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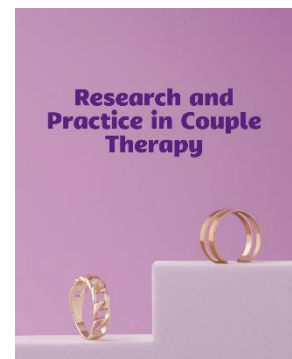
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Relationship Between Marital Disagreements and Emotional Intimacy: Mediated by Perspective-Taking

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of perspective-taking in the relationship between marital disagreements and emotional intimacy among married individuals. A descriptive correlational research design was used with a sample of 420 married individuals from Hungary, selected based on the Morgan and Krejcie sampling table. Standardized tools were utilized to measure marital disagreements, perspective-taking, and emotional intimacy. Data were analyzed using SPSS-27 for descriptive and correlational statistics, and AMOS-21 for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Pearson correlation coefficients assessed the bivariate relationships, and SEM evaluated the proposed mediation model and fit indices. Pearson correlation analysis revealed that marital disagreements were negatively correlated with both perspective-taking ($r = -.41, p < .001$) and emotional intimacy ($r = -.48, p < .001$), while perspective-taking was positively correlated with emotional intimacy ($r = .52, p < .001$). SEM results confirmed a good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.10$, GFI = 0.94, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.051, TLI = 0.95). The path analysis showed that marital disagreements had a significant direct negative effect on emotional intimacy ($\beta = -.29, p < .001$) and on perspective-taking ($\beta = -.26, p < .001$), while perspective-taking had a significant positive effect on emotional intimacy ($\beta = .39, p < .001$). The indirect effect of marital disagreements on emotional intimacy through perspective-taking was also significant ($\beta = -.10, p < .001$), confirming the mediating role. The findings underscore the detrimental impact of marital disagreements on emotional intimacy and highlight perspective-taking as a crucial cognitive-emotional mechanism that buffers this relationship. Enhancing perspective-taking skills may be a valuable strategy in couple-based interventions aimed at preserving emotional closeness despite conflict.

Keywords: Marital disagreements; Emotional intimacy; Perspective-taking

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Introduction

Marital relationships are among the most emotionally charged and psychologically complex human bonds, shaped by daily interactions, social expectations, and intrapersonal dispositions. As societies evolve and family dynamics transform, the quality of emotional intimacy within marriages remains central to marital satisfaction, psychological health, and long-term relational stability. Emotional intimacy, characterized by mutual understanding, empathy, and responsiveness, can be significantly compromised by recurring marital disagreements and communication breakdowns (Amato & Kane, 2011; Lavner et al., 2016).

Emotional intimacy has been widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of relational well-being, influencing not only marital satisfaction but also individual resilience and family cohesion (Cheung & Lui, 2023; Fahd & Hanif, 2019). Couples who maintain high levels of emotional closeness are more likely to engage in constructive conflict resolution, experience higher relational commitment, and report lower levels of stress and depression (Bukhari et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2022). Yet, persistent



marital disagreements—particularly those involving unresolved conflict or emotionally charged exchanges—can erode this intimacy over time (Goosen & Whitear-Nel, 2020; Lavner et al., 2016).

Marital disagreements may take various forms, including conflicts over parenting, finances, communication, household responsibilities, or unmet emotional needs. These conflicts, when unresolved or poorly managed, often escalate into relational patterns of withdrawal, criticism, or defensiveness, thereby impairing intimacy (Deschênes et al., 2022; Musgrave-Takeda et al., 2022). Research indicates that negative communication cycles contribute not only to lower relationship satisfaction but also to reductions in perceived emotional safety and partner accessibility (Lee, 2022; Neff & Geers, 2013). These breakdowns often manifest in relational distancing, where emotional walls replace open dialogue and understanding.

One potentially mitigating factor in this dynamic is the cognitive-emotional skill of perspective-taking, defined as the ability to mentally adopt the viewpoint of another person. Perspective-taking is central to maintaining emotional intimacy in the face of disagreement, as it promotes empathy, regulates emotional reactivity, and enhances communication accuracy (Möhr et al., 2013; Rigby & Cobb, 2022). Individuals high in perspective-taking are more likely to interpret their partner's behavior within a compassionate framework, reducing misinterpretation and defensive reactions (Ohtaka & Karasawa, 2019). This aligns with findings that demonstrate how couples who actively engage in mutual perspective-taking report higher levels of relational satisfaction and emotional closeness (Deschênes et al., 2022; Liu & Cheung, 2014).

Perspective-taking also has important implications for reducing conflict intensity. Research has shown that the failure to adopt a partner's viewpoint during disagreements leads to entrenched miscommunication and prolonged conflict cycles (Kalus & Szymańska, 2019; Reczek et al., 2010). Conversely, dyadic empathy enhances prosocial behaviors such as validation, active listening, and emotional regulation, thereby transforming conflict into an opportunity for growth rather than a threat to intimacy (Cho et al., 2014; Neff & Geers, 2013). In light of this, perspective-taking may serve not only as a buffer but also as a mediator in the relationship between marital disagreements and emotional intimacy.

A systems-based view of family dynamics supports the conceptualization of perspective-taking as a mediating mechanism. From a family systems perspective, the behavior of one spouse influences the responses of the other in a recursive loop of mutual reinforcement or disruption (Bachem et al., 2017). In this regard, emotional intimacy is not simply a static emotional state but a dynamic outcome of continuous interaction shaped by each partner's cognitive and emotional processes. Hence, a lack of perspective-taking in one partner may trigger defensiveness in the other, resulting in relational discord, while mutual empathy and mentalization can reinforce trust and openness (Bukalski, 2021; Haselschwerdt et al., 2019).

Contextual and cultural considerations further emphasize the relevance of examining these dynamics in contemporary marriages. Modern couples navigate complex demands from both traditional family roles and evolving expectations for emotional support, equality, and personal autonomy (Cheung & Lui, 2023; Yasuike, 2011). In dual-earner households, for example, the distribution of responsibilities often becomes a source of friction, especially when unaddressed gendered expectations persist. When partners fail to understand each other's socioemotional perspectives, marital disagreements escalate and emotional intimacy suffers (Liu & Cheung, 2014; Lo et al., 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the vulnerability of marital relationships under stress. During lockdowns, couples were confined to shared spaces under elevated anxiety and uncertainty, which intensified preexisting tensions and tested communication skills (Mbisike, 2024). In such situations, perspective-taking became a critical skill in maintaining relational harmony and emotional connectivity. The pandemic highlighted how external pressures could magnify internal fractures within marital systems, particularly when couples lacked the emotional tools to bridge perceptual gaps (Ermer & Segel-Karpas, 2020).

The role of psychological and relational interventions in enhancing perspective-taking has gained increasing scholarly attention. Interventions aimed at promoting cognitive empathy, emotional literacy, and reflective functioning have been associated with improvements in relationship quality and emotional intimacy (Hollon & Sexton, 2012; Shareh & Sani, 2019). Furthermore, therapeutic models such as Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) and Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT) underscore the importance of recognizing and validating each partner's emotional world, a skill deeply rooted in perspective-taking capacity (Neff & Geers, 2013; Rigby & Cobb, 2022).

Despite the wealth of literature on marital satisfaction and conflict resolution, relatively few studies have empirically examined perspective-taking as a mediating variable in the association between marital disagreements and emotional intimacy. Existing research tends to address these constructs independently, leaving a theoretical and empirical gap regarding the mechanisms by which marital conflict erodes intimacy or, conversely, how couples navigate conflict to preserve emotional closeness (Deschênes et al., 2022; Lavner et al., 2016). Understanding this mediating process can inform targeted interventions aimed at enhancing relationship quality through specific cognitive-emotional competencies.

Additionally, previous studies have often been conducted in culturally homogeneous or Western-centric contexts, limiting their applicability across diverse marital structures and cultural backgrounds. This study addresses this gap by focusing on married individuals in Hungary, a Central European country where traditional family values intersect with modern gender roles, creating a unique sociocultural backdrop for understanding marital dynamics (Bukhari et al., 2023; Cho et al., 2014). Investigating perspective-taking within this context provides a richer understanding of how emotional intimacy is constructed, threatened, and potentially restored across diverse marital landscapes.

This study aims to investigate the mediating role of perspective-taking in the relationship between marital disagreements and emotional intimacy.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational research design to explore the relationship between marital disagreements and emotional intimacy, with the mediating role of perspective-taking. The target population included married individuals residing in Hungary. A total of 420 participants were selected using stratified random sampling, with the sample size determined based on the Morgan and Krejcie sample size determination table (1970) for a large population. Inclusion criteria required that participants be legally married for at least one year, aged 20 to 60 years, and fluent in Hungarian. Participants were recruited from community centers, online forums, and local civil registry offices.

Measures

To assess emotional intimacy, the Emotional Intimacy Scale (EIS) developed by Sinclair and Dowdy (2005) was used. This scale is designed to measure the emotional closeness and connection between partners. The EIS consists of 5 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The scale includes items such as "My partner listens to me when I need someone to talk to" and "I feel emotionally connected to my partner," which reflect mutual emotional sharing and responsiveness. The total score is obtained by summing all item responses, with higher scores indicating greater emotional intimacy. The EIS has demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values typically exceeding .85 in prior studies, and its construct validity has been supported through its significant correlations with related constructs such as relationship satisfaction and trust.

Marital disagreements were assessed using the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI) developed by Kurdek (1994), which evaluates how often marital partners experience and manage disagreements. For this study, the subscale measuring the frequency and intensity of disagreements was used, which consists of 5 items. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often), with higher scores reflecting greater levels of conflict or disagreement. This tool has been widely used in marital and relationship research, and studies have confirmed its reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .78 to .84. Validity evidence includes significant associations with marital satisfaction, communication quality, and stress indicators.

Perspective-taking was measured using the Perspective-Taking subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) developed by Davis (1983). This subscale includes 7 items designed to assess an individual's tendency to adopt the psychological point of view of others. Items such as "I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision" are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (does not describe me well) to 4 (describes me very well). Higher scores indicate greater perspective-taking ability. The Perspective-Taking subscale has shown strong psychometric properties, with reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients typically above .75. Its validity is supported by correlations with empathy, social functioning, and conflict resolution capabilities in close relationships.

Data analysis

Data analysis was performed in two stages. First, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were used to summarize the participants' demographic characteristics. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated using SPSS version 27 to examine bivariate relationships between the dependent variable (emotional intimacy) and independent variables (marital disagreements and perspective-taking). Then, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS version 21 to test the hypothesized mediation model. Model fit was evaluated using conventional indices such as the chi-square statistic (χ^2), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI).

Findings and Results

Among the 420 participants, 239 were female (56.9%) and 181 were male (43.1%). The participants' ages ranged from 22 to 59 years, with the majority ($n = 174$, 41.4%) aged between 30–39 years. Regarding educational background, 192 participants (45.7%) held a university degree, 138 (32.9%) had completed secondary education, and 90 (21.4%) had postgraduate degrees. In terms of marital duration, 158 participants (37.6%) reported being married for 6–10 years, 127 (30.2%) for 1–5 years, and 135 (32.1%) for more than 10 years. Most participants ($n = 322$, 76.7%) reported having at least one child.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 420)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Marital Disagreements	3.17	0.82
Perspective-Taking	3.84	0.69
Emotional Intimacy	4.12	0.74

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the main study variables. The mean score for marital disagreements was 3.17 ($SD = 0.82$), indicating a moderate frequency of reported disagreements among participants. Perspective-taking had a mean score of 3.84 ($SD = 0.69$), reflecting a relatively high tendency to adopt the partner's viewpoint. Emotional intimacy had the highest mean ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.74$), suggesting that participants generally perceived strong emotional closeness in their relationships.

Prior to conducting the main analyses, all statistical assumptions were examined and confirmed. The normality of the data was assessed through skewness and kurtosis coefficients. All values fell within the acceptable range of -1.50 to $+1.50$ (e.g., emotional intimacy: skewness = -0.42 , kurtosis = 0.85 ; marital disagreements: skewness = 0.34 , kurtosis = -0.67), indicating approximate normal distribution. Linearity and homoscedasticity were confirmed through scatterplots. Multicollinearity was evaluated using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with all VIF values below 2.00 (e.g., marital disagreements = 1.48 ; perspective-taking = 1.32), suggesting no multicollinearity problems. The data showed no significant outliers based on Mahalanobis distance ($p > 0.001$), and residuals were randomly and evenly distributed, confirming model suitability for regression and SEM.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Variables (N = 420)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Marital Disagreements	—		
2. Perspective-Taking	-.41** ($p < .001$)	—	
3. Emotional Intimacy	-.48** ($p < .001$)	.52** ($p < .001$)	—

Note. $p < .01$ for all significant correlations.

Table 2 displays the Pearson correlations between all variables. Marital disagreements were negatively correlated with both perspective-taking ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$) and emotional intimacy ($r = -.48$, $p < .001$). Additionally, perspective-taking showed a strong positive correlation with emotional intimacy ($r = .52$, $p < .001$). These results suggest that greater conflict is associated with lower empathy and intimacy, while higher perspective-taking is associated with greater emotional closeness.

Table 3. Fit Indices of the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Threshold (Cut-off)
Chi-Square (χ^2)	134.72	—
Degrees of Freedom (df)	64	—
χ^2/df	2.10	< 3.00
GFI	0.94	≥ 0.90
AGFI	0.91	≥ 0.90
CFI	0.96	≥ 0.95
TLI	0.95	≥ 0.95
RMSEA	0.051	≤ 0.06

Table 3 reports the goodness-of-fit indices for the proposed structural equation model. The model demonstrated acceptable fit: $\chi^2(64) = 134.72$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.10$, GFI = 0.94 , AGFI = 0.91 , CFI = 0.96 , TLI = 0.95 , and RMSEA = 0.051 . All indices meet or exceed recommended thresholds, indicating that the proposed mediation model provides a good fit to the data.

Table 4. Standardized and Unstandardized Path Coefficients in the Structural Model

Path	b	S.E.	β	p
Marital Disagreements → Emotional Intimacy (Direct)	-0.31	0.06	-.29	$< .001$
Marital Disagreements → Perspective-Taking	-0.27	0.05	-.26	$< .001$
Perspective-Taking → Emotional Intimacy	0.45	0.07	.39	$< .001$
Marital Disagreements → Emotional Intimacy (Indirect)	-0.12	0.03	-.10	$< .001$
Marital Disagreements → Emotional Intimacy (Total)	-0.43	0.05	-.39	$< .001$

Table 4 summarizes the path coefficients in the structural model. The direct path from marital disagreements to emotional intimacy was significant ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .001$), indicating that conflict directly reduces closeness. Additionally, marital disagreements negatively predicted perspective-taking ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .001$), and perspective-taking significantly predicted higher emotional intimacy ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect of marital disagreements on emotional intimacy through

perspective-taking was also significant ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .001$), confirming mediation. The total effect (direct + indirect) was $\beta = -.39$ ($p < .001$), demonstrating a substantial cumulative impact.

Structural Model of Marital Disagreements, Perspective-Taking, and Emotional Intimacy

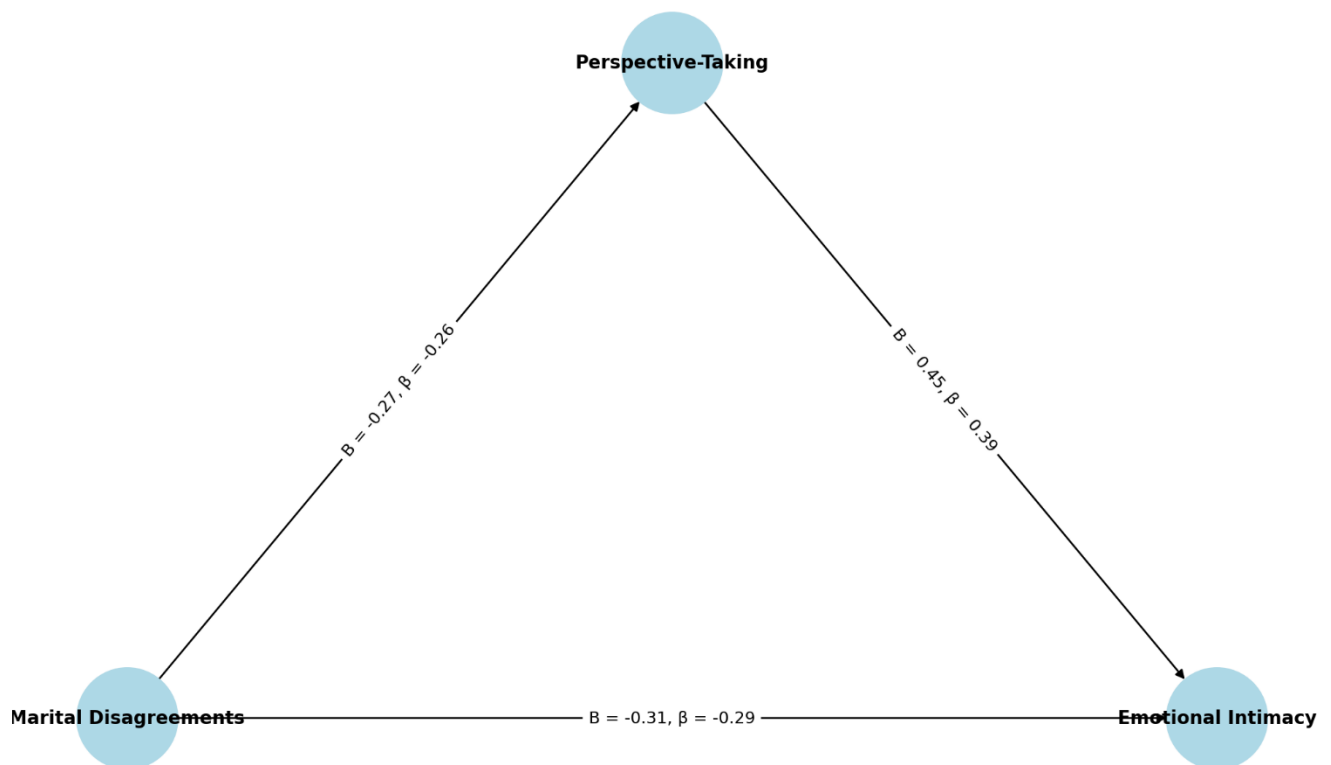


Figure 1. Model with Standard Coefficients

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study revealed significant relationships among the variables of marital disagreements, emotional intimacy, and perspective-taking among married individuals in Hungary. First, a strong negative correlation was found between marital disagreements and emotional intimacy, indicating that increased conflict frequency and intensity are associated with diminished emotional closeness between partners. Second, marital disagreements were negatively associated with perspective-taking, suggesting that as conflict escalates, individuals are less likely to engage in empathetic cognitive processes toward their spouses. Third, perspective-taking was found to be positively correlated with emotional intimacy, reinforcing the idea that the ability to mentally adopt a partner's viewpoint is essential for sustaining closeness and relational satisfaction. Most importantly, the structural equation modeling (SEM) results confirmed that perspective-taking significantly mediates the relationship between marital disagreements and emotional intimacy. This finding suggests that one reason why marital conflict impairs emotional intimacy is due to its erosion of the couple's capacity for mutual perspective-taking.

These findings are consistent with prior research that has established marital disagreements as a key predictor of relational dissatisfaction and emotional detachment. As couples encounter unresolved or poorly managed conflict, they often experience emotional withdrawal and defensiveness, which over time undermines relational safety and mutual responsiveness (Cheung & Lui, 2023; Lavner et al., 2016). Prior studies have confirmed that high levels of conflict correlate with negative emotional climates, where expressions of warmth, vulnerability, and connection diminish significantly (Lee, 2022; Sun et al., 2022). In

line with our findings, marital discord appears to trigger not only emotional distance but also cognitive rigidity, thereby reducing the likelihood that partners will seek to understand each other's emotional states.

The finding that marital disagreements are negatively related to perspective-taking also aligns with theoretical frameworks that emphasize conflict's disruptive effect on empathic engagement. When individuals are emotionally activated or feel threatened during conflict, they tend to shift into self-focused cognitive patterns that prioritize personal defense over understanding the other's perspective (Neff & Geers, 2013; Ohtaka & Karasawa, 2019). This phenomenon, known as empathic failure, has been widely observed in distressed couples and is often accompanied by blame, hostility, and communication breakdowns (Haselschwerdt et al., 2019; Kalus & Szymańska, 2019). Our findings support these observations by suggesting that ongoing marital disagreements compromise perspective-taking, thereby disrupting the dialogical space needed for intimacy to flourish.

The positive relationship between perspective-taking and emotional intimacy further reinforces the role of cognitive empathy as a critical relational skill. Prior research has shown that couples who exhibit high levels of dyadic perspective-taking are more likely to validate each other's experiences, respond supportively, and engage in collaborative problem-solving (Deschênes et al., 2022; Rigby & Cobb, 2022). These interpersonal behaviors contribute to the maintenance of emotional intimacy by preserving trust, openness, and emotional responsiveness. Our data offer empirical support to this theoretical proposition by highlighting how perspective-taking directly enhances emotional intimacy, particularly in the context of conflict-prone relationships.

Importantly, the mediation effect of perspective-taking in the relationship between marital disagreements and emotional intimacy provides novel insight into the mechanisms that buffer couples against the harmful effects of conflict. This finding supports systemic and family therapy models, which suggest that the process through which partners interpret each other's behaviors—especially during disagreements—is central to relational functioning (Bachem et al., 2017; Bukalski, 2021). When couples fail to take one another's perspectives, disagreements are likely to escalate, become personalized, and damage the emotional bond. Conversely, when couples maintain perspective-taking, even during tension, they may preserve the emotional safety necessary for sustaining intimacy.

Our findings also resonate with the literature on the socio-cognitive foundations of marital functioning. In a study by (Möhr et al., 2013), it was shown that perspective-taking is influenced by personal and interpersonal factors and that this skill plays a central role in conflict resolution and emotional regulation. In high-stress or emotionally reactive moments—such as marital disagreements—the ability to mentally simulate the partner's perspective serves as a de-escalation mechanism, reducing misunderstanding and promoting connection. This aligns with our data, which suggest that the capacity to engage in perspective-taking mitigates the damaging effects of conflict on emotional closeness.

Additionally, the context of this study—married individuals in Hungary—adds to the cross-cultural validation of perspective-taking as a mediator. Although previous work has often focused on Western or East Asian samples (Cho et al., 2014; Yasuike, 2011), our results suggest that the mechanisms linking disagreement and emotional intimacy via cognitive empathy may operate similarly across cultures. Hungarian marital norms, which balance traditional family roles with growing emphasis on emotional equality, provide a culturally nuanced lens through which these psychological dynamics unfold. This supports previous research emphasizing the universality of emotional intimacy processes, despite cultural variation in expression and role expectations (Bukhari et al., 2023; Liu & Cheung, 2014).

Moreover, the implications of our findings extend to relational interventions and psychoeducation. Cognitive-behavioral and emotionally focused therapy models have emphasized the importance of fostering perspective-taking to reduce conflict escalation and rebuild emotional trust (Hollon & Sexton, 2012; Neff & Geers, 2013). Programs designed to enhance relational

empathy and reflective functioning may serve as preventive or remedial strategies for couples at risk of intimacy decline due to frequent disagreements. For instance, teaching couples to ask open-ended questions, reflect before reacting, and verbalize understanding can strengthen the neural and emotional pathways that facilitate intimacy, even amid relational tension (Rigby & Cobb, 2022; Shareh & Sani, 2019).

In addition to its alignment with psychological theories and empirical findings, our study contributes methodologically by incorporating both correlational and structural equation modeling (SEM) approaches. This enabled a robust analysis of both direct and indirect effects, providing empirical support for the mediational role of perspective-taking. The significant fit indices obtained from the SEM model reinforce the theoretical validity of the proposed framework and highlight the structural pathways through which relational dynamics unfold in marital contexts.

Despite its contributions, the present study is not without limitations. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits causal inference. While SEM allows for the modeling of complex relational paths, it does not confirm the directionality of influence. It is possible, for example, that lower emotional intimacy may lead to increased conflict, or that individuals high in intimacy are more inclined to practice perspective-taking. Second, the use of self-report measures may introduce bias due to social desirability or recall inaccuracy, particularly in sensitive domains such as marital conflict and emotional closeness. Third, although the sample was sizable and drawn from diverse regions in Hungary, it may not be fully representative of other cultural or relational contexts, limiting the generalizability of findings. Lastly, potential confounding variables such as personality traits, attachment style, or mental health were not controlled for and may influence the observed relationships.

Future studies should consider using longitudinal designs to examine how changes in marital disagreements and perspective-taking evolve over time and how they influence emotional intimacy across different stages of marriage. Experimental or interventional research could also provide more direct evidence of causal pathways by manipulating perspective-taking skills and observing changes in relational outcomes. Moreover, incorporating dyadic data from both spouses would allow for more nuanced understanding of mutual influence processes, while also addressing potential gender differences in emotional processing and conflict behavior. Cross-cultural comparisons could further explore whether the mediational role of perspective-taking varies across collectivist and individualist societies, or among couples with different value orientations regarding emotional expression and relational harmony.

Practitioners working with couples should emphasize the development of perspective-taking skills as a central component of therapy or marital education programs. Techniques such as role-reversal exercises, reflective listening, and emotionally attuned dialogue can help partners better understand each other's inner experiences and reduce conflict escalation. Educators and counselors may also consider integrating perspective-taking training into premarital courses or workshops for parents, as early intervention can foster more resilient relational patterns. Moreover, public awareness campaigns that normalize emotional openness and empathy in marital relationships could serve as preventive strategies against emotional disconnection and divorce.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Transparency of Data

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

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