

*Original Article*

# Structural Equation Modeling of the Relationship Between Dark Personality Traits and Subjective Well-Being in Women on the Verge of Divorce, with an Emphasis on the Mediating Role of Emotion Regulation

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## Abstract

**Background and Aim:** The present study aimed to investigate the structural model of dark personality traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy), interpersonal emotion regulation, and psychological well-being in married women experiencing thoughts of separation.

**Materials and Methods:** This descriptive-correlational study used a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. The statistical population consisted of married women in Tehran who had thoughts of separation in 2024, from whom 188 individuals were selected using convenience sampling. Participants completed the Short Dark Triad (SD3), Interpersonal Emotion Regulation (IRI) questionnaire, and the Ryff Psychological Well-Being questionnaire. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients and structural equation modeling with AMOS software.

**Results:** The results indicated that dimensions of dark personality traits had a significant adverse effect on the ability of interpersonal emotion regulation; in particular, Machiavellianism and narcissism directly weakened interpersonal emotion regulation and reduced psychological well-being. Although psychopathy did not have a direct effect on interpersonal emotion regulation, it exerted the most substantial negative impact on psychological well-being. The mediating role of interpersonal emotion regulation in the relationship between narcissism and psychological well-being was confirmed, whereas such mediation was not observed for Machiavellianism and psychopathy.

**Conclusion:** Dark personality traits—especially narcissism—lead to reduced psychological well-being in women on the verge of divorce, with interpersonal emotion regulation serving as a key mechanism in this relationship. It is recommended that couples therapy interventions focus on training interpersonal emotion regulation strategies and enhancing components of psychological well-being.

**Keywords:** Dark personality traits; Interpersonal emotion regulation; Psychological well-being; Married women

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## Introduction

The family serves as the foundation for the realization of essential social functions and is the principal context for the development of individuals who are expected to contribute to the vitality and progress of society with physical and intellectual health. In recent years, the most critical aspects of Iranian family life—including the transformation of gender roles, declining marriage rates, and increasing divorce rates—have undergone profound changes. These developments have significantly eroded the family's social capital, as well as the psychological and physical well-being of couples (1). Divorce, as one of the most critical consequences of couple relationships, manifests in extensive psychological, economic, and social dimensions and directly threatens the psychosocial order rooted in the family structure (2, 3). Evidence demonstrates that the formal dissolution of the family is often the result of a gradual process of psychological instability and emotional divorce between spouses, rooted in recurrent conflict, communication breakdowns, failure of intimacy, and declining psychological and physical health (4, 5).

While social and economic factors contribute to the erosion of healthy family functioning, individual characteristics, particularly personality traits of couples, occupy a central role. Empirical findings indicate that the dark personality traits—namely narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism—not only correlate with poor quality of interactions, couple conflict, and romantic breakdown, but also threaten the psychological and physical health of couples both directly and indirectly (6-10). Individuals with higher levels of these traits frequently demonstrate a tendency toward a lack of empathy, exploitation, dominance, projection, and risky behaviors, all of which pose significant challenges to effective communication, conflict resolution, and psychological safety within romantic relationships (11, 12).

In contemporary research, couple health is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing physical, emotional, and social well-being. Optimal family functioning requires adequate levels in all these domains (13). The World Health

Organization also defines mental health not merely as the absence of illness but as the ability to maintain effective communication, resolve conflicts, and successfully adapt to changes and life stressors (14).

Meanwhile, self-regulation—particularly cognitive emotion regulation strategies—has emerged as one of the most important psychological mechanisms mediating the relationship between personality traits and couple health. Emotion regulation involves internal and external processes that monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional responses, playing a key role in mitigating the adverse effects of dark personality traits on both psychological and physical health (15-18). Research indicates that the use of adaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as acceptance and positive reappraisal, is positively associated with life quality and psychological flexibility. In contrast, maladaptive strategies, including rumination and catastrophizing, increase the likelihood of psychological problems and marital conflict (3, 19, 20).

Ultimately, the occurrence of psychosocial conflicts and problems within the family—whether during a crisis or through the gradual progression of dissatisfaction and divorce—necessitates the identification of precise individual and psychological antecedents. Accordingly, the present study focuses on the structure of dark personality traits and the mediating role of self-regulation strategies in order to elucidate the extent to which these dimensions can predict and explain the psychological and physical health of couples, especially in the context of growing threats to family health in Iranian society (21, 22). The findings of this study can provide a specialized foundation for the development of interventions aimed at modifying personality features and promoting adaptive emotional strategies in couple therapy, thereby enhancing family functioning.

Undoubtedly, identifying and elucidating the role of dark personality traits in couple health is of considerable theoretical importance, given the profound impact of these characteristics on individual and social functioning (23). Notably, the majority of domestic and international research has focused on positive personality dimensions or general models of couple health. The examination of psychopathology—particularly in the context of dark personality traits and the mediating role of self-regulation—remains largely

underexplored.

Dark personality traits, and related dimensions such as novelty seeking, are recognized as determinants of many psychological and physical ailments, communicative failures, and increased risk of family dissolution; yet, there is a scarcity of structured research addressing their role in couple health with an emphasis on self-regulation and emotion regulation strategies. Theoretical evidence suggests that dark personality traits not only exacerbate relational and emotional challenges for couples but also foster an increase in negative emotions and undermine direct conflict resolution by reinforcing cycles of blame-shifting, projection, and diminished empathy (11, 23). On the other hand, emotion regulation traits play a critical role in moderating and even preventing such harms. Employing adaptive strategies not only strengthens psychological resilience and enhances couples' quality of life but also promotes constructive behavior in response to adversity. Conversely, the use of maladaptive strategies is likely to aggravate psychological health problems (8, 11).

Given the current situation—including rising rates of conflict and divorce, social and economic transformations in recent decades, and the widespread psychological stress imposed by crises—the need for research on the psychopathology of couple relationships and scrutiny of individual factors (such as dark traits and emotion regulation) has become more pronounced than ever. Undertaking such research can facilitate the identification of psychological vulnerabilities and the design of appropriate interventions at the individual, couple, and family levels. Furthermore, the resulting findings can not only address existing research gaps but also provide counselors and family therapists with evidence-based approaches for improving couple relations and overall health, thereby indirectly promoting societal health and well-being (24).

## Methods

This study was applied in terms of its aim and descriptive-correlational in terms of its methodology, relying on structural equation modeling (SEM) and specifically structural regression equations. The statistical population included all couples applying for

divorce in Tehran in 2024. Sampling was conducted through convenience sampling, where all couples aged 25–50 who were applying for divorce and referred to the divorce reduction centers in districts 4 and 5 of Tehran by the family courts between May and August 2024 participated in the study after receiving an explanation of the study objectives and providing written consent. The final sample size was 300 individuals. Inclusion criteria were: currently going through separation, age between 25 and 50, at least secondary school education, and marriage within the past year. Exclusion criteria included: having a psychological disorder (based on clinical interviews), physical problems requiring immediate intervention, substance abuse or addiction history, criminal background, and unwillingness to participate. All participants were informed at the beginning of the questionnaire about the study's objectives, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. There was no time limit for completing the questionnaires; however, the average duration was estimated to be approximately 30 minutes. According to the formula presented by Supar (2024) for SEM sample size estimation—with an effect size of 0.19, test power of 0.80, six latent variables, twenty observed variables, and an error level of 0.05—a minimum of 100 and a maximum of 1,599 participants were recommended, and 300 participants were selected for this study.

**The Short Dark Triad (SD3)**, developed by Paulhus and Jones, consists of 27 items that assess three dimensions—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—using a five-point Likert scale. Each subscale ranges from 5 to 45, and the total scale ranges from 27 to 135. The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the subscales in international studies ranged from 0.70 to 0.80, and in Iran, from 0.65 to 0.82; concurrent validity with other personality assessment tools ranged from 0.18 to 0.52 (25, 26).

**Interpersonal Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (IERQ)**: This scale comprises 20 items and four subscales, each scored on a five-point Likert scale. The reliability of the subscales in the original study ranged from 0.91 to 0.98, and for the overall scale in the Persian version, it was 0.90 (27, 28).

**Adult Subjective Well-Being Questionnaire**: The scale developed by Ghiers and Margamio (2003)

evaluates three components—emotional, psychological, and social well-being—with a total of 45 questions. The reliability of the total scale was 0.80, while the subscales ranged from 0.61 to 0.86. The overall validity was 0.78, and for the Persian version of the overall scale, it was 0.80 (29, 30).

In the data analysis stage, after verifying data integrity, managing missing data, and confirming parametric assumptions, descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, were computed. For inferential statistics, Pearson’s correlation coefficient was calculated using SPSS version 28, and structural equation modeling by maximum likelihood estimation was performed with AMOS version 28. The direct and indirect path effects were estimated using the bootstrap method with 2,000 resamples.

## Results

In the present study, 188 women on the verge of divorce participated. Based on the descriptive data, the mean age of participants was 38.87 years with a standard deviation of 3.749. The minimum age in the sample was 25, and the maximum age was 50 years. In terms of education, the highest frequency was among women with a middle school diploma (33.33%), followed by those with an associate degree (26.7%) and a high school diploma (20%). The lowest frequency was reported among women with a doctoral degree (3.3%). Regarding the duration of marriage, the most significant proportion (43.33%) had been married for between 1 and 3 years, 30% for between 4 and 6 years, and 20% for between 7 and 9 years, while

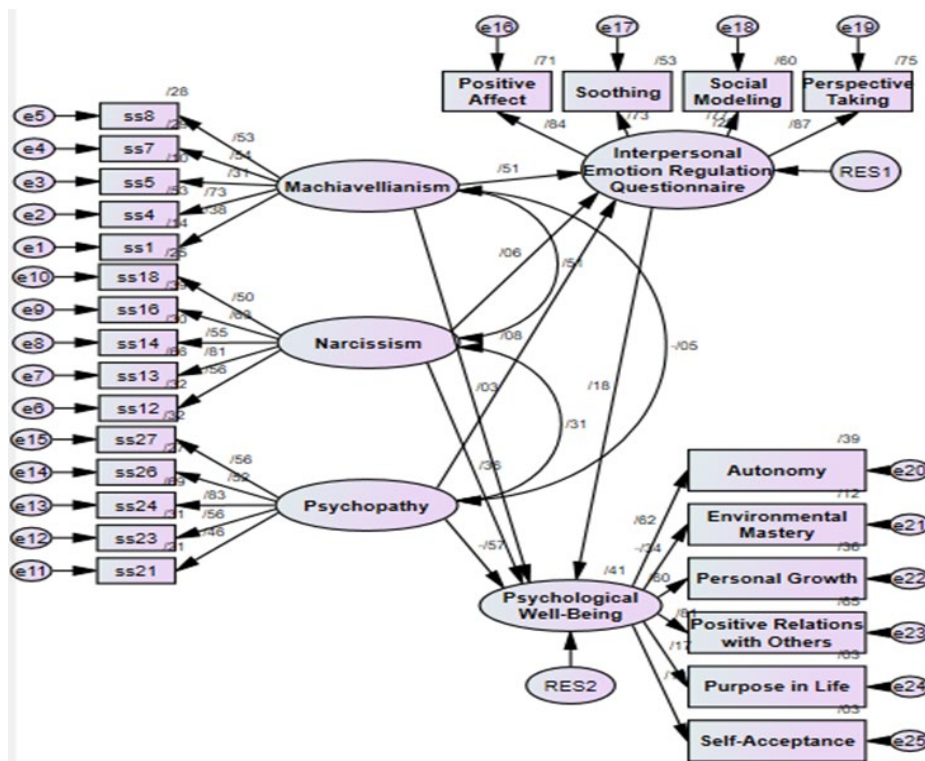
only 6.7% had been married for more than 10 years. These data provide an overall picture of the demographic characteristics of the sample. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the main study variables. Assessment of the structural equation modeling assumptions revealed no multicollinearity between predictor variables (all tolerance values > 0.1 and variance inflation factor < 10). Additionally, the Durbin–Watson test for exogenous, mediating, and endogenous variables yielded values within the optimal range (1.5 to 2.5), indicating the absence of autocorrelation among residuals. The Mardia test results also confirmed that the data were multivariate normal. Table 2 presents the correlation matrix for the study variables. The results indicate that there are significant negative correlations among the dimensions of the dark triad of personality (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy). Furthermore, self-regulation was found to have a significant negative correlation with each of the dark triad traits ( $p < 0.05$ ). Psychological well-being was not only correlated with the dark triad traits but also exhibited a significant positive correlation with self-regulation. The conceptual model of the study was examined using structural equation modeling in AMOS software. Figure 1 presents the empirical model according to standardized coefficients. Structural model assessment demonstrated that all relationships among the primary variables or latent constructs were supported at the 0.05 significance level. The direct effects of the three dimensions of dark personality traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy), as well as interpersonal emotion regulation, on psychological well-being were statistically significant.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and normality tests of study variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Error (SE)	Skewness	SE (Skewness)	Kurtosis	SE (Kurtosis)	Minimum (Min)	Maximum (Max)
Machiavellianism	10.36	4.36	0.789	0.111	0.039	0.222	5	13
Narcissism	13.14	4.88	0.812	0.111	0.048	0.222	5	17
Psychopathy	6.16	3.20	0.489	0.111	0.413	0.222	5	8
Positive Emotion	18.16	4.55	-0.789	0.111	0.879	0.222	5	20
Consolation	19.44	5.66	-0.912	0.111	1.263	0.222	5	22
Social Modelling	16.66	4.33	-0.741	0.111	1.269	0.222	5	18
Perspective	18.47	4.48	-0.809	0.111	1.612	0.222	5	21
Self-regulation	72.73	10.55	-0.475	0.111	-0.412	0.222	22	81
Psychological Well-being	133.16	32.64	2.870	0.111	3.987	0.222	45	178

**Table 2.** Correlation matrix of study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
Machiavellianism	1				
Narcissism	-0.32	1			
Psychopathy	-0.39	-0.37	1		
Self-regulation	-0.38	-0.35	-0.55	1	
Psychological Well-being	-0.44	-0.42	-0.44	0.24	1



**Figure 1.** The structural model of dark personality traits and psychological well-being with the mediating role of self-regulation

The model fit indices reported in Table 3 indicate an acceptable fit of the model to the observed data, with no evidence of poor fit. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) was calculated to be 0.41, indicating that dark personality traits, in combination with self-regulation, accounted for 41% of the variance in psychological well-being, reflecting above-average explanatory power.

Analysis of the standardized coefficients in the structural model, based on the data in Table 4, reveals a clear distinction in the way each dimension of dark personality traits affects the two key variables: interpersonal emotion regulation and psychological well-being. According to the results, Machiavellianism has a significant adverse effect on interpersonal emotion regulation ( $\beta = -0.51, p = 0.001$ ), but its relationship with psychological well-

being is negative and statistically non-significant ( $p = 0.057$ ). In contrast, narcissism exerts a significant negative impact on both interpersonal emotion regulation ( $\beta = -0.25, p = 0.003$ ) and psychological well-being ( $\beta = -0.31, p = 0.001$ ). Notably, psychopathy demonstrated a negligible and non-significant influence on interpersonal emotion regulation ( $\beta = -0.077, p = 0.723$ ). At the same time, this dimension has a substantial adverse effect on psychological well-being ( $\beta = -0.57, p = 0.001$ ). Overall, this pattern highlights the differential impacts of the three dark personality trait dimensions, indicating that each component has a unique effect on the mediator and outcome variables examined in this study.

Based on the results of the mediation analysis using the bootstrapping method, as presented in Table 5, the findings indicate that the mediating role of

interpersonal emotion regulation in the relationship between different dimensions of dark personality traits and psychological well-being varies across different contexts. Specifically, interpersonal emotion regulation demonstrated a positive but statistically nonsignificant indirect effect in the relationships between Machiavellianism and psychological well-being (effect = 0.07, p = 0.067) and between psychopathy and psychological well-being (effect =

0.08, p = 0.057). However, in the path from narcissism to psychological well-being, interpersonal emotion regulation served as a mediator with a significant positive indirect effect (effect = 0.27, p = 0.001). These findings suggest that interpersonal emotion regulation can play a meaningful mediating role in mitigating the adverse effects of narcissism on psychological well-being. In contrast, such a significant mediating role was not observed for Machiavellianism or psychopathy.

**Table 3.** Model fit indices

Index	R <sup>2</sup>	PGFI	IFI	NFI	CFI	GFI	RMSEA	Chi-square/df
Criterion*	0.33	> 0.70	> 0.90	0.90	0.90	0.90	< 0.08	1 – 5
Result	0.45	0.77	0.94	0.93	0.95	0.96	0.079	2.33

**Table 4.** Results of Direct Effects Analysis of Variables in the Model

Path	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Machiavellianism → Self-regulation	-2.74	-0.51	0.792	3.47	0.001
Machiavellianism → Psychological Well-being	-0.230	-0.13	0.121	1.90	0.057
Narcissism → Self-regulation	-1.24	-0.25	0.424	2.29	0.003
Narcissism → Psychological Well-being	-0.305	-0.30	0.092	3.29	0.001
Psychopathy → Self-regulation	-0.155	-0.077	0.435	0.355	0.723
Psychopathy → Psychological Well-being	-0.617	-0.57	0.127	4.84	0.001
Interpersonal Emotion Regulation → Psychological Well-Being	0.245	0.17	0.132	2.24	0.034

**Table 5.** Mediation Analysis of Interpersonal Emotion Regulation Using the Bootstrapping Method

Mediation Path	Indirect Effect	p-value
Machiavellianism → Self-Regulation → Psychological Well-being	0.07	0.067
Narcissism → Self-Regulation → Psychological Well-being	0.27	0.001
Psychopathy → Self-Regulation → Psychological Well-being	0.08	0.057

## Discussion

The findings obtained from structural equation modeling indicate that dark personality traits (including Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy/antisociality) exert a direct adverse effect on interpersonal emotion regulation. It means that individuals with higher levels of these characteristics are generally less capable of perceiving, experiencing, and expressing their own emotions and those of others, and are less able to manage emotions efficiently and adaptively (24, 31-33). This deficiency in emotional experience and regulation constitutes a key commonality among the

three dark personality traits. It plays a fundamental role as a core factor in the emergence of many emotional disorders, interpersonal problems, and the reduction of psychological well-being (34).

Previous studies have confirmed this issue as well; for example, Plouffe et al. showed that individuals high in dark personality traits often experience no emotional distress when observing or confronted with the suffering of others, which can increase their tendency toward exploitation and destructive behavior without feelings of guilt or empathy (24). Among these, psychopathy stands out, especially considering its two types. Primary psychopathy (with traits such as selfishness, callousness, lack of interpersonal affect,

superficial charm, and ruthlessness) and secondary psychopathy (antisocial and impulsive behavior) are both associated with significant impairments in emotional and mood processes (35). Evidence indicates that primary psychopathy is negatively associated with positive emotions and with a tendency to disregard one's own feelings, and is mainly linked to poor mood recovery; whereas individuals with secondary psychopathy report lower confidence in mood regulation and improving negative affect, and show more intense negative emotions even in response to neutral stimuli (35).

Furthermore, each of the three dark triad traits affects emotional experience and expression distinctly. In Machiavellianism, emotional indifference and lack of empathy are quite evident; antisocial individuals are characterized mainly by egocentrism, cruelty, and disregard for the feelings of others; and in vulnerable narcissism, psychological fragility, introversion, avoidance of close relationships, weak intensity in expressing positive emotions, and poor comforting skills are observed (31, 35). These emotional disorders and the inability to effectively manage negative affect form the basis of widespread problems in one's interactions with self and others and weaken psychological health (31, 32).

The present model's findings also showed that some dark traits, especially Machiavellianism and narcissism, have both a significant direct adverse effect on emotion regulation and on mental health. The direct effect of psychopathy on self-regulation was not significant in this study; however, psychopathy had a substantial negative impact on psychological well-being. Additionally, the mediating role of emotional self-regulation in the path from narcissism to psychological well-being was confirmed. In contrast, mediation in the paths from Machiavellianism and psychopathy to psychological well-being was not statistically significant.

Individuals with the dark triad traits often, due to exploitative tendencies, dishonesty, lack of guilt or remorse, and severe narcissism, lack a deep understanding of their own and others' emotions. When faced with stressful situations, they are less likely to use adaptive cognitive strategies for emotion regulation. Accordingly, behaviors such as aggression, threat, avoidance, and even destructive

actions are more common among these individuals (24, 36). A closer look reveals that deficits in decision-making, conflict resolution, the inability to identify and label emotions, and a lack of empathy increase the likelihood of interpersonal conflicts and rumination, thereby broadening psychological vulnerability (24).

Interpersonal emotion regulation, meaning the ability to manage and adjust emotions in social interactions and close relationships, acts as a fundamental mediator between dark personality traits and mental health. Recent studies have emphasized that these traits, beyond their direct effects, can intensify negative psychological outcomes through weakening interpersonal emotion regulation (36, 37). The current study's results are in line with these findings: individuals with high emotion regulation abilities typically cope more adaptively with life challenges and enjoy better psychological health, whereas those with dark personality traits place little value on others and feel little guilt or remorse even when harming them (24).

According to emotion regulation models, people with dark personality traits, when facing emotional situations, not only resort less to adaptive strategies (such as acceptance, cognitive reappraisal, and emotional expression), but are more inclined to maladaptive methods such as suppression, narcissistic attention-seeking, reality distortion, or social sabotage (24, 31). This can exacerbate dissatisfaction, hostility, and emotional harm in relationships, particularly in close partnerships such as marital relationships.

The present study demonstrated that in close relationships, such as between couples, people with elevated dark personality traits are prone to aggressive, hostile, avoidant, damaging behavior, and even enjoy their partner's suffering (38). A lack of empathy, poor anger and negative emotion management skills, the use of strategies such as vindictiveness, reprisal, or damaging the partner's reputation, are prominent features in these individuals. This inability to control impulses and properly suppress emotions increases tendencies toward aggression and emotional disorders, and ultimately weakens psychological well-being.

Thus, the present findings emphasize that dark personality traits threaten mental health and the emotional quality of couples through weakening or disruption of emotion regulation pathways,

highlighting the importance of interventions that enhance emotional self-regulation in couple therapy and family-oriented programs. These results provide a theoretical and empirical foundation for future research, the development of multilevel intervention programs, and evidence-based policy-making to enhance family health.

## Conclusion

Finally, it is worth noting that the present study has limitations, including its focus on women considering separation and the use of tools with limited sensitivity to cultural differences; therefore, the generalizability of the results to other population groups should be done cautiously. Additionally, the exclusive focus on interpersonal emotion regulation limited the scope of analysis, and future studies are recommended to examine other dimensions of self-regulation and social-cultural contexts as well.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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