

The Role of Relationship Emotional Schemas and Personality Dimensions on Domestic Violence in People Referred to a Forensics Center in Iran

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Abstract

Objective: Domestic violence is an important social problem and according to the DSM5 classification, this problem is considered from a clinical point of view. Factors that play a role in the occurrence of domestic violence may include the personality traits of couples and the ways in which couples manage each other's emotions. The purpose of the study was to investigate the role of personality dimension and relationship emotional schema in prediction of domestic violence.

Method: In this cross-sectional study, the study population included all men and women who referred to Sari forensic medicine in 2019 who were selected by convenience sampling. Data collection tools were Domestic Violence Scale, NEO Personality Questionnaire (NEO - FFI) and Relationship Emotional Schema (RESS). Data analysis was performed through correlation coefficients and regression analysis using SPSS 24 software.

Results: Based on the results of stepwise regression analysis, negative relationship emotional schemas (Guilt/shame, Control, Numbness, Rational, Duration, Rumination, and Blame) and positive relationship emotional schemas (Comprehensibility, Validation, Differentiation, Values, Consensus, Acceptance, Expression) are the best predictor variable ($R = 0.65$; adjusted R square = 0.41; $F = 44.41$; $P = 0.001$), and personality dimension was excluded from the model because it did not have a significant predictive power. And was not able to explain the variance of domestic violence.

Conclusion: According to the findings, the emotional schema of the relationship (negative/positive) and neuroticism play a key role in domestic violence. Therefore, by identifying the emotional schemas and personality traits of the couple's relationship, it is possible to provide more appropriate treatment outcomes for mental health professionals and effectively prevent the increase in domestic violence.

Key words: *Domestic Violence; Emotional; Personality; Schema*

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Domestic violence is a crucial, preventable public health problem and an important subject of investigation; hence DSM-5 assigns this problem in the category of “other conditions that may be a focus of clinical attention.” According to DSM5 criteria and literature review, domestic violence is divided into physical, sexual and emotional (1). The findings of the review study (2) indicate that even with the recent scientific and technological advances and increased educational level and changed lifestyle, still many women/man are victims of marital violence and the causes of this problem must be addressed. One of the fundamental factors in domestic violence is the personalities of the abuser and the victim (3).

Personality refers to all the characteristics adapted to the changing internal and external environments in a unique way. Personality disorder has a prevalence of between 10% to 20% in general population. People with this disorder have a problem with work and love, are less educated, and more likely to be addicted to drugs, are single, and have marital problems (4). It is advised that mental health professionals working in the field of domestic violence use the term personality styles rather than personality disorders to access treatment options more. Personality styles refer to pervasive and carved traits perpetuating one’s daily problems (3). On the other hand, research has shown that emotional schemas are related to marital relationship quality (5, 6).

Problematic emotional schemas are usually associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, PTSD, cognitive factors of concern, empirical avoidance, marital maladjustment, personality disorders, and reduced mindfulness (7). Few studies revealed that the inability to tolerate mixed emotions is one of the main predictors of marital dissatisfaction (one of the components of emotional schema) (5). In addition, research findings show that people reporting greater marital maladjustment are more likely to experience emotional schemas associated with low self-esteem and validation, high shame, and low tolerance for mixed emotions and feelings (5, 7). Furthermore, researches performed on marital interactions have shown that people have different abilities in understanding emotions. These individual differences are also observed in other skills related to these abilities. Moreover, happy couples perform better than maladapted couples do, both in expressing emotions and in perceiving, recognizing, and receiving emotions. It is assumed that if couples become aware of their spouses’ emotions, they can clearly express and show their emotions to each other, and they will have a better life. To this end, they need to be aware of the causes, aspects, and consequences of emotional experiences on marital life (8).

Many studies reveal that these emotional schemas are associated with many psychological disorders, such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, metacognitive aspects of concern, alcohol abuse, marital maladjustment, and

personality disorders (9). Hasani (2014) in their study found that emotional schemas of blame, agreement, and a simplistic view of high emotions, and values express 20% of the variance in marital satisfaction. In addition, various components of emotional schema explain the marital satisfaction dimensions. Hasani *et al.* (2014) also recognized that the coefficients of emotional schemas explanation were higher than emotional intelligence (6). Today, domestic violence is a Significant health problem, especially mental health worldwide; factors contributing to this phenomenon include the personality traits of couples and the ways they manage each other’s emotions through emotional schemas (2). Furthermore, understanding the fundamental personality structures may help professionals initiate an appropriate treatment approach for domestic violence (3). In addition, after reviewing the literature on domestic violence, it was found that most researches performed in this field are descriptive and few studies have addressed the underlying mechanism of domestic violence. Many researches have also been done on the extent of domestic violence and spouse abuse and they have reported its high prevalence in developing countries. Nevertheless, there are no sufficient studies on the factors affecting domestic violence. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, no study has been done on the role of emotional schemas in the incidence of domestic violence.

Objectives of the Study

In order to more accurately investigate the causes and factors leading to domestic violence, the present study was conducted to determine the role of personality traits and emotional schemas of the relationship in the occurrence of domestic violence in Iranian couples referring to forensic medicine.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This was a cross-sectional study in terms of data collection method. The statistical population of the present study included all those who referred to the forensic medicine in Sari in 2018.

Participants

The sampling was done by convenience sampling method. The sample size was calculated based on the formula of calculation of sample size, with 95% confidence level and 90% power; and 132 persons were calculated based on correlation of 0.38 (10) that was increased by 10% due to lower correlation in some dimensions.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria included in the study were literacy, age range of 18-60 years, married status, tendency to participate in the study, and referral due to domestic violence. Other psychiatric disorders, such as psychotic disorders, were the exclusion criteria (according to

diagnostic interview based on DSM-5 with an assistant psychiatric).

Sampling Technique

The participants in the study were selected according to the accessibility to the statistical population, so that a psychiatric assistant resided in forensic medicine in Sari and based on the previous coordination with all units, any married person referring to the forensic medicine center was referred to the assistant if they were willing to participate in the study. After evaluating the inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria and obtaining consent, he/she was entered the study.

Measurement of Study Variables

The present study included three questionnaires given to the participants by a questioner (psychiatric assistant) in a separate room.

The Relationship Emotional Schema Scale (RESS): This questionnaire was designed by Leahy (11, 12) To evaluate couples' beliefs about each other's emotional experiences. This questionnaire has 13 items that evaluate couples' relationship emotional schema. It is scored according to Likert scale from one (very untrue) to six (very true). The subscale of this questionnaire consists of Comprehensibility, Validation, Guilt/shame, Differentiation, Values, Control, Numbness, Rational, Duration, Consensus, Acceptance, Rumination, Expression, and Blame. Iranian RESS psychometric properties were appropriate and internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.71) was acceptable. The results of exploratory factor analysis showed that RESS has four factors. Also, the correlation between the items confirms the validity of the scale structure (13).

Spouse abuse questionnaire (SAQ): This self-reported questionnaire has been specifically developed to assess physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Its validity in Iranian population (Cronbach's alpha coefficient: 0.92) and reliability (test-retest reliability: $r = 98\%$; $P \leq 0.001$) have already been established in previous studies (14).

The 5-Factor Personality Inventory (NEO-FFI): The NEO-FFI is a short form of the five factors personality scale developed by Costa and McCrae in 1983 (John & Srivastava, 1999). It has 60 items with a 5-point Likert options, ranging from one "strongly disagree" to five "strongly agree". A research in Iran showed acceptable reliability of NEO-FFI among Iranians (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.86). The reliability of the NEO-FFI in this study was acceptable (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.71) (15).

Data Collection

After describing the purpose of the research and ensuring the confidentiality of the information, the participants were asked to accurately and honestly complete the questionnaires in person. Participation or nonparticipation in the study was optional. Moreover, the questioner was actively involved in answering their questions when necessary. A trained psychologist initially presented the purpose of participation in the study to the participants and after obtaining consent, the participants were given the questionnaires and to prevent

the effect of the order of their performance, counter balanced method was used for data collection.

Ethical Clearance

This study was conducted after receiving the Code of Ethics from the Student Research Committee of the University, with approval code IR.MAZUMS.REC.1397.1485).

Statistical Analysis

The data were entered into MS Excel software and analyzed through SPSS software version 24 (SPSS Inc). Applying appropriate descriptive statistical methods (Pearson correlation coefficient and stepwise regression analysis), the results were tabulated. The response rate was 100% as our sampling method was convenience sampling method and before distributing the questionnaires, we obtained participants' consent. The present study had about 3% missing data and we used them pairwise for analysis.

Results

The contents of this section have been presented in two sections of descriptive and analytical results. Descriptive statistics have been first used to sort information. The data obtained from the research are presented in the relevant tables. The second part of the data analysis is based on statistical inference. The demographic characteristics of the participants are as follows: age (maximum: 70 minimum: 16) gender (male: 38; Female: 85); education (elementary:11; middle school education level: 31, high school diploma: 39; academic certificate: 36); job (self-employed: 45; employed: 13; unemployed: 6; housewife: 49; retired: 6). The results of the analysis showed that none of these demographic variables (education, age, and gender) had a significant relationship with domestic violence.

The mean and standard deviation score of all variables are as follows: emotional violence (M: 25.36;SD: 16.18), physical violence (M: 8.42; SD: 7.75), sexual violence (M: 6.91; SD: 7.40), the total score of violence (M: 40.6, SD: 27.90), neuroticism (M: 25.15; SD: 6.29), Extraversion (M: 29.5; SD: 6.46), Openness (M: 23.82; SD: 4.74), agreeableness (M: 30.43, SD: 6.79); conscientiousness (M: 36.8; SD: 6.06), negative relationship emotional Schema (M: 29.0, SD: 7.14), Positive Relationship Emotional Schema(M: 13.70, SD: 7.18). According to the study hypothesis, there is a correlation between personality dimensions, relationship emotional schemas, and domestic violence dimensions. Pearson correlation test was employed to investigate the relationship between personality dimensions, relationship emotional schemas, and domestic violence dimensions. Tables 1 and 2 presents the correlation coefficients for these variables. As observed in Table 1, the personality dimensions of neuroticism and extraversion showed the highest correlation coefficient. The relationship between neuroticism and total domestic violence score was positive and significant; however,

extraversion and the total score of domestic violence had a significant inverse relationship.

Based on the results of Table 2, there was a significant correlation between relationship emotional schemas and domestic violence. Hence, the hypothesis that relationship emotional schemas are related to domestic violence is confirmed in all emotional schemas.

To answer this question that how much of domestic violence is explained by relationship emotional schemas and personality dimensions, stepwise multivariate regression analysis was used. Table 3 presents the results of this test. According to the result of stepwise

multivariate regression analysis, personality dimensions were excluded from the model.

Based on the results of Table 3, relationship emotional schemas can explain 41% (adjusted R = 0.416) of the variance in domestic violence (F = 44.41, P < 0.001).

Table 4 shows the regression coefficients of negative and positive relationship emotional schemas in predicting the amount of domestic violence. As the table results show, positive emotional schemas, (Beta = -0.58; P < 0.001) and negative relationship emotional schemas (Beta = 0.30; P < 0.001) can explain the variance of domestic violence changes.

Table 1. Correlation between Personality Dimension and Domestic Violence Components in People Referred to a Forensics Center in Iran

| Structure | Variable | Total Score of Domestic Violence | Sexual Violence | Physical Violence | Emotional Violence | Duration of Violence |
|------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| personality dimensions | Neuroticism | 0.39** | 0.11 | 0.36** | 0.40** | 0.20** |
| | Extraversion | -0.19* | -0.01 | -0.16 | -0.25** | -0.05 |
| | Openness | 0.05 | 0.09 | 0.02 | 0.06 | -0.08 |
| | Agreeableness | -0.04 | -0.16 | 0.33 | 0.01 | -0.24** |
| | Conscientiousness | -0.15 | -0.55 | -0.09 | -0.20* | 0.12 |

*P < 0.05, **P < 0.01

Table 2. Correlation between Relationship Emotional Schemas and Domestic Violence Components in People Referred to a Forensics Center in Iran

| Structure | Variable | Total Score of Domestic Violence | Sexual Violence | Physical Violence | Emotional Violence |
|---|---|----------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Relationship emotional schemas | Comprehensibility | -0.70** | 0.48** | -0.51** | -0.71** |
| | Validation | -0.66** | 0.46** | -0.50** | -0.67** |
| | Guilt/shame | 0.24** | 0.04 | 0.19* | 0.28** |
| | Differentiation | -0.53** | 0.26** | -0.45** | -0.54** |
| | Higher values | -0.32** | 0.24** | -0.28** | -0.31** |
| | Uncontrollability | 0.29** | 0.11 | 0.21* | 0.25** |
| | Numbness | 0.61** | 0.42** | 0.51** | 0.62** |
| | Rationality | 0.46** | 0.28** | 0.37** | 0.48** |
| | Duration | 0.50** | 0.26** | 0.43** | 0.51** |
| | Consensus | -0.23** | 0.09 | -0.21** | -0.22** |
| | Acceptance | -0.24* | 0.20** | -0.029** | -0.46** |
| | Rumination | -0.23* | -0.18* | -0.18* | -0.21* |
| | Expression | -0.54** | 0.36** | -0.43** | -0.53** |
| | Blame | 0.51** | 0.35** | 0.44** | 0.51** |
| | Negative relationship Emotional schemas | 0.49** | 0.26** | 0.41** | 0.53** |
| Positive relationship Emotional schemas | -0.58** | -0.31** | -0.45** | -0.65** | |

*P < 0.05, **P < 0.01

Table 3. Summary of Predicted Domestic Violence Based on Relationship Emotional Schemas and Personality Components in People Referred to a Forensics Center in Iran

| Model | | R | R square | R adjust | Standard error of estimation | F | P Value |
|-------|---|-------|----------|----------|------------------------------|-------|---------|
| 1 | Negative relationship emotional schemas | 0.589 | 0.346 | 0.341 | 22.65 | 63.14 | < 0.001 |
| 2 | Positive relationship Emotional schemas | 0.652 | 0.425 | 0.416 | 21.33 | 44.41 | < 0.001 |
| 3 | Personality dimension | 0.238 | 0.057 | -0.001 | 23.95 | 0.976 | < 0.438 |

Table 4. Regression Coefficients' Relationship Emotional Schemas in Prediction of Domestic Violence

| Predictive Variables | Regression Coefficient (B) | Standard error | Beta | T | P value |
|---|----------------------------|----------------|-------|-------|---------|
| Constant | 70.57 | 4.25 | | 16.59 | < 0.001 |
| Positive relationship Emotional schemas | -1.64 | 0.205 | -0.58 | -8.00 | < 0.001 |
| Negative relationship Emotional schemas | 0.98 | 0.242 | 0.30 | 4.06 | < 0.001 |

Discussion

This study was aimed at investigating the relationship of relationship emotional schemas and personality dimensions with the amount of domestic violence. The results of the present study reveal that relationship emotional schemas and personality dimensions are related to domestic violence. On the other hand, the results of this study also revealed that relationship emotional schemas express 41% of the variance in domestic violence. In addition, the components of relationship emotional schemas were in relation with different aspects of domestic violence. These results are in favor of the findings of Leahy and Kaplan (5). Moreover, Leahy reports that couples feeling that their partner's response to their emotions is negative are more vulnerable to emotional maladjustment, and these emotional schemas explain the negative association of 50% of marital dissatisfaction in couples, which is consistent with the findings of the present study.

Deeper explanations of the role of emotional schemas in domestic violence appear to be proposed through considering the content of these emotional schemas. The schema of blame is based on the process that one blames others for his/her emotions and emotional experiences. In the emotion-based treatment model, it is believed that blaming others causes anxiety and depression to continue (9) and since anxiety and depression are associated with marital maladjustment (16), it is logical that that maladaptive couples be more violent toward each other, which is in line with findings of previous study (17). In this regard, Leahy (2018) found that negative emotional schema predicts psychological inflexibility. People with less psychological flexibility abuse their spouse more (18), which is in favor of our findings. Moreover, since researches indicate that emotion regulation is an important factor in couples' relationships satisfaction (19), the emotion schema is a

type of maladjusted emotion-regulation strategy that can negatively affect couples' relationship quality. This was evident in the findings of the present study.

For some people, it is very disappointing and emotionally disturbing to hear their spouse talking in anger or rage. Indeed, the results support the fact that these people's heart rate significantly goes up during the conflict; this is unbearable for them, and this excitement intensifies for men more than women do. The outcome of these emotional exchanges is that the negative emotions of couples are intensified and they will be unable to control them. Such individuals try to either suppress their spouse's emotions or leave the room when the couple commits physical and emotional violence (20).

Findings of the present study have shown that negative relationship emotional schemas have a significant correlation with domestic violence, which is consistent with previous researches (21). A common emotion schema in people is that listening to and validating their spouse's feelings only reinforces their whining and complaining behavior. The spouse with this look at emotion probably believes in complaining, and whining provides the conditions for an outburst of intense emotions that eventually leads to no escape; hence they stop their spouse by mocking, humiliating, controlling, and destroying them as soon as their spouses begin to express their feelings. It is logical that after the couples treat each other this way, a suitable context for domestic violence will be provided (18).

As noted in the findings section, among the emotional schemas of relationship, validation has a significant and relatively strong correlation with domestic violence, indicating that the more couples understand each other's emotions, the less domestic violence will be among them and vice versa; this finding is convergent with previous research (6). In a study on emotion schema of

relationship, validation, caring about spouse, and desire to hear spouse's words are important predictors of relationship satisfaction. Researches show that among the 14 emotional schemas dimensions, low validation is the best predictor of divorce in couples. People who feel they have been validated are less likely to blame their partner. Hence, validation is a fundamental emotional schema in interpersonal relationships (7). Thus, it can be understood that validating emotions in couples can play a decisive role in the occurrence of domestic violence in families.

Mears *et al.* (23) report that after controlling the mediating role of emotional intelligence in relationship satisfaction, emotional schemas express about 5% of marital satisfaction dispersion. Since marital satisfaction is strongly associated with domestic violence, it makes sense to conclude that emotional schemas of relationship play a significant predictive role in domestic violence. The current study provides strong evidence on the relationship between these structures. On the other hand, in their research, Mears (22) concluded that emotional intelligence and emotional schema are significantly correlated; and the higher the individual's emotional intelligence is, the more positive his/her emotional schema will be, which also can be generalized in the context of marital relationship and domestic violence. Domestic violence is likely to occur in people with more negative emotional schemas and lower emotional intelligence.

The content of the emotional schema of agreeableness is based on the fact that many people have the imagination and feelings that one experiences. In other words, the individual is not a strange person (9). The lack of agreeableness "his/her emotions are different from those of other people", the belief that the spouse's emotions are just for him/her will lead to tagging, personalizing, blaming, rejecting, and discrediting the spouse. These beliefs about how others feel are often according to our perceptions of what an intimate relationship should be like, making other people who do not have those feelings marginalized. Based on the Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) Model of Leahy(20), recognizing that others experience emotions similar to them will lead to reduced anxiety and depression. The perception of validation by the spouse reduces the feeling of alienation and the individual feels that he/she has been understood in the marital relationship. This expression is in line with the findings of Leahy that when one feels that his/her imagination and emotions are different from others, he/she will feel less in agreement with others. Consequently, he/she will face problems in interpersonal relationships. Moreover, low levels of emotional schema are associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression (7); and high levels of anxiety predicts marital maladaptation. Therefore, it can be said that the low levels of emotional schema of agreeableness in relationships between couples may predict violence in their relationships. Many people consider their emotions,

impulses, and fantasies strange and therefore do not share them with their spouses and consequently do not receive validation from them; thus, their sense of being strange continues. This creates a vicious cycle, both increasing maladjustment and domestic violence and continuing the negative emotional schemas.

Moreover, emotional schema of high values had a significant inverse correlation with domestic violence aspects, which is in line with the previous results (6). Emotional schema of high values implies that one's emotions, feelings, and imagination reflect his/her personal needs and values (9, 23). Researchers believe that emotions may reveal individual's needs (like intimacy, relationship, and progress) and that the emotional schema of high values makes many painful emotional experiences bearable. Thus, the higher value schema is an adapted emotion regulation strategy(23). The current study revealed that emotional schema of high values has a significant inverse correlation with the dimensions of domestic violence. This result is consistent with the findings of Mears *et al.* (22), Leahy *et al.* (24) concluded that higher value schemas predict psychological flexibility and psychological flexibility is an important factor in marital satisfaction. Therefore, it can be claimed that higher value schemas play a significant role in domestic violence.

Also, the present study has shown that among the personality dimensions, only neuroticism and extraversion had a significant relationship with domestic violence. And personality dimensions were able to explain 11% of the variance in domestic violence, which is consistent with the findings of previous research (25). To explain this finding, it can be said that spouses who have high neuroticism have ambiguous conflicts and paradoxes in feelings, beliefs, and behaviors. These spouses cannot make a definite and appropriate decision. Behavioral and personality disorders, psychosomatic illnesses such as shortness of breath, chronic indigestion, severe headaches, etc., can all be signs of neurological conflicts that lead to domestic violence (26). Neuroticism is associated with a range of negative emotions, such as anxiety and anger, which can lead to domestic violence. People who score high on mental illness are more likely to experience mental disorders, severe negative emotions, more violence, anxiety, and depression, and high impulsivity and ineffective coping strategies. On the other hand, neuroticism is associated with aggressive behaviors. Research has shown that high neuroticism (high levels of negative emotion) and low extroversion (low levels of positive emotions) predict domestic violence in both women and men (27). Based on previous research, we predicted that high neuroticism is associated with domestic violence in both women and men (28, 29), while low extraversion is also associated with physical violence in both genders (27). According to these studies, our hypothesis about the relationship between personality dimensions and domestic violence in the two dimensions of neuroticism and extraversion

was confirmed. Research has shown that low neuroticism and high extraversion are associated with marital satisfaction (30).

Relevance of This Study to the Practice of Primary Health Care

The findings of this study are related to the performance of primary health care physicians and psychologists in the country. The provision of primary health care by a family physician plays a major role in the early detection and diagnosis of home problems among men and women, as they are the patients' first level of contact with health centers.

Limitation

The limitation of this study was the limited sample size. Most of the examples were women, although understandable, but it could jeopardize the external validity and generalizations of both sexes. In addition, other types of emotional relationships (eg, white marriage and homosexuality) in which there may be domestic violence were not included in the present study.

Conclusion

According to the emotional schema model, a person with a negative belief (emotional schema) about one's emotions in close relationships is more likely to humiliate, destroy, suppress, ignore, and ridicule his/her spouse's emotions. These conditions create a vicious cycle of mutual negative emotions, paving the way for domestic violence (20). Like research that targeted emotional regulation (31), detecting negative relationship emotional schema in couple's therapy have important clinical implications.

Limitations of the present study include sampling method (convenience sampling method), which may endanger the research in external validity. The sample selected was from a forensic center only, and this could hamper the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, implementing a better sampling method in multiple centers is recommended. This study was performed on people who referred to a forensic medicine and it is not clear whether it can be generalized to those couples who experience domestic violence but hide it. The present study focused on the emotional schemas of relationship in the population of couples who were married, so the generalizability of the results to minorities who are emotionally related (same-sex couples, couples who are not formally married but they have been in an emotional relationship for a long time [white marriage] etc.) should be done with caution. Thus, future researches can address this issue with selecting samples in general populations and other sexual relationships. In addition, this is a first study that implement RESS in domestic violence worldwide, therefore, more cross-cultural researches are needed in the future to replicate these findings in different cultures.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have confirmed that there are not any conflicts of interest.

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