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The Role of Family of Origin and object relations in couple burnout: The Mediating Role of Differentiation of self and Ego Strength

shahriar Dargahi
Farhangian University
parviz fadakar
Allameh Tabataba'i University
Sepideh Bashirgonbadi
University of Mohaghegh Ardabili
Jafar Aghaei
Ardabil Azad University
Behnam Molaei
b.molaei@arums.ac.ir

Ardabil University of Medical Sciences

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Abstract

Couple burnout is a significant factor leading to divorce. Family of origin and object relations are influential factors in couple burnout; however, the psychological mechanisms that link these two components to couple burnout, and that can be targeted in psychotherapy, have not been fully explored. We examined the role of differentiation of self and ego strength as potential mediators between family of origin, object relations, and couple burnout in couples. Participants in the study included 384 Iranian individuals who completed Persian versions of the Couple Burnout Measure(CBM), Family of Origin Scale(FOS), Object Relations Questionnaire, Differentiation of Self Inventory and Psychosocial Inventory of Ego Strength(PIES). Structural equation modeling and the SPSS22 and R-4.3.2 software were used for data analysis. The results indicated that the family of origin, differentiation of self, and ego strength have a negative relationship with couple burnout, while the path between object relations and couple burnout is positive. Furthermore, the model-based results, considering the influence of mediating variables in the relationship between exogenous and endogenous variables, supported the mediation of differentiation of self in the relationship between the family of origin and couple burnout, as well as the mediation of ego strength in the relationship between object relations and couple burnout ($p < 0.01$). In fact, it was shown that the family of origin, object relations, differentiation of self, and ego strength play a key role in couple burnout. Therefore, training and improving these variables can serve as an important preventive measure against the occurrence of couple burnout.

Highlights

• the experiences of couples in their family of origin shape their behaviors and interpersonal relationships in married life, enabling the couple to deal with issues and problems effectively while avoiding harm.

• Healthy object relations play a crucial role in forming a strong, constructive, and resilient ego, particularly in relation to marital dynamics.

• Individuals with high ego strength tend to show fewer signs of psychological distress, and consequently enjoy more successful marriages with lower levels of couple burnout.

Introduction

The institution of the family is established through the marriage of a man and a woman; this emotional commitment, which also has a legal dimension, plays a crucial role in the life of an adult (Yang, Yang & Yang,). As a result, many laws, policies, and programs have been developed to support this institution (Kim, Ma & Wang,). Marital satisfaction is a significant factor that generally affects the family; however, achieving marital satisfaction is a goal that does not seem easily accessible (Fernandez et al., 2022). When marital satisfaction is not achieved, individuals experience frustration, which they attribute to their spouse. Ultimately, this leads to the dissolution of the marital bond, replacing initial passion with burnout (Lee,).

In fact, couple burnout is considered one of the main factors contributing to divorce (Fernandez et al., 2022; Fuang, Lin, Zhou & Wang, 2022). Kaiser (1996) defined couple burnout as the gradual loss of emotional attachment, which includes a decrease in spousal attention, emotional estrangement, and an increase in feelings of discouragement and indifference towards one's partner (Kandemir & Tunç, 2020). Research conducted in the field of family studies indicates an increase in the prevalence of couple burnout within families. These studies also show that 50% of couple's experience couple burnout in their marriages (Dobrowolska et al.,).

One of the most important factors affecting couple burnout is the role of the family of origin as an influential factor on the personality of the spouses. Numerous studies have also supported the connection between the family of origin and conflicts between spouses (Lewandowska-Walter & Blazak, 2022; Kilicarslan & Shahani, 2021; Botha, Van den Berg, & Vanter, 2009). The research by Muraru & Turliuc () suggest that the family of origin can predict traits such as independence, intimacy, compromise, satisfaction, and the nature of individuals' relationships. Based on this, the functioning of the family of origin can be an influential variable in couple burnout. Bowen's multigenerational theory states that individuals learn the foundation of interpersonal relationships in their family of origin, and the family and marital problems of couples are a continuation of the relational issues within their family of origin (Calatrava et al.,).

Given the importance of marital life, one key variable that can be considered to increase compatibility and reduce communication disturbances among couples is object relations. Object relations are based on the assumption that individuals are prone to engaging in maladaptive interaction patterns because they establish their current relationships based on unconscious communication schemas that were formed during the early years of life (Glick, Rait, Heru & Ascher,). According to proponents of object relations theory, individuals entering into marriage bring their unique psychological heritage into the relationship (Kaure, 2021). They project their internal suppressed objects on each other and force their spouse to accept this role through the process of projective identification (Glick et al.,). In this regard, various studies have confirmed the effectiveness of object relations in reducing marital problems and shown that object relations can be used to enhance marital intimacy and resolve conflicts between couples (Kaure, 2021; Abbasi et al., ; Kerr, 2013).

Furthermore, we examined the direct and indirect roles of differentiation of self and ego strength in couple burnout. Differentiation of self, the most important concept in family systems theory, reflects an individual's ability to separate their rational and emotional processes. It pertains to the degree to which an individual can differentiate their cognitive processes from their emotional, affective, and experiential responses (Chang & Shin,). This ability plays a significant role in the psychological well-being and future life of couples (Jenkins,). Işık et al. () demonstrated a significant negative relationship between differentiation of self and couple burnout, while Peixoto-Freitas et al. (), in a cross-sectional study, concluded that differentiation of self is related to marital compatibility. Additionally, the research by Gableman (2014) showed that the lower couples' differentiation of self leads to more marital conflicts and couple burnout. On the other hand, Johnson, Thorngren & Smith () reported that the functioning of

the family of origin influences the levels of differentiation of self in young individuals. Walsh () also stated that the degree of adolescents' differentiation from their family of origin directly correlates with their ability to handle stressors and the dysfunctional communication and family patterns that they may encounter in marriage.

Ego strength is another crucial variable in couple functioning. It refers to the capacity of the self to manage the conflicting demands of the ego, superego, and external reality. When an individual cannot maintain a functional balance among these forces, their personality may become destabilized. The term ego strength denotes an individual's ability to effectively handle competing demands and overwhelming situations and to function effectively despite these conflicting pressures and expectations. Therefore, a strong ego enables couples to show fewer signs of psychological distress and to have sufficient resilience and tolerance against the stressors of life. On the other hand, ego weakness causes the organism to withdraw from the external world into the internal world (Fraise et al., 2019). Studies indicate a relationship between ego strength and marital satisfaction among couples (Shokri, Shafie-Abadi & Doukanehfard, 2021). Furthermore, the family of origin is a predictor of ego strength utilization. The presence of the ego relationship indicates the fundamental nature of this relationship (Lindblom et al.,). However, to date, few studies have examined the mediating role of these two variables. Accordingly, the present study aims to investigate the role of self-differentiation and ego strength as mediators between the family of origin and object relations with couple burnout.

Method

The present study was a descriptive-analytical cross-sectional study, using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to analyze the relationships between study variables. A total of 384 participants (192 men and 192 women) were included in the study. These participants had sought help for marital issues at public and private family counseling centers in Ardabil in 2023 and were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: willingness to participate voluntarily and complete the questionnaires, a minimum of one year of marriage, literacy in reading and writing, no history of mental illness or current psychiatric treatment, no substance or alcohol abuse, and no cognitive impairments. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Of the participants, 95 individuals (24.7%) were aged between 31 and 35. Additionally, 23.4% (90 individuals) had been married for one year, while 31% (119 individuals) had been married for 2–5 years. Regarding family size, 23% (89 individuals) had no children, 38% (146 individuals) had one child, and 24.2% (93 individuals) had two children. Participants responded to research instruments, and the collected data were analyzed using structural equation modeling with SPSS 22 and R-4.3.2 (with the packages psych, lavaan, semPlot, and lavaanPlot).

Research Instrument

Couple Burnout Measure (CBM)

Couple Burnout Measure was developed by Panis (1996) to measure the level of burnout in marital relationships. This questionnaire consists of 20 questions and aims to assess the dimensions of couple burnout. This questionnaire contains 20 items and assesses three main dimensions of burnout: physical burnout, emotional burnout, and psychological burnout. All items in this questionnaire are scored on a seven-point scale as follows: (Never = 1, Once for a long period = 2, Rarely = 3, Sometimes = 4, Usually = 5, Often = 6, Always = 7). The evaluation of the reliability coefficient of the Couple Burnout Measure in Panis's (1996) research showed internal consistency between the variables in the range of 0.84 to 0.90. In Iran, in a study by Shadab (2002), the test-retest reliability was 0.89 for a one-month period, 0.76 for a two-month period, and 0.66 for a four-month period. Internal consistency for most participants was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which ranged from 0.91 to 0.93. In this study, the internal consistency of the questionnaire was found to be 0.82, indicating good consistency.

Family of Origin Scale (FOS)

The Family of Origin Scale was developed by Hovestadt and colleagues (1985) to measure the level of independence and intimacy within the family of origin. This questionnaire is a 40-item tool that assesses two dimensions: independence and intimacy. Scoring of the questionnaire is done as follows: responses are rated according to the scale (Strongly Disagree, this does not apply to my family of origin = 1; Disagree, this does not apply to my family of origin = 2; Neutral (neither agree nor disagree) = 3; Agree, this describes my family of origin = 4, and Strongly Agree, this describes my family of origin = 5). In Hovestadt and colleagues' (1985) studies, the validity of the scale was determined through factor analysis (criterion above 0.40) and its reliability through test-retest (above 0.76). In Iran, in a study by Karami (2014), the reliability of the scale in the preliminary phase was 0.89, and in the final phase, it was 0.92, with a test-retest reliability of 0.89 after two weeks (Karami, 2014). Additionally, in this study, internal consistency using Cronbach’s alpha for this tool was found to be 0.85, indicating high consistency.

Object Relations Questionnaire

The Object Relations Questionnaire was developed by Bell (1995) to examine and measure the level of object relations in marital relationships. This questionnaire contains 45 items and assesses four dimensions: alienation, insecure avoidant attachment, egocentricity, and social inadequacy. Responses to the questions are based on a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 5, Agree = 4, Somewhat = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1). Bell (1995) established the validity of the scale using factor analysis and by calculating factor loadings above 0.40. He also determined four main subscales by examining the explained variance in each dimension. In this study, test-retest reliability and Cronbach’s alpha were found to be 0.75 and 0.81, respectively, confirming the scale's reliability. In Iran, in a study by Shaker (2018), the content and face validity of the research were confirmed through the opinions of psychology professors, and the reliability of the scale was calculated to be 0.78 using Cronbach's alpha. Additionally,

in this study, internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha for this tool was found to be 0.84, indicating high consistency.

Differentiation of Self Inventory

The Differentiation of Self Inventory was developed by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) to determine the level of differentiation of self. This questionnaire consists of 45 items and assesses four components: emotional reactivity, my position, emotional cut-off, and fusion. Responses to the questions are scored on a 5-point Likert scale, according to the pattern (Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4, Strongly Agree = 5). In Skowron and Friedlander's study, the validity of the scale was determined by correlating the subscales of the questionnaire, with the correlation between components ranging from 0.75 to 0.88. Additionally, the reliability of the scale was assessed using test-retest over a one-month period, resulting in a reliability coefficient of 0.78. In Iran, in a study by Eskian (2005), the Cronbach's alpha for overall differentiation of self was found to be 0.88, and for the components, it was 0.73, 0.75, 0.70, and 0.80, confirming the reliability of the scale. In this study, internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha for this tool was found to be 0.89, indicating high consistency.

psychosocial inventory of ego strengths

This scale was developed by Markstrom and colleagues (1997) as a 32-item self-report measure comprising eight "ego strengths" labeled as Hope, Initiative, Goal-Directedness, Competence, Loyalty, Love, Care, and Wisdom, with its validity and reliability confirmed (Markstrom & Marshall, 2007). Respondents answered each item on a five-point scale ranging from 1 "does not describe me well" to 5 "describes me very well". The validity of the scale was established through factor analysis and internal correlation of the subscales. The reliability of the scale was reported with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 and a test-retest reliability of 0.79. In Iran, the validity of the scale has been confirmed in a study based on the opinions of psychology department professors. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha for the inventory in an Iranian sample was reported as 0.91, and the split-half reliability of the scale was 0.77 (Toopchi et al., 2023). In this study, internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha for this tool was found to be 0.81, indicating high consistency.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation

Regarding the status of the research variables, the results showed that the mean overall scores were as follows: couple burnout (77.64 ± 8.55), family of origin (134.19 ± 13.26), object relations (150.52 ± 12.33), differentiation of self (169.45 ± 12.84), and ego strength (106.22 ± 8.55) (Table 1).

Table 1
Mean, Standard Deviation, Skewness and Kurtosis Research Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	kurtosis	Skewness
Couple Burnout	77.64	8.55	0.606	0.554
Family of Origin	134.19	13.26	-0.249	-0.253
Object Relations	150.52	12.33	-0.862	0.907
Differentiation of Self	169.45	12.84	0.156	-0.852
Ego strengths	106.22	8.55	1.025	-0.46

To examine the distribution of the research variables, skewness and kurtosis indices were used. Based on the results, since the skewness and kurtosis values for the regression model variables are within the range of -2 to + 2 (Table 1), the distribution of the research variables is considered normal, and the use of the parametric test of multivariate linear regression is appropriate (Horswell & Looney, 1992). Table 2 presents the correlation matrix of the study variables. All variables have a significant correlation with couple burnout (the dependent variable).

Table 2 Correlation between study variables (n = 384)

	1	2	3	4	5
Couple Burnout	1				
Family of Origin	-0.336**	1			
Object Relations	0.261**	-0.161**	1		
Differentiation of Self	-0.397**	0.244**	-0.114*	1	
Ego strengths	-0.457**	0.276**	-0.189**	0.366**	1

Assessment Model Fit

To assess model fit, Kline (2023) recommended using model fit indices such as the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (CMIN/DF), normed fit index (NFI), incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), comparative fit index (CFI), and the goodness-of-fit index (GFI). A commonly accepted threshold for these fit indices is that values equal to or above 0.90 indicate acceptable fit (Kline, 2023). Furthermore, if the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is below 0.08, the model is

considered acceptable. The obtained fit indices were as follows: CMIN/DF = 1.06, p < 0.001, TLI = 0.992, IFI = 0.993, NFI = 0.993, CFI = 0.993, GFI = 0.955, and RMSEA = 0.013. According to Kline's (2023) criteria, these indices demonstrate a good model fit.

As shown in Fig. 1, all variables have a significant relationship with couple burnout. Additionally, the results from Fig. 1 indicate that family of origin, differentiation of self, and ego strength have a negative relationship with couple burnout, while the path between object relations and couple burnout is positive.

Mediation Test of differentiation of self and ego strength

The variables of differentiation of self and ego strength partially mediate the relationship between the exogenous variables (family of origin and object relations) and the endogenous variable (couple burnout). According to Kline (2023), this is due to the fact that the fit indices for the mediation model [$\mathcal{X}^2 = 1.06\,;\ \mathrm{AIC}\ =\ 45960.55$] are smaller than those for the indirect model [$\mathcal{X}^2 = 1.27\,;\ \mathrm{AIC}\ =\ 45997.45$], and the PNFI (0.775) of the mediation model is greater than the PNFI (0.764) of the indirect model. The results presented in Table 3 indicate that in the direct model, the relationships between family of origin and couple burnout **(** $\beta\ = -0.771$(and between object relations and couple burnout **)** $\beta\ = 0.69$(were significant.

Table 3
Standard Regression Weight in the Full Mediation, Direct, and Indirect Model.

DV		IV	Mediation model	Direct model	Indirect model
DoS	←	FoO	0.473***		0.506***
CB	←	DoS	-0.222**		-0.446***
CB	←	FoO	-0.496***	-0.771***	
Es	←	OR	-0.342***		-0.359***
CB	←	Es	-0.262**		-0.355***
CB	←	OR	0.427***	0.69***	

Note.CB: Couple Burnout, FoO: Family of Origin, DoS: Differentiation of Self, Es: Ego strengths, OR: Object Relations. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Furthermore, the results based on the mediation model show a significant relationship between family of origin and differentiation of self (β = 0.473), differentiation of self and couple burnout (β = -0.222), as well as between object relations and ego strength (β = -0.342) and ego strength with couple burnout (β = -0.263). However, although the standardized regression weight for the direct relationship between family

of origin and object relations with couple burnout decreased with the inclusion of differentiation of self and ego strength as mediating variables in the mediation model, it remained significant (Table 3). Additionally, the relationships between family of origin and ego strength, and between object relations and differentiation of self, were not significant, so the two paths related to them were removed, and the final model was presented in Fig. 1. Therefore, according to Hair et al. (2006), given the impact of the mediating variables on the relationship between exogenous and endogenous variables, the partial mediation of differentiation of self in the relationship between family of origin and couple burnout, and ego strength in the relationship between object relations and couple burnout, was supported.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to determine the role of the family of origin and object relations in couple burnout, with the mediation of differentiation of self and ego strength. The results indicated a significant relationship between the family of origin and object relations with couple burnout, confirming these relationships.

Studies such as those by Lewandowska-Walter and Błażek (2022), Kiliçarslan and Şahan (2021), and Botha, Van den Berg, and Venter (2009) align with the findings regarding the relationship between the family of origin and couple burnout. According to Minuchin's structural theory, a family becomes dysfunctional when its rules are not upheld. Moreover, in the interactive dynamics of two individuals, not only do they influence each other, but they are also impacted by other elements of the system and, in turn, affect them as well (Botha, Van den Berg, and Venter, 2009). Thus, it is not surprising that the primary family and its rules can influence individuals' future emotional relationships.

The findings on the relationship between object relations and couple burnout are also consistent with studies by Kaur (2021), Abbasi et al. (2021), and Kerr (2013). Research in this area suggests that when two individuals marry, each brings a unique and distinct psychological heritage into the relationship, projecting their repressed inner objects onto one another. Through the process of projective identification, they influence their partner to adopt this role (Kerr, 2013). Consequently, the object relations between couples can affect their relationship and, in the long term, lead to couple burnout.

The results also indicate a significant coefficient for differentiation of self in relation to couple burnout. This finding aligns with the studies of Isik et al. (2020), Peixoto-Freitas et al. (2020), and Gableman (2014). Regarding the negative and significant relationship between differentiation of self and couple burnout, it can be argued that couples with low levels of differentiation have limited capacity for intimacy at the time of marriage and often sacrifice their autonomy for the sake of the relationship’s stability. In stressful situations, such couples experience disruptions in marital functioning, and due to their limited ability to address issues rationally, they exacerbate marital conflicts, ultimately leading to couple burnout (Gableman, 2014). Conversely, high differentiation of self enables couples to establish boundaries. In essence, differentiation prevents enmeshment during crises, empowering them to resolve issues in the relationship with reason and logic, rather than through emotional reactivity (Isik et al., 2020). On the

other hand, lack of differentiation can lead couples to emotionally distance themselves from each other in difficult situations, pushing them toward couple burnout.

The results showed that ego strength also has a significant impact on couple burnout. This finding aligns with the study by Shokri, Shafiabadi, and Dokanei-Fard (2021). In this regard, it can be argued that ego strength, based on lifespan developmental theories, is recognized as a key process in the development of a mature personality for establishing intimate relationships. According to Erikson's theory, a mature and effective personality capable of forming close relationships depends on successfully resolving crises in various stages of development and acquiring ego strengths (Friese et al., 2019). Individuals with higher ego strength are better equipped to handle problems and changes in their relationships and, as a result, tend to have more successful marital relationships (Lindblom et al., 2016). Moreover, a person with high ego strength can present themselves more effectively in relationships and express their needs to their spouse in a more constructive manner, which prevents couple burnout (Shokri, Shafiabadi, and dokaneheeifard, 2021).

The findings from the structural equation model analysis regarding indirect paths revealed that differentiation of self mediates the relationship between the family of origin and couple burnout. Although no research in Iran has specifically examined these variables, the results are indirectly consistent with studies conducted by Lewandowska-Walter and Błażek (2022), Calatrava et al. (2022), Kiliçarslan and Şahan (2021), Muraru and Turliuc (2012), and Botha, Van den Berg, and Venter (2009). To explain this finding, it can be stated that in well-functioning families, flexibility helps family members manage conflicts through communication, mutual tolerance, and addressing each other's various needs. A healthy family of origin reflects adaptive skills that facilitate growth and development. The dimensions of family of origin functioning indicate a favorable balance between independence and intimacy. Families with such characteristics tend to have higher functionality, reducing the influence of conflict-generating elements and encouraging couples to shift from burnout toward more constructive and positive interactions (Kiliçarslan and Şahan, 2021). When children fail to experience positive marital interaction patterns (such as in cases of divorce or severe parental conflict), they may not develop effective interpersonal skills like communication and conflict resolution, which are essential for avoiding marital conflicts in the future. Consequently, individuals who encounter challenges in their marital relationships often reorganize and replicate the communication issues observed in their family of origin (Muraru and Turliuc, 2012). In essence, if a person comes from a healthy family of origin, they are more likely to address their spouse's expectations and needs in marriage and interact empathetically. This, in turn, reduces the likelihood of couple burnout.

Ego strength also mediated the relationship between object relations and couple burnout. This finding aligns with studies by Shokri, Shafiabadi, and dokaneheeifard (2021), Frabaz et al. (2019), and Lindblom et al. (2016), which highlighted the role of ego strength in marital life. Object relations theory holds that early life events and interactions influence our relationships in adulthood, and the way primary caregivers interact with a child shapes how that individual will engage with their partner in adulthood. Positive object relations foster the development of the ego, which is the core of personality. By nurturing

competence, they create increasing capabilities to resolve psychological and environmental challenges. An individual's ability to cope with life (i.e., psychological balance) depends on the strength of the ego and its capacity to overcome the various pressures it faces (Abbasi et al., 2023). Healthy object relations play a crucial role in forming a strong, constructive, and resilient ego, particularly in relation to marital dynamics. Individuals with high ego strength tend to show fewer signs of psychological distress, maintain greater control over themselves in response to anxiety and daily stressors, and consequently enjoy more successful marriages with lower levels of couple burnout.

In general, according to the results, the family of origin and object relations, with the mediation of differentiation of self and ego strength, are related to couple burnout. It can be said that the experiences of couples in their family of origin shape their behaviors and interpersonal relationships in married life. Therefore, the quality of the family of origin ensures that the family is sufficiently strong, enabling the couple to deal with issues and problems effectively while avoiding harm. Additionally, object relations provide a deep integration between individual dynamics and a systematic understanding of the couple and their extended family. Differentiation of self, as the most important concept of family systems theory, enhances an individual's ability to separate rational and emotional processes. Since differentiation of self is influenced by the family of origin and, in turn, affects couple burnout, its mediating role is justifiable. It can be argued that an individual's level of differentiation of self is shaped in their family of origin and impacts their future life. Moreover, appropriate object relations affect the level of ego strength, and couples with lower ego strength lack motivation to face obstacles in their shared life. In contrast, couples with higher ego strength are sufficiently motivated to overcome life’s challenges, constantly striving for self-improvement and understanding their own and their partner's emotions. Based on this, the mediating role of ego strength can also be explained.

However, this study faced some limitations, including that it was a cross-sectional design. Future studies can evaluate the current model within the framework of longitudinal research to confirm its statistical and clinical significance. Another limitation of this study was the use of self-report measures, which increases the risk of receiving honest responses from participants. Additionally, the study participants were all from the same geographic region, lacking diversity. Therefore, any generalizations should be made with caution. Despite these limitations, the results of this study can enhance our understanding of marital relationships. Based on these findings, it is recommended that necessary training on the aforementioned variables be provided to couples so they can acquire the skills and knowledge to understand each other better in their relationships. Furthermore, proper cognitive approaches and logical perspectives on interpersonal and object relations should be offered to young people about to marry, through cultural and social programs. The necessary skills for assessing differentiation of self and ego strength in couples should be measured with various tools, and couples lacking the ability to manage these variables should receive training through methods endorsed by specialists.

Declarations

Ethical Approval

This study has been approved with the ethical code IR.IAU.ARDABIL.REC.1400.089 by the Ardabil branch of the Islamic Azad University. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study. Additionally, in order to ensure research ethics, the names of all participants were entered using codes.

Author Contribution

All authors reviewed the manuscript

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Conflict of interest: No conflict of interest exists in this study.

Data Availability

Data is available when needed.

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Figures

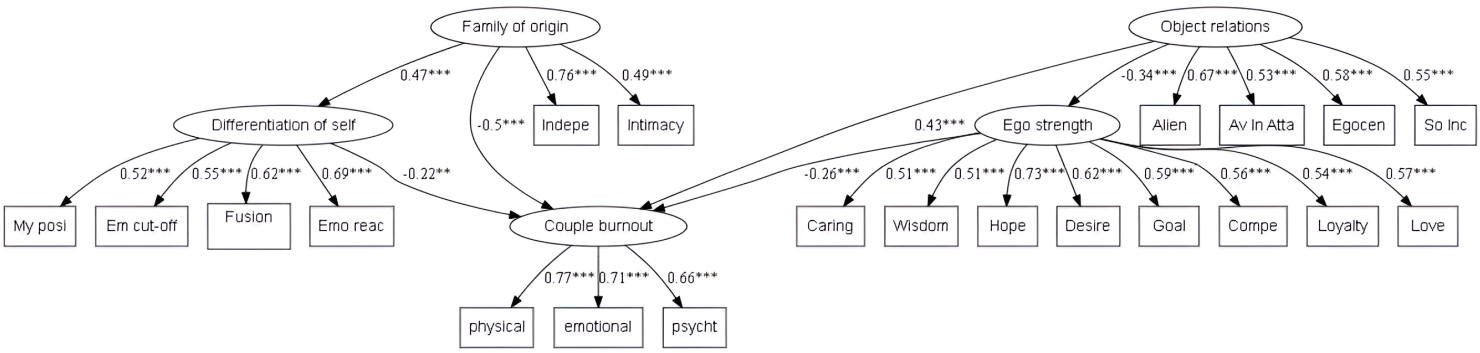


Figure 1

Path analysis of all the study variables.