

Multiple Mediated Effect of Adult Attachment Style on Association between Acquired Skills from Gottman's Intervention on Marital Communication Patterns

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Abstract

This research aimed to evaluate the multiple mediated effect of adult attachment style on acquired skills of Gottman's psycho-educational intervention and marital communication patterns in 144 married people selected from 256 Iranian spouses who had already finished the Gottman's intervention within two months. The accumulated evidences have shown Gottman's intervention improves marital communication patterns, what is missing, however, is the multiple mediated effect of adult attachment style on marital communication patterns and intervention. The results indicated that acquired skills of Gottman's psycho-educational intervention significantly influenced all attachment's subscales. Furthermore, attachment significantly mediated the effect of acquired skills of Gottman's intervention on marital communication patterns. These results suggest family counselors to consider attachment style as predictable ways for more effective Gottman's intervention on marital communication patterns. For future researches, it is suggested to utilize Actor-Partner Interdependence Model for Mediator for evaluating the multiple mediated effect of adult attachment in dyadic interaction.

Keywords: Marital Communication Patterns, Adult Attachment Style, Multiple Mediated Effect, Gottman's Psycho-Educational Intervention, Acquired Skills, And Married People

Introduction

In general, a relation in marriage does not occur in a vacuum but depends on the interaction between couples' interpersonal skills, intrapersonal characteristics, personal experiences, and a set of socio-economic-cultural factors (Halford, Markman, Kling, & Stanley, 2003; Sanders, 2010). Obviously, insufficient knowledge about the abovementioned factors and low quality of interaction between couples can deconstruct the marital relationships and lead to dissolution and divorce.

Globally, divorce rates are dramatically increasing. In Europe and the United States, the divorce rate has reached between 30 and 50% (Bodenmann, et al., 2006). In Malaysia, as a Muslim country the divorce rate has reached 22% among married couples from 18 to 50 years old (Hassan, 2015). Added to that, divorce in the Saudi Arabia happens at the rate of 127 cases per

day (Tonnessen, 2016) , It is striking that Indonesian couples with their Muslim marriages get divorce, on average, more than one thousand cases per day (Qibthiyyah, 2016). Similarly, the divorce rate in Iran is substantial. The National Organization for Civil Registration in Iran (2015) has reported that divorce occurs 18 times per hour and the recorded divorces were 155, 369 cases in 2014. (Iran's Ministry of Interior, 2015).

For prevention of any marital dissolution and divorce, couple have to manage their problems and improve their relationship especially modify their marital communication patterns either by attending in the counseling sessions or educational family programs. Accumulated documents of family counselling literature recognizes marital communication patterns are a central component and a major predictor of marital stability after ten years (Blanchard et al., 2009; Childs, 2009; Gottman, 1999, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Gottman & Notarius, 2000; J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2013). Particularly, Gottman can predict divorce with 94% accuracy based on the quality and patterns of marital communication (Gottman & Levenson, 2002). Gottman suggests that predictability of a successful marriage depends on how couples communicate with each other (Gottman & Swanson, 2002).

Although it is impossible to have a satisfying marriage without constructive communication, it is important to understand that constructive communication does not guarantee such a marriage. This is a vital factor but not sufficient on its own. It must be noted, based on previous studies, that some intrapersonal variables, such as a couple's adult attachment style, also have an effect on marital communication (Steuber, 2005). The accumulated evidence of family studies in both Iran and other countries have demonstrated that every person has positive and negative personal experiences and emotional bond with his/her father–mother relationship that can create facilities or obstacles in their future marital life (Deylami, et al., 2007; Gottman & Levenson, 2002; Isanezhad, et al., 2010; Janbaz et al., 2008; Kazemi, 2008; Matthews, 2010; Ostenson, 2008).

Research conducted by Bretz (2009) shows that spouses who were accustomed to negative communication patterns were characterized as having an insecure attachment style. They have negative defenses for acquiring marital skills compared to couples who are secure and familiar with constructive communication patterns. In one study on Iranian couples, Honarian, et al., (2010) claim that the attachment approach can explain how and why problems appear in relationships; they have shown men with secure attachment style were less avoidant, blaming, and rejecting than men with an insecure style. Additionally, secure women were more supportive, friendly, and constructive with their partners than insecure women.

Moreover, Iranian family researchers found marital communication and attachment style are related and can predict successful marriage and marital maladjustment after attendance in family intervention (AhmadiGatab & Khamen, 2011; Bidokhti & Pourshanbaz, 2012; Ebrahimi & Kimiaei, 2014; Honarian et al., 2010; Isanezhad, et al., 2010; Janbaz Fereidounil, et al., 2008; Shaker, et aal., 2010). Therefore, conceptually it makes sense that adult attachment styles

would mediate an association between Gottman's intervention and communication patterns (Bowlby, 2001; Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Crowley, 2008; Deylami, et al., 2007; Bretz, 2009; Hollist & Miller, 2005; Honarian, et al., 2010), however, the multiple mediating effect of these variables are not discussed in detail (Smith & Ng, 2009), particularly as they are utilized after the intervention. There has been little discussion about the confounding mediating role of adult attachment style on marital communications and the participants' skills (Ledermann, et al., 2011; Millings & Walsh, 2009; Parker, et al., 2012). Therefore, there is a notable gap in the literature, which calls for an evaluation of the mediated effects of attachment style on marital communication in this study.

It is recognized and hypothesized that if adult attachment style has an effect on marital communication, then the effect of acquired skills from Gottman's psycho-educational intervention will be deteriorated, unchanged, improved, or recovered. Hence, for more effective psycho-educational intervention, and relevant achieved skills, the mediated effect of adult attachment style should be considered. This hypotheses was tested by utilizing a special new version of the mediation is known "multiple mediator analyzing," (Chow, et al., 2013; Hayes & Preacher, 2014).

Method

Participants

The target sample in this study consisted of 144 Iranian spouses' heterosexual adults (72 married women, and 72 married men). They were selected from a list of participants who recently attended in consecutive eight sessions of educational family program that is called "Bridging the Couple Chasm". This program was under the principals of Gottman's psycho-educational intervention and was held in family counseling center in the Shiraz Medical Science University in Iran. Approximately half of participants were 20–30 years old (46.5%); 11.1% were 41–50 years old. The mean age of the participants was 32.25 years. In all, over more than 60% of participants were undergraduates and that 69.4% of participants reported they had been married between 1 and 4 years. Of the study population, 39 couples had no children.

Measures

The eligible sample completed an evaluation packet. The following instruments were included in the pocket;

Demographic questionnaire. Basic demographic information was collected from demographic questionnaire as one of the sources for data collection. This questionnaire obtained information about age, gender, education level, number of children, and duration of marriage.

Sound Relationship House scales (SRH-s). The acquired skills from psycho-educational Gottman intervention (GPI) was assessed through a battery of the Sound Relationship House scales (SRHs) include of 16 questionnaires (Love Map, Fondness and Admiration, Turning Toward or Away, Emotional Distance and Loneliness, Harsh Start-up, The Four Horsemen, Gridlock on Perpetual

Issues, Accepting Influence, Compromise, Flooding, Negative Sentiment Override, Effective Repair Attempts, Shared Meaning Rituals, Shared Meaning Roles, Shared Meaning Symbols, and Shared Meaning goals). These scales were designed based on the Gottman couple theory, which has demonstrated adequate validity (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2011).

Communication patterns questionnaire (CPQ). This questionnaire is developed by Christensen & Sullaway, (1984), has 35 items and an assessment tool designed to evaluate individuals' perceptions of the dyadic patterns of problem solving behavior occurring in their couple relationship. The CPQ were used to measure couples' communication patterns when discussing conflict topics in which reported adequate validity (Christensen and Sullaway, 1984). The CPQ has six subscales that in this study only mutual constructive communication, mutual avoidance, and demand/ withdraw communication patterns were used, and a high scores in each of them was considered as a participant's attachment style.

Revised adult attachment style (RAAS). The 18-item Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS) (Collins, 1996) assessed husbands' and wives' comfort with closeness, comfort depending on others, and anxiety over experiencing abandonment and rejection in three subscales: close subscale measures the extent to which a person is convenient with closeness and intimacy. The 'Depend' subscale assesses the extent to which a person feels he/she can depend on others to be available when needed. The style of 'Anxiety' measures the extent to which a person is worried about being abandoned or unloved. The three scores from average score of each subscales indicated the individual attachment dimension (Collins & Allard, 2004).

Procedures

Admission. The participants (n=144 individuals, 72 males and 72 females) was selected among 256 married people who had enrolled and already passed eight sessions of Gottman's psycho-educational intervention program it called "Bridging the couple chasm". They had already trained well with all issues in couple training based on the Gottman's theory by a qualified couple therapist who certified by Gottman's institute. The counseling center of Shiraz Medical Science University in Shiraz-Iran were authorized responsible to organize this program. Participants were certified for successful passing program. In the first step, among 256 subjects, 38 persons eliminated because they didn't meet inclusion criteria. Also 10 people reluctant to join study.

Screening. In the second step, afterwards, 29 people were excluded because 8 couples were under another psychological treatment currently, six men were polygamous, and 5 males and two females were addicted. The researcher in this step screened the rest of the participants (n= 179 spouses) with SRHs to remove spouses with very low or very high scores in acquired skills from Gottman's intervention. Collected data from SRHs distinguished 160 spouses were recruited for this study. This assessment was done for controlling the statistical regression as a threat to internal validity (Ary, et al., 2009).

Selecting. Finally, regarding to sample size, 144 spouses out of 160 persons were randomly selected. At the end, this eligible sample was assessed by questionnaires (CPQ, and RAAS).

Analytic Plan

In this research sought to answer how adult attachment style can mediate the association between acquired skills from Gottman’s intervention (AS-GPI) as a predicted variable and marital communication patterns (MCP) as an outcome. To evaluate the multiple mediation effect, path analysis with PROCESS Macro was used. PROCESS Macro is an ordinary least squares method or logistic regression-based path analytic framework for estimating direct and indirect effects in simple and multiple mediator models that can be run in SPSS or SAS (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). Bootstrap and Monte Carlo confidence intervals are implemented for inference about indirect effects, including various measures of effect size. PROCESS can estimate moderated mediation models with multiple mediators, multiple moderators of individual paths, interactive effects of moderators on individual paths, and models with dichotomous outcomes (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012).

Results

Path analysis for Mediated Effect of AAS

Regarding the study objective, it was hypothesized that there is significant mediation effect of adult attachment styles on the relationship between AS-GPI and marital communication patterns (CC, TWDC, MAC) of individuals.

The results indicated that AS-GPI score significantly influenced all attachment’s subscales (path *a*). AS-GPI influences a significant positive effect on close ($B= 0.02, p <0.001$) and depend ($B= 0.014, p <0.001$), while it negatively affected anxiety ($B= -0.025, p < 0.01$).

Constructive Communication (CC)

For the first sub-hypothesis of MC, it was hypothesized that adult attachment style (close, depend, and anxiety) significantly mediated the relationship between AS-GPI and CC among individuals.

Table 1. The Effect of AS-GPI on Attachment’s Subscales

DV		B	SE	t	p value	R ²
CLOSE	constant	2.054	0.128	16.032	<0.001	0.503
	AS-GPI	0.0195	0.003	6.933	<0.001	
DEPEND	constant	2.310	0.136	17.040	<0.001	0.375
	AS-GPI	0.0143	0.003	4.816	<0.001	
ANXITY	constant	3.731	0.171	21.818	<0.001	0.482
	AS-GPI	-0.0246	0.004	-6.559	<0.001	

The results of the multiple mediation analysis based on the Sobel test for CC revealed that all three attachment's subscales including close, depend, and anxiety significantly mediated the effect of AS- GPI on CC. The direct effect of AS-GPI on CC was still significant after being mediated by the attachment subscales.

Effect	coefficient	SE	t/Z	P	results
Direct effect	0.1324	0.0896	3.6605	0.0004	--
CLOSE	0.0492	0.0198	2.485	0.013	Partially mediation
DEPEND	0.0342	0.0145	2.3633	0.0181	Partially mediation
ANXITY	0.049	0.0189	2.5959	0.009	Partially mediation

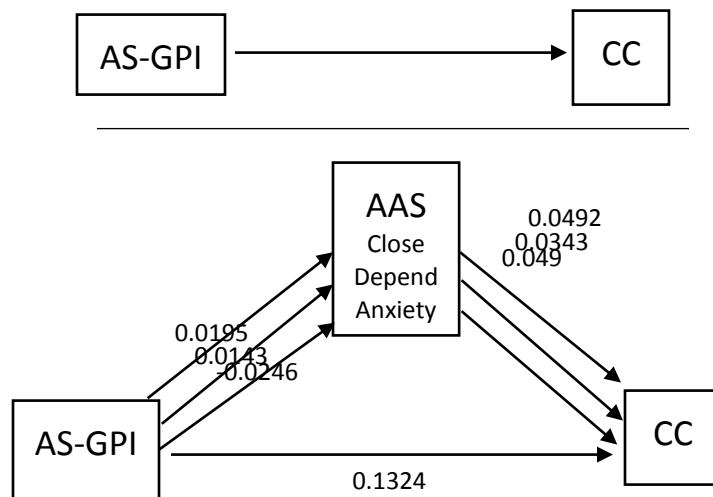


Figure 1. Mediation Effect on Constructive Communication

Regarding to results, it can be concluded that the attachment's subscales partially mediate the effect of AS-GPI on CC (Table 2).

Total Withdraw/Demand Communication (TWDC)

To evaluate whether adult attachment style (close, depend, and anxiety) mediated the relationship between AS-GPI and TWDC among individuals a path analysis in multiple mediation model based on the Sobel test was conducted. The results showed that all three attachment's subscales including close, depend, and anxiety did not significantly mediate the effect of AS-GPI on TWDC. The direct effect of AS-GPI on TWDC was not significant after being mediated by the

attachment subscales. Additionally, the results indicate that the variables of close, depend, and anxiety cannot mediate the effect of AS-GPI on TWDC (see Table 3).

Effect	Coefficient	se	Z	p	results
Direct effect	-0.0594	0.0323	-1.843	0.064	
CLOSE	-0.0383	0.0172	-2.228	0.3694	no Mediation
DEPEND	-0.004	0.0124	-0.3722	0.2714	No Mediation
ANXI	-0.0425	0.018	-2.562	0.069	no Mediation

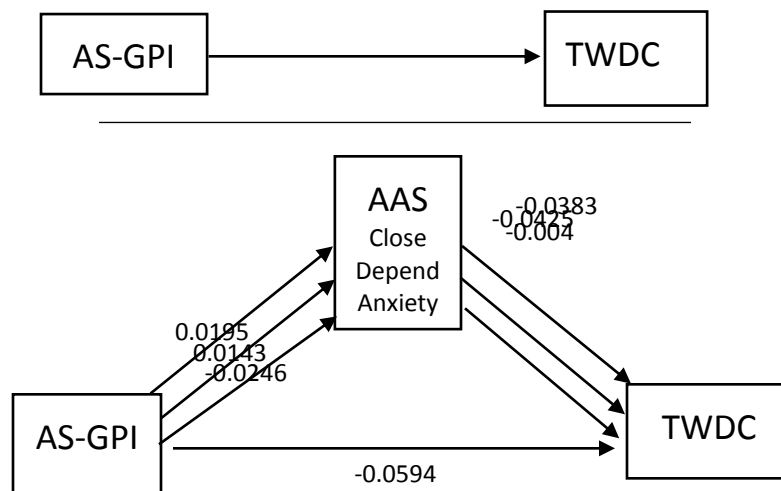


Figure 2. Mediation Effect on Total Demand / Withdraw Communication

Mutual Avoidance Communication (MAC)

For the third sub-hypothesis of MC, the mediated effect of the adult attachment style (close, depend, and anxiety) on the relationship between AS-GPI and MAC among individuals were assessed.

The results of the multiple mediation analysis based on the Sobel test for MAC are reported in Table 4. It reveals that all three attachment’s subscales including close, depend, and anxiety significantly mediated the effect of AS-GPI on MAC. The direct effect of AS-GPI on MAC was still significant after being mediated by the attachment subscales.

Effect	Coefficient	SE	t/Z	p	results
Direct effect	-0.0555	0.0205	-2.714	0.007	
CLOSE	-0.0217	0.0108	-2.015	0.044	Partially Mediation
DEPEND	-0.0137	0.0076	-1.806	0.0709	No Mediation
ANXITY	-0.0178	0.0101	-1.774	0.076	No Mediation

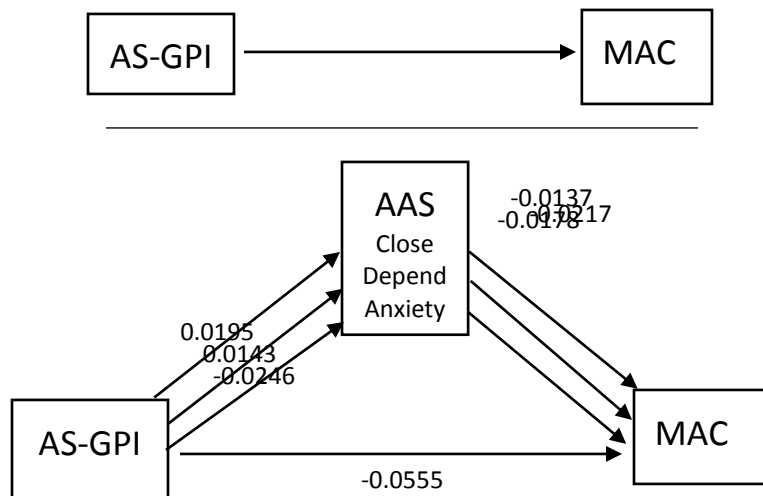


Figure 3. Mediation Effect on Mutual Avoidance Communication

The attachment’s subscales can be concluded to partially mediate the effect of AS-GPI on MAC through close (See table 4). Considering the *p* value for the two other components of attachments including depend and anxiety, which were almost small values ($p=0.070$), it can be concluded that these two subscales can also be considered as effective mediators despite that they were not statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Discussion

Findings of the literature on Gottman therapy indicated that Gottman’s intervention and relevant acquired skills significantly improve marital communication. However, it has to be considered that statistics can be used to ascertain whether an association between variables exists and of what magnitude. This may assist to develop the soundness of the causal argument but does not demonstrate how this effect works. The most crucial point described is the limitation of the Gottman approach. This theory, like all family theories, is unable to offer holistic insight into what variables predict each patterns of marital communication.

Meanwhile, a family therapist has to help couples to improve their satisfaction fulfilment and control conflict. Considering Gottman’s component can teach couples how to communicate but

cannot explain which potential predictors can identify marital communication. All skills are achieved from Gottman's intervention can empower marital communication. Additionally, a review of the literature on adult attachment theory offered an extended chance to analyze this in depth (AhmadiGatab & Khamen, 2011; Bidokhti & Pourshanbaz, 2012; Bowlby, 2001; Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Crowley, 2008; Deylami, et al., 2007; Ebrahimi & Kimiaei, 2014; Honarian, et al., 2010; Shaker, et al., 2010). However, the attachment literature has not fully considered how interpersonal exchanges might influence marital communication. If Gottman theory and attachment theory are considered and combined together, they can be useful components for building a more comprehensive model of marital communication.

In the present study, attachment is characterized as the participants' score on the three scales of attachment, namely, close, depend, and anxiety that discussed how they can mediate the association between Gottman's intervention-based skills and marital communication between spouses.

Constructive Communication

Individuals who identify themselves as securely attached people recognize their problems as a challenge rather than threatening interaction with their partners. They believe every conflict can be discussed effectively with negotiation and dialogue. As expected, individuals who are comfortable in the close relationships and recognize securely attached they have positive effects and felling in their communication patterns.

The results were consistent with research predictions in this study and partially supported by previous studies. The first major finding in the hypotheses of the attachment-mediated approach indicated that acquired skills from Gottman's intervention can increase the constructive communication pattern through close, depend, and anxiety styles. The close scale in the attachment style measures the level of comfort feelings, intimacy, and closeness. Also, the dependent scale evaluates the extent to which a person can trust and depend on others, while the anxiety scale is related to the levels of discomfort and anxiety in the relationship. High scores in the close and dependent scales and low scores in the anxiety scale can be found in secure persons. A secure person is less likely to experience severe relationship problems than an insecure person.

The strong relationship between adult attachment style and marital communication has been reported in the literature; however, the association between Gottman's intervention-based skills and adult attachment style has only been sparsely discussed in previous literature. This study attempts to explore and evaluate this association on improving marital communication. It is interesting that findings show there is a mediated effect between dependent and independent variables in this study. The close scale of attachment can mediate the ability of spouses to communicate constructively with their partners. This means significant increases in constructive communication is dependent on the effect of Gottman's intervention and also the

effect of adult attachment style. Insecure persons cannot accept the influence of Gottman's issues to have constructive communication.

Total Demand/Withdraw Communication

It was surprising that the results of this study did not show any significant effect of acquired skills from Gottman's intervention on demand/withdraw communication through the close, depend, and anxiety scales. Therefore, this suggests that the style of an individual's attachment has no effect between intervention-based skills and communication. In other words, individuals would achieve a great benefit from the direct effect of acquired skills from Gottman's intervention for decreasing their demand/withdraw communication.

Mutual Avoidance Communication

Another important finding in this study was that Gottman's intervention-based skills can decrease the mutual avoidance between participants through the close scale on the adult attachment style. What is surprising is that depend and anxiety scales were unable to affect marital communication. These findings were in terms of inferential statistics and the p value was very small, hence, a mediated effect of this scale exists on communication.

Implication of the Study

Couples seek family therapy or intervention for solve their marital problems, regardless how many skills and techniques are learned, they may have dependent, anxiety, and/or close styles. Meaning that they may be dismissing, preoccupied, and/or fearful relationship styles which may differ from their partner's attachment style. Every spouse has his or her own attachment style, and they may respond actively in the intervention and accept the therapeutic strategies or ignore them and create a defensive guard, either consciously or subconsciously against of learning and achieving the skills. This study suggests to family therapist that couples' attachment styles most probably influence the therapeutic and learning-teaching process. The findings of this study help family counselors to realize that clients' attachment styles in the therapeutic sessions can be catalyst for change. It is notable that if counselors ignore this important finding, they will miss therapeutic opportunities to consult with their clients, such as problematic therapeutic alliance.

Additionally, family therapists and even couples have to recognize the differences of attachment style between them and its verification that can affect a relationship. The differences of adult attachment are considerable in this study. These findings, based on the Gottman couple theory, precisely described that adult attachment style may be a particularly vulnerable factor that does not permit couples to interact effectively in their committed relationship with their companions. Therefore, individuals with an attachment style that differs from their spouses may not achieve fulfillment in their relationship especially when their differences are not concerned.

The present study helps researchers and clinicians ask how the representational models of attachment that might be different in each spouse can reflect on their quality of intimate relationships. Concisely, this is considered to deal with the dual nature of attachment in the couple. This might encourage couple therapists to use the term “complex attachment” to introduce that there are two styles of attachment in every couples system that may be the same or different. For example, both spouses are secure in a secure couple attachment or dismissing-dismissing couple attachment, preoccupied-preoccupied couple attachment and /or dismissing/preoccupied couple attachment.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study has conducted recent advances in the statistical procedure and causal inference on mediation have extended traditional approaches to direct and indirect effects. The advanced statistical of multiple mediation modeling, allow for interactions and non-linearity instead of traditional mediator modeling that were single mediations for evaluating direct paths.

Multiple mediator analyzing in this research revealed that acquired skills from Gottman’s psycho-educational intervention can significantly increase constructive communication through adult attachment style. This means that the close, depend and anxiety styles partially mediated the effect of intervention. This finding indicates that for therapists to have more effective interventions, and for more guaranty that acquired skill will be efficient, it should be necessary to consider the couple’s attachment style. Although mutual avoidance communication patterns are mediated by the close style, the dependent and anxiety styles cannot statistically mediate the effect of acquired skills of Gottman’s intervention on this pattern. The most crucial point made from this result is the amount of P value, which is very small. The small p value suggests that those styles can mediate the association between Gottman therapy and mutual avoidance communication despite the statistical insignificance of its mediated effect.

Regarding to study limitations, it is suggested for the future researches to evaluate the mediated effect of adult attachment style on marital communication among couples. More information on adult attachment in the dyadic level would help the researchers to establish a greater degree of accuracy in the evaluation effect of attachment on marital communication. Therefore, it is recommended to evaluate the dyadic interaction between couple as a dyad. Because the nature of communication between couple is happened on dyadic interaction and both spouses effect and are effected by each other. It is suggested; researchers should be assess the interdependence data in a more holistic theoretical framework that is called actor-partner interdependence model (APIM). Afterwards, they can evaluate the mediated effect in the dyadic interaction by conducting the expanded and flexible model of APIM namely, actor-partner interdependence for mediation model (APIMeM). It is suggested for more understanding, include adult attachment style as the multiple mediator between Gottman’s intervention-based skills and marital communication patterns in dyadic level not just individual level.

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