

The Role of Psychological Flexibility, Acceptance, and Commitment in Marital Adjustment Among Couples

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to determine the role of psychological flexibility, acceptance, and commitment in marital adjustment among couples.

Method: This study was applied and descriptive-correlational in nature. The population included couples (both women and men) from Amol County, who were studied using a convenience sampling method involving 126 couples. Data were collected using the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory by Dennis and Vander Wal (2010), the second version of the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire by Bond et al. (2007), and the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale (1976). For the analysis of data in the inferential statistics section, simultaneous multiple regression was conducted using SPSS version 21.

Findings: The findings indicate that psychological flexibility, acceptance, and commitment can explain 16.9% of the variance in marital adjustment. The t-tests for significance in regression for the coefficient of psychological flexibility ($\beta = 0.191$) and acceptance and commitment ($\beta = 0.285$) were significant. Acceptance and commitment have a greater unique contribution in predicting marital adjustment among couples ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Conclusion: According to the results, the most significant influences on marital adjustment are acceptance and commitment, followed by psychological flexibility. It is recommended that the findings of this research be utilized to enhance marital adjustment among both women and men.

Keywords: Psychological Flexibility, Acceptance and Commitment, Marital Adjustment Among Couples.

1. Introduction

The family system is among the most important social systems formed based on marriage between two genders (Parsakia et al., 2023; Saadati & Parsakia, 2023);

marital adjustment, which means the level of satisfaction, agreement, and understanding between husband and wife, is a significant and influential factor in enhancing the quality of marital life and consequently the healthier functioning of

the family (Shayesteh Fard et al., 2023). Marital adjustment is a term widely used in family and marital studies. Generally, marital adjustment means the presence of understanding and satisfaction in the marital relationship between couples, which is influenced by various personal and psychological factors (Ünal & Akgün, 2022). Marital adjustment significantly affects the durability and survival of a marriage and is focused on the ability to cope with the opposing person, influenced by many factors, including cultural, psychological, and personality factors, which in turn can affect marital adjustment (Soleimannezhad & Hajizadeh, 2022).

Stable and satisfying marital relationships contribute significantly to positive outcomes for family members, including positive mental health, physical health, and growth, and also promote the growth and health of family members (Michalitsianos, 2014). The marital relationship is a unique human connection that is incomparable to any other interpersonal relationships (Eyni & Safdarian, 2020). According to research by Rafiee and colleagues (2022), psychological flexibility is one of the significant factors in the level of satisfaction and adjustment of couples in marital life (Rafiee, 2021). Psychological flexibility refers to the extent to which an individual is receptive to internal and external experiences. This personality trait, observed to varying degrees in different individuals, determines how people react to new experiences (Kashdan, 2010). Psychological flexibility is a process, ability, or outcome of successfully adapting to threatening conditions (Taghizadeh, 2014). Flexible individuals, curious about both their internal and external worlds, lead richly experiential lives because they like and seek out new experiences (Fanaee, 2015). Therefore, the factors that explain an individual's further adaptation to life's needs and threats are among the most fundamental constructs studied in this science (Carr, 2013).

Cognitive flexibility, which refers to the extent to which an individual is receptive to internal and external experiences, is another key factor (Dennis, 2010). One of the primary features of human adaptive behavior, it reflects complex decision-making processes that are recognized as part of the executive control processes (Lezak, 2004). Individuals with flexible thinking use alternative justifications, positively reconstruct their mental frameworks, accept challenging situations or stressful events, and are psychologically more tolerant than those who are inflexible (Phillips, 2011).

Moreover, recent studies have demonstrated the unique contribution of flexibility and its opposite, psychological

inflexibility, in predicting outcomes related to illnesses such as anxiety, depression, and sleep quality (McCracken, 2011). Pursuing pleasure, commitment, and meaning in life leads to the creation and reinforcement of happiness through positive components such as positive affect and resilience (Finan, 2015).

As mentioned, marital adjustment does not mean the absence of problems in life but the capacity to adapt to problems and the ability to solve them. Marital adjustment is an ongoing changing process and is considered as the ability to compromise and solve problems through which individuals achieve commitment and acceptance of individual differences leading to growth (Eyni & Safdarian, 2020). Adjustment in marital relationships affects various dimensions of quality of life, including mental and physical health (Nazirirad, 2021). From another perspective, marriage is an important social and legal institution that supports stable marital relationships by providing a specific set of rights, privileges, commitments, responsibilities, and new expectations (Honarparvaran, 2014). For this reason, in the present study, another variable studied is acceptance and commitment.

Acceptance means accepting and affirming another person's feelings and thoughts. In fact, acceptance in a marital relationship indicates that the accepted person is unconditionally accepted by their spouse, with no need to change or impose their views and ideas (McCracken, 2011).

Marital commitment is also an essential characteristic of successful and long-lasting marriages. The word commitment means a rational decision that involves being bound to specific actions or a state reflecting emotional and rational attachment to an ideal. In Persian, commitment is defined as taking on a condition or covenant and considering oneself obliged to perform an act, and commitment consists of: 1- the act of committing to a responsibility or a belief, 2- the act of referring to or pointing out a topic, 3- the undertaking or responsibility of doing something in the future, 4- the state or condition of emotional or obligatory force to do something in the future (Abbasi, 2016).

Commitment at its most fundamental level is the execution of behavior truly aligned with one's values, not just promising or agreeing to execute them. Adherence may also involve the willingness to experience unpleasant thoughts and feelings, which often arise in the path of living a valued life. In some cases, goals may be relatively short-term. It should be noted that behaviors aligned with values are often not formally and explicitly planned; rather, they may involve helping a client in ACT to identify ways of

living in the direction of a value. Acceptance means not merely wanting to endure irritating emotions and experiences or showing perseverance; it is the willingness to experience unpleasant events, i.e., internal events that arise in the path of behavior aligned with values. Acceptance is the opposite pole of experiential avoidance (Faustino, 2020; McKay, 2012). Thus, commitment and acceptance are two important concepts in marital relationships. Commitment means striving for stability and development of the relationship, and acceptance means looking at the situation in light of the needs and realities that exist and striving to accept and tolerate the spouse's imperfections. When spouses adhere to their commitment to the relationship and at the same time accept the existing conditions, they demonstrate greater compatibility in relationships (Faustino, 2020).

Given the high prevalence of problems and conflicts in family and marital relationships and consequently the rising divorce rates in the country, it is essential to specifically study and research the factors related to this problem. Therefore, the present research aims to investigate whether psychological flexibility, acceptance, and commitment play a role in marital adjustment among couples.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

The current study was conducted with the aim of determining the role of psychological flexibility, acceptance, and commitment in marital adjustment among couples. The study was applied and descriptive-correlational in nature. The population included couples (both women and men) from Amol County, and 126 couples were studied using a convenience sampling method.

Initially, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the questionnaires were designed electronically and posted on social media pages in groups from Amol County. The link to the questionnaires (along with instructions) was provided to those willing to participate in the study and who met the entry criteria, allowing them to respond to the questionnaires and submit their responses to the researcher by clicking the "submit" button. The responses of the participants, after completion, were automatically saved in Google Drive. All data collected from 252 individuals, comprising 126 men and 126 women, were analyzed using appropriate statistical methods.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Cognitive Flexibility

The Cognitive Flexibility Index, created by Dennis and Vander Wal (2010), is used to assess an individual's progress in clinical and non-clinical work and to evaluate the development of flexible thinking. It consists of 20 items rated on a seven-point Likert scale, with three components: a) the willingness to perceive difficult situations as controllable, b) the ability to understand multiple alternative explanations for life events and human behavior, and c) the ability to generate multiple alternative solutions for difficult situations. Dennis and Vander Wal (2010) reported a concurrent validity of this questionnaire with the Beck Depression Inventory at -0.39, and convergent validity with the Martin and Rubin's Cognitive Flexibility Scale at 0.75, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 for the entire scale and 0.87, 0.89, and 0.55 for the subscales respectively (Dennis, 2010). This questionnaire also demonstrates satisfactory convergent and concurrent validity in Iran. Unlike the original scale, which had two factors, the Persian version of the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory consists of three factors: perceived controllability, perceived options, and perceived behavioral justification (Baradaran & Ranjbar Noushari, 2022). The reliability of this questionnaire in the present study was determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88.

2.2.2. Acceptance and Commitment

The Acceptance and Action Questionnaire, Second Edition, created by Bond et al. (2007), is a 10-item version originally developed by Hayes (2000). It measures constructs related to acceptance, experiential avoidance, and psychological flexibility. Higher scores indicate greater flexibility. The original version has demonstrated satisfactory reliability, validity, and construct validity based on results from 2,816 participants across six samples. It achieved an average Cronbach's alpha of 0.84 and test-retest reliability over 3 and 12 months of 0.81 and 0.79, respectively. In a study by Abbasi, Fathi, and Mouludi Vezrab (2012), internal consistency and classification reliability of the questionnaire among four groups of healthy individuals and three groups of individuals with psychological disorders ranged from 0.71 to 0.89 (Eyni & Safdarian, 2020). The reliability of this questionnaire in the current study was determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79.

2.2.3. Marital Adjustment

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale, created by Graham Spanier in 1976, aims to assess the quality of the marital relationship from the perspective of either the wife, the husband, or both parties living together. It consists of 32 items and is scored on a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 150. Scores of 100 or higher indicate marital adjustment, while scores below 100 suggest issues in marital relationships and family discord. This questionnaire evaluates the overall marital adjustment of an individual. Reliability and validity studies related to this scale have always been positive. Spanier (1978) obtained a Cronbach's alpha reliability of 0.96 for this scale. Sharpley and Cross (1982) reported a reliability coefficient of 0.96 for the questionnaire and recommended its use due to its solid psychometric foundations compared to other scales (Spanier, 1976; Spanier, 1982). The reliability obtained by Hasanshahi (1999) using split-half methods was 0.96, and by using Cronbach's alpha, it was 0.92. This reliability was confirmed in another study by Spanier and Thompson (1982), who calculated an internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha of 0.91. In Iran, Mollazadeh et al. (2002) reported the scale's reliability with a test-retest method of 0.86 and with Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, and its concurrent validity with the

Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Questionnaire was 0.90 (Akbarzadeh, 2022). In the present study, the reliability of this questionnaire was determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82.

2.3. Data Analysis

For the analysis of data in the inferential statistics section, simultaneous multiple regression was conducted using SPSS version 21.

3. Findings and Results

The present research was conducted on a sample of 252 couples, comprising 126 men and 126 women, with an average age of 45.32 and a standard deviation of 11.29. Among the participants, 29.2% had a high school diploma, 31.4% had an associate degree, and 39.4% had a bachelor's degree or higher.

To examine the hypothesis of normal distribution of single variable values, skewness and kurtosis were analyzed, and to evaluate the homoscedasticity hypothesis, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance coefficient were examined.

In Table 1, the mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis of the research variables are reported.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics Results

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Tolerance	VIF	Durbin-Watson
Marital Adjustment	76.94	28.216	0.301	-0.427	Criterion	Criterion	
Psychological Flexibility	66.17	23.628	0.444	-0.817	0.77	1.287	1.621
Acceptance and Commitment	21.57	7.89	0.686	-0.486	0.77	1.287	

The analysis of the data showed that the skewness and kurtosis values of the variables are between ± 2 , indicating a satisfactory distribution of data. Also, considering the variance inflation factor values less than 10 and the tolerance coefficient higher than 0.10, there is no multicollinearity among the research variables. The Durbin-Watson test

(1.621) was used to assess the independence of observations (independence of residuals or errors), suggesting adherence to the assumption of error independence.

Correlations between research variables are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Pearson's Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3
Marital Adjustment	1		
Psychological Flexibility	0.326**	1	
Acceptance and Commitment	0.375**	0.472**	1

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

The findings showed that marital adjustment is positively and significantly correlated with psychological flexibility ($r = 0.326$) and acceptance and commitment ($r = 0.375$) at the

0.01 level. A simultaneous multiple regression was used to determine the extent to which each variable predicts marital adjustment (Table 3).

Table 3

Summary of Regression Model

Predictive Variable	F	P	R	R2	Adjusted R2	b coefficient	SE	β coefficient	T	Significance Level
Constant						39.883	5.505		7.245	0.001
Psychological Flexibility	25.30	0.001	0.411	0.169	0.162	0.228	0.078	0.191	2.918	0.004
Acceptance and Commitment						1.018	0.234	0.285	4.342	0.001

According to Table 3 ($F = 25.30$; $P = 0.001$), the model is statistically significant, and psychological flexibility and acceptance and commitment can explain 16.9% of the variance in marital adjustment. The t-test for significance in regression for the coefficient of psychological flexibility ($\beta = 0.191$) and acceptance and commitment ($\beta = 0.285$) was significant at less than 0.05 level. Acceptance and commitment have a greater unique contribution in predicting marital adjustment among couples.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this research demonstrated that psychological flexibility, acceptance, and commitment have the ability to predict marital adjustment among couples. In interpreting these results, it can be noted that psychological flexibility, as a personality trait, influences marital adjustment. This trait represents an individual's ability to adjust and adapt to various and changing conditions in life. The degree of flexibility indicates an individual's attitude towards life challenges. Individuals with a negative outlook may engage in excessive avoidance of the negative aspects of their mental framework, leading to an inability to accept these parts of their psychological system. However, negative dimensions are a natural part of people's mental systems. Especially in individuals who constantly face external situations that provoke negative attitudes, non-acceptance of these mental aspects can lead to a decrease in cognitive flexibility and an increase in avoidance of attention and acceptance of the internal mental world. Therefore, directly confronting and challenging these psychological aspects over the long term can drain significant mental energy from these individuals and reduce their cognitive flexibility. Conversely, individuals with high flexibility demonstrate a greater ability to adapt positively to challenging events and adjust themselves to circumstances (Akbarzadeh, 2022).

Psychological flexibility in couples can lead to improved marital adjustment. Couples possessing this trait have the potential capability to manage and control emotions, adjust to each other's needs, and coordinate more effectively in their relationships. Conversely, individuals with low psychological flexibility may struggle with problems and changes in life and relationships, potentially leading to psychological disorders, increased marital tensions, and issues in marital relationships (Ishaghi Jordwey, 2021). Prior research (Gupta, 2018; Ishaghi Jordwey, 2021; Moradzadeh & Pirkhaefi, 2018; Rafiee, 2021; Rafiei Saviri, 2022) also align with the current findings, showing a significant relationship between psychological flexibility and satisfaction and adjustment in marital life.

Acceptance and commitment are two important characteristics in marital relationships that have a profound effect on marital adjustment. Acceptance means truly accepting the realities, characteristics, and weaknesses of a spouse. When a couple shows acceptance towards each other, it actually means affirming each other in all aspects of their lives and interactions. This characteristic can lead to better understanding of each other and help in reducing dissatisfaction and tensions in marital relationships (Ellen Byrd, 2009).

Commitment means the desire to maintain a long-term relationship with a spouse. When couples demonstrate their commitment to their relationship, it signifies that they are committed to resolving problems and overcoming obstacles that arise, maintaining their relationships to achieve their goals. Commitment also gives couples hope that they can develop together and improve their relationship (Karimzadeh, 2018). Prior research (Eyni & Safdarian, 2020; Honarparvaran, 2014) also align with the current findings, showing a significant relationship between commitment, acceptance, and satisfaction and adjustment in marital life.

Finally, to explain the findings of the current research, it can be stated that marital adjustment is an ongoing process considered as the ability to compromise and solve problems through which individuals achieve understanding and acceptance of individual differences related to growth. Individuals with high positive emotions are able to experience pleasure, have a broader and more creative range of thinking, and possess more optimistic thoughts. Also, having high cognitive flexibility plays an important role in life satisfaction, optimism, socio-emotional health, cognition, physical health, and performance (Khanjani, 2017). Psychological flexibility can be seen as one of the important factors in improving marital adjustment among couples. To enhance this characteristic, practicing and training skills such as emotional management, positive thinking, acceptance of changes, and self-regulation can be beneficial. Additionally, the skills of commitment and acceptance are very important for couples' adjustment. The skill of commitment means adherence to commitments and loyalty to a life partner, while the skill of acceptance means accepting and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of a life partner. Having these skills in couples' lives can have positive effects on their adjustment. With the skill of commitment, couples can make their best effort to achieve their common goals, thereby increasing cohesion and trust in each other. This skill also enables couples to be more courageous in facing potential flaws and problems in their relationship and avoid dismissive or evasive behaviors {Eyni, 2020 #20335}. The skill of acceptance is also recognized as one of the important factors in couples' adjustment. With this skill, couples can make their best effort to understand and accept each other's strengths and weaknesses. This skill can ensure that each partner understands and supports the needs and desires of their partner, increasing a sense of acceptance and trust, and gradually improving couples' adjustment and communication.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

This research, like others, has its limitations, including limitations in the selection of subjects, as the present study was conducted separately on married men and women. It is suggested that future research use a sample of couples to obtain better results. Since the cultural, social, and economic background was not evaluated in this research, for better generalization of the results, it is recommended that different communities be studied and compared in future research.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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