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Modeling Marital Burnout Based on Schema Mode with the Mediation of Marital Infidelity Justification

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Marital burnout is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by emotional, cognitive, and behavioral patterns in couples. Schema modes and infidelity justification may contribute significantly to the emergence or maintenance of burnout. This study aimed to model marital burnout based on schema modes, with the mediating role of marital infidelity justification.

Methods and Materials: This descriptive-correlational study was conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM). A total of 373 married individuals (279 women and 94 men) from Districts 2 and 5 of Tehran were selected through purposive sampling. Participants completed the Schema Mode Inventory (SMI), Pines' Marital Burnout Scale, and the Infidelity Justification Scale. Data analysis was performed using SPSS-26 and AMOS-24 software. The model's fit indices, path coefficients, and mediation effects were examined.

Findings: Maladaptive schema modes significantly predicted marital infidelity justification (β= 0.56, p< 0.001), which in turn predicted marital burnout (β= 0.36, p< 0.001). The direct path from maladaptive schema modes to burnout was not statistically significant (β= 0.09, p = 0.112), indicating full mediation. Adaptive schema modes negatively predicted both infidelity justification (β = −0.17, p < 0.001) and marital burnout (β= −0.21, p< 0.001). The overall model demonstrated acceptable fit (χ^2/df = 2.45, RMSEA= 0.052, CFI = 0.94).

Conclusion: Maladaptive schema modes may indirectly contribute to marital burnout through the justification of infidelity. Adaptive schema modes, by contrast, offer a protective role. Therapeutic interventions focused on modifying schema modes and addressing cognitive rationalizations for infidelity may reduce marital burnout in clinical populations.

Keywords: Marital Relations, Burnout, Maladaptive Behavior, Infidelity.

Introduction

A satisfying marriage is a form of intimate and social bond between spouses that can either become a source of joy and happiness or lead to deep distress (Yaarmohammadi Vasel et al., 2021). When a marriage begins with hope, couples anticipate that their partner will understand their emotions and accept them as they are, ultimately achieving the satisfaction that marriage promises (Beam et al., 2018). Burnout, as defined by (Pines & Keinan, 2005), is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that emerges under prolonged emotional tension. Physical fatigue is characterized by low energy, chronic exhaustion, weakness, and a variety of physical and psychological complaints. Emotional fatigue encompasses feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and deception, while mental fatigue involves developing negative attitudes toward oneself, one's work, and life in general (Hassan & Ali, 2025; Hockey, 2013; Jesse et al., 2018).

Marital burnout consists of physical symptoms (e.g., fatigue, lethargy, chronic headaches), emotional symptoms (e.g., anxiety, sadness, hopelessness, depression), and psychological symptoms (e.g., feelings of meaninglessness, emptiness, futility, and even suicidal thoughts), which are often the result of discrepancies between expectations and reality (Mohammadi & Mohammadian, 2018). Generally, marital burnout unfolds in three stages: disappointment, anger and resentment, followed by indifference and emotional detachment—ultimately reducing marital quality (Nejatian et al., 2021). The onset of burnout rarely occurs suddenly and typically follows a gradual decline. Intimacy and love slowly diminish, accompanied by a general sense of fatigue (Kessler, 2018).

Spousal relationships can be predicted by various psychological variables, among which schema modes are particularly significant. According to (Young, 1999), personality pathology is reflected in a collection of schema modes—temporary, repetitive patterns of behavior, emotion, and cognition (Aalbers et al., 2022). Schema modes emerge from the activation of maladaptive schemas and the individual's coping strategies in response to that activation (Young et al., 2006). These modes can be classified as either adaptive or maladaptive. Maladaptive modes stem from dysfunctional coping styles, whereas the "Healthy Adult"

mode represents functional psychological states, and the "Dysregulated Child" mode represents maladaptive states (Arntz & Jacob, 2017). Currently, ten schema modes are recognized and categorized into four main groups: child modes, maladaptive coping modes, maladaptive parent modes, and the healthy adult mode (Young et al., 2006).

Young et al., (2006) suggest that, in the context of marriage, schemas formed during the relationship—beyond pre-existing individual schemas—can lead to marital dysfunction and potentially divorce if left unmet or if they contradict pre-existing core schemas (Hashemi & Darvishzadeh, 2016).

Given that the mental health of society is fundamentally rooted in the stability of family structures—especially healthy marital relationships—issues like infidelity, which have become an increasingly concerning social harm, must be studied. While precise national statistics are lacking, unofficial reports suggest a significant rise in marital betrayal (Fathi et al., 2013). Extramarital relationships, broadly defined, include sexual affairs outside the marital bond, but recent studies have expanded the definition to encompass sexual infidelity (without emotional involvement), emotional infidelity (romantic involvement without sexual contact), and combined emotional and sexual affairs (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2016). Marital infidelity is generally characterized as a sexual or emotional secret that violates the commitment within the marriage (Loudová et al., 2013).

With the increasing divorce rates and the growing prevalence of interpersonal conflicts and emotional disruptions in marital relationships—and given the wide-ranging psychological, emotional, physical, and social consequences for spouses and children—there is a pressing need to identify the psychological factors associated with marital breakdown. In light of the above, the present study aims to address the question: Does the model of marital burnout based on schema modes, mediated by justification of marital infidelity, have a good fit?

Methods and Materials

Study Design

This research is a descriptive-correlational study using structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical

population consisted of all married individuals who visited counseling centers in districts 3 and 11 of Tehran in 2024. Determining the minimum sample size required for data collection in SEM is crucial (McQuitty & Wolf, 2013). Although there is no universal agreement on the exact number of cases for factor analysis and structural modeling (Schreiber, 2008), many researchers suggest a minimum sample size of 200 (Garver & Mentzer, 1999). Klein & Muthén (2007) also maintains that for exploratory factor analysis, 10 to 20 participants per variable is ideal, with 200 as the minimum defensible sample size. In this study, the sample size was 373 participants selected through convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria included willingness to participate, being married, aged between 20 and 60 years, at least five years of marital life, and not being divorced or living apart.

After obtaining approval and coordination with the managers of the counseling centers, the study commenced. Prior to participation, the goals and instructions for answering the questionnaires were explained to the participants, and informed consent was obtained. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured; participants were told not to include names. The researcher's email address was included in the questionnaire for those interested in receiving the results. Incomplete questionnaires were removed after collection.

The study first conducted descriptive statistical analyses (mean, standard deviation, correlation matrix). Then, the dataset was screened and prepared, especially for assumptions of SEM such as missing values, normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity (Klein & Muthén, 2007). Finally, hypotheses were tested using multivariate analysis through SEM.

Ethical considerations: Written informed consent was obtained, Ethical principles such as confidentiality,

privacy, and voluntariness were followed, Participation incurred no financial cost and the research adhered to cultural and religious norms.

Instruments

*Marital Burnout Questionnaire***:** This 20-item questionnaire assesses aspects of marital burnout, adapted from a general burnout scale developed by (Pines & Keinan, 2005). It covers three core dimensions: physical exhaustion (e.g., fatigue, lethargy, sleep disorders), emotional exhaustion (e.g., hopelessness, feeling trapped), and psychological exhaustion (e.g., feelings of worthlessness, frustration, anger toward the spouse). Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never to 7 = always). Internal consistency ranges from 0.84 to 0.90. Test-retest reliability was 0.89 over one month, 0.76 over two months, and 0.66 over four months. In an Iranian sample (Babaei et al., 2024), Cronbach's alpha was 0.86.

Schema Modes Inventory: Developed by Young et al. (2006), this 124-item questionnaire evaluates 14 schema modes, including vulnerable child, angry child, impulsive child, undisciplined child, happy child, compliant surrender, detached protector, self-soother, self-aggrandizer, bully and attack, punitive parent, demanding parent, and healthy adult. Responses are recorded on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = never to 6 = always). Content validity was confirmed by expert review, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability.

Marital Infidelity Questionnaire: Designed by Yeniseyri & Kokdemir (2006), this 24-item questionnaire measures emotional and sexual infidelity across six dimensions: legitimacy, seduction, normalization, sexual tendencies, social context, and sensation-seeking. In Iran, (Karimi et al., 2023) validated this tool for educational staff. Cronbach's alpha exceeded 0.70, and overall reliability was reported as 0.91.

Findings and Results

The study included 373 married participants (279 women, 94 men) with a mean age of 37.31 years (SD = 5.98). Education levels were: 92 (24.7%) with a diploma or lower, 8 (2.1%) associate degree, 207 (55.5%) bachelor's, and 66 (17.7%) master's or higher. The average length of marriage was 11.96 years (SD = 6.06).

Regarding number of children: 21 (5.6%) had none, 109 (29.2%) had one, 232 (62.2%) had two, and 11 (2.9%) had more than two. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients among the study variables.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Research Variables

No.	Research Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Maladaptive Schema Mode – Vulnerable Child	20.97	4.86
2	Maladaptive Schema Mode – Angry Child	23.45	5.37
3	Maladaptive Schema Mode – Enraged Child	17.62	3.35
4	Maladaptive Schema Mode – Impulsive Child	21.98	4.51
5	Maladaptive Schema Mode – Undisciplined Child	13.62	3.77
6	Maladaptive Schema Mode – Submissive Surrenderer	14.01	3.68
7	Maladaptive Schema Mode – Detached Protector	15.04	3.70
8	Maladaptive Schema Mode – Detached Self-Soother	11.18	2.68
9	Maladaptive Schema Mode – Self-Aggrandizer	23.54	4.66
10	Maladaptive Schema Mode – Bully and Attack	21.90	5.05
11	Maladaptive Schema Mode – Punitive Parent	16.73	3.90
12	Maladaptive Schema Mode – Demanding Parent	27.04	6.35
13	Adaptive Schema Mode – Happy Child	31.75	6.74
14	Adaptive Schema Mode – Healthy Adult	39.20	7.95
15	Justification of Infidelity – Legitimacy	9.82	2.45
16	Justification of Infidelity – Seduction	9.01	3.49
17	Justification of Infidelity – Normalization	9.39	2.20
18	Justification of Infidelity – Sexual Desire	9.81	2.50
19	Justification of Infidelity – Social Context	9.65	2.91
20	Justification of Infidelity – Sensation Seeking	10.73	3.30
21	Marital Burnout – Physical	21.03	4.95
22	Marital Burnout – Psychological	26.31	6.23
23	Marital Burnout – Emotional	22.43	6.16

The correlation directions among the variables were aligned with the researcher's expectations and the theoretical framework of the study. To evaluate the univariate normality of the data distribution, skewness and kurtosis values for each variable were assessed. The results indicated that none of the variables exceeded the acceptable range of ±2, confirming that each variable followed a normal distribution. Moreover, multicollinearity was evaluated using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance Index. The results showed that the assumption of non-multicollinearity held, as no tolerance values were below 0.1 and no VIF values exceeded 10.

Multivariate normality was tested via Mahalanobis distance, where the skewness and kurtosis of Mahalanobis distance scores were 0.79 and 0.43 respectively, indicating multivariate normality was established. Finally, to assess homogeneity of variance, a scatter plot of standardized residuals was examined and the results confirmed that this assumption also held.

After validating all assumptions, the data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). AMOS version 24.0 with Maximum Likelihood Estimation was employed. The proposed model hypothesized that adaptive and maladaptive schema modes are related to marital burnout through the mediating role of infidelity justification.

In the model (as illustrated in Figure 1), the indicators for maladaptive schema mode were: Vulnerable Child, Angry Child, Enraged Child, Impulsive Child, Undisciplined Child, Submissive Surrenderer, Detached Protector, Detached Self-Soother, Self-Aggrandizer, Bully and Attack, Punitive Parent, and Demanding Parent. The indicators for adaptive schema mode were: Happy Child and Healthy Adult. The indicators for infidelity justification included: Legitimacy, Seduction, Normalization, Sexual Desire, Social Context, and Sensation Seeking. Marital burnout was represented by its physical, psychological, and emotional components.

Table 2

Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Initial Model	Modified Model	Cut-off Criteria
Chi-Square (χ^2)	503.10	441.08	–
Degrees of Freedom	224	222	–
χ^2/df	2.25	1.99	< 3
GFI (Goodness of Fit)	0.890	0.906	> 0.90
AGFI (Adjusted GFI)	0.865	0.883	> 0.85
CFI (Comparative Fit)	0.938	0.943	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.058	0.052	< 0.08

As shown in Table 2, all fit indices except for GFI support an acceptable model fit in the initial model. Considering the importance of the GFI index, the modification indices were reviewed and two covariances were added between indicator error terms. The revised model fit indices suggest an overall good fit with the data.

Table 3

Direct, Indirect, and Total Path Coefficients in the Structural Model

Path	b	S.E.	β	p
Direct Effects				
Infidelity Justification → Adaptive Schema Mode	-0.113	0.049	-0.190	0.031
Infidelity Justification → Maladaptive Schema Mode	0.151	0.040	0.305	0.001
Marital Burnout → Infidelity Justification	0.833	0.138	0.441	0.001
Adaptive Schema Mode → Marital Burnout	-0.313	0.101	-0.277	0.001
Maladaptive Schema Mode → Marital Burnout	0.099	0.064	0.106	0.112
Indirect Effects				
Adaptive Schema Mode → Marital Burnout	-0.094	0.040	-0.083	0.031
Maladaptive Schema Mode → Marital Burnout	0.126	0.043	0.134	0.001
Total Effects				
Adaptive Schema Mode → Marital Burnout	-0.407	0.109	-0.361	0.001
Maladaptive Schema Mode → Marital Burnout	0.225	0.075	0.241	0.005

The results presented in Table 3 show that the total path coefficient between adaptive schema mode and marital burnout was negative and significant (β = -0.361, p = 0.001), while the total coefficient between maladaptive schema mode and marital burnout was positive and significant (β = 0.241, p = 0.005). Moreover, infidelity justification significantly mediated these relationships, acting as a positive mediator between maladaptive schema mode and marital burnout, and as a negative mediator between adaptive schema mode and marital burnout.

The sum of squared multiple correlations for the variable of marital burnout was calculated to be 0.42, indicating that the adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of schema modes, along with the justification of marital infidelity, collectively explained 42% of the variance in marital burnout.

Discussion and Conclusion

Accordingly, the first research hypothesis was confirmed, and it was concluded that the structural model showed a good fit with the collected data. The adaptive schema mode was found to be negatively and significantly associated with marital burnout, while the maladaptive schema mode was positively and significantly associated with it. Moreover, the justification of marital infidelity significantly mediated the relationship between maladaptive schema modes

and marital burnout. These findings are consistent with the results of prior studies conducted by (Damiris & Allen, 2023; Dumitrescu & Rusu, 2012; Hashemi & Darvishzadeh, 2016; Khatamsaz et al., 2017; Pokorska et al., 2013).

This can be explained by the premise that couples, when entering into marital contracts, expect mutual intimacy and support to foster personal growth and fulfillment. However, maladaptive schema modes can disrupt this valuable process. These modes refer to dominant emotional, cognitive, and behavioral states that emerge when multiple early maladaptive schemas are activated, increasing the likelihood of infidelity—defined as emotional, verbal, or sexual involvement with someone outside the marriage under conditions of secrecy.

Schema modes are deeply rooted cognitive-emotional patterns that persist throughout life. Even when individuals realize these modes lead to distress, they remain attached to them due to a false sense of comfort, reinforcing negative relational dynamics. Individuals with Vulnerable Child, Angry Child, or Impulsive Child modes often have unmet emotional needs from childhood, such as security, autonomy, or affection, which translate into heightened emotional reactivity and immature coping behaviors in adulthood.

Empirical evidence shows that increasing activation of modes such as Vulnerable Child, Detached Protector, Angry Child, Undisciplined Child, and Punitive Parent correlates with reduced life satisfaction (Jahangir, 2018). Marital burnout and infidelity can be conceptualized through these early maladaptive schemas, which resurface particularly in intimate relationships like marriage (Tehrani et al., 2024). Individuals with such schemas may perceive inadequate emotional support from their spouses, harbor abandonment fears, or adopt distorted self-perceptions (Arntz & Jacob, 2017).

These maladaptive patterns increase negative evaluations and emotional distance, fostering conflict, alienation, and eventual burnout. When schema activation occurs, individuals often lose control over their emotions and behaviors (Young et al., 2006). Consequently, marital dissatisfaction and burnout provide fertile ground for infidelity. Schema modes function like cognitive residues from childhood, shaping adult character, interpersonal dynamics, and relationship outcomes. They bias how individuals interpret relational events, often fueling misunderstanding and unrealistic expectations (Li, 2020).

According to (Young et al., 2006), maladaptive schemas and corresponding modes stem from unmet basic emotional needs in childhood. The schema theory posits that these unfulfilled needs—such as acceptance and emotional security—lead to interpersonal maladjustments later in life, including marital conflict (Atmaca & Gençöz, 2016). Specifically, the activation of the Vulnerable Child mode intensifies interpersonal sensitivity, lowers tolerance for differences, and heightens emotional distress, thereby contributing to marital burnout.

Schema modes also influence extramarital relationships. These patterns, formed during childhood and adolescence, manifest in adulthood and marital contexts. The more maladaptive the schemas, the more detrimental their effects on marital satisfaction and fidelity. Conversely, healthy schema modes promote emotional regulation, dialogue, and mutual responsiveness—reducing tension and increasing marital resilience. Couples with fewer healthy modes tend to show lower adaptability, leading to greater marital burnout (Khatamsaz et al., 2017).

The Healthy Adult mode is a significant negative predictor of marital burnout. It facilitates the fulfillment of emotional needs and moderates maladaptive responses, fostering balanced interaction with significant others such as one's spouse (Arntz & Jacob, 2017). In contrast, couples employing avoidant coping styles indirectly address conflict by suppressing emotions and avoiding confrontation—practices that exacerbate disconnection and distress (Niknam & Rikhtehgar Berenji, 2022).

Limitations and Recommendations

Like all studies, this research has limitations affecting its generalizability. First, data collection relied solely on self-report questionnaires. Second, the study sample was limited to the city of Tehran, which may restrict the applicability of findings to broader populations. Third, cultural, economic, and social variables—potential confounders—were not controlled and may have influenced participants' responses. Future research is recommended to: Include cultural, economic, and social variables as covariates, Expand sampling beyond Tehran to enhance generalizability, Assess schema modes in premarital counseling to identify potential relational

risks, Address the schema-related dynamics in couples coping with infidelity and equip psychologists and counselors with tools to prevent extramarital affairs through workshops and family education. Given the meaningful associations between schema modes, infidelity justification, and marital burnout, early identification and intervention through schema-focused assessments in counseling settings are both advisable and necessary.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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