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Predicting Marital Satisfaction through Early Maladaptive Schemas and Communication Styles of Couples

Asie Eftekhari, MA*
Department of Psychology
Zanjan Branch, Islamic Azad University.
azin.eftekhary@gmail.com

Masoud Hejazi, PhD
Department of Psychology
Zanjan Branch, Islamic Azad University

Khadije Yazdani, MA
Department of Psychology
Zanjan Branch, Islamic Azad University

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Marital satisfaction is one of the most important factors in making progress in one's life and achieving life's goals. The role of communication in maintaining healthy and prolonged marital relationships is important. One of the internal psychological factors that play a role in marital satisfaction and the relationships of couples is early maladaptive schemas. Hence, this study investigated the effects of early maladaptive schemas and the communication styles of couples in predicting marital satisfaction among married students of Zanjan Azad University. A sample of 93 individuals was selected by convenience sampling method and evaluated by Enrich marital satisfaction scale questionnaire (EMS) (Fowers & Olson, 1989), Young early maladaptive schemas short-form (YSQ-SF) (Young & Brown 1998), and couple's communication styles questionnaire (CPQ) (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984). The information obtained from the samples was analysed by SPSS 22 software. Independent T test, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis were also used. The results showed a significant and negative correlation between subjugation schema (r= -.68), failure schema (r= -.52), and the total score of early maladaptive schema with marital satisfaction (r= -.55). There was a significant and positive correlation between the mutual

constructivist pattern (r= .91), negative and significant correlation between avoidance pattern (r= -.78), and demand/withdraw pattern with marital satisfaction (r= -.66). The total score of maladaptive schemas (p<.05) and constructive communication pattern (p<.05) can predict marital satisfaction. The results also showed no significant difference between couples' communication styles and marital satisfaction in women and men. However, the difference in the emotional deprivation schema is significant (p<.01). The present findings suggest that marital satisfaction is predictable through early maladaptive schemas and the communication styles of couples.

Keywords: marital satisfaction, couples' communication style, early maladaptive schemas.

Marriage is one of the deepest and most complex relational factors among human beings, and marital satisfaction is a condition in which spouses are mostly happy and satisfied with one another. Satisfaction and adjustment are created through mutual interest, caring for one another, acceptance, understanding, and satisfaction of needs (Baucom et al., 2009). Communication and marital satisfaction affect the physical and mental health of the couples (Novak, 2014). Substantial evidence shows that married individuals are mentally healthier than those who have never been married and previously married individuals (Marcussen, 2005). This is connected to the fact that marriage helps individuals avoid the stress that follows relationship dissolution (Liu, Elliott & Umberson, 2010). Marital satisfaction is a positive attitude to being married, and depends on factors such as personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual satisfaction, parenting, the role of egalitarianism, and religious orientation (Kajbaf, Aghai & Kaviani, 2004). Though there is no perfect couple that can have an absolute non-problematic relationship, there can always be improvements in relationships, and even divorce-related grounds can be controlled and decreased (McKay,

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1994). The quality of communication between couples is widely assumed to affect their subsequent judgments of relationship satisfaction. But this assumption is rarely tested against the alternative prediction that communication is merely a consequence of spouses' prior levels of satisfaction (Lavner et al., 2016). Because communication has been viewed as the key mechanism underlying the functioning of relationships, interventions designed to prevent or ameliorate couples' distress have emphasized communication skills (e.g., Benson, McGinn & Christensen, 2012; Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson & Bradbury, 2013). Early maladaptive schemas (EMSs)—important cognitive structures—are expected to have a profound effect on interpersonal relationships and communication skills (Mojalal et al., 2015). Early maladaptive schemas are also important in predicting marital satisfaction (Rahmanshahi & Usefynezhad, 2017; Esmaili et al., 2016), marital conflict (Karami, 2017), and can anticipate marital adjustment (Sabzikar, Bahrami & Sodagar et al., 2015; Saidi et al., 2014). Studies suggest that people who have fewer maladaptive schemas follow more adaptive behaviours and fewer maladaptive behaviours in their marital relationships, and, so, will experience greater marital satisfaction (Afshari et al., 2015).

According to Bradburry, Fincham and Beach (2000), many factors affect marital satisfaction: (a) interpersonal processes that operate within marriage, including cognition, affect, physiology, behavioural patterning, social support, and violence; (b) the milieus within which marriages operate, including microcontexts (e.g., the presence of children, life stressors, and transitions), and macrocontexts (e.g., economic factors, perceived mate availability). Components of intimacy—emotional and sexual are important factors in marital satisfaction (Yoo et al., 2016).

Traits approach and psychoanalysis theorists emphasize the role of interpersonal factors and believe that the psychological characteristics of couples provide marital satisfaction, while cognitive-behavioral therapists consider interpersonal factors as the most important ones (Dozois, Martin & Bieling, 2009).

Interpersonal processes in marriage retain a strong focus on behaviours exchanged during marital conflict and marital problem-solving discussions. The cognition factor in interpersonal processes comprises maladaptive attributions or interpretations for negative partner behaviours (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). Schemas are the most profound cognitive structures (Beck, 1993). Those schemas that cause psychological problems are called early maladaptive schemas. These schemas have cognitive, emotional, and behavioural elements in the original structures of the damaging experiences of childhood. They gradually form distorted thoughts and dysfunctional behaviours. These are self-stabilizers and show a lot of resistance against change (Young, Klosko & Weishaar, 2003). People are attracted to those who have schemas similar to their own schemas and activate their own schemas. This process is called a schema charm (Thimm, 2010). Hence, schemas can be considered one of the cognitive factors directly involved in spouse selection. Studies have also shown that schemas play an important role in dysfunctional marital relationships and if they are modified during marital relations, the latter improve (Lazaruz & Folkman, 1984). A schema-inconsistent nature of the disease usually appears when patients, in the course of their lives, interact with others in particular marital relations and act in such a way that their schema is approved (Hoseini, Pakize & Salari, 2014). Studies also show that there is relationship between marital

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intimacy and early maladaptive schemas; the presence of early maladaptive schemas reduces marital intimacy (Stieles, 2004).

There are 18 early maladaptive schemas: Abandonment/ Instability, Mistrust/Abuse, Emotional Deprivation, Defectiveness/Shame, Social Alienation/Rejection, Dependence/Incompetence, Vulnerability to Harm or Illness, Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self, Entitlement/Grandiosity, Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline, Subjugation, Self-Sacrifice,Approval-Seeking/Recognition-Seeking, Negativity/ Pessimism, Emotional Inhibition, Unrelenting Standards/ Hypercriticalness, and Punitiveness (Young, Klosko & Weishar, 2003). Early maladaptive schemas predict interpersonal maladaptation. The maladaptive nature of schemas often manifests itself when the individual acts in such a way in life and in interactions with others, especially in his marital relationship, which confirms his schemas, even if their initial interpretation has been inaccurate (Borjali & Taghvaie, 2014). Early maladaptive schemas lead us to focus on our interpretations of events, and these biases can cause pathology in interpersonal relationships, misunderstandings, distorted attitudes, speculation, incorrect and unrealistic goals and vision (Pascal, Christine & Jean, 2008). The results of studies (Khajoueinia, 2014) conducted in Iran and India, including one on the predictive role of early maladaptive schemas in marital dissatisfaction, found that abandonment, dependence, and subjugation schemas are significant predictors of marital dissatisfaction in Iranian couples while emotional deprivation is a significant predictor of marital dissatisfaction in Indian couples. The results of another study showed that marital satisfaction decreases with an increase in the degree to which the individual possesses early maladaptive schemas (Dumitrescu & Rusu, 2012). Other findings, such as those of Hassani et al. (2012),

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Yousefi et al. (2011), Harrison and Rainey (2013), and Mans et al. (2010), suggest that couples having maladaptive schemas have a high probability of family disintegration and divorce. Since the maladaptive schemas are dysfunctional, these result in dissatisfaction in marital relationships, thereby providing grounds for divorce. Also, it has been found out that there is a significant difference between nearly-divorced, divorced, and normal individuals in terms of marital conflicts (Manzary, Makvandi & Khoshli, 2014).

Moreover, some aspects of early maladaptive schemas have significant negative correlation with efforts to improve the aspect of relations. Early maladaptive schemas affect safe communications between couples in adulthood (Mahmoudi, Mahmoudi & Nooripour, 2015). There are significant and negative relationships between maladaptive schemas and the scales of marital satisfaction, including marital satisfaction, communication, and conflict resolution (Falah Chay, Zarei & Normandy Pour, 2014).

Marital relationship is a strong predictor of marital quality (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Markman, 1989; Ebadatpoor, 2000). Also, spouses who experience marital disputes and conflicts have defects in the field of communication skills (Weiss & Heyman, 1997; Gottman et al., 2005). Improving communication, thus, has been the primary goal in leading models of prevention (e.g., Wood et al., 2014) and intervention (e.g., Benson et al., 2012), driven by this perceived need and by the assumption that communication is a key predictor of relationship satisfaction. Therefore, we can say that communication problems are the most common and most destructive ones in failed marriages (Yalcin & Karahan, 2009). A couple's relationship always follows patterns. These patterns, with which couples deal with the problems in

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conflict situations, are called couples' communication styles (Christensen & Shenk, 1991).

Christensen and Sullaway (1991) divided couples' communication styles into three categories: 1) mutual constructive pattern, 2) demand-withdraw pattern, and 3) mutual avoidance pattern. In the mutual constructive pattern, the most important feature is the pattern of a win-win situation. In this pattern, the couples easily talk about their problems and conflicts, seek solutions for the problems, and avoid irrational and aggressive reactions. The demand-withdraw pattern consists of two parts: Male demand/female withdraw and female demand/male withdraw. In this pattern, one spouse tries to be involved in the relationship, while the other one resigns. This pattern creates a vicious cycle, such that with increase in one, another is reduced, and this also leads to a constant escalation of marital problems. There is clear evidence that the demand-withdraw interaction pattern—a pattern in which one partner seeks change and discussion of a problem, while the other avoids the conflict (Christensen, 1988) is concurrently associated with couple dissatisfaction (Noller et al., 1994). In the mutual avoidance pattern, the conflict between couples is intense and destructive, and has become a permanent pattern; couples refrain from communicating with each other. They live parallel to each other and their relationship is minimal or non-existent. This pattern has behaviours, such as changing the subject, joking, trying to bring peace, not divisiveness, unwillingness to talk about problems, and silence (Christensen & Sulllaway, 1991). The findings raise important doubts about theories and interventions that prioritize couple communication skills as the key predictor of relationship satisfaction, while raising new questions about other factors which might predict communication and satisfaction, and

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which might strengthen or moderate their association (Lavner et al., 2016).

Though marriage has been associated with many advantages, these benefits might not be similar across different groups; in other words, this positive association does not include all individuals. Contrariwise, marriage might be unrelated or even deleterious to an individual's mental health (Williams and Umberson, 2004). However, little is known about the causes of conflict in relationships and processes through which interpersonal relationships become effective. Furthermore, most of the studies on relationship standards have been conducted in Western countries, and further research is required in Asian and other cultures. There were also many gaps in research to understand the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and marital satisfaction. The present study was conducted to find the factors that contribute to a long-lasting marriage or that predict marital satisfaction to understand whether or not the schemas developed during childhood and brought into the marriage can predict marital satisfaction.

On the basis of the importance of early maladaptive schemas and couples' communication styles, predictive roles and the dearth of studies about the relationship between these three variables, few studies have compared men and women in these three variables. Hence, the purpose of the present study is to examine predictions of marital satisfaction through early maladaptive schemas and couples' communication styles, as also the comparison of these three variables in men and women.

Method

The study population included all the married students of Zanjan Azad University of 2015 that mentioned their marital status in the

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university education system. There were 400 individuals. Among them, based on the sample size table (Mitchell and Jolley, 2007), with the 95% confidence level, 105 students were selected via the random sampling, and the questionnaires were distributed among them. After collecting the questionnaires, 93 questionnaires were identified as usable. Thus, finally, the sample size decreased to 93. Among them, 48 individuals were male and 45 individuals female.

Instruments

Enrich marital satisfaction scale questionnaire was used to assess marital satisfaction. It is a 75-item and a five-degree responding scale (to not at all=1, very much=5). This questionnaire is a T-score scale where the average is 50, and the standard deviation 10. A score less than 30 indicates severe dissatisfaction, scores between 30 and 40 indicate dissatisfaction, scores between 40 and 60 indicate rather satisfaction, scores between 60 to 70 indicate high satisfaction, and scores above 70 indicate great satisfaction from marital relationships. Fowers & Olson (1989) reported the validation by using the alpha coefficient .92 for this form. Mahdavian (1997), in a study on the validity of the test using Pearson correlation coefficient and test-retest, achieved .93 for men, .94 for women, and .94 for men and women within a week. Internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha in this study was obtained at .87 in male and female populations.

Early maladaptive schemas were assessed by using the Young early maladaptive schemas short-form (YSQ-SF). It is a 75-item and six-degree responding scale (to not at all=1 very much=6). Five questions in the questionnaire measures a schema. If the average of each subscale is above 25, it is an inefficient scheme.

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The reliability and validity have been demonstrated in many studies (Oei & Baranoff, 2007). The validation of this inventory in Iran was conducted by Ahi (2005) on college students in Tehran University. Internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha was obtained at .97 in the male population and .98 in the female population. Internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha in this study was obtained at .83 in male and female populations.

Christensen and Sullaway (1984) designed a communication patterns questionnaire (CPQ) at the University of California to study the mutual communication style. The questionnaire has 35 questions and is graded on a scale not at all impossible—degree of (1)—to very likely (9). This questionnaire describes three steps of spouses' behaviour during marital conflict. These steps include: (1) when a problem occurs between spouses, (2) in the period when the discussion is about the communication problem, and (3) after discussing about the problems of communication. Christensen and Sullaway (1991) have estimated the reliability of three scales of the questionnaire. In this study, three groups of couples—helpless, non-exhaustive, and divorced—were compared. Mutual constructive subscales could be able to distinguish between the three groups, while the subscale of mutual avoidance and demand/withdraw were able to distinguish between distressed and non-distressed couples (Rasooli, 2001). Ebadtpoor (2000) estimated Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the pattern of mutual constructive communication .70, mutual avoidance communication .71, male demand/female withdraw .52, and female demand/male withdraw .51. Internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha in this study was obtained as .80 in male and female populations.

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Results

Self-report questionnaires, which were answered in 25 to 30 minutes at the university, were used in the present research. Independent t-tests, Pearson's correlation coefficient, and multiple regression analysis were used for the data analysis.

The average age of all subjects was 37.79 (SD=6.21), it was 35.4 (SD=3.75) for the males and 34.8 (SD=3.48) for the females. The average years of marriage in all subjects was 5.79 (SD=1.21), it was 5.4 (SD=1.45) for the males, and 4.8 (SD=2.48) for the females. The maximum and minimum scores, the mean, and the standard deviation of the research variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
The Descriptive Data for Marital Satisfaction, Couples' Communication Style, Early Maladaptive Schemas

Variables	M	SD	Min	Max
Marital satisfaction	39.29	10.53	20	50
Mutual constructive communication	13.64	9.27	10	26
Mutual avoidance communication	10.14	4.65	3	17
Demand/Withdraw communication	19.71	9.77	9	41
Early maladaptive schemas	12.13	3.43	5	25
Abandonment/ Instability	12.14	4.70	6	22
Mistrust/Abuse	11.29	4.30	6	22
Emotional Deprivation	9.43	3.39	6	16
Defectiveness/ Shame	6.71	2.01	5	10

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Social Alienation /Rejection	6.71	2.01	5	13
Dependence/ Incompetence	10.72	6.98	5	30
Vulnerability to Harm or Illness	9.36	4.55	5	22
Enmeshment/ Undeveloped Self	12.37	5.49	5	24
Entitlement/ Grandiosity	15.86	4.98	11	30
Insufficient Self-Control/ Self-Discipline	15.50	4.59	10	29
Subjugation, Self-Sacrifice	19.07	5.24	8	26
Approval-Seeking/ Recognition-Seeking	11.14	3.61	6	18
Failure	8.50	2.90	5	13
Emotional Inhibition	11.57	5.11	5	22
Unrelenting Standards/ Hypercriticalness	17.93	4.84	10	29

Table 1 shows that in terms of couples' patterns, Demand/Withdraw communication pattern average is higher than the average of Mutual Constructive and Mutual Avoidance patterns. The highest mean in schemas is related to the Subjugation and Self-Sacrifice schemas.

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Table 2

The Bivariate Correlations of Marital Satisfaction, Couples' Communication Style, Early Maladaptive Schemas

Variables	Marital Satisfaction	
	Correlation (r)	Sig.
Mutual constructive communication	.91**	.001
Mutual avoidance communication	-.78**	.001
Demand/Withdraw communication	-.61*	.023
Early maladaptive schemas	-.54*	.04
Abandonment/ Instability	.10	.74
Mistrust/Abuse	.05	.98
Emotional Deprivation	-.002	.99
Defectiveness/ Shame	-.28	.49
Social Alienation /Rejection	.41	.14
Dependence/ Incompetence	.21	.45
Vulnerability to Harm or Illness	-.24	.40
Enmeshment/ Undeveloped Self	-.47	.87
Entitlement/ Grandiosity	-.009	.99

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Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline	-.13	.64
Subjugation, Self-Sacrifice	-.48	.09
Approval-Seeking/ Recognition-Seeking	-.68**	.001
Failure	-.52*	.05
Emotional Inhibition	.37	.19
Unrelenting Standards/ Hypercriticalness	.45	.99

**P<.01 *P<.05

As observed in Table 2, marital satisfaction is significantly and positively correlated with mutual constructive communication (p<.01, r=.915), mutual avoidance communication (p<.01, r=.782), and with demand/withdraw communication (p<.05, r=.600). It also shows that there is a significant and negative correlation between Failure schema (p<.05, r=.52), Approval-Seeking/Recognition-Seeking (p<.01, r=.68), and the total score of early maladaptive schemas (p<.05, r=.54).

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Table 3

Predicting Marital Satisfaction by the Early Maladaptive Schemas and Couples' Communication Styles

Predictor and constant variables	B	SE	β	T	P	R	R^2	F
Constant variable	51.929	13.29		3.93	.003	.34	.12	7.396
Early maladaptive schemas	-.163	.067	-.476	-2.429	.038			
Mutual constructive communication	1.022	.325	.697	3.146	.012			
Mutual avoidance communication	.328	.241	.248	1.365	.205			
Demand/ Withdraw communication	-.083	.308	-.059	-.279	.749			

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As can be observed in Table 3, early maladaptive schemas (β=-.476, p<.05), mutual constructive communication (β=.697, p<.05), and mutual avoidance communication (β=.248, p<.01) were significant predictors of marital satisfaction. These components together significantly explained 32.3% of the variance in the organizational loyalty.

The results also showed that Results showed no significant difference between couples' communication styles and marital satisfaction in women and men. But the difference in the emotional deprivation schema is significant (p<.01).

Discussion

According to the results provided by the present research, early maladaptive schemas have a significant negative relationship with the marital satisfaction. This result is consistent with the findings of Mojalal et al. (2015), Rahmanshahi & Usefynezhad (2017), Esmaili et al. (2016) Karami (2017), Sabzikar, Bahrami and Sodagar (2015), Saidi (2014), Afshari et al. (2015), Hamidpoor and Andooz (2006), Azadbakht and Vakili (2006), and also Theiler (2005), based on decreasing marital satisfaction, by increasing the early maladaptive schemas. Marital studies have shown that adults who have marital problems activate their early maladaptive schemas more often (Thimm, 2010). People often behave in the course of their life and married life so that their schemas are approved (Hoseini, Salari & Pakize, 2014). Schemas charming (Thimm, 2010), selecting on the basis of schemas (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), is behaving in a way that schemas approve.This can be one of the reasons for decreasing of marital satisfaction with increasing of early maladaptive schemas.

The schema of Approval-Seeking is placed on the 'other directedness' area. People whose schemas are in this area, instead

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of addressing their needs, meet the needs of others. They do this in order to obtain confirmation, continuity of emotional relationship, or avoidance of revenge. These people tend to emphasize the responses of others more than their own needs in social relationships, and are often unaware of their anger and desires. They have not been freed in their childhood to follow their natural tendencies, and in adulthood, instead of being directed from inside, are influenced by the external environment and obeyed by the wishes of others (Young, 2003). This inability to correctly express anger and emotion can be one of the reasons for marital dissatisfaction. Approval Seeking usually leads to gradual anger and appears in the form of maladaptive symptoms (such as passive-aggressive behaviours, uncontrollable outbursts of anger, psychotic symptoms, or emotional isolation) (Young & Brown, 1998). The constant suppression of desires and emotional responses, especially anger, can be a factor in creating marital dissatisfaction.

The Failure schema is connected to impaired autonomy and achievement. Autonomy means the ability of an individual to separate oneself from the family and to function independently. This ability is measured in comparison with people of the same age. Individuals whose schemas are in this area have expectations of themselves and their surroundings, impeding their ability to separate from their parents' symbol and achieve independent performance. These parents strongly supported them, but, on the contrary, they have rarely cared for them. One of the most important factors for a satisfactory marriage is the ability to function independently and because of the disruption of this activity, marital dissatisfaction can be explained by this schema.

On the other hand, people who have failure schema believe they will undoubtedly fail to achieve the usual level of

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development (fields like education, sports, occupation). People who have this schema often find themselves self-motivated, inferior, or unsuccessful (Young & Brown, 1998). This feeling of inadequacy can be another reason for marital dissatisfaction.

The results also showed that marital satisfaction is significantly and positively correlated with mutual constructive communication and significantly and negatively correlated with mutual avoidance communication and demand/withdraw communication. These results are consistent with the findings of Lavner et al. (2016), Yoo et al. (2016), and Donato et al. (2013), which showed there is a significant relationship between marital satisfaction and couples' communication patterns.

Fitzpatrich (1988) states that marital satisfaction for those couples who emphasize interdependence and proximity are correlated with high levels of sharing information, while marital satisfaction for those couples who place more emphasis on independence is positively correlated with avoidance and conflicts. On the other hand, Christensen and Heavy (1990) showed that only husband withdrawal is linked to simultaneous dissatisfaction. In his study, Noller (1994) concluded that the pattern of mutual avoidance is associated with marital satisfaction. He also suggests the mutual avoidance is associated with couples' dissatisfaction in the first few years of marriage. Some research suggests that the pattern of demand/withdraw, especially when woman demands and man withdraws, can predict declines in marital satisfaction (Heavey, Christensen and Malamuth, 1995) and divorce (Levenson & Gottman, 1985). The results of a study by Abbasi and Afsharnia (2015) showed that there is no significant negative relationship between marital satisfaction and demand/withdraw pattern while there is a negative significant correlation between marital satisfaction and

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mutual avoidance. In this study, too, the highest correlation was between mutual constructive communication pattern and marital satisfaction. The study of Madahi, Samadzade & Javidi (2013) showed that there is a significant negative relationship between marital dissatisfaction and mutual constructive communication style. This study suggests that there is a positive significant relationship between demand/withdraw and marital dissatisfaction. The root of many tensions of couples' marital problems lies in misunderstandings and the inability to communicate in a healthy manner and listen honestly to each other, engaging in negative and mutually annoying behaviours, falling into the trap of cognitive distortions and negative thoughts, inability to negotiate and hold constructive dialogue to resolve marital issues, and engaging in the process of attack and counter-attack, which provoke mutual anger and aggression. Couples with problems, rather than expressing their feeling, desires, and needs honestly and respectfully, attack these demands or tell them indirectly. In mutual constructive communication, the couples easily talk about their problems and conflicts, looking for good solutions and avoiding irrational reactions. These reasons may explain the increase in marital satisfaction in this pattern. In mutual avoidance pattern, the couples live in parallel with each other, and their relationships are minimal or non-existent. The parallel lives, avoidance of discussion, and silence could be the reasons for marital discontent.

It is notable that the generalization of findings depends on the research limitations. This research basically was a correlational research. Hence, a causal explanation of the results is not possible. In addition, this research statistical sample was selected on the basis of the use of self-report measurement instruments. Therefore, the generalization of the results should be done

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cautiously. Accordingly, it is suggested that validity and reliability be considered in more various and vast samples in future research by the use of random sampling method. In addition to the importance of marital satisfaction, it is important to study the relationship between marital adjustment and early maladaptive schemas. Though in this study the relationship between communication styles and marital satisfaction of couples was confirmed, the complexity and the nature are not well known. Therefore, it is important to understand the complexity of the style and type of relationship in couples in future.

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