



On the Causal Relationship Between Attachment Styles and Marital Satisfaction: Mediating Role of Gottman's Marital Communication Model

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Abstract

Background: Marital satisfaction is one of the main factors affecting the quality of life in marital relationships. It refers to individuals' positive attitudes toward their marital relationship, and marital dissatisfaction is a negative and displeased attitude toward various aspects of marital relationship.

Objectives: The present study aimed to explore the causal relationship between attachment styles and marital satisfaction regarding the mediating role of Gottman's marital communication model.

Methods: The statistical population encompassed all university students in Ahvaz in the academic year 2019 - 2020. The multi-stage random sampling method was used, and 230 persons were selected as the study samples. Hudson's Index of Marital Satisfaction (IMS), Coolins and Reed's Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS), and Gottman's Communication Skills Scale (FHS) were also used to collect the data. Data analysis was performed using SPSS software version 26 and AMOS software version 24.

Results: The results indicated that the study model well-fitted the study population, and all direct paths were statistically significant. Moreover, there was a significant relationship between secure attachment, anxiety-insecure attachment, and avoidance-insecure attachment with marital satisfaction mediated by Gottman's communication skills ($P \leq 0.001$).

Conclusions: Given the effect of Gottman's couple attachment styles and four communication skills on marital satisfaction, their effectiveness in marital satisfaction is proved. Accordingly, therapists are recommended to implement educational and treatment programs containing cognitive and preventive attachment styles and Gottman's communication skills to promote couples' marital satisfaction.

Keywords: Attachment Styles, Gottman's Communication Skills, Marital Satisfaction, Students

1. Background

Marriage is one of the most profound and most critical relational factors in human lives, which is accompanied with a close and intimate relationship between the couples. A married person expects a new life full of happiness and satisfaction; hence, the success of a marriage or marital satisfaction is more important than marriage itself (1). Marital satisfaction refers to individuals' optimistic attitudes as such, the couple feels happy and satisfied with their marriage and attachment (2, 3). The fixed characteristics of unhealthy marriages are scarce; however, Gottman, cited in Hudson and Fraley (4), considered the first one to be reciprocal negative emotions arising from the failure of resolution efforts. The second is the demand-withdrawal pattern. Women are more likely to be critical, while men are more likely indifferent. The third

one is fewer positive behaviors than negative behaviors. The frequency of the latter scenario is about 0.8 in unstable marriages. The fourth scenario refers to the existence and abundance of negative behaviors.

Another factor affecting marital satisfaction is the anxious-insecure attachment style, which is characterized by extreme attachment. People with anxious-attachment styles constantly tend to communicate with others and only concentrate on ones' needs. They are always anxious, and they consider a meaningless word or wrong reaction as a big problem or even a threat, which may destroy their relationship with their spouse.

The other variable affecting marital satisfaction is avoidance-insecure attachment style. Instead of solving problems, being anxious, or contacting others, individuals with this attachment style tend to avoid or escape from

the situation. In facing a problem, they do not talk about it and instinctively assume that they do not need others, especially when they are alone (5).

According to Gottman's research, divorce has minor symptoms to be considered during the marriage, which include the onset of an intense argument, criticism of the spouse instead of complaining, exhibiting hatred and disgust, negative body language, high defensive posture, and lack of approval from both parties (3).

In Gottman's research on marriages, he detected a set of traits, called "Four Deadly Horsemen", which indicate the lack of effective communication modification mechanisms and predict weak marital satisfaction and divorce (6, 7).

The four horsemen [namely, criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (withdrawing from the interaction)] rapidly ruin the couple's life. When one of the traits emerges in the couple's life, the other traits will follow it and influence their life; hence, the couples will ignore their commitments (3, 8).

A fundamental issue in Gottman's approach is the severance of the negative interactive cycle in the marital relationship. In this regard, teaching the seven principles of a secure home in Gottman's relationship model would be beneficial. The principles are as follows: (1) familiarity with the map of love and affection; (2) sharing, love, self-admiration, and appreciation; (3) approaching instead of keeping off from each other; (4) accepting spousal influence; (5) learning how to solve solvable problems; (6) ways to overcome permanent problems; and (7) creating a common environment. Teaching these behavioral skills to couples and applying them in their relationships would help the couples emotionally support each other, not feel lonely under stressful conditions, and improve their marital satisfaction and quality (9). Gottman argues that the only way for couples to survive and thrive is to resolve unavoidable conflicts in their relationships (3).

Some researchers [Yekeh Fallah et al. (10), Mardani Hamule and Heidari (11), Chung (12), Sandberg et al. (13), and Egeci and Gencoz (14)] detected a significant difference between attachment styles and marital satisfaction. Gottman and Levenson (15) studied the relationships of many couples and found out that satisfaction with marital life depends on the couple's response and how they communicate with each other (8). In his research, Najarpourian et al. (16) suggested a strong relationship between attachment styles and marital satisfaction and detected these style predictors for the continuation or cessation of relationship.

In a study by Azizi and Beyranvand (17), the findings indicated significant implications explaining the attachment styles of married nurses in their marital satisfaction. Arefi and Mohsenzadeh (18) also noted that the avoid-

ance attachment style has a direct and significant effect on marital satisfaction. In their study, Timm and Keiley (19) showed a positive relationship between the secure attachment style and marital satisfaction and a significant negative relationship between the avoidance-attachment style and marital satisfaction. Moreover, Huang et al. (20) and Mirhashemi and Akbarimoghadam (21) concluded a significant relationship between Gottman's communication skills and relationship satisfaction. Candel and Turliuc (3) introduced the relationship between anxiety and avoidance attachment as a predictor of marital satisfaction and divorce and explained that Gottman's communication skills affected the relationship between marital satisfaction and attachment styles. Sakizadeh et al. (22) claimed that improving marital skills based on Gottman's model positively affected marital happiness.

In various studies on marital satisfaction and the complexity of marital relationships, marital satisfaction has revealed a high potential for review. More research in this field is required to clarify the inconsistencies in research findings and detect further variables promoting marital satisfaction. In this regard, no research in Iran and few studies in other countries have examined this relationship using a model containing communication skills. Accordingly, such research is urgent in Iran to identify how to enhance satisfaction in marital life accurately and find out the reasons for increasing divorce. The findings would reduce the effects of dissatisfaction, family and psychological costs posed by disputes and divorce problems. Furthermore, the results would provide a better understanding for practitioners and psychologists regarding the implicit behaviors and attachment styles to predict and control couples' behaviors. In addition, one of the factors influencing the success of a marriage is individuals' attachment styles, and the detection of such variables leads to the development of appropriate ways to increase cohabitation survival.

Figure 1 illustrates the model proposed in the present study. Given the significance of the problem, the question is whether marital satisfaction can affect the arousal of secure-, anxious-, and avoidance-attachments regarding the mediating role of Gottman's communication skills.

2. Objectives

The present study was to explore the causal relationship between attachment styles and marital satisfaction regarding the mediating role of Gottman's marital communication model.

3. Methods

This research was applied in terms of objectives and descriptive-correlational based on structural equation

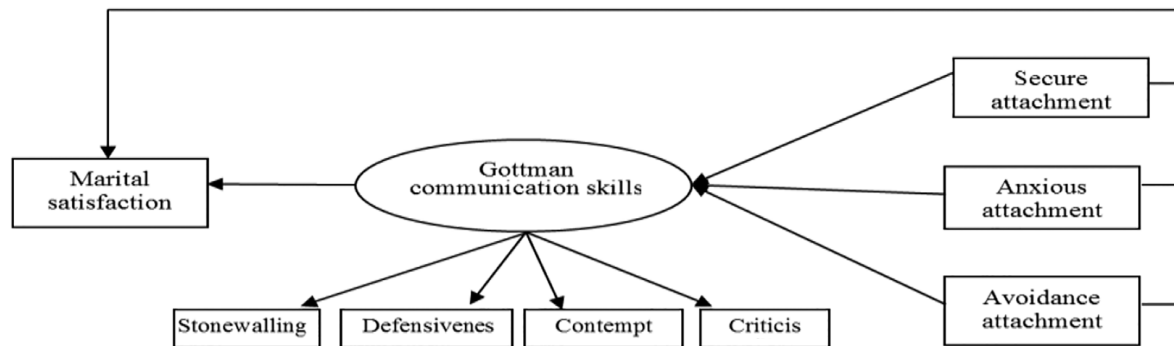


Figure 1. The proposed research model

modeling in data collection. The statistical population of the study encompassed all married students studying in Ahvaz universities in the academic year 2009 - 2010. The multi-stage random sampling method was used, and 230 persons were selected as the research samples. In this study, the target group consisted of only one of the couples, male or female, who answered the questionnaires. Inclusion criteria were diploma or academic education, at least two years of marriage, and age range of 20 - 50 years.

The number of parameters in each model should be counted according to its specific characteristics. The number of parameters in this model was calculated as follow: The number of error variances (internal) + the number of covariances + the number of external variable variances + path

According to Klein's (1998) suggestion, which states that at least ten subjects are required for each calculated parameter. Accordingly, the sample size was estimated to be 230 persons.

3.1. Index of Marital Satisfaction (IMS)

The Index of Marital Satisfaction (1992) was developed by Hudson to measure the extent, severity, or range of marital problems in a marital relationship. The scale is a 25-item instrument, which was scored based on a 7-points Likert scale (zero = never to 6 = always) (23). In this study, the inverse scoring method was also used. IMS has an acceptable concurrent validity and significantly correlates with Locke and Wallace's (24) marital adjustment test. Ofoww et al. (23) and Lotfi Sarjini et al. (25) used Cronbach's alpha coefficient and reported the reliability coefficient of this test to be 0.96 and 0.87, respectively. In the present study, the instrument's reliability was also calculated by Cronbach's alpha coefficient (= 0.99).

3.2. Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS)

Coolins and Reed's Scale (26) measures attachment, including the skills of building relationships, self-descriptiveness, and the ways of forming relationships with attachment in the form of self-report. This scale consists of 18 items and three subscales (namely dependency, proximity, and anxiety). Coolins and Reed (26) developed this scale based on a description of three major attachment styles in Hazan and Shaver's Adult Attachment Questionnaire (27). In general, the subscales proximity, dependence, and anxiety correspond with the secure-, avoidant-, and bilateral anxiety-attachment styles (26). The answers are scored based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (= 0) to strongly agree (= 4) (28). Coolins and Reed (26) reported the validity of the subscales of this index by using Cronbach's alpha coefficients and retest method after two months to be 0.69 and 0.75. Fye et al. (29) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients for anxiety, proximity, and dependence to be 0.75, 0.52, and 0.29, respectively. In the present study, the instrument's reliability was also calculated by Cronbach's alpha coefficients for secure attachment (0.96), anxious attachment (0.95), and avoidance attachment (0.95).

3.3. Four Horsemen Scale (FHS)

This scale was developed by Gottman (1999) to measure couples' incompatibility in marital relationships. This 33-item scale is self-reporting and consists of four subscales (namely, criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling). The scoring of this scale is (1) for true and (0) for false. In this study, the total score and the inverse score of the scale were used (6). Mohammadi and Pirkhaefi (30) reported the correlation coefficient of this scale with a marital quality scale of 0.567. Karnani and Zelman (31) reported the reliability coefficients for the four subscales of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling, and

the whole scale using Cronbach's alpha, 0.70, 0.80, 0.87, 0.65, and 0.96, respectively. In the present study, the instrument's reliability was also calculated by Cronbach's alpha coefficients to be 0.99, 0.98, 0.95, and 0.79 for criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling, respectively.

4. Results

Of the 230 participants in the study, 132 were women, 98 were men, 54.3% were PhD students, 20% were MA/MS students, 24.8% were undergraduate students, and 0.9% were junior students. The participants' mean age was 32.78 years, with minimum and maximum ages of 18 and 56 years, and their mean age of marriage was 23.34 years, with minimum and maximum ages of 13 and 42 years, respectively. Moreover, 73.5% of the participants had a traditional wedding style, and 26.5% had a modern marriage style. [Table 1](#) shows the mean, standard deviation, and correlational coefficients of the research variables.

As shown in [Table 1](#), all relationships between the variables are significant at $P = 0.01$, with the exception of the relationship of anxiety-avoidance attachments, which was meaningful at $P = 0.5$. The structural equation model (SEM) was used to evaluate the proposed model. A combination of fit indices was used to determine the fit adequacy of the proposed model. [Table 2](#) presents the results of the fit for the final model.

According to the results in [Table 2](#), the fit indices indicate reasonable and appropriate fit of the proposed model. In other words, the variables are acceptable predictors of marital satisfaction. [Figure 2](#) shows the final research model and the path coefficients.

[Figure 2](#) illustrates that all direct paths are significant. One of the underlying assumptions in the proposed model was the existence of intermediate paths; hence, the Bootstrap method was used to determine the significance of the intermediate relationships. [Table 3](#) shows the results of Bootstrap for intermediate relationships.

As [Table 3](#) shows, the confidence interval for the indirect paths indicates no zero value in these intervals. Accordingly, all indirect paths in the proposed model are confirmed, and Gottman's communication skills mediate the relationship between secure attachment and marital satisfaction.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the causal relationship between attachment styles and marital satisfaction regarding the mediating role of Gottman's marital communication model among married students.

The data analysis results showed a positive relationship between secure attachment style and marital satisfaction and between secure attachment style and Gottman's communication skills. The findings are in line with those reported by Egeci and Gencoz (14), Sandberg et al. (13), Najarpourian et al. (16), Mardani Hamule, and Heidari (11), Timm and Keiley (19), and Candel and Turliuc (3). If a person is satisfied with his/her parents' feelings of emotional well-being in childhood and has a secure attachment, in his adulthood, s/he would fulfill his or her emotional needs and a secure feeling in the relationships (32). These individuals are more confident in their spouse's support because their background experience has proved them that their spouses support them in difficult situations and is more satisfied with their marital life (33). Individuals with a secure-attachment style tend to regulate their emotions and express positive behaviors in the debate, thereby promoting their confidence in themselves and others (34). Secured couples complain instead of criticizing others constantly. They discuss issues and, finally, settle the problem and reach an agreement.

The findings also revealed a negative relationship between the anxiety-attachment style and marital satisfaction and between anxiety-attachment style and Gottman's communication skills. This finding is in line with those reported by Azizi and Beyranvand (17), Yekeh Fallah et al. (10), Chung (12), Candel and Turliuc (3), Mardani Hamule and Heidari (11), Najarpourian et al. (16), and Egeci and Gencoz (14). Individuals with an anxious-insecure attachment style, in which the fear of rejection is persistent, constantly complain, use poor skills in their relationship with their spouse, and insult and humiliate their spouse (5, 33). Couples with an anxious-attachment style encounter difficulty in their life due to the high levels of power expression and emotional manipulation of their partner. They ignore their spouse's needs and focus on their distressing thoughts, which plays a role in arousing anger in marital relationships (35). Most couples who refer to courts for divorce have an unstable anxiety-attachment style (25). Anxious couples adopt more defensive mechanisms and quickly turn into stone walls against a small problem.

Furthermore, there was a negative relationship between avoidance-attachment style and marital satisfaction and between avoidance-attachment style and Gottman's communication skills. This finding is consistent with the findings of Azizi and Beyranvand (17), Yekeh Fallah et al. (10), Candel and Turliuc (3), Chung (12), Najarpourian et al. (16), and Arefi and Mohsenzadeh (18). A person with insecure-avoidance attachment rejects intimacy and seeks more loneliness (33). Couples with avoidance attachment style find intimacy worthless and fail to trust their partner emotionally and sexually. They do not seek to communicate with others and do not make attempt to do so;

Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlation Coefficients of Research Variables

Variables	Mean ± SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Marital satisfaction	39.09 ± 35.17	1							
Secure attachment	10.17 ± 8.59	0.981 ^a	1						
Avoidance attachment	8.87 ± 8.25	-0.533 ^a	-0.512 ^a	1					
Anxiety attachment	11.84 ± 8.48	-0.707 ^a	-0.733 ^a	-0.152 ^a	1				
Criticism	2.70 ± 3.69	0.953 ^a	0.959 ^a	-0.486 ^a	-0.746 ^a	1			
Contempt	2.36 ± 3.21	0.955 ^a	0.961 ^a	-0.488 ^a	-0.747 ^a	0.998 ^a	1		
Defensiveness	3.28 ± 3.40	0.952 ^a	0.967 ^a	-0.458 ^a	-0.746 ^a	0.956 ^a	0.955 ^a	1	
Stonewalling	2.97 ± 1.80	0.817 ^a	0.813 ^a	-0.518 ^a	-0.520 ^a	0.755 ^a	0.755 ^a	0.781 ^a	1

^a P ≤ 0.01.

Table 2. Results of Final Fitness Indicators

Abbreviation	Acceptable Fit	Calculated Values	Final Pattern's Values
χ^2	> 5%	143.174	36.412
df	-	21	17
χ^2/df	1-5	6.818	2.142
p	< 0.05	0.001	0.004
GFI	> 0.90	0.902	0.907
AGFI	> 0.90	0.744	0.904
TLI	> 0.90	0.950	0.990
IFI	> 0.90	0.977	0.996
NFI	Nearly 10	0.973	0.993
CFI	> 0.90	0.977	0.996
RMSEA	< 0.1	0.159	0.071

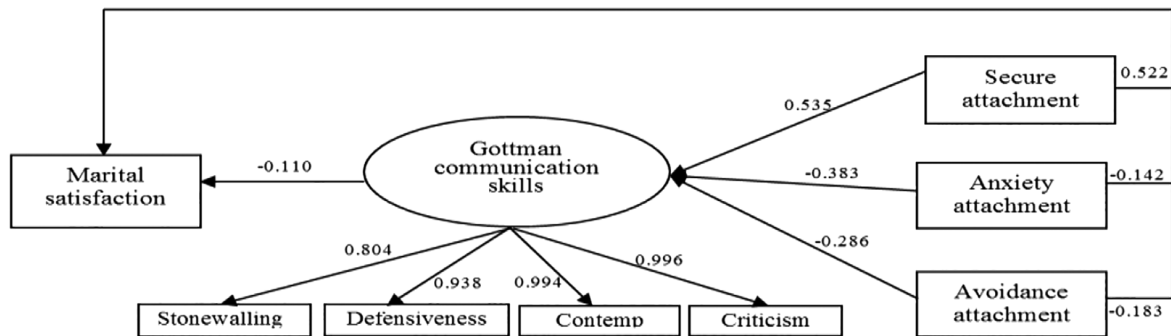


Figure 2. Final pattern of research with standard paths coefficients

hence, they reject their spouse's efforts to become more intimate. Accordingly, they enjoy low satisfaction in marital relations (33). The avoidant-insecure individuals hold a hostile attitude toward others because of their insecure

mental model; they always see others as negative and inferior and see themselves as positive and perfect. They always make an attempt to project their undesirable traits to their partner in their interactions and criticize and reject

Table 3. Indirect Path Coefficients of Proposed Model Using Bootstrap Method

Paths	Values	Confidence Level of 0.95		Standard Error	Significance
		Max	Min		
Secure-attachment → gottman's communication skills → marital satisfaction	0.506	0.033	0.975	0.325	0.001
Anxiety-attachment → gottman's communication skills → marital satisfaction	-0.774	-0.240	-0.347	0.340	0.001
Avoidance-attachment → gottman's communication skills → marital satisfaction	-0.119	-0.501	-0.773	0.386	0.001

them; hence, they enjoy more than their partner and make their self-concept full of confidence (34). The avoidance- and anxious-insecure attachment style makes individuals view their romantic and communicative experiences from a negative perspective and thus be engaged in destructive and threatening behaviors (14).

Moreover, a negative relationship between Gottman's communication skills and marital satisfaction was noticed in the present study. This finding is consistent with the findings of Candel and Turliuc (3), Huang et al. (20), and Mirhashemi and Akbarimoghadam (21). An acceptable relationship between spouses enables them to share their needs and interests, express their love, friendship, and affection to each other, and solve their inevitable problems. However, the lack of necessary communication skills makes the aforementioned functions impossible, and the couple's intimate relationship converts to a parallel and non-intimate relationship (36). According to Gottman, criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling are destructive for a marital life (3), resulting in many conflicts, repeated criticisms, sheltering in silence, lack of emotional support, and unresolved issues (36) as such the couple's marital satisfaction is on the verge of collapse.

In addition, the results showed that Gottman's communication skills played a mediating role insecure attachment and marital satisfaction relationships. The findings are consistent with the findings of Azizi and Beyranvand (17), Felt (19), Timm and Keiley (19), Yeke Fallah et al. (10), and Candel and Turliuc (3). Like a systematic map, attachment styles can cover all aspects of intimate relationships. Securely-attached individuals hold positive attitudes toward themselves and others (37). Accordingly, acceptable communication skills are more prominent in securely-attached individuals, and they use less negative communication skills (33). Having a secure-attachment style, the couples solve their problems in the best way. This is while, according to Gottman, disputes also exist in families with acceptable communication skills as they are an integral part of life. In other words, the way couples deal with these conflicts is different.

The present study documented that Gottman's communication skills play a mediating role in the relationship

between anxiety attachment and organizational marital satisfaction. The findings are consistent with those reported by Candel and Turliuc (3), Mirhashemi and Akbarimoghadam (21), Azizi and Beyranvand (17), Chung (12), and Huang et al. (20). Anxiously attached spouses frequently contact their spouse, leave messages constantly, and are anxious about where their spouse is and what he/she is doing (5). This attachment style easily destroys love, intimacy, and satisfaction since the person constantly focuses on his/her concerns and anxieties rather than meeting his/her spouse's needs (33). Meanwhile, Gottman's communication skills, which are directly related to marital satisfaction, also act as an interface between the attachment style and marital satisfaction (8).

According to the present findings, Gottman's communication skills play a mediating role in avoidance-insecure attachment and marital satisfaction relationships. This finding is consistent with those reported by Huang et al. (20), Mirhashemi and Akbarimoghadam (21), Arefi and Mohsenzadeh (18), Timm, and Keiley (19), and Candel and Turliuc (3). Couples with the avoidance-attachment style find intimacy worthless and fail to trust in their spouses. Accordingly, they are less satisfied with their marital relationship (33). Gottman's communication skills as a mediator in the relationship between the avoidance-attachment style and marital satisfaction play a critical role. (34). In other words, these individuals engage in destructive and threatening behaviors in arguments (14). The insecure-avoidance attached individuals generally sink into their defenses and, like a stone wall, remain silent. The couples consider themselves right; however, they separate from each other due to their partial verbal communication and lack of communication skills.

5.1. Conclusion

In general, individuals' attachment styles formed in the early stages of life play an important role in the whole process of their living and also play a significant role in their satisfaction with their marital life. The more secure a person's attachment is, the more stable and satisfying his/her relationship will be. On the other hand, a securely-attached couple forms healthier communication skills, hu-

miliates their spouse less in solving marital problems, concentrates more on resolving conflicts not coercion and defense. According to Guttman, what is important is how to deal with the problem and solve the problem, not to focus on the problem itself. In short, individuals' attachment style play an effective role in their marital life.

The present research was a cross-sectional study examining Ahvaz University students during a specific period; therefore, the generalization of the findings to students from other universities should be made with caution. Given the effect of Gottman's couple attachment styles and four communication skills on marital satisfaction, their effectiveness in marital satisfaction is proved. Accordingly, therapists are recommended to implement educational and treatment programs containing cognitive and preventive attachment styles and Gottman's communication skills to promote couples' marital satisfaction. Furthermore, regarding the attachment styles, familiarity with individuals, families, newly-married couples, and couples who have recently had a child helps them raise securely-attached children and feel satisfied and happy in the long run.

Footnotes

Authors' Contribution: Study concept and design, Sayed Ali Marashi and Maryam Mardani; Data analysis and interpretation, Sayed Ali Marashi, Maryam Mardani, and Zabihoallah Abasspour; Manuscript drafting, Maryam Mardani; Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content, Sayed Ali Marashi and Zabihoallah Abasspour; Statistical analysis, Maryam Mardani and Sayed Ali Marashi.

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