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Research Paper

The Role of Object Relations in Predicting Emotional Expression, Distress Tolerance and Marital Quality



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to investigate the role of object relations in predicting emotional expression, distress tolerance and marital quality.

Methods: The research method was quantitative, applied and descriptive-correlational. The statistical population of the study was all 257 couples which formally married in the first three months of 2022 in Ardebil. The non-random available sampling method was used due to the limitations of the corona pandemic. The sample size was 110 couples, including 110 males and 110 females. Bell Object Relationships Inventory (1995), King & Ammons Emotional Expression Questionnaire (1990), Distress Tolerance Scale (DTS) and Basby Marital Quality Questionnaire (1995) were used for data collection. In the descriptive part, we used the central and dispersion indices. Also, in the inferential part, multiple regression was used. The data were analyzed using SPSS software.

Results: The results of this study showed there is a significant negative relationship between social incompetence with emotional expression, distress tolerance and marital quality ($p < 0.01$), and a significant negative relationship between egocentricity with emotional expression, distress tolerance and marital quality ($p < 0.01$). Also, there is a significant negative relationship between insecure attachment with emotional expression, distress tolerance and marital quality ($p < 0.01$) and finally there is a significant negative relationship between alienation with emotional expression, distress tolerance and marital quality ($p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: Considering the results, couple therapy based on object relations can be used to improve emotional expression, distress tolerance and marital quality of couples.

1. Introduction

The family is one of the main institutions in a society. In healthy family, members must have good mental health and interpersonal relationships (Darbani, Farrokhzad & Lotfi Kashani, 2020). The basis of the formation and growth of the family is the couple's relationship. But during the time, many factors can sometimes come together to create many problems that eventually lead to conflict in couples (Waring,

2013) such as differences in beliefs, values, needs, desires, and habits, so it is obvious that no human relationship can be free from strife and misunderstanding (Tolorunleke, 2014), but how to be relationships between couples is widely controversial (Allendorf & Gimayer, 2013; Rogers & Amato, 1997; Zhang et al., 2013; Amato, Johnson, Booth & Rogers, 2003).

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Among the concepts that contribute to the image of the family is marital quality which illustrates the existence of good aspects in marital life and the absence of bad aspects in it. Marital quality is an important dimension of family life, which is of great importance to study in many respects (Rogers & Amato, 1997; Schramm & Harris, 2011). For example, the relationship between higher levels of marital quality with many positive outcomes, such as less depression and greater health in various studies, has been confirmed. The marital quality affects not only one's health and well-being but also one's relationships with others. The low marital quality can lead to the separation of spouses (Ross, Mirowsky & Goldstein, 1990; Umberson & Williams, 2005; Wickrama, Lorenz, Conger & Elder, 1997; Cowan & Cowan, 2005; Beach, Whisman & O'Leary, 1994).

Distress tolerance refers to the perceived capacity to withstand negative emotional or physiological states and to the behavioral manifestation of distressing internal states that are recalled by various types of stressors (Lavasani & Assyrian, 2017; Zvolensky, Vujanovic, Bernstein & Leyro, 2010). People with higher levels of tolerate distress are more able to respond to distressing situations. Distress tolerance may affect or may be affected by a number of self-regulated processes, including cognitive assessments of emotional or physical distressing states (Zvolensky et al., 2010). Veilleux, Hyde & Clift (2022) concluded in a study that 82% of people believe their distress tolerance is impaired under stress, negative mood, and lack of social support.

Researchers identify the lack of awareness of the personality traits of the spouse as one of the factors that cause conflicts (Navabi Far, Atashpour & Golparvar, 2020). Also, having romantic relationships requires the ability to recognize and express emotions (Feldman Barrett et al., 2019). Emotional expression refers to any facial changes, physical movements, or verbal expressions that reliably convey an emotional state (Konishi, Froyen, Skibbe, & Bowles, 2018). Yildirim-Celik et al. (2022) concluded that expression is associated with some of the couple features, including marital satisfaction. Emotionally empowered couples recognize their feelings in the face of whatever is annoying, understand the implicit concepts, and more effectively express their emotional states to their spouse (Nawabi Far et al., 2020). These couples are more successful in coping with negative experiences and show more appropriate marital adjustment in relation to the marital living space (Konishi et al., 2018).

The object-oriented couple therapy is one of the few

approaches that has paid particular attention to emotional expression (Scharff, 2014). The assumption of object-based couple therapy is that individuals are prone to engaging in problem conservation patterns of interactions because they establish their current relationships based on the intuitive communication maps that have been formed during the early years of life (Glick, Rait, Heru & Ascher, 2017). In this approach, it is believed that a person's current communication problems are a reflection of the main family issues because each person has idealistic beliefs about marital relationships and wants to satisfy his unfulfilled needs from childhood relationships with his parents in a marital relationship (Siegel, 2020). The results showed that there was a significant relationship between object relations and distress tolerance (Fuchshuber et al., 2019, Conradi, Conradi, Kampuis & Jonge, 2018). Hosseini, Vakili, and Abu al-Maali al-Husseini (2021) found that couple therapeutic intervention of object relationships is a good way to increase positive emotional expression and intimate emotional expression as well as to reduce negative emotional expression in spouses. Jahanbakhshian et al. (2019) concluded short-term couple therapy based on object relations can be used to increase marital adjustment and resolve conflicts.

Due to the importance of marital life, different approaches to couple therapy have been designed and applied to increase the compatibility and reduce the communication disturbances of couples. But most approaches do not address the emotional underpinnings and causes; however, object-oriented couple therapy is one of the few approaches that has paid particular attention to emotional expression. On the other hand, considering the costs that dysfunctional marital relationships have for families, couples, children, and society, investigating its underlying factors is one of the important research needs in the field of family health. So, the researchers tried to answer the question whether there is a relationship between object relations with emotional expression, distress, and marital quality and whether object relations can predict emotional expression, distress, and marital quality or not?

2. Materials and Methods

This research was quantitative, applied and descriptive-correlational. The statistical population of the study was all 257 couples which formally married in the first three months of 2022 in Ardabil according to statistics obtained from the Marriage Registration Offices of Ardebil. Due to the high size of the statistical population, Cochran formula was used.

With the Cochran formula, the number obtained for the sample size of 257 couples or 514 people ($n = 514$) was 220 people that means 110 couples. Since data collection was done in Corona Pandemic Conditions, there was no random sample access. So, non-random available sampling method was used. With the necessary licenses and ethical considerations, the phone number of 110 couples was received and the relevant questionnaires were sent to them virtually. In the first place of the 220 distributed questionnaires, the data of 52 questionnaires were incomplete, which was forced to compensate for the sample size of 52 other population from the statistical population to complete the sample size.

Bell Object Relations Inventory (BORI): It was designed and validated by Bell in 1995, consisting of 45 questions in 4 components. The answer is based on a five-degree Likert scale. The four sub-scale measures alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for these subscales were 0.76, 0.71, 0.63 and 0.60 respectively.

The Emotional Expression Questionnaire: it consists of 16 items designed by King and Ammons (1990) and have three components. The components are positive emotion, intimacy, and negative emotion. The reliability of this scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and its value was 0.68 in this study. Also, regarding the validity of the

questionnaire, this scale had a high and significant similarity between subscales.

The distress tolerance scale: It is a self-measurement index of emotional distress tolerance that has 15 items and four subscales of tolerance, absorption, evaluation and regulation. Simmons and Gaher (2005) reported an alpha coefficient of 0.82 for the entire scale. They have also reported that this questionnaire has good initial convergent and criterion validity. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.79.

Marital Quality Scale: This scale is a revised form of Busby, Crown, Larsen and Christensen, developed in 1995 and used to measure the quality of marital relationships. The reliability of the Cronbach's alpha questionnaire was reported in the study of Holist, Cody and Miller (2005) for the three subscales of agreement, satisfaction and cohesion from 0.79, 0.80 and 0.90, respectively. The validity of the marital quality questionnaire was tested in relation to concepts based on structures such as marital satisfaction, couple correlation, and couple agreement. Convergent validity coefficients were significant. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha of subscales were 0.81, 0.82 and 0.88 respectively.

3. Results

In the descriptive section, the mean and standard deviation values of variables were obtained as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of the research variables

Variable	Mean	SD
Object relations	32.32	14.28
Emotional expression	46.56	16.33
Distress tolerance	43.80	14.55
Marital quality	32.96	15.05

Before performing the hypothesis tests, the normal or abnormal distribution of the data was first determined using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Since the significance level for the variables was above 0.05 (5%), the data has a normal distribution and parametric tests can be used for data analysis.

Pearson correlation test was used to investigate the relationship between research variables. The results of

the correlation coefficient in Table 2 are shown that since the significance level of the test is 0.01 in all cases, it can be said that there is a negative and significant relationship between all of the object relations subscales (social incompetence, egocentricity, insecure attachment, and alienation) and the emotional expression, the distress tolerance and the marital quality.

Table 2. Correlation matrix of research variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Social incompetence	1						
Egocentricity	0.591	1					
Insecure Attachment	0.531	0.423	1				
Alienation	0.484	0.342	0.468	1			
Emotional expression	-0.684	-0.848	-0.714	-0.597	1		
Distress tolerance	-0.708	-0.690	-0.680	-0.649	0.910	1	
Marital quality	-0.689	-0.670	-0.724	-0.581	0.903	0.912	1

(Significance level of test is 0.01)

Multiple regression was used to determine whether 4 subscales of object relationships could predict emotional expression, distress tolerance, and marital quality. To observe the defaults of using this model, the Durbin-Watson's test was used. The Durbin-Watson's test result for predictive variables (social incompetence, egocentricity, insecure attachment, and alienation) with the emotional expression was 1.52 which can be confirmed and there is no correlation between the residual regression residues. Regression can therefore be used. Given that the adjusted

coefficient of determination was about 0.717, it can be said that the prediction subscales of the object relations variable (social incompetence, egocentricity, insecure attachment, and alienation) can control and predict 71% of the variance of the emotional expression as a criterion variable.

As Table 3 shows, of the components studied in multiple regression with regard to the standardized coefficient (beta), the Egocentricity had the most impact (beta = -0.308) at the significance level of 0.000 in explaining the changes related to emotional expression.

Table 3. Predicting emotional expression based on variables

model	B	Beta	T	P-Value	R ²	F	P-Value
Constant	78.332		53.172	0.000			
Social incompetence	-0.559	-0.205	-4.090	0.000	0.722	139.745	0.000
Egocentricity	-0.773	-0.308	-6.808	0.000			
insecure attachment	-1.413	-0.297	-6.637	0.000			
alienation	-2.600	-0.289	-6.731	0.000			

The Durbin-Watson statistic value for predictor variables of object relations with the distress tolerance criterion variable is 1.74, which can be confirmed and shows no autocorrelation between the regression residuals. Therefore, regression can be used. Considering that the adjusted coefficient of determination was around 0.767, it can be acknowledged that the subscales predicting the variable of object relations (social incompetence,

egocentricity, insecure attachment and alienation) can control and predict 76% of the variance of the criterion variable of distress tolerance.

As Table 4 shows, among the components studied in multiple regression with regard to the standardized coefficient (beta), egocentricity had the most impact (beta = -0.345) at the significance level of 0.00 in explaining the changes related to distress tolerance

Table 4. Variance Criterion Variable (Distress Tolerance) Based on Predictor Variables

model	B	Beta	T	P-Value	R ²	F	P-Value
Constant	73.101		61.377	0.000			
Social incompetence	-0.510	-0.210	-4.617	0.000	0.772	181.529	0.000
Egocentricity	-0.772	-0.345	-8.413	0.000			
insecure attachment	-1.205	-0.284	-7.002	0.000			
alienation	-2.381	-0.296	-7.624	0.000			

The Durbin-Watson statistic value for predictor variables of object relations with the marital quality is 1.81, which can be confirmed and shows no autocorrelation between the regression residuals. Therefore, regression can be used.

Considering that the adjusted coefficient of determination was around 0.743, it can be acknowledged that the subscales predicting the variable of object relations (social incompetence,

egocentricity, insecure attachment and alienation) can control and predict 74% of the variance of the criterion variable of marital quality.

As Table 5 shows, among the components studied in multiple regression with regard to the standardized coefficient column (beta), the insecure attachment component had the most impact (beta = -0.394) at the significance level of 0.00 in explaining the changes in marital quality

Table 5. Variance Criterion Variable (marital quality) based on Predictor Variables

model	B	Beta	T	P-Value	R ²	F	P-Value
Constant	62.850		48.552	0.000			
Social incompetence	-0.498	-0.198	-4.144	0.000	0.747	159.104	0.000
Egocentricity	-0.743	-0.321	-7.453	0.000			
Insecure Attachment	-1.730	-0.394	-9.245	0.000			
Alienation	62.850	-0.198	48.552	0.000			

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of object relations in predicting emotional expression, distress tolerance and marital quality. The findings of the study showed that there was a negative and significant relationship between social incompetence, egocentricity, insecure attachment and alienation with emotional expression, distress tolerance and marital quality. Thus, the person with the higher score in social incompetence, egocentricity, insecure attachment and alienation had a low score of emotional expression, distress tolerance, and marital quality. To explain this finding, it can be said that in order to establish and maintain a lasting and intimate marriage, one must be able to identify himself in association with the spouse and be aware of his own feelings, expectations, needs, fears and aspirations so that he can express himself in an adult relationship while maintaining individuality and can exchange support and care in a reciprocal relationship (Navabi Far et al., 2020).

People with a high score in alienation are usually unstable in their communication, and they show serious problems in establishing intimacy. Such people seek refuge and isolate themselves to protect themselves from the anger and hostility they project on others (Bell, 1995). Therefore, they cannot communicate properly and benefit from the support of others against problems, and because of the resulting unexpressed emotions, it becomes difficult and exhausting for them to bear problems and distress. This instability in communication and establishing intimacy causes damage to the relationship with the spouse and significantly reduces the marital quality. Couples' self-explaining and response are also key elements of emotional expression; Couples need to be able to achieve and express their emotions when communicating with each other and to differentiate between the current relationship and past failed experiences. But people with a high score in social incompetence are shy and nervous, they hesitate to express their emotions to others, and for these people communication seems extremely difficult and unpredictable. They often avoid any relationships (Bell, 1995). Therefore, it is possible to explain and predict the low quality of marital relations and distress tolerance by increasing the score of people in this component.

A high score in egocentricity indicates three attitudes towards relationships, which include suspicion and distrust of other people's motives, individual exploitation of relationships, and manipulation and abuse of others to achieve one's own desires. Such

people do not express any kind of empathy in their interpersonal relationships and do not know or worry about the feelings and perceptions of others (Bell, 1995). Learning care of each other in emotional and conflicting situations enables couples to effectively meet the mutual needs and challenges of life and see each other as individuals with weaknesses and not perfect individuals (Varma, Traynor & Fitzpatrick, 2022). But if spouses, instead of playing the role of a couple's caregiver, each of them exaggerates their own bad object relations on the other and forces their spouse to accept this role through the process of mutual replication, rather than establishing an intimate and consistent relationship between couples, the relationship derived from the inner assumptions is formed between them, the same thing that happens in relationship with people which have high egocentricity scores (Konishi et al., 2018).

A high score in insecure attachment reflects a person's sensitivity to being rejected and hurt by others. Loss, separation and abandonment, whether imaginary or real, are hard and unbearable for these people. Although establishing relationships with such people is very important, since their relationships are usually associated with feelings of guilt, jealousy, and anxiety, their relationships often lead to incompatible patterns and self-harming and other-harming tendencies (Bell, 1995). The stressful experiences that a person experiences in childhood increases the sensitivity of the person to future stressors and insecure attachment is one of the most important factors. On the other hand, people with bad caregivers are not only unable to resolve their conflicts in distress, but also lack the resources to cope (Takhayori, Fakhri, & Hasanzadeh, 2021). As a result, individuals with insecure attachment are both more prone to stressful events and lack adequate coping resources due to the experience of poor caregiving, leading to reduced distress tolerance. (Bagheri et al., 2019).

The object relationship has an impact on the formation and quality of personality structures, especially the "ego". Communication with the first object plays an important role in the ego. A good object becomes a focal point that ego grows around it (Tabatabai pour, Khosropour, & Zenoozian, 2019). People with better object relationships can have higher adaptive performance and balance the psychological stability in stressful situations, resulting in higher distress tolerance (Di Giuseppe et al., 2019). The object relationships are the representations of the individual and their environment. These representations are enduring internal patterns that are activated in communication situations and determine

how one relates to others. In fact, these enduring internal patterns are important elements in the success of individuals in all areas, including the marital quality and they lead to marital satisfaction (Hoseini, Vakili, & Abolmalialhoseini, 2021). Object relations theorists interpret subsequent problems in marital life as influenced by the child's primary relationships. From this point of view, the ability to interact with others in life is partly due to the internalized pattern of early interactions that will affect one's inter-family relationships in the future.

Finally, as there was a significant relationship between object relations (social incompetence, egocentricity, insecure attachment and alienation) with emotional expression, distress tolerance and marital quality, object relations-based couple therapy can be used to promote emotional expression, distress tolerance, and marital quality.

Research Limitations

The limitations of the research included Corona Pandemic Condition, which was a major barrier to gathering information through the distribution of questionnaires in person. Other limitations were the limitations of cause-and-effect relationships between variables that must be used with caution in interpreting the results. The present study was also conducted on married people in Ardabil city, so caution should be exercised in extending the results to other groups and other cities. Also, the present research has been obtained based on the self-report scales, and surely the variables like mood could have an effect on the results. The last limitation can be high sample of questions in the questionnaires caused that answering to get tired and seem in the result of article.

Other researchers can do their field research on the impact of object relations on other psychological structures. Also, they can investigate the relationships of object relations with emotional expression and distress tolerance among other groups and in huge sample.

The results of the present study can help couple therapists to focus on object relations to solve communication problems. Also, given the importance of object relationships, workshops can be held to familiarize couples with good and bad relationships before marriage.

5. Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

All ethical principles are considered in this article. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and its implementation stages. They were

also assured about the confidentiality of their information and were free to leave the study whenever they wished, and if desired, the research results would be available to them.

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Authors' contributions

All authors have participated in the design, implementation and writing of all sections of the present study.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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