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Predicting Marital Adjustment Based on Ego Strength and Mentalization: The Mediating Role of Relationship Quality with the Spouse's Family

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to predict marital adjustment based on ego strength and mentalization, with the mediating role of relationship quality with the spouse's family.

Methods and Materials: This applied study employed a descriptive-correlational design. The statistical population consisted of married couples residing in Tehran during 2025–2026. A sample of 370 participants was selected through convenience and voluntary sampling methods. The research instruments included the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), the Psychosocial Ego Strength Inventory (Markstrom et al., 1997), the Mentalization Scale (Dimitrijević et al., 2017), and the Systemic–Triangular Family Scale (Cheraghi et al., 2017). Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from .79 to .89. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the bootstrap method with 5,000 resamples, and SPSS/AMOS version 26.

Findings: Among the participants, 53.7% were female and 46.3% were male, with the majority aged 35–44 years. Most participants held a bachelor's degree (63.3%), reported a moderate socioeconomic status (54.3%), and 71.9% had a history of counseling utilization. In addition, 63.3% had been married for more than 12 years. SEM findings demonstrated significant direct and indirect relationships. Ego strength had a positive direct effect on marital adjustment ($\beta = .30, p < .001$) and a significant indirect effect through relationship quality with the spouse's family ($\beta = .33, p < .001$). Mentalization also showed significant direct ($\beta = .14, p = .013$) and indirect effects ($\beta = .16, p = .003$) on marital adjustment. Relationship quality with the spouse's family significantly mediated the associations between both predictor variables and marital adjustment. Model fit indices indicated a satisfactory fit to the data ($CFI = .98, GFI = .96, RMSEA = .07, \chi^2/df = 2.16$).

Conclusion: Ego strength and mentalization play substantial roles in enhancing marital adjustment both directly and indirectly through improving relationship quality with the spouse's family. Strengthening these psychological capacities may assist clinicians and family counselors in designing interventions aimed at promoting marital stability and reducing the risk of divorce.

Keywords: Marital Adjustment, Ego Strength, Mentalization, Relationship with the Spouse's Family

1. Introduction

Marital adjustment is considered one of the central indicators of psychological health, family stability, and relational satisfaction within marital life. Researchers have consistently emphasized that marital adjustment reflects the degree of compatibility, cohesion, consensus, emotional intimacy, and constructive interaction between spouses (Berton et al., 2024). High levels of marital adjustment are associated with greater psychological well-being, emotional security, life satisfaction, and family resilience, whereas poor marital adjustment is linked to chronic conflict, emotional disengagement, psychological distress, and increased likelihood of separation and divorce (Gottman, 2023; Moore & Diener, 2019). In recent decades, growing social transformations, changing family structures, migration patterns, and evolving gender roles have altered the dynamics of marital relationships and increased the complexity of maintaining stable and satisfying marriages (Le Bail, 2023; Xiong, 2023). Consequently, identifying the psychological and interpersonal factors contributing to marital adjustment has become one of the major concerns in family psychology and couple therapy research.

Contemporary models of marital functioning emphasize that marital adjustment is not merely the outcome of behavioral interactions between spouses, but rather the product of a multilayered system involving emotional regulation, personality organization, attachment experiences, family-of-origin influences, and social support systems (S. Hashemi et al., 2024; S. F. Hashemi et al., 2024). Within this framework, psychological capacities such as ego strength and mentalization have received growing attention because they influence individuals' ability to manage emotional experiences, regulate interpersonal tensions, and maintain adaptive relational functioning under stressful conditions (Arabadzhev & Paunova, 2024; Bateman, 2022). In addition, marital relationships do not develop in isolation from broader family systems. Relationships with the spouse's family, especially in collectivistic and family-oriented cultures, can significantly shape marital quality, emotional stability, and relational satisfaction (Abbaspour et al., 2024; Ang-Tan & Choo, 2024). Therefore, investigating the interactive role of intrapsychic capacities and family relational contexts may provide a more comprehensive understanding of marital adjustment.

Ego strength is conceptualized as an individual's capacity for psychological resilience, emotional regulation, adaptive coping, and coherent identity functioning. Individuals with

stronger ego capacities are generally more capable of tolerating stress, resolving interpersonal conflicts constructively, and maintaining emotional balance during relational difficulties (Jamali et al., 2021). Ego strength enables spouses to respond flexibly to emotional challenges, negotiate disagreements effectively, and sustain commitment and intimacy within marital relationships. Conversely, weak ego functioning may contribute to impulsivity, emotional instability, maladaptive coping patterns, and heightened relational dissatisfaction (Przybylski et al., 2023). Recent studies have shown that ego competence is associated with healthier relational functioning and greater marital satisfaction. For example, Mousavi demonstrated that psychological ego strength significantly predicts marital satisfaction among married individuals (Mousavi, 2024). Similarly, Javadi Kama and colleagues found that ego competence indirectly influences marital instability through its association with marital quality (Javadi Kama et al., 2024). These findings suggest that ego strength constitutes a fundamental psychological resource for maintaining adaptive marital functioning.

The role of ego strength becomes particularly important when couples encounter emotional strain, external family pressures, and interpersonal conflicts. Couples with stronger ego functioning tend to display greater frustration tolerance, empathy, and constructive communication patterns, all of which facilitate marital adjustment (Jamali et al., 2021). Furthermore, ego strength contributes to the development of self-differentiation, emotional maturity, and boundary regulation, which are critical in managing relationships with extended family systems. In collectivistic societies, where family involvement in marital affairs is often pronounced, the capacity to maintain psychological autonomy while preserving respectful family relationships becomes highly important (Ganjan et al., 2025; Mardani & Zakeri Nasrabadi, 2025). Therefore, ego strength may influence marital adjustment not only directly but also indirectly through its effects on the quality of relationships with the spouse's family.

Another psychological construct that has recently attracted considerable scholarly attention in couple and family research is mentalization. Mentalization refers to the capacity to understand one's own and others' behaviors in terms of underlying mental states such as feelings, beliefs, desires, and intentions (Bateman, 2022). This capacity allows individuals to interpret interpersonal experiences more accurately, regulate emotional reactions effectively, and maintain empathic communication during relational

interactions. Arabadzhiev and Paunova described mentalization as a multidimensional and complex psychological process involving both cognitive and affective understanding of self and others (Arabadzhiev & Paunova, 2024). Deficits in mentalization are associated with emotional dysregulation, interpersonal misunderstandings, rigid interpretations of others' behaviors, and heightened relational conflict (Matin & Etemadi, 2025).

In marital relationships, mentalization facilitates emotional attunement, empathy, and adaptive conflict resolution between partners. Spouses with higher mentalization capacities are more capable of understanding the emotional needs and perspectives of one another, thereby reducing misunderstandings and improving relational satisfaction (Kim & Woo, 2025). In contrast, impaired mentalization may lead to emotional misattunement, hostile interpretations, defensive communication, and escalating marital conflict (Matin & Etemadi, 2025). Empirical studies support the central role of mentalization in marital functioning. Akbari and colleagues reported that mentalization significantly mediates the relationship between behavioral systems and marital satisfaction (Akbari et al., 2022). Babaei and colleagues also found that mentalizing capacity is positively associated with interpersonal trust and constructive conflict resolution styles among couples (Babaei et al., 2023). Furthermore, Mahdavianfard and colleagues demonstrated that reduced mentalization capacity contributes to marital burnout, highlighting the protective role of mentalization in sustaining marital quality (Mahdavianfard et al., 2025).

Research also indicates that mentalization is closely associated with broader psychological capacities such as attachment security, emotional regulation, and ego competence. Bahraloloum and Lajevardi found that ego competence significantly mediates the relationship between attachment styles and mentalization (Bahraloloum & Lajevardi, 2025). Similarly, Isazadeh and Bahramkhani showed that both mentalization and ego strength are associated with adaptive emotional functioning and lower psychological distress (Isazadeh & Bahramkhani, 2024). These findings suggest that ego strength and mentalization may operate in a mutually reinforcing manner, contributing to healthier interpersonal functioning and greater relational stability.

Beyond intrapsychic capacities, marital relationships are strongly influenced by interactions with extended family members, particularly relationships with the spouse's family. In many cultures, the spouse's family plays an

important role in shaping marital expectations, emotional support, childrearing practices, and conflict management processes (Ang-Tan & Choo, 2024). Positive relationships with in-laws may provide emotional support, practical assistance, and relational stability, whereas negative or intrusive relationships can become a major source of marital tension and dissatisfaction (Emelah & Kebbi, 2025). Research has increasingly emphasized that conflicts involving the spouse's family represent one of the common relational stressors contributing to marital instability and emotional distress (Abbaspour et al., 2024).

The influence of the spouse's family on marital adjustment appears particularly significant in societies where family interconnectedness and intergenerational involvement remain strong. Ang-Tan and Choo demonstrated that supportive relationships with in-laws contribute to the adaptation and well-being of spouses, especially in culturally diverse marriages (Ang-Tan & Choo, 2024). Conversely, Cevheroğlu and Tutarel-Kışlak found that perceived rejection by the spouse or mother-in-law negatively affects women's marital adjustment and emotional security (Cevheroğlu & Tutarel-Kışlak, 2022). Similarly, Emelah and Kebbi reported that in-law interference significantly predicts marital maladjustment among married individuals (Emelah & Kebbi, 2025). Qualitative findings by Abbaspour and colleagues further revealed that excessive interference from the spouse's family is frequently experienced as a major factor underlying emotional exhaustion and divorce intentions among women seeking divorce (Abbaspour et al., 2024).

Recent studies have increasingly conceptualized relationship quality with the spouse's family as a mediating variable linking individual psychological characteristics to marital outcomes. Ganjian and colleagues demonstrated that relationship quality with the spouse's family mediates the relationship between differentiation of self and marital intimacy (Ganjian et al., 2025). Similarly, Mardani and Zakeri Nasrabadi emphasized that healthy boundaries and adaptive interactions with in-laws contribute to greater emotional intimacy and relational satisfaction among married women (Mardani & Zakeri Nasrabadi, 2025). These findings suggest that couples' psychological capacities may shape how they navigate extended family relationships, which in turn influence marital adjustment.

Family-of-origin experiences also appear to exert long-term effects on marital functioning. Li and colleagues highlighted that adverse family-of-origin experiences negatively influence attachment security and marital

satisfaction in adulthood (Li et al., 2025). Likewise, Kim and Woo found that self-differentiation and mentalization indirectly influence marital satisfaction through family-of-origin health (Kim & Woo, 2025). Hashemi and colleagues further reported that family-of-origin health affects marital adjustment through emotion regulation, conflict management, and intimacy processes (S. F. Hashemi et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance of examining marital relationships within a broader systemic and intergenerational framework.

Another important aspect concerns the role of emotional regulation and cognitive coping processes in maintaining marital quality. Rusu and colleagues demonstrated that adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies are associated with positive dyadic outcomes and relationship satisfaction (Rusu et al., 2019). Mentalization and ego strength both contribute to individuals' ability to regulate emotional responses during interpersonal conflicts, thereby facilitating constructive communication and emotional stability. Moreover, subjective well-being and relational adjustment appear to reinforce one another reciprocally, as individuals with satisfying marital relationships often report greater life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Moore & Diener, 2019). These findings indicate that psychological functioning and marital adjustment are deeply interconnected.

In addition, demographic and social transitions have increased the complexity of contemporary marital relationships. Migration, urbanization, economic pressures, and changing gender expectations may intensify dependence on family networks while simultaneously increasing tensions related to boundaries and autonomy within marital systems (Le Bail, 2023; Xiong, 2023). Such sociocultural changes make it increasingly important to understand how internal psychological resources such as ego strength and mentalization help couples adapt to relational and family-related stressors.

Despite the growing body of literature on marital adjustment, several conceptual and empirical gaps remain. First, many studies have investigated ego strength, mentalization, or family relationships separately rather than examining their integrated effects within a comprehensive structural model. Second, relatively limited research has focused specifically on the mediating role of relationship quality with the spouse's family in the association between psychological capacities and marital adjustment. Third, although evidence highlights the importance of family systems and mentalization processes in relational

functioning, few studies have simultaneously explored ego strength, mentalization, and in-law relationship quality within the same framework, particularly among Iranian couples. Finally, cultural differences in family involvement and marital expectations necessitate context-specific investigations that consider the sociocultural realities of collectivistic societies.

Therefore, given the importance of marital adjustment for psychological well-being and family stability, the influential role of ego strength and mentalization in interpersonal functioning, and the significance of relationships with the spouse's family within marital systems, the present study aimed to predict marital adjustment based on ego strength and mentalization with the mediating role of relationship quality with the spouse's family.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was applied in terms of purpose and employed a descriptive-correlational design using regression analysis based on Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The statistical population consisted of married couples residing in Tehran during 2025–2026. Married couples were defined as individuals who, at the time of the study, were engaged in a formal marital relationship (i.e., legally married and cohabiting). Regarding sample size estimation for structural equation models, Fritz and MacKinnon (2007) recommended a minimum sample size of 116 participants. In addition, sources such as Kline (2005) have suggested a minimum of 200 participants for such studies. In the present study, data from 370 participants were collected using convenience and voluntary sampling methods.

The inclusion criteria were: residence in Tehran at the time of the study, age above 20 years, obtaining at least a moderate level of marital adjustment based on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale developed by Graham B. Spanier, and having at least one year of marital cohabitation. The exclusion criteria included incomplete responses or invalid response patterns on the research questionnaires. After obtaining approval from the university research ethics committee and coordinating with collaborating centers, the researcher recruited eligible participants voluntarily through in-person visits or by distributing an online survey link and provided them with the questionnaires. Prior to completing the questionnaires, participants received brief information regarding the purpose of the study, estimated completion time, confidentiality of the data, and methods of contacting

the researcher. At the beginning of the survey form, participants provided written informed consent for participation in the study and subsequently completed the questionnaire items. Data collection continued until the required sample size was achieved. After ensuring the completeness of the responses, the data were entered into the software and analyzed using appropriate statistical procedures. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the commencement of the study. Confidentiality of participants' data and protection of their privacy were ensured throughout the research process. Data were securely stored, and unique identifiers were used to link participants' responses across different questionnaires without disclosing their identities. Appropriate safeguards were implemented to protect the collected data against unauthorized access, loss, or misuse. Furthermore, all study materials, including questionnaires and consent forms, were reviewed to ensure cultural appropriateness and accurate translation into Persian.

2.2. Measures

Dyadic Adjustment Scale: The Dyadic Adjustment Scale was developed by Graham B. Spanier (1976). This 32-item instrument assesses the quality of marital relationships from the perspective of either spouse or both partners living together. The scale measures four dimensions: marital satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, dyadic consensus, and affectional expression. Graham B. Spanier confirmed the construct validity of the instrument using factor analysis and reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .96. In Iran, Darvizeh and Kahki (2008) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .94 for the scale. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for this scale was calculated as .85.

Psychosocial Ego Strength Inventory: The Ego Strength Questionnaire was developed by Carol A. Markstrom and colleagues (1997). This 64-item scale assesses eight ego strengths, including hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom. The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not at all true of me") to 5 ("completely true of me"). Higher scores indicate greater ego strength. Carol A. Markstrom et al. (1997) confirmed the face, content, and construct validity of the questionnaire and reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .68. In a study conducted by Parviz et al. (2016), the reliability of the scale was reported as .64 using Cronbach's alpha. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .89.

Mentalization Scale: The Mentalization Scale was developed by Dimitrijević and colleagues (2018) and consists of 28 items. The questionnaire is scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "completely incorrect" (score = 1) to "completely correct" (score = 5). The Mentalization Scale includes three subscales: self-related mentalization, other-related mentalization, and motivation for mentalization, in addition to a total score. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the three subscales and the total score ranged from .74 to .79. Dimitrijević et al. (2017) confirmed the validity of the questionnaire through correlations with emotional intelligence and empathy variables. In Iran, Safari Mousavi et al. (2020) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .86 for the total score of the scale. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .82.

Systemic-Triangular Family Scale: Cheraghi and colleagues (2017) developed this questionnaire to assess the quality of spouses' relationships with each other's families. The questionnaire consists of 87 items, including 35 items assessing relationship quality with the spouse's family (connectedness), 35 items measuring differentiation and boundaries with the spouse's family, and 17 items evaluating the alliance between spouses. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (0) to "strongly agree" (4). Higher scores indicate better relationship quality. The developers reported satisfactory face validity and construct validity for the questionnaire. Reliability coefficients for the total questionnaire were reported as .98 using Cronbach's alpha and .96 using the test-retest method (Cheraghi et al., 2017). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .79.

2.3. Data Analysis

The research data were analyzed at both descriptive and inferential levels. At the descriptive level, frequency tables and measures of central tendency and dispersion, including means and standard deviations, were calculated using SPSS version 26. At the inferential level, regression analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26, while Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and the bootstrap method were performed using AMOS version 26. In addition, a moderated mediation model was tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro in SPSS.

3. Findings and Results

Based on the collected data, the research sample consisted of 370 married couples, slightly more than half of whom were female (53.7%). In terms of age, the highest frequency

was related to the 35–44-year age group (43.2%), followed by the 45–55-year age group (21.9%); therefore, the majority of the sample was in middle adulthood. Regarding employment status, nearly half of the participants were employed full-time (46.5%), while approximately one-quarter were homemakers (25.7%). The highest educational attainment was a bachelor's degree (63.3%), and a considerable proportion of participants also held graduate degrees (master's and doctoral degrees combined: 27.5%).

In terms of economic status, more than half of the participants reported a moderate economic status (54.3%),

and approximately 39% reported an above-average economic status. A substantial majority of participants had a history of counseling utilization (71.9%). Regarding number of children, the highest frequency was related to families with two children (41.7%), while approximately 18% of participants had no children. Concerning marital duration, 63.3% had been married for more than 12 years, indicating the predominance of longer-term marriages within the sample. Finally, 76.2% lived independently from their spouse's family, whereas only 2.4% resided in the same household as their spouse's family.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Research Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Marital Adjustment	116.62	15.18	-1.45	0.75
Ego Strength	239.05	25.75	-0.18	-0.52
Mentalization	105.36	12.35	0.15	-0.16
Relationship Quality with the Spouse's Family	189.48	48.28	0.68	0.65

According to Table 1, the mean and standard deviation of marital adjustment were 116.62 and 15.18, respectively; for ego strength, 239.05 and 25.75; for mentalization, 105.36 and 12.35; and for relationship quality with the spouse's

family, 189.48 and 48.28, respectively. The skewness and kurtosis values ranged between -3 and +3, indicating that the variables were normally distributed.

Table 2

Results of Pearson Correlation Analysis Among the Research Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Marital Adjustment	—			
2. Ego Strength	.34**	—		
3. Mentalization	.17**	.56**	—	
4. Relationship Quality with the Spouse's Family	.55**	.35**	.19**	—

The results presented in Table 2 demonstrate the relationships among the research variables. Based on these findings, significant relationships were observed among ego

strength, mentalization, relationship quality with the spouse's family, and marital adjustment.

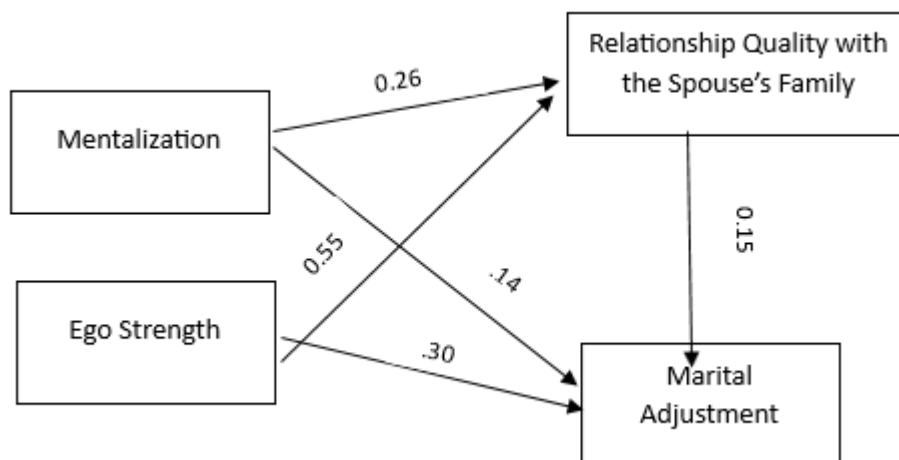
Table 3

Standardized Coefficients and Significance Levels of the Direct Relationships Among Variables

Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Lower CI	Upper CI	Critical Ratio	Significance Level	Significance of Indirect Effect
Effect of Ego Strength on Marital Adjustment	0.30	0.33	-0.52	-0.22	-3.80	.001	.001
Effect of Mentalization on Marital Adjustment	0.14	0.16	-0.28	-0.06	-2.49	.013	.003
Effect of Ego Strength on Relationship Quality with the Spouse's Family	0.55	—	—	—	-7.19	.001	—
Effect of Mentalization on Relationship Quality with the Spouse's Family	0.26	—	—	—	-3.53	.001	—
Effect of Relationship Quality with the Spouse's Family on Marital Adjustment	0.15	—	—	—	5.13	.001	—

Figure 1

Standardized Coefficients of the Structural Research Model



To evaluate the research model, the bootstrap method with 5,000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval was employed. The results presented in Table 3 indicate that the direct effect of ego strength on marital adjustment was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.30$), and its indirect effect through relationship quality with the spouse's family was also positive and significant ($\beta = 0.33$). Furthermore, the direct effect of mentalization on marital adjustment was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.14$), and its indirect effect through relationship quality with the spouse's family was likewise positive and significant ($\beta = 0.16$). In addition, the direct effect of ego strength on relationship quality with the

spouse's family ($\beta = 0.55$) and the direct effect of mentalization on relationship quality with the spouse's family ($\beta = 0.26$) were both positive and significant. Moreover, the direct effect of relationship quality with the spouse's family on marital adjustment was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.15$). Since all critical ratios (t-values) exceeded 1.96 and none of the confidence intervals crossed zero, the findings indicate that relationship quality with the spouse's family plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between mentalization and ego strength with marital adjustment.

Table 4

Model Fit Indices

Fit Indices	RMSEA	CFI	GFI	IFI	χ^2/df
Acceptable Values	< 0.08	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	< 3
Obtained Values	0.07	0.98	0.96	0.98	2.16

According to Table 4, the fit indices of the research model confirmed the adequacy and appropriateness of the proposed model. In model evaluation, a chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) below 3, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) values greater than 0.90, and a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) value below 0.08 indicate satisfactory model fit. Therefore, marital adjustment can be predicted based on ego strength and mentalization, with the mediating role of relationship quality with the spouse's family.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to predict marital adjustment based on ego strength and mentalization with the mediating role of relationship quality with the spouse's family. The findings demonstrated that ego strength had a significant positive direct effect on marital adjustment and also indirectly predicted marital adjustment through relationship quality with the spouse's family. In addition, mentalization exerted both direct and indirect positive effects on marital adjustment through the mediating role of relationship quality with the spouse's family. Furthermore, ego strength and

mentalization significantly predicted relationship quality with the spouse's family, while relationship quality with the spouse's family significantly predicted marital adjustment. Overall, the structural model demonstrated satisfactory fit indices, indicating that the proposed model adequately explained the relationships among the study variables.

One of the primary findings of the present study was that ego strength positively predicted marital adjustment. This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the role of ego competence and psychological maturity in relational functioning (Jamali et al., 2021; Javadi Kama et al., 2024; Mousavi, 2024). Ego strength reflects an individual's capacity for emotional regulation, frustration tolerance, adaptive coping, self-control, and coherent identity functioning. Individuals with higher ego strength are more capable of managing interpersonal tensions and responding flexibly to marital stressors. Such individuals are less likely to engage in impulsive reactions, emotional withdrawal, or destructive communication patterns during relational conflicts. Consequently, they are better able to maintain emotional intimacy, mutual understanding, and relational stability within marriage.

From a theoretical perspective, ego strength contributes to the individual's ability to balance autonomy and intimacy within close relationships. Marital relationships inherently involve emotional dependency, interpersonal negotiation, and adaptation to changing relational demands. Individuals with strong ego capacities can preserve their psychological boundaries while simultaneously engaging in emotional closeness and empathic interaction with their spouses. This psychological balance reduces emotional reactivity and facilitates constructive problem solving during marital disagreements. Previous evidence suggests that weak ego functioning is associated with emotional instability, interpersonal sensitivity, and maladaptive coping mechanisms, all of which may undermine marital quality (Przybylski et al., 2023). Therefore, the present findings support the notion that ego strength functions as a protective psychological resource that enhances marital adjustment.

The findings also revealed that mentalization significantly predicted marital adjustment. This result is congruent with previous studies emphasizing the importance of mentalization in couple relationships and interpersonal functioning (Akbari et al., 2022; Babaei et al., 2023; Mahdavianfard et al., 2025). Mentalization refers to the ability to interpret one's own and others' behaviors in terms of underlying emotions, intentions, beliefs, and desires. In marital relationships, this capacity enables spouses to

understand each other's emotional experiences more accurately and avoid distorted interpretations of relational interactions. Individuals with stronger mentalization capacities are more capable of empathic listening, emotional attunement, and adaptive conflict management. Such individuals can regulate their emotional reactions more effectively and interpret their partner's behaviors with greater psychological flexibility rather than through rigid or hostile assumptions.

The positive association between mentalization and marital adjustment can also be explained through the role of mentalization in emotional communication and intimacy. Marital satisfaction and adjustment largely depend on the ability of spouses to feel emotionally understood and psychologically validated. Couples who possess stronger mentalizing capacities are more likely to engage in reflective communication patterns and maintain emotional responsiveness during stressful interactions. Conversely, deficits in mentalization often lead to emotional misattunement, interpersonal misunderstandings, and escalating conflict cycles (Matin & Etemadi, 2025). Bateman also emphasized that mentalization facilitates emotional regulation and interpersonal stability in close relationships (Bateman, 2022). Therefore, the present findings reinforce the importance of mentalization as a core psychological process underlying adaptive marital functioning.

Another important finding of the present study was that relationship quality with the spouse's family significantly mediated the relationship between ego strength and marital adjustment. This finding highlights the systemic nature of marital relationships, particularly in family-oriented cultures where interactions with extended family members significantly influence marital life. Individuals with stronger ego functioning may be more capable of establishing balanced emotional boundaries with the spouse's family while simultaneously preserving respectful and supportive interactions. Such individuals can tolerate interpersonal tensions with greater flexibility and are less likely to perceive family involvement as threatening or emotionally overwhelming.

This finding aligns with studies emphasizing the role of family relationships and in-law dynamics in marital quality (Ang-Tan & Choo, 2024; Ganjian et al., 2025; Mardani & Zakeri Nasrabadi, 2025). Positive relationships with the spouse's family may provide emotional support, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging, all of which contribute to marital stability. In contrast, unresolved tensions with in-

laws may intensify marital stress and increase emotional conflicts between spouses. Individuals with strong ego capacities are generally better equipped to manage these relational complexities through emotional regulation, assertive communication, and adaptive boundary-setting. Consequently, healthy interactions with the spouse's family may strengthen marital cohesion and reduce relational distress.

The findings further demonstrated that relationship quality with the spouse's family mediated the relationship between mentalization and marital adjustment. This result suggests that individuals with stronger mentalization capacities may establish more adaptive and empathic relationships not only with their spouses but also with extended family members. Mentalization enhances the ability to understand the emotional perspectives and intentions of others, thereby reducing interpersonal misunderstandings and defensive reactions during family interactions. In relationships involving the spouse's family, where emotional sensitivities and cultural expectations may be highly salient, mentalization appears particularly important for maintaining relational harmony.

This finding is consistent with studies indicating that mentalization contributes to interpersonal trust, constructive communication, and adaptive relational functioning (Babaei et al., 2023; Kim & Woo, 2025). Couples with higher mentalization capacities may be more successful in interpreting the behaviors of in-laws in less threatening ways and responding to family-related tensions with greater emotional awareness and flexibility. Such individuals may also be more capable of maintaining emotional differentiation while preserving family connectedness. Consequently, healthier relationships with the spouse's family can indirectly enhance marital adjustment by reducing external relational stressors and promoting emotional support within the marital system.

The significant direct effect of relationship quality with the spouse's family on marital adjustment is another important finding of the present study. This finding is supported by previous research indicating that family interference, rejection, and conflict with in-laws negatively affect marital quality and emotional stability (Abbaspour et al., 2024; Cevheroğlu & Tutarel-Kışlak, 2022; Emelah & Kebbi, 2025). In collectivistic cultures, marital relationships are often embedded within broader family systems, and the spouse's family may exert substantial influence on decision-making processes, emotional support, parenting styles, and conflict management. Positive interactions with the spouse's

family may create a supportive emotional environment that strengthens marital bonds. Conversely, excessive interference, criticism, or relational rejection may increase emotional strain and undermine marital satisfaction.

The findings may also be interpreted in light of family systems theory, which conceptualizes marital relationships as interconnected with broader relational networks. According to this perspective, unresolved tensions within extended family systems can spill over into the marital relationship and influence emotional interactions between spouses. Couples who experience chronic conflict with in-laws may encounter greater emotional exhaustion, reduced intimacy, and increased relational dissatisfaction. In contrast, supportive family relationships may buffer marital stress and enhance relational resilience. Ang-Tan and Choo demonstrated that supportive in-law relationships contribute positively to spouses' adaptation and well-being (Ang-Tan & Choo, 2024). Similarly, Ganjian and colleagues emphasized that relationship quality with the spouse's family is associated with greater marital intimacy (Ganjian et al., 2025).

The present findings also support the interconnected nature of ego strength and mentalization. Previous studies have suggested that these constructs are conceptually and functionally related (Bahraloloum & Lajevardi, 2025; Isazadeh & Bahramkhani, 2024). Individuals with stronger ego functioning are often better able to regulate emotions and engage in reflective psychological processes, which may facilitate mentalization capacities. Likewise, mentalization may strengthen ego functioning by promoting emotional awareness and adaptive interpersonal understanding. This reciprocal relationship may explain why both variables contributed significantly to marital adjustment in the present study.

Furthermore, the findings align with studies emphasizing the role of emotional regulation, attachment security, and family-of-origin experiences in marital functioning (S. F. Hashemi et al., 2024; Li et al., 2025; Rusu et al., 2019). Ego strength and mentalization may influence how individuals process attachment-related fears, regulate emotional distress, and interpret interpersonal interactions within marriage. Couples with healthier emotional functioning are more likely to engage in constructive communication and adaptive coping strategies, which in turn enhance marital satisfaction and adjustment. In addition, family-of-origin dynamics may shape individuals' expectations regarding boundaries, intimacy, and family involvement in marital relationships. Therefore, examining marital adjustment

through an integrated psychological and systemic framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of relational functioning.

Another notable aspect of the present findings concerns the sociocultural context of marital relationships. In many societies, including Iranian culture, family interconnectedness remains highly influential in marital life. Relationships with in-laws often involve strong emotional expectations, social obligations, and frequent interactions. Under such conditions, psychological capacities such as ego strength and mentalization become particularly important because they help individuals navigate relational boundaries and interpersonal tensions more effectively. Couples who possess these capacities may be more capable of balancing family connectedness with marital autonomy, thereby preserving relational harmony within both the marital subsystem and the broader family network.

Overall, the findings of the present study indicate that marital adjustment is influenced by a combination of intrapsychic capacities and interpersonal family dynamics. Ego strength and mentalization contribute directly to adaptive marital functioning by enhancing emotional regulation, empathy, and psychological flexibility. Simultaneously, these capacities indirectly influence marital adjustment through improving relationship quality with the spouse's family. These findings underscore the importance of considering both individual psychological characteristics and systemic family relationships in understanding marital functioning and designing couple-based interventions.

One limitation of the present study was the use of a correlational design, which restricts causal interpretations of the relationships among variables. In addition, the data were collected through self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability bias and subjective response tendencies. The use of convenience sampling and restriction of the sample to married couples residing in Tehran may also limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic groups. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the study did not allow examination of changes in marital adjustment and family relationships over time.

Future studies are recommended to employ longitudinal and experimental designs to clarify the causal relationships among ego strength, mentalization, relationship quality with the spouse's family, and marital adjustment. Researchers may also investigate these variables in different cultural contexts and among couples with varying durations of marriage and family structures. Examining moderating

variables such as attachment style, emotion regulation, personality traits, and socioeconomic status could provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying marital adjustment. In addition, qualitative studies may offer richer insights into couples' lived experiences regarding interactions with in-laws and their impact on marital functioning.

The findings of the present study have important practical implications for family counselors, couple therapists, and mental health professionals. Intervention programs designed to strengthen ego functioning, enhance mentalization capacities, and improve emotional regulation may contribute significantly to marital adjustment and relational stability. Couple counseling programs should also address the role of extended family relationships and teach couples effective boundary-setting and communication skills in managing interactions with in-laws. Furthermore, psychoeducational workshops focusing on empathy, reflective functioning, and constructive conflict management may help couples develop healthier relational patterns and reduce the likelihood of marital dissatisfaction and divorce.

Authors' Contributions

All authors significantly contributed to this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent.

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