

## Research Paper



# The Relationship Between Irrational Beliefs and the Marital Satisfaction Based on the Mediating Role of the Conflict Resolution Behavior and the Marital Stress

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The current study was designed to explain the causal relationship between irrational beliefs and marital satisfaction based on the mediating role of conflict resolution behavior and marital stress.

**Methods:** The research had a descriptive-correlational design, and the study's statistical population consisted of all married men and women living in Tehran City, Iran, in 2019. Of whom, 933 people were selected based on the available method. The research instruments consisted of the first version of the Jones irrational beliefs questionnaire, the conflict tactics scales (Straus, 1979), the Stockholm female marital stress scale, and the marital satisfaction questionnaire.

**Results:** The present study's data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The results of the present study revealed that all fit indexes of the structural equation modeling analysis supported the goodness fit of the structural model of the collected data ( $\chi^2/df=2.82$ , comparative fit index [CFI]= 0.947, goodness-of-fit index (GFI)=0.946, adjusted goodness-of-fit index [AGFI]= 0.910, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA]=0.072). In the present study, the indirect path coefficient between irrational beliefs and marital satisfaction through conflict behavior ( $\beta=-0.071$ ,  $P<0.05$ ) and the path coefficient of both through marital stress ( $\beta=-0.127$ ,  $P<0.01$ ) was negative and significant, respectively at the levels of 0.05 and 0.01.

**Conclusion:** Both variables of conflict behavior and marital stress negatively and significantly mediated the relationship between irrational beliefs and marital satisfaction.

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## Highlights

- Marital stress, irrational beliefs, and conflict behavior directly affect marital satisfaction.
- Irrational beliefs directly affect marital stress and conflict behavior.
- Irrational beliefs have an indirect effect on marital satisfaction through conflict behavior and marital stress

## Plain Language Summary

This study investigated the role of irrational beliefs, conflict behavior, and marital stress in predicting marital satisfaction. The results show that irrational beliefs, conflict behavior, and marital stress significantly predict satisfaction. Also, results show that conflict behavior and marital stress have a mediating role between irrational beliefs and marital satisfaction.

### 1. Introduction

A

large number of people begin their marriage with satisfaction and contentment, but the situation gradually gets dark or even becomes a source of anxiety. The statistics show that about two-thirds of first marriages end in a separation or divorce (Yu, et al., 2020).

Several theories explain the components affecting marital satisfaction, and it is essential to consider these theoretical models in this field (Kreuzer and Gollwitzer, 2022). One of the most important and widely used predictive models is the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of relationships (Monk et al., 2021).

One of the variables that are considered an aspect of enduring vulnerability is irrational beliefs, which is a factor that seems to affect the marital relationship (Tadros and Ansell, 2022). According to Ellis's rational emotive behavior theory, the relationship between the couple's irrational thinking and marital dissatisfaction has been verified. He added that if couples stop self-criticism and self-degrading, it will increase their tolerance level in the marriage relationship, ultimately leading to success and progress in their relationship (Jankvist and Niss, 2018). Regarding the prediction of marital satisfaction, Pourrahimi and Shaker (2012) discovered that irrational beliefs have a more significant role than the two variables of attachment and perfectionism. In pre-marital counseling sessions, the irrational beliefs of couples can be identified and modified, and by increasing the level of marital satisfaction, the divorce rate could be decreased. In the research of Filipović, Vukosavljević-Gvozden, and Opačić (2016), irrational beliefs that were mediated by dysfunctional emotions had a significant effect on marital satisfaction.

According to the family stress model (Chzhen et al., 2022) and the stress-divorce model (Bodenmann et al., 2021), daily stressful happenings are considered predictors of marital performance and negative marital consequences. Stress is the body's reaction to a change that requires an adaptation of a physical, mental, or emotional response. Stress could be caused by any stressful factor or stimulus (Dinero, Donnellan, & Hart, 2022). Saki (2014), in their research, showed a negative relationship between perceived stress and the teacher's marital adjustment. Mohammadi and Maghsoudi (2012) also confirmed a relationship between job stress and marital satisfaction.

Carney, Story & Bradbury (1995), in the model of vulnerability-stress-adaptation, have introduced the conflict resolution strategies of the couples as one of the effective variables on marital satisfaction (Monk et al., 2021). Every partner has some specific methods of conflict resolution, which are based on what they have learned, their experiences, and their underlying knowledge. Nowadays, marital satisfaction has become one of the main concerns of couples, and due to the conflicts and the challenges in any married life, sometimes the conflicts get increased, and the couples encounter lots of difficulties. Although all spouses experience disagreements and conflicts in their married life, they do not respond to them similarly (Yaghoubi and Mohammadzadeh, 2016). Subsequently, in the study of Beyrami et al. (2013) entitled "Predicting marital satisfaction based on the components of emotional intelligence and the conflict resolution methods", there was a direct correlation between marital satisfaction and the collaborating and compromising conflict resolution methods. There was also a reverse correlation between marital satisfaction and avoidant

conflict resolution. [Fathi et al. \(2015\)](#) have introduced constructive strategies for resolving marital and family conflicts, such as clarification, support of the partner, adaptation, compensation, improved independence, comforting through logical and peaceful conversation, and practicing supportive resources. According to [Hosseini, et al., \(2013\)](#) findings, the health of the nuclear family and the constructive/non-constructive conflict resolution styles are directly related to marital intimacy. Furthermore, there is a significant indirect correlation between the health of the nuclear family and the constructive/non-constructive conflict resolution styles with marital intimacy through the mediating role of marital justice and intimacy. The conflict resolution styles and the adaptation of the depressed patients and their partners could predict the subsequent depression phase ([Özgüç & Tanrıverdi, 2018](#)).

The components of persistent psychological vulnerabilities, which consist of irrational beliefs, greatly affect the couples' patterns of interaction when faced with problems and conflicts. Therefore, to define the influence of irrational beliefs on marital satisfaction, they need to be studied precisely. It is essential to consider the factors and strategies that could distinguish a married life with a high level of marital satisfaction from a married life with a low level of marital satisfaction because marital failure might lead to a high degree of social, economic, and emotional costs. Therefore, there is a need to identify and investigate the mentioned factors in Iran to provide a basis for the strategies that could improve marital satisfaction. It is worth mentioning that marital satisfaction could have a great impact not only on the health and the happiness of the people in married life but also on the other relationships and situations inside and outside a family. Hence, the purpose

of this study was to answer the following question: Is there a causative relationship between irrational beliefs and marital satisfaction based on the mediating role of marital conflict resolution and marital stress?

## 2. Participants and Methods

The research method was descriptive-correlational. The study's statistical population included married men and women living in Tehran City, Iran, in 2019. First, through an announcement, eligible people were invited to participate in this research. Then, during a preliminary interview done by the first author of this article, 355 people were selected among the people willing to participate in the study who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Since [Guadagnoli and Velicer \(1998\)](#) suggest that in research with a modeling approach, it is necessary to have samples of 300 to 450 people, this research pulled the data from 355 available married volunteers. The inclusion criteria included age from 20 to 45 years, a maximum of two to five years of married life experience, and a willingness to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria included having a psychotic illness, substance abuse (as reported by the individual), and failing to complete the questionnaire.

To comply with the ethics of the research, before the implementation of the research plan, explanations were given to the participants about the objectives of the research and its necessity. Voluntary participation is also mentioned. The confidentiality of the information with the researcher was also explained to the participants. They were also asked to write their E-mails in the questionnaire if they wanted to have the results of the questionnaires.

**Table 1.** Measurement model of fit indexes and structural model

Fit Indexes	Measurement Model	Structural Model	Cut-Off Point
Chi-square	93.10	112.92	-
Model's degree of freedom (df)	32	40	-
$\chi^2/df$	2.91	2.82	5>
GFI	0.951	0.946	0.90>
AGFI	0.916	0.910	0.850>
CFI	0.953	0.947	0.90>
RMSEA	0.074	0.072	0.08<

GFI: Goodness-of-Fit Index; AGFI: Adjusted GFI; CFI: Comparative Fit Index; RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

### Instruments of the study

**Jones Irrational Beliefs Questionnaire (IBQ):** We used the first version of the Jones (1968) irrational beliefs questionnaire (IBQ) was used, which consisted of 100 items, 10 subscales, rated on a 5-point Likert scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. The subscales consisted of expecting approval from others, excessive expectations from himself/herself, self-blaming and other-blaming, reacting to helplessness with failure, emotional irresponsibility, anxious attention, problem avoidance, dependency, helplessness against change, and perfectionism. Ebadi and Motamed (2005) standardized the short version of this test after removing 60 items. They created a 4-factor structure consisting of helplessness against change, expecting approval from others, avoiding problems, and emotional irresponsibility. Ebadi and Motamed (2005) reported a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.75 for this instrument, and they stated that the instrument’s analysis based on the 100-item version was equal to 0.87.

**Conflict resolution behavior scale:** The Straus (1979) conflict resolution behavior scale consists of 28 items, which assesses five subscales of verbal, neglect, forgiveness, finalizing, and misbehavior on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 to 7. Dibaji, Foroushani, Emami-pour, and Mahmoudi (2009) reported that this instrument’s Cronbach alpha coefficients ranged from 0.57 to 0.93, and the correlation of the subscales of this instrument with the marital satisfaction questionnaire as an indicator of the instrument validity.

**Stockholm marital stress scale:** The Stockholm marital stress scale by Orth-Gomér et al. (2000) involves 17 items scored as 0 and 1. In the revised version of this instrument devised by Besharat, Shamsipour, and Barati (2006), marital stress was scored on a 5-point Likert scale of “very high=5, “high”=4, “medium”=3, “low”=2, and

“very low”=1. Besharat et al. (2006) reported the Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.91 for this instrument. They mentioned the correlation of this instrument with the Glumbog-Rost marital status questionnaire equal to 0.35 as the indicator of the instrument’s validity.

**Marital satisfaction inventory questionnaire:** Asoudeh, Khalili, and Lavasani (2010) developed the marital satisfaction questionnaire, which includes 35 items based on 4 subscales of marital satisfaction, relationship, conflict resolution, and ideal distortion. They were scored on a 5-point Likert scale of “strongly agree”=5, “agree”=4, “neither agree nor disagree”=3, “disagree”=2, and “strongly disagree”=1. Some items also have been scored inversely. Asoudeh et al. (2010) reported that the Cronbach alpha coefficients of the marital satisfaction subscales were 0.68, relationship 0.78, conflict resolution 0.62, and ideal distortion 0.77. The correlation coefficient of Enrich questionnaire with family satisfaction was from 0.41 to 0.60.

### Data analysis

In this study, the data were analyzed using the structural equation modeling method with AMOS software v. 22.

### 3. Results

In the current study, the data were extracted from 353 participants (191 females and 162 males). The Mean±SD age of the participants was 34.45±5.31 years.

Table 1 presents that all fit indexes obtained from the confirmatory factor analysis support the acceptable fit of the measurement model with the collected data.

**Table 2.** Total path coefficient, direct, and indirect between the variables in the research model

Paths	B	SE	B	Sig.
Path coefficient of conflict behavior-marital satisfaction	-0.143	0.034	-0.334	0.001
Path coefficient of marital stress-marital satisfaction	-0.149	0.028	-0.341	0.001
Path coefficient of irrational beliefs-marital stress	0.522	0.096	0.373	0.001
Path coefficient of irrational beliefs-conflict behavior	0.303	0.132	0.213	0.022
Direct path coefficient of irrational beliefs-marital satisfaction	-0.054	0.038	-0.089	0.161
Indirect path coefficient of irrational beliefs-marital satisfaction	-0.121	0.031	-0.198	0.001
Total path coefficient of irrational beliefs-marital satisfaction	-0.176	0.043	-0.287	0.001

**Table 3.** Mediating role of conflicting behavior and marital stress between irrational beliefs and marital satisfaction

Routs	a×b	SE <sub>ab</sub>	Z	β
Irrational beliefs ► Conflict behavior ► Marital satisfaction	-0.043	0.019	-2.26*	-0.071
Irrational beliefs ► Marital stress ► Marital satisfaction	-0.078	0.021	-3.72**	-0.127

\* P<0.05; \*\* P< 0.01

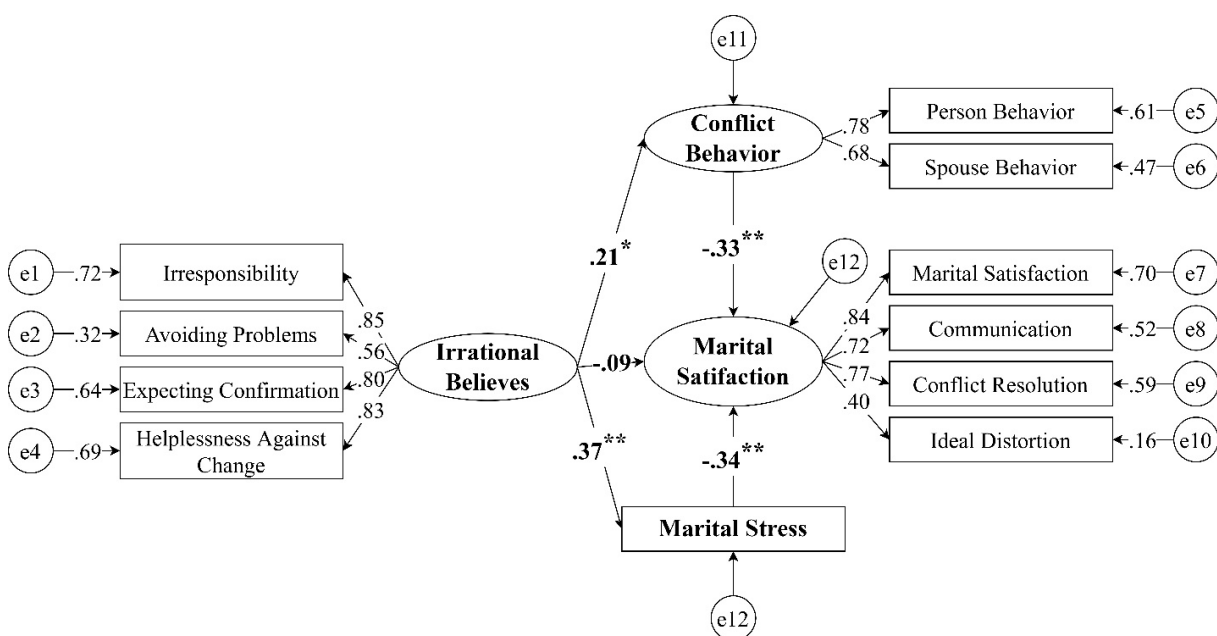
According to Table 2, the indirect path coefficient between irrational beliefs and negative marital satisfaction is at the level of 0.01 significant ( $P<0.01$ ,  $\beta=-0.198$ ). Because in this study, there were two mediators (conflict behavior and marital stress), it was necessary to investigate the significance/non-significance of the mediating role of each of them in the relationship between irrational beliefs and marital satisfaction. For this reason, the formula of Baron and Kenny (1986) was used, and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 presents the indirect path coefficient between irrational beliefs and marital satisfaction through conflict behavior ( $P<0.05$ ,  $\beta=-0.071$ ), and the path coefficient of both of them through marital stress ( $P<0.01$ ,  $\beta=-0.127$ ) was negative and they were significant respectively at the levels of 0.05 and 0.01.

#### 4. Discussion

Both variables of conflict behavior and marital stress negatively and significantly mediated the relationship between irrational beliefs and marital satisfaction. In

defining the prediction of marital satisfaction based on the irrational beliefs of couples, it could be said that according to Ellis’s emotional, rational approach, people with rigid and dogmatic beliefs about events and situations contribute to their psychological problems as well as to specific symptoms. This approach is based on the assumption that cognitions, emotions, and behaviors significantly affect each other, and they have a cause-and-effect relationship. The mentioned approach has always emphasized these three aspects and their interactions so that it could be considered an interactive approach (Jankvist and Niss, 2018). Couples would encounter conflicts if they were not flexible in thinking and behaving, expecting from themselves and others based on pressure and obligation (Hickey and Doyle, 2017). In this approach, the irrational and dysfunctional beliefs that do not approve of the realities of one’s life are the causes of emotional and behavioral disabilities in individuals and especially couples (Dobson & Dozois, 2019).



**Figure 1.** The structural model of the research

In explaining the prediction of marital satisfaction based on the conflict resolution behavior of couples, it could be said that [Gottman \(1998\)](#) stated that the couples' relationship style, especially when they have conflicts, could be a strong indicator of the couple's satisfaction during married life. He added that categorizing the subset of conflict does not come from what they argue about but from how they react when they argue. According to Gottman, a strong marriage structure includes constructing friendship, optimism, conflict management, and building a system of shared concepts. [Marchetti and Tocci \(2020\)](#) use the term "conflict evolution" to describe his approach to resolving a conflict. This approach focuses on the dialectical nature of the conflict. He considers this conflict results from the change in the relationship, which here could be referred to as the level of marital satisfaction of the couple. According to Gottman, to establish harmony, the negative or destructive patterns of conflict must be transformed into positive or constructive marital relationships. This happens through a personal and systematic change that encourages couples to pursue truth, justice, and forgiveness. [Marchetti and Tocci \(2020\)](#) focused on strengthening power and mutual knowledge, along with interdependence, justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Regarding the prediction of marital satisfaction based on marital stress, the [Bodenmann et al. \(2021\)](#) model identifies the effective role of intra-family stress (e.g. negative communication patterns and marital conflicts) and external stress (e.g. work stress, financial stress, main family stress, and poverty stress) in marriage. The mentioned framework suggests that the mild chronic stresses that originate from outside the relationship would increase the tendency towards tensions and conflicts, and they could be damaging to the marriage because they gently decline the quality of the relationship. It eventually could cause marital dissatisfaction.

By explaining the mediating role of the conflict resolution behavior and the marital stress related to the irrational beliefs of couples and marital satisfaction, it can be said that some couples, under the influence of irrational beliefs, have specific tendencies in their behavior and actions that could cause their dissatisfaction in the married life. It has been believed that these irrational thoughts are the roots of many psychological problems and disorders because many unrealistic expectations, thoughts, and challenges in life would lead to marital conflicts and stresses. The rational-emotional-behavioral approach suggests that if there are some common mental errors, it could distort people's interpretation and

perception of reality, and it leads to inappropriate moods and behaviors, which could affect their conflict resolution strategies. When a person applies maladaptive conflict resolution strategies instead of adaptive strategies, marital stresses arise and persist, consequently affecting the couple's marital satisfaction.

Although every research seeks to link the factors and the extent of the impacts, in reality, there are always a set of limitations in the nature of this procedure. In this study, self-report was used to measure the people's marital satisfaction if they may have consciously or unconsciously pretended to look good. The participants in the present study consisted of non-clinical individuals who, based on the existing research background, might have needed to get tested. However, they had not gone to any medical centers, psychologists, or psychiatrists due to various reasons, such as fear of being labeled, financial problems, or even not being determined enough to take action. It could cause more disapproval or even denial of the problems, which affects the results of the research. Therefore, it is suggested that other researchers conduct qualitative research using thorough and detailed interviews to examine marital satisfaction besides identifying other factors affecting it. It is also recommended that future research consider the possible impact of the treatment process on the research results and compare them with the results of the clinical cases in psychotherapy centers and hospitals. One of the limitations of this research is that the sample was limited to married people in Tehran, and based on this, it is suggested that further studies be conducted on a larger population of married people. Another limitation of the research is that the collected information was obtained only through the self-report questionnaire, which may bias the answers. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies benefit from multiple sources for data collection.

## 5. Conclusion

Conflict behavior and marital stress negatively and significantly mediated the relationship between irrational beliefs and marital satisfaction. Based on the results of this study, family counselors and couple therapists can help couples to improve marital satisfaction by designing interventions based on correcting irrational beliefs, conflict resolution behaviors, and reducing stress.

## Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

Consent of the participants to participate in the study was obtained. The personal information of the participants was kept confidential.

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### Authors' contributions

All authors equally contributed in preparing this article.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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