

The Structural Model of Predicting Marital Intimacy Based on Forgiveness and Cognitive Flexibility with the Mediating Role of Marital Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to determine the structural model for predicting marital intimacy based on forgiveness and cognitive flexibility, with the mediating role of marital boundaries. The research method was descriptive and correlational in nature. The statistical population consisted of all married individuals residing in the city of Qom in 2023. From this population, 257 individuals were selected using a non-random, convenience sampling method. The data collection instruments included the Bagarozzi Marital Intimacy Questionnaire (2001), the Ehteshami Forgiveness Scale (2009), the Dennis and Vander Wal Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (2010), and the Houshyari et al.'s Marital Boundaries Questionnaire (2020). For data analysis, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used with the SPSS-26 and PLS software. The results indicated that marital boundaries play a mediating role in the relationship between forgiveness and marital intimacy, fully mediating this relationship. Furthermore, marital boundaries partially mediated the relationship between cognitive flexibility and marital intimacy. Therefore, the presence of marital boundaries allows couples to establish personal limits, remain committed to their marital life, and subsequently improve their marital relationship and intimacy.

Keywords: flexibility, forgiveness, marital intimacy, marital boundaries

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Introduction

A successful marriage is regarded as a turning point in personal growth and development, representing a commitment filled with love and responsibility to nurture familial relationships (1). It serves as a source of emotional expression, security, tranquility, and the flourishing of the family unit (2). However, within the framework of the Islamic lifestyle, more crucial than the act of marriage and forming a family is the durability, dynamism, and elevation of marriage, as these influence various dimensions of the couple's

personal and social life and the overall functionality of the family (3). While marital life can serve as the nucleus of positive emotions and constructive outcomes for couples, at times, it may also be vulnerable to threats that endanger the relationship (4). One such threat is a low level of marital intimacy, a key and essential characteristic of marital relationships, and a notable indicator of a successful marriage. The absence or deficiency of intimacy is considered a marker of marital distress (Nazari et al., 2019). Therefore, achieving a successful marriage requires attention to specific principles and rules, among which marital intimacy is particularly significant (5).

The term *intimacy* is often used to denote the general sense of closeness between spouses. Marital intimacy, thus, is a form of interaction centered on mutual understanding, acceptance, empathy, and appreciation of the partner's feelings, arising from the sharing of deeply personal matters and intimate experiences (6). Intimacy is broadly defined as “the effort to achieve complete connection on all levels” and “the ability to disclose extensive personal information.” It is considered a process where individuals strive to draw closer, exploring similarities and differences in emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (7). Intimate connections between spouses strengthen their relationship and are considered a critical factor in marital success (8).

Research has shown that forgiveness, as a personality variable, can predict marital intimacy and satisfaction (9-11). Individuals who can forgive their spouses typically believe in the sanctity of their marriage and such forgiveness contributes to stronger relationships and increased marital satisfaction (12). Thus, promoting forgiveness is important in spousal interactions (13). Forgiveness is a process through which an injured individual's negative cognitions and emotions toward the offender are transformed. This implies a desire to forgive the other person, reduce negative emotions, decrease retaliatory rumination, and ultimately avoid emotional withdrawal. This process is even applicable in infidelity interventions, where the betrayed partner cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally forgives the other, thereby repairing the marital bond (14). In this regard, the study by Tolu Takmili Torabi et al. (2021) indicated that intrinsic religious orientation and forgiveness can positively affect marital relations and satisfaction, suggesting that religious beliefs and forgiveness should be reinforced in marital counseling (15).

Another variable related to marital intimacy and satisfaction is cognitive flexibility. Gaining accurate awareness about relational skills between the sexes originates from psychological flexibility (16). Those with high psychological flexibility create an environment conducive to the growth and development of all family members, which in turn fosters marital satisfaction (17, 18). Couples who possess flexible thinking utilize alternative justifications, positively reconstruct their cognitive frameworks, and accept challenging or distressing events in their marital relationships (19). In line with this, Eshaghi Jorduyi et al. (2021) found that psychological flexibility and self-control can predict marital adjustment (20). Rafiei et al. (2021) also showed that emotional intelligence and psychological flexibility are correlated with marital adjustment in couples (21).

Another important factor in marital life is *marital boundaries*. Elizur and Minuchin (1990) proposed that marital boundaries are hypothetical lines formed by behavioral patterns, rules, and expectations that distinguish the marital subsystem from other subsystems and the external world. These boundaries determine the quantity and quality of interactions between spouses and with outsiders. Family subsystems and their boundaries are essential elements referenced in Islamic teachings, especially from a structuralist

perspective in religious texts. The emphasis on family boundaries in Islamic doctrine stems from their role in the proper functioning of familial roles and the mental, emotional, sexual, and overall well-being of family members. In Islamic teachings, the dynamics and rules governing marital interactions are conceptualized through ethics and practical rulings, forming the Islamic model of marital boundaries. These include limits on sexual interactions, mutual expectations, private psychological and physical space, confidentiality in the marital relationship, and mutual flexibility—all of which constitute key elements of the marital subsystem (22). Therefore, individuals who adhere to marital boundaries are considered committed spouses and are more inclined toward marital intimacy (23, 24).

Based on the aforementioned literature, it appears that flexibility and forgiveness are predictors of marital intimacy, and marital boundaries serve as a mediating factor in this relationship. In other words, forgiveness and flexibility enhance marital intimacy through the improvement of marital boundaries. Consequently, further research is needed in this area, particularly as no integrated study has yet examined a structural model involving forgiveness and flexibility in predicting marital intimacy with the mediating role of marital boundaries. Therefore, the present study aims to determine the structural model of predicting marital intimacy based on forgiveness and cognitive flexibility, with the mediating role of marital boundaries.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

The research method was descriptive and correlational. The statistical population of this study included all married individuals in the city of Qom in 2023. From this population, 257 individuals were selected using a non-random, convenience sampling method. The inclusion criteria were: age above 20 years, absence of chronic physical or psychological disorders, no use of medication, and no current psychological treatments. The exclusion criteria included incomplete questionnaire responses—defined as failure to respond to more than 20% of total items—and withdrawal from participation in the study.

Data Collection

Bagarozzi's Marital Intimacy Questionnaire (2001): This questionnaire was developed by Bagarozzi in 2001 and consists of 41 items designed to assess eight dimensions of marital intimacy: emotional intimacy, psychological intimacy, intellectual intimacy, sexual intimacy, physical intimacy, spiritual intimacy, aesthetic intimacy, and social-recreational intimacy. Each item is rated on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 10. The maximum score for each dimension is 50, except for spiritual intimacy, which is scored out of 60. The total score in each dimension (excluding emotional intimacy) ranges from 5 to 50, while emotional intimacy ranges from 6 to 60. Higher scores in a dimension indicate a greater need for that aspect of intimacy from one's spouse. Etemadi (2005) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.94 for the total scale. Additionally, Khamseh and Hoseinian (2007) calculated test-retest reliability for each dimension, resulting in coefficients of 0.89 (emotional), 0.82 (psychological), 0.81 (intellectual), 0.91 (sexual), 0.80 (physical), 0.65 (spiritual), 0.76 (aesthetic), and 0.51 (social-recreational), confirming the acceptable reliability of the scale (4).

Ehteshamzadeh et al.'s Forgiveness Questionnaire (2010): This questionnaire includes 25 items and assesses interpersonal forgiveness and its dimensions. It comprises three subscales: reconciliation and revenge control (Items 1–12), resentment control (Items 13–18), and realistic understanding (Items 19–25).

Responses are rated on a Likert scale. For Items 19 to 25, scoring is: strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, agree = 3, strongly agree = 4. The remaining items are reverse scored. The total score ranges from 25 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater forgiveness capability. The validity of this scale was supported by its significant correlation with the Forgiveness in Family System (FFS) subscale. Ehteshamzadeh et al. (2010) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.77 for reconciliation and revenge control, 0.66 for resentment control, and 0.57 for realistic understanding (4).

Cognitive Flexibility Inventory by Dennis and Vander Wal (2010): Developed by Dennis and Vander Wal (2010), this 20-item self-report questionnaire measures a type of cognitive flexibility essential for coping with challenges and replacing maladaptive thoughts with more effective ones. It assesses three dimensions: (a) willingness to perceive difficult situations as controllable (Items 3, 5, 6, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 20), (b) ability to perceive multiple alternative explanations for life events and others' behaviors (Items 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 15, 17), and (c) ability to generate alternative solutions for difficult situations (Items 8, 10). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The total score ranges from 20 to 140. Items 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, and 17 are reverse scored to prevent response bias. The total score is calculated by summing all item scores. Dennis and Vander Wal confirmed the factorial structure, convergent validity, and concurrent validity of the instrument. In Iran, Fazeli et al. (2014) reported a test-retest reliability of 0.71 and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 (25).

Marital Boundaries Questionnaire by Houshyari et al. (2020): This questionnaire, developed by Houshyari et al. (2020) based on Islamic teachings, includes 35 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale. It assesses five subcomponents: marital commitment, boundaries of sexual interactions, boundaries of non-sexual interactions, exclusive psychological-physical space, and marital confidentiality. Higher scores indicate stronger alignment of interactions with religious standards, positive spousal attitudes, and adherence to ethical and legal norms of the marital subsystem, signifying healthy marital boundaries. Construct validity was confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis, and the questionnaire was administered to a sample of 805 participants. The fit indices supported the model's adequacy. Houshyari et al. (2020) reported Cronbach's alpha values of 0.781 for the total scale, and 0.846 (marital commitment), 0.812 (sexual boundaries), 0.732 (non-sexual boundaries), 0.743 (exclusive space), and 0.870 (confidentiality) for the subscales. Bivariate correlations among subcomponents ranged from 0.14 to 0.811, all statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, confirming strong internal consistency (22-24).

Data analysis

For data analysis, SPSS-26 and PLS software were used. Descriptive statistics included frequency distribution tables, central tendency indicators, and dispersion measures. Inferential statistics included Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient and structural equation modeling (SEM). Pearson's correlation was used to test the assumptions of SEM, such as absence of multicollinearity, normal distribution, and linearity of variable relationships. Structural modeling was conducted and reported using PLS.

Findings and Results

In the present study, 38% of respondents were male and 62% were female. Approximately 54.1% of the respondents were in the age range of 31 to 40 years. About 25.7% were in the 41–50 age range, and 20.2% were between 21 and 30 years old. Regarding education, 9.3% had education below a high school diploma. Approximately 30.7% had a high school diploma, 11.3% had an associate degree, 34.6% held a bachelor's degree, and 14% had a master's degree. Concerning the duration of marriage, 17.5% reported being married for less than 5 years, 25.3% for 5 to 10 years, 30.7% for 10 to 15 years, and 26.5% had been married for more than 15 years. Respondents with no children comprised 16% of the sample; 28% had one child, 37% had two children, 15.6% had three children, and 3.5% had more than three children.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Main Variables (N = 257)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Marital Intimacy	145.32	18.47
Forgiveness	78.45	10.23
Cognitive Flexibility	104.89	14.56
Marital Boundaries	102.37	13.82

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the main variables under study. Participants reported a relatively high level of marital intimacy ($M = 145.32$, $SD = 18.47$) and forgiveness ($M = 78.45$, $SD = 10.23$), suggesting generally positive perceptions of relationship quality and interpersonal forgiveness. The average score for cognitive flexibility was 104.89 ($SD = 14.56$), indicating moderate cognitive adaptability among respondents. Marital boundaries were also rated moderately high ($M = 102.37$, $SD = 13.82$), reflecting perceived adherence to relationship norms and role expectations within the spousal subsystem.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Main Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Marital Intimacy	—			
2. Forgiveness	.41**	—		
3. Cognitive Flexibility	.45**	.38**	—	
4. Marital Boundaries	.56**	.43**	.49**	—

** $p < .01$

Table 2 displays the Pearson correlation coefficients among the primary variables. Marital intimacy was significantly and positively correlated with forgiveness ($r = .41$, $p < .01$), cognitive flexibility ($r = .45$, $p < .01$), and marital boundaries ($r = .56$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, forgiveness was positively related to both cognitive flexibility ($r = .38$, $p < .01$) and marital boundaries ($r = .43$, $p < .01$). A strong positive association was also observed between cognitive flexibility and marital boundaries ($r = .49$, $p < .01$). These correlations indicate that higher levels of forgiveness and cognitive flexibility are associated with better-defined marital boundaries and increased marital intimacy.

The model fit indices are presented in the table below:

Table 3. Model Fit Indices

Row	Model Fit Index	Recommended Value	Model Calculated Value
1	AGFI	≥ 0.90	0.92
2	IFI	≥ 0.90	0.96
3	CFI	≥ 0.90	0.96
4	RMSEA	< 0.08	0.079
5	χ^2/df	< 3	2.6

The model fit indices indicate a good fit for the proposed model.

The standardized coefficients for direct and indirect paths are shown in the table below:

Table 4. Tested Paths in the Path Diagram

Endogenous Variable	Exogenous Variable	Direct Effect	t-value	Indirect Effect	t-value	Total Effect	t-value	R ²
Marital Intimacy	Marital Boundaries	0.47	3.03	—	—	0.47	3.03	0.44
	Cognitive Flexibility	0.33	4.26	0.16	3.57	0.49	5.72	
	Forgiveness	—	—	0.19	4.31	0.19	4.31	
Marital Boundaries	Cognitive Flexibility	0.33	2.60	—	—	0.33	2.60	0.29
	Forgiveness	0.40	2.89	—	—	0.40	2.89	

As shown in Table 4, the three variables—marital boundaries, cognitive flexibility, and forgiveness—account for 44% of the variance in marital intimacy. There is only a direct path from marital boundaries to marital intimacy, which is positive and significant. From forgiveness to marital intimacy, there is only an indirect path, which is also positive and significant. In the case of cognitive flexibility, there are both direct and indirect paths to marital intimacy, and both are positive and significant. From cognitive flexibility and forgiveness to marital boundaries, only direct paths are observed, and both are positive and significant.

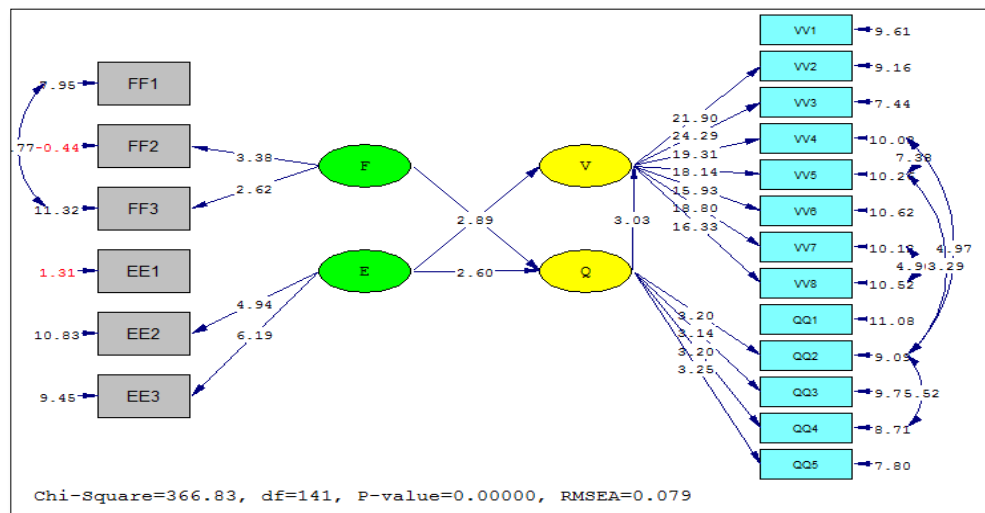


Figure 1. Final Model of the Relationship Between Forgiveness and Cognitive Flexibility with Marital Intimacy Through Marital Boundaries

Figure 1 illustrates that, based on the results, the direct relationship between forgiveness and marital intimacy was not significant and was therefore removed from the final model.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to determine the structural model predicting marital intimacy based on forgiveness and cognitive flexibility, with the mediating role of marital boundaries. The results indicated that marital boundaries mediate the relationship between forgiveness and marital intimacy, fully accounting for this relationship. Moreover, marital boundaries were found to partially mediate the relationship between cognitive flexibility and marital intimacy. These findings align with those of previous studies (4, 5, 9-11, 15, 21, 26, 27)

This finding can be explained by the idea that successful marriages are based on specific principles and rules that both spouses should acknowledge and follow. One such principle is marital intimacy (Rahmati et al., 2019). A satisfying, forgiving, and fulfilling relationship significantly contributes to the longevity of a marriage. The way spouses interact strongly influences their marital adjustment, intimacy, and satisfaction—producing either joy or distress (28). Therefore, promoting forgiveness plays a critical role in spousal relations (13). Tse and Yip (2009) demonstrated that forgiveness has a significant relationship with interpersonal compatibility and intimacy, leading to their enhancement (29). Other studies have also highlighted the role of forgiveness in increasing marital satisfaction, reinforcing commitment, and reducing maladaptive schemas (12). Those who can forgive their partners are more likely to view their marriage as sacred, and this capacity for forgiveness strengthens the marital bond and enhances satisfaction (12). Forgiveness is a person's internal experience and belief system, shaped by reflections on their physical, behavioral, and psychological self, and is expressed both independently and interpersonally (30). Supporting these findings, Tolu Takmili Torabi et al. (2021) suggested that psychological strengths such as gratitude and optimism facilitate the forgiveness process by reducing negative emotions and fostering the realization that no human is perfect. This positive perspective allows injured spouses to forgive more easily (15). The responses of a forgiving spouse include a range of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors directed toward the partner's mistake and its consequences. When spouses forgive, they acknowledge that a transgression occurred and cognitively, emotionally, or behaviorally reassess the event, viewing their partner in a new light. This reflective process enhances the emotional climate of the relationship and increases marital satisfaction.

Psychological flexibility is a significant determinant of how individuals experience trauma and function socially (31). Accurate awareness of marital skills between the sexes and the capacity for marital self-regulation stem from psychological flexibility (Sedaghatkhoh & Behzadipour, 2017). It serves as a core component of cognitive control, enabling individuals to regulate conditions, focus on the present moment, and use opportunities in line with internal values—even in the presence of challenging or unwanted psychological experiences (18). Psychological flexibility involves full engagement with the present moment and acting in ways that serve chosen values. It encompasses skills such as openness to thoughts and feelings, present-moment awareness, and meaningful action (32). It includes two broader processes: acceptance and mindfulness, and behavioral processes. Mindfulness refers to the awareness focused on present experiences, while acceptance is the willingness to experience these without attempts to alter, avoid, or control them. Behavioral processes clarify personal values and direct actions toward achieving them (17). Flexibility also includes the capacity to stay present and psychologically detach from one's thoughts and internal experiences (4, 33). Spouses with flexible thinking adapt their mental frameworks positively and handle stressful situations with acceptance and resilience. Thus, psychological flexibility contributes to better marital relationships by introducing fresh perspectives. However, flexibility and forgiveness sometimes require a supportive element to activate them—marital boundaries appear to serve this purpose by fostering greater commitment between partners.

Individuals with low flexibility tend to remain trapped in repetitive patterns, discouraging family and friends from engaging in new activities due to fear of failure or ridicule. Their weak psychological flexibility causes problem-solving difficulties and negatively affects their marital life, often characterized by excessive

expectations of order and discipline from their spouse and children. These individuals expect high performance from themselves and others and seek top positions in all areas—despite lacking the mental adaptability to support such ambitions. In contrast, high flexibility in one partner can calm the other, as it encourages collaborative decision-making. This partnership dynamic enhances marital intimacy by fostering mutual involvement in all aspects of life, creating a culture of consultation within the family.

Marital boundaries also influence parenting effectiveness, longevity, health, life satisfaction, emotional well-being, child development, social relationships, and susceptibility to deviance. When a marriage fails to meet the needs of both partners, the potential positive outcomes of marriage are lost, possibly resulting in serious and sometimes irreversible consequences—not just for spouses but also for their children. High levels of forgiveness among spouses reflect a recognition of the need for others while maintaining low dependence on external validation. Such individuals do not blindly imitate others' beliefs but thoughtfully adopt useful principles, which helps them navigate important social and familial decisions and maintain composure despite conflict, criticism, or rejection.

In Islamic teachings, family boundaries are essential for fulfilling family roles and maintaining emotional, sexual, and psychological health. The structure of spousal interactions and their regulations are outlined through ethical norms and legal duties known as Islamic family boundaries. These include sexual interaction boundaries, mutual expectations, private psychological-physical space, marital confidentiality, and mutual flexibility (23, 24). Individuals who respect marital boundaries are seen as committed and more inclined toward marital intimacy (22).

General marital commitment refers to adherence to all relational boundaries, including mutual rights and obligations, acceptable interaction styles, private emotional and physical space, confidentiality, moral standards, and other ethical guidelines. Marital boundaries help couples maintain appropriate limits, stay committed to each other, and enhance the quality and intimacy of their relationship (23). Accordingly, this study examined the structural model of forgiveness and cognitive flexibility in predicting marital intimacy through the mediating role of marital boundaries.

As with any research, this study has certain limitations. Since it was conducted in the province of Qom, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings. It is recommended that similar studies be conducted in other provinces and cities to compare regional variations and better understand the influencing factors.

Future research is encouraged to implement comparative studies across diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious contexts to explore how varying sociocultural frameworks shape the role of marital boundaries, forgiveness, and flexibility. Longitudinal studies could also investigate the development and long-term effects of these variables in newlywed versus long-married couples.

In light of the findings, it is recommended that widespread educational workshops aimed at enhancing spousal flexibility be held in family health centers. Structured programs to improve marital boundaries should also be introduced by professionals in family counseling sessions. Finally, given that adherence to marital boundaries reflects greater commitment and intimacy, it is advisable to incorporate marital boundary training sessions—representing a novel approach—into couples therapy programs.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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