The Relationship Between Successful Marriage and Self-Differentiation: The Mediating Role of Cognitive Emotion Regulation

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is a critical stage in life that facilitates identification. Various components such as self-differentiation or cognitive emotion regulation affect marriage. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between successful marriage and self-differentiation by considering the mediating role of cognitive emotion regulation. This study was a descriptive correlational study of structural equations. The statistical population of the study was married men and women in Tehran and 635 people were selected using random and available sampling methods collected in the period of summer (2019) to summer (2020). To collect the data of this study, Hudson Successful Marriage Index Questionnaire (1992), Garnefski, Critch and Spinhaven Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (2001), Skowron and Friedlander Self-Differentiation Questionnaire (2003) were used. The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed in two descriptive and inferential sections using statistical tests and the structural equation approach by SPSS and AMOS software. The results showed that the independent variable of self-differentiation is related to a successful marriage ($p > .001$), and emotion regulation plays a mediating role in the relationship between self-differentiation with a successful marriage. Since cognitive emotion regulation skills are one of the most important individual factors in a successful marriage and family stability, Therefore, the role of training these strategies as well as self-differentiation is very important and requires more attention from counselors and stakeholders.

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Introduction

Marriage is the most essential and greatest social custom that has been highlighted in the past, and it is capable of meeting the emotional and safety demands of adults while also ensuring the human race's survival (Wallerstein, 2019). Marriage is also a crucial period in one's life when it comes to establishing one's identity. Because marriage requires separation from one's parents as well as the ability to make decisions and accept responsibility, this life-changing decision is to a rebirth in life that is done entirely voluntarily (Gottman, 2014). This decision should not be made haphazardly or without the appropriate knowledge and planning, because any mistake made throughout this process could turn into an irreversible mistake, drastically altering the direction of a person's life. More crucially, such a mistake can cause social harm, and the consequences can affect people who do not appear to be involved in the mistake (Terpper et al., 2014).

Social structures (institutions, social groupings, social status, and roles), culture (beliefs, values, religion, ethnic origin, and language, among others), family of origins, unconscious motivations, habitual patterns, and personality traits are among the influential variables in marriage (Knox et al., 2019). On the other hand, marriage, like life, is a system of habits that one builds. As a result, couples can develop a healthy and happy relationship by practice (Skurtu, 2018). In other words, happiness and success in life do not come naturally and are contingent upon the couple's attributes and efforts. In other words, marriages can be successful or unsuccessful based on the partners' features, activities, and behaviors (Mazzuca et al., 2019). Happily married couples had a longer and healthier life expectancy than divorced and single persons, according to studies (Lawrence et al., 2019).

Success in marriage entails spouses establishing a sense of serenity and fulfillment through a spiritual and moral perspective and by engaging in happiness-producing actions in the presence of others as part of their constructive marriage. Couples that are happy and successful share four characteristics: the ability to resolve conflicts, manage money and expenses, spend leisure time with family and friends, and mutual understanding and respect (Khojasteh Mehr and Mohammadi, 2016). Additionally, successful marriages exhibit certain traits. Several of these features are discernible prior

to marriage. For instance, those whose cognitive problem-solving mechanisms are activated in response to a challenge report having successful marriages (Spinellis, 2018).

A variety of psychological needs, such as love and affection, friendship, and security, are met in successful marriages. Mutual support, intimacy, appreciation, commitment, sexual satisfaction, agreement on fundamental issues, and attempting to satisfy each other appear to be the most significant variables in a successful marriage, and addressing these factors increases the likelihood of a happy marriage (Khodadadi Sangdeh and et al., 2015). Several studies have found that self-differentiation can improve the chances of a successful marriage. Self-differentiation, according to Bowen, refers to a person's ability to differentiate between the thought and emotional processes. Even when one partner is differentiated, it can put the other partner on the same path and result in a happy marriage. When a person can balance his ideas and emotions, he is at his most self-differentiation.

By striking a balance between reason and feeling, couples can maintain relative independence while remaining dependent on one another and avoid losing their identity in a marriage (Haefner, 2014). The ability to maintain relative independence while maintaining an emotionally balanced connection is a hallmark of couples who have healthy and satisfying relationships, and so an adequate level of self-differentiation can be critical to a successful marriage (Lohan and Gubta, 2016) because people with low differentiation absorb anxiety and show emotional reactivity in marital conflicts.

The less differentiated a person is, the more likely he or she is to become emotionally fused with others in order to establish an undifferentiated self (Boehlander, 1999). As a result, emotions can be said to play an essential and vital role in the lives of couples (Bloch et al., 2014). Emotional skills are prevalent in partner interactions (Mirgain and Cordova, 2007). These abilities contribute to marital fulfillment by fostering intimacy. Knowledge of the nature and expression of emotions, as well as how to control and use them appropriately, can be a valuable resource in the adjustment of couples. Emotions were once thought to be chaotic, accidental, irrational, and immature, and emotion and reason were thought to be opposed.

Emotions and intellect are no longer at odds, contrary to popular belief, rather emotions and feelings can now work in tandem with intellect (Akbari Zardkhaneh et al., 2014). The majority of your existence is made up of emotions. Emotions can be seen in reasoning and rationality in both direct and indirect ways. Ignoring emotions, not controlling them, and expressing them carelessly can put people's lives at risk. The ability to express emotion makes facing life's obstacles easier, and it leads to improved mental health and, eventually, a better life. Emotionally empowered people are able to recognize their feelings in a variety of settings, understand their consequences, and effectively communicate their emotional states to others. These individuals are better at coping with adverse experiences and adapting to their surroundings and others than those who lack the ability to understand and communicate their emotional states (Goleman, 1995). These people, it could be stated, do not conform to the beliefs and desires of others and freely express their own thoughts and ideas.

Given our culture's regard for listening to and respecting elders, it seems that there is no complete separation from the primary family after marriage, which might pose challenges for couples. According to Bowen's family systems theory, a person's level of differentiation is formed in his family of origins, and the degree of self-differentiation influences the degree of desire for independence and intimacy, as well as the quality of marital relationships and, as a result, marriage stability and success. According to this view, self-differentiation, in fact, provides the groundwork for closeness and mutual acceptance in marriage. Men and women with low degrees of self-differentiation are likely to have less emotional maturity at the time of marriage, as well as a restricted capacity for intimacy and oneness, which can be a major factor affecting divorce and fundamental difficulties in relationships. The goal of this study is to look at the link between a successful marriage and cognitive emotion regulation mediated by self-differentiation.

Method

This was a cross-sectional study since it examined pertinent data over a defined time period and was a correlation research design using structural equation modeling. The population consisted of all married men and women living together in Tehran at the time of the study. To create a representative sample for data gathering, a random sampling technique was applied. Thus,

districts 1, 5, 6, 10, and 17 of Tehran were randomly selected, and then sample members were recruited using an accessible and purposeful technique by referring to the Neighborhood Houses or schools in the designated districts. 635 participants were chosen based on inclusion criteria (being married, being in the first marriage, no history of divorce, being married for around 5 to 20 years) and exclusion (incomplete or distorted questionnaire). The sample size was determined using the formula 5Qn10Q, where Q is the total number of items included in the study questionnaires (Hooman, 2005). It should be emphasized that the questionnaires were handed to everyone and they were requested to respond anonymously to the questions and submit them at their next visit.

Instruments

Index of Marital Satisfaction. The successful marriage was measured using a standard 25-item questionnaire (IMS) or Index of marital satisfaction created by Hudson (1992). The severity of marital problems and marital satisfaction can be understood determined by this questionnaire. The Likert scale is used to score this questionnaire, with answers ranging from 1 to 7 (1 = never, 2 = very seldom, 3 = comparatively low, 4 = sometimes, 5 = reasonably high, 6 = most of the time, and 7 = constantly). Cronbach's alpha of .96 in women and .94 in men was reported by Ebrahimnejad (2002). Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this questionnaire was .96, according to the original developer (Sanaei Zakir, 2008). Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this questionnaire was calculated to be .92 in this study.

Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ). The Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire developed by Garnefski, Kraaij, and Spinhoven (2001) was used to assess cognitive emotion regulation. The scale is a 36-item self-report instrument that uses a 5-point Likert scale from always to never to assess cognitive emotion regulation strategies following stressful life experiences. This measure evaluates nine cognitive strategies for emotion control and regulation including self-blame, acceptance, rumination, positive refocusing, refocus on planning, positive reappraisal, putting into perspective, catastrophizing, and other-blame. These nine components can be classified into two broad subscales: positive and negative emotion regulation. Garnefski et al. (2002) found an alpha coefficient for the

subscales of this questionnaire ranging from .71 to .81. Hassani (2010) validated the Persian version of this questionnaire in Iran, reporting reliability ranging from .76 to .92. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this questionnaire was calculated to be .77 in the current study.

Self-Difference Inventory. We used the standard self-differentiation Inventory (DSI) created by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) and revised by Skowron and Schmidt to assess self-differentiation (2003). Younesi (2006) validated this instrument in Iran, reporting a reliability coefficient of .85. This questionnaire is a self-assessment instrument with 46 items that is meant to assess individuals' differentiation. Its primary focus is on adults, their significant relationships, and their existing family interactions. This questionnaire includes a 6-point Likert scale and four subscales: emotional reactivity, I position, emotional cut-off, and fusion. In the study by SKowron and Dandy (1998), its reliability was reported to be .88. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this questionnaire was calculated to be .77 in the current study.

Procedure

After the university research committee approved the proposal, study questionnaires were delivered to participants by referring to schools and neighborhoods in various locations, describing the issue and its importance in daily life, and emphasizing anonymity and voluntary participation. Participants were first exposed to the research topic, and if they were comfortable, they were invited to answer questions at home before delivering their answers. A brief and explicit description of how to answer the questions, the objective of the research, and its application in predicting the future of marriage, as well as the comfort and health of the family, were provided at the start of the questionnaire.

Ethical principles were attempted to be taken into account at all stages of the research. While offering participants the freedom to choose whether or not to participate in the research and ensuring that confidentiality guidelines are enforced, efforts were taken to respect individuals' privacy.

Results

The current study's main hypothesis was that "self-differentiation is correlated with successful marriage through cognitive emotion regulation mediation." To test this hypothesis, descriptive statistics were used to

determine the mean and standard deviation of the research's main variables, and the structural equation modeling was used in the inferential part according to its nature, as detailed below.

There were 315 women (49.64 percent) and 320 men (50.36 percent) among the 635 total participants. The majority of the participants were in their 30s and 40s. In addition, 9.1 percent (58 people) had a school diploma, 40.1 percent (255 people) had a diploma, 40.5 percent (257 people) had a bachelor's degree, 8.8 percent (56 people) had a master's degree, and 1.5 percent (9 people) had a Ph.D. In terms of marital duration, 7.3 percent (46 people) were married for 5 years, 24.8 percent (158 people) were married for 6 to 10 years, 33.2 percent (211 people) were married for 11 to 15 years, and 34.7 percent (220 people) were married when they were 16 to 20 years old.

Table 1

Results of descriptive statistics and normality of research variables (Shapiro-Wilkes test)

Variable	Shapiro–Wilk Statistics	Kurtosis	Skewness	SD	M	P
Successful marriage	.99	.71	.76	9.11	104.13	.24
Cognitive emotion regulation	.99	.27	.94	16.01	147.66	.56
Adaptive regulation	.99	.75	.62	13.44	92.32	.86
Maladaptive regulation	.92	.79	.51	11.79	82.93	.36
Self-differentiation	.99	.56	.58	10.14	121.50	.70
Emotional reactivity	.99	.70	.02	8.64	48.11	.35
I position	.99	.71	.67	6.20	52.08	.90
Emotional cut-off	.99	.77	.57	9.20	53.53	.16
Fusion	.99	1.00	.84	9.19	50.71	.47

According to Table 1, successful marriages, cognitive emotion regulation, and self-differentiation are all at a moderate degree. Additionally, the adaptive component (92.32) and the emotional cut-off component (53.53) have the

highest averages in the "cognitive emotion regulation" dimension and the "self-differentiation" dimension, respectively. Additionally, Table 1 shows that the skewness and kurtosis indexes of the variables are between 2 and -2, indicating that the variable distribution is very comparable to the normal distribution. The Shapiro-Wilkes test has a significance level larger than 0.05 for research variables. That is, the null hypothesis is accepted, or the data distribution is assumed to be normal. Table 2 shows the factor loads and significant values extracted using AMOS software.

Table 2

Significance of measurement models

variable	Items	Factor loadings	Critical ratio	p
Successful marriage	IMS2	.71	8.32	.001
	IMS8	.83	9.58	.001
	IMS11	.77	8.91	.001
	IMS13	.70	8.22	.001
	IMS19	.89	10.11	.001
	IMS20	.73	8.51	.001
	IMS21	.82	9.45	.001
	IMS23	.85	9.72	.001
Self-differentiation	Emotional reactivity	.75	8.75	.001
	I position	.79	9.18	.001
	Emotional cut-off	.91	10.36	.001
	Fusion	.80	9.28	.001
Cognitive emotion regulation	Adaptive	.80	9.23	.001
	Maladaptive	.82	9.48	.001

The findings in Table 2 show that factor loadings are greater than .7 and the critical ratio is greater than 2.56, indicating that the factor loadings in the measurement models are significant at the 99 percent confidence level.

Table 3 summarizes the direct and indirect effects of the independent and mediating variables, as well as the dependent variable.

Table 3

Results of direct and indirect effects of independent and mediation variables on the dependent variable

Relationship		Standard coefficient of direct/indirect effect		Total effect	Critical ratio	*p*
Self-differentiation	→ successful marriage	.26	-------	------	3.83	.001
Self-differentiation	→ Cognitive emotion regulation	.19	-------	------	3.14	.001
Cognitive emotion regulation	→ successful marriage	.43	---------	---------	5.59	.001
Self-differentiation on successful marriage	→ Cognitive emotion regulation	.19× .43= .081		.27	2.01	.019
VAF index	total effect ÷ indirect effect= .23					

The data in Table 3 indicate that, at a level of 99 percent confidence, self-differentiation has a direct and significant effect on successful marriage (critical ratio equal to 3.83 which is more than 2.56). Given the positive nature of this correlation, as self-differentiation increases, so does the possibility of a successful marriage (the direct standard coefficient of the relationship is .26 and is significant).

Additionally, the data in the table above demonstrate that self-differentiation has a statistically significant influence on cognitive regulation of emotion at a 95% confidence level (critical ratio equal to 3.14 which is more than 2.56). Due to the positive nature of this relationship, as self-differentiation increases, cognitive regulation of emotion increases as well (the direct standard coefficient of the relationship is equal to .19 and is significant).

Additional data in Table 3 indicate that the indirect effect of self-differentiation on a successful marriage is equal to .081 when .19 is multiplied by .43. Since the critical ratio of indirect effect is more than 1.96 and the significance level is less than .05, therefore the indirect impact is significant. The total effect (direct + indirect) is equal to .27, and the VAF index is equal to .23, which is within the range of .2 and .8, indicating that cognitive emotion regulation plays a minor mediating function. As a result, the main hypothesis of the study is confirmed.

Discussion and conclusion

The main hypothesis of this study was that self-differentiation via cognitive emotion regulation mediation had an effect on a successful marriage, which was validated by the findings. This research supports Bowen's theory. Additionally, these findings are consistent with those of Luhan and Gubta (2016) and Biadsy-Ashkar & Peleg (2013), who discovered a substantial association between marital satisfaction and differentiation, as well as the importance of differentiation in couple adjustment. They concluded that differentiation is a strong predictor of marital conflict and satisfaction, with a negative correlation between marital conflict and contentment. Additionally, the research findings are consistent with Park and Byun's (2017) findings on the effectiveness of self-differentiation training.

Additionally, their research found that low levels of self-differentiation have a detrimental influence on marital satisfaction and intimacy, resulting in a vicious cycle of marital conflict. Additionally, Mohammadi, Alibakhshi, and Seddiqi's (2019) research demonstrated that training and developing self-differentiation improves couples' relationships. In their study, Mustafa et al. (1400) established a substantial association between self-differentiation and codependence, and emotional abuse. They noted that self-differentiation training can help couples lessen the negative impacts of codependence and emotional abuse, hence improving and enhancing their relationships and marital satisfaction.

To explain the present study's findings, Bowen asserts that a person's level of differentiation is formed in his family of origins; hence, couples are significantly influenced by the dynamics and interactions of their family of origins. Bowen also believes that individuals join marriages with the lifestyle patterns and degree of differentiation established in their family of origins.

Arianfar and Rasouli (2017) discovered a positive correlation between the health of one's family of origins and marital satisfaction. They stated that communication patterns are formed within the family of origins and have an impact on how future relationships and problems outside the family of origins are resolved. In other words, Bowen asserts that the emotional context of the child's family of origins has an effect on his or her ability to establish self-differentiation. In a family with well-differentiated parents, children gradually learn to regard themselves as a single, distinct but connected family member. They learn how to manage their emotions and make sound judgments about their beliefs, values, and beliefs. In comparison, when parents lack differentiation, children tend to follow in their parent's footsteps or take a reactive stance toward their values and ideas. Individuals with greater differentiation appear to be more flexible, allowing for more intimate connection, tolerating differences of opinion, and suffering less emotional passivity. Additionally, empirical data has demonstrated the influences of their level of differentiation on several aspects of mental health, and differentiation has been identified as a critical factor in supporting mental health (Rodríguez et al., 2019). According to Kerr and Bowen (1988; cited in Hoseinian & Najafloui, 2012), individuals with low levels of differentiation are more likely to experience psychological and physical difficulties as a result of their high levels of chronic worry. They argued that psychological and physical difficulties contribute to the absorption of chronic worry, which results in family dysfunction and maladaptation.

According to systems theory, when self-differentiation is low, there is a risk of fusion, which results in a loss of individuality and greater similarity of one's thoughts and feelings to those of others; Since the process of self-differentiation is based on conscious control of anxiety, self-differentiation, which is a way of expressing and separating feelings and thoughts, reduces anxiety in marital relationships and provides an opportunity for the development of a strong self and the expression of personal opinions. This issue has a significant impact on couples' relationships. Bohlander (1999) notes that the less differentiated an individual is, the more likely he or she is to emotionally fuse with others in order to establish an undifferentiated self. This emotional fusion of two undifferentiated individuals into a single self

occurs frequently in personal relationships, most notably in marriage. Yet, the greater the degree of differentiation in a relationship, the higher the marital satisfaction and general satisfaction with the couple's life (Işık et al., 2020).

Given that self-differentiation training strengthens an individual's ability to distinguish thoughts from feelings, it's natural to expect that improving or increasing self-differentiation will result in an increase in marital satisfaction; that is, it enables a person to develop the skills necessary to control and regulate emotions, as well as to have a clear definition of self and beliefs, and to better define the direction and purpose of their lives, and maintain control during strong emotional situations that often result in spontaneous responses and poor judgments, and make rational and logical decisions and behave more appropriately in interpersonal roles and settings.

Self-differentiation training also helps individuals distinguish between thoughts and feelings, resulting in increased emotional maturity. Additionally, because self-differentiation helps people exhibit a less avoidant attachment style in their relationships and to trust others more, it results in increased levels of trust in married life, as those with secure attachment view their spouse as more reliable and trustworthy (Tuason, 2000). In this sense, it can also help predict a successful marriage.

In general, differentiated individuals feel free to experience intense emotions, are capable of regulating them, and have access to them; they are also capable of identifying and expressing their personal thoughts. Individuals who achieve the highest level of differentiation are recognized as having their own defined boundaries, whilst those who are not emotionally differentiated experience psychological problems (Khodayari Fard and Abedini, 2011).

Because this study provides some evidence on improving couples' quality of life, it is proposed that counselors and psychologists investigate self-differentiation training and cognitive emotion regulation strategies for premarital counseling as well as enriching couples' relationships. In other words, because of the study's relational nature, it's possible that as self-differentiation improves, so does the adoption of adaptive strategies for regulating emotions, and as a result, couples' quality of life improves, and a successful marriage is anticipated. Meanwhile, the current research is confined to the years 2019-2020, and we must be cautious when generalizing the findings. Furthermore, the primary instrument for measuring variables was a questionnaire, and the downside of self-report instruments is the possibility

of social desirability. As a result, it is recommended that the subjects be studied in future studies through interviews and clinical observations.

Compliance with research ethics

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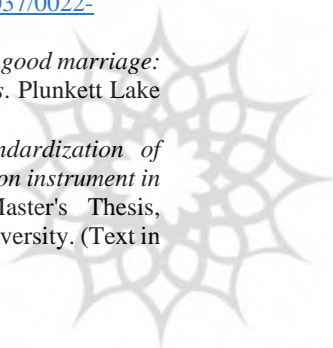
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