Original Article

The Correlation between Self-Differentiation and Emotional Experiences toward the Spouse with the Probability of Divorce among Married Female Students

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Abstract

Background: Understanding the factors that influence divorce can help individuals and couples make informed decisions about their relationships and seek appropriate support. The study aimed to investigate the correlation between self-differentiation and emotional experiences towards the spouse and the probability of divorce among married female students.

Methods: This study used a descriptive-correlational design to examine the relationship between divorce probability, self-differentiation, and emotional experiences in married female students at Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz, Iran in 2023. A convenience sample of 304 participants was selected. Data were collected using the Divorce Probability Questionnaire (DPQ), Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI), and Experiences of Emotions Towards Spouse Questionnaire (EETSQ). Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. Correlation coefficients and regression were employed to examine the correlations between the variables.

Results: The results revealed a significant negative correlation between self-differentiation and the probability of divorce (r=-35, P=0.001). Additionally, emotional experiences towards the spouse were negatively and significantly correlated with the probability of divorce (r=-33, P=0.001).

Conclusions: The findings suggested that self-differentiation and emotional experiences towards the spouse are significantly correlated with the probability of divorce among married female students. By understanding the importance of self-differentiation and positive emotional experiences, interventions can be developed to help couples strengthen their relationships and reduce the risk of divorce.

Keywords: Divorce, Emotions, Women, Self-differentiation

1. Introduction

Married female students, like individuals in all stages of life, face the significant challenge of navigating the complexities of marriage and building a shared life with their partners (1). While mutual love and affection are often seen as the cornerstone of a successful marriage, the reality is often more complex. When married life does not meet expectations, couples may experience disillusionment, discouragement, and a decline in their mutual affection (2). Over time, unresolved conflicts can lead to resentment and indifference, marking the final stages of emotional connection between a man and a woman and ultimately culminating in divorce (3).

Divorce can manifest in two forms: overt and formal, resulting in the dissolution of the family unit, or covert, where the family maintains its outward structure but is emotionally hollow, a condition known as emotional divorce (4). The divorce rate in Iran has shown a rapid increase compared with the past two decades, reaching one divorce for every three marriages in 2019. Experts believed that formal divorce often follows emotional divorce (5). Official divorce statistics do not fully reflect the extent of marital failure, as a larger proportion is attributed to emotional divorce, which is not officially recorded and lacks precise data. According to one estimate, the prevalence of emotional divorce among Iranian couples is reported to be 40.9%, indicating its high

incidence in Iran (5). Recent study indicated that a significant proportion of Iranian couples, roughly 50%, report marital dissatisfaction. Furthermore, approximately 10% of Iranian individuals experience emotional divorce (6). Given these recent statistics and their severity, it is imperative to identify and implement processes and strategies to protect families from such harm and challenges.

Studies showed that self-differentiation among couples is increasingly effective in improving their relationships. It can be argued that one of the reasons for the likelihood of divorce is the lack of self-differentiation among couples, while family health plays a role in increasing self-differentiation (7, 8). Self-differentiation can be examined at two levels. Firstly, as a process that occurs within an individual. Secondly, as a process that occurs in interpersonal relationships. At the interpersonal level, self-differentiation reflects an individual's ability to maintain a sense of self as a unique person, separate from others, despite having deep intimate relationships. Individually, self-differentiation involves the ability to separate thoughts from emotions (9). It encompasses emotional maturity, rational thinking under emotional pressure, and the capacity for healthy, intimate relationships (10). From Bowen's perspective, individuals with higher levels of differentiation are associated with increased movement toward complex emotional relationships and decreased symptoms of stress and anxiety (11). Individuals with higher levels of differentiation experience less stress in response to stressors, enjoy better mental health, and experience a quicker recovery from experienced stress compared with individuals with lower levels of differentiation (12). In line with this, Hosseini-Ghidari and colleagues (13) found a weak direct correlation between irrational beliefs and the tendency toward divorce among women. There was a weak indirect correlation between individual differentiation and the tendency toward divorce among women.

In this context, it is impossible to ignore the emotional experiences that couples have towards each other in the formation or lack thereof of marital conflicts and the probability of divorce (14). Experiencing various emotions towards one's spouse can significantly influence the changes and transformations in their marital and family life (15). For a couple to have a healthy marital relationship, marital relationship education alone is insufficient. Marriage and marital life are intertwined with a rich fabric of emotions and affection, and most conflicts between couples arise due to emotional arousal (16). Individuals vary in their ability to accurately perceive and recognize their own and others' emotions (17). A lack of proper understanding of marital emotions can lead to emotional turmoil and result in sadness and even psychological harm (18). What is damaged in relationships is an individual's positive feelings about themselves and their spouse. When feelings about a spouse are hurt, trust decreases, mistrust is activated, and attachment is threatened. Under such circumstances, with the threat to self-esteem and attachment, emotional security decreases in the individual (19).

Given the pivotal role of the family in individual lives and society, and the central importance of the husband-wife relationship within the family unit, understanding factors that contribute to marital stability is essential. In recent years, there has been a concerning decline in feelings of security, peace, and intimacy within marriages, coupled with a global rise in divorce rates. This study aimed to address a critical gap in the literature by investigating the correlation between self-differentiation, emotional experiences toward the spouse, and the likelihood of divorce among married female students. By examining these factors, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics that influence marital stability and provides valuable insights for interventions aimed at strengthening marital relationships. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the correlation between self-differentiation and emotional experiences towards the spouse and the likelihood of divorce among married female students.

2. Methods

This descriptive-correlational study examined married female students at Azad University of Ahvaz, Iran in 2023. A total of 304 individuals were selected as a convenience sample. Given the number of variables and the possibility of contaminated data, 315 individuals were initially considered as the sample. After removing incomplete questionnaires and outliers, 304 individuals had fully completed the questionnaires and were analyzed. The inclusion criteria for the study were: female gender, being married and living with a spouse, and providing informed

consent to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria were: unwillingness to cooperate with the researcher and failure to complete all items of the questionnaires.

2.1. Procedure

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines, obtaining prior approval from the institutional review board (IRB). Married female students at Azad University of Ahvaz, Iran were invited to participate through various communication channels, including university announcements, email, and personal invitations. Potential participants were provided with detailed information about the study and its implications before obtaining informed consent. The questionnaires were distributed to eligible participants, with the researcher available to clarify any questions. To ensure participant privacy, all identifying information was removed from the questionnaires, and participants were assured of strict confidentiality and anonymity.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Divorce Probability Questionnaire (DPQ)

The Divorce Probability Questionnaire (DPQ) assesses two dimensions: 1) desire to leave (tendency towards divorce) and 2) desire to compromise. This questionnaire consists of 14 items on a 7-point Likert scale (Never: 1, Rarely: 2, Very Rarely: 3, Sometimes: 4, Often: 5, Very Often: 6, Always: 7). The score range is between 14-98. A score between 14-33 indicates a low level of inclination towards divorce, a score between 33-66 indicates a moderate level of inclination towards divorce, and a score between 66-98 indicates a high level of inclination towards divorce among couples (20). Consistent with the findings of Hosseini-Ghidari and colleagues (13), DPQ demonstrated high reliability in the present study, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 for women. In their study, the questionnaire exhibited excellent reliability (α=0.90) and satisfactory content validity (CVI=0.91, CVR=0.89). In the present study, the reliability of DPQ was 0.83 using Cronbach's alpha.

2.2.2. Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI)

The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI) is a 46-item self-report measure assessing individual self-differentiation. Participants rate items on a 6-point Likert scale across four subscales: affective congruence, self-evaluation, emotional avoidance, and emotional reactivity. A total score is calculated by summing responses across all items (21). Consistent with previous research (22), DSI demonstrated strong psychometric properties in the present study. DSI exhibited excellent internal consistency, as evidenced by a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.85. Additionally, DSI demonstrated satisfactory content validity, with a CVI of 0.75 and a CVR of 0.70.

2.2.3. Experiences of Emotions Towards Spouse Questionnaire (EETSQ)

This questionnaire assesses emotional experiences towards a spouse using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). The questionnaire is divided into two subscales: positive emotions (fear, anger, jealousy, sadness, anxiety, and hatred) and negative emotions (happiness, hope, and love) (23). Javanbakht and Yousefi (23) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85 and confirmed its construct validity through exploratory factor analysis. Additionally, DSI demonstrated satisfactory content validity, with a CVI of 0.86 and a CVR of 0.83 (23). They reported its psychometric properties as adequate. The questionnaire demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data gathered in this study were analyzed using SPSS version 27. For descriptive analysis, mean and standard deviation were calculated, while Pearson correlation coefficient and multiple regression analyses were employed at the inferential level to investigate the relationships among self-differentiation, emotional experiences toward the spouse, and the potential for divorce among students.

3. Results

The sample comprised 304 married female students enrolled in various undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs at Azad University of Ahvaz, Iran. The average age of the participants was 32.17 years, with a standard deviation of 4.75 years. The majority of students were pursuing Master's degrees (n=184, 60.5%), followed by Undergraduate students (n=104, 34.2%) and

Table 1: Means, standard deviations (SD), skewness, kurtosis, and Pearson correlation coefficients of the study variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Correlation coefficients
Probability of divorce	55.30	11.75	-0.26	-0.46	1
Self-differentiation	160.35	26.79	-0.01	-0.11	-0.35**
Emotional experiences towards the spouse	122.20	24.38	0.01	-0.18	-0.33**

**P<0.001; SD: Standard Deviation

Table 2: Results of multiple regression analysis

Variables	B	SE	β	t	P
Self-differentiation	-0.45	0.23	0.30	2.06	0.001
Emotional experiences towards the spouse	-0.49	0.31	0.36	3.30	0.001

Doctoral students (n=16, 5.3%). Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis, and Pearson correlation coefficients for the variables examined in this study. Participants exhibited a mean divorce probability of 55.30, with a standard deviation of 11.75. The average self-differentiation score was recorded at 160.35, with a standard deviation of 26.79. Finally, the mean score for emotional experiences towards the spouse was 122.20, with a standard deviation of 24.38. Based on the results, self-differentiation was negatively and significantly correlated with the probability of divorce (r=-0.35, P=0.001). Similarly, emotional experiences toward the spouse also showed a negative and significant correlation with the probability of divorce (r=0-0.33, P=0.001).

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine which variable had a stronger association with the probability of divorce. Self-differentiation and emotional experiences toward the spouse were entered as explanatory variables, and the probability of divorce was entered as the criterion variable. The multiple regression analysis presented in Table 2 demonstrates a significant correlation between self-differentiation and emotional experiences toward the spouse and the probability of divorce among married female students. The combined effect of these variables was significantly related to the probability of divorce (β=0.36). This indicates that higher levels of self-differentiation and positive emotional experiences toward the spouse are associated with lower odds of divorce.

4. Discussion

This study investigated the association between self-differentiation, emotional experiences toward the spouse, and the probability of divorce among married female students. The findings of this study indicated a significant negative correlation between self-differentiation and the probability of divorce among married female students. The results of this study revealed a noteworthy negative correlation between self-differentiation and the probability of divorce among married female students. This aligns with previous research (24, 25). This outcome can be understood in light of the definition of self-differentiation, which pertains to a person's ability to sustain their own identity and emotional autonomy in intimate relationships. It reflects the individual's skill in regulating emotions and upholding personal boundaries in the context of marriage. Individuals with high levels of self-differentiation are better able to cope with marital conflicts and problems. These individuals can usually manage their emotions effectively and express their needs and expectations clearly, without being overly dependent on their spouses (25). The higher an individual's level of self-differentiation, the lower the probability of divorce. In other words, self-differentiation can act as a protective factor that helps individuals cope with marital problems in a more effective and emotionally stable manner. Individuals who are more successful in maintaining their identity and personal boundaries are usually able to reduce the probability of divorce by decreasing tensions and improving marital communication (13). Confirmation of this hypothesis can lead to the design of educational and counseling programs to improve self-differentiation in married individuals. These programs can include specific training to strengthen self-differentiation skills and improve the quality of marital relationships.

Enhanced self-differentiation can lead to a decrease in marital dissatisfaction and conflict, ultimately reducing the probability of divorce. Self-differentiation refers to an individual's ability to

maintain their identity and emotional independence within close relationships, including the ability to preserve psychological and emotional boundaries when facing relationship challenges (25). Individuals with high levels of self-differentiation are better equipped to manage conflicts in a more constructive manner. They can avoid emotional and impulsive reactions and approach problem-solving with a rational and dialogical perspective. This leads to a reduction in the intensity of conflicts and improves marital relationships (8). Self-differentiation helps individuals to maintain their identity and personal values during marital conflicts and challenges. This ability allows them to attend to their own needs and feelings and establish healthy boundaries within the relationship without excessive emotional dependence on their spouse (24). Overall, maintaining identity and emotional independence contributes to increased marital satisfaction. Individuals who are strong in self-differentiation typically experience greater satisfaction in their relationships and actively participate in improving the quality of their relationships.

Another finding of this study was that emotional experiences toward the spouse had a significant negative correlation with the probability of divorce among married female students. This result aligns with the findings conducted previously (26, 27). This finding can be explained by the fact that emotional experiences encompass an individual's feelings and emotional reactions in interactions with their spouse and can significantly impact the quality of a marital relationship. Positive emotional experiences such as love, empathy, and satisfaction can strengthen marital bonds and decrease the probability of divorce. Conversely, negative emotional experiences such as anger, disappointment, and dissatisfaction can lead to tension and conflict, increasing the probability of divorce (26). An individual's ability to manage and express emotions in an appropriate and effective manner plays a crucial role in the quality of a marital relationship. Negative emotional experiences that are not well-managed can contribute to increased dissatisfaction and conflict in a relationship. How one responds to emotional experiences within the marital relationship can influence the longevity and quality of the relationship. Individuals who are able to manage their emotions and exhibit positive and constructive responses toward their spouse are generally less likely to encounter serious problems

and have a lower probability of divorce (27).

Positive and supportive emotional experiences towards a spouse can increase marital satisfaction and decrease the probability of divorce. Conversely, negative and critical emotional experiences may contribute to decreased satisfaction and an increased probability of divorce (28). Individuals who report more positive and supportive feelings toward their spouse exhibit a reduced probability of divorce. This finding suggested that positive emotional experiences may serve as protective factors against marital dissolution (2). Conversely, negative emotions and dissatisfaction with one's partner have been associated with an increased risk of divorce (29). Confirmation of this hypothesis can lead to the development of educational and counseling programs to improve emotion management and enhance positive emotional experiences in marital relationships. These programs can include emotion regulation techniques, communication enhancement, and conflict resolution skills. Improving emotional experiences can help reduce dissatisfaction and conflict, ultimately decreasing the probability of divorce.

4.1. Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the results may not be fully generalizable to other populations of married women due to the limited sampling of married female students from Azad University of Ahvaz, Iran. Additionally, the study was conducted within a specific academic environment, which may have imposed limitations on the generalizability of the findings. Environmental and social factors such as financial difficulties or academic pressures can influence marital relationships and should be considered in future research. Furthermore, individual variations in psychological state and marital experiences can complicate the effects of the studied variables and may require further exploration.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study suggested that self-differentiation and emotional experiences towards the spouse are significantly correlated with the probability of divorce among married female students. The results demonstrated a strong negative correlation between both variables and

the probability of divorce, indicating that higher levels of self-differentiation and positive emotional experiences towards the spouse are associated with lower divorce rates. Collectively, these variables accounted for 60% of the variance in divorce probability, highlighting their substantial influence on marital stability. Notably, self-differentiation was more strongly correlated with the probability of divorce than emotional experiences, suggesting that the ability to maintain one's own identity within a relationship is a crucial factor in preventing divorce. These findings contribute to a growing body of research on the factors associated with marital satisfaction and dissolution. By understanding the importance of self-differentiation and positive emotional experiences, interventions can be developed to help couples strengthen their relationships and reduce the risk of divorce.

Authors' Contribution

Tahere Amirahmadi: Substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data for the work, drafting the work and reviewing it critically for important intellectual content. Hamdollah Jayervand: Substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data for the work, drafting the work and reviewing it critically for important intellectual content. Farzaneh Hooman: Substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data for the work, drafting the work and reviewing it critically for important intellectual content. Rezvan Homaei: Substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work, acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work, drafting the work and reviewing it critically for important intellectual content. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, such as the questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work.

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Ethical Approval

The research received approval from the Ethical Committee of Islamic Azad University-Ahvaz Branch, Ahvaz, Iran with the code of IR.IAU. AHVAZ.REC.1403.002. Also, written informed consent was obtained from the participants.

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