

# Determining the Children's Behavioral Problems Model based on Object Relations: Mediation of Five Personality Factors

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## Abstract

**Background:** The important identity-preceding structure is the self, a personality structure formed out of interpersonal interactions. The self is formed in infancy and early childhood out of the internalized and 'metabolized' interactions between the child and significant others.

**Objectives:** The present study aimed to determine children's behavioral problems based on object relations with the mediating role of five personality factors.

**Methods:** The present study was conducted based on a structural equation correlation design. The statistical population included all children and their parents living in the 1st and 2nd districts of Tehran in 2020-2021, who were selected via convenience sampling method. Data collection tools were Bell Object Relations Inventory (BORI), The Child Behavior Checklist/4-18, and NEO Personality Inventory (Short Form). The data were analyzed in SPSS (version 27) and Smart PLS 3 software packages with the structural equation model method. A p-value of 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

**Results:** Based on the drawn model, the mediator variable in the model was significant, and the value of the path coefficient increased due to the mediator variable. Moreover, in the Sobel test, the mediating effect of a variable was significant at a 95% confidence level. The Z-value for fathers' personality traits was equal to 6.52.

**Conclusion:** As evidenced by the obtained results, it is recommended that more emphasis be placed on parenting in clinical practice and the development of parenting interventions for parents of children with emotional and behavioral problems based on object relations.

**Keywords:** Children's behavioral problems, Five personality factors, Object relations

## 1. Background

Children's behavioral problems are considered a danger to the family and society, threatening the community's health (1). Behavioral problems refer to situations where the child's emotional and behavioral responses differ from cultural, age, and ethnic norms. Therefore, there is a negative impact on academic performance, self-care, social relationships, behavior in the classroom, and adaptation to the environment (2). Although several factors are involved in the formation of these problems, the personality of the parents is crucial as one of the main factors in the early prevention of behavioral problems (3) since if problems persist, their psychological health is shadowed as a builder of their future and the society in which they live (4). Some researchers have divided behavioral problems into two major categories: internalizing behavioral problems and externalizing behavioral problems. Externalizing behavior problems are maladaptive behavior patterns that create problems for others (such as law-breaking and aggressive behavior). On the other hand, internalizing behavioral problems are inward, and their symptoms are related to over-controlled behaviors. They are manifested in the form of anxiety, depression, isolation, and physical complaints (5).

On the other hand, this period is critical due to the impressionability and vulnerability of the child and the transfer of the inner feelings experienced to adulthood.

The essential need of children is the need to establish sincere, constructive, and sufficient communication with both parents. If these needs do not receive an appropriate response from the parents, the child shows his/her protest in the form of behavioral problems (6). Consequently, the World Health Organization, according to its reports, puts an emphasis on the importance of supporting the parent-child relationship in the early years (7). In this regard, it seems that the way parents interact under the title of parenting style plays a fundamental role in the formation of behavior, psychological problems, and the level of children's adaptability in the future (8). It is the context of the family and the way of interactions where the child learns the norms of behavior, attitude, and style of interaction with others and becomes socialized (9). Inappropriate interaction is a reflection of the parent's psychological disturbances, being manifested in the form of behavioral problems (6,7).

From the point of view of object relations, personality is the result of the internalization of early relationships that a person experiences during growth and an individual's representations of him/herself and others and accompanying emotions, which determine a significant part of the quality of subsequent relationships. The kind of images that a person internalizes with his/her subject is considered to shape his/her capacity for human relationships, in the sense that how relationships with objects are formed in the first years of life is momentous (10). Object

relations explain the cause of this process in such a way that the primary interpersonal relationships between the child and the primary caregivers, as well as the image and type of caregivers internalized in the child, affect the interpersonal relationships in the family of origin, companion selection, reproductive family, and other subsequent relationships (11).

According to the object relations theory, people communicate with others based on expectations formed by early experiences in children. In addition, the theory of object relations is based on the Freudian theory and the later works of such theorists as Kohat, Mahler, Fairburn, and Winnicott. It formulates the difficulties of current relationships originating from the primary parent/child interactions (10). In fact, a representation in the form of an image is internalized from each relationship, and the person's relationships are then based on these representations. These representations are stable internal patterns that are activated in communication situations and determine how a person relates to others and even the quality of relationships through the construction of psychological capacity (12).

From another point of view, adverse childhood experiences prevent the integration of pleasant and unpleasant images taken from loved ones, and the result of this process is the formation of an insecure self that projects these images on all subsequent relationships (13). Finally, the result of experiences with objects, like a deposit in the layers of the

individual's personality, forms the basis of all subsequent relationships of the individual (14). For instance, if what is internalized in the interaction with objects is formed with the content of stability and security, the ground is provided for the formation of personality traits of trustworthiness, reassurance, and resilience in the face of threats in a person (15). Therefore, the quality of object relations, processing, psychological perception, and the content of values makes a person's self-esteem reservoir. In this regard, it is crucial to consider the father's role as an anchor in the child's socialization base, where the impact of interaction quality continues across generations, to prevent the occurrence of behaviors in children.

## 2. Objectives

Considering the stated contents and the lack of research performed in the form of a model, children's pathology from a psychodynamic point of view, and the role of father's object relations that have been formed in them since childhood and manifested in the form of personality traits, this research strived to demonstrate whether the model of children's behavioral problems based on object relations with the mediation of fathers' personality traits has a suitable fit. Current research introduces the following conceptual and theoretical framework ([Figure 1](#)).

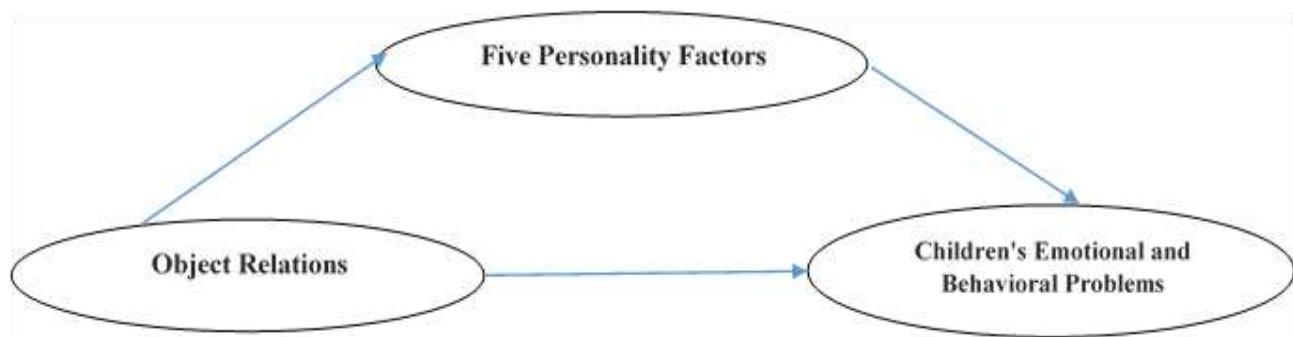


Figure 1. Theoretical model of research

## 3. Methods

The present study was conducted based on a structural equation correlation design. The statistical population included all children and their parents living in Tehran in 2020-2021, who were selected via convenience sampling method according to the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the G\* power software, the minimum sample size required for this research was estimated at 119 respondents to achieve a power of 0.95 and an average effect of 0.15 (16). According to the Alabama questionnaire, the age of the sample group of children was considered to be between 8 and 15

years old, and finally, the 2nd to 6th-grade elementary school children were selected depending on the convenience sample. The inclusion criteria entailed having the motivation to participate in the research, parents with children between 8 and 15 years of age, the minimum education of high school, not undergoing psychological and psychiatric treatment, and both parents living together. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria were participation in psychological treatments, divorce of parents, and incomplete questionnaires.

The survey was made online and shared with schools and psychologists after getting approval from the university. The author first got the permission of

school boards and administrators and then collected the data. In this research, parents were asked to answer Bell Object Relations Inventory (BORI), The Child Behavior Checklist/4-18, and NEO Personality Inventory. After the collection of information, the data were quantitatively defined and analyzed. To this end, using descriptive statistics indicators, descriptive information of variables, such as mean, standard deviation, as well as minimum and maximum scores, were determined using the SPSS software (version 23). Following that, the structural equation model method was used in Amos software to check the research hypotheses. It is worth noting that the assumptions of univariate normality (by checking the skewness and kurtosis), multivariate normality (Mahalanobis test), linearity (by drawing the scatter diagram matrices), multicollinearity (by checking the variance inflation factor and tolerance coefficient), and the fit of the model were examined.

#### *Bell Object Relations Inventory (BORI)*

Bell object relations inventory is part of the 90-item Bell object relations and reality testing inventory (BORRTI), a self-reporting tool to assess object relations aspects (17). Bell object relations inventory includes 45 items that are answered as true or false and presents an accurate and credible assessment of object relations through four subscales, including alienation (ALN), insecure attachment (IA), egocentricity (EGC), and social incompetence (SI). Based on the questionnaire answer key, the true option receives a score of one; for others, the wrong option gets a score of one. The sum of scores related to each subscale question determines the rejection score in each one of them. Regarding the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, Bell et al. (17) reported that the tool is able to differentiate clinical populations and has high discriminant validity. The internal consistency estimates through the alpha coefficient and Spearman-Brown split-half coefficient for four object relations subscales ranged from 0.78-0.90 (18). Cronbach Alpha and split-half coefficients were 0.66-0.77 and 0.60-0.77, respectively. Accordingly, the reliability and construct validity of the Persian version of BORI was confirmed. Therefore, BORI for psychological research among Iranian samples is suitable (19). In the present research, Cronbach's alpha for the test was reported as 0.75.

#### *The Child Behavior Checklist/4-18*

This is a 113-item questionnaire completed by parents about their children (Parent Rating Form). The primary difference between the CBCL/4-18 (older version) and the CBCL/6-18 (20) is updated normative data and a change in the lower limit of the age range. Only six new items were added. The authors noted that: "most children's scores would rank at nearly the same level on the new and 1991

versions;" and "if a child's functioning did not change much between assessments on the 1991 and new versions of a form, the child's syndrome scores should be equivalent to about the same percentiles and T scores on each version" (20). Therefore, patterns on the CBCL found in the current study would be expected to be nearly identical to those used in the current version of the CBCL. This study focused on the syndrome scale scores, and t-scores were used in analyses. When standardizing this list in the Iranian population, the retest validity and internal consistency ratio using Cronbach's alpha calculation were given for behavior problems, resulting in 0.58 for internalizing problems, and three values (0.48, 0.86, and 0.69) are mentioned for just externalizing problems (21). The research Cronbach's alpha for the test was calculated at 0.73.

#### *NEO Personality Inventory (Short Form)*

This 60-item questionnaire evaluates the five personality factors: neurosis, agreeableness, extroversion, openness, and conscientiousness. Each factor covers 12 questions, and a score between 0 and 48 is assigned to each factor (each question: a 0-4 score). The long-form questionnaire, which consists of 240 items, is developed by McCrae and Costa for the normal population. The reported alpha coefficients were 0.74 to 0.89, with an average of 0.81. By the same token, a recent study on personality and eating disorders has reported an internal consistency of 0.69-0.90 for the scales of the test (22). In a similar vein, Haghshenas has confirmed the reliability of this test in Iran through the implementation of the test on a sample of 502 people in Shiraz, using both test-retest and Cronbach's alpha (23). Cronbach's alpha for the test was obtained at 0.78.

## 4. Result

The mean age scores of fathers and children taking part in the research were reported as  $43.48 \pm 4.74$  and  $10.47 \pm 1.25$  years, respectively. Regarding education level, 36 (13.5%), 49 (18.4%), 22 (8.1%), 96 (36%), and 64 (24%) cases had high school, diploma, post-graduate degree, bachelor's degree, and master's degree or higher, respectively. Among the families taking part in the research, 115 (43.1%), 98 (36.7%), 48 (18%), and 6 (2.2%) families had one, two, three, and over three children, respectively. In terms of gender, 145 (54.3%) and 122 (45.7%) children taking part in the research were female and male, respectively. Moreover, 23 (8.6%), 38 (14.2%), 65 (24.3%), 72 people (27%), and 69 (25%) children taking part in the research were in the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, respectively.

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**Table 1. Correlation matrix of research variables among fathers**

Research variables	Mean $\pm$ SD	Cronbach's alpha	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Extroversion of fathers	3.82 $\pm$ 1.78	0.63	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Openness of fathers	5.31 $\pm$ 2.88	0.72	.255	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Agreeableness of fathers	2.79 $\pm$ 5.65	0.79	.131	.060	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Duties of fathers	73.7 $\pm$ 3.41	0.74	.156	.060	.112	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
The suffering of fathers	80 $\pm$ 6.28	0.65	.182	.046	.279	.359	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Incompetence	19.27 $\pm$ 6.67	0.78	.108	.055	.179	.277	.176	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Self-centeredness	06/24 $\pm$ 5.65	0.61	.074	.005	.090	.326	.177	.604	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Insecure attachment	31 $\pm$ 6.19	0.68	.133	.028	.169	.323	.225	.750	.661	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Alienation	92.31 $\pm$ 8.77	0.77	.121	.064	.096	.449	.221	.658	.618	.594	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Behavioral problems - anxiety/depression	3.28 $\pm$ 1.85	0.76	.076	.094	.091	.591	.236	.144	.269	.240	.269	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Behavioral problems - withdrawal/depression	3.84 $\pm$ 2.37	0.82	.092	.017	.051	.596	.331	.112	.216	.254	.289	.679	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-
Behavioral problems - physical complaints	51.1 $\pm$ 1.16	0.71	.021	.071	.015	.400	.212	.008	.067	.079	.125	.478	.612	1.000	-	-	-	-	-
Behavioral problems - social problems	3.58 $\pm$ 2.18	0.83	.132	.088	.016	.351	.188	.167	.231	.196	.252	.524	.411	.320	1.000	-	-	-	-
Behavioral problems - thinking problems	2.27 $\pm$ 1.56	0.66	.111	.105	.054	.500	.232	.192	.278	.252	.292	.770	.668	.517	.661	1.000	-	-	-
Behavioral problems - attention problems	2.47 $\pm$ 3.08	0.74	.072	.134	.016	.445	.309	.066	.206	.190	.206	.611	.589	.514	.554	.662	1.000	-	-
Behavioral problems - law-breaking behavior	3.79 $\pm$ 2.25	0.79	.096	.114	.006	.445	.315	.131	.263	.200	.220	.690	.557	.494	.544	.747	.654	1.000	-
Behavioral problems - aggressive behavior	3.53 $\pm$ 2.07	0.83	.013	.094	.019	.460	.326	.076	.154	.110	.176	.561	.536	.391	.315	.542	.465	.602	1.000

As illustrated in Table 2, the regression coefficients of the path between the variables of object relations

and fathers' personality traits and between the variables of fathers' personality traits and children's

behavioral disorders were significant. In a similar vein, based on the obtained T value, since these values are higher than 1.96 among the mentioned variables, it can be concluded that the research model is 95% significant. The coefficient of the path of fathers' personality traits from the object relations variable as a mediating variable is equal to 0.420, and from the fathers' personality traits variable to children's

behavioral disorders is equal to 0.574. It can be recognized that this value has increased. Moreover, based on Figure 4, it can be determined that the R<sup>2</sup> level obtained for the dependent variable of the research is equal to 0.355. If we express this as a percentage, 35.5% of the variable variance of children's emotional and behavioral problems is explained by the research variables.

Table 2. Standard research coefficients, in general

Relationship of variables	Path coefficient	P-value	T-value	Result
Object Relations -> Children's Emotional and Behavioral Problems	0.048	p = 0.388	0.863	rejection
Object Relations -> Personality traits of fathers	-0.420	p < .001	7.931	confirmation
Personality traits of fathers-> Children's Emotional and Behavioral Problems	-0.574	p < .001	13.594	confirmation

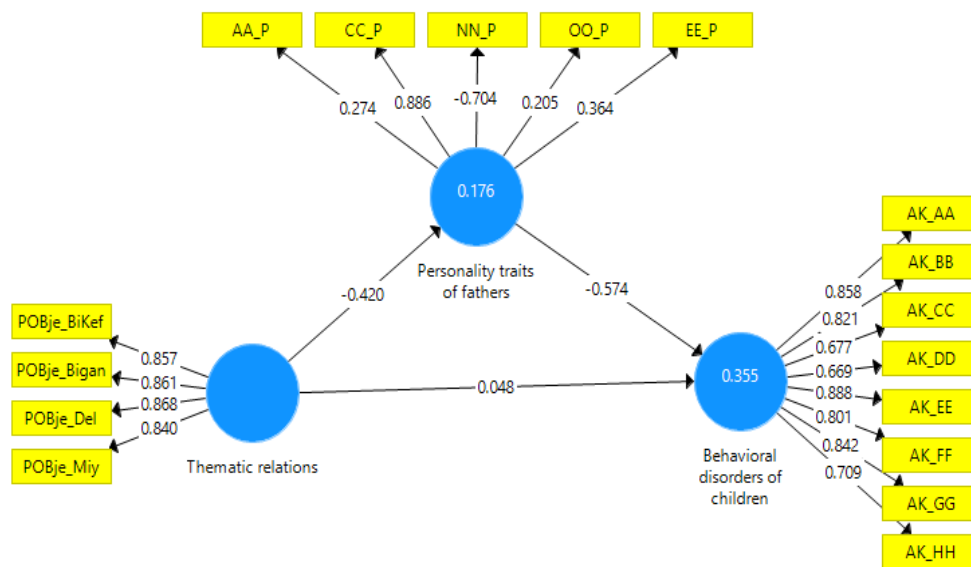


Figure 4. Amount of R<sup>2</sup> variables

It should be mentioned that based on the drawn model, the mediator variable in the model is significant, and the value of the path coefficient has increased due to the mediator variable. Nonetheless, the relationship between the object relations variable and children's emotional and behavioral problems was not significant, and it is meaningful only through the mediation of fathers' personality traits. In the same way, the researcher used the Sobel test to check the significance of the mediating variable of the research. This test was calculated based on the following formula. In the Sobel test, if the Z value exceeds 1.96, it can be confirmed that the mediating effect of a variable is significant at the 95% confidence level. The Z-value for the personality traits of fathers' variable was equal to 6.52.

$$Z - value = \frac{a * b}{\sqrt{(b^2 * s_a^2) + (a^2 * s_b^2) + (s_a^2 * s_b^2)}}$$

As displayed in Table 3, the reliability and validity of

the model have been confirmed. Cronbach's alpha reliability of children's emotional and behavioral problems children and object relations variables is higher than 0.7. On the other hand, the reliability value of fathers' personality traits is not confirmed, and the CR reliability of this variable is lower than 0.7. In a similar vein, convergent validity was also checked using the Ave index. Its minimum value should be 0.5; therefore, the desired latent variable explains at least 50% of the variance of its observables. Since its value is higher than 0.5 for children's emotional and behavioral problems and object relations variables, it can be concluded that the validity of the model is confirmed. Nonetheless, the validity of fathers' personality traits is not confirmed due to the existence of variables with a factor load value lower than 0.4 on this variable. To improve the reliability and validity of the model, the researcher removed these variables and

improved the model. After removing it in the same way, the researcher examined the fit of the model based on Table 3. As it is known, all the fit indices confirm the fit of the model. The SRMR or standardized root mean square residual index is the

difference between the observed correlation and the correlation matrix of the structural model. If the value of this index is less than 0.8, it indicates a good fit for the model.

**Table 3. Reliability and validity of the model**

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Children's Emotional and Behavioral Problems	0.910	0.928	0.620
Personality traits of fathers	- 0.115	0.232	0.306
Object Relations	0.880	0.917	0.733

According to Table 4, the researcher used blindfolding to check the model's ability to predict the research variable. Q2 or Goodness of Fit values above

zero indicate that the observed values are well reconstructed and the model has predictive ability.

**Table4. Model index of fit**

Fit Indices	SRMR	NFI	Chi-squared
Research model	0.074	0.835	369.361

As displayed in Table 5, the researcher investigated the goodness of fit of the model using an index called GOF goodness of fit based on the following formula. The obtained value was equal to 1.284, and since this value is higher than 0.36, it can

be concluded that the model has the necessary fit.

$$GOF = \sqrt{\text{average (AVE)} \times \text{average (R}^2\text{)}}$$

**Table 5. Predictive communication Q<sup>2</sup>**

Variable	SSO	SSE	Q <sup>2</sup> (=1-SSE/SSO)
Children's Emotional and Behavioral Problems	2136.000	1654.979	0.225
Personality traits of fathers	534.000	476.663	0.107
Object Relations	1068.000	1068.000	

## 5. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the effect of object relations on children's emotions and behavior, as well as the role of five personality factors as a mediator. The findings of this study did not support the effect of object relations on children's emotions and behavior and the role of five personality factors having a significant positive relation. Based on the results, object relations showed no significant correlation with children's emotional and behavioral problems; moreover, it was meaningful only through the mediation of fathers' personality traits. In addition, the mediating effect of fathers' personality traits was significant. Contrary to the findings of the present study, previous research has shown that failure to achieve integrated object relations predicts poor social and emotional outcomes in adults, including personality disorders. Cognitive, cellular, and systemic neuroscience of episodic memory seems to support the key hypotheses of object relations theory and helps to clarify the neural mechanisms of psychodynamic psychotherapy (10). In explaining the organization of personality in object relations, Kerenberg emphasized childhood experiences and their effects on a person's perception of him/herself and his/her relationships with others. It also

regards personality as the result of the internalization of primary relationships that shape the capacity of the ego and starts defense mechanisms (24).

Therefore, according to the perspective of subject relationships, the way people are placed in relationships is affected by their experiences and the type of interaction during their childhood, which is the objective manifestation of these categories as personality traits. They often internalize categories about intimacy, inhibition or self-control, how to experience emotions, how to resolve conflict, and clear rules about how communication should be in their experience with their parents (25). Moreover, in future relationships, according to a representation of these internals, they communicate with others with reassurance, openness, and stability (26). The results of the study by Salamat et al. pinpointed that the variable of child adjustment in relation to maternal parenting styles with behavioral problems in preschool children plays an undeniable role (27).

Parental object relationships are the basis for the appearance of personality traits, and usually, these traits appear when a person interacts with another (his own child) according to these traits, which are the internalized results of relationships (19). In addition, Abasi-Rad et al. estimated the structural

model in which a children's attitudes toward their fathers as an in-dependent variable and object relations were introduced into the mediator, demonstrating that this model explains 22% of borderline personality organization. Therefore, the negative function of the father as a reference to power in the triple relations of mother-child - father during the pre-Oedipus period can form the borderline personality organization in adulthood. The borderline personality organization indirectly could be interpreted by the child's attitude toward his/her father via primary object relations and personality organization (28).

According to the aforementioned findings, the authors' explanation can be stated as father's object relations can provide the basis for the child's behavioral problems. In fact, the father, as the second other, is the first subject that enters the child's inner world from the outside world. As a result, he can facilitate the separation of the child from the mother by creating a secure relationship and helping him/her regulate and manage the emotions necessary for social interactions (28,29). As someone who has socialized with his/her child, according to the theory of subject relations, he enters the field of relationship with his/her child based on what he has stored in his/her personality structures from the interactions with his/her parents. In fact, the subject relationships of fathers in the first years of life are the basis of establishing his subsequent relationships, so that the content of his early interactions with the main caregivers manifests itself as a legacy in the form of personality traits in all his relationships today. If this content includes insecurity and failure to satisfy the appropriate needs of childhood, it will be brought to the parent's relationship with the child today under the heading of personality traits. In fact, the insecurity and failure experienced in the early years of a father's childhood can turn him into a father with such personality traits as instability, inflexibility, and impulsiveness. Accordingly, he does not have the capacity to create a platform for the expression of the child's needs and feelings and is oblivious to the psychological world and the necessity of accompanying him/her in vital experiences (29).

Considering the facilities and the situation in which the research was carried out, it has limitations that make its generalization to society difficult. Among the notable limitations of the research, we can refer to the available sampling method and low sample size. Fathers encountered many obstacles when participating in the study, which required the researcher to conduct a 15-minute information session, which ultimately satisfied them. The Bell Questionnaire has been used to measure relationships between subjects, and although this test has become flexible and

normative in Iran, the ambiguity and questions of parents draw attention to the fact that cultural factors influence how people react. It is suggested that random sampling and high-volume sampling be used in future studies. The present study pointed out that children's behavioral problems are predicted based on the thematic relationships of fathers with the mediation of personality traits. Therefore, it is suggested to pay more attention to the father's role in future research and in interventions to prevent or treat children's behavioral problems. The father's personality pathology and not just educational measures should be given importance since unresolved childhood needs are repeated generationally.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings of the present study revealed that five personality factors of fathers are positively associated with object relations. It is worth noting that based on the drawn model, the mediator variable in the model was significant, and the value of the path coefficient also increased according to the mediator variable. Nonetheless, object relations showed no significant relationship with children's emotional and behavioral problems and were significant only through the mediation of fathers' personality traits.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships.

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