

Explaining the Causal Relationship Between Self-Differentiation and Marital Burnout in Women Who Have Experienced Marital Infidelity: The Mediating Role of Psychological Distress

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ABSTRACT

Exposure to marital betrayal and infidelity constitutes a traumatic crisis that can erode psychological functioning and disrupt the emotional bond between spouses. The present study aimed to explain the causal relationship between self-differentiation and marital burnout through the mediating role of psychological distress among women who had experienced marital infidelity by their spouses. This study employed a descriptive-correlational design based on structural equation modeling. The statistical population consisted of all married women who had experienced marital infidelity and attended counseling centers and psychological service clinics in Tehran during the 2025–2026 academic year. From this population, a sample of 252 participants was selected using convenience sampling. The research instruments included the Differentiation of Self Inventory (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), and the Couple Burnout Measure (Pines, 1996). The data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The results of structural equation modeling indicated that the hypothesized model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the empirical data and that the variables included in the model significantly accounted for variations in marital burnout and psychological distress. Self-differentiation had a significant negative effect on both marital burnout and psychological distress. Furthermore, psychological distress had a significant positive effect on marital burnout. The mediation analysis also confirmed that psychological distress played a significant mediating role in the relationship between self-differentiation and marital burnout. Based on the findings, lower levels of self-differentiation may intensify psychological distress and thereby contribute to increasing exhaustion and burnout in the marital relationships of women affected by infidelity. Therefore, strengthening the components of self-differentiation and reducing symptoms of psychological distress may constitute effective strategies in clinical interventions and couple therapy aimed at reducing marital burnout among victims of marital infidelity.

Keywords: self-differentiation, psychological distress, marital burnout, marital infidelity

1. Introduction

Marital relationships are among the most influential interpersonal contexts shaping adults' psychological well-being, emotional security, and overall quality of life. Although marriage can provide intimacy, companionship, mutual support, and a stable relational framework, it can also become a source of profound psychological strain when trust and commitment are disrupted. Among the most destabilizing events within marriage is infidelity, because it simultaneously challenges emotional exclusivity, interpersonal trust, assumptions about the partner's reliability, and expectations regarding the continuity of the relationship. Infidelity may therefore be experienced not merely as a relational disagreement but as a major attachment-related and psychological crisis that reorganizes the injured partner's perceptions of the self, spouse, and marital bond. Reviews of the causes and consequences of infidelity suggest that its impact extends beyond immediate emotional reactions and may involve persistent distress, anger, grief, intrusive thoughts, loss of trust, relational insecurity, and deterioration in marital functioning (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Longitudinal evidence further suggests that exposure to spousal infidelity can have consequences that extend beyond the relationship itself, potentially affecting chronic health and long-term well-being (Hoy & Oh, 2024). Accordingly, identifying the psychological processes that explain why some women who experience marital infidelity develop severe marital burnout whereas others demonstrate comparatively greater relational resilience is an important objective for both psychological research and clinical intervention.

The psychological consequences of infidelity may be especially intense because betrayal violates expectations of loyalty and challenges the injured spouse's interpretation of the history and meaning of the relationship. Following discovery of infidelity, the betrayed partner may repeatedly reconsider previous interactions, question the authenticity of earlier expressions of affection, and experience uncertainty regarding future commitment. Such cognitive and emotional disruption can amplify negative affect and weaken the capacity to maintain a coherent and stable position within the relationship. Infidelity may also be interpreted through attributions concerning blame, responsibility, intentionality, and relational worth, all of which influence emotional responses and subsequent willingness to forgive or maintain the relationship. Research on responses to parental infidelity, for example, has shown that responsibility attributions and

the interpersonal framing of betrayal can affect forgiveness-related responses, illustrating how interpretations of infidelity shape subsequent relational processes (April & Schrodt, 2019). In intimate partnerships, these appraisal processes may be even more personally threatening because the betrayed spouse is directly involved in the attachment bond and may experience the infidelity as evidence of rejection, inadequacy, or relational instability. Consequently, post-infidelity adjustment cannot be understood solely in terms of the occurrence of betrayal; it is also necessary to examine the intrapersonal capacities that influence emotional regulation and relational functioning after such an event.

One psychological construct that may be particularly important in this context is differentiation of self. Bowen's family systems theory conceptualizes differentiation of self as the capacity to maintain a clearly defined sense of self while remaining emotionally connected to significant others (Bowen, 1978). A differentiated individual is able to balance emotional and intellectual functioning, preserve personal convictions under interpersonal pressure, and sustain closeness without becoming overwhelmed by emotional fusion or relying excessively on emotional withdrawal. In contrast, lower differentiation is associated with heightened emotional reactivity, difficulty maintaining an autonomous position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. These tendencies become especially relevant under conditions of relational stress because intense anxiety within the family system can activate maladaptive emotional patterns. From a Bowenian perspective, therefore, the discovery of marital infidelity may constitute precisely the kind of relational crisis in which differences in self-differentiation become particularly consequential. A woman with greater differentiation may be better able to acknowledge intense emotional pain while preserving reflective functioning, whereas a woman with lower differentiation may be more vulnerable to emotional flooding, reactive decision-making, self-other fusion, or defensive distancing.

Empirical research has increasingly supported the relevance of differentiation of self to relationship quality and psychological adjustment. Longitudinal and dyadic evidence indicates that differentiation of self is associated with relationship attachment, quality, and stability, suggesting that the ability to maintain emotional connectedness without losing personal autonomy contributes meaningfully to relational functioning (Rodríguez-González et al., 2023). In a comparative study of couples seeking divorce and ordinary couples, differentiation of self was also found to differ

alongside couple burnout and emotional intimacy, further emphasizing its relevance to marital adaptation (Pouragha & Sotoudeh Nouroudi, 2023). Research conducted with maladjusted couples has likewise supported the clinical importance of differentiation, indicating that it can be a meaningful target within interventions designed to improve couple functioning (Khatibi, 2015). These findings are theoretically consistent with the proposition that lower differentiation may leave individuals more susceptible to the emotional instability created by betrayal, while higher differentiation may provide a psychological resource that protects against escalating distress and deterioration in the marital bond.

The relationship between differentiation and well-being appears to extend beyond marital satisfaction alone. Recent evidence suggests that couple differentiation is associated with health-related quality of life, underscoring the broader implications of maintaining adaptive emotional boundaries and a stable sense of self in intimate relationships (Worch & Bartle-Haring, 2024). Similarly, tests of Bowen theory have demonstrated meaningful relationships among differentiation of self, anxiety, triangling, and psychological distress, suggesting that reduced differentiation may contribute to distress through family-system processes characterized by emotional reactivity and relational tension (Murdock et al., 2023). These findings are especially relevant to women who have experienced infidelity because betrayal often heightens interpersonal anxiety, increases monitoring of the partner, and creates uncertainty regarding emotional safety. Under such circumstances, low differentiation may intensify psychological vulnerability by making it more difficult to regulate emotions without either becoming excessively entangled with the partner's behavior or withdrawing psychologically from the relationship. Thus, self-differentiation may have both a direct association with marital burnout and an indirect association operating through psychological distress.

Psychological distress represents a broad domain of emotional suffering commonly reflected in symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. In the aftermath of infidelity, such distress may arise from repeated intrusive thinking, perceived rejection, fear of future betrayal, anger, self-blame, uncertainty about the continuation of the marriage, and disruption of attachment security. These experiences may become particularly persistent when the injured partner has difficulty separating emotional reactions from reflective appraisal. Research linking differentiation to depression and anxiety provides support for this possibility. Hussain and

Lansford demonstrated that self-differentiation, depression, and anxiety can operate within serial pathways related to adult marital adjustment, indicating that differentiation is closely connected to emotional symptoms that subsequently shape marital functioning (Hussain & Lansford, 2025). Similarly, Murdock et al. found that differentiation is associated with anxiety and distress within a Bowen-theory framework (Murdock et al., 2023). Taken together, these studies suggest that psychological distress is not merely an accompanying reaction to relationship difficulties but may represent an important mechanism through which lower self-differentiation contributes to impaired marital functioning.

Psychological distress may also play a central role in the development of marital burnout. Marital burnout refers to a state of progressive physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion arising from prolonged relational strain and unmet expectations. Pines conceptualized couple burnout as a multidimensional syndrome involving physical exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, and psychological exhaustion, emphasizing that chronic relational stress can gradually erode the emotional resources necessary to sustain intimacy (Pines, 1996). Subsequent work further demonstrated that burnout can have implications for both relational and occupational functioning, reinforcing its significance as a clinically meaningful construct rather than a transient expression of dissatisfaction (Pines & Nunes, 2003). In the Iranian context, marital or couple burnout has also been studied as a meaningful indicator of relational deterioration, including among individuals experiencing stressful interpersonal and occupational circumstances (Navidi, 2005). Accordingly, marital burnout provides a useful outcome for understanding the long-term relational consequences of infidelity because it reflects not simply dissatisfaction but a more cumulative pattern of depletion and emotional disengagement.

Marital burnout is influenced by both interpersonal and intrapersonal processes. Research among married women has shown that communication skills and conflict-resolution styles are associated with couple burnout, suggesting that the manner in which partners respond to relational tension can either reduce or intensify cumulative exhaustion (Shamshirgaran & Homaei, 2023). More recent research has highlighted the role of emotion regulation in this process. Koçyiğit and Uzun found that mindfulness and emotion regulation serially mediated the relationship between couple burnout and marital satisfaction, indicating that regulatory capacities may be central to the way relational stress becomes translated into burnout (Koçyiğit & Uzun, 2024).

Their subsequent work further demonstrated that the association between emotion regulation and couple burnout can vary according to authenticity and family-related contextual factors, suggesting that marital burnout develops through a complex interaction between emotional regulation, personal functioning, and relational circumstances (Koçyiğit & Uzun, 2025). These findings are particularly relevant after infidelity, when emotional regulation demands are exceptionally high and the injured partner may need to manage anger, fear, sadness, vigilance, and uncertainty simultaneously.

From a theoretical perspective, self-differentiation may function as an upstream psychological resource that influences these emotional regulation processes. Highly differentiated individuals are not necessarily less emotional; rather, they are better able to experience strong emotions without allowing those emotions to completely determine cognition or behavior. In contrast, individuals with lower differentiation may react to relational threat through intense emotional reactivity, excessive dependence on the partner's responses, or abrupt emotional cutoff. In the context of infidelity, these patterns may create a cycle in which betrayal-related distress increases, emotional regulation becomes more difficult, and ongoing relational interactions are experienced as increasingly exhausting. Over time, repeated activation of this cycle may contribute to physical, emotional, and psychological burnout. The distinction between direct and indirect effects is therefore theoretically important: self-differentiation may directly protect against marital burnout by supporting more stable relational functioning, while at the same time reducing psychological distress, which itself may lower the risk of burnout.

This mediational perspective also helps integrate otherwise separate lines of research on differentiation, distress, and marital outcomes. Evidence indicates that greater self-differentiation is linked to higher relationship quality and stability (Rodríguez-González et al., 2023), whereas lower differentiation is related to anxiety and psychological distress (Murdock et al., 2023). At the same time, depression and anxiety appear to participate in pathways linking earlier relational experiences and self-differentiation to adult marital adjustment (Hussain & Lansford, 2025). Couple burnout, meanwhile, is closely connected to deficits in emotion regulation and broader relational maladjustment (Koçyiğit & Uzun, 2024, 2025). Taken together, these findings support a model in which self-differentiation may reduce psychological distress, and lower psychological distress may in turn reduce marital burnout.

However, this specific mechanism has received limited direct investigation among women who have experienced spousal infidelity, despite the fact that this population is likely to experience particularly intense emotional and relational strain.

The cultural and clinical relevance of examining this model among Iranian women should also be considered. Marriage, family continuity, emotional intimacy, and marital reputation can have substantial personal and social significance, and women who experience infidelity may face simultaneous pressures related to emotional pain, decisions about relationship continuation, parenting responsibilities, social judgment, and concerns about family stability. Findings from Iranian studies showing differences in differentiation and couple burnout between distressed and non-distressed couples (Pouragha & Sotoudeh Nouroudi, 2023), as well as associations between communication processes and burnout among married women (Shamshirgaran & Homaei, 2023), suggest that both intrapersonal and interpersonal factors are highly relevant in this population. Studying women affected by infidelity therefore provides an opportunity to examine whether psychological distress constitutes a mechanism through which lower differentiation contributes to more severe relational burnout under conditions of a major marital crisis.

Methodologically, testing such a model requires an analytic framework capable of estimating multiple direct and indirect relationships simultaneously while taking account of the latent nature of the principal psychological constructs. Structural equation modeling is particularly appropriate for this purpose because it permits the simultaneous estimation of measurement and structural relationships and enables researchers to examine mediation within an integrated theoretical model. Established SEM guidelines emphasize the importance of adequate sample size, theoretically specified latent constructs, and appropriate evaluation of model fit (Kline, 2010). Moreover, interpretation of fit indices should rely on multiple indicators rather than a single statistic, with comparative and residual-based indices used jointly to evaluate the adequacy of the hypothesized model (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Such an approach is especially suitable for the present conceptual framework because self-differentiation, psychological distress, and marital burnout are multidimensional constructs represented by multiple indicators and are hypothesized to operate within a directional mediation model.

Despite the growing literature on marital infidelity, self-differentiation, emotional distress, and couple burnout,

several gaps remain. Much of the existing research has examined these constructs separately or within general married populations rather than specifically among individuals who have experienced infidelity. Studies on infidelity have established its profound emotional, relational, and health consequences (Hoy & Oh, 2024; Rokach & Chan, 2023), while research on differentiation has shown its importance for relationship quality, stability, anxiety, and health-related quality of life (Rodríguez-González et al., 2023; Worch & Bartle-Haring, 2024). Other studies have demonstrated the importance of emotion regulation, communication, and psychological symptoms in couple burnout and marital adjustment (Hussain & Lansford, 2025; Koçyiğit & Uzun, 2024; Shamshirgaran & Homaei, 2023). Nevertheless, relatively little research has integrated these findings into a single explanatory model in which psychological distress mediates the relationship between self-differentiation and marital burnout following spousal infidelity. Clarifying this pathway may have important clinical implications because it can identify not only whether self-differentiation is associated with marital burnout, but also how this association may be transmitted through modifiable emotional symptoms.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to explain the causal relationship between self-differentiation and marital burnout through the mediating role of psychological distress among women who had experienced spousal infidelity.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a descriptive-correlational research design. The statistical population consisted of all married women with an experience of spousal infidelity in Tehran during the 2025–2026 academic year. Although there is no general consensus regarding the sample size required for factor analysis and structural models (Schreiber, 2006), many researchers have suggested that the minimum required sample size is 200 participants (Garver & Mentzer, 1999; Holter, 1983; Ho & Bentler, 2008; Sivo et al., 2006). Kline also maintained that structural equation modeling generally requires approximately 10 to 20 observations per variable, although a minimum sample size of 200 can be considered defensible (Kline, 2010). In the present study, 252 eligible women completed the questionnaires. Convenience sampling was used to recruit the participants.

The study was implemented by first coordinating with counseling centers and psychological clinics to identify appropriate channels for accessing the target population. After obtaining the cooperation and approval of the administrators of these centers, the questionnaire link was distributed through groups and information channels associated with clients and women's support groups. Instructions on how to complete the questionnaires and the necessary explanations regarding the measures were included in the distributed link, and a telephone number was also provided to participants for additional clarification when required. In accordance with ethical principles, participants were informed before completing the questionnaires that their first and last names would not be recorded and that the findings would be reported only in aggregate form and exclusively for scientific purposes. The initial information also explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

2.2. Data Collection Tools

Differentiation of Self Inventory. Self-differentiation was assessed using the 46-item Differentiation of Self Inventory developed by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) based on Bowen's theory. The instrument consists of four subscales: Emotional Reactivity (Items 1, 6, 10, 14, 18, 21, 26, 30, 34, 38, and 40), I-Position (Items 4, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31, 35, 41, and 43), Emotional Cutoff (Items 2, 3, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, 32, 36, 39, and 42), and Fusion with Others (Items 5, 9, 13, 17, 22, 25, 29, 33, 37, 44, 45, and 46). Items are scored on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 6 (very true of me), producing total scores ranging from 46 to 276. Drake (2011) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .89 for the questionnaire. In Iran, Khatibi (2015) also reported satisfactory reliability using internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .861$), split-half reliability (.762), and 15-day test-retest reliability ($r = .861$). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .88 for Emotional Reactivity, .86 for I-Position, .89 for Emotional Cutoff, and .91 for Fusion with Others, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Psychological Distress Questionnaire. Psychological distress was assessed using the 21-item Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21), developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995). This instrument assesses negative emotional symptoms across three seven-item subscales: Depression, Anxiety, and Stress. Responses are scored on a

four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me very much). By multiplying the summed score of each dimension by 2, each subscale score ranges from 0 to 42, while the total score ranges from 0 to 126. Higher scores indicate greater severity of psychological distress. The psychometric properties of the instrument have been supported in international studies, including Antony et al. (1998), who reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients above .90, as well as in Iranian studies by Sahebi et al. (2005) and Heydari (2017), which demonstrated satisfactory reliability and internal consistency. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .85 for Depression, .83 for Anxiety, and .80 for Stress, indicating adequate internal consistency.

Couple Burnout Measure. Marital burnout was assessed using the 21-item Couple Burnout Measure (CBM), developed by Pines (1996) to evaluate burnout in intimate relationships across three dimensions: Physical Exhaustion (Items 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, and 19), Emotional Exhaustion (Items 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, and 20), and Psychological Exhaustion (Items 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, and 21). Responses are scored on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). The total mean score, calculated by dividing the sum of the item scores by the number of items, ranges from 1 to 7 and represents the respondent's level of marital burnout. The psychometric properties of the measure have been supported by Pines and Nunes (2003) and in Iranian populations by Barati et al. (2013) and Navidi (2005), with a reported Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .86. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .89 for Physical

Exhaustion, .86 for Emotional Exhaustion, and .82 for Psychological Exhaustion, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency.

2.3. Data Analysis

The study findings were analyzed using structural equation modeling.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 252 women who had experienced marital infidelity participated in the present study. Their mean age was 37.40 years (SD = 5.91). Regarding educational attainment, 13 participants (5.2%) had less than a high school diploma, 64 (25.4%) had a high school diploma, 28 (11.1%) had an associate degree, 130 (51.6%) had a bachelor's degree, and 17 (6.7%) had a master's degree or higher. Among the participants, 29 women (11.5%) had no children, 90 (35.7%) had one child, 113 (44.8%) had two children, and 20 (7.9%) had more than two children. Finally, 35 participants (13.9%) had been married for less than 5 years, 91 (36.1%) for 6–10 years, 61 (24.2%) for 11–15 years, and 65 (25.8%) for more than 15 years. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among self-differentiation (Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others), psychological distress (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress), and marital burnout (Physical Exhaustion, Emotional Exhaustion, and Psychological Exhaustion).

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among the Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Self-Differentiation – Emotional Reactivity	—									
2. Self-Differentiation – I-Position	.41**	—								
3. Self-Differentiation – Emotional Cutoff	.48**	.50**	—							
4. Self-Differentiation – Fusion with Others	.52**	.45**	.57**	—						
5. Psychological Distress – Depression	-.23**	-.21**	-.14*	-.19**	—					
6. Psychological Distress – Anxiety	-.24**	-.18**	-.19**	-.24**	.35**	—				
7. Psychological Distress – Stress	-.21**	-.26**	-.18**	-.26**	.43**	.54**	—			
8. Marital Burnout – Physical Exhaustion	-.25**	-.32**	-.24**	-.31**	.36**	.20**	.28**	—		
9. Marital Burnout – Emotional Exhaustion	-.28**	-.38**	-.30**	-.28**	.29**	.31**	.33**	.43**	—	
10. Marital Burnout – Psychological Exhaustion	-.21**	-.26**	-.27**	-.33**	.41**	.39**	.45**	.52**	.58**	—
Mean	40.11	39.21	37.90	40.97	14.51	11.56	11.88	26.07	33.94	29.89
Standard deviation	9.94	8.87	9.63	10.29	4.50	3.72	3.79	6.61	7.52	7.85

As shown in Table 1, the correlations among the study variables were in the expected directions and were consistent with the theoretical framework of the study. To assess the

assumption of univariate normality, the skewness and kurtosis values of each variable were examined. Multicollinearity was evaluated using the variance inflation

factor (VIF) and tolerance coefficients. The corresponding results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Assessment of the Assumptions of Normality and Multicollinearity

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis	Tolerance	VIF
Self-Differentiation – Emotional Reactivity	–0.27	–0.96	0.61	1.65
Self-Differentiation – I-Position	–0.14	–0.87	0.63	1.60
Self-Differentiation – Emotional Cutoff	–0.01	–0.84	0.56	1.79
Self-Differentiation – Fusion with Others	–0.12	–0.76	0.65	1.54
Psychological Distress – Depression	–0.64	–0.27	0.72	1.38
Psychological Distress – Anxiety	–0.03	–1.22	0.65	1.55
Psychological Distress – Stress	0.21	–0.34	0.61	1.63
Marital Burnout – Physical Exhaustion	–0.49	–0.30	—	—
Marital Burnout – Emotional Exhaustion	–0.51	–0.16	—	—
Marital Burnout – Psychological Exhaustion	0.34	–0.26	—	—

According to the findings presented in Table 2, the skewness and kurtosis values for all components fell within the ± 2 range. This finding indicates that the assumption of univariate normality was satisfied (Kline, 2016). Table 2 further demonstrates that multicollinearity was not problematic in the present dataset because the tolerance coefficients for all predictor variables exceeded .10 and their VIF values were below 10. According to Meyers et al. (2006), a tolerance coefficient below .10 and a VIF value above 10 indicate problematic multicollinearity. To determine whether the assumption of multivariate normality was satisfied, information pertaining to Mahalanobis distance was also examined. The skewness and kurtosis values of the Mahalanobis distance distribution were 0.91 and 0.48, respectively, indicating that the multivariate distribution of the data was approximately normal. Finally, to evaluate the homogeneity of variances, the scatterplot of

standardized error variances was examined, and the findings indicated that this assumption was also satisfied.

After evaluating the statistical assumptions, the data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. AMOS version 29.0 and the maximum likelihood (ML) estimation method were employed. The hypothesized model proposed that self-differentiation was associated with marital burnout both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of psychological distress among women who had experienced marital infidelity. As illustrated in Figure 1, the latent variable of self-differentiation was measured by the indicators of Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others; the latent variable of psychological distress was measured by Depression, Anxiety, and Stress; and the latent variable of marital burnout was measured by Physical Exhaustion, Emotional Exhaustion, and Psychological Exhaustion. Table 3 presents the model fit indices.

Table 3

Fit Indices for the Structural Model

Fit Index	Model Value	Recommended Cutoff
Chi-square (χ^2)	43.63	—
Degrees of freedom (df)	32	—
χ^2/df	1.36	< 3
GFI	.968	> .90
AGFI	.945	> .85
CFI	.985	> .90
RMSEA	.038	< .08

As shown in Table 3, all fit indices obtained from the analysis supported an acceptable fit of the proposed model

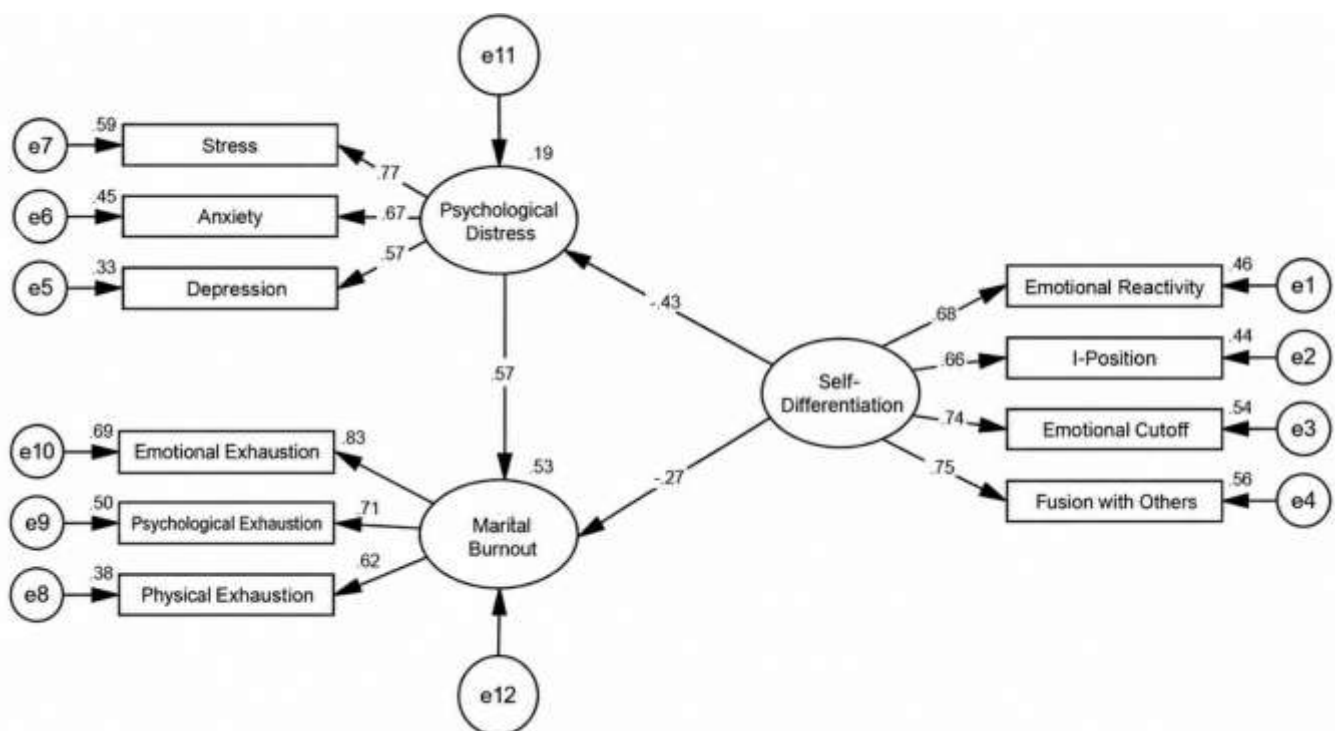
to the collected data. Table 4 presents the total, direct, and indirect path coefficients in the structural model.

Table 4*Total, Direct, and Indirect Path Coefficients Among the Study Variables*

Path	<i>b</i>	SE	β	<i>p</i>
Self-Differentiation → Psychological Distress	−0.163	0.037	−0.431	.001
Psychological Distress → Marital Burnout	0.903	0.175	0.568	.001
Direct effect: Self-Differentiation → Marital Burnout	−0.159	0.064	−0.270	.005
Indirect effect: Self-Differentiation → Marital Burnout	−0.147	0.038	−0.245	.001
Total effect: Self-Differentiation → Marital Burnout	−0.306	0.068	−0.515	.001

Table 4 shows that the total path coefficient between self-differentiation and marital burnout was negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -.515$, $p = .001$). The path coefficient between psychological distress and marital burnout was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = .568$, $p = .001$). According to the results presented in Table 4, the indirect path coefficient between self-differentiation and

marital burnout was also negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -.245$, $p = .001$). Accordingly, it was concluded that psychological distress significantly mediated the relationship between self-differentiation and marital burnout among women who had experienced marital infidelity. Figure 1 presents the structural model based on standardized estimates.

Figure 1*Standardized Parameters of the Structural Model*

The figure indicates that the squared multiple correlation coefficient (R^2) for marital burnout was .53. This finding demonstrates that self-differentiation and psychological distress jointly explained 53% of the variance in marital burnout among women who had experienced spousal infidelity.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between self-differentiation and marital burnout among women who had experienced spousal infidelity, with psychological distress considered as a mediating mechanism. The structural equation model demonstrated acceptable fit with

the observed data, indicating that the proposed theoretical relationships were empirically plausible. The findings showed that self-differentiation had a significant negative direct effect on marital burnout, meaning that higher levels of self-differentiation were associated with lower levels of marital burnout. Self-differentiation also had a significant negative effect on psychological distress, whereas psychological distress had a significant positive effect on marital burnout. In addition, the indirect effect of self-differentiation on marital burnout through psychological distress was negative and statistically significant, indicating that psychological distress significantly mediated this relationship. The total effect of self-differentiation on marital burnout was also significant and negative. Furthermore, self-differentiation and psychological distress jointly explained 53% of the variance in marital burnout, which indicates that these variables constitute substantial explanatory factors in the marital burnout experienced by women affected by infidelity.

The significant negative relationship between self-differentiation and marital burnout is consistent with Bowen's family systems perspective, according to which differentiation of self reflects the capacity to maintain a coherent sense of identity while remaining emotionally connected to important others (Bowen, 1978). Individuals with higher differentiation are better able to distinguish emotional reactions from thoughtful judgment, maintain personal values under interpersonal pressure, and regulate closeness and distance without becoming excessively fused with or detached from significant others. In the context of marital infidelity, these capacities are particularly important because betrayal often generates intense emotional arousal, uncertainty, anger, fear, and relational instability. Women with higher self-differentiation may be better able to experience these emotions without allowing them to completely dominate their interpretation of the relationship or their behavioral responses. Consequently, the psychological and relational burden of infidelity may be less likely to develop into persistent emotional, physical, and psychological exhaustion.

This finding is also consistent with empirical evidence showing that self-differentiation is positively associated with relationship quality and stability. Rodríguez-González et al. demonstrated that differentiation of self was related to more adaptive attachment processes and better relationship quality and stability in couple relationships (Rodríguez-González et al., 2023). Their findings support the proposition that greater differentiation provides a relational

resource that enables individuals to manage emotional interdependence without losing autonomy. In the present sample, women with greater differentiation may have been better able to preserve psychological boundaries, evaluate the infidelity more reflectively, and avoid becoming chronically overwhelmed by their partner's behavior. These capacities may reduce the sustained strain that contributes to marital burnout. Similarly, Pouragha and Sotoudeh Nouroudi reported meaningful differences in self-differentiation and couple burnout between couples seeking divorce and ordinary couples, indicating that lower differentiation and greater burnout tend to coexist in distressed relational contexts (Pouragha & Sotoudeh Nouroudi, 2023). The present findings extend this evidence specifically to women confronting marital infidelity, a highly stressful form of relational disruption.

The negative association between self-differentiation and marital burnout can also be interpreted through the emotional regulation demands of betrayal. Couple burnout is understood as a state of progressive physical, emotional, and psychological depletion resulting from prolonged relational stress and frustrated expectations (Pines, 1996). Pines and Nunes further emphasized that burnout develops when chronic strain consumes emotional resources and leaves individuals feeling exhausted and disillusioned within intimate relationships (Pines & Nunes, 2003). Spousal infidelity may accelerate this process because it undermines trust, emotional safety, and expectations of exclusivity. A poorly differentiated individual may respond to betrayal with persistent emotional reactivity, intense dependence on the partner's reassurance, repeated conflict, or emotional withdrawal. Over time, these responses can maintain relational stress and contribute to burnout. By contrast, greater differentiation may buffer this process by allowing the betrayed partner to remain emotionally engaged without becoming completely engulfed by relational anxiety.

The finding that higher self-differentiation was associated with lower psychological distress also accords with Bowenian theory and previous empirical research. Murdock et al. found that differentiation of self was significantly related to anxiety and psychological distress and showed that lower differentiation was associated with greater emotional vulnerability within family systems (Murdock et al., 2023). This finding is highly relevant to the present study because infidelity can substantially increase emotional tension within the marital system. Women who are less differentiated may have greater difficulty regulating emotional arousal and maintaining an independent sense of self when confronted

with betrayal. Emotional reactivity, fusion with the spouse, and emotional cutoff can each intensify anxiety and distress in different ways. Heightened reactivity may amplify anger and fear, fusion may make the partner's behavior central to one's own emotional stability, and emotional cutoff may prevent adaptive processing of the relational crisis. The observed negative path from self-differentiation to psychological distress is therefore both theoretically and empirically coherent.

The present result is also compatible with the findings of Hussain and Lansford, who demonstrated that self-differentiation, depression, and anxiety were involved in pathways predicting adult marital adjustment (Hussain & Lansford, 2025). Their work suggests that differentiation is not only a relational construct but also a psychological resource closely connected to emotional symptoms. In the current study, psychological distress was represented by depression, anxiety, and stress, all of which are likely to be activated by the experience of infidelity. Women with higher differentiation may be more capable of regulating these emotional responses, maintaining perspective, and avoiding excessive self-blame or catastrophic interpretations. As a result, they may experience lower levels of psychological distress despite exposure to a highly stressful marital event.

The significant positive relationship between psychological distress and marital burnout is another important finding. Women with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress reported greater marital burnout. This relationship is theoretically understandable because psychological distress can deplete the emotional and cognitive resources necessary for effective marital functioning. Depression may reduce motivation, emotional responsiveness, and hope regarding the future of the relationship. Anxiety may increase vigilance, rumination, suspiciousness, and sensitivity to signs of further rejection. Chronic stress may lead to irritability, physiological exhaustion, and diminished tolerance for relational conflict. When these states persist, the marital relationship may increasingly be experienced as draining rather than supportive, thereby intensifying emotional, psychological, and physical exhaustion.

This finding is consistent with the broader literature on marital burnout and emotion regulation. Koçyiğit and Uzun showed that mindfulness and emotion regulation played significant mediating roles in the relationship between couple burnout and marital satisfaction (Koçyiğit & Uzun, 2024). Their findings underscore the importance of emotional regulatory capacity in determining whether

marital strain develops into burnout. In the present study, psychological distress may reflect, at least in part, the emotional burden that accumulates when regulation becomes difficult after infidelity. Koçyiğit and Uzun also found that the relationship between emotion regulation and couple burnout may depend on authenticity and family-context variables (Koçyiğit & Uzun, 2025). This evidence supports the broader interpretation that couple burnout is not solely the result of external marital circumstances but is also shaped by how individuals process and regulate emotional experiences within the relationship.

The association between psychological distress and marital burnout is also compatible with findings concerning communication and conflict processes. Shamshirgaran and Homaei reported that communication skills were related to the association between conflict resolution styles and couple burnout among married women (Shamshirgaran & Homaei, 2023). Psychological distress may interfere with effective communication by increasing defensiveness, withdrawal, irritability, and difficulty expressing needs clearly. In the aftermath of infidelity, such communication difficulties may be especially damaging because the couple often faces repeated discussions about trust, responsibility, forgiveness, and the future of the marriage. When distress remains high, these interactions can become exhausting and repetitive, increasing the likelihood of marital burnout.

One of the most important findings of the present study was the significant mediating role of psychological distress in the relationship between self-differentiation and marital burnout. This result suggests that self-differentiation is associated with marital burnout not only directly but also indirectly through its relationship with depression, anxiety, and stress. In other words, lower differentiation may increase vulnerability to psychological distress, and heightened distress may subsequently contribute to greater burnout. This mediation model integrates Bowen's theoretical assumptions with contemporary evidence on marital adjustment and emotional functioning. Bowen proposed that poorly differentiated individuals are more vulnerable to chronic anxiety in emotionally intense systems (Bowen, 1978). Murdock et al. empirically supported the relationship among differentiation, anxiety, and distress (Murdock et al., 2023), while Hussain and Lansford demonstrated that depression and anxiety participate in pathways linking differentiation to marital adjustment (Hussain & Lansford, 2025). The present findings extend these relationships by identifying marital burnout as a clinically meaningful downstream outcome.

The mediation finding is particularly meaningful in the context of infidelity because the betrayed spouse is exposed to a stressor capable of simultaneously activating intrapersonal and interpersonal vulnerabilities. Infidelity may generate questions about self-worth, desirability, trust, identity, and the continuity of the marriage. For women with low self-differentiation, these experiences may be especially destabilizing because the boundary between the partner's behavior and one's own sense of self may be less secure. The betrayal may therefore be interpreted not only as the spouse's action but as a threat to personal identity and emotional stability. This can intensify distress, which then contributes to greater depletion and disengagement from the marital relationship. Such a mechanism helps explain why self-differentiation may be especially important in populations exposed to major relational trauma.

The present findings also correspond with research demonstrating broader consequences of infidelity. Rokach and Chan described infidelity as a phenomenon with substantial emotional and relational consequences, including pain, mistrust, conflict, and deterioration in relationship functioning (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Hoy and Oh further showed that spousal infidelity may have implications for long-term health, suggesting that the consequences of betrayal can extend beyond immediate relationship dissatisfaction (Hoy & Oh, 2024). The current findings may help clarify one psychological pathway through which such consequences emerge. If infidelity produces persistent psychological distress, and that distress contributes to marital burnout, then the impact of betrayal may become chronic unless emotional and self-regulatory processes are addressed. This may be particularly true for individuals with lower self-differentiation, who may have fewer internal resources for managing relational anxiety.

The role of interpersonal meaning-making following infidelity should also be considered. April and Schrodt found that responsibility attributions and person-centered communication influenced willingness to forgive in the context of parental infidelity (April & Schrodt, 2019). Although their study examined a different relational context, it demonstrates that reactions to infidelity are shaped not only by the event itself but also by how responsibility and emotional meaning are interpreted. In betrayed spouses, low differentiation and high distress may increase the likelihood of rigid blame, global negative interpretations, and difficulty tolerating ambiguity. Such processes can hinder constructive relational decisions and intensify burnout. By contrast, a more differentiated individual may be better able to

acknowledge the seriousness of the betrayal while maintaining reflective capacity and making decisions based on personal values rather than immediate emotional pressure.

The strength of the structural model also deserves attention. Self-differentiation and psychological distress together explained 53% of the variance in marital burnout, indicating substantial explanatory power. This result suggests that marital burnout among women who have experienced infidelity cannot be understood solely as a consequence of the partner's betrayal. Instead, the degree to which the betrayed partner can maintain a differentiated self and regulate the associated psychological distress appears to play a major role in the severity of burnout. This interpretation is consistent with previous findings linking self-differentiation to marital functioning (Pouragha & Sotoudeh Nouroudi, 2023; Rodríguez-González et al., 2023), couple differentiation to health-related quality of life (Worch & Bartle-Haring, 2024), and emotional regulatory processes to couple burnout (Koçyiğit & Uzun, 2024, 2025). The acceptable model fit also supports the adequacy of the proposed structural relationships according to established principles of structural equation modeling (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2010). Overall, the findings support an integrated interpretation in which self-differentiation functions as a protective psychological resource, while psychological distress represents an important mechanism linking lower differentiation to greater marital burnout following spousal infidelity.

The present findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the cross-sectional correlational design does not permit definitive causal conclusions, even though the proposed structural model was theoretically specified and demonstrated acceptable fit. Second, participants were recruited through convenience sampling from counseling and psychological service centers in Tehran, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to women who have experienced infidelity but have not sought professional services, as well as to women from other cultural or geographical contexts. Third, all variables were assessed using self-report questionnaires, which may increase the possibility of common-method variance, recall bias, and socially desirable responding. Fourth, the study focused exclusively on women who had experienced spousal infidelity and did not include husbands or dyadic assessments, preventing examination of reciprocal partner effects. Finally, potentially relevant variables such as time elapsed since discovery of infidelity, type and duration of the

affair, marital duration, forgiveness, attachment style, social support, and continuation or termination of the extramarital relationship were not incorporated into the model.

Future studies are recommended to employ longitudinal designs in order to examine temporal changes in self-differentiation, psychological distress, and marital burnout from the initial discovery of infidelity through later stages of adjustment. Dyadic designs involving both partners could provide a more comprehensive understanding of actor and partner effects and clarify how one partner's differentiation and distress influence the other partner's functioning. Future research could also compare women who remain in the marriage with those who separate or divorce, as well as examine whether the mediating model differs according to the emotional, sexual, or combined nature of infidelity. Incorporating additional mediators and moderators, such as forgiveness, rumination, attachment insecurity, perceived social support, emotion regulation, marital commitment, and communication quality, could improve the explanatory scope of the model. Replication in more diverse populations and cultural settings would also help establish the robustness and generalizability of the observed relationships.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that interventions for women affected by marital infidelity should address both self-differentiation and psychological distress rather than focusing exclusively on the betrayal event itself. Individual and couple-based interventions may benefit from helping clients distinguish emotional reactions from reflective decision-making, strengthen personal boundaries, clarify values, reduce excessive emotional fusion, and prevent maladaptive emotional cutoff. At the same time, targeted strategies for reducing depression, anxiety, stress, rumination, and physiological arousal may prevent the progression of acute post-infidelity distress into chronic marital burnout. Clinicians may also consider assessing self-differentiation and psychological distress early in treatment to identify women at greater risk of severe relational exhaustion. Interventions that combine emotional regulation, self-definition, communication skills, and structured processing of the infidelity may ultimately support more informed relational decisions and healthier psychological adjustment.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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