



# Formulation of the Extramarital Relationships Model Based on Early Maladaptive Schemas Mediated by Sensation-seeking in Men

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## Abstract

**Background and Objective:** The existence of extramarital relationships is one of the main causes of family breakdown and divorce. The current study aimed to formulate an extramarital relationship model based on early maladaptive schemas mediated by sensation-seeking in men.

**Materials and Methods:** This descriptive-correlational study was conducted based on structural equation modeling. The statistical population included all men with extramarital relationships visiting a counseling center in the west of Tehran (Hamkadeh) from March to September 2021. The sample for this study included 250 men with extramarital relationships within the age range of 28-45 who were selected via the convenience sampling method. Data gathering was carried out using the marital infidelity questionnaire of Yeniceri and Kökdemir (2006), Young's early maladaptive schema questionnaire (1998), and the Zuckerman Sensation-seeking questionnaire (2006). Structural equation modeling was used for data analysis.

**Results:** The results indicated that the assumed research model is fitted over the empirical data (RMSEA=0.056). The coefficient of a direct path between early maladaptive schemas and marital intimacy ( $\beta=0.28$ ) was significant at 0.05 level. The indirect coefficient of early maladaptive schemas to extramarital relationships through flexibility was significant ( $P=0.001$ ).

**Conclusions:** The early maladaptive schemas were correlated with extramarital relationships mediated by sensation-seeking. Therefore, it can be stated that the reduction of early maladaptive schemas and sensation-seeking will effectively mitigate extramarital relationships.

**Keywords:** Early maladaptive schema, Extramarital relationships, Sensation-seeking

## Background

The relationship between spouses is one of the most critical factors in determining the performance of a healthy family [1]. Betrayal of commitments and trust created in the family through extramarital relationships threatens family structure and stability, as well as the mental health of couples [2]. Extramarital relationships, which are often encountered by family and marriage therapists during their clinical work, can result in confusion and pain for all involved parties. Extramarital relationships are one of the major causes of divorce and desolation of the family [3-4]. A wide array of studies have attempted to determine different dimensions of extramarital relationships and the factors affecting them and to provide solutions for the enhancement of family health.

Extramarital relationships can be conceptualized through early maladaptive schemas. Early maladaptive

schemas are damaging emotional and cognitive patterns that are formed at the early onset of mental development, evolve throughout life, continue their existence, and impose themselves over future life experiences. These schemas are formed during childhood and adolescence and are manifested in adulthood and marital relationships. More maladaptive schemas have more marked adverse effects on satisfaction in marital life and marital commitment [5].

Previous studies on the causes of extramarital relationships presented a pattern indicating that along with the aforementioned personal factors, which are rooted in childhood, circumstantial and relationship factors can also affect the interactions between couples and family health [6-7]. Observing the marital life of individuals in society and the results of studies in this regard demonstrated that

warm interpersonal relationships, resulting from a loving, passionate, and emotional attachment, are of great importance in the stability of marital relationships. Psychologists define intimacy as the ability to connect with others and express one's emotions and believe it to be one of the natural rights and part of human nature [8]. Therefore, individuals who experience higher levels of intimate relations display more positive behaviors in their relationship and can more effectively express their needs to their spouse [9]. This means that an increase in intimacy and enjoyment in couple interactions results in more satisfaction in marital relationships, improving couples' mental health and happiness [10].

The personality characteristics of spouses are among the essential factors in the survival or destruction of the family. Therefore, understanding personality characteristics can help fix the family lives of individuals who are burdened by their lives. In this regard, sensation-seeking as one of the emotional personality characteristics is one of the significant factors with clear and undeniable effects on interpersonal relationships, shedding light on family dynamics and emotional relationships between spouses [11]. According to Zuckerman, sensation-seeking behavior is a need for new, varied, and complex emotions and experiences. Individuals with this type of behavior are willing to take various social or physical risks to achieve these new experiences. The assessment of various groups in the United States has demonstrated that individuals with high sensation-seeking behavior are more involved in sexual activities [12]; therefore, these individuals are also more likely to engage in infidelity.

A study by Vowles, Vowles, & Mark pointed out that marital infidelity can be somewhat predicted, and interpersonal factors, such as satisfaction with the relationship, love, passion, and the length of the relationship, are the most important predictors of online and offline infidelity [13]. In another study, Kazemian and Rabat Milli investigated the relationship of early maladaptive schemas and attachment styles with a desire for extramarital relationships [14]. The results of their study indicated that early maladaptive schemas showed a significant correlation with attachment styles and a desire for extramarital relationships. The findings of their study also suggested that early maladaptive schemas and attachment styles play a crucial role in the prediction of extramarital relationships. A study by Bakhtyari et al. investigated a model for extramarital relationships based on attachment styles and early maladaptive schemas mediated by marital intimacy and love styles [15]. They pointed to a direct and significant effect of anxious intimacy,

emotional deprivation, abandonment, social isolation, failure, and vulnerability schemas on Storge's love style. Furthermore, emotional deprivation, vulnerability, sacrifice to eros, Storge, and agape styles of love had direct effects on marital intimacy, while anxious intimacy, storge love style, preoccupation, vulnerability, sacrifice, and intimacy schemas had a significant direct effect on marital infidelity [15].

In the study by Hwang and Park, sensation-seeking demonstrated a significant correlation with risky behavior, having multiple sexual partners, unregulated sexual activities, and marital infidelity [16]. In another study, Zarei & Shayeagan Menesh pointed to the significant correlation of beliefs, self-awareness, and psychological flexibility with the quality of marital relationships [17]. The result of the study by Khorram Abadi et al. revealed that executive functions, including inhibition, flexibility, and active memory, indirectly affect extramarital relationships mediated by self-control [18]. The results presented by Momeni illustrated that negative emotion, emotional alexithymia, and sensation-seeking can significantly predict attempts at marital infidelity [19]. In general, theoretical and empirical research findings pointed out that maladaptive schemas and sensation-seeking behaviors are correlated with extramarital relationships [13,14,15]. Nonetheless, the main point determined by studying the current literature is that previous studies have not investigated the combined role of these factors on extramarital relationships while failing to determine the mediating role of sensation-seeking.

## Objectives

Based on these factors, the current study aimed to assess the correlation between early maladaptive schemas and extramarital relations and determine the mediating role of sensation-seeking as a structural model. The main research question is whether the model for extramarital relationships based on early maladaptive schemas mediated by sensation-seeking behavior has a good fitting with the available data.

## Materials and Methods

The current study was fundamental research carried out using the descriptive-correlational method as structural equation modeling. Furthermore, this study was a descriptive, cross-sectional study. The statistical population of the study included all men with extramarital relationships visiting a counseling center in west Tehran (Hamkadeh) for six months from March to September 2021. Based on the nature of the research, no precise statistics regarding

the size of the statistical population were available. The sample size in this study was set at 250 men with extramarital relationships, among whom 20 cases were eliminated due to incomplete questionnaires or corrupted data, with the final sample size for the study being 230 men with extramarital relationships within the age range of 28-45. The sampling was carried out using the availability sampling method. The inclusion criteria for this study entailed: 1. An age range of 28-45 years old, 2. Marriage duration of four years or longer, and 3. Academic degree of high school diploma or higher. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria were as follows: 1. Lack of desire to continue cooperation or fill out the questionnaires and 2. Incomplete questionnaire or corrupted information.

The following scales were used for data gathering in the current study:

#### A) Marital Infidelity Questionnaire:

This questionnaire was first introduced by Yeniceri and Kökdemir to measure emotional and sexual infidelity [20]. This scale contains 24 items and six factors of justification, temptation, normalization, sexual desires, social background, and sensation-seeking, scored using the Likert scale. This questionnaire measures marital infidelity using items such as "Being in an emotional relationship when one's spouse does not provide companionship and intimacy." Each item in this questionnaire is scored from "Very Important" (5) to "Not Important at all" (1). The score range for this questionnaire is from 24-120, with higher scores indicating higher marital infidelity and vice versa [21]. In the study by Karimi et al., the content, face, and criterion validity of the questionnaire were determined to be satisfactory [22]. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for this questionnaire calculated in the study by Karimi et al. was equal to 0.7 [22].

#### B) Early Maladaptive Schema Questionnaire:

Young's short form is a self-report tool, including 75 items for measuring 18 early maladaptive schemas in 5 areas [23]. This scale was first designed by Young et al. in 1988. Each item is scored based on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (completely wrong) to 6 (completely correct). In this questionnaire, every five items measure one schema. The high score in a subscale indicates a higher probability of a schema in a person. The validity and reliability of this tool were proven in a population in the Netherlands, with the split-half reliability coefficient being between 0.68 and 0.87. This questionnaire has been translated for use in Iran, and its normative data are available. This questionnaire was tested on

513 Iranian students, and the data were used to determine its reliability using the internal reliability coefficient and re-test method. The calculated Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was between 0.79 and 0.93. The results of the re-test after 185 days were reported from 0.67-0.84. This questionnaire also has suitable face and judgmental validity [21].

#### c) Sensation-seeking Scale:

Zuckerman proposed a 40-item Sensation-seeking scale (SSS), which was tested on numerous individuals whose behaviors matched the definition of sensation-seeking [24]. These individuals included those who volunteered for psychological tests, which exposed them to new experiences, individuals whose occupations included physical risk (such as police officers or drivers), and individuals with a history of drug use and various sexual experiences. The test scores for these individuals were then compared to the scores of those who generally and willingly avoided these activities. Individuals who desire abnormal and dangerous activities have a higher score on the SSS test, and individuals preferring calmer and less-risky activities have a lower score. Four main factors were determined for the general characteristic of sensation-seeking: 1. Thrill and adventure seeking, 2. Experience seeking, 3. Disinhibition and 4. Boredom susceptibility. Each of these sub-scales includes 10 items, with each item containing two A and B answers. Unlike some other tests, this scale has no correct or incorrect answers. In the study by Zuckerman, the reliability of this scale was reported as 0.85. The reliability of this scale was also tested in France using the re-test method and reported at 0.70 [21].

#### Implementation

After receiving written permission from the Hamkadeh Counselling Centre by the university to conduct the study on individuals visiting Hamkadeh Counselling Centre (to receive the ethics code), the study was conducted. The participants were 250 individuals who were added to a WhatsApp channel due to the Covid-19 pandemic. All participants were ensured through the counseling center that their information and data would remain fully confidential. Thereafter, online questionnaires were prepared using the [www.porsline.ir](http://www.porsline.ir) website and were added to the WhatsApp channel to be filled out by the members. Nevertheless, 20 cases were excluded due to incomplete questionnaires, and the final sample size for the study was estimated at 230 subjects. The questionnaires were then analyzed using axis variance methods for structural equation modeling in two sections of the measurement

model and structural model for all 230 participants. In the axis variance method, which is the second generation of structural equations, the homogeneity test was initially carried out for the items in one factor, and the results were then used to test the rest of the structural model as proposed by Heer (2001) and Henser (2009).

### Data Analysis

After gathering the questionnaires, the data were coded and analyzed using SPSS (version 27) and AMOS (version 24) software packages. To this end, descriptive statistics, such as minimum, maximum, mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution, were used. Furthermore, Pearson correlation coefficient and structural equation modeling with maximum accuracy method 1 (ML) were used to analyze the research hypotheses.

### Results

The final sample size for this study was equal to 230 cases after the exclusion of incomplete questionnaires. Based on the nature of extramarital relationships, participants' personal information was

not gathered. In the following section, the descriptive factors of the sample are presented based on the main factors and their components.

The data presented in the above table indicate that the overall mean score for extramarital relationships is 97.42, with a standard deviation of 9.77 and a range of changes between 72 and 120. The mean score for early maladaptive schemas was 235.86, with a standard deviation of 58.86. The skewness and kurtosis factors were in the range of +2 to -2 for all variables, indicating a normal distribution.

Table 2 displays the Pearson correlation coefficient matrix for the main research variables and their significance in the next row for each variable.

Based on the reported Pearson correlation coefficient values presented in the above matrix, all independent and mediating variables are significantly correlated with the main variable of extramarital relationships at the 0.01 and 0.05 significance levels. The intensity of correlation based on the available categorization (0.01-0.29= small; 0.30-0.49=average, 0.50-1=large) was between small and average [17]. The correlation coefficients also match the theoretical basis of the variables.

**Table 1.** Descriptive criteria of main research factors and their components

Factor/Component	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Minimum	Maximum
Justification	16.06	1.848	0.021	0.885	11	20
Temptation	15.84	2.189	-0.305	0.948	8	20
Normalization	16.02	2.198	-0.314	0.488	9	20
Sexual Desires	16.02	2.134	-0.111	-0.039	10	20
Social Background	16.43	2.209	-0.532	0.608	9	20
Sensation Seeking	16.95	2.021	-0.277	-0.268	12	20
Extramarital Relationships	97.42	9.771	0.307	1.527	72	120
Separation and Rejection	71.99	19.77	-0.197	-0.389	25	117
Self-reliance and disrupted performance	56.11	21.47	-0.125	-1.306	20	95
Disruptive Limitations	38.73	9.43	-0.913	1.233	10	60
Other-directedness	34.76	11.83	-0.491	-0.897	11	55
Hypervigilance	36.67	10.58	-0.713	-0.057	10	57
Early maladaptive schemas	235.8	58.86	-0.492	-0.628	77	352
Replacements	58.15	8.209	-1.62	1.407	36	63
Perception of controllability	28.45	9.510	1.29	0.346	20	56
Alternatives for human behavior	11.75	3.987	-1.63	1.015	2	14

**Table 2.** Pearson correlation coefficient matrix for the main research variables (n=230)

Variables	1	2	3
1. Maladaptive Schema	1	-	-
	0.001	-	-
2. Sensation Seeking	0.018	1	-
	0.790	-	-
3. Extramarital Relationships	0.307	0.258	1
	0.001	0.001	-

**Hypothesis:** There is a correlation between early maladaptive schemas and extramarital relationships mediated by sensation-seeking.

To evaluate this research hypothesis, it is necessary to calculate direct and indirect correlation coefficients between all variables in direct and mediating models and then determine their significance. To this end, the Bootstrap method was

used. The direct coefficient between these two variables in the direct effect model and mediating model is presented in the arrows in Figures 1 and 2. Table 3 shows direct, indirect, and total coefficients between all variables in the mediating model.

According to the data presented in Table 3, the direct correlation coefficient between the variables of early maladaptive schemas and extramarital is equal to 0.28 in the direct effect model and significant (sig=0.01). Furthermore, in the mediating model, the direct correlation between these two variables is equal to 0.28, and the inclusion of the mediating variable has resulted in no change in the correlation between these two variables. In addition, the indirect coefficient for these two variables is equal to 0.001 and not statistically significant (sig=0.993).



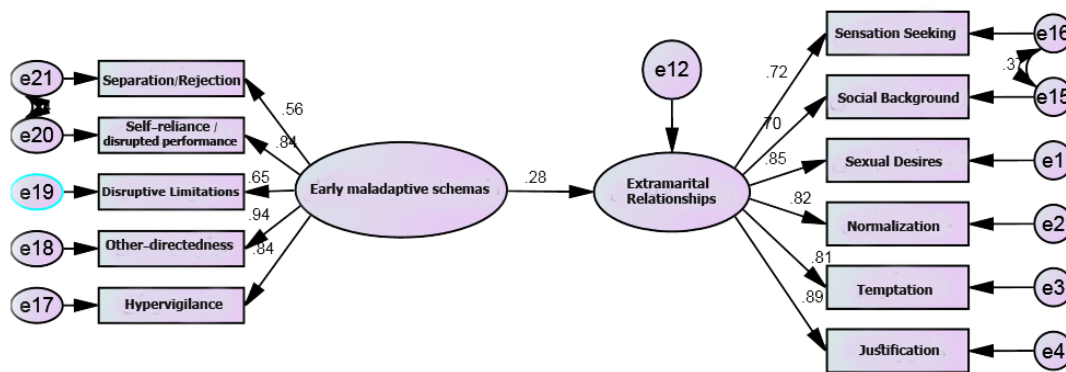


Figure 1. Direct Effects model at standard coefficient mode (without the presence of mediating factors)

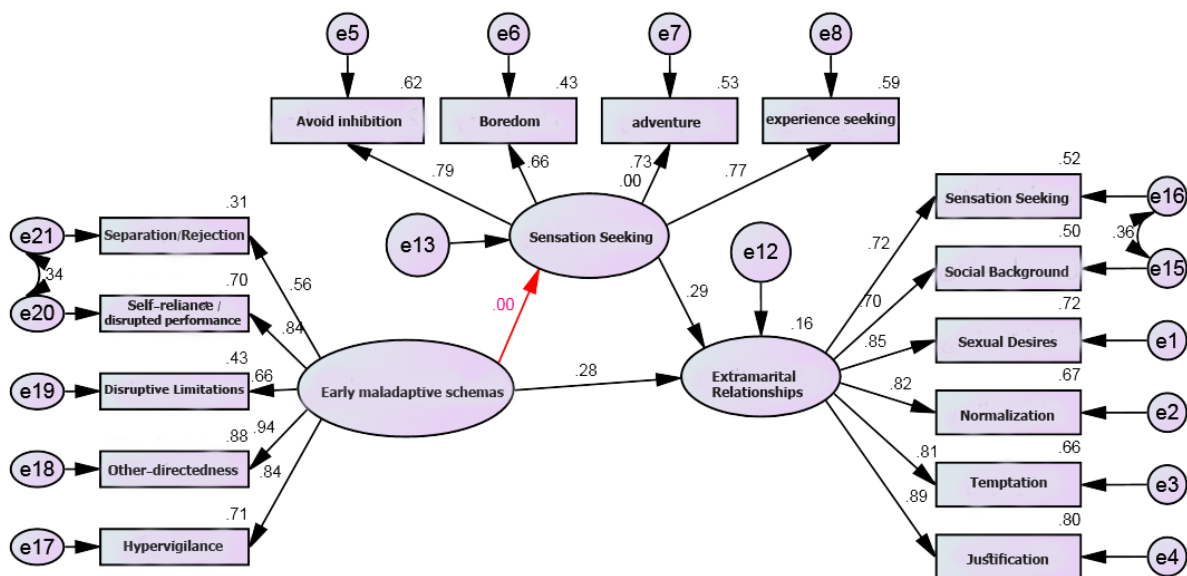


Figure 2. Mediating factor at standard coefficient mode (indirect effects)

Table 3. Direct, indirect, and total standard effects of independent research variables on dependent variables

From latent variable	Through mediating variable	To latent variable	Direct effect in direct model C (sig)	Direct effect in mediating model C'	Indirect effect (sig)
Maladaptive Schema	Sensation-seeking	Extramarital relationships	0.280 (0.008)	0.280 (0.013)	0.001 (0.993)

Therefore, the mediating role of sensation-seeking in the correlation between early maladaptive schemas and the latent variable of extramarital relations is not validated.

## Discussion

The current study aimed to model extramarital relationships based on early maladaptive schemas mediated by sensation seeking. The results of testing the model demonstrated that the correlation between the variables in the model is significant, and the design model has a good fit over empirical

data. Based on the results obtained from the model, there was a positive and significant correlation between early maladaptive schemas and extramarital relationships. The results pointed out that sensation seeking does not have a mediating role in the correlation between early maladaptive schemas and extramarital relationships. Overall, based on the results of previous studies, sensation-seeking is correlated with risky behavior, having multiple sexual partners, unregulated sexual activities, and marital infidelity [25]. The results of the studies by Momeni et.al. [19], Khorram Abadi et.al. [18], Kazemian

et.al.[14] and Lalasz & Weigel are also important in this regard [26]. After investigating different groups in the United States, Lalasz & Weigel reported that individuals with high sensation-seeking are more likely to engage in sexual activities and more susceptible to marital infidelity [26].

As an explanation for these findings, it can be stated that the reason for a desire for extramarital relationships in individuals with high sensation-seeking is a personal desire to seek new things, seek variety, acquire new excitements, and a desire for risk, fearlessness, and seeking danger, all of which are the evident characteristics of these individuals. The results of the study by Medina et al., providing a structural analysis of factors leading to infidelity, illustrated that the cause of infidelity in men was a lack of variety in sexual relationships [27]. This lack of variety resulted in their boredom, discomfort, confusion, anxiety, and loneliness, which are correlated with experience-seeking and boredom susceptibility of individuals with high sensation-seeking, including aversion to repeated experiences, routine activities, and unrest when faced with these situations. In general, the main factor that makes individuals susceptible to infidelity is the excitement and pleasure resulting from these actions. While human behavior is measured based on logic and mental activities, the essential role of emotion and feelings cannot be ignored. This means that human behavior is often a combination of logic, emotion, and feelings [28].

Another important point in explaining the current results is the fact that individuals increase their adaptability to those around them by controlling emotions and improving self-esteem and self-awareness. Individuals who are more susceptible to extramarital relationships often have lower emotional awareness, self-expression, self-esteem, self-actualization, and independence while also having lower stress tolerance and emotional control. Controlling emotions can, on the one hand, help avoid negative feelings and emotions and, on the other hand, opens the way for experiencing positive feelings and emotions. Furthermore, individuals with high emotional control capacity also have good interpersonal skills, are less likely to feel depressed, and have higher general life satisfaction [15]. These factors result in a decrease in the couple's opinions regarding extramarital relationships. In this regard, it can be stated that creating positive feelings and emotional experiences, high self-esteem, high life satisfaction, social commitment, and mental well-being acts as the basis for marital satisfaction, resulting in a decreased desire for extramarital relationships. Individuals with self-restraint and emotional regulation skills are more successful in

creating a good interaction with their spouse even in difficult and stressful situations, resulting in increased marital satisfaction, a decreased likelihood of infidelity, and a negative attitude toward extramarital relationships [14].

Finally, in regards to the failure to confirm the mediating role of sensation-seeking in the correlation between early maladaptive schemas and extramarital relationships, it can be stated that as presented in previous studies, sensation-seeking has a direct and positive correlation with marital infidelity and can be considered one of the main causes of marital infidelity. In addition, the activation of early maladaptive schemas results in levels of emotion, which can directly lead to various forms of psychological disorder, such as depression, anxiety, occupational disability, substance abuse, interpersonal conflict, and other similar conditions. On the other hand, maladaptive schemas do not directly lead to personality disorders but increase the individuals' vulnerability toward these disorders. Instead of being the results of extreme occurrences, the maladaptive schemas are usually created through constant patterns formed by family members or peers who strengthen these schemas.

Maladaptive schema constructs are self-damaging emotional and cognitive patterns in individuals formed at the start of mental development and repeated throughout one's life [29]. These schemas act at the deepest level of cognition, usually outside of the conscious level, and make individuals psychologically vulnerable to such disorders as depression, anxiety, ineffective relations, addiction, and psychosomatic disorders. Early maladaptive schemas are mostly gradual, maintained as subconscious internal factors in individuals, and used as a model for processing future experiences. Therefore, these schemas are expanded throughout one's life and determine one's behaviors, thoughts, emotions, and relationships with others [30]. This means that strengthening various areas of these schemas results in reduced sensation-seeking. As a result, there can be a correlation between early maladaptive schemas, as the hard foundation of personal cognition in individuals formed during development periods, and future divergences in later developmental periods. These schemas are among personal and psychological causes important in studying emotions [31].

Extramarital relationships can be conceptualized through primary maladaptive schemas, which are emotional and cognitive patterns of self-harm formed in the mind at the beginning of growth and development and continue to move and impose themselves on the next experiences of life. In other

words, these schemas are formed in childhood and adolescence and appear in marital relationships in adulthood. The more inconsistent the schemas are, the more detrimental they are to life satisfaction and marital commitment [32]. Therefore, it can be concluded that primary maladaptive schemas are related to extramarital relationships through the mediating variable of sensation-seeking.

Among the limitations of this study, we can refer to gender and cultural differences, which limit the generalizability of the results to women, as well as other cultures and subcultures. It is suggested that these schemas be used in pre-marriage, marriage, and personal counseling to identify individuals with the risk of extramarital relations and treat individuals affected by marital infidelity. Furthermore, the emotions of both spouses, their early maladaptive schemas, their level of intimacy, and the contract between their internal psychological elements should be investigated to create and maintain the mutual marital relationship between spouses. This can help improve and continue the relationship between spouses and improve family health.

## Conclusion

As evidenced by the obtained results, sensation-seeking affects the relationship between primary incompatible schemas and extramarital relationships. Accordingly, it is suggested that married couples, couples with problems, and young couples have a thorough knowledge of the destructive role of primary incompatible schemas in creating marital problems through holding face-to-face or virtual training courses. Furthermore, the findings of the present research can be used at a practical level to prepare treatment plans. These findings can be used as a basis for designing and implementing more extensive studies. The results of this survey can be used as guidelines in the field of prevention, and family counseling can greatly help families by examining the personality status of people before marriage, creating necessary conditions for marriage, and getting to know each other.

## Compliance with ethical guidelines

All ethical principles were considered in the present study. The participants were informed about the research participants and procedures. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their information. This research was registered with the code of ethics IR.IAU.CTB.REC.1400.093.

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## Authors' contributions

This study was extracted from the Ph.D. thesis of the first author at the Department of Psychology, Tehran Central Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. Dr. Souzan Emami-pour, the second author, was the supervisor of the Thesis.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors reported no conflict of interest.

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