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Structural Modeling of Fear of Intimacy Based on Object Relations with the Mediating Role of Splitting Emotional Conflict in Individuals Aged 25 to 50

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to examine the structural relationship between object relations and fear of intimacy, with the mediating role of splitting emotional conflict, in adults aged 25 to 50 years. This research employed a descriptive–correlational design using structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population included individuals aged 25–50 years who referred to counseling centers and psychology clinics in Tehran in 2023. A purposive and convenience non-random sampling method was used to select 300 participants who met the inclusion criteria. Data were collected using the Fear of Intimacy Scale (Descutner & Thelen, 1991), the Bell Object Relations Inventory (Bell, 1995), and the Self-Criticism/Self-Attack/Self-Reassurance Scale (Gilbert et al., 2004). Reliability and validity of the measures were confirmed, and data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 27 for descriptive statistics and SmartPLS version 3 for SEM analysis. The results indicated that object relations significantly predicted splitting emotional conflict ($\beta = 0.762$, $t = 22.282$, $p < 0.01$) and fear of intimacy ($\beta = 0.748$, $t = 21.799$, $p < 0.01$). Splitting emotional conflict also significantly predicted fear of intimacy ($\beta = 0.757$, $t = 22.105$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, the indirect effect of object relations on fear of intimacy through splitting conflict was 0.576, and the total effect was 1.080, both statistically significant. Goodness-of-fit indices confirmed adequate model fit ($R^2 = 0.586$, GOF = 0.577, $Q^2 = 0.238$, NFI = 0.956). The findings suggest that dysfunctional object relations influence fear of intimacy both directly and indirectly through splitting emotional conflict, emphasizing the importance of early relational schemas and defense mechanisms in adult relational functioning. These results highlight the relevance of targeting object relations and splitting conflict in therapeutic interventions aimed at reducing intimacy fears and improving interpersonal relationships.

Key words: Fear of intimacy; Object relations; Splitting emotional conflict; Structural equation modeling; Adult relationships

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Introduction

Fear of intimacy is a central construct in understanding the complexities of adult relationships, as it directly influences the capacity to establish and sustain closeness in interpersonal bonds. Scholars have conceptualized fear of intimacy as not merely an individual-level phenomenon, but as one deeply rooted in developmental, relational, and intrapsychic processes that span early childhood experiences and extend into adulthood (1, 2). In recent years, the intersection of attachment theory, object relations perspectives, and emotional regulation models has drawn increased attention, as these frameworks help explain how internalized relational patterns and unresolved emotional conflicts shape intimacy avoidance. A growing body of literature emphasizes that fear of intimacy should be studied not only as a symptom of relational anxiety, but as an outcome of broader psychological mechanisms such as splitting conflict, self-criticism, and maladaptive schemas (3-5).

Object relations theory has been particularly influential in linking early experiences with caregivers to adult relational capacities. Rooted in the works of Melanie Klein and her successors, this perspective views interpersonal functioning as an extension of internalized representations of significant others (6, 7). According to this view, dysfunctional or insecure object relations are associated with heightened vulnerability to fear of intimacy, as individuals project ambivalent, fragmented, or persecutory internal objects into current relationships (3, 8). Internalized object relationships can also become diagnostic markers, helping clinicians better understand the origins of relational dysfunction (7). In this context, intimacy avoidance is not simply a behavioral choice but a reflection of unresolved psychic conflicts embedded within the self-other dynamic.

At the heart of object relations theory lies the concept of splitting, wherein individuals compartmentalize experiences into all-good or all-bad categories to manage anxiety and ambivalence (6). This defense mechanism, while adaptive in childhood, can persist into adulthood as an emotional conflict that disrupts the integration of self and other. Splitting conflict has been implicated in mediating the relationship between early object relations and adult relational fears, particularly fear of intimacy (9, 10). Studies suggest that unresolved splitting not only fuels self-criticism and shame but also prevents individuals from developing consistent and secure patterns of attachment (11, 12). Thus, exploring splitting conflict as a mediator offers a nuanced way of capturing the dynamics through which internal relational templates translate into lived relational difficulties.

Fear of intimacy is also associated with broader emotional and behavioral phenomena, such as social anxiety, sexual aversion, and relational dissatisfaction. For example, research on young adults indicates that heightened social anxiety often co-occurs with increased fear of intimacy, reducing the ability to engage in supportive and fulfilling partnerships (1). Similarly, clinical studies on sexual aversion and disgust highlight fear of intimacy as a central theme, underscoring the need for multimodal therapeutic approaches (13). Dissatisfaction of basic psychological needs and difficulties in emotion regulation have also been identified as significant predictors of fear of intimacy (14). Moreover, findings on lay beliefs about romantic relationships reveal that family dysfunction indirectly shapes relationship satisfaction through intimacy-related cognitions, emphasizing the sociocultural embeddedness of this phenomenon (15).

The consequences of unresolved intimacy fears are wide-ranging, from decreased marital satisfaction to increased risk of relational breakdown. Studies indicate that couples experiencing destructive conflict

resolution patterns and attachment insecurities are more likely to engage in cycles of intimate partner violence (16). Other investigations have shown that dyadic conflicts are mediated by sexual satisfaction in shaping relationship quality, thereby linking intimacy avoidance with broader marital outcomes (17). Indeed, fear of intimacy has even been identified as a predictor of sexual problems in clinical populations (18). Relationship dissolution itself has been associated with heightened posttraumatic stress symptoms, further illustrating the psychological toll of intimacy-related difficulties (19). Research on infidelity and intergenerational patterns of betrayal further confirms that relational trauma often manifests in intimacy fears among adult children of unfaithful parents (20). Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of understanding fear of intimacy as both a cause and consequence of maladaptive relational cycles.

Therapeutic interventions have been developed to address fear of intimacy through multiple modalities. Emotion-focused therapy, for example, has been shown to facilitate emotional and interactional transformation in couples, allowing them to restructure maladaptive relational patterns (12, 21). Recent trials on emotion-focused therapy for disorders such as binge eating also suggest that enhancing emotional processing can reduce avoidance patterns linked to intimacy fears (22). Complementary approaches such as transactional analysis therapy combined with hypnotherapy have been applied to resolve emotional conflicts that underlie intimacy avoidance (9). Compassion-focused interventions targeting self-criticism have also demonstrated efficacy, given the role of shame and harsh self-attacks in perpetuating fear of intimacy (11). Similarly, therapies such as EMDR have been used successfully to address the aftermath of relational traumas, including break-ups that exacerbate intimacy fears (23). These findings highlight the multi-method therapeutic landscape for reducing intimacy-related anxieties and improving interpersonal functioning.

From a psychometric perspective, measurement tools such as the Bell Object Relations Inventory have been widely employed to operationalize object relations in empirical research. The Persian version of this scale has been validated, confirming a four-factor structure encompassing egocentricity, alienation, insecure attachment, and social incompetence (24). Similarly, the Fear of Intimacy Scale has been adapted and validated across cultural contexts, demonstrating high internal consistency and reliability (4, 5). These instruments provide the empirical foundation necessary for structural modeling studies, enabling researchers to test pathways between object relations, emotional conflict, and intimacy fears using robust statistical frameworks. Following best practices in structural equation modeling, as outlined by methodological authorities, ensures rigor in evaluating such complex relational constructs (25).

The cultural and contextual dimensions of intimacy fears cannot be overlooked. In societies where interdependence, family expectations, and gender roles strongly shape relational dynamics, fear of intimacy often manifests differently compared to more individualistic contexts (2, 26). Iranian research has consistently highlighted how attachment insecurities and dyadic conflicts, when combined with sociocultural pressures, exacerbate intimacy avoidance (14, 27). Other studies suggest that in clinical populations, unresolved maladaptive schemas and low self-compassion further mediate the impact of cultural scripts on relationship quality (5). These findings underline the necessity of integrating cross-cultural perspectives into intimacy research, particularly as globalization and migration reshape familial and relational experiences worldwide.

In addition to traditional psychological perspectives, emerging fields have contributed innovative conceptual tools for examining relational dynamics. Relational aesthetics, for example, has been proposed

as a framework for understanding human connections beyond object-subject binaries, offering new insights into the affective and symbolic dimensions of intimacy (8). Advances in computational modeling have also enabled the extraction of relational patterns in domains far removed from psychology, such as satellite imagery, but the methodological parallels highlight how relational structures can be quantified across contexts (28). Together, these perspectives enrich the theoretical landscape and encourage interdisciplinary approaches to the study of fear of intimacy.

Despite the richness of existing research, several gaps remain. While many studies have established correlations between object relations, emotional conflict, and intimacy fears, fewer have employed structural modeling to explicitly test mediational pathways involving splitting conflict (3, 7). Moreover, much of the literature has been limited to Western samples, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive research in non-Western settings such as Iran (9, 27). There is also a scarcity of studies examining middle adulthood, despite evidence that intimacy fears persist and evolve across the lifespan (15). The present study addresses these gaps by employing structural equation modeling to examine the role of splitting emotional conflict as a mediator between object relations and fear of intimacy in adults aged 25 to 50.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

The statistical population of the study included all individuals aged 25 to 50 years who referred to counseling centers and psychology clinics in Districts 3 and 7 of Tehran in 2023. To estimate the sample size, Klein's theory for structural equations was used. According to Klein (2016), a sample size between 200 and 500 participants is sufficient. To ensure adequacy, 300 participants who met the inclusion criteria of the study were selected using purposive and convenience non-random sampling.

The inclusion criteria were: being older than 25 and younger than 50 years, being married, having at least a high school diploma, not suffering from any severe physical illness such as cardiovascular disease or multiple sclerosis, and willingness to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Fear of Intimacy Scale (Descutner & Thelen, 1991): The Fear of Intimacy Scale, developed by Descutner and Thelen (1991), consists of 35 items designed to assess fear of intimacy and anxiety related to close relationships. Responses are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all characteristic of me" (1) to "extremely characteristic of me" (5). Items 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 25, 27, 29, and 30 are reverse-scored. The total score is obtained by summing the 35 items, with possible scores ranging from 35 to 175. The psychometric properties of the Persian version of the scale were examined in a sample of 623 married men and women from the general population (335 women and 288 men). Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the Fear of Intimacy Scale was reported as .91, indicating good internal consistency. The test-retest correlation coefficient for 116 participants over a two- to four-week interval was .74, which was significant at $p < .001$, confirming satisfactory test-retest reliability (Besharat, 2011). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was calculated as .71.

Bell Object Relations Inventory (Bell, 1995): The Object Relations Inventory, designed and validated by Bell (1995), consists of 45 close-ended items and measures four subscales: Alienation, Insecure-Avoidant

Attachment, Egocentricity, and Social Incompetence. The instrument uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). Two approaches can be applied in analyzing this questionnaire: (a) analysis based on the components of the questionnaire, and (b) analysis based on the total score obtained. In the present study, the second method was used. According to this scoring method, scores between 45 and 90 indicate a low level of the construct, scores between 90 and 180 indicate a moderate level, and scores above 180 indicate a very high level. Validation of this instrument in Iran was conducted by Mesgarian et al. (2017). Factor analysis confirmed four factors—Egocentricity, Alienation, Insecure Attachment, and Social Incompetence. The reliability coefficients using Cronbach's alpha ranged from .66 to .77, the split-half reliability coefficients ranged from .60 to .77, and the ordinal theta for the entire scale was .86. Significant correlations between object relations dimensions and defense mechanisms further supported the convergent and divergent validity of the scale. Overall, it can be concluded that the Persian version of the Bell Object Relations Inventory has a four-factor structure and possesses adequate validity and reliability for use in psychological research with Iranian samples. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was calculated as .73.

Self-Criticism Scale (Gilbert et al., 2004): In this study, self-criticism—considered an index of splitting conflict—was measured using the 22-item Self-Criticism/Self-Attack/Self-Reassurance Scale. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (0) to "strongly agree" (4), with total scores ranging from 0 to 88. Gilbert et al. (2004) reported a Cronbach's alpha reliability of .90 for this scale. In a study by Rajabi et al. (2015), the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was .64, and the validity of the scale was confirmed through its significant correlation with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (r = -.36) in a sample of 50 individuals. The scale includes two forms of self-criticism: Inadequate Self and Hated Self (13 items). Inadequate Self focuses on feelings of personal insufficiency (e.g., "I easily get disappointed in myself"), while Hated Self assesses the extent of self-directed anger and tendencies toward self-harm (e.g., "I get so angry with myself that I want to hurt or injure myself"). Additionally, the scale contains a Self-Reassured dimension (9 items) that reflects the ability to think positively about oneself (e.g., "I can remind myself of positive things about myself"). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was calculated as .76.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis, were calculated with IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 (2015) to summarize demographic and research variables and assess data normality. Inferential analysis was performed using structural equation modeling (SEM) with Smart PLS version 3, following a two-step approach: first evaluating the measurement model to confirm reliability and validity, and then testing the structural model to examine path coefficients, direct and indirect effects, coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and model fit indices (GOF and NFI).

Findings and Results

In this section, the statistical description of the demographic characteristics of the quantitative part, including the analysis and summarization of the demographic information of the target group in the statistical population, is presented. These analyses help researchers identify demographic patterns and

tendencies and achieve a better understanding of the social structure. In addition, the results of these descriptions can be effective in interpreting the findings of the research, as well as in providing practical recommendations, policies, and social programs. Therefore, in this study, based on the data collected through questionnaires, the statistical description of demographic characteristics of the quantitative section, including age, gender, and education, is presented in the following table:

Table 1. Statistical Description of Demographic Characteristics of Clients Aged 25 to 50 Referring to Counseling Centers and Psychology Clinics in Tehran (Sample Size = 300 Respondents)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Highest Frequency	Lowest Frequency
Age (years)	25–30	57	19%	31–35	25–30
	31–35	69	23%		
	36–40	63	21%		
	41–45	60	20%		
	46–50	51	17%		
Gender	Female	141	47%	Male	Female
	Male	159	53%		
Education	Bachelor's	57	19%	Master's	Bachelor's
	Master's	162	54%		
	Doctorate	81	27%		

In this study, the demographic characteristics of clients aged 25 to 50 who referred to counseling centers and psychology clinics in Tehran were examined. The results presented in the table above show that in terms of age, the highest frequency belonged to the 31–35 age group with 69 individuals (23%), while the 25–30 age group had the lowest frequency with 57 individuals (19%). Overall, the age distribution indicates that the 31–35 and 36–40 age groups, with 23% and 21% respectively, had the highest frequencies, whereas the 46–50 age group had the lowest with 51 individuals (17%). Regarding gender, the distribution was relatively balanced, with 159 men (53%) and 141 women (47%), indicating a slightly higher male representation. In terms of education, the highest frequency was observed among the master's group with 162 participants (54%), followed by doctorate with 81 participants (27%), while the bachelor's group had the lowest frequency with 57 participants (19%). In the table below, the main constructs of the study are described based on the data collected through questionnaires using the indicators of mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis, analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 (2015).

Table 2. Statistical Description of Research Variables Using Central Tendency, Dispersion, and Data Distribution Indicators (Sample Size = 300 Respondents)

Variable	Mean (Likert)	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Fear of Intimacy with Spouse	3.66	0.83	-0.36	-0.11
Fear of Intimacy with Others	3.14	0.81	0.18	-0.37
Egocentricity	3.19	0.77	-0.03	0.35
Alienation	3.27	0.86	-0.09	-0.24
Insecure Attachment	3.28	0.93	0.13	-0.38
Social Incompetence	3.32	0.71	-0.06	0.41
Inadequate Self	3.30	0.75	-0.05	-0.54
Self-Reassured	3.39	0.80	-0.12	-0.09

Overall, the obtained data indicate that the distributions of all dimensions are normal, as their skewness and kurtosis values fall within the acceptable range (between -2 and +2). This allows researchers to use appropriate parametric statistical tests for analysis.

To examine the hypotheses of this study, Smart PLS version 3 software was used. The model assessment in this software is carried out in two stages. The first stage evaluates the measurement model, and when sufficient evidence of the reliability and validity of the measurement models is obtained, the structural model is assessed.

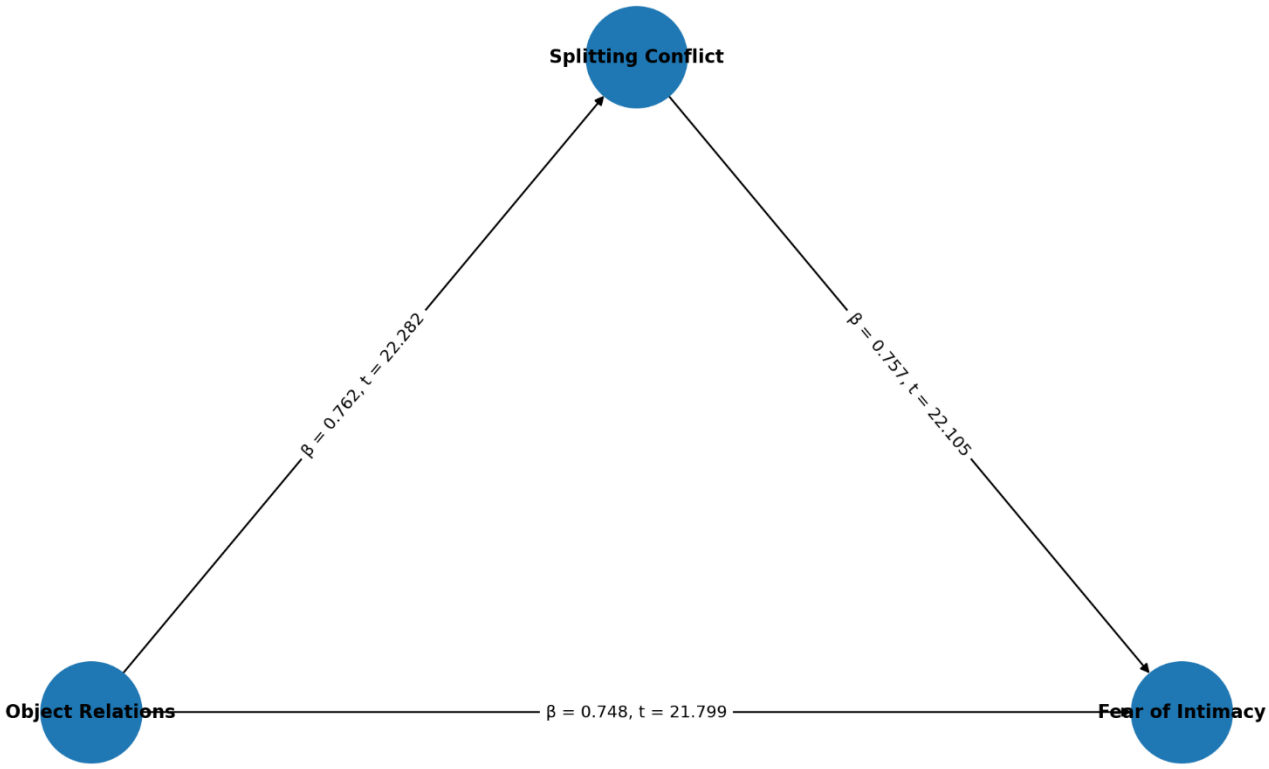

Figure 1. Graphic Display of Path Coefficients in the Hypothetical Research Model

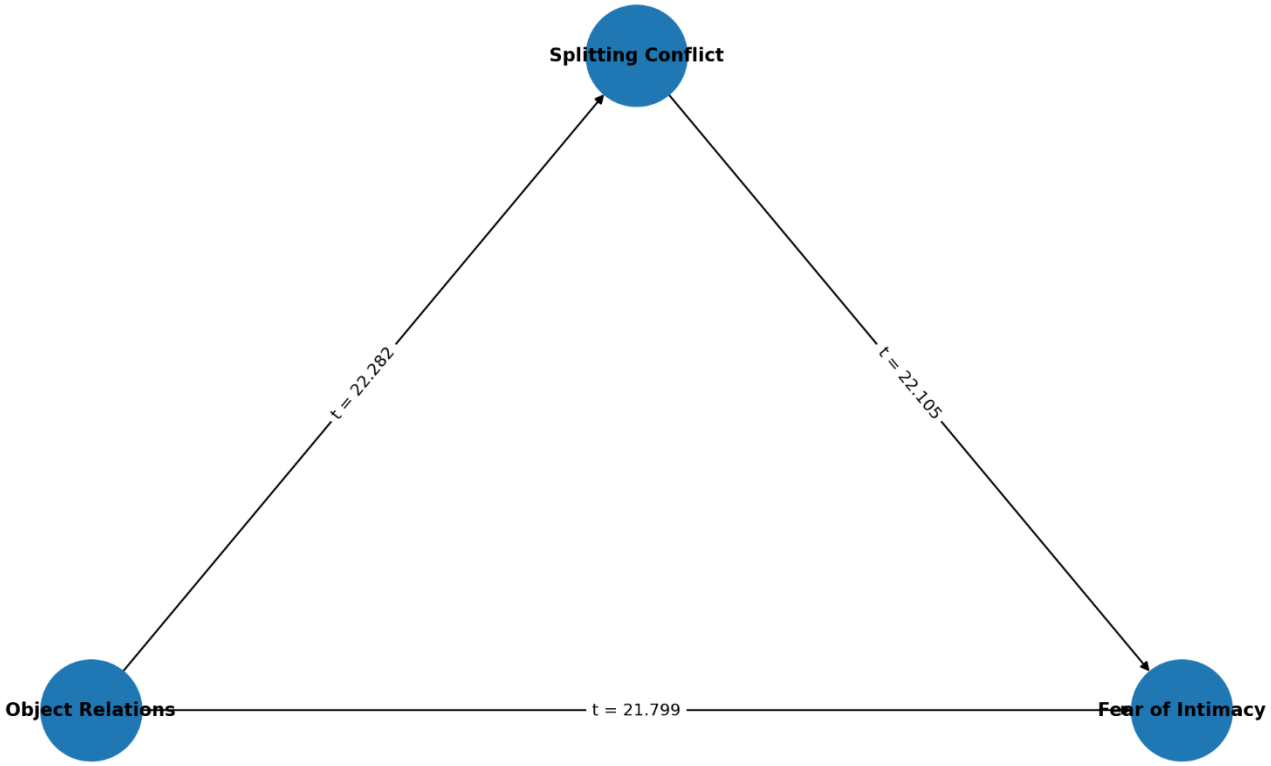

Figure 2. Graphic Display of Significance Coefficients in the Hypothetical Research Model

The table below presents the path coefficients along with significance values. As shown, all hypothesized paths were supported.

Table 3. Path Coefficients, T-values, and Their Status

Path	Path Coefficient	T-value	Status
Object Relations → Splitting Conflict	0.762	22.282	Supported
Splitting Conflict → Fear of Intimacy	0.757	22.105	Supported
Object Relations → Fear of Intimacy	0.748	21.799	Supported

To examine the direct and indirect effects of independent variables on dependent variables, the total, direct, and indirect effects for the endogenous variables of the model are presented below.

Table 4. Decomposition of Direct and Indirect Effects in the Research Hypothesis

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Object Relations	Splitting Conflict	0.762	---	0.762
Splitting Conflict	Fear of Intimacy	0.757	---	0.757
Object Relations	Fear of Intimacy	0.748	0.762*0.757=0.576	1.080

As observed in the table above, the effect of object relations on fear of intimacy, with the mediating role of splitting conflict, was 1.080. It should be noted that if the significance value is greater than 2.58, the relationship is significant at the 0.01 confidence level.

The purpose of assessing overall model fit is to determine the degree to which the model is consistent with the empirical data. Structural equation modeling combines confirmatory factor analysis and multivariate regression. In this method, the overall model test includes testing the measurement model (reliability and validity) and the structural model (path coefficients and explained variance).

Coefficient of Determination (R^2) for Dependent Variables: The R^2 coefficient for endogenous latent variables indicates the effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable. According to the criteria, values of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67 represent weak, moderate, and strong R^2 levels, respectively. The calculated value was 0.586.

Goodness of Fit (GOF): This index was calculated using the geometric mean of R^2 and the average communality index for the entire model, resulting in 0.577. Since the GOF value obtained for the second sub-hypothesis model was greater than 0.36, the model demonstrates a good fit.

Predictive Relevance (Q^2): This index measures the predictive power of the model for dependent variables. The interpretation criteria are 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35, representing low, moderate, and strong predictive power, respectively. The Q^2 value for the research variable was 0.238, which indicates an acceptable level. Thus, it can be concluded that the model has desirable predictive power regarding the variables.

Normed Fit Index (NFI): This index shows the degree of improvement in fit, with values greater than 0.90 considered acceptable. For this model, NFI was 0.956, indicating a high level of fit.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the tested model demonstrates an appropriate fit in the examined sample. Furthermore, since all factor loadings of the observed variables were greater than 0.40 and their significance values exceeded 1.96, the construct under study has satisfactory validity.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the present study demonstrated that object relations significantly predict fear of intimacy, both directly and indirectly, through the mediating role of splitting emotional conflict in adults aged 25 to 50 years. The strength of the pathways suggests that internalized object relationships, when unresolved, exert a profound impact on the ability to form and maintain close interpersonal relationships. More specifically, the finding that splitting conflict mediates this association highlights the importance of understanding how early defensive mechanisms continue to shape adult intimacy avoidance. The results provide empirical support for the theoretical assertions of object relations theory, which emphasize the enduring influence of early relational templates on adult psychological functioning (3, 7).

The significant direct effect of object relations on fear of intimacy aligns with clinical and theoretical literature suggesting that maladaptive internalized relationships distort adult relational capacities. Klein's conceptualization of splitting as a central defensive mechanism (6) helps explain why individuals who experience fragmented or persecutory internal object representations struggle to integrate positive and negative aspects of self and others. Such individuals may avoid intimacy as a means of protecting themselves from potential rejection or engulfment. This interpretation resonates with contemporary discussions on relational aesthetics, which extend the notion of internal objects to broader cultural and global challenges, emphasizing relationality as the core of human experience (8).

The mediating role of splitting conflict further underscores the importance of defense mechanisms in understanding intimacy difficulties. Splitting, while adaptive in early development, becomes maladaptive when it persists into adulthood, as it prevents the integration of ambivalent emotions. The present study found that splitting not only directly contributes to fear of intimacy but also serves as the psychological pathway through which dysfunctional object relations influence relational anxiety. This supports findings

that emotional conflicts and unresolved ambivalence are central to relational problems (9, 10). Moreover, the significant path coefficients obtained in this study are consistent with the idea that splitting contributes to harsh self-criticism, which in turn perpetuates shame and intimacy avoidance (4, 11).

The results also converge with empirical research linking social anxiety, sexual aversion, and relational dissatisfaction to fear of intimacy. Studies show that individuals with heightened social anxiety report significantly higher intimacy fears (1), and clinical cases of sexual aversion confirm intimacy avoidance as a core theme (13). Similarly, dissatisfaction of basic psychological needs, difficulties in emotion regulation, and loneliness have been identified as predictors of intimacy fears (14). The current findings suggest that these relational and emotional difficulties may, at least in part, stem from dysfunctional object relations filtered through splitting conflict, providing an integrative explanatory model.

Consistent with previous research, the findings underscore the interpersonal consequences of unresolved intimacy fears. Couples with destructive conflict resolution strategies often display heightened fear of closeness and greater likelihood of engaging in cycles of intimate partner violence (16). The mediation model supported in this study echoes these findings by demonstrating how splitting undermines secure relating, fueling fear of intimacy that then contributes to relational dissatisfaction and conflict. In fact, fear of intimacy has already been identified as a predictor of sexual problems (18) and a mediator in marital quality (17), confirming the relevance of this construct across relational outcomes. The observed link between object relations, splitting, and intimacy fears provides further evidence of the transdiagnostic role of relational schemas in shaping adult partnership functioning.

The findings also resonate with studies addressing relational trauma and family dysfunction. Research on adult children of unfaithful fathers highlights that betrayal within families of origin often leads to increased intimacy fears later in life (20). Similarly, studies on lay beliefs about romantic relationships show that family dysfunction indirectly affects romantic satisfaction through intimacy-related cognitions (15). These align with our findings by situating intimacy fears as both intrapsychic phenomena and outcomes of broader relational contexts. When object relations are fraught with dysfunction, splitting conflict intensifies and manifests in adult relationships through avoidance and ambivalence.

From a therapeutic standpoint, the present findings provide validation for interventions targeting both object relations and splitting conflict. Emotion-focused therapy, for instance, has demonstrated effectiveness in restructuring maladaptive emotional patterns and reducing intimacy fears (12, 21). Similarly, the feasibility of emotion-focused therapy in treating eating disorders confirms the broader application of these methods to relational avoidance (22). Compassion-focused therapy, which reduces self-criticism and shame, also directly addresses the mediational mechanisms highlighted in our study (11). Interventions combining transactional analysis and hypnotherapy to treat emotional conflicts (9) or EMDR to address relational break-up trauma (23) further support the idea that tackling unresolved conflicts is central to reducing intimacy fears. The present findings thus provide a theoretical and empirical rationale for multi-method clinical approaches.

The psychometric rigor of this study also merits discussion. The measurement of object relations, splitting conflict, and fear of intimacy relied on well-validated instruments. The Persian version of the Bell Object Relations Inventory has been confirmed to possess a reliable four-factor structure (24), while the Fear of Intimacy Scale has shown strong psychometric properties across contexts (5). These tools, combined with

structural equation modeling (25), allowed for robust examination of mediational pathways. The alignment of our findings with previous psychometric and empirical research strengthens the validity of the observed model and contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing the utility of SEM in psychological research.

Cultural considerations also provide an important lens for interpreting the findings. In Iranian cultural contexts, relational expectations, marital norms, and family obligations significantly shape intimacy experiences (2, 27). Prior studies confirm that attachment insecurities and dyadic conflicts, amplified by sociocultural pressures, increase intimacy avoidance (9, 14). The present findings are consistent with this line of research, suggesting that splitting conflict may serve as the psychological mechanism through which cultural and familial dynamics exert influence. Indeed, cross-cultural perspectives on attachment and relational schemas (26) highlight how intimacy avoidance reflects both universal psychological defenses and context-specific relational scripts.

Moreover, the interdisciplinary insights into relationality offer fertile ground for interpreting the broader implications of this study. Relational aesthetics emphasizes the global and philosophical dimensions of human connections (8), while advances in computational models of object relationships even in non-psychological domains (28) illustrate the growing relevance of relational paradigms across fields. Taken together, these perspectives reinforce the centrality of object relations and splitting conflict in understanding not only fear of intimacy, but also the relational nature of human experience more broadly.

In conclusion, the present study confirms that dysfunctional object relations significantly predict fear of intimacy, with splitting emotional conflict serving as a critical mediator. These findings advance theoretical models of intimacy avoidance by integrating object relations perspectives, defense mechanisms, and cultural considerations, while also offering practical implications for therapeutic interventions. The convergence of empirical results with prior studies across diverse contexts underscores the robustness of the model and highlights fear of intimacy as a pivotal construct in understanding adult relational functioning.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the use of non-random purposive sampling in counseling and clinical centers limits the generalizability of the findings to broader community populations. The sample, although sufficient in size according to methodological guidelines, may overrepresent individuals already experiencing psychological distress, which could inflate the associations observed. Second, the reliance on self-report questionnaires introduces the risk of response biases, including social desirability and self-deception, particularly given the sensitive nature of intimacy-related questions. Third, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences, as the temporal sequence between object relations, splitting conflict, and fear of intimacy cannot be definitively established. Longitudinal designs would be necessary to confirm the mediating role of splitting conflict over time. Finally, the study was conducted in a single cultural context, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other cultural settings with different relational norms and expectations.

Future studies should build on these findings by adopting longitudinal and experimental designs to establish causal pathways between object relations, splitting conflict, and fear of intimacy. Cross-cultural research is also warranted, as comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts would shed light on the universality versus cultural specificity of these mechanisms. Additionally, qualitative approaches could complement quantitative findings by providing richer insights into the lived experiences of individuals

struggling with intimacy fears. Future research should also examine gender differences and d evelopmental trajectories, as intimacy fears may manifest differently across genders and life stages. Incorporating neurobiological and psychophysiological measures could further clarify the mechanisms through which splitting and self-criticism translate into relational avoidance, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study highlight the importance of targeting both object relations and splitting conflict in therapeutic interventions for individuals struggling with fear of intimacy. Clinicians may integrate emotion-focused, compassion-focused, and schema-based therapies to reduce self-criticism and promote emotional integration. Psychoeducation on defense mechanisms and relational schemas could empower clients to recognize and challenge maladaptive patterns. Couple-based interventions may also be tailored to address intimacy avoidance, equipping partners with skills to manage ambivalence and strengthen emotional closeness. Finally, preventive interventions in educational and community settings could help individuals develop healthier relational schemas earlier in life, potentially reducing the risk of intimacy fears in adulthood.

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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.

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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