

Can Deficits in Emotional Intelligence Explain the Negative Relationship between  
Abandonment Schema and Marital Quality?

Peter O'Connor

Queensland University of Technology

Zahra Izadikhah

University of Southern Queensland

Samaneh Abedini

University of Beheshti

Chris J. Jackson

University of New South Wales

Author Note

Peter O'Connor, School of Management, Queensland University of Technology; Zahra Izadikhah, Schools of Psychology and Counselling, University of Southern Queensland; Samaneh Abedini, School of Psychology, University of Beheshti; Chris J. Jackson, School of Business, University of New South Wales.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Peter J. O'Connor, School of Management, Queensland University of Technology Queensland, 4000, Australia, GPO Box 2434, Brisbane QLD 4001, Australia. E-mail: peter.oconnor@qut.edu.au

## Abstract

**Objective:** To determine whether the harmful effects of abandonment schema on marital quality can be attributed to low trait emotional intelligence in a sample of Iranian couples.

**Background:** Research has demonstrated that maladaptive schemas are related to various indicators of marital quality; however, little is known about the mechanisms underlying these relationships. In this study, we use maladaptive schema theory to propose that the harmful effects of abandonment schema on marital quality can be attributed to low trait emotional intelligence.

**Method:** Data were collected from a sample of 123 married couples from Iran. Participants completed a series of questionnaires designed to measure maladaptive schemas, trait emotional intelligence, and marital quality. Structural equation modelling was used to assess the hypothesized indirect effect.

**Results:** Results indicate that abandonment schema is negatively associated with several indicators of marital quality via the indirect effects of trait emotional intelligence.

**Conclusion:** We conclude that trait emotional intelligence can account for the negative relationships between abandonment schema and spousal ratings of marital satisfaction, communication satisfaction, and conflict resolution satisfaction in a sample of Iranian couples.

**Implications:** Couple therapists should consider emotion focused techniques in treating treating couples where one or both partners present with abandonment schema.

*Keywords:* emotions, marital communication, marital quality, marital satisfaction, mental health

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Marital quality is one of the most salient predictors of individual, family, and societal well-being (Car, Freedman, Cornman, & Schwartz, 2014; Stack & Eshleman, 1998). Defined here in terms of indices of satisfaction, marital quality has been linked to such diverse and important outcomes as long term job satisfaction (Rogers & May, 2003), happiness (Jackson, Miller, Oka, & Henry, 2014), and survival following congestive heart failure (Coyne et al., 2001). The effects of marital quality do not seem to be constrained to the immediate family unit: Research has shown that children of divorced parents have a greater likelihood of experiencing divorce themselves (Amato, 1996), and children who witness violence in their parents' relationships are more likely to be involved in violent relationships years later (Kwong, Bartholemew, Henderson, & Trinke, 2003).

Given these associations, much research in this area has sought to determine *why* some marriages are successful and functional and some are unsuccessful and dysfunctional (Bricker, 2005). This question is not only important from a theoretical point of view, but also crucial to improving work undertaken by marriage and family therapists (Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998). In the present study, we add to a growing literature addressing this question by considering how early maladaptive schemas predict a range of marital quality indicators. Specifically, we investigate the role trait emotional intelligence (hereafter referred to as trait EI) plays in the relationship between abandonment schema and various indicators of marital quality using a sample of Iranian women and their partners.

### **Abandonment Schema and Adult Relationship Outcomes**

The concept of *schemas* has been defined by Beck (1976) as organized patterns of thought people use to interpret, integrate, and organize information from the external world. Schemas are thought to develop in response to the environment (Beck & Weishaar, 2005); accordingly, once embedded, they become relatively stable and enduring aspects of peoples' personalities. Beck (1976) posited that schemas influence the selection, codification, and evaluation of a stimulus, and they can be adaptive or maladaptive depending on underlying beliefs or thought patterns. Maladaptive schemas are composed of (sometimes obsessively) revisited memories of past hurt, fear, tragedy, neglect, abuse, abandonment, unmet safety needs, or lack of normal human affection (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003). The negative cognitions associated with maladaptive schemas can lead to misunderstanding, incorrect suppositions, and unrealistic objectives and expectations (Antoine, Antoine, & Nandrino, 2008). Maladaptive schemas usually operate in subtle ways (i.e., out of conscious awareness) and tend to be resistant to change (Bricker & Young, 2012).

Young and colleagues (2003) hypothesized that there are 18 largely discrete early maladaptive schemas and grouped them into five higher-order domains. The most destructive domain is the *disconnection and rejection domain*, which includes a set of schemas thought to originate in families that are detached, cold, rejecting, withholding, lonely, explosive, unpredictable, or abusive. This domain includes the early maladaptive schema termed the *abandonment schema* (Young et al., 2003). According to Young (1994), this schema is among the most harmful and psychologically damaging schemas. Abandonment schema involves the underlying belief that significant others will not be present when needed (i.e., they cannot provide emotional support) either because they are not reliable, not psychologically stable, prone

to abandoning others, or even likely to die (Young, 1994). This schema is said to develop in childhood, primarily in response to an important person withdrawing physically, emotionally, or both. Specific causes of abandonment schema might include parental divorce or parental unreliability (e.g., such as with a mentally ill, workaholic, or exceptionally unemotional or uncommunicative parent).

Research has demonstrated that individuals with abandonment schema have less success in adult intimate relationships. For example, couples suffering from abandonment schema are more susceptible to divorce (Yoosefi, Etemadi, Bahrami, Ftehizade & Ahmadi, 2010), dissatisfaction (Esmaili, Mohammadi, & Hakami, 2016), low perceived mate value (Dumitrescu, & Rasu, 2012), and interpersonal conflict (Messman-Moore & Coates, 2007). More broadly, research has also indicated that remembrances of child emotional maltreatment in adult females are negatively related to romantic relationship satisfaction (Peterson, Peugh, Loucks, & Shaffer, 2017). However, research has not yet explored how abandonment schema affects these relationship outcomes. Because maladaptive emotions stem from abandonment schema (e.g., insecurities, jealousy, pessimism), it is possible that an underlying set of emotional competencies are affected by maladaptive schemas. Indeed, this is consistent with contemporary approaches to schema therapy for couples (see Simeone-DiFrancesco, Roediger, & Stevens, 2015), which advocate emotion-focused therapy as a core therapeutic technique for assisting those with abandonment schema.

### **Trait Emotional Intelligence as Potential Mediator**

Trait EI is one factor that might underlie the negative relationship between abandonment schema and marital quality. Also known as emotional self-efficacy, trait EI can be defined as a constellation of emotional self-perceptions “located at the lower levels of personality

hierarchies” (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007, p. 287). Individuals high in trait EI have a range of self-perceived competencies related to identifying, understanding, managing, and harnessing emotions in both the self and others. Compared to those low in trait EI, high trait EI individuals have been shown to have better emotional perception, and be more responsive to positive mood induction (Petrides & Furnham, 2003). They have also been found to cope more effectively with stress (O’Connor, Nguyen, & Anglim, 2017), ruminate less, and be more satisfied with life than those low in trait EI, even when controlling for the Big Five dimensions of personality (i.e., openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism; Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, 2007). These findings suggest that trait EI might be able to explain the relationship between abandonment schema and marital quality.

One explanation for the associations between trait EI, abandonment schema, and marital quality emerges from maladaptive schema theory. According to maladaptive schema theory, abandonment schema involves a range of maladaptive cognitions relating to the underlying belief that significant others are unreliable, emotionally unstable, or erratic (Young et al., 2003). Accordingly, children with maladaptive emotional beliefs (e.g., “others are not capable of love,” “I am not worthy of being loved”) struggle to objectively process emotional information and consequently suffer impaired development of the core emotional competencies and emotional self-efficacy underlying trait EI. Consistent with this theoretical supposition, research has identified several links between abandonment schema and various emotional competencies. Individuals who have been maltreated during childhood have more difficulty managing hostility, anxiety, anger, and depression compared to those who have not been maltreated or have been maltreated during adulthood (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Wright, Crawford & Castillo, 2009).

Adults maltreated as children also report more problems in interpersonal functioning in home, work, and different types of social relationships (Zlotnick, Zakriski, Shea, & Costello, 1996).

Additionally, trait EI may explain the connection between abandonment schema and marital quality because deficits in core elements of trait EI are problematic for successful adult relationships. Deficits in trait EI involve difficulties identifying, interpreting, and describing emotions in the self and others, which hinder an individual's ability to manage interactions and relationships with others (Lane, 2008). These deficits also limit a person's ability to adopt another person's perspective. This shortcoming is likely to be particularly problematic for the quality of marital relationships because it will limit the extent to which marital partners can connect and comprehend each other and ultimately resolve conflicts (see Ogrodniczuk, Piper, & Joyce, 2011). Research is consistent with this proposition. People with high trait EI have longer and happier marriages (Fitness, 2001) and experience more satisfaction in their marriages (Lavalekar, Kulkarni, & Jagtap, 2010). Conversely, conflict, violence, and deception are more likely to occur between couples with lower levels of trait EI (Brackett, Warner, & Bosco, 2005). Research has also demonstrated that high trait EI is associated with higher empathic perspective-taking and self-monitoring in social interactions, higher levels of agreeableness, higher social skills, more accommodating responses toward partners, and the experience of more affectionate relationships (O'Connor & Athota, 2013; Schutte et al., 2001; Smith, Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2008). Conversely, conflict is found between couples with lower levels of these skills (Brackett, Warner, & Bosco, 2005).

Overall, the arguments and research presented above provides support to suggest that trait EI is related to both abandonment schema and marital quality. Thus, in the present study, we conducted a preliminary test to examine whether trait EI can explain the negative association

between abandonment schema and various indices of marital quality. Specifically, we hypothesized that abandonment schema is negatively associated with marital quality via the mediating effect of trait EI. This hypothesis was tested using a sample of Iranian married couples. Although the majority of research on trait EI and marital quality has utilized Western samples, the relationship between abandonment schema and EI on marital quality is not unique to Western samples. Indeed, research has demonstrated that abandonment schema and trait EI are important constructs in non-Western cultures, such as Iran (Nia & Sovani, 2014; Nikoopour, Farsani, Tajbakhsh, & Kiyae, 2012), and these constructs correlate meaningfully with a range of external criteria in Iranian samples (e.g., Farsani, Khezrimoghadam, & Abedi, 2015). Therefore, we expected the hypothesis—formulated based on the psychological characteristics of people in general rather than being true only for specific populations—to be supported a sample of Iranian married couples.

## **Method**

### **Sample Size and Participant Characteristics**

With a regression model containing seven predictors (two independent variables and five control variables) and an alpha criterion of .01, a power analysis using the statistical program G\*Power 3.0 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) indicated that that at least 122 participants were needed to detect a medium effect size ( $f^2 = .15$ ) 90% of time. A convenience sample of 123 married women from the city of Isfahan, Iran with ages ranging from 21 to 59 years ( $M = 34.7$ ,  $SD = 4.51$ ) were recruited to participate in the study. The level of highest education attained in our sample of females varied; 4.9% reported that their highest education was primary school, 7.7% reported that their highest education was middle school, 49% reported that their highest education was high school, 35.4% reported their highest education was a



bachelor degree and 3% reported they had completed a postgraduate degree.. Participants had been married a mean of 7.8 years and had a mean of 2.1 children. A majority of the participants (61%) reported their socioeconomic status as middle-class, 26% low-class, and 13% high-class. Most (91%) participants reported their religion as Islam, 5% had a different religious preference (e.g., Christian), and 4% did not report a religious preference. The sample reflects the Iranian population demographics in terms of fertility (national average of 1.83 children per couple; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2015), religion (more than 95% of the population identifies their religion as Islam; United States Central Intelligence Agency, 2016), and education (43% of the overall population and 60% of women enroll in tertiary education; World Education Services, 2013).

## Measures

**Maladaptive schemas.** The Young Schema Questionnaire–Short Form (YSQ–SF; Young & Brown, 1990; Young et al., 2003) is a 90-item scale that assesses 18 separate maladaptive schemas using 5 items each. Although the entire questionnaire was completed by participants, only scores from the abandonment schema subscale (e.g., "I worry that people I feel close to will leave me or abandon me") were used in this study. Response options range from *completely untrue of me* (scored as 1) to *describes me perfectly* (6). Thus, scores on this subscale positively correspond with the presence of abandonment schema. This inventory has been translated into Farsi and validated by Ghiasi, Molavi, Neshat, and Salavati (2011). Test–retest reliability on the subscales for the YSQ in Farsi ranges from .52 to .81 and internal consistency reliability ranges from .80 to .94. In the present study, the abandonment schema scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .79.

**Trait EI.** The 30-item Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire–Short Form (TEIQue–SF; Petrides & Furnham, 2001) provides comprehensive coverage of the trait emotional intelligence domain. Example items include “I often find it difficult to see things from another person’s viewpoint” and “I usually find it difficult to regulate my emotions.” Seven Likert-type response options are provided, ranging from *completely disagree* (1) to *completely agree* (7). Fifteen items, including the two example items, are reverse scored so that higher scores indicate higher levels of emotional intelligence. Both the English and Farsi versions of this questionnaire have been found to have good validity and reliability (Azghandi, FerasatMemar, Taghavi & Abolhassani, 2007; Marnani, 2003; O’Connor et al., 2017). In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha was .83. Although the questionnaire contains four highly correlated subscales, these scales are commonly combined to form an overall score for trait EI.

**Marital quality.** The ENRICH Marital Assessment (Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1987) is a self-report marital assessment that measures the degree of satisfaction experienced from married life and adjustment to marriage. In addition to the female participants in this study, their husbands also filled out this assessment for the purpose of providing validation checks, as detailed later. ENRICH includes 12 subscales, including leisure activities, equalitarian roles, idealistic distortion, marital satisfaction, personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, sexual relationship, children and parenting, family and friends, and religious orientation. Only the scales for conflict resolution (e.g., “My partner and I have different ideas about the best way to solve our disagreements”), communication (e.g., “I am very satisfied with how my partner and I talk with each other”), and marital satisfaction (e.g., “I am very happy with how we handle role responsibilities in our marriage”) were used in this study. These scales, respectively, assess the extent to which spouses are happy with the way they solve

their conflicts, how they communicate, and their marriage. Marital satisfaction was chosen because it provides the most direct assessment of marital quality and the other two scales were chosen because they discriminate very well between happily versus unhappily married couples (Fowers & Olson, 1989). Responses are scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5); higher scores indicate higher marital quality.

ENRICH has been empirically validated in numerous studies and has demonstrated high reliability and validity (Fowers, 1999). It was translated into Farsi and validated by JanBozorgi and Ibrahimi (2008), who found test–retest reliability on the subscales ranging from .56 to .82, and internal consistency reliability ranging from .81 to .92. In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha ranged from .73 to .82 (see Table 1). The construct validity of the scale is supported by correlations with measures of family functioning and family satisfaction (JanBozorgi & Ibrahimi, 2008).

### **Procedure**

Participants were approached in public locations, such as parks, shopping centers, and cultural events (e.g., while families were waiting for a concert to start). Potential participants were only approached if they were clearly part of a family (i.e., were presently with their husband and children). We also collected a small amount of data regarding marital quality from participants’ husbands to more accurately measure the couples’ marital quality and consequently to eliminate the possibility that the results could be attributed to common method variance (see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Poksakoff, 2003). Marital quality was the only data collected for husbands because we were conscious that families were volunteering their personal family time and we the research team did not want to overburden them. Once participants agreed to participate, they completed paper versions of the three questionnaires. To ensure participants

were comfortable and honest in their responses, husbands and wives completed their respective questionnaires independently and were assured that their partner would not have access to their answers. All participants were volunteers and were assured of their individual responses would remain confidential.

### **Statistical Analyses**

The hypothesized mediation between abandonment schema and marital quality via trait EI was assessed using structural equation modelling (SEM) in AMOS Version 23. SEM allows for the assessment of sequential, linear relationships between latent variables. Importantly, SEM also allows for the assessment of model fit, which provides an indication of the plausibility of hypothesized models based on how consistent the set of hypothesized relationships are with those present in the data. As recommended by Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson (2014) model fit was assessed using 4 criteria. First, by dividing the chi-square statistic by the model degrees of freedom (CMIN/DF) and determining whether this value is lower than 3. Second, by inspecting the comparative fit index (CFI) and determining whether this value exceeds 0.95. Third, by inspecting the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and determining whether this value is lower than .08. And finally by inspecting the standardized root mean residual (SRMR) and determining whether this value is lower than .08. According to Hair et al., (2014) models producing statistics that meet these criteria can be considered as having adequate fit.

SEM was deemed an appropriate method for testing the hypothesis because the hypothesized model in the present study is a sequential (mediational) model and our dependent variable (marital quality) constitutes a latent variable (i.e., a variable that cannot be directly observed or measured but that theoretically underlies a set of related, observable variables). In the present study, marital quality was the latent variable measured indirectly based on variance

common to three variables: spousal marital satisfaction, conflict resolution, and spousal communication. The specific SEM model we tested is a *common fate model* (see Ledermann & Kenny, 2012) because our latent variable (marital quality) is based on dyadic data (i.e., both husband and wife ratings) and therefore only exists at the level of the dyad. When modelling the dependent variable in our SEM analysis, marital quality was represented as a factor (or latent variable) with both husbands' and wives' ratings of marital satisfaction, conflict resolution, and spousal communication as indicators (see Figure 1). The IV (abandonment) and mediator (emotional intelligence) were modeled as observed variables with only the dependent variable modeled as a latent variable. In accordance with Ledermann & Kenny (2012) all loadings on the measurement model (marital quality) were set to 1.

When interpreting the magnitude of direct and indirect effects, the widely accepted thresholds suggested by Cohen (1992) were used. Values of .10 to .29 were regarded as 'small', values of .30 to .49 were regarded as 'medium', and values of .50 and above were regarded as 'large'.

In an attempt to minimize the possibility that correlated socioeconomic factors could explain hypothesized relationships between our focal variables, we measured and controlled for the following variables in the study: mother's age in years, mothers' education (categorized as primary school, middle school, high school, bachelor's degree, master's degree and above), number of children, years married, and self-reported economic state (categorized as below average, average, above average). These variables were controlled in SEM by modelling them as direct predictors of the marital-quality latent variable and allowing them to covary. The final degrees of freedom for the common fate SEM model was 56.

## Results

Data were checked for linearity, normality, and the presence of outliers. Bivariate scatterplots revealed no evidence of non-linearity, skewness and kurtosis statistics were within acceptable levels, and no outliers were found beyond  $p < .001$ . Means, standard deviations, alphas, and correlations between focal variables in this study are shown in Tables 1–3; all composite variables had adequate levels of internal consistency and the variables were generally correlated as expected. Missing data was very minor and occurred in less than 2% of respondents. Missing values were therefore treated as random and imputed using expectation maximization in SPSS. The mean level of abandonment schema ( $M = 15.23$ ) was similar to the non-clinical sample mean reported by Ghiasi et al., (2011). The effects of control variables are summarized in Table 4. Bivariate correlations were also used to assess the associations between wife and husband scores on the three indicators of marital quality; results indicated the reports were all statistically significant and high (communication satisfaction:  $r = .78$ ; conflict resolution satisfaction:  $r = .71$ ; ; marital satisfaction:  $r = .76$ ).

The hypothesis that abandonment schema is negatively associated with marital quality via the mediating effect of trait EI was tested using SEM in AMOS, which allowed us to assess the fit of the model as well as the statistical significance of the proposed indirect (mediated) effect. The size and statistical significance of the hypothesized indirect effect was calculated in AMOS and represents the product of the two underlying direct effects (i.e., the effects between abandonment schema and trait EI as well as between trait EI and marital quality). The indirect effect can also be conceptualized as the reduction in the association between the independent variable (abandonment schema) and the dependent variable (marital quality) once the mediator (trait EI) is controlled. The results of this analysis are summarized in Figure 1. The hypothesized

model including the control variables was a good fit (CMIN/DF = 1.68; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .08.). The 90% confidence intervals for the RMSEA were .046 (lower) and .097 (upper). There was a strong direct effect between abandonment schema and trait EI ( $\beta = -.52, p < .01$ ), and a strong direct effect between trait EI and marital quality ( $\beta = .55, p < .01$ ). The indirect (mediated) effect from abandonment schema to marital quality was statistically significant (*indirect effect* =  $-.29, p < .01$ ). This indicates that, for each standard deviation increase in abandonment schema, there is a 0.29 standard deviation decrease in marital quality, which can be attributed to the effects of trait EI. In other words, when trait EI is controlled (i.e., treated as equal across all values of abandonment schema), the negative relationship between abandonment schema and marital quality is reduced by a magnitude of 0.29. Because the direct effect between abandonment schema and marital quality ( $\beta = .02$ ) was no longer significant when trait EI was modeled as a mediator, this effect represents a full mediation. The statistical significance of the indirect effect ( $p < .01$ ) was assessed using 5,000 bootstrap samples, which indicated that the magnitude of the indirect effect obtained in the present study would only be expected 0.2% of the time if the actual indirect effect was zero (see Kline, 2015, for a full explanation regarding the use of bootstrapping in testing for the statistical significance of indirect effects).

### Discussion

The results of the present study make two primary contributions to the literature on trait EI and marital satisfaction. First, we demonstrated that the presence of abandonment schema in adults is associated with low levels of trait EI. This study is the first examination of the relationship between these two fundamental concepts and extends earlier findings that love (Sillick & Schutte, 2006) and secure attachment (Kafetsios, 2004) are associated with higher

levels of trait EI. Second, we provide preliminary evidence for our suggestion that trait EI can account for the established negative relationship between abandonment schema and marital quality. Our results indicate that, when controlling for trait EI, the statistically significant, moderate-sized relationship between abandonment schema and marital quality becomes statistically non-significant (i.e., an indirect effect). Therefore, it seems plausible that the relationships between abandonment schema and indicators of relationship and marital quality exist primarily because individuals with abandonment schema tend to have low levels of emotional competencies.

From a theoretical perspective, our results indicate a possible process through which abandonment schema predict various indicators of marital quality. Specifically, our results are consistent with the idea that the negative relationship between abandonment schema and marital quality can be explained by low levels of trait emotional intelligence in those with abandonment schema. We speculate that abandonment schema, which theoretically forms in childhood and prior to the development of mature adult emotions, inhibits the normal development of emotional skills and emotional self-efficacy that underlie trait EI. We note, however, that the cross-sectional results from the present study can only provide preliminary support for this causal relationship: Our results only indicate that trait EI can explain the negative association between abandonment schema and indicators of marital quality.

### **Practical Implications**

Currently, interventions designed to enhance relationship and marital quality are guided by foundational work on communication and conflict resolution (e.g., Gottman, 1989), behaviorism (e.g., integrative behavioral couple therapy; Dimidjian, Martell, & Christensen, 2002), and emotional regulation in couples (e.g., Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Johnson,



2012). In the present study, we focused on the concept of schemas, which underlie a form of cognitive therapy (i.e., schema therapy; Young et al., 2003) and demonstrated that a plausible reason for why abandonment schema leads to poor marital quality is because individuals with this schema tend to have poor emotional competencies (as assessed using trait EI). This finding is important because a major therapeutic technique in schema therapy is emotion focused therapy (EFT; see Johnson, 2012), which utilizes cognitive, experiential, and emotion-based techniques to enhance emotional functioning. Although clinical trials provide evidence that supports the practice of EFT with couples (see Greenberg, 2010), our study is among the first to demonstrate an empirical link between abandonment schema and emotional functioning, thereby supporting the possible utility of EFT in the treatment of those with abandonment schema.

Another implication of this finding relates to the selection of appropriate treatment for couples where at least one individual presents with abandonment schema. Based on our results, an effective form of treatment for such couples might be treatment focused on enhancing the emotional competencies (i.e., their abilities to regulate their own emotions, others emotions, and handle stress) of both partners. Indeed, this outcome is consistent with maladaptive schema theory (Young et al., 2003; Simeone-DiFrancesco et al., 2015), which endorses a range of therapeutic approaches focusing on emotions (e.g., EFT for couples; Greenberg 2010; Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). We tentatively suggest that incorporating emotion focused techniques into therapy utilizing traditional techniques (i.e., focusing on behavior modification, communications skills, conflict resolutions strategies, etc.) might enhance therapeutic outcomes in such couples. Although our findings suggest the importance of this work with couples in which one partner has an abandonment schema, additional intervention studies on a clinical sample are needed to determine whether this treatment would be effective.

Consequently, we tentatively endorse the range of emotion-focused techniques described by Simeone-DiFrancesco et al. (2015) for couples when at least one member presents with abandonment schema. In particular, we suggest that practitioners consider exploring and unpacking emotions with such couples to enhance empathy, which, in the mid- to long-term might enhance emotional competencies in individuals. Consistent with Simeone-DiFrancesco et al. (2015), we suggest that—as one part of their overall approach—therapists working with couples should (a) work to deepen the emotional experience and connection in partners, (b) provide theoretical explanations of emotional experiences and discuss how such experiences can be routinely achieved, and (c) emphasize that couples are essentially practicing a new form of communication in therapy that should ultimately become habitual. For example, a standard empathy-based task in a therapy session might progress as follows:

James (husband): I do not enjoy returning home from work because Sara (wife) always shouts at me for being late, even when it is just a few minutes. I am sick of it (looks frustrated/annoyed).

Therapist: Sara, can you comment on this? How do you feel when your husband returns from work late?

Sara (wife): Very angry to be honest. I used to put up with it, but he just doesn't seem to care. He does it every day (looks angry).

Therapist: Do you just feel angry? Can you identify any softer emotions? You seem to be a little hurt.

Sara (pauses, anger fading, appears slightly sad): Well, yes, I am a bit hurt. I actually get sad because I miss the old days when we spent more time together. I look forward to seeing my husband during the day.

Therapist: So you are sad because you miss your husband when he works late and think he doesn't care. James, do you care?

James (no longer frustrated, looks compassionate): Yes, of course I care. I don't like working late either and I also miss the times when we had more fun.

At this point, the therapist would interrupt and offer a theoretical account of what happened. The therapist might point out that Sara's admission of sadness made her feel and appear vulnerable to her husband and, consequently, caused an empathetic response from him. This effect, in turn, led the husband to feel understood and cared about, which allowed an emotional connection between the couple. Essentially, anger and hostility were replaced with vulnerability and empathy. The therapist might also discuss abandonment schema at this point, and explain to the couple that Sara's strong emotions about this particular issue largely reflect underlying fears of abandonment. The therapist could further explain to the couple that abandonment schema is less problematic when couples have the capacity to unpack, explore, and understand emotions and that a major therapeutic goal will be training in such emotional competencies. We note, however, that the ability to unpack and understand emotions is just one aspect of EI. Other aspects, such as emotional control, should also be fostered in therapy. Also note that schema therapy for couples involves a broad set of techniques beyond the development of emotional capabilities (e.g., communication and cognitive behavioral techniques, imagery, reparenting, etc.).

Overall, the idea that emotional skills can enhance relationship and marital quality is well supported. Previous research indicates that a person's ability to identify and communicate emotions in oneself and in one's romantic partner is associated with marital quality due to the "facilitative role" that emotion skills "play in the intimacy process" (Cordova, Gee & Warren,

2005, p. 232). Additionally, previous research has demonstrated that competencies underlying trait EI are important factors for managing potential stresses that arise in interactions or interpersonal relationships (Johnson, Batey, & Holdsworth, 2009). From a practical perspective, our results provide insight into a possible cause of marriage and relationship dysfunction and can be incorporated into therapeutic and intervention programs where appropriate.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The primary limitation in this study is the use of cross-sectional data to assess an effect that has a longitudinal component. Although it is likely that abandonment schema, which theoretically precedes emotional maturity, has a causal role in the development of trait EI, results in this study cannot be used to conclusively support this idea. Similarly, our results cannot conclusively support the idea that low levels of emotional competencies (as assessed here using trait EI) account for the negative relationship between abandonment schema and marital quality. Although we utilized some controls in this study (e.g., mother's age, education, years married, number of children, economic status), we did not control for other psychological variables that could also act as mediators, such as adult attachment styles or relationship-contingent self-esteem. Indeed, it is possible that trait EI is no longer relevant when these variables are controlled. We therefore recommend that future research replicate the present set of results while controlling for a range of competing pathways.

A second limitation in this research is the use of a sample of married women from Iran. By collecting complete data from a sample of women only (data from husbands was only collected on ENRICH for validation purposes), the results are limited in the extent to which we can generalize our findings to men (i.e., the effect of husband abandonment schema on marital satisfaction via trait EI). With that said, our hypotheses theoretically relate to both men and

women, and we expect abandonment schema and EI in men to be as harmful to aspects of marital quality as abandonment schema and EI in women. Similarly, our focus on Iranian couples limits the generalizability of the present findings to this population. Therefore, we suggest that future studies be designed to test our hypotheses in different populations.

Third, our focus on schemas in this research was limited to the narrowly-defined *early maladaptive schemas*, which are theoretically caused by close relationships in early life and not greatly influenced by other environmental factors (Young et al., 2003). However, this aspect of early maladaptive schema theory has not been properly tested and is not completely consistent with broader conceptualizations of schemas and how they develop (see Johnson-Hanks, Bacharach, Morgan, & Kohler, 2011). It is plausible that maladaptive schemas in adults are also influenced by other environmental factors, such as schooling, culture, the media, and adult relationships. Although this is not a major problem for the present research—we simply demonstrated that the negative effects of abandonment schema on marital satisfaction in adults can be attributed to poor emotional competencies—we recognize the need to broaden research and theory on early maladaptive schemas.

### **Conclusion**

The present study demonstrated that the presence of abandonment schema in adults is associated with trait EI and that trait EI can statistically account for the negative relationship between abandonment schema and marital quality. These two results are novel and provide empirical evidence for the use of EFT (Simeone-DiFrancesco, 2015) in schema therapy for couples. Although EFT is one of many techniques utilized by therapists in schema therapy, we suggest that EFT might be of particular importance in couples seeking help when one member presents with abandonment schema. It is also of importance when couples are particularly

dissatisfied with their communication. In such cases, we suggest that therapists might prioritize EFT in therapy and aim to assist clients with developing emotional skills and competencies. We do not suggest that such EFT and EI training form the sole therapeutic techniques employed, but rather form a major part of therapy along with more traditional techniques focusing on communication and conflict resolution.

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Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Alphas for Abandonment Schema, Trait Emotional Intelligence, and Ratings of Satisfaction with Conflict Resolution, Communication, Marriage, and Parenting*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$
Abandonment schema	15.23	6.20	.79
Emotional intelligence	141.51	24.25	.83
Wife			
Conflict resolution satisfaction	10.89	2.61	.78
Communication satisfaction	13.68	3.64	.82
Marriage satisfaction	22.61	4.44	.76
Husband			
Conflict resolution satisfaction	10.93	3.56	.81
Communication satisfaction	13.98	4.23	.79
Marriage satisfaction	16.25	4.43	.73



Table 2

*Correlation Coefficients for Abandonment Schema, Emotional Intelligence, and Wives' Ratings of Satisfaction with Conflict Resolution, Communication, and Marital Success*

	1	2	3	4
1. Abandonment schema	—			
2. Trait emotional intelligence	-.45**	—		
3. Conflict resolution satisfaction	-.11	.29**	—	
4. Communication satisfaction	-.17**	.45**	.44**	—
5. Marriage satisfaction	-.07	.33**	.38**	.43**

\*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 3

*Correlation Coefficients for Abandonment Schema, Emotional Intelligence, and Husbands' Ratings Of Conflict Resolution, Communication, and Marital Satisfaction*

	1	2	3	4
1. Abandonment schema	—			
2. Trait emotional intelligence	-.45**	—		
3. Conflict resolution satisfaction	-.24**	.36**	—	
4. Communication satisfaction	-.30**	.46**	.54**	—
6. Marital satisfaction	-.14	.37**	.48**	.47**

\*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 4

*Means and Standard Deviations of Control Variables and Their Direct Effects on Marital Quality*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
Wife's age	35.06	8.02	.02	.86
Wife's education <sup>a</sup>	2.49	0.86	-.04	.57
Number of children	2.07	1.10	.07	.41
Years married	12.76	8.31	.04	.70
Self-reported economic status <sup>b</sup>	2.14	0.53	-.22**	<.01

*Note.* Education and self-reported economic status comprised ordinal categorical variables and were consequently treated as continuous variables when controlling for them in the main analysis.

<sup>a</sup>Education was coded as *primary school* (0), *middle school* (1), *high school* (2), *bachelor's degree* (3), *master's degree and above* (4). <sup>b</sup>Self-reported economic status was coded as *below average* (1), *average* (2), *above average* (3).

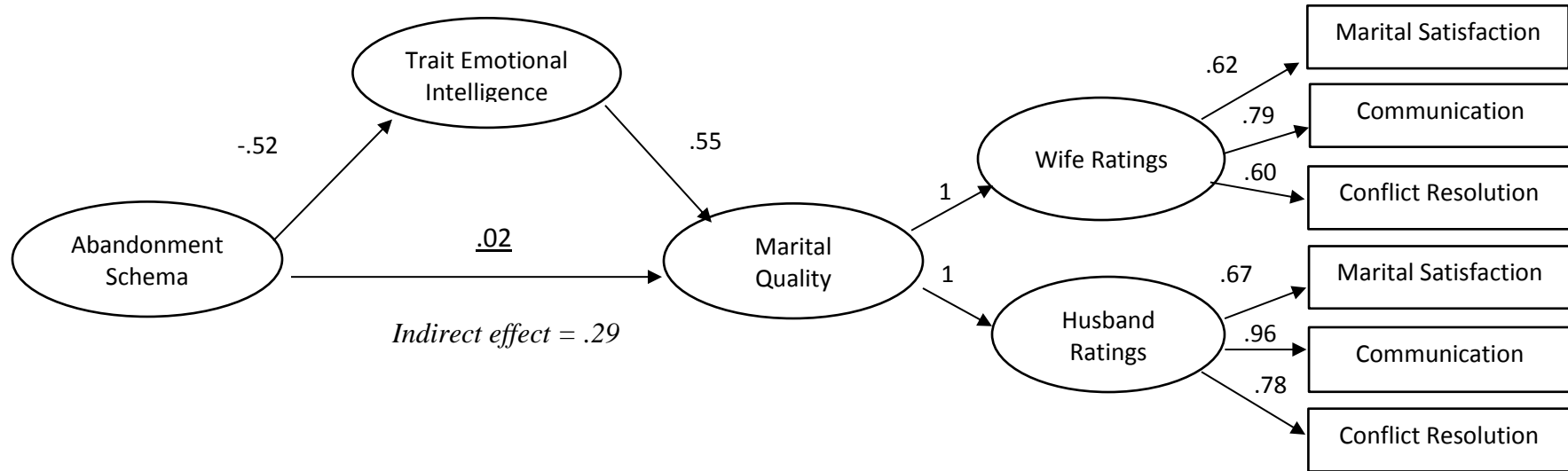


Figure 1. The indirect effect of abandonment schema on marital quality via trait emotional intelligence in women (indirect effect = .29,  $p < .01$ ). Variables controlled include age, education, number of children, year's married, and economic status. All paths were statistically significant at  $p < .01$ , except the direct effect between abandonment schema and marital quality when controlling for trait EI, and effect sizes are displayed in beta ( $\beta$ ). Standardized estimates are included.