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THE ROLE OF COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS AND PERSONALITY TRAITS IN PREDICTION OF MARITAL CONFLICTS IN A SAMPLE OF COUPLES

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ABSTRACT

Promotion of marital life quality and recognition of factors affecting the marital conflicts are important issues in family therapy program. This study aimed to investigate the role of the cognitive distortions and personality traits in prediction of the marital conflicts in a sample of couples in Rasht city. It is a descriptive and correlational study. The statistical society of the study includes all couples residing in Rasht city in 2014. The sample consists of 250 couples, of whom 125 conflicting couples, who had been introduced to the family counseling and intervention centers by the family court due to their intense conflict, were selected. Available sampling method was used in this study. The HEXACO personality inventory, cognitive distortions, and marital conflicts inventories were used for data collection. Results showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between personality traits (honesty, humility, emotionality, and extraversion) and score of the couple's conflicts. However, there is no significant relationship between personality traits (conscientiousness, openness, and agreeableness) and score of couple's conflicts. There is a negative significant relationship between one of the personality traits i.e. openness and cognition distortions; however, there is no significant relationship between the personality traits (conscientiousness, honesty, humility, emotionality, extraversion and agreeableness). There is no significant relationship between the cognition distortions and the couple's conflicts. Moreover, the results of the regression analysis showed that the predictor variables can explain the variance of the marital conflicts up to 9%.

Keywords: *Cognitive Distortions, Personality Traits, Marital Conflicts, Family*

INTRODUCTION

Couple's conflict is very natural; sometimes, there is disagreement between couples due to the nature of couple's interaction and consequently, couples show the feelings of anger, disappointment, and dissatisfaction. Therefore, conflict is a part of a marital relationship and married life. Thus, the couples should learn to resolve their conflicts in order to feel life satisfaction (Alice, 1995). Conflict in relationships occurs when someone's behavior does not match with the expectations of the other one (Davis, 2003). The devastating consequences of the conflict may be physical, mental, and psychological. Psychologically, most of the people experience conflict extremely stressful (Halford, 2001). Conflict is associated with the increased risk of mental disorders such as depression especially in women, drug abuse especially in men, sexual dysfunction in both gender and increased behavioral problems in children especially behavioral disorders in boys (Afar, 1989). In addition to mental disorders, conflict affects the physical health, too (Shmalyng and Evil, 1977). Conflict in marital relations affects the entire relationship. Studies show that conflicting couples experience the lowest rate of couple satisfaction and the highest divorce rate (Favrzvalsvn, 1992). Many studies have shown that personality traits of the couples are one of the most effective factors in marital satisfaction and in explaining the changes in marital satisfaction (Abbasi *et al.*, 2009).

In order to describe the personality, some personal characteristics such as smartness, extraversion, and conscientiousness are considered (Hilgard, 2006). Personality shows the individual characteristics such as the constant thinking, affective and behavioral patterns (Parvin, 2007). Studies showed that personality traits predict health, marital satisfaction, and divorce and job success. Another study showed that

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personality traits predict health, marital satisfaction, divorce and job success (Fincham *et al.*, 2000). Robert (2009) indicated that spouse's personality and their life quality, intimacy and communication between them are the main sources of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Singer *et al.*, (1954) emphasized on the inconsistent role of the types in relationship problems. Many scholars believe that irrational beliefs and errors cause the behavioral and marital conflicts. The collapse of the couple's relationship is the most common manifestation of the severe conflict. Evidences suggest that nowadays, nearly half of the marriages lead to the divorce. After divorce, nearly 65% of women and 70% of men probably re-marry and nearly 50% of the people who married for second time will divorce (Guttman, 1998; quoted from Yang and Long, 2007; Vrsyngtvn, 2005). Communication problems are the most common problems of the couples. More than 90% of disturbed couples consider this kind of problem as the main issue in their relationships. Communication problem is a key issue in communication approaches of the family. These approaches regard the marital conflict as an inefficient relationship. These conflicts often cause a vicious cycle with a lost starting point (Rezazade, 2008).

Personality traits may be defined as the dimensions of the individual differences in the form of thinking, feeling, and behavioral sustainable patterns (Jovanovic *et al.*, 2011). Psychologists summarized personality in five major factors after decades of efforts. These five major factors are neuroticism, extraversion, and openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Parvin and John, 2002). However, psychologists obtained recently other dimensions of personality beyond five-factor model (Ashton and Lee, 2001). They obtained other six dimensions that vary with five-factor model called the Hexaco model (from the Initials of six dimensions). Six dimensions of this model includes honesty-humility (H), emotionality (E), extraversion (X), Agreeableness (A), conscientiousness (C) and openness to experience (O). On the other hand, the scientific study of personality in health leads to identifying the different patterns of personality.

Fluctuations of marital relations, dissatisfaction and divorce were caused by various factors. If the factors such as age differences, mutual infidelity, addiction, economic problems are not considered, one of the other most problematic factors will be irrational beliefs in the couple relationships that lead to the decreased self-confidence, negative feelings of the spouses, frustration and conflict, frustration and self-dislike. No doubt, the beliefs form the essence of every character of people. Human being is alive and lives with his/her beliefs. In fact, beliefs are our views regarding the environmental events and they determine our daily feelings and behaviors. Aaron Beck, one of the famous psychologists believed that the main cause of marital problems and human relationships are misunderstandings and errors of thought and irrational belief. He believed that the difference in the people's attitude causes the disputes between the couples. Ellis focuses on the couples' problems and states that couples expect each other similar thinking and behavior patterns (Ellis, 2003). When one or both couples have irrational beliefs on their communication events, they show negative reactions and pathological response (Weeks & Arthritis, 2001).

Unpleasant emotions are often associated with the thought distortions or biases. Automatic thoughts are tied with negative emotion or inefficient behavior and they sound good at the first glance, such as "I'll never be happy", "no one loves me" and so on (Leahy, 2003; translation by Hamidpour and Anduz, 2009). Due to the transition of our society from traditional to industrial and modernism, family problems, communication troubles, and roles are one of the most important problems in the area of families' mental health. Repeated references to the family therapy and crisis intervention centers and increase of the help-seeking behaviors show the emergence of a serious problem in the family's mental health. Divorce is the result of the most serious and acute communication problems of the family. Unfortunately, Iran is one of the first seven countries in the world in terms of divorce - marriage ratio (Amirian, 2012).

Some studies have shown that inefficient relationship beliefs have direct relationship with active destructive responses including negative attitude towards the relationship, threat to leave and family psychopathology. On the other hand, the mental health is defined when every person has mental health if he/she were able to cope with severe problems and adapt with herself/himself or others and overcome the internal inevitable conflicts (Amirian, 2012). In the normal human life, no straight line separates the

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health and disorder. Health is something that should be constantly developed. Maintaining the sustainable health is a natural concern (Honarparvaran, 2007). Therefore, this study tries to answer this question: if there is a relationship between the personality traits and cognitive distortions with marital conflicts.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology of this study, given the nature of this study that investigates the relationship between personality traits and cognitive distortions and marital conflicts in the Rasht city couples, is descriptive and correlational. The statistical society of the study includes all normal and conflicting couples residing in Rasht City. The available sampling method was used for sample selection. The sample consists of 250 couples, of whom 125 conflicting couples, who had been introduced to the family counseling and intervention centers by the Family Court due to the intense conflict with one year of mutual life, were selected. Of normal couples, 125 couples were selected with similar conditions using the available method as the volunteers for participating in this study. It should be noted that there was no possibility of using a random sampling method due to the lack of officials' cooperation.

HEXACO personality inventory: Ashton and Lee (2004) provided the HEXACO personality inventory based on the revised 5-factor personality theory. This questionnaire includes six factors: honesty-humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Each of these factors has 4 scales, too. Saffarinia *et al.*, (2012) conducted a study on standardization of HEXACO personality inventory in Tehran. The initial values of Cronbach's alpha for 6 factors range from 0.208 to 0.441. Reliability coefficients in the retest range from 0.462 to 0.708 that were significant at 0.01 and 0.05 level.

Cognitive distortions inventory: It is a researcher-developed tool. It has been developed with the aim of providing an easy tool for understanding cognitive distortions in everyday life and since many difficulties and inappropriate emotions arise from our unreasonable thinking, it is necessary to be aware of these thoughts in order to get rid of a wide variety of life problems and interventions. This questionnaire consists of 20 questions.

Questions are scored on a five-point scale. This questionnaire has high internal consistency with alpha of 95% and desirable concurrent validity. There is a significant correlation between the score of social anxiety thoughts questionnaire and the scale of avoidance and social discomfort (58%), Watson, and Friend's fear of negative evaluation scale (60%). Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained for this questionnaire was 87%.

Marital Conflict Scale: Marital Conflict Scale is a 42-items tool that was developed by Sanaei (2000) for measuring the marital conflict based on the clinical experience. This questionnaire measures seven dimensions of marital conflicts including reduction of cooperation, reduction of sex, increase of the emotional reaction, increase of the children's protection, and increase of the personal relationship with their relatives, reduction of family relationship with partner relatives and friends and separation of the finances. Reliability of the questionnaire was calculated 94% by Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the whole questionnaire in a group of 30 people. In order to describe the data, the mean and standard deviations were used and in order to describe the test hypotheses, the parametric statistical test of Pearson correlation coefficients and hierarchical regression were used. In addition, all statistical operations were analyzed using SPSS software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Research sample with age group of 20-56 (mean= 36.34 and standard deviation= 8.03) participated in this study and their education levels are as follows: 4 people (1.6%) below diploma, 76 (30.4%) with diploma, 131 (52.4%) with Associate's Degree, 10 (4%) with Bachelor's Degree, 27 (10.8%) with master's degree or higher and 2 (0.8%) didn't report their educational status.

Before examining the research hypotheses, mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis, personality traits, marital conflicts and cognitive distortions are reported in Table 1.

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Table 1: The mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis of research variables

Variables	Variable dimensions	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Personality traits	Conscientiousness	25.02	5.99	-0.142	0.291
	Openness to experience	149.58	72.31	0.002	-1.192
	Honesty-Humility	43.24	8.19	0.070	-0.194
	Emotionality	42.98	9.67	0.220	-0.315
	Extraversion	41.24	8.02	0.175	0.232
	Agreeableness	33.10	6.40	0.197	0.710
Cognitive distortions		41.98	21.92	1.415	0.867
Marital conflict		96.54	14.98	1.26	5.27

Table 1 reports the mean and standard deviation of personality traits, marital conflicts and cognitive distortions of 250 people who participated in this study. Table 1 shows that the indicators of skewness and kurtosis of all variables except kurtosis index of marital conflicts do not exceed the ± 2 border. This suggests that the data distribution for each of the research variables is normal except for marital conflicts. Since the kurtosis rate of raw scores of marital conflicts was more than 2 (5.27), its square root was used for achieving normality.

Deductions of hypotheses testing are presented as follows. The research hypotheses are restated:

Hypotheses

1. There is a relationship between personality traits and marital conflicts.
2. There is a relationship between personality traits and cognitive distortions.
3. There is a relationship between cognitive distortions and marital conflicts.

Research Questions

Can cognitive distortions and personality traits predict the marital conflicts?

In order to examine the linearity hypothesis of relationships between variables, scatterplot matrix was used. Results showed that the research variables developed a scatterplot matrix as pairwise with and oval shape.

Accordingly, none of the relations between cursors showed the apparent deviation from linearity. Table 2 showed the correlation matrix between the variables (personality traits, marital conflicts, and cognitive distortions).

Table 2: Correlation matrix between study variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Conscientiousness	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
2 Openness to experience	0.05	1	-	-	-	-	-
3 Honesty-Humility	-0.10	-0.03	1	-	-	-	-
4 Emotionality	-0.10	-0.01	**0.64	1	-	-	-
5 Extraversion	0.01	0.03	**0.47	**0.56	1	-	-
6 Agreeableness	0.01	-0.04	**0.42	**0.50	**0.49	1	-
7 Cognitive distortions	-0.00	*-0.14	0.08	-0.01	0.06	0.05	1
8 Marital conflict	0.01	0.11	**0.22	**0.26	**0.19	0.12	0.06

Table 2 showed the correlation coefficients between personality traits (dutifully, openness, honesty, humility, emotionality, extroversion and agreeableness), cognitive distortions and marital conflicts. As shown in table 2, there is a significant relationship between personality traits (honesty, humility, emotionality and extraversion) and score of marital conflicts, however there is no significant relationship between personality traits (Conscientiousness, openness and agreeableness) and score of the marital conflicts. In addition, there is no significant relationship between personality traits (Conscientiousness, honesty, humility, emotionality, extroversion and agreeableness) and cognitive distortions; however, there is a negative relationship between openness of personality traits and cognitive distortions. There is no

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significant relationship between score of marital conflicts and cognitive distortions. The results obtained by the correlation test on research hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive and significant relationship between personality traits (honesty, humility, emotionality and extraversion) and score of marital conflicts; however, there is no significant relationship between personality traits (Conscientiousness, openness and agreeableness) and score of marital conflicts.

Hypothesis 2: There is a negative relationship between openness as one of the personality traits and cognitive distortions; however, there is no significant relationship between personality traits (Conscientiousness, honesty- humility, emotionality, extraversion and agreeableness) and cognitive distortions.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant relationship between cognitive distortions and marital conflicts. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is not confirmed.

In order to answer the research question: "can cognitive distortions and personality traits predict marital conflicts?" hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used. The results are shown in Table 3.

According to the research literature and theoretical basis, variables of marital conflicts and personality traits (Conscientiousness, openness, honesty, humility, emotionality, extroversion and agreeableness) and cognitive distortions were considered as dependent and independent or predictor variables in this study, respectively. They were tested with introduction of the linear regression hypotheses. If hypotheses are confirmed then we can use regression test to analyse the data of this study. This study showed that there is no correlation between the errors of the model, the dependent variable is normally distributed, the distribution of errors is normal and there is no correlation between the independent variables; Thus, we can conduct the regression tests.

After investigating the confirmation of regression analysis hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to answer this question: "can cognitive distortions and personality traits predict the marital conflicts?" and results are presented in table 3.

Table 3: Hierarchical multiple regression coefficients of marital conflict predictors

Variables	R ²	β	t	P
Conscientiousness	9	0.034	0.558	0.578
Openness to experience		0.144	2.35	0.019
Honesty-Humility		0.177	1.91	0.058
Emotionality		0.021	0.345	0.731
Extraversion		-0.060	-0.978	0.329
Agreeableness		0.105	1.72	0.087
Cognitive distortions		0.197	3.22	0.001

In this study, the variable of marital conflicts and personality traits (dutifully, openness, honesty, humility, emotionality, extroversion and agreeableness) and cognitive distortions were considered as the dependent and independent or predictor variables, respectively. According to the table 3, in the hierarchical multiple regression analysis, the variables of personality traits (dutifully, openness, honesty, humility, emotionality, extroversion and agreeableness) and cognitive distortions were considered in the model, simultaneously. Therefore, the model can predict 9% of the variance criterion.

In response to the research question: "can cognitive distortions and personality traits predict marital conflicts?" the final model shows that openness as one of the personality traits and cognitive distortions play a role in explaining the variance criterion variable. Beta coefficient of openness and cognitive distortions is positive. Thus, there is a positive and significant relationship between openness and cognitive distortions variables with the marital conflicts. T-value along with their corresponding significant amounts indicates that variables of openness and cognitive distortions can predict 6% of marital conflict variance, significantly. Based on the partial correlation between predictor and criterion variables, openness (2.1%) and cognitive distortions (3.9%) can predict the marital conflicts. However,

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the personality traits of dutifully, openness, honesty, humility, emotionality, extroversion, and agreeableness play a significant role in explaining the marital conflicts variance.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the role of the cognitive distortions and personality traits in prediction of the marital conflicts in a sample of couples. Results were investigated as the hypotheses.

H1. There is a relationship between personality traits and marital conflicts. The results of table 2 showed the there is a significant positive relationship between the personality traits (honesty, humility, emotionality, and extroversion) and the score of the marital conflicts. However, there is no significant relationship between personality traits (Conscientiousness, openness and agreeableness) and score of the marital conflicts. The results of this study are consistent with the Yaghoubi's findings (2010) that showed there is a significant relationship between personality traits and of the cognitive distortions so that as the score of the cognitive distortion decreases the life satisfaction increases. Naderi *et al.*, (2010) in their study entitled the relationship between the personality traits and intimate relationships in mutual life with couple burnout in addicted spouses in Ahvaz, found that there is a significant relationship between the personal traits and couple burnout and intimate relationships with the couple satisfaction that are consistent with the results of this study.

In order to explain the obtained results, it should be said that one of the traits of the people with couple's conflicts is inability to express the feelings. Couple satisfaction is achieved in the families, who are not emotionless, cold, withholding, isolated, fierce, unpredictable or bad-tempered. Having a stable and serious personality is effective in overcoming the anxieties resulting from the social relationships, helping the people to control the environment, showing their happiness in the best way, reducing the anxiety resulting from an instable personality and rejecting the illogical demands. Couples with marital satisfaction are interested in establishing the long emotional and intimate relationships and use their desirable social skills so that they rarely are anxious in their future life.

H2. There is a relationship between personality traits and cognitive distortions. The results of table 2 showed that there is a negative relationship between openness as one of the personality traits and cognitive distortions however; there is no significant relationship between personality traits (Conscientiousness, honesty- humility, emotionality, extraversion and agreeableness) and cognitive distortions.

The results of this study are consistent with the findings of Ebrahimi *et al.*, (2011). The results of a study entitled the relationship between the mental pathology of the family relationships and cognitive pathology (inefficient attitude and interpersonal cognitive distortions) showed that the cognitive models are effective in explaining the mental pathology of the family relationships. Monjezi *et al.*, (2013) in their research investigated the effectiveness of the life skill training on the personal traits and illogical beliefs and distortions in the couples of Isfahan and concluded that the effect of the training on the improving the conflicts of the couples in Isfahan has been positive and consistent with the results of this study. A study by Dye and Eckardt showed that there is a significant relationship between cognitive distortions and illogical beliefs and couple's conflicts that is consistent with the results of this study.

In order to explain the obtained results, it should be said that the effective relationships between the family members improve the emotions and values. Effective relationships is the basis of a healthy and successful family; in other words, when the family members use the communication patterns effectively, they can convey their clear meaning, satisfy their mental needs and participate in social events. Therefore, the communication patterns affect the personality, learning, self-confidence, selection power and logical decision-making of the family members and should be seriously considered. Words form the worlds of the human beings. People use words to give meaning to their lives. On the other hand, cognitive distortions affect the social efficiency that is the basis of the social communications. This causes illogical behaviours and thoughts. Generally, people are anxious because they think of the future instead of the present time. Therefore, the couples with stable personality can effectively solve their problems and achieve their goals and this leads to their better adjustment, lower conflicts and this is consistent with the results of the previous studies.

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H3. There is a relationship between cognitive distortions and marital conflicts. The results of table 2 showed that there is no significant relationship between cognitive distortions and marital conflicts. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is not confirmed.

The obtained result is not consistent with the findings of this study. In order to explain the obtained results, it should be said that the people relationships such as marriage and marital life are full of emotions. Mayer *et al.*, (2004) believe that the basic emotional potential is to receive and recognize the emotions that help to understand the self and others. Emotional arousal is observed among the couples with more conflicts. The ability to understand others improve the interpersonal relationships. The people with extravert personality and participate in social events with their friends or relatives use the communication skills effectively. They can solve their problems by consulting with others, analyse the situations and communicate successfully.

Research Question: can cognitive distortions and personality traits predict marital conflicts?

Based on table 3, variables of the personality traits (conscientiousness, openness, honesty-humility, emotionality, extraversion and agreeableness) and cognitive distortions simultaneously are inserted in the equation; therefore, the whole model can predict only 9% of the variance of the criteria variable.

The results of the study are consistent with the following findings:

Hosseini *et al.*, (2009) in their study entitled the relationship between the personal traits and the style of the interpersonal conflict solving and the couple adjustment of the married students concluded that there is a significant relationship between the personal traits (agreeableness, extraversion, pleasantness and flexibility). This study showed that there is a negative significant relationship between the neuroticism and couple adjustment. Hosseini *et al.*, (2013) in their study entitled the comparison of the personal traits of the conflicting and normal couples using the Neo's 5-factor questionnaire concluded that personal traits such as neuroticism, extraversion and conscientiousness play an important role in conflicts of the couples. In order to explain the obtained results, it should be said that personal traits of the couples affect their beliefs, motivations and abilities in controlling the life. Couples while try to achieve their goals decide to limit or encourage certain behaviours. The couples with stable personality are more self-reliant, and have positive attitudes and overcome the problems. They teach their children to secure themselves against the anxieties and tensions. They internalize the social and ethical values.

Since this study is a correlational type therefore, a causal explanation for showing the relationship between the variables is not proper. This study has been conducted on the couples and perhaps the findings are not generalizable for other people. Some factors such as the type of the questionnaire with many questions caused tiredness and reluctance of the respondents in answering the questions. Therefore, random answers reduced the validity of the test that is one of the limitations of this study. Considering the relationship between the personal traits and couple conflicts it is recommended to recognize the personal traits as the predicting variable of the couple's conflicts in the sessions of pre-marriages. Also, personal traits of the couples should be considered in sessions of family consultancy. Because of the predicting power of the couple's conflicts by the cognitive distortions and personal traits it is recommended to consider the cognitive distortions and personal traits in order to recognize the personality and modify the cognitive distortions.

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