

# Examining the mediator roles of conflict resolution styles and the interpersonal cognitive distortions in the association between childhood trauma and romantic relationship satisfaction

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## Keywords

childhood traumas, cognitive distortions related to relationships, conflict resolution styles, romantic relationship satisfaction

## Anahtar kelimeler

çocukluk çağı travmaları, ilişkilerle ilgili bilişsel çarpıtmalar, çatışma çözme stilleri, romantik ilişki doyumu

## Abstract

Romantic relationships are at an important point in the lives and interpersonal relationships of individuals. The level of satisfaction they get from their romantic relationships also affects the course of their relationships. In the literature, different variables affecting romantic relationship satisfaction are mentioned. This study aims to examine the relationships and effects of childhood traumas and romantic relationship satisfaction, cognitive distortions related to relationships, and conflict resolution styles in women. The sample of the study consists of 490 women between the ages of 18-50, living in different cities in Türkiye. Demographic Information Form, Childhood Trauma Scale, Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions Scale, Conflict Resolution Styles in Romantic Relationships Scale, and Relationship Satisfaction sub-dimension of the Relationship Stability Scale were applied to the participants. The findings showed that there was a positive relationship between childhood traumas, negative and submissive conflict resolution style, and cognitive distortions related to relationships, and a negative relationship between these variables and relationship satisfaction. In addition, a positive relationship was found between relationship satisfaction and positive conflict resolution style. Multiple regression analysis showed the predictive effects of emotional neglect, positive and negative conflict resolution styles, and cognitive distortions related to relationships on romantic relationship satisfaction, which are sub-dimensions of childhood traumas. When mediation models were tested, it was found that cognitive distortions related to relationships and conflict resolution styles (negative, positive, and submission styles) played a mediating role in the relationship between childhood traumas and relationship satisfaction. The findings of the study were evaluated with the relevant literature, and some suggestions for future studies were presented.

## Öz

### Çocukluk çağı travmaları ve romantik ilişki doyumu arasındaki ilişkide çatışma çözme stillerinin ve ilişkilerle ilgili bilişsel çarpıtmaların aracı rolünün incelenmesi

Romantik ilişkiler bireylerin hayatlarında ve kişilerarası ilişkilerinde önemli bir noktadadır. Romantik ilişkilerinden aldıkları doyumun düzeyi de bireylerin ilişkilerinin gidişatını etkilemektedir. Alanyazında romantik ilişki doyumunu etkileyen farklı değişkenlerden bahsedilmektedir. Bu araştırma ise kadınlarda çocukluk çağı travmalarının, romantik ilişki doyumunun, ilişkilerle ilgili bilişsel çarpıtmaların ve çatışma çözme stillerinin birbirleriyle olan ilişkilerini ve birbirlerine olan etkilerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırmanın örneklemini 18-50 yaş arasında, Türkiye'nin farklı şehirlerinde yaşayan 490 kadın oluşturmaktadır. Katılımcılara Demografik Bilgi Formu, Çocukluk Çağı Travmaları Ölçeği, Romantik İlişkilerde Çatışma Çözme Stilleri Ölçeği, İlişkilerle İlgili Bilişsel Çarpıtmalar Ölçeği ve İlişki İstikrarı Ölçeğinin İlişki Doyumu alt boyutu uygulanmıştır. Çocukluk çağı travmaları, olumsuz ve boyun eğme çatışma çözme stilleri ve ilişkilerle ilgili bilişsel çarpıtmalar arasında pozitif ve bu değişkenlerle ilişki doyumu arasında negatif korelasyon olduğu bulgulanmıştır. Ayrıca, olumlu çatışma çözme stili ile ilişki doyumu arasında pozitif yönde bir korelasyon saptanmıştır. Çoklu regresyon analizi sonuçları, çocukluk çağı travmalarının alt boyutlarından duygusal ihmalin, ilişkilerle ilgili bilişsel çarpıtmaların ve olumlu ve olumsuz çatışma çözme stillerinin romantik ilişki doyumu üzerinde yordayıcı etkisi olduğunu göstermiştir. Aracılık modelleri sınıandığında, çocukluk çağı travmaları ve romantik ilişki doyumu arasındaki ilişkide çatışma çözme stillerinin (olumsuz, olumlu ve boyun eğici tarzların) tam aracı; ilişkilerle ilgili bilişsel çarpıtmaların ise kısmi aracı rolleri üstlendikleri bulgulanmıştır. Çalışmanın bulguları, ilgili alan yazını ile değerlendirilmiş ve gelecek çalışmalara yönelik birtakım öneriler sunulmuştur.

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Childhood history of abuse and neglect negatively affects the satisfaction that individuals receive from their relationships (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012; Keizer & Schenk, 2012). Childhood traumas negatively shape beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions and lead to the development of dysfunctional and irrational beliefs (Beck, 1995). At the same time, it is stated that individuals bring the conflict resolution styles they learned from childhood to adulthood (Godbout et al., 2009). Examining the factors affecting relationship satisfaction in the literature, it is seen that beliefs and cognitive distortions about relationships are an important factor (Çakır et al., 2014; Lumley & Harkness, 2007; Uebelacker & Whisman, 2005). It is a remarkable finding that relationship satisfaction is also associated with conflict resolution styles (Chapin et al., 2001; Gottman, 1994a, 1994b, 1998).

Child abuse and neglect represent all acts of physical, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse and neglect that may result in actual or improbable harm to a child's health, right to life, emotional, physical, and social development, or to a relationship based on trust (World Health Organization [WHO], 2006). Physical abuse is referred to as behaviors, consciously carried out, that are violent and limit the development and abilities of the child; behaviors such as sexual abuse, sexual intercourse with the child to satisfy the sexual needs of adults, and forcing the child to watch sexually explicit publications and the sexual activities of others; behaviors such as emotional abuse and neglect, deterioration of the child's capacity and abilities, deprivation of social relations and social supports, making requests that are not appropriate to child's age and abilities; also economic abuse, exploiting the rights of children in jobs where the child's power is insufficient and/or in jobs with low pay (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2010).

Child abuse and neglect can lead to many psychological problems such as depression, self-harm, aggression, anger, substance and alcohol abuse, ADHD, personality disorders, anxiety disorders and criminal behaviors, oppositional defiant disorder and behavior disorder, suicide attempts, obsessions, sleep disorders, sexual problems, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Moreover, experiences of abuse and neglect in childhood can cause different problems in relationships established in adulthood (Koçtürk & Bilge, 2017; Lahav et al., 2019). For example, individuals who have been subjected to abuse and neglect may have high expectations in their relationships, a controlling or avoidant style, and may perceive their partners more negatively in the relationships they establish (Aktepe, 2009). It can also lead to the development of insecure attachment styles and emotion regulation difficulties (Dixon et al., 2008; Finzi et al., 2001). According to similar research results, traumatic experiences in childhood may also reduce satisfaction with relationships in adulthood (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012; Keizer & Sch-

enk, 2012; Mason et al., 2005).

Romantic relationship satisfaction is the compatibility between the expectations of individuals from their relationship and partner and the behavior of their partner in the relationship (Feeney, 2002). In all interpersonal relationships, including romantic relationships, there may be some difficulties and problems, and all these may affect the satisfaction that individuals receive from their relationships (Çırakoğlu & Tezer, 2010). For this reason, it is important to investigate and determine the factors affecting romantic relationship satisfaction.

Examining the individual factors that affect relationship satisfaction, negative experiences during childhood are remarkable. Experiences of abuse and neglect negatively affect an individual's ability to establish and maintain healthy attachments (Colman & Widom, 2004; Muenzenmaier et al., 2015). It has been observed that children who have been exposed to abuse and neglect face more problems in their interpersonal and romantic relationships and experience the negative effects of trauma than those who have not been exposed to such traumas (Lahav et al., 2019; Peleikis et al., 2005). Individuals learn the sense of trust through their early lives; on the other hand, abuse and neglect harm the formation of this sense of trust and can cause the individual to develop different beliefs such as being unlovable and that people are bad (MacIntosh & Johnson, 2008; Wells, 2016). It is seen that these developed relationship beliefs also affect relationship satisfaction (Saraç, 2013; Uebelacker & Whisman, 2005). Beliefs about romantic relationships are the individual's thoughts, expectations, and perceptions of the relationship (Sullivan & Schwebel, 1995). Reviewing the field literature, it was found that romantic relationship beliefs and cognitive distortions about relationships negatively affected relationships (Addis & Bernard, 2002; Whisman & Uebelacker, 2013).

Cognitive distortions related to relationships are defined as exaggerated, rigid, rational, and dysfunctional thoughts of individuals toward their relations and partners (DiGuseppe & Zee, 1986). In this study, cognitive distortions related to relationships are discussed in three dimensions: interpersonal rejection, unrealistic relationship expectation, and interpersonal misperception. Interpersonal misperception is the belief that individuals should know what is mutually going through each other's minds in their interpersonal relationships; unrealistic relationship expectation is the belief that the demands from the partner that are suitable for the relationship or impossible to meet should be met; and interpersonal rejection is the belief that the closeness to be established with the other person will result in negative results and that the person should stay away from establishing closeness (Hamamci & Büyükoztürk, 2004).

It seems important to understand where cognitive distortions about relationships, which have an impact

on relationship satisfaction, occur and are triggered. Beliefs about oneself, one's partner, and one's relationship are influenced by early experiences. Studies conducted have achieved supportive results. For example, it has been observed that childhood sexual abuse is associated with cognitive distortions (Owens & Chard, 2001). This situation also reveals the relationship between negative experiences such as abuse and neglect experienced during childhood and individuals' beliefs about those around them and the world (Çakır et al., 2014; Lumley & Harkness, 2007). It is considered that traumatic experiences can lead individuals to develop negative, distorted, and dysfunctional beliefs about themselves, others, and the world, to make evaluations based on these beliefs, and to exhibit a more negative attitude in their relationships. In line with all this information, traumatic experiences in childhood are thought to play a role in the development of cognitive distortions related to relationships, and these distortions cause a decrease in relationship satisfaction.

While conflict resolution styles are generally categorized as positive and negative in the field literature, in this study, these styles were categorized into four dimensions: positive, negative, withdrawal, and submission. It was thought that it would be more appropriate to use a scale that was developed in Turkish and culturally relevant and was found to be valid and reliable. For this reason, sub-dimensions in this scale were used.

Negative conflict resolution style covers physically and verbally destructive behaviors; positive conflict resolution style covers behaviors in which partners develop valid and promising solutions to the needs of each partner; submission conflict resolution style covers behaviors such as trying to minimize the problem and focusing on the partner; and withdrawal conflict resolution style covers behaviors such as ignoring conflicts (Özen et al., 2016).

In romantic relationships, it is important how couples perceive the problems they face and how they resolve the conflict (Cann et al., 2008). If individuals handle conflict through positive conflict resolution behaviors, partners can understand each other's feelings and set common goals by taking into account each other's needs and wants. Using positive conflict resolution styles during conflict supports higher levels of relationship satisfaction, while using negative conflict resolution styles leads to a decrease in relationship satisfaction as partners activate power struggles and feelings of anger towards each other (Lawrence & Bradburg, 2007). In the field literature, it is observed that positive conflict resolution styles positively affect relationship satisfaction, while negative conflict resolution styles reduce relationship satisfaction regardless of the subject of the conflict (Akeri et al., 2012; Çakmak Tolan, 2015; Luo et al., 2010). Individuals who rate their partner as supportive and/or affirmative

during conflict report higher relationship satisfaction in their relationships. Conversely, individuals who rate their partners as more demanding and/or hostile report lower levels of relationship satisfaction (Burrus & Cobb, 2011; Busby & Holman, 2009). It is also thought that this may be due to the tendency of these people to evaluate their partners and relationships positively, independently of their partners' behaviors, and therefore they may evaluate the satisfaction they receive from the relationship more positively. In addition, the withdrawal style, which includes behaviors such as staying silent during conflict, refusing or postponing discussing, also negatively affects relationship satisfaction (Berg-Cross, 2001).

Early life is effective in the conflict resolution styles of individuals (Godbout et al., 2009). Conflict resolution styles learned in childhood persist into adulthood (Godbout et al., 2009). In this context, traumatic experiences of childhood may harm conflict resolution styles. Experiences of abuse and neglect can cause individuals to have difficulty expressing their emotions and to withdraw emotionally (Whisman, 2006). At the same time, these individuals may perceive those with whom they have a close relationship as unreliable and may show reactivity to protect themselves in their relationships (Wells, 2016). It has been reported that individuals who are exposed to emotional abuse in childhood experience emotional dependence, excessive obedience, or passivity in their interpersonal relationships (Jantz & McMurray, 2009). This can make it easier for them to use their style of submission and retreat during the conflict. From this perspective, traumatic experiences in childhood can cause individuals to close themselves down, withdraw, or show reactive behaviors during any conflict in adulthood.

The research model focused on the relationship between traumatic experiences in childhood with cognitive distortions and conflict resolution styles related to the relationships in which these experiences were effective, as well as their relationship with romantic relationship satisfaction. Since there are no studies in the literature in which all these variables are discussed. The hypotheses put forward in the study can be listed as follows: (1) There is a negative relationship between the level of childhood trauma and positive conflict resolution styles and relationship satisfaction. (2) There is a positive relationship between the level of childhood trauma and cognitive distortions and negative, withdrawal, and submission conflict resolution styles related to relationships. (3) There is a positive relationship between relationship satisfaction and positive conflict resolution styles. (4) There is a negative relationship between relationship satisfaction and negative, withdrawal, and submission conflict resolution styles and the level of cognitive distortions related to relationships. (5) There is a positive relationship between childhood traumas and relationship satisfaction.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants**

Variables	Women (n = 490)		
	N	Mean	%
Age	26.19	4.65	
<b>Educational Background</b>			
Secondary School Graduate		3	0.6
High School Graduate		11	2.2
Undergraduate Graduate/Student		269	54.9
Postgraduate Graduate/Student		207	42.2
<b>Socioeconomic Level</b>			
Low		77	15.7
Medium		379	77.3
High		34	6.9
<b>Marital Status</b>			
Married		184	37.6
Single		306	62.4
<b>Living Situation</b>			
Family		220	44.9
Wife/Husband		184	37.6
Romantic Partner		20	4.1
Alone		66	13.5
<b>Parental Status</b>			
Yes		54	11
No		436	89
<b>Psychological/Psychiatric Support History</b>			
Yes		193	39.4
No		297	60.6
<b>Support Type</b>			
Psychotherapy		76	15.5
Medicine		53	10.8
Medicine and Psychotherapy		56	11.4

Conflict resolution styles and cognitive distortions have a significant mediating effect on the relationship. It is thought that this research will contribute to literature.

## METHODS

### Participants

The study sample consisted of 490 female participants aged between 18-50 who had been in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months. Considering that women are more exposed to abuse and neglect than men in early childhood, it was decided to conduct this study with only female participants. In the WHO's Child Maltreatment Report (2010), it was stated that girls are more exposed to traumatic experiences compared to boys. The demographic information of the participants is shown in detail in Table 1.

### Measures

Research data was collected through the Informed Consent Form, Demographic Information Form, Childhood Traumas Scale, Conflict Resolution Styles in Romantic Relationships Scale, Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions Scale, and Relationship Satisfaction sub-dimension of the Relationship Stability Scale.

**Demographic Information Form** The form includes demographic information such as gender, age, education level, socioeconomic level, employment status, family members who live with the participant, psychiatric diagnosis status, duration of romantic relationship/marriage year, educational status of the partner, and medication and/or psychotherapy support history.

**Childhood Traumas Scale (CTS)** This scale was developed by Bernstein et al. (1994) and was prepared to measure childhood experiences of abuse and neglect, and the scale has five sub-dimensions: emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, emotional and physical neglect. Scale items are evaluated in the 5-item Likert-type scale, and the increase in the score obtained from the scale shows that the frequency of traumatic experiences also increases. As a result of the validity and reliability study of the original scale, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found between .79 and .94 and was evaluated as high. The studies on the adaptation of the scale to Turkish were carried out by Şar et al. (2020); as a result of the factor analysis, 6 sub-dimensions were determined, and these sub-dimensions were defined as emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, physical and emotional neglect, and excessive protection-control. The reliability coefficients of these dimensions were found to be between .77 and .90 and .87 for the total scale (Şar et al., 2020). Within the scope of this study, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency

coefficient of the total score of the scale was found as .92, the physical abuse sub-dimension as .86, the physical neglect sub-dimension as .77, the sexual abuse sub-dimension as .91, the emotional neglect sub-dimension as .88, the emotional abuse sub-dimension as .78, and finally the internal consistency coefficient of the overprotection and control sub-dimension as .84.

***Conflict Resolution Styles in Romantic Relationships Scale (CRRS)*** This scale, which was developed by Özen et al. (2016) to evaluate the responses to conflict resolution, consists of 4 sub-dimensions as negative, positive, submission and withdrawal conflict resolution style and has a total of 25 items. The scale is evaluated in the 6-item Likert type, and the high scores obtained from the sub-dimensions indicate the frequency of behaviors associated with the conflict resolution style of the sub-dimension. As a result of the validity and reliability study of this scale, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found to be .81 for the negative style, .77 for the positive style, .75 for the withdrawal style, and .80 for the submission style (Özen et al., 2016). In this study, the reliability values of the scale were found to be .80 in the negative style, .73 in the positive style, .78 in the withdrawal style, and .79 in the submission style.

***Relationship Satisfaction Sub-Dimension of the Relationship Stability Scale*** It was developed by Rusbult et al. (1998) to measure the level of commitment and dependency bases (satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size) in romantic relationships. There are 25 items on the scale. The scale has 4 sub-dimensions: relationship satisfaction, relationship investment, evaluation of the quality of options, and commitment. For this study, the Relationship Satisfaction subscale of the scale, which includes 6 questions, was used. The internal consistency of this dimension was found to be between .92 and .95 (Rusbult et al., 1998). The scale was adapted to Turkish by Büyükşahin et al. (2005) and the internal consistency value of the relationship satisfaction sub-dimension was calculated as .90. In this study, the reliability value of the scale was found to be .92.

***Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions Scale (ICDS)*** There are 19 question items in the scale prepared to measure cognitive distortions in relationships developed by Hamamci & Büyüköztürk (2004), and there are 3 sub-dimensions in the scale: interpersonal rejection, unrealistic relationship expectation, and interpersonal misperception (Hamamci & Büyüköztürk, 2004). The CDR is rated on a 5-item Likert-type scale, and high scores from the scale indicate that the level of cognitive distortions related to relationships increases. As a result of the reliability study of this scale, Cronbach's alpha coefficient of interpersonal rejection was found to be .73, unrealistic relationship expectati-

on was .66, and interpersonal misperception was .43. The total scale was calculated as .67, and the test-retest reliability was calculated as .74 (Hamamci & Büyüköztürk, 2004). In this study, the reliability values of the scale were found to be .85 for the whole scale, .84 for interpersonal rejection, .66 for interpersonal misperception, and .78 for unrealistic relationship expectation. Although the validity and reliability values of the scale are at the border, this scale was used in the study because there is no alternative scale in the literature, and this scale has been used in many articles and theses on this subject. In this study, the total score of the scale was used.

### ***Procedure***

In the first step for this study, approval number 8 of the meeting of Maltepe University Ethics Committee dated 9/17/2021 and numbered 2021/24 was obtained, and the measurement tools used in the study were delivered to the volunteer participants through online resources (Google survey, e-mail, social media groups, etc.). The purpose and scope of the study, confidentiality, and volunteering information were communicated to the participants through the Informed Consent Form before the application. It took about 20 minutes for the self-report scales to be filled out by participants.

### ***Statistical Analysis***

The measurement tools used in the study were filled in by a total of 490 participants, and the data was tested for compliance with the normal distribution before the analysis. The SPSS 22 package program was used to test the hypotheses established in the research. First, the demographic characteristic distribution of the participants, then the mean, standard deviation, lowest and highest values, and Cronbach's alpha values of the relevant scales and the sub-dimensions of the scales were obtained. Then, Pearson correlation analysis was performed to see the relationships among the variables in the research with each other. Hierarchical regression analysis and mediation analyses with the Hayes Process macro were applied to determine the predictors of the dependent variable. In this study, the indirect effects of mediator variables were interpreted over a sample of 5000 people, produced using the bootstrap technique. The absence of zero in the 95% confidence interval of the mediator variables indicates that the indirect effect is non-zero, i.e., significant (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

## **RESULTS**

### ***Descriptive Statistics on Research Variables and Correlations Between Variables***

The average scores obtained from the scales, the stan-

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency Coefficients for the Scales Used in the Research**

Scales	M	SD	Min.-Max.	Cronbach's alpha
CTS-Physical Abuse	6.27	3.25	5-25	.86
CTS- Physical Neglect	6.94	2.94	5-21	.77
CTS-Sexual Abuse	7.77	5.19	5-25	.91
CTS-Emotional Abuse	8.47	4.05	5-25	.78
CTS-Emotional Neglect	10.77	4.78	5-25	.88
CTS-Overprotection Control	11.02	4.94	5-25	.84
CTS-Total Score	51.25	17.68	30-126	.92
CRSS-Positive Style	27.36	5.20	9-36	.73
CRSS-Negative Style	16.91	6.67	7-42	.80
CRSS-Retreat Style	20.77	7.01	6-36	.78
CRSS-Submission Style	19.31	6.32	6-36	.79
ICDS-Interpersonal Rejection	19.16	6.54	8-40	.84
ICDS-Interpersonal Misperception	9.19	2.67	3-15	.66
ICDS-Unrealistic Relationship Expectation	20.47	6.16	8-39	.78
ICDS-Total Score	48.81	11.78	20-94	.85
Relationship Stability Scale-Relationship Satisfaction	38.40	7.23	13-45	.92

**Note.** CTS = Childhood Traumas Scale, CRSS = Conflict Resolution Styles Scale, ICDS = Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions Scale.

**Table 3. Pearson Correlation Coefficients Among Variables**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	1												
2	.28***	1											
3	.57***	.37***	1										
4	.44***	.53***	.64***	1									
5	.23***	.28***	.23***	.29***	1								
6	.29***	.36***	.57***	.59***	.19***	1							
7	.62***	.64***	.81***	.82***	.57***	.74***	1						
8	-.15***	-.10**	-.15**	-.11*	.01	-.11*	-.14**	1					
9	.13**	.23***	.12*	.26***	.06	.17***	.22***	-.22***	1				
10	.06	.12**	.09*	.09*	.11*	.16***	.16***	.02	.04	1			
11	.07	.10*	.05	.09	.08	.04	.10*	-.07	.05	.40***	1		
12	.20***	.25***	.24***	.30***	.19***	.30***	.35***	-.07	.50**	.36***	.10	1	
13	-.14**	-.01	-.20***	-.16***	.01	-.17***	-.16***	.28***	-.22***	-.09*	.00	-.19***	1

**Note.** \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; 1 = CTS- Physical Neglect, 2 = CTS-Physical Abuse, 3 = CTS-Emotional Neglect, 4 = CTS-Emotional Abuse, 5 = CTS-Sexual Abuse, 6 = CTS-Overprotection Control, 7 = CTS-Total Score, 8 = CRSS-Positive Style, 9 = CRSS-Negative Style, 10 = CRSS-Retreat Style, 11 = CRSS-Submission Style, 12 = ICDS-Total Score, 13 = Relationship Satisfaction.

dard deviation values, and the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient values of the scales are given in Table 2.

**Relationships Between Research Variables**

Pearson correlation analysis was applied for the relationships between childhood total trauma, positive, negative, submission, and withdrawal sub-dimensions of conflict resolution styles, the total score of the Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions Scale, and relationship satisfaction. The significance of the correlation coefficient is interpreted according to the p-value. As a result of the analysis, it was found that the total score of childhood was positively associated with positive style ( $r = .22, p < .001$ ), submission style ( $r = .16, p < .001$ ) and cognitive distortions related to relationship ( $r = .35, p < .001$ ), and negatively associated with

relationship satisfaction ( $r = -.16, p < .001$ ). It was concluded that positive conflict resolution style was positively associated with relationship satisfaction ( $r = .28, p < .001$ ), that negative conflict resolution style was positively associated with cognitive distortions related to relationships ( $r = .50, p < .001$ ) and negatively associated with relationship satisfaction ( $r = -.22, p < .001$ ). It was concluded that the submission style was positively associated with a total cognitive distortion related to relationships ( $r = .36, p < .001$ ). It was observed that the sum of the cognitive distortions related to relationships was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction ( $r = -.19, p < .001$ ). The sub-dimensions of cognitive distortions related to relationships were not used because they were not included in the research hypotheses, and the validity and reliability values of the total score of the scale were more appropriate. All correlation coefficients of the analysis are

**Table 4. Regression Analysis Findings on Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction**

Variables	R	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	t	p
<b>Model 1: Sociodemographic variables</b>	.159	.025			
Age			-.159	-3.55	.000**
<b>Model 2: Childhood Traumas</b>	.223	.050			
Childhood Traumas Total Score			-.158	-3.50	.000**
<b>Model 3: Conflict Resolution Styles and ICDS *</b>	.377	.142			
Positive Style			.232	5.27	.000**
Negative Style			-.104	-2.06	.040*
Retreat Style			.079	1.69	.125
Submission Style			-.077	-1.54	.091
<b>ICDS</b>			-.083	-1.50	.043*

*Note.* \*\* $p < .001$ , \* $p < .05$ ; ICDS: Cognitive Distortions Related to Relationship.

shown in Table 3.

### **Regression Analysis Findings on the Predictor of Relationship Satisfaction**

Hierarchical regression analysis was performed to examine the factors explaining relationship satisfaction. The independent variables were entered into the regression equation by using the stepwise method in 3 steps. Before performing the regression analysis, multicollinearity was first checked through correlation values, and no correlation value above .70 was found. This shows that there is no multicollinearity. The Durbin-Watson test was performed to determine whether there was autocorrelation, and it was found to be close to 2 with a value of 1.30. Tolerance values were found to be greater than 0.2, and VIF values were found to be less than 10. In the first step, age was taken into the regression equation from demographic variables to control for their possible effects. After controlling for the possible effects of demographic variables, the sub-dimensions of the Childhood Traumas Scale (total score) were included in the analysis in the second step. Finally, in the third step, the sub-dimensions of the Conflict Resolution Styles Scale (positive style, negative style, submission, and withdrawal) and the total score of the Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions Scale was included in the equation.

As a result of the analysis, firstly, age ( $\beta = -.16$ ,  $t = -3.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $pr = -.16$ ) was entered into the regression equation and explained only 2% of the total variance,  $F_{change}(1, 488) = 12.58$ ,  $p < .001$ . Following demographic variables, the childhood trauma total score was found to significantly predict the level of relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = -.16$ ,  $t = -3.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The second model increased the total variance described to 5%,  $F_{change}(2, 487) = 12.72$ ,  $p < .001$ . Then, of the conflict resolution styles, the positive style ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $t = 5.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and negative conflict resolution style also ( $\beta = -.10$ ,  $t = -2.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were found to significantly predict the level of relationship satisfaction. However, retreat style ( $\beta = .079$ ,  $t = 1.69$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and submission style ( $\beta = -.077$ ,  $t = -1.54$ ,  $p > .05$ ) did not predict relationship satisfaction. Also, it was seen that the level of distortions related to relationships ( $\beta = -$

.083,  $t = -1.50$ ,  $p < .05$ ) predicted relationship satisfaction. The third model increased the total variance described to 14%,  $F_{change}(5, 482) = 10.40$ ,  $p < .001$ .

According to these results, after controlling demographic variables, it was observed that the use of negative conflict styles, cognitive distortions related to the relationship, and the increase in experience of traumas in childhood significantly explained the decrease in relationship satisfaction. However, relationship satisfaction also increases significantly as the use of positive conflict resolution styles increases. The findings of the regression analysis are summarized in Table 4.

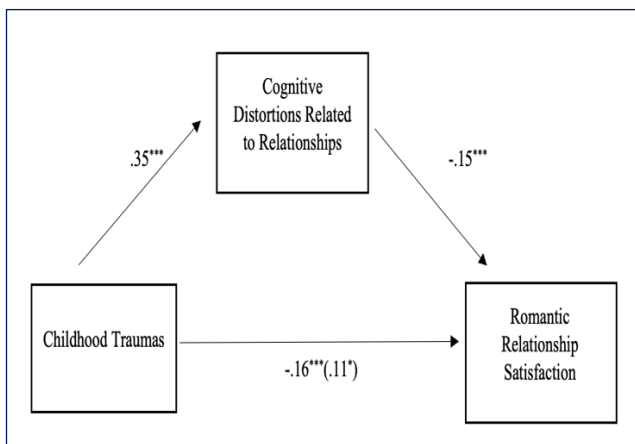
### **Findings for Examining the Mediating Roles of Cognitive Distortions and Conflict Resolution Styles Related to Relationships in the Relationship Between Childhood Traumas and Relationship Satisfaction**

Finally, in the research, the mediating role of cognitive distortions and conflict resolution styles related to relationships in the relationship between childhood traumatic experiences and relationship satisfaction was examined. An SPSS-compatible macro (PROCESS) developed by Hayes (2013) was used for mediation analysis, and 2 different regression analyses were performed. The predictor variable is childhood trauma experiences (CTS total score); the predictive variable is relationship satisfaction (RS); the mediator variables are the level of cognitive distortion related to relationships (the total score of the ICDS) and conflict resolution styles (positive, negative, submission, and withdrawal). In different studies in the literature, it is seen that the sub-dimensions of different childhood traumas have an impact on relationship satisfaction. In the correlation analysis conducted in the study, it was seen that four sub-dimensions (physical neglect, emotional neglect, emotional abuse, and protective control) and the total trauma score were significantly related to relationship satisfaction. For these reasons, the total score of childhood traumas was used in the mediation analysis.

In the analysis, 5000 bootstrap samples and a 95% Confidence Interval (CI) obtained from the original data set by the bootstrapping method were used, and the absence of "0" within the obtained confidence

interval shows that the mediator has a significant effect (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

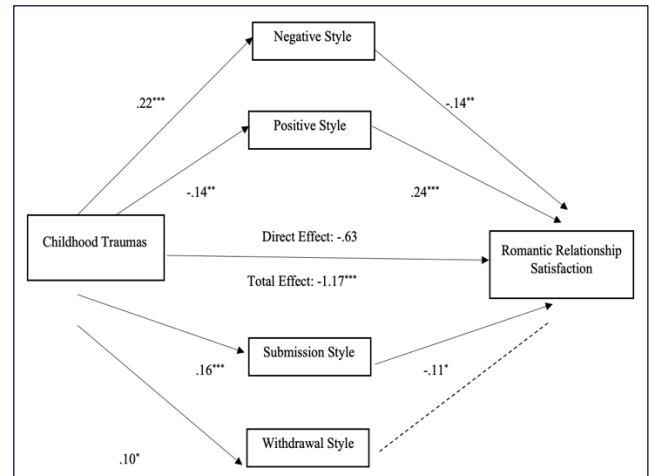
According to the findings obtained as a result of the regression analysis conducted to examine the mediating role of the level of cognitive distortions related to relationships between the level of childhood mental trauma and relationship satisfaction, it was observed that psychological traumas had a significant effect on the cognitive distortions related to relationships as mediator variables ( $\beta = .35, t = 8.30, SE = .04, p < .001$ ) and cognitive distortions on the relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = -.15, t = -3.22, SE = .05, p < .01$ ). In addition, psychological traumas have a significant direct effect on relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = -.11, t = -2.28, SE = .02, p < .05$ ). Finally, the indirect effect of cognitive distortions was also observed to be significant,  $\beta = -.05, SE = .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.09, -0.02]$ . These results show the partial-mediating effect of cognitive distortions related to relationships between psychological traumas and relationship satisfaction (Figure 1). This model explained 22% of the total variance,  $F(2, 487) = 11.82, p < .001$ .



**Figure 1. The Mediating Role of Cognitive Distortions Related to Relationships in the Relationship Between Childhood Traumas and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction. Note 1.** \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  The standardized beta coefficients were used in the figure. **Note 2.** Hayes Process Model 4 was used in mediation analysis.

Secondly, the mediating role of conflict resolution styles in the relationship between childhood traumas and relationship satisfaction was examined by parallel mediator variable analysis. According to the findings, the significant effect of mental traumas was observed on the negative style ( $\beta = .22, t = 5.01, SE = .04, p < .001$ ), positive style ( $\beta = -.14, t = -3.07, SE = .04, p < .01$ ), submission style ( $\beta = .16, t = 3.51, SE = .04, p < .001$ ), and withdrawal style ( $\beta = .10, t = 2.22, SE = .05, p < .05$ ). Also, significant effect of the negative style ( $\beta = -.14, t = -3.21, SE = .32, p < .01$ ), positive style ( $\beta = .24, t = 5.52, SE = .32, p < .001$ ), and submission style ( $\beta = -.11, t = -2.34, SE = .34, p < .05$ ) was found on the relationship satisfaction. According to these data, a significant mediating effect of negative style,  $\beta = -.03, SE = .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.05, -0.01]$ , positive style,

$\beta = -.03, SE = .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.06, -0.01]$ , and submission style,  $\beta = -.02, SE = .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.04, -0.01]$  were observed. There was no direct significant effect of childhood traumas on relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = -.08, t = -1.94, SE = .02, p > .05$ ). These results show the complete mediating effect of the interpersonal styles in question between psychological traumas and relationship satisfaction (Figure 2). This model explained 35% of the total variance,  $F(1, 488) = 13.02, p < .001$ .



**Figure 2. The Mediating Role of Conflict Resolution Styles in the Relationship Between Childhood Traumas and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction. Note 1.** \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  The standardized beta coefficients were used in the figure. Effects that were not statistically significant were indicated by a dashed line. **Note 2.** Hayes Process Model 4 was used in mediation analysis.

It was observed that as the number of variables in the model increased the explained variance also increased. In the first mediation analysis, the total score was used instead of the sub-dimensions of the Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions Scale, as stated in the hypotheses. Cronbach's alpha values of the scale were also taken into consideration when making this decision.

## DISCUSSION

This research has revealed findings to understand the relationship between childhood traumas, which are linked to many psychopathologies and problems in close relationships, and romantic relationship satisfaction, and showed that conflict resolution styles and cognitive distortions related to relationships have different effects on this relationship. Based on the knowledge that childhood traumas are positively related to positive conflict resolution styles and negative conflict resolution styles, and cognitive distortions related to relationships, it was aimed to examine the mechanisms of action of conflict resolution styles and cognitive distortions related to relationships in this relationship. From this point of view, intermediary models have been established.

According to the correlation analysis findings, childhood trauma experience was positively associated with negative and submissive use of conflict resolution style and cognitive distortions related to relationships. However, it was seen that childhood traumas were negatively related to romantic relationship satisfaction. In studies conducted in the field literature, it is seen that individuals who have experienced trauma also have early adjustment disruptive schemes (Gong & Chan, 2018; Roemmele & Messman-Moore, 2011). At the same time, how individuals react during conflict can be influenced by early disruptive schemes, which can shape coping styles for problems in romantic relationships. For example, the abandonment scheme may cause individuals to perceive and evaluate conflict as a situation in which they will be abandoned and left alone and may exhibit conflict-avoiding behaviors so that their partner does not leave (Rafaeli et al., 2013; Young et al., 2003; Young & Klosko, 2016). Another concept that has the potential to explain this relationship is attachment. Childhood traumatic experiences are very important because attachment occurs during childhood and occurs as a result of the relationship between the child and the child's primary caregiver (Fonagy et al., 2012; Oshri et al., 2015). Individuals with insecure and disorganized attachment styles have a higher history of negative family experiences and traumatic events than those with secure attachment styles (Baer & Martinez, 2006; Harder, 2014). Moreover, there is evidence that attachment styles are also associated with conflict resolution methods. Ricco and Sierra (2017) found a positive relationship between avoidant and anxious attachment styles and the use of avoidance, one of the conflict resolution strategies. On the other hand, it has been observed that individuals who are securely attached have more positive attitudes towards conflict and use reconciliation and integration strategies more often (Ben-Ari & Hirshberg, 2009).

In related studies, it has been observed that childhood traumas are positively related to cognitive distortions related to relationships (Katar, 2020), negative automatic thoughts, and cognitive distortions (Gündüz & Gündoğmuş, 2019), as well as irrational beliefs (Akbaba Türkoğlu, 2013). It is reported that irrational beliefs consist of dysfunctional, disruptive schemes that people acquire from family and close relationship experiences (Young et al., 2019). According to Beck (1976), these beliefs are formed by the development of dysfunctional schemes of oneself and one's environment as a result of early experiences. From this point of view, it is seen that irrational beliefs and incompatible schemes can be related to each other (Eken, 2017; Haratian et al., 2020; Kebritchi & Mohammadkhani, 2016; McDermott, 2008). Also, as mentioned above, neglect and abuse are known to have an impact on disruptive schemes. The fact that individuals have more negative experiences in childhood and the increase of

incompatible schemes can play a role in the increase of irrational relationship beliefs. Traumatic experiences during childhood can affect individuals' beliefs about their future romantic relationships and/or marriages. These developed beliefs can also have an impact on relationship and marital satisfaction (Colman & Widom, 2004). Experiences such as abuse and neglect also negatively affect individuals' self-perception and self-worth (Loos & Alexander, 1997). These negative evaluations are important for interpersonal relationships (Connolly & Konarski, 1994). The conclusion that negative experiences in childhood affect the satisfaction of relationships in adulthood is also supported by studies in the literature (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012; Kaler & Freeman, 1994; Mason et al., 2005; Tencer, 2002). The negative relationship between traumatic experiences and romantic relationship satisfaction can be explained by different factors. For example, in literature, it is seen that individuals who have been exposed to neglect and abuse early in their lives have poor cognitive flexibility and have difficulty regulating emotions (Harms et al., 2017; Hawk, 2022; Odacı et al., 2021; Shipman et al., 2007; Spann et al., 2012; Wolfe et al., 2001). Low levels of cognitive flexibility and difficulty in regulating emotions can lead to a decrease in satisfaction from relationships (Akdur & Aslan, 2017; Bloch et al., 2014; Toksöz & Kolburan, 2018).

While it was seen that positive conflict resolution style was positively related to relationship satisfaction, the negative style was found to have a negative relationship with relationship satisfaction. In addition, it was observed that negative and submission conflict resolution styles were positively related to the level of cognitive distortion related to relationships. There are studies in literature that support these results. They have shown that the approach that increases romantic relationship satisfaction the most is the confirmatory conflict resolution style, while the hostile approach plays an important role in decreased satisfaction (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019). Although studies on the relationship between negative styles and cognitive distortions related to relationships are quite limited, significant associations have been found between early disruptive schemes and emotional avoidance in conflicts, the use of manipulative and abusive styles, and avoidant problem-solving styles (Gallagher & Gardner, 2007; Janovsky et al., 2020; Khajouei Nia & Sovani, 2014; Nikmanesh et al., 2015; Sade & Zabihi, 2018; Thimm, 2013; Welander & Stedal, 2015; Zadahmad & Torkan, 2016). It has been observed that the presence of disruptive schemes and irrational relationship beliefs is positively related (Savaş, 2021). That is, as early disruptive schemes increase, so does the level of distortion of relationships. When evaluated in this context, it can be said that the presence of early disruptive schemas is related to both the use of negative conflict resolution styles and cognitive distortions

related to interpersonal relationships. Another explanatory context for this relationship is the attachment style. It has been stated that individuals with secure attachments are less likely to view conflicts as a threat and have more functional discussion skills in conflicts than those who are insecurely attached, while those who are insecurely attached avoid conflicts (Pistole & Arricale, 2003). Similarly, the relationship between insecure attachment styles and unrealistic beliefs and distortions about relationships has been revealed (Çelebi & Odacı, 2018; Stackert & Bursik, 2003).

Cognitive distortions related to relationships were observed to be negatively correlated with the level of relationship saturation. Studies evaluating relationship satisfaction support this result (Campbell et al., 2010; Knee et al., 2003; Sığircı, 2010). When beliefs about relationships are dysfunctional, they become more likely to have problems in relationships (Friedman & Whisman, 1998). It also leads to less constructive behavior in problem-solving, which reduces relationship satisfaction (Metts & Cupach, 1990). The unmet needs of individuals in romantic relationships in the early period, the incompatible schemes formed in the early period, and the coping styles towards these schemes affect the quality and satisfaction of the relationship (Rafaeli et al., 2013). When early discordant disruptive schemes increase, it is seen that couples' satisfaction with the relationship decreases (Dumitrescu & Rusu, 2012; McDermott, 2008).

Examining the results of regression analysis, it was found that age increase predicted a decrease in relationship satisfaction. When the relationship between age and relationship satisfaction is examined, some studies have found a positive relationship (Mavruk Özbiçer & Atıcı, 2018; Özaydın, 2016; Tezer, 1996); others have shown a negative relationship in the opposite way (Jose & Alfons, 2007; Taşköprü, 2013; Yıldız, 2018). There are also studies in which the relationship between age and relationship satisfaction, which is one of the demographic characteristics, is not significant (Ökten, 2016; Savaş, 2021; Ulutaş, 2018). Considering these different results, it can be said that individual and relational dynamics play more of a role in relationship satisfaction than demographic characteristics.

Examining the results of regression analysis, it was found that childhood traumas predicted a decrease in relationship satisfaction. This finding appears to be compatible with literature. It has been observed that children who have been exposed to abuse and neglect face more problems and negative effects in their interpersonal and romantic relationships than those who have not been exposed (Koçtürk and Bilge, 2017; Lahav et al., 2019; Peleikis et al., 2005). Those exposed to abuse experience intense feelings of anger towards themselves and other individuals and show an insecure attitude in their relationships (Peleikis et al., 2005). In their study, Colman and Widom (2004) stated that those who did not experience abuse experienced fewer

divorces and had higher positive perceptions of romantic relationships than those who did. According to similar research results, negative experiences in childhood can also affect the satisfaction received from future relationships (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012; Keizer and Schenk, 2012; Mason et al., 2005; Plant et al., 2007). Individuals learn the feeling of trust through early experiences, and abuse damages this sense of trust and may cause individuals to develop beliefs that they are unlovable (Colman & Widom, 2004; MacIntosh & Johnson, 2008; Paivio & Pascual Leone, 2010; Wells, 2016; Whisman, 2006).

Positive and negative conflict resolution styles seem to significantly explain relationship satisfaction. Related studies have also shown that particularly negative style (Cramer, 2002; González-Ortega et al., 2021) and withdrawal (Berg-Cross, 2001; Gottman, 1993) are observed to play a role in the decrease in relationship quality and satisfaction. However, positive and constructive styles increase satisfaction from marriage or romantic relationships (Sakmar, 2010; Wunderer & Schneewind, 2008).

Finally, the factor that explains relationship satisfaction is cognitive distortions about relationships. As the level of cognitive distortion increases, relationship satisfaction decreases. Unrealistic, distorted beliefs seem to cause high expectations while in a relationship, disappointment as a result of experiencing that these expectations are not met, and a decrease in relationship satisfaction (Van der Zee & Hembrecht, 2009). Metts and Cupach (2000) stated in their study that individuals who hold the belief that "conflict will be destructive" and that "spouses will not change" exhibit separation behavior. In the sample of Türkiye, a negative relationship was found between the beliefs that "men and women cannot understand each other", "sexual perfectionism", "disagreement is destructive" and "mind-reading" and relationship satisfaction (Beştaş, 2007). In this context, results consistent with studies in literature have been obtained.

In the mediation analysis results, positive, negative, and submission conflict resolution styles played a fully mediating role, while cognitive distortions related to relationships had a partial mediating role in the relationship between childhood traumas and romantic relationship satisfaction. Childhood traumas increase the level of cognitive distortion related to relationships, and increasing distortions cause decreased relationship satisfaction. Studies on the sustaining and explanatory effect of cognitive distortions about relationships are quite limited. Kütük Yılmaz (2021), similar to the study finding, stated that cognitive distortions play a mediating role in the relationship between childhood traumas and relationship satisfaction. Similarly, it has been observed that individuals exposed to abuse have more unrealistic relationship expectations, more cognitive distortions, and relationship beliefs (Aktepe, 2009; Briere & Runtz, 1987; Owens & Chard, 2001). According to these results, it is thought

that traumatic experiences of childhood can lead individuals to develop negative, distorted, irrational, and dysfunctional beliefs about themselves, others, and the world and to make evaluations based on these beliefs. It can be said that these beliefs may also play a role in the increase of relationship problems in the adult period by triggering negative reactions.

It has been observed that as traumatic experiences increase, negative and withdrawal style increase, while positive style decreases, and as a result, relationship satisfaction decreases. Studies on the sustained and explanatory effect of conflict resolution styles are quite limited. Missotten et al. (2016) found that positive experiences during childhood support the use of constructive conflict resolution styles in adult romantic relationships. It is noteworthy that individuals who have been exposed to negative experiences are prone to show violence and destructive behaviors in their romantic relationships (Nikulina et al., 2021). Another study concluded that negative experiences activate dysfunctional behaviors in conflicts (Meng et al., 2019). Negative conflict resolution styles also lead to lower relationship quality and satisfaction (Çakmak Tolan, 2015; Delatorre & Wagner, 2019; González-Ortega et al., 2021; Sakmar, 2010). According to related studies, decreased cognitive flexibility, which is also associated with abusive childhood experiences (Ar, 2021; Çelikkaleli, 2014), increased difficulty in emotion regulation (Lang et al., 1993; Oral, 2006), and intense feelings of anger (Pettrey, 2003; Üstün et al., 2005) also increase the use of negative conflict resolution styles. Accordingly, it can be said that these dynamics also play a sustaining role in the decrease in relationship satisfaction.

### *Conclusion and Suggestions*

In light of the findings obtained as a result of the research, it is seen that early traumatic experiences affect romantic relationship satisfaction by affecting cognitive distortions and conflict resolution styles related to relationships. It has been found that as exposure to traumatic experiences increases, cognitive distortions related to relationships and the use of negative conflict resolution styles increase, and the level of romantic relationship satisfaction decreases. It emphasizes the need to focus on the beliefs and conflict resolution styles of individuals in romantic relationships, both in their past lives and in the relationships they have in the present. Thus, it is possible to take precautions against the negative effects of past experiences on current relationship satisfaction and to offer suggestions for increasing relationship satisfaction. This research underlines the problems experienced in romantic relationships in adults, their investigation, treatment, prevention, early-stage experiences, and the cognitive distortions and conflict resolution styles shaped by these experiences. Considering the impor-

tance of romantic relationships for individuals' interpersonal relationships, it cannot be ignored that they get satisfaction from the relationship they are in. In romantic relationships or when working with individuals who state that they have difficulties in their close relationships, the client's work can begin with an assessment of whether there is a history of abuse. When addressing the impact of childhood abuse experiences on interpersonal relationships, it is essential for psychologists to be aware of their own early abuse histories and the long-term consequences of these experiences, as well as to be prepared to work with their effects. Considering the prevalence of early adverse experiences and their influence on an individual's life, various intervention methods and techniques are employed. Within this framework, the trauma-informed approach, which is grounded in trauma knowledge, holds a significant place. Adopting a trauma-informed perspective when working with clients contributes both to a more comprehensive understanding of psychological processes and to the implementation of more effective intervention strategies.

A way to reduce the effects of childhood maltreatment in adulthood is to develop prevention programs that address trauma-specific issues. It is thought that it is important to develop culture-specific prevention programs. According to research findings, individuals who experienced childhood abuse and neglect factors that lead to low relationship satisfaction are conflict resolution styles and cognitive distortions about relationships. Therefore, relationships in which the individual can get satisfaction priority in the therapeutic environment to support the establishment and recovery of it are one of the issues that need to be studied. It is thought that studying early maladaptive schemas and attachment styles may be useful. It is also thought that providing psychoeducation specific to conflict resolution styles and cognitive distortions may be beneficial.

The fact that the data of this study were obtained with self-report measurement tools, that only female individuals were formed, that some sociodemographic variables such as age, education level, relationship duration, and education status of the partner were not evenly distributed, low Cronbach's alpha values of the ICDS and finally the cross-sectional nature of the study are the limitations of the study. This study can be repeated in a way that the gender distribution will be balanced and/or with different age groups, and the results can be discussed. In addition, in the literature review, it is seen that relational factors (relationship duration, relationship status) are effective on relationship satisfaction as well as individual factors. By adding these factors, more thorough research can be done. This study focused on the total level of beliefs about relationships. Therefore, studies examining the sub-dimensions will also contribute to the literature. Since childhood trauma is a sensitive issue, it will be me-

asured using different measurement tools. With evaluations, answers can be diversified, and the consistency of the findings can be ensured. For example, a mixed method with the information obtained from interviews with participants research can be conducted.

## DECLARATIONS

**Ethics Committee Approval** The fact that this study conforms to ethical principles and rules was approved by Maltepe University Ethics Committee (Decision no: 8; Date: Sep 17, 2021/24).

**Conflict of Interest** All authors of this article declare that they have no conflict of interest regarding the article.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

**Project/Funding** No fund was obtained for this study.

**Data Sharing/Availability** Data is available upon reasonable request.

**Authors' Contributions** [MM]: Conceptualization and design of the study, gathered data and conducted data analysis, the writing of the manuscript.

**Use of Artificial Intelligence** Artificial intelligence was not used at any stage of this study.

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