

Relationships of Students' Mental Well-being with Mothers' Emotional Breakdown and Marital Justice Mediated by Mothers' Marital Intimacy

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Abstract

Background: Students' mental well-being can be influenced by various maternal characteristics due to their close relationships with their mothers. These factors have an impact on their overall mental health. This study aimed to investigate the relationships between students' mental well-being, mothers' emotional breakdown, and marital justice, with the mediating role of mothers' marital intimacy in Ahvaz, Iran.

Methods: The statistical population of this descriptive-correlational study included all female and male senior high school students in Ahvaz, Iran, and their mothers during the 2022–23 academic year. A stratified cluster sampling method was employed, and 300 students and their mothers were selected as the research sample. The research utilized several tools, including the Psychological Well-being Scale, the Love Trauma Inventory, the Marital Justice Scale, and the Marital Intimacy Questionnaire. Path analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 25 to evaluate the proposed model.

Results: The mean and standard deviation (SD) of students' mental well-being, mothers' emotional breakdown, mothers' marital justice, and mothers' marital intimacy were as follows: 59.69 (12.94), 19.29 (5.11), 59.36 (8.87), and 67.99 (12.34), respectively. The findings indicated that all direct paths to students' mental well-being were significant ($P < 0.001$), except for the marital justice of mothers. Furthermore, mothers' marital intimacy significantly mediated the indirect path between mothers' emotional breakdown and students' mental well-being ($P < 0.001$). Similarly, the relationship between mothers' marital justice and students' mental well-being was significantly mediated by mothers' marital intimacy ($P < 0.001$).

Conclusion: The study revealed a direct positive relationship between mothers' marital intimacy and students' mental well-being. Therefore, it is expected that enhancing mothers' marital intimacy will have a positive impact on students' mental well-being. To achieve this, training workshops should be conducted to improve marital justice between spouses, thereby enhancing mothers' marital intimacy and boosting students' mental well-being.

Keywords: Psychological well-being, Emotions, Family conflict, Students

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1. Introduction

Adolescents are universally recognized as sensitive groups within society, emphasizing the significance of their individual, social, physical, and mental health aspects (1). During adolescence, individuals undergo a closely intertwined development process that encompasses physical, mental, and social dimensions. They often encounter potentially perilous situations, as they are faced with new needs while lacking sufficient experience. Consequently, ensuring the mental health and well-being of students is deemed essential in all societies (2).

In general, adolescence is a developmental stage that commences with puberty and concludes with the onset of adulthood. It represents a transitional

period between childhood and adulthood, akin to a bridge that every individual must cross to attain a well-developed adult state (3). Therefore, the mental health and well-being of students hold great significance (4). Mental well-being serves as a crucial indicator of overall health and hygiene within any given society. It encompasses emotional well-being, the ability to derive pleasure from life, recover from distress, despair, and discomfort, and cultivate a sense of self-dignity, self-worth, and empathy towards others (5, 6).

Simultaneously, children are influenced by various maternal characteristics due to their frequent interactions with their mothers, which can significantly impact the mental well-being of adolescents. One such characteristic is the occurrence of emotional breakdowns among

mothers. Marital relationships are generally considered to be powerful human connections, and their quality ultimately affects couples, children, other family members, and society as a whole. However, failure to establish a healthy relationship is a prevalent issue often expressed by dissatisfied spouses (7). Inadequate interaction and relationship skills during the early years of marriage can exacerbate verbal and physical aggression. Unfortunately, many spouses struggle to establish and maintain amicable relationships (8). Emotional breakdowns typically represent painful experiences that can influence how spouses behave towards their children (9).

In this regard, the marital satisfaction of mothers also directly impacts the quality of their marital life and their relationships with their children. Marital satisfaction is a significant concern in interpersonal interactions, influencing individuals' identities, motivations, and behaviors (10). Justice is considered a crucial social concern and a key tool for regulating social life. Different levels of identity are influenced by justice: personal identity, relational identity (i.e., spousal relationships), and collective identity (i.e., intergroup relationships) (11). According to existing literature, the absence of a belief in fair conditions can lead to decreased commitment and diligence (12).

Studies have shown that both emotional breakdown and marital justice of mothers can directly impact the mental well-being of their adolescent children (13). This study aimed to analyze the roles of indirect factors that affect mothers' emotional breakdown and marital justice and the mental well-being of their adolescent children. In this regard, the mediating role of mothers' marital intimacy can be considered (14).

Marital intimacy can be seen as a psychological state that does not arise spontaneously but requires efforts from both spouses (15). It holds great value in a marriage as it strengthens the commitment of the partners to maintain a stable relationship and positively contributes to marital satisfaction (16). Additionally, marital intimacy can be defined as a dynamic process in which couples strive to connect with each other and explore the similarities and differences in their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (17). Demirtas (18) established a correlation between mothers' cognitive flexibility and marital intimacy with their children's mental

well-being. Moreover, social emotions and academic self-efficacy can act as mediators in the relationships between mothers' cognitive flexibility, marital intimacy, and mental well-being.

Generally, research has indicated that many mental and behavioral disorders originate from family dynamics and interactions with mothers. However, it is also important to acknowledge that families can be a source of social progress, as a recent study has suggested (19). We did not find any studies that simultaneously examined the causal model of adolescents' mental health based on mothers' experience of emotional breakdown and marital justice mediated by their marital intimacy. Therefore, this study aimed to fill that research gap. Based on the provided information and research background, the objective of this study was to investigate the relationships between students' mental well-being and mothers' emotional breakdown and marital justice, with mothers' marital intimacy serving as a mediating factor.

2. Methods

The statistical population for this descriptive-correlational path analysis consisted of all male and female senior high school students in Ahvaz, Iran, and their mothers during the 2022-23 academic year. The stratified cluster sampling method was employed to select a research sample of 300 students and their mothers based on the number of research variables and the adopted statistical model.

The number of exogenous variables, error variances, and parameters were calculated in the path analysis, taking into account the number of direct paths. Based on Kline's proposition (20), a minimum of 10 participants is required for each calculated parameter to test a research model. However, for this study, it is advisable to consider approximately 25 participants for each parameter in the research sample to ensure sufficient data for model testing.

The inclusion criteria for the study were as follows: high school students aged between 16 and 18 years, providing written consent to participate in the research, and not suffering from any physical or mental illnesses. The exclusion criteria included unwillingness to continue cooperation in the research and providing an incomplete questionnaire.

2.1. Procedure

The present study was initiated after obtaining the necessary approvals from the competent authorities. To ensure a suitable sample, two districts were randomly selected from the four educational districts of Ahvaz city, Iran. Subsequently, two girls' high schools and two boys' high schools were chosen from each district. Finally, two classes were selected from each school using a simple random method.

Following the selection process, the conditions of the research were explained to the students in the selected classes. Written informed consent was obtained from each student, granting permission to conduct the research. The research questionnaires were distributed to the students, who were then requested to answer the questions. They were assured that their responses would be treated with utmost confidentiality by the researcher.

Each participant was given a time frame of 20 to 25 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Once the time was up, the completed questionnaires were collected for further analysis.

2.2. Instruments

Psychological Well-being Scale: Developed by Ryff (21), the Psychological Well-being Scale consists of 18 items scored on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree). This tool measures six factors including independence, environmental mastery, personal development, positive relationships with others, purposiveness in life, and self-acceptance. The total score of this questionnaire is calculated by summing the scores of all six factors, resulting in scores ranging between 18 and 108. A higher score indicates better psychological well-being. Bayani and colleagues (22) reported a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.82 for the Psychological Well-being Scale. The validity of the Psychological Well-being Scale was confirmed with a content validity index (CVI) of 0.89 and a content validity ratio (CVR) of 0.78 (22). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale was 0.79.

Love Trauma Inventory: The Love Trauma Inventory Questionnaire, designed by Rosse (23), consists of 10 items with four-choice options and a cutoff point of 20. This questionnaire assesses

physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral distress. Each item is scored on a scale of 0 to 3, with items 1 and 2 scored inversely. The total score indicates the level of symptoms associated with emotional breakdown, ranging from 0 to 30. A higher score indicates a greater presence of emotional breakdown symptoms. Etemadnia and colleagues (24) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.83 for the Persian version of this questionnaire, confirming its validity. The questionnaire's validity was further supported by a CVI of 0.91 and CVR of 0.89 (24). In our study, the questionnaire demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86.

Marital Justice Scale: The Marital Justice Scale, developed by Ghaffari and co-workers (25), consists of 20 items that measure the components of social and organizational justice in marital relationships. The scale comprises two subscales: distributive justice and procedural/interactive justice. Respondents rate each item on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). The total score on this scale ranges from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating a more favorable perception of marital justice. Ghaffari and co-workers (25) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.97 for the Marital Justice Scale, indicating high internal consistency. The validity of the scale was confirmed with a CVI of 0.98 and CVR of 0.97 (25). In our study, the scale demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89.

Marital Intimacy Questionnaire: The Marital Intimacy Questionnaire, developed by Hudson and colleagues (26) to assess levels of spousal satisfaction, comprises 25 items. These items evaluate various aspects of marital intimacy, including sexual satisfaction (e.g., "I feel that my sexual life lacks quality or my husband cannot sexually satisfy me."). Respondents rate each item on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (always) to 5 (never). The total score on this questionnaire ranges from 25 to 125, with higher scores indicating greater levels of marital intimacy for mothers. The scale demonstrates good reliability, with a reported Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.77 (27). The validity of the Marital Intimacy Questionnaire was confirmed with a CVI of 0.88 and CVR of 0.87 (25). In our study, the questionnaire yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.80.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, such as the mean, standard deviation, and Pearson correlation coefficient. Structural equation modeling was employed to evaluate the proposed research model in SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 25.

3. Results

According to the findings on demographic variables, there were 150 (50.0%) female and 150 (50.0%) male students. Regarding mothers' education, the results indicated that 42.0% had junior high school educations, whereas 28.0% had high school diplomas. Moreover, 25.0% and 5.0% had bachelor's and master's degrees, respectively. Furthermore, 81.0% and 19.0% of mothers were homemakers and employed, respectively. Quantitative findings and the Pearson correlation coefficient for all variables are reported in Table 1. Figure 1 demonstrates the

proposed model of the research.

According to the data in Table 2, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA=0.506) indicated that the initial model needed revision because it was saturated. In other words, all possible paths were drawn; hence, it was impossible to calculate the chi-square and other indices in this model. After omitting one path (between mothers' marital justice and students' mental well-being), the model was no longer saturated. It was then possible to calculate the chi-square and other indices in the software. Figure 2 depicts the final model, in which RMSEA=0.066 indicates its good fit.

Table 3 reports the findings on the approximation of path coefficients to analyze direct and indirect paths. The results showed that there was no significant relationship between mother's marital justice and students' mental well-being ($\beta=0.06$, $P=0.129$). The relationship between mother's marital justice and marital intimacy was

Table 1: Mean, standard deviation (SD), and Pearson correlation coefficients of the studied variables

Variables	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4
1- Students' mental well-being	59.69 (12.94)	1			
2- Mothers' emotional breakdown	19.29 (5.11)	-0.64**	1		
3- Mother's marital justice	59.36 (8.87)	0.36**	-0.24**	1	
4- Mother's marital intimacy	67.99 (12.34)	0.75**	-0.55**	0.39**	1

**P<0.01

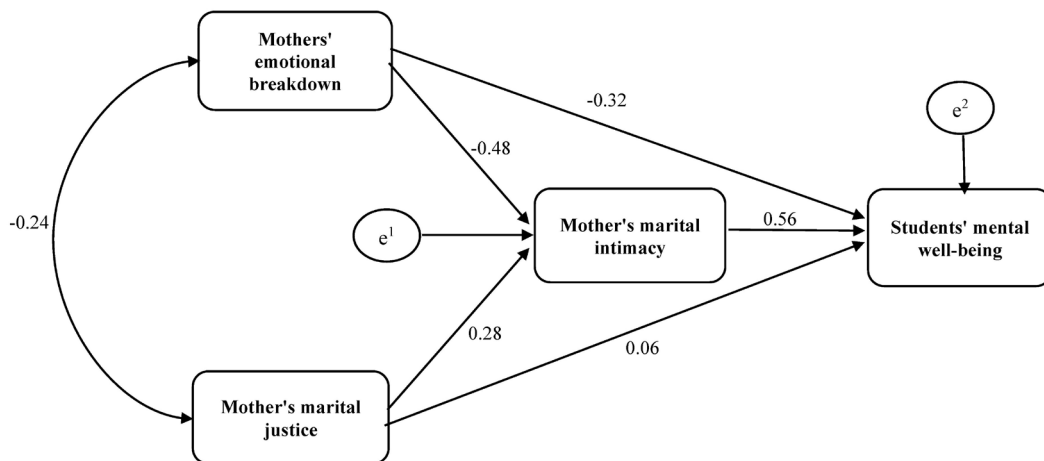


Figure 1: The figure shows the proposed model of the research.

Table 2: Fit indicators of the proposed and final models

Fit indicators	χ^2	df	(χ^2/df)	IFI	RFI	TLI	CFI	NFI	RMSEA
Proposed model	-	-	-	0.87	-	-	0.74	0.80	0.506
Final model	2.29	1	2.29	0.99	0.97	0.98	0.99	0.99	0.066

IFI: Incremental Fit Index; RFI: Relative Fit Index; TLI: Tucker–Lewis index; CFI: Comparative Fit Index; NFI: Normed Fit Index; RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

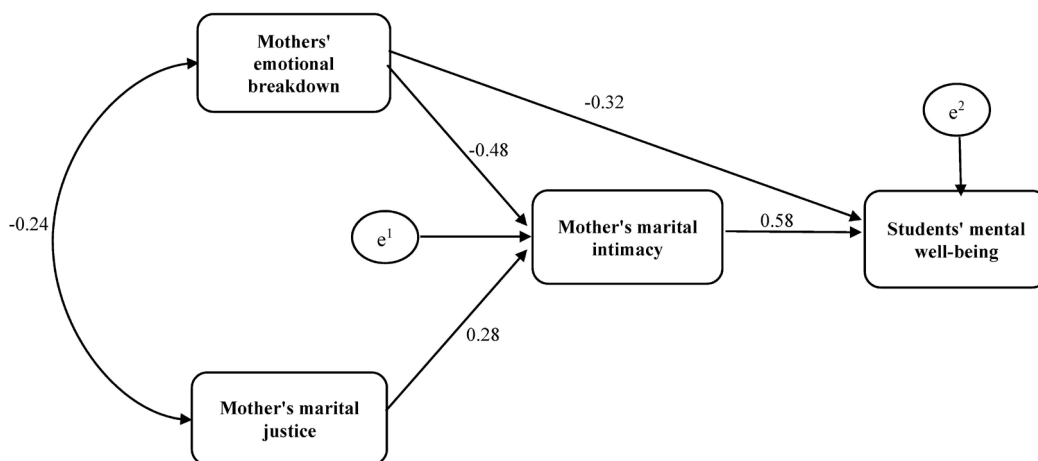


Figure 2: The figure shows the final model of the research.

Table 3: Direct and indirect path in the proposed and final models

Paths	Proposed model		Final model	
	β	P	β	P
Mothers' emotional breakdown \rightarrow Students' mental well-being	-0.32	0.001	-0.32	0.001
Mother's marital justice \rightarrow Students' mental well-being	0.06	0.129	-	-
Mothers' emotional breakdown \rightarrow Mother's marital intimacy	-0.48	0.001	-0.48	0.001
Mother's marital justice \rightarrow Mother's marital intimacy	0.28	0.001	0.28	0.001
Mother's marital intimacy \rightarrow Students' mental well-being	0.56	0.001	0.58	0.001
Mothers' emotional breakdown \rightarrow Students' mental well-being through mother's marital intimacy	-0.68	0.001	-0.71	0.001
Mother's marital justice \rightarrow Students' mental well-being through mother's marital intimacy	0.23	0.001	0.24	0.001

positive and significant ($\beta=0.28, P=0.001$). The relationship between mother's marital intimacy and students' mental well-being was positive and significant ($\beta=0.56, P=0.001$). There was a negative and significant relationship between mothers' emotional breakdown and students' mental well-being ($\beta=-0.32, P=0.001$) and between mothers' emotional breakdown and marital intimacy ($\beta=-0.48, P=0.001$).

Table 3 indicates the significance of an indirect path from the mother's emotional breakdown to the students' mental well-being mediated by mothers' marital intimacy ($P<0.001$). It also indicates the significance of an indirect path from the mother's marital justice to students' mental well-being mediated by mothers' marital intimacy ($P<0.001$).

4. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the relationships between students' mental well-being, mothers' emotional breakdown, and marital justice, mediated by mothers' marital intimacy. According

to the first research finding, there was a direct negative relationship between mothers' emotional breakdown and students' mental well-being. This finding is consistent with Yap and Baharudin's (28) report that parental conflicts and parents' emotional breakdown negatively affect adolescents' mental well-being, with self-efficacy beliefs mediating this relationship. Leniz-Maturana and colleagues (29) also reported that mothers' emotional well-being directly impacts the emotional and social development of children, supporting the findings of the present study. Additionally, Hannighofer and colleagues (30) found that single or unstable parental relationships are associated with higher rates of mental health problems in both mothers and children, compared to stable two-parent families. These findings suggested that phenomena such as mothers' emotional breakdown and its consequences for children are topics of interest in sociology and behavioral sciences, including education sciences. Insufficient attention has been given to parental conflicts, maladjustments, parent-child conflicts, and their effects on children. Thus, family structure is an important factor influencing

children's mental well-being. Positive relationships between parents are associated with higher levels of mental well-being in children (31). Conversely, when parents experience emotional breakdown or divorce, children are more likely to have lower levels of mental well-being. The emotional presence of parents, particularly mothers, in the home and children's lives fosters affection and improves family members' attachment, resulting in higher levels of mental well-being in children. Therefore, it is crucial to place greater emphasis on familial relationships and their enhancement.

The second research finding indicated a lack of significant relationship between mothers' marital justice and students' mental well-being. The researcher did not find similar studies to support this hypothesis, and no studies have concurrently analyzed these variables. Therefore, this finding is novel. It can be argued that successful marital relationships between parents can prevent many familial anomalies and children's maladjustments, with marital justice playing a key role. Generally, fair procedures in a marital relationship lead to improved commitment and increased interest in cooperation, as the family functions as a system of mutual relationships (25). The division of household drudgery and the perception of fairness also impact women's marital quality, which can influence the positive relationships among family members (12). However, this study found no significant relationships between mothers' marital justice and students' mental well-being. Path analysis was used to analyze the research hypotheses, and the relationship between mothers' marital justice and students' mental well-being was significant in the Pearson test. However, due to the presence of a mediating variable in the model, all the shares and effects of mothers' marital justice on students' mental well-being were explained by the mediating variables or the indirect relationship. In other words, the marital justice of mothers indirectly affected the mental well-being of adolescents in this model. Marital justice, the division of drudgery, and the perception of fairness between husbands and wives in the household contribute to improving the marital intimacy of mothers (25). As mothers have managerial roles in families, they can enhance children's mental well-being by showing love for their spouses and children.

The third research finding demonstrated a direct positive relationship between mothers' marital

intimacy and students' mental well-being. This finding is consistent with previous studies (18, 32). Niu and colleagues (32) reported a positive association between parent-child communication and the subjective well-being of left-behind children. Improving mothers' marital intimacy is expected to enhance students' mental well-being. In general, it can be concluded that marital intimacy influences various personal and social aspects of life. It also facilitates the parental role by directly influencing the adoption of appropriate parenting styles. Therefore, the literature suggested that parents' marital relationships can play a pivotal role in children's acceptance and mental well-being (32).

Considering the family structure as a whole, it is important to note that each family has specific interactions, functions, and life cycles. An experience that affects one family member will impact all members. Consequently, the characteristics and behaviors of parents towards each other can affect children's health. In other words, marital intimacy is a result of spousal satisfaction and adjustment across various aspects of marriage. It ensures the cohesion of the family and the mental well-being of children, as this positive attitude and feeling are passed on to them.

The results also indicated that maternal marital intimacy mediated the relationship between their emotional breakdowns and marital justice with the mental well-being of students. No study in the literature has compared this finding. Therefore, a significant relationship exists between maternal emotional breakdowns and students' mental well-being. The indirect relationship suggested that maternal marital breakdowns reduce their marital intimacy and indirectly diminish the mental well-being of their children (33). Conversely, the direct path indicated no significant relationship between maternal marital justice and students' mental well-being. However, the indirect path suggested that maternal marital justice affects the mental well-being of students when it enhances marital intimacy. Therefore, the importance of maternal marital justice and the management of fair criteria and emotions at home by spouses should be highlighted more than ever before. When mothers feel fairly treated by their husbands, they can improve their children's mental well-being. Thus, a mother's marital intimacy can effectively mediate the relationships between emotional breakdowns and marital justice with students'

mental well-being.

4.1. Limitations

This study had some limitations. Firstly, its statistical population only included female and male senior high school students and their mothers in Ahvaz, Iran. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the research results to students of other grades or from other cities. Further studies are recommended using different samples to validate the findings. Secondly, the findings of this research were based on self-report scales. Personal reports in questionnaires are susceptible to distortion due to unconscious biases, carelessness in filling out questionnaires, and answer prejudices. These factors may compromise the reliability of the research results. Additionally, the correlational research design, its limited duration, and the use of self-reporting questionnaires for data collection indicated the need for further studies.

5. Conclusions

According to the results, the proposed model demonstrated good fitness; thus, it can be considered a significant step in identifying the factors that affect students' mental well-being. The marital intimacy of mothers showed a direct positive relationship with students' mental well-being. It is expected that by improving mothers' marital intimacy, students' mental well-being will also improve. Additionally, the marital intimacy of mothers acted as a mediator in the relationships between emotional breakdown and marital justice of mothers, and the mental well-being of students. Therefore, children experience higher levels of well-being in families where parents have positive relationships. To enhance the marital intimacy of mothers and promote students' mental well-being, it is recommended to organize training workshops aimed at improving marital justice between spouses.

Ethical Approval

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Islamic Azad University- Ahvaz Branch with the code of IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1401.061. Also, written informed consent was obtained from the participants.

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Authors' Contribution

H.J: Substantial contributions to the conception of the work, data curation, drafting and critical revision of the manuscript. B.M: Substantial contributions to the conception of the work, drafting and critical revision of the manuscript. A.H: Data analysis and interpretation, critical revision of the manuscript. P.A: Substantial contributions to the conception of the work, critical revision of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, such that the questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work.

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