. (2017). Bridging the sciences of mindfulness and romantic relationships: A theoretical model and research agenda. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *21*(1), 29-49. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868315615450

Kimmes, J. G., Jaurequi, M. E., May, R. W., Srivastava, S., & Fincham, F. D. (2018). Mindfulness in the context of romantic relationships: Initial development and validation of the Relationship Mindfulness Measure. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *44*(4), 575-589. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12296

Kimmes, J. G., Jaurequi, M. E., Roberts, K., Harris, V. W., & Fincham, F. D. (2020). An examination of the association between relationship mindfulness and psychological and relational well- being in committed couples. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *46*(1), 30-41. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12388

Kozlowski, A. (2013). Mindful mating: Exploring the connection between mindfulness and

relationship satisfaction. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 28(1–2), 92–104. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2012.748889

Krys, K., Capaldi, C. A., Zelenski, J. M., Park, J., Nader, M., Kocimska-Zych, A., ... & Uchida, Y. (2021). Family well-being is valued more than personal well-being: A four-country study. *Current Psychology*, *40*, 3332-3343. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00249-2

McGill, J., & Adler-Baeder, F. (2019). Exploring the link between mindfulness and relationship quality: Direct and indirect pathways. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 46(3), 523–540. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12412

Mcvey, M. D., & kasper, J. Z. (2023). EMOTIONALLY FOCUSED THERAPY WITH COUPLES. *Marriage and Family Therapy: A Practice-Oriented Approach*, 323. https://doi.org/1001891/9780826145383

Nurhayati, S. R., Faturochman, F., & Helmi, A. F. (2019). Marital quality: A conceptual review. *Buletin Psikologi*, *27*(2), 109-124. https://journal.ugm.ac.id/buletinpsikologi/article/download/37691/26457

Peel, R., Caltabiano, N., Buckby, B., & McBain, K. (2019). Defining romantic self-sabotage: a thematic analysis of interviews with practising psychologists. *Journal of Relationships Research*, *10*, e16. https://doi.org/10.1017/jrr.2019.7

Pratscher, S. D., Wood, P. K., King, L. A., & Bettencourt, B. A. (2019). Interpersonal mindfulness: Scale development and initial construct validation. *Mindfulness*, 10(6), 1044–1061. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12671-018-1057-2

Robles, T. F., Slatcher, R. B., Trombello, J. M., & McGinn, M. M. (2014). Marital quality and health: a meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 140(1), 140–187. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031859

Struck, N., Krug, A., Yuksel, D., Stein, F., Schmitt, S., Meller, T., ... & Brakemeier, E. L. (2020). Childhood maltreatment and adult mental disorders–the prevalence of different types of maltreatment and associations with age of onset and severity of symptoms. *Psychiatry research*, *293*, 113398. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113398

Turan, R., & Yildirim, İ. (2023). Turkish Adaptation of the Relationship Sabotage Scale: A Validity and Reliability Study. *Turkish Psychological Counseling and Guidance Journal*, *13*(70), 345-359. https://doi.org/10.17066/tpdrd.1266739.6

Umberson, D., & Thomeer, M. B. (2020). Family matters: Research on family ties and health, 2010 to 2020. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, **82**(1), 404–419. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12640

Yang, J., Lin, X. Z., Guo, Q. W., Wang, C. L., Yang, R. Y., Zhang, J. W., & Zeng, Y. (2023). Mediating effect of mindfulness level on the relationship between marital quality and postpartum depression among primiparas. *World Journal of Clinical Cases*, *11*(12), 2729. https://doi.org/10.12998/wjcc.v11.i12.2729

Yekta, F. F., Yaghoubi, H., Ghomian, S., & Gholami Fesharaki, M. (2022). Mediators for Effect of Mindfulness in Promoting Marital Satisfaction: Modeling Structural

Equations in an Experimental Study. *Iranian journal of psychiatry*, *17*(1), 72–83. https://doi.org/10.18502/ijps.v17i1.8051