

Investigating the Mediating Role of Self-Differentiation in the Association between Self-Silencing and Divorce Proneness in Women

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Abstract

Background: Behaviors of self-silencing, in which individuals prioritize harmony in relationships by repressing their personal needs and wishes, often lead to considerable emotional strain and interpersonal difficulties. The present study investigated how self-differentiation serves as a mediator in the complex link connecting self-silencing to the likelihood of divorce among women.

Methods: The present descriptive-correlational study was conducted in 2024. The statistical population comprised married women residing in Karaj, Iran, from which a convenience sample of 350 individuals was recruited. For data collection, Silencing the Self Scale (STSS), revised Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI-R), and Divorce Proneness Questionnaire (DPQ) were used. For data analysis, Pearson correlation and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were applied, using SPSS version 27 and SmartPLS version 3, to evaluate the direct and indirect relationships between the constructs.

Results: Our findings revealed a significant positive association between self-silencing ($M=95.44$, $SD=15.20$) and divorce proneness ($M=56.83$, $SD=12.77$) ($\beta=0.28$, $P<0.001$), and significant negative associations between self-differentiation ($M=180.61$, $SD=25.36$) and both self-silencing ($\beta=-0.37$, $P<0.001$) and divorce proneness ($\beta=-0.49$, $P<0.001$). Self-differentiation significantly mediated the association between self-silencing and divorce proneness ($\beta=0.18$, $P<0.001$), with higher self-silencing linked to lower self-differentiation which, in turn, predicted increased divorce proneness.

Conclusions: The present study underscored the paramount importance of fostering self-differentiation as a vital protective factor against relational distress and the propensity for divorce, particularly when such challenges stem from self-silencing behaviors within marital contexts.

Keywords: Women's Health; Divorce; Self-concept; Emotional Regulation; Marital Conflict

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1. Introduction

The institution of marriage, a cornerstone of societal structure across cultures, is intended to be a source of profound emotional connection, support, and shared well-being. However, contemporary societies, including those in the Middle East, are witnessing an alarming rise in marital dissolution and a corresponding increase in divorce rates (1). This escalating trend presents significant societal challenges, impacting not only the individuals involved but also their families, particularly children, and the broader community. For women, the experience of marital distress and divorce can be especially complex, often entailing unique psychological, social, and economic hardships (2). In many contexts, women disproportionately bear the burden of marital breakdown, facing stigma, reduced financial security, and significant shifts in their social roles (3). Therefore, understanding

the intricate psychological dynamics that predispose women to marital instability and divorce proneness is of paramount importance. The present study addressed married women, recognizing their pivotal role within family structures and the distinct pressure conditions they may experience. Exploring the underlying psychological vulnerabilities and protective factors within this population is crucial for developing effective interventions aimed at promoting marital health and preventing family disintegration.

A key psychological factor influencing relationship health is self-silencing, a concept rooted in relational-cultural theory that involves routinely stifling personal opinions, emotions, and requirements to preserve connections or sidestep disagreements (4). This pattern frequently arises from entrenched cultural norms, especially those pressuring women to place others' priorities above

their own and uphold relational balance, regardless of the emotional toll. Although it may appear adaptive, persistent self-silencing frequently results in numerous adverse mental health effects, such as heightened risks of depressive symptoms, anxious states, diminished self-worth, and a deep feeling of disconnection from one's true self (5). In the realm of marriage, such silencing undermines authentic closeness, breeds underlying bitterness, and obstructs the honest dialogue essential for addressing disputes and building shared empathy. Empirical evidence repeatedly associates elevated self-silencing with reduced marital contentment and greater relational strain, positioning it as an essential element in exploring couple interactions and routes toward marital dissolution (6, 7).

In contrast, self-differentiation—a fundamental idea in Bowen's Family Systems Theory—provides a framework for examining emotional maturity and the quality of interpersonal bonds (8). It describes a person's capacity to preserve a distinct identity and independence alongside emotional ties to those around them. This construct includes two primary aspects: the skill to separate one's internal experiences, such as thoughts and emotions (intrapsychic differentiation), and the strength to uphold personal values and boundaries in high-stakes emotional interactions without excessive fusion or defensiveness (interpersonal differentiation) (9). People with strong differentiation tend to manage their feelings effectively, maintain rational thinking amid pressure, and handle relational obstacles while upholding their core identity. They resist undue influence from affective demands, display increased adaptability, and cultivate deeper, more balanced connections (10). Empirical work has repeatedly shown that elevated self-differentiation correlates with superior mental health, stronger partnership fulfillment, and more effective dispute management, serving as a safeguard against emotional turmoil in relationships and supporting enduring marital harmony (11, 12).

The interplay between self-silencing, self-differentiation, and marital outcomes highlights a critical area for investigation. While self-silencing represents a potential vulnerability, self-differentiation may serve as a significant protective factor. Understanding how these constructs interact can provide invaluable insights into the complex pathways leading to divorce proneness in women. Although an expanding collection of

studies has examined these constructs in isolation (2, 3), investigations that pinpoint the mediating influence of self-differentiation on the connection between self-silencing and marital dissolution tendencies—especially among Iranian women—are notably scarce. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the mediating role of self-differentiation in the relationship between self-silencing and divorce proneness among women.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

This descriptive-correlational study primarily aimed at investigating the associations among psychological variables and exploring a specific mediating pathway.

2.2. Selection and Description of Participants

The present study was conducted in 2024, focusing on a statistical population comprising all married women who referred to psychological counseling and psychological services centers under the supervision of the Psychology and Welfare Organization of Karaj, Iran. A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants, with a sample size of 350 determined based on 10 participants per observed variable in Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), as recommended by Kline (13). Given the 34 observed variables across the three instruments used in this study, a minimum sample of 340 was required, and 350 participants were recruited to ensure adequate statistical power. The final sample comprised 350 married women, all of whom met the predetermined inclusion criteria: being legally married, residing in Karaj, being over 18 years of age, and providing informed consent to participate. Conversely, the exclusion criteria were established to ensure the generalizability of findings to a non-clinical population, specifically excluding individuals with a diagnosed severe psychological disorder or those currently engaged in marital therapy. Throughout the entire research process, all participants received explicit assurances regarding their anonymity and the strict confidentiality of their data.

2.3. Data Collection and Measurements

The Silencing the Self Scale (STSS): The Silencing the Self Scale (STSS), created by Jack and Dill in 1992 (14), consists of 31 self-report items measuring

the extent to which people stifle their thoughts, emotions, and requirements to sustain relationships. Rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree), it yields scores from 31 to 155, where higher values signal greater self-silencing. Total scores sum all responses without reverse items and reveal subscales like externalized anger, self-sacrifice in caregiving, and reluctance to express anger, emphasizing the emotional burden of others' priorities. The Persian adaptation of STSS exhibits solid content validity (CVI=0.92; CVR=0.85), as confirmed by Davoodi and co-workers (15), with prior internal consistency at Cronbach's $\alpha=0.75$ (15). In this study, the Persian adaptation of STSS showed strong reliability ($\alpha=0.83$).

Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R): DSI-R, devised by Skowron and Friedlander (16), is a 45-item self-report tool grounded in Bowen Family Systems Theory. It evaluates a person's ability to uphold a clear self-identity amid intimate emotional ties. Covering four subscales—Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Fusion with Others, and Emotional Cutoff—responses use a 6-point Likert scale (1=not at all true of me; 6=very true of me), producing total scores of 45–270. Greater scores reflect stronger differentiation, indicating improved emotional management and relational independence. Subscale and total scores sum responses, with designated items reverse-scored per the manual. The Persian adaptation of DSI-R shows solid content validity (CVI=0.89; CVR=0.82), as noted by Ghavibazou and colleagues (17). It features reliable psychometrics, with Cronbach's α typically over 0.83 across the scale and subscales (17). In the present study, the Persian adaptation of DSI-R demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha=0.81$).

The Divorce Propensity Questionnaire (DPQ): The Divorce Proneness Questionnaire (DPQ), developed by Rusbult and colleagues (18), features 14 self-report items evaluating a person's mental readiness for ending a marriage. It delves into multiple dimensions of attitudes, emotions, and plans related to relationship longevity. Using a 7-point Likert scale (1=never; 7=constantly), it generates scores of 14–98, where higher values denote increased divorce risk. Total scores sum all items without reversals. As a key resource, DPQ flags those vulnerable to marital collapse, enabling proactive measures. The Persian adaptation of DPQ boasts robust content validity (CVI=0.91;

CVR=0.84), according to Mehri Borujeni and co-workers (19), with established reliability at Cronbach's $\alpha=0.80$ (19). In the present study, the Persian adaptation of DPQ displayed strong internal consistency ($\alpha=0.86$).

2.4. Procedure

The study secured ethical clearance from the pertinent institutional review board, confirming strict adherence to prevailing ethical standards for human-subjects research. Eligible participants were provided with a comprehensive informed consent form that clearly outlined their rights, emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, and offered strong assurances of confidentiality and data anonymity. The participants were given ample time to review the form and address any queries they might have before providing their signature. Subsequently, self-report questionnaires were administered. The participants completed these questionnaires in a private setting to ensure their comfort and minimize potential external influences, with the completion process typically taking approximately 20–25 minutes. Researchers were present to offer clarification on any instrument-related questions, strictly refraining from providing any leading information. Upon completion, all questionnaires were immediately collected to maintain data integrity and prevent any potential compromise of confidentiality.

2.5. Data Analysis

For data analysis, we used SPSS version 27 for initial examinations and SmartPLS version 3 for complex modeling. Pearson correlations were computed to assess associations among the variables of the study. The conceptual model, depicted in Figure 1, illustrates the hypothesized associations among self-silencing, self-differentiation, and divorce proneness.

3. Results

The study sample comprised 350 married women from Karaj, Iran, aged 20 to 50 years ($M=34.2$, $SD=7.8$). Regarding the level of education, 19% of the study participants held high school diplomas, and 81% had university degrees (Bachelor or higher). Out of the 350 participants, 40% were homemakers, and 60% were employed in sectors such as education, healthcare, and administration.

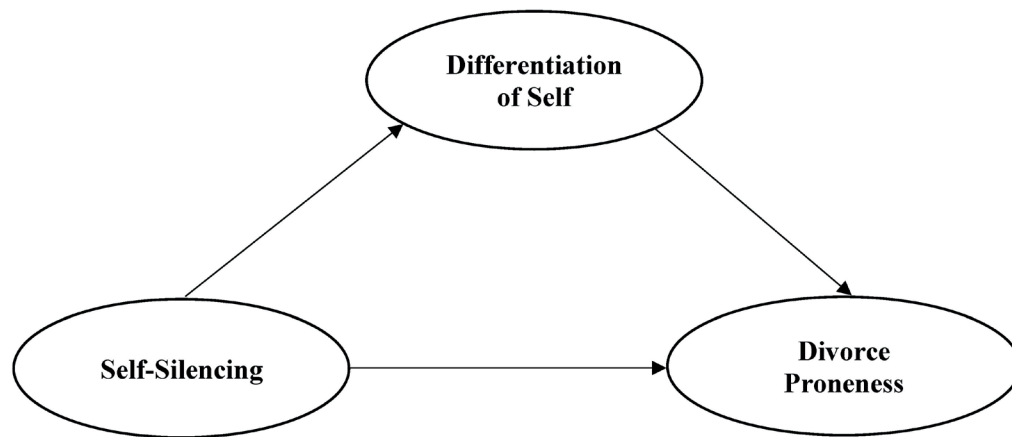


Figure 1: The figure shows the conceptual model of the research.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1- Self-silencing	95.44	15.20	-0.32	0.41	1.00		
2- Self-differentiation	180.61	25.36	0.28	-0.35	-0.38**	1.00	
3- Divorce proneness	56.83	12.77	0.19	0.27	0.45**	-0.55**	1.00

SD: Standard Deviation. **P<0.001

Table 2: Goodness-of-fit indices for the research model

Fit index	Observed value	Acceptable value
χ^2	112.58	-
df	62	-
χ^2/df	1.82	< 3.0
CFI	0.94	> 0.90
NFI	0.91	> 0.90
TLI	0.93	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.05	< 0.08
SRMR	0.06	< 0.08

CFI: Comparative Fit Index; NFI: Normed Fit Index; TLI: Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR: Standardized Root Mean Square Residual

These demographic characteristics ensured a diverse sample, enhancing the generalizability of findings to married women in similar socio-cultural contexts.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among the variables under investigation along with mean and standard deviation scores for self-silencing, self-differentiation, and divorce proneness. Additionally, the skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were found to be within acceptable ranges (between -2 and +2), thereby indicating a normal distribution and confirming their suitability for parametric statistical analyses. Of particular significance, the correlation analysis revealed statistically significant associations that align precisely with the study's a priori hypotheses.

Specifically, self-silencing demonstrated a notable positive correlation with divorce proneness ($r=0.45$, $P<0.001$), indicating that an increased tendency towards self-silencing is significantly associated with a higher propensity for divorce. Furthermore, self-differentiation exhibited significant negative correlations with both self-silencing ($r=-0.38$, $P<0.001$) and divorce proneness ($r=-0.55$, $P<0.001$), suggesting that a higher level of self-differentiation is consistently linked to reduced self-silencing behaviors and reduced inclination towards divorce.

Table 2 shows the fit indices for the structural model, illustrating the alignment of the model with the empirical data. Although the chi-square statistic was significant—a typical outcome with sizable samples—additional metrics supported an outstanding fit. The chi-square/degrees of

freedom ratio ($\chi^2/df=1.82$) fell under the 3.0 cutoff, indicating a concise and suitable model. Moreover, Comparative Fit Index (CFI=0.94), Normed Fit Index (NFI=0.91), and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI=0.93) surpassed the 0.90 benchmark, denoting robust adequacy. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA=0.05) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR=0.06) stayed under 0.08, reinforcing the model's viability. Overall, these measures confirm that the framework effectively captures the interplay between self-silencing, self-differentiation, and divorce proneness.

Table 3 details the results of both direct and indirect paths within the final structural model. The final structural model is depicted in Figure 2, illustrating the significant direct and indirect paths among self-silencing, self-differentiation, and divorce proneness. All direct pathways examined

were found to be statistically significant ($P<0.001$). In particular, self-silencing had a notable positive direct impact on divorce proneness ($\beta=0.28$), showing that greater self-silencing directly elevates the risk of marital breakdown. Self-silencing also showed a clear negative direct influence on self-differentiation ($\beta=-0.37$), implying that those prone to self-silencing often display reduced differentiation. As expected in its protective capacity, self-differentiation exerted a strong negative direct effect on divorce proneness ($\beta=-0.49$). Notably, the mediated pathway from self-silencing to divorce proneness through self-differentiation proved significant ($\beta=0.18$, $P<0.001$). This finding robustly confirmed that self-differentiation partially mediates the association, implying that self-silencing impacts divorce proneness not solely through a direct pathway, but also indirectly by undermining an individual's capacity for self-differentiation.

Table 3: Direct and mediating relationships in the research model

Path	β	SE	t	P
Self-silencing → Divorce proneness	0.28	0.03	9.33	0.001
Self-silencing → Self-differentiation	-0.37	0.04	-9.25	0.001
Self-differentiation → Divorce proneness	-0.49	0.03	-16.33	0.001
Self-silencing → Self-differentiation → Divorce proneness	0.18	0.02	9.00	0.001

SE: Standard Error

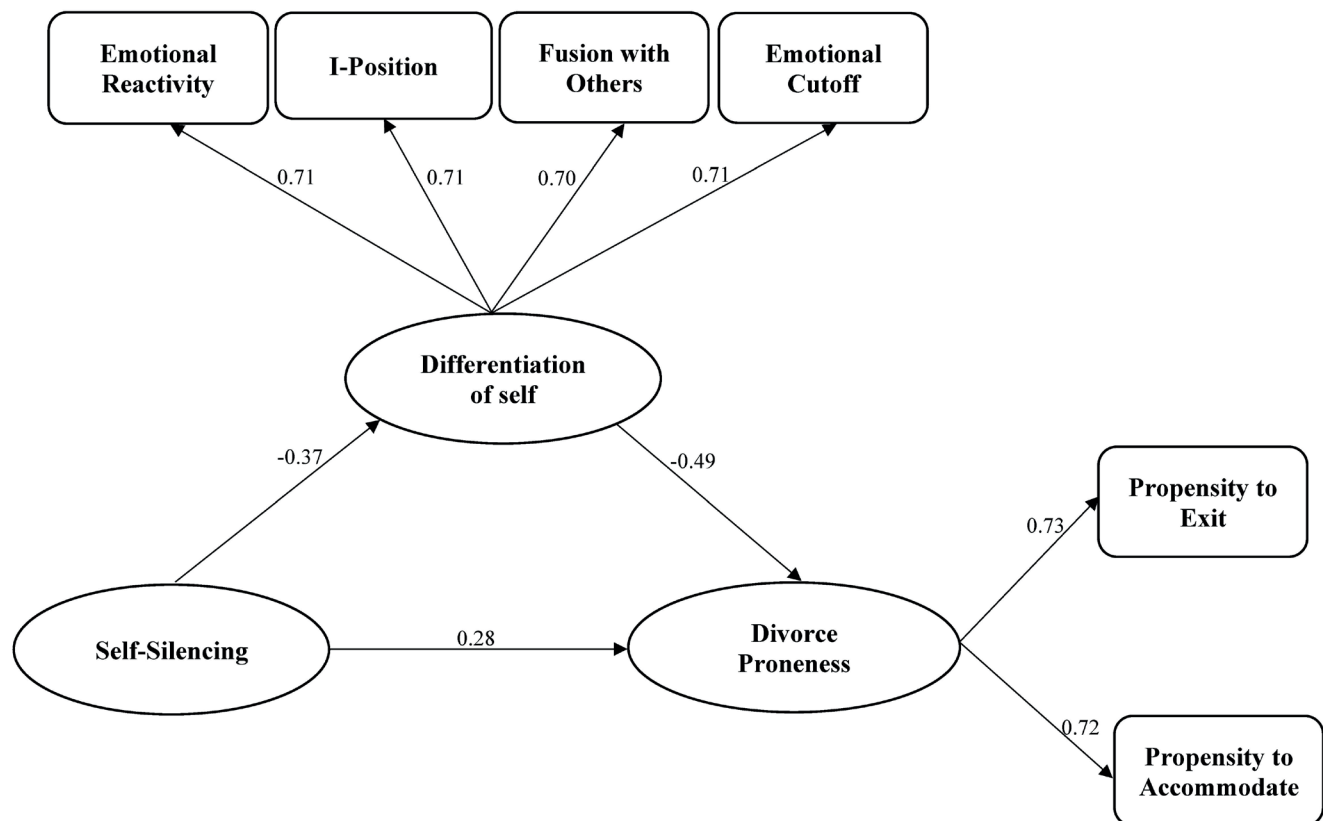


Figure 2: The figure shows the final structural model of the research.

4. Discussion

Our findings provided substantial empirical support for the hypothesized model, offering significant insights into the psychological mechanisms that contribute to marital instability. These results extend the existing literature by clarifying how suppressed self-expression can indirectly lead to an increased vulnerability to divorce through its impact on an individual's level of self-differentiation. The coherence of the findings with theoretical frameworks underscores their importance in understanding the complex dynamics within marital relationships, particularly for women who often navigate unique societal and relational pressures.

The first significant finding of this study revealed a direct positive association between self-silencing and divorce proneness. This result aligned with a growing body of literature highlighting the detrimental effects of chronically suppressing one's authentic thoughts, feelings, and needs in relationships (20, 21). When individuals, especially women, consistently prioritize the desires of their partners or the perceived harmony of the relationship over their own well-being, it can lead to unmet emotional needs, accumulating resentment, and a profound sense of inauthenticity. Over time, this emotional disengagement and lack of genuine expression can erode relational satisfaction and increase an individual's psychological inclination towards marital dissolution (22). This finding emphasized that while self-sacrifice might appear to maintain peace in the short term, it can contribute to a deeper dissatisfaction that ultimately threatens the longevity of the relationship.

Furthermore, the present study found a significant negative direct association between self-silencing and self-differentiation. This suggests that the more an individual engages in self-silencing behaviors, the lower their level of self-differentiation tends to be. This finding was theoretically consistent, as self-differentiation involves the capacity to maintain a clear sense of self and personal autonomy even within emotionally intense relationships (23). The act of habitually suppressing one's self prevents the development and expression of a distinct "I-position," which is central to differentiation. When individuals consistently merge their identity with others, or avoid expressing their true selves to prevent

conflict, they hinder their ability to distinguish between their own emotional processes and those of others (24). Consequently, this leads to lower emotional regulation, increased emotional reactivity, and an impaired capacity for genuine and mature relational functioning.

Conversely, a significant negative direct effect was observed between self-differentiation and divorce proneness, indicating that higher levels of self-differentiation are associated with a reduced inclination towards divorce. This finding underscored the protective role of self-differentiation in marital stability, aligning with Bowen's Family Systems Theory and extensive empirical evidence (11, 25). Highly differentiated individuals possess the capacity to maintain their individuality while remaining emotionally connected, enabling them to navigate marital challenges with greater emotional regulation and less reactivity. They are better equipped to engage in constructive conflict resolution, communicate their needs effectively, and resist being drawn into emotional fusion or cutoff patterns that often characterize distressed relationships (26). Their internal locus of control and clear sense of self allow them to foster healthier, more resilient marital bonds, thereby diminishing the psychological predisposition to divorce.

Most notably, the central finding of this study confirmed the significant mediating role of self-differentiation in the association between self-silencing and divorce proneness. This indicated that self-silencing contributes to divorce proneness not only directly but also indirectly by undermining an individual's self-differentiation. In essence, the process unfolds as follows: engaging in self-silencing behaviors impedes the development or maintenance of a healthy level of self-differentiation (10). This diminished capacity for differentiation then reduces an individual's ability to navigate marital challenges effectively, regulate emotions, and maintain a distinct self, ultimately increasing their vulnerability to divorce. This mediating pathway offers a more nuanced understanding of the psychological mechanisms at play, suggesting that interventions aimed at fostering self-differentiation can mitigate the negative consequences of self-silencing and bolster marital resilience (11, 27).

The findings of this study carried important

practical implications for marital counseling and intervention programs for women. Given the significant role of self-silencing and self-differentiation in divorce proneness, therapeutic approaches should focus on helping women identify and reduce self-silencing patterns. Concurrently, interventions aimed at enhancing self-differentiation, such as promoting an “I-position,” improving emotional regulation, and fostering individual autonomy within relationships, could serve as crucial preventative strategies against marital dissolution. These strategies can empower women to cultivate more authentic and resilient relationships. Our results also highlighted the necessity for culturally sensitive interventions in contexts like Iran, acknowledging specific societal expectations that may contribute to self-silencing behaviors in women.

4.1. Limitations

The present study had certain methodological constraints that merit attention. Primarily, the cross-sectional design of the study hindered causal conclusions, impeding clarity on the causal flow of relationships. Additionally, self-report tools risk distortions from social desirability or memory errors, potentially undermining result accuracy. Convenience sampling, though expedient, curtails extrapolation to wider groups, especially beyond Karaj’s cultural milieu in Iran. Finally, the female focus narrows relevance to male or heterosexual pairs. Future studies could mitigate these limitations through prospective methods for causality, varied data sources to curb biases, random sampling for wider reach, and inclusive samples to probe gender variances and expanded scope.

5. Conclusions

The present study indicated that self-silencing significantly contributes to divorce proneness among married women, both directly and, more importantly, indirectly through its adverse impact on self-differentiation. This study empirically substantiated that women who habitually suppress their authentic selves tend to exhibit lower levels of self-differentiation, which, in turn, increases their vulnerability to marital dissolution. These results underscored the critical importance of fostering self-differentiation as a psychological protective factor. The implications of the study are substantial

for both theoretical understanding of marital dynamics and developing targeted psychological interventions aimed at enhancing women’s well-being and promoting more resilient marital relationships.

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Authors’ Contribution

Seyedeh Liba Yadegari: Contributed to the conception and design of the study, the acquisition and analysis of data, interpreted the results; drafted the work. Parisa Peyvandi: Contributed to the conception and design of the study, supervised data acquisition and analysis; critically reviewed the manuscript for important intellectual content. Marjan Hosseinzadeh Taghvaei: Contributed to the design of the study, assisted in the interpretation of data; critically reviewed the manuscript for important intellectual content. Mohammadreza Beliad: Contributed to the conception of the study, provided guidance on data analysis and interpretation; critically reviewed the manuscript for important intellectual content. Saeed Mahmoodinia: Contributed to the design of the study, assisted in the interpretation of results; critically reviewed the manuscript for important intellectual content. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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Ethical Approval

The Ethics Review Board of Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran approved the present research with the code of IR.IAU.K.REC.1404.066. Also, written informed consent was obtained from the participants.

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