Identification of the Direct Effect of Self-Differentiation on Marital Satisfaction in Married Women

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study was to identify the direct effect of self-differentiation on marital satisfaction in married women.

Methods and Materials: This quantitative, applied research utilized a descriptive-correlational design with a structural modeling approach. The statistical population included all married women who visited counseling centers at the University of Tehran between February 2023 and August 2023. A sample of 330 participants was selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected using the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (1989) and the Self-Differentiation Scale developed by Skowron and Smith (2003). The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (structural equation modeling).

Findings: The results showed that the proposed structural model for marital satisfaction demonstrated an acceptable fit. Self-differentiation had a direct and significant effect on marital satisfaction among married women (P < .01).

Conclusion: The findings suggest that self-differentiation plays a significant role in influencing marital satisfaction among married women, emphasizing the importance of self-differentiation in marital relationships.

Keywords: Marital Satisfaction, Self-Differentiation, Married Women.

1. Introduction

The family serves as the fundamental structure of every society and, as a socio-emotional unit, is a place of growth, development, and change; thus, the impact of the family on psychological, emotional, and social equilibrium cannot be overlooked (Green et al., 2020). The most crucial factor influencing the family is marital satisfaction among women (Titelman & Mousavi, 2023). Studies have shown that women's physical and psychological health is not solely dependent on biological risk factors. Significant social and cultural factors, particularly those related to gender roles and power dynamics, play a critical role in this issue (Mirhoseini et al., 2020; Narimani et al., 2020; Safaei Nezhad et al., 2019). Although women often demonstrate higher adaptability in the face of challenges, this comes at the cost of increased risk for mental health issues, such as depression, detachment, mood swings, anxiety, and stress (Faraji et al., 2019; Henry, 2023).

Everyone envisions the family as an institution full of intimacy, friendship, and safety, ensuring the comfort of its members (Vahidi et al., 2022); however, statistics reveal an increase in divorce rates and marital conflicts. Approximately 55% of first marriages in the United States, and 40-45% in Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Switzerland, end in divorce (Ghazalsaflou et al., 2022; Safarnia & Houshmandi, 2021). Divorce rates have also been rising in East Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong, indicating a trend similar to that observed in the West (Jones, 2018). In Iran, statistics clearly show an increasing ratio of divorces to marriages. From 2011 to 2015, the divorce-to-marriage ratios nationwide were 6.1, 5.5, 4.4, and 4.3, respectively, with further increases reported in 2016 and 2017 (Asadian, 2021; Khosravi et al., 2021; Tamala, 2019).

Marital satisfaction encompasses a set of feelings, including pleasure, satisfaction, and joy experienced by either spouse across all aspects of marriage, and it is a vital component of individual, particularly psychological, well-being (Hakimi Dezfouli & Ebrahimpour, 2024; Mirhoseini et al., 2020). Analyzing marital processes provides valuable insights into the essential nature of successful marriages. In successful marriages, the quality of the relationship is high, and partners are satisfied and content with their union (Chemi et al., 2020; Halaafi, 2023; Henry, 2023; Mirhoseini et al., 2020). Although the quality of the marital relationship and spousal adjustment are influenced by various factors, and extensive research has been conducted on marital satisfaction and relationship stability, numerous unanswered questions remain, and cohesive studies are lacking (Rasaei & Arouti-Movafagh, 2021; Riahi et al., 2020). Research findings suggest that self-differentiation is among the factors influencing marital satisfaction (Asadian, 2021; Azami, 2021; Bradberry, 2019; Motahari, 2023).

The concept of self-differentiation refers to an individual's capacity for realistic thinking about emotionally charged family issues (Pourshahabadi & Einipour, 2020). According to Bowen's theory, self-differentiation occurs on two levels: intrapsychic and interpersonal. On the intrapsychic level, differentiation encompasses the individual's ability to thoughtfully assess situations, possess full awareness of personal emotions, and apply rational reasoning or effective strategies based on situational needs (Doba et al., 2018; Esmaeili Jamaloui, 2021). The degree of self-differentiation develops within the family of origin and is significantly influenced by the dynamics and interactions among family members, affecting the individual's future

life. People enter marital life with patterns of lifestyle and levels of differentiation that have developed in their family of origin (Heidari et al., 2021; Jahangiri & Rezaei, 2021; Kahrezi et al., 2021; Khosravi et al., 2021; Malati & Zam, 2021; Rahimnia, 2020; Soltanabadi et al., 2021).

Essentially, marital satisfaction has positive consequences for individuals and society, and its absence can create various problems for couples and the family system. This absence causes disorder and disorganization, particularly in women (due to their unique characteristics), and destabilizes the quality of family relationships. The aforementioned issues suggest that marital dissatisfaction leads to separation and divorce. Thus, examining and predicting marital satisfaction is of paramount importance. The primary issue of this study is to present a structural model of marital satisfaction based on self-differentiation. The present study investigates the structural model for predicting marital satisfaction. The proposed research model hypothesizes direct and indirect relationships between marital satisfaction and self-differentiation. Consequently, the research question is whether the collected data fit the conceptual model.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

The present study is classified as a quantitative research approach. In terms of purpose, it is categorized as applied research. Regarding the research method, it falls under descriptive-correlational studies with a structural modeling approach. The statistical population of this study consisted of all married women who visited counseling centers at the University of Tehran between February 2023 and August 2023 (6 months). Given that structural equation modeling methodology shares several similarities with aspects of multivariate regression, the principles of sample size determination in multivariate regression analysis can be applied to structural equation modeling. In multivariate regression analysis, the ratio of sample size (observations) to independent variables should not be less than 5; otherwise, the results will lack generalizability. A more conservative ratio of 10 observations per independent variable has been suggested. Even considering 15 observations per predictor in multiple regression analysis with the standard ordinary least squares method is a good rule of thumb. Therefore, in structural equation modeling, the sample size can range from 5 to 15 observations per measured variable: $5Q < n < 15Q$, where Q is the number of observed variables or

questionnaire items, and n is the sample size (Hooman, 2005). In this study, the number of components of the research variables was multiplied by 15. Given that the number of components in this study was 21, a sample size of 340 was determined, with 25 individuals considered for potential attrition. Ultimately, 330 participants were selected using convenience sampling. The procedure involved distributing the research questionnaires, which included the Marital Satisfaction and Self-Differentiation questionnaires, to women after obtaining the necessary permissions. The participants were given explanations about the questionnaires and assured about the confidentiality of their information and ethical research considerations.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Satisfaction

ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire has been widely used as a reliable research tool in multiple marital studies. Olson (1989) developed this instrument to assess marital satisfaction and emphasized its sensitivity to changes occurring over the human lifespan, as well as changes within the family context. Each item relates to specific areas within a marital relationship, which can describe potential issues or identify strengths in couples. This questionnaire contains 47 items and evaluates the level of marital satisfaction experienced by couples across 12 subscales. Cronbach's alpha coefficients reported by Olson, Fournier, and Druckman (1989) for the subscales, including Conventional Response, Marital Satisfaction, Personality Issues, Communication, Conflict Resolution, Financial Management, Leisure Activities, Sexual Relations, Marriage and Children, Relatives and Friends, Egalitarian Roles, and Ideological Orientation, were as follows: .90, .73, .81, .68, .75, .72, .76, .71, .49, .78, and .81, respectively. This tool uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree," scoring from 1 to 5 points for each item. In Iran, Soleimanian (1994) reported internal consistency coefficients of .93 for the long form and .95 for the short form. Mirakhti (1996) found a Cronbach's alpha of .92 and reported correlations between the ENRICH questionnaire and family satisfaction and life satisfaction scales ranging from .41 to .60, providing evidence of construct validity. Mahdian (1997) reported reliability coefficients of .93 for men, .94 for women, and .94 for both genders combined (Mirhoseini et al., 2020; Najarzadegan & Farhadi, 2019).

2.2.2. Self-Differentiation

Originally designed by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) and later revised by Skowron and Smith (2003), this questionnaire uses a 6-point Likert scale. It includes four subscales: 1) Emotional Reactivity (ER): This subscale, comprising 11 items, measures the tendency of individuals to respond to environmental stimuli with automatic, emotionally expressive reactions. 2) I-Position (IP): Consisting of 11 items, this subscale assesses an individual's sense of self and ability to act according to personal beliefs, even under external pressure. 3) Emotional Cutoff (EC): With 12 items, this subscale identifies fear of intimacy or being engulfed in close relationships and defensive behaviors to manage these fears. 4) Fusion with Others (FO): Also containing 12 items, this subscale reflects intense emotional involvement with significant others and identity formation linked to parents (Skowron & Smith, 2003). The questionnaire has 46 items, with "I-Position" scored positively and the other three subscales (Emotional Reactivity, Fusion with Others, and Emotional Cutoff) scored inversely. Studies have shown high reliability and validity for this questionnaire. The revised form's reliability, measured by Cronbach's alpha, is .92 for the overall scale and .89, .81, .84, and .86 for Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others, respectively. The relationship between high self-differentiation and lower anxiety and greater marital satisfaction supports the construct validity of this scale. Skowron and Friedlander (1998) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .88. Younesi (2006) estimated the reliability at .81 (Bagheri & Khodai, 2021; Bakhshaei & Azadi, 2020; Bani Torfi & Homaei, 2020).

2.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (structural equation modeling). Structural equations using LISREL software were employed to test the research hypotheses.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic analysis of the study revealed that among the participants, 78 individuals were between 20 and 30 years old, 121 were between 31 and 40 years old, 97 were between 41 and 50 years old, and 44 were over 50 years old. Additionally, 75 participants had a diploma or lower, 154

had a bachelor's degree, 89 had a master's degree, and 22 had a doctoral degree.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Research Variables

Statistical Index	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Emotional Reactivity	38.39	6.885	-1.123	1.117
I-Position	42.66	5.853	-0.788	0.499
Emotional Cutoff	45.06	7.763	-0.174	-0.479
Fusion with Others	43.96	6.640	-0.311	-0.229
Self-Differentiation (Overall)	170.08	17.932	-0.477	0.762
Conventional Response	10.99	2.914	-0.705	0.058
Satisfaction	11.74	2.758	-0.998	1.039
Personality Issues	13.25	2.986	-0.674	0.003
Marital Communication	10.38	3.277	-0.304	-0.590
Conflict Resolution	12.48	3.238	-0.346	-0.583
Financial Management	11.07	2.890	-0.543	-0.063
Leisure Activities	13.14	3.215	-0.728	-0.049
Sexual Relations	10.86	3.005	-0.370	-0.502
Marriage and Children	12.28	3.239	-0.361	-0.429
Relatives and Friends	9.38	3.361	-0.036	-0.689
Egalitarian Roles	11.73	3.237	-0.243	-0.553
Ideological Orientation	12.08	2.720	-0.864	0.654
Marital Satisfaction (Overall)	139.40	24.121	-0.425	0.545

Statistical indices for variables such as skewness and kurtosis, along with mean and standard deviation scores, are presented in Table 1. The mean scores were as follows: Emotional Reactivity = 38.39, I-Position = 42.66, Emotional Cutoff = 45.06, Fusion with Others = 43.96, and overall Self-Differentiation = 170.08. Skewness and kurtosis values fell within the range of -2 to +2, indicating that the data followed a normal distribution at the 0.05 significance level.

Similarly, Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for marital satisfaction variables, including skewness and kurtosis values, means, and standard deviations. The mean scores were as follows: Conventional Response = 10.99, Satisfaction = 11.74, Personality Issues = 13.25, Marital Communication = 10.38, Conflict Resolution = 12.48, Financial Management = 11.07, Leisure Activities = 13.14, Sexual Relations = 10.86, Marriage and Children = 12.28, Relatives and Friends = 9.38, Egalitarian Roles = 11.73, Ideological Orientation = 12.08, and overall Marital Satisfaction = 139.40. Again, skewness and kurtosis values between -2 and +2 indicated a normal distribution at the 0.05 level.

Table 2

Correlation Coefficients Matrix for Research Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Self-Differentiation	1				
5. Marital Satisfaction	0.514**	0.576**	0.590**	0.576**	1

**p<0.01

The correlation between Self-Differentiation and Marital Satisfaction is shown in Table 2. All correlation coefficients were positive and significant at the 0.01 alpha level (p < .01).

The positive coefficients indicate a direct relationship between self-differentiation and marital satisfaction in married women.

Table 3

Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Acceptable Range	Observed Value	Evaluation
χ^2/df	≤ 5	3.618	Acceptable
IFI	> 0.90	0.924	Acceptable
RMSEA	≤ 0.08	0.061	Acceptable
SRMR	≤ 0.08	0.052	Acceptable
CFI	> 0.90	0.923	Acceptable
GFI	> 0.90	0.919	Acceptable

Table 3 displays the model fit indices, showing that all criteria for a good model fit have been satisfied. The values of χ^2/df (3.618), RMSEA (0.061), and SRMR (0.052) are within acceptable ranges, while IFI (0.924), CFI (0.923), and GFI (0.919) exceed the threshold of 0.90.

Table 4

Measurement Model Coefficients

Path	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient	C.R.	p-value
Self-Differentiation → Emotional Reactivity	1	0.207		
Self-Differentiation → I-Position	2.344	0.571	3.128	0.002
Self-Differentiation → Emotional Cutoff	3.249	0.597	3.143	0.002
Self-Differentiation → Fusion with Others	3.328	0.715	3.178	0.001

Results for measurement models are presented in Table 4. The significance of regression weights indicates that all observed indicators adequately represent the latent variables. For instance, the regression weight for Emotional Reactivity ($\beta = 0.207$), I-Position ($\beta = 0.571$, CR = 3.128, p = 0.002), Emotional Cutoff ($\beta = 0.597$, CR = 3.143, p = 0.002), and Fusion with Others ($\beta = 0.715$, CR = 3.178, p = 0.001) were significant.

Table 5

Path Coefficients for Direct Effects

Path	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient	t-value	Significance Level
Self-Differentiation → Marital Satisfaction	0.304	0.217	2.137	0.033

The path coefficient for the direct effect of Self-Differentiation on Marital Satisfaction is shown in Table 5. The unstandardized coefficient was 0.304, the standardized coefficient was 0.217, t = 2.137, and p = 0.033. The positive and significant path coefficient at the 0.05 alpha level ($p < 0.05$) supports the hypothesis that Self-Differentiation has a direct effect on Marital Satisfaction among married women.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to develop a structural model of marital satisfaction based on self-differentiation in married women. From the perspective of inferential analysis, the results indicated that the path coefficient between self-differentiation and marital satisfaction was positive and significant at the 0.05 alpha level ($p < .05$). Thus, the research hypothesis that self-differentiation has a direct effect on marital satisfaction in married women is confirmed. In a comparative analysis of the research hypothesis, which is the direct impact of self-differentiation on marital satisfaction in married women, the findings of this study are consistent with the results of both domestic and international researchers (Al-Madani et al., 2022; Finzi-Dottan, 2023; Heidari et al., 2021; Keles et al., 2023; Mohammadi & Alibakhshi, 2021; Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022; Toloo Takmili Torabi et al., 2021; Zamanifar et al., 2022).

To interpret these findings, it can be stated that, based on Bowen's theory of self-differentiation, it encompasses emotional, cognitive, and self-independence from others. Individuals achieve a sense of identity through the process of individuation. This differentiation from the family of origin enables them to take responsibility for their thoughts,

feelings, perceptions, and actions. In other words, a differentiated individual can respond to life issues and problems with rational, logical thinking and can avoid emotionally driven reactions. Therefore, these individuals are capable of resolving issues peacefully. Conversely, individuals with low self-differentiation experience higher anxiety and greater emotional entanglement between thoughts and feelings, leading to emotional conflicts in relationships. According to Bowen's theory, women with low self-differentiation are less capable of making rational decisions when facing life challenges. Additionally, these women, due to their dependency on the family of origin and the overlap between family systems, face problems that increase conflicts and lead to marital dissatisfaction. Thus, it can be stated that women with higher self-differentiation are more capable of enhancing marital satisfaction.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

This study had some limitations. The research sample was restricted to the city of Tehran and included only married women who visited counseling centers at the University of Tehran between February 2023 and August 2023. This research was a cross-sectional study and assessed the positive effects only over a few months. It is suggested that workshops titled "Self-Differentiation in Married Women" be conducted. Specialized sessions on self-differentiation in married women should be organized. The most skilled and competent therapists and psychologists familiar with self-differentiation should be employed at the University of Tehran's counseling centers to improve marital satisfaction in married women. Based on the results and the direct impact of self-differentiation on marital satisfaction, it is recommended that therapists and psychologists use these variables to improve marital satisfaction in married women. Future research could focus on developing a model of marital satisfaction based on self-differentiation with happiness as a mediating factor in married men. It is also suggested that this study be replicated with married women from other cities to verify the findings.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally 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

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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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