



Association Between Marital Infidelity Based on Fear of Intimacy and Self-differentiation Through the Mediating Role of Sexual Satisfaction in Women with Marital Conflict

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Abstract

Background & Aims: Marital infidelity is regarded as a behavioral disorder with undesirable impacts that leads to considerable damages and problems for both the betraying and betrayed spouses. The present study aimed to investigate the association between marital infidelity based on fear of intimacy and self-differentiation through the mediating role of sexual satisfaction in women with marital conflict.

Materials and Methods: This study was conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM). The study population included all women with marital conflict visiting the consulting centers in Ahvaz, Iran, in 2021. A total of 144 participants were selected through convenience sampling. The research instruments included the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ), the Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale, the Fear-of-Intimacy Scale (FIS), and the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R). The data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation coefficient as an inferential statistical test, and SEM.

Results: The results revealed that all direct paths to marital infidelity were significant ($P < 0.001$), except self-differentiation. In addition, there was an indirect relationship between fear of intimacy and infidelity as well as self-differentiation and infidelity through the mediating role of sexual satisfaction ($P < 0.001$).

Conclusion: Based on the findings, it can be concluded that fear of intimacy and self-differentiation can predict marital infidelity through the mediation of sexual satisfaction. Therefore, family counselors should take these factors into account to reduce the psychological problems of women experiencing marital conflict and improve their marital relationships.

Keywords: Extramarital relations, Fear, Intimacy, Personal satisfaction, Women

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1. Introduction

Although marriage is one of the most exciting and stressful events in a person's life, it is quite normal for a couple to have disagreements and conflicts [1,2]. The marital relationship can be regarded as both one of the most profound human pleasures and one of the most significant sources of suffering in couples. However, marital distress is determined by the spouses' mental assessment of their relationship. Continuous distress in a relationship often leads to divorce or separation [3]. Marital infidelity is a sexual and/or emotional relationship with someone other than the spouse, which is usually kept secret from them [4]. Women's marital infidelity is affected by various factors, one of which is fear of intimacy. As one of the reasons for a relationship's failure, fear of intimacy is defined as an individual's inability to share their thoughts or feelings with someone important or close to them [5].

Moreover, marital infidelity can be associated with self-differentiation which is one of the most important personality traits and has a considerable impact on individual's mental health and future life. Self-differentiation refers to people's ability to separate

their cognitive processes from their experienced emotional processes [6]. Both fears of intimacy and self-differentiation can indirectly affect marital infidelity through sexual satisfaction. Sexual satisfaction refers to a person's level of enjoyment from sexual relations as well as his or her competence in providing mutual pleasure. In essence, the strength of a marital relationship is jeopardized in the absence of satisfying sexual relations. Sexual satisfaction is one of the most significant pleasures that individuals have experienced throughout their lives, and it is this pleasure that allows spouses to withstand the hardships of life and conflicts between them [7,8]. In their research, Fung et al [9] found a significant association between marital infidelity and marital conflicts, reporting that couples who were dissatisfied with their relationship were more likely to violate their marriage bond. Miller et al [10] proposed a model to explain marital infidelity. They argued that one of the most influential aspects in the occurrence of this negative phenomenon is couples' unfulfilled needs, deficiencies in empathetic response to these needs, and fatigue, all of which directly impact the reduction of marital satisfaction.



Fear of intimacy and its components (i.e., inclination to intimacy, fear of intimacy, worrying about others' opinions, and relationship quality) are essential variables connected with sexual satisfaction in women [11]. According to Montesi et al [12], marital intimacy has a negative and statistically significant relationship with attitudes toward extramarital relationships, with the mediating role of marital commitment. Jahandar Lashki et al [13] found that the fear of intimacy plays a mediating role in the relationship between attachment pathologies and sexual disorders. Mphaphuli and Smuts [14] investigated the association between marital intimacy and marital infidelity. They concluded that lack of marital intimacy can lead to marital infidelity in women. In addition, Jeanfreau et al [15] found a significant positive and direct relationship between marital burnout and marital infidelity in couples. They also discovered a negative association between sexual satisfaction and performance and marital infidelity. Likewise, Lee et al [16] found a negative association between sexual satisfaction and performance and infidelity and a positive association between marital burnout and infidelity.

As marital infidelity is one of the most prevalent issues that couples and couple therapists confront, it is necessary to study the factors that contribute to it [17,18]. Additionally, since risk factors of marital infidelity have not yet been considered in the bulk of the literature and given that the traditional society is transitioning into a modern one in Iran, factors that may lead to marital infidelity require special attention. Any factor that disrupts the family system and affects the proper functioning of the family can have adverse effects on the development of society. Marital maladjustment in women causes conflict between couples. Timely training of women with marital conflict to deal effectively with family problems and difficulties prevents the occurrence of maladjustment and mental disorders. Evaluation of the association between marital infidelity based on fear of intimacy and self-differentiation through the mediating role of sexual satisfaction in women with marital conflict is among the most important innovations of this study. Therefore, based on the issues outlined above, the present study aimed to investigate the association between marital infidelity based on fear of intimacy and self-differentiation through the mediating role of sexual satisfaction in women with marital conflict.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population included all women with marital conflict visiting consulting centers in Ahvaz, Iran, in 2021. Three consulting centers in Ahvaz were selected randomly. Then, 144 female participants who visited the centers mentioned above were selected through convenience sampling. The inclusion criteria

for the participants were being married for at least 6 months, providing informed consent to participate in the study, getting a higher-than-average score on the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ), and being in the age range of 20–50 years. The exclusion criteria were participants' unwillingness to participate and their failure to respond to the questions.

Three centers were selected among consulting centers in Ahvaz in a cluster, and questionnaires containing the variables of the research were handed over to the women with marital conflict to be completed. In the present study, a total of 158 questionnaires were distributed, and 144 were analyzed following the elimination of incomplete questionnaires.

For ethical considerations, the participants were ensured that their information would remain strictly confidential. Questionnaires were filled with the participants' satisfaction, and written informed consent was obtained from the participants in this study.

2.1. Instruments

MCQ: The MCQ, developed by Boostanipoor and Sanai Zaker [19], was used to determine the degree of marital conflict. The questionnaire includes 42 items and examines marital conflicts through the subscales including, decreased cooperation, decreased sexual relations, increased emotional reactions, attracting more support from children, increased personal relationship with relatives, decreased relationship with the spouse's relatives, and separation of financial matters. The scores of items ranged from 1 to 5, and the questionnaire scores ranged from 42 to 210. A low score implies a natural conflict, whereas a high score indicates a severe conflict between spouses [19]. Mohammadi et al [20] evaluated its reliability as 0.81. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.80 for the questionnaire.

Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale: This measure was developed by Whatley [21] and has 12 items that are scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (7) to strongly disagree (1). A higher score on this scale implies that the responder has a positive attitude toward marital infidelity [21]. The reliability of attitudes toward infidelity scale was reported 0.71 using Cronbach's alpha [22]. In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.76 for the scale.

Fear-of-Intimacy Scale (FIS): The FIS, developed by Descutner and Thelen [23], is a 35-item self-reported measure designed to assess an individual's anxiety about close relationships. The items in the FIS include two subscales: relationship with a spouse (items 1 to 30) and relationship with others (items 31 to 35). In this questionnaire, the responder is asked to evaluate her responses to each of the statements on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "not at all characteristic of me" (1) to "extremely characteristic of me" (5), depending on

the frequency of each behavior. In this questionnaire, questions 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 27, 29, and 30 are reverse-scored. The maximum and minimum scores on this questionnaire are 175 and 35, respectively. It should be noted that the total score of the questionnaire was applied in this study. Falahzadeh et al [24] reported the reliability for this scale as equal to 0.92. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89 was obtained.

Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R): DSI-R was developed by Skowron and Schmitt. It is a 46-item scale measuring individuals' differentiation of self. DSI-R is divided into four subscales: fusion with others, taking an "I" position, emotional cut-off, and emotional reactivity. The items are scored using a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree). The overall score of the questionnaire was utilized in this study [25]. Jahanbakhshi and Kalantarkousheh [26] reported the reliability for this scale as equal to 0.69. In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.78 for the questionnaire.

Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS): Hudson et al [27] developed the ISS, consisting of 25 items designed to measure couples' sexual satisfaction levels. The participant's reaction to each topic is scored based on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7. The minimum and maximum scores of ISS are 25 and 175, respectively. Questions 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, and 23 are reversely scored, with a high score indicating higher sexual satisfaction. Ghazanfari Shabankare et al [28] reported the reliability for this scale as equal to 0.71. In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.82 for the questionnaire.

2.2. Statistical Analyses

The data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation coefficient as an inferential statistical test, and SEM. The path analysis was used to assess the proposed model, and SPSS AMOS was used for analyzing the data. The theoretical model of the study is presented in Figure 1.

3. Results

One hundred and forty-four women with marital conflict and a mean (standard deviation) of 26.75 (8.23) years participated in this study. The mean (standard deviation) of participants' scores for the study variables was 44.43 (9.10) for marital infidelity, 92.34 (29.75) for fear of intimacy, 145.25 (51.06) for self-differentiation, and 58.11 (12.20) for sexual satisfaction. Table 1 presents the Pearson correlation coefficient of the variables. According to the results shown in Table 1, marital infidelity positively and significantly correlated with fear of intimacy and self-differentiation and negatively and significantly correlated with sexual satisfaction.

Table 2 demonstrates the findings of the path coefficient estimations to examine direct assumptions. According to the results, there was a direct and significant relationship between fear of intimacy and marital infidelity ($\beta = 0.41$, $P < 0.001$) as well as between self-differentiation and sexual satisfaction ($\beta = 0.43$, $P < 0.001$) in women with marital conflict. Conversely, there was a negative relationship between fear of intimacy and sexual satisfaction ($\beta = -0.38$, $P < 0.001$) and between sexual satisfaction and marital infidelity ($\beta = -0.37$, $P < 0.001$) in women with marital conflict. The results in Table 2 revealed that there is no significant direct relationship between self-differentiation and marital infidelity ($\beta = -0.07$, $P = 0.081$).

Table 3 presents the results of the indirect paths. According to Table 3, the indirect path from fear of intimacy to marital infidelity through mediating role of sexual satisfaction ($\beta = 0.07$, $P < 0.001$) and the indirect path from self-differentiation to marital infidelity through sexual satisfaction ($\beta = -0.05$, $P < 0.001$) were significant.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the association between marital infidelity based on fear of intimacy and self-differentiation through the mediating role of sexual satisfaction in women with marital conflict. According to the results, fear of intimacy and self-differentiation may predict marital infidelity with the mediation of sexual

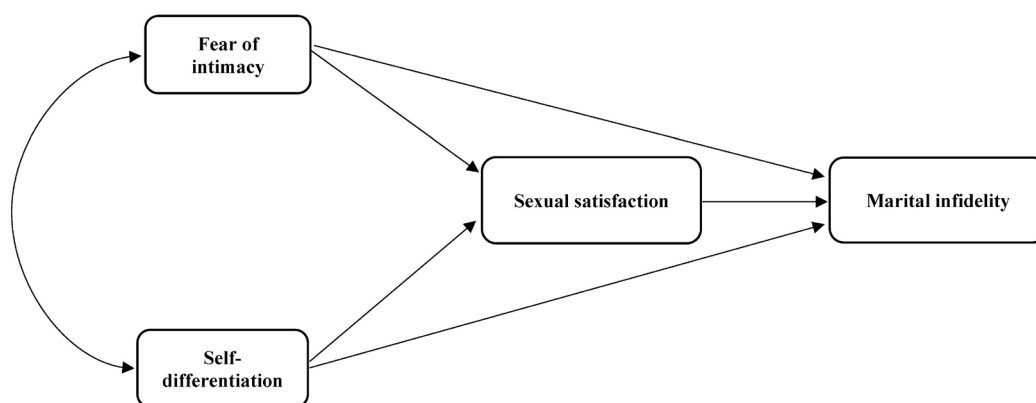


Figure 1. The theoretical model of the study

Table 1. Pearson correlation coefficients among the research variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
Marital infidelity	1			
Fear of intimacy	0.41*	1		
Self-differentiation	0.38*	-0.61*	1	
Sexual satisfaction	-0.34*	-0.41*	0.43*	1

Note. * $P < 0.05$.

Table 2. Path coefficients of direct effects between research variables in the model

Path	β	P
Fear of intimacy to marital infidelity	0.41	0.001
Fear of intimacy to sexual satisfaction	-0.38	0.001
Self-differentiation to sexual satisfaction	0.43	0.001
Sexual satisfaction to marital infidelity	-0.37	0.001
Self-differentiation to marital infidelity	-0.07	0.081

Table 3. Results of the bootstrap method for investigating indirect and intermediary paths

Predictor variable	Mediator variable	Criterion variable	β	P
Fear of intimacy	Sexual satisfaction	Marital infidelity	0.07	0.001
Self-differentiation	Sexual satisfaction	Marital infidelity	-0.05	0.001

satisfaction. The results indicated that there is a direct association between fear of intimacy and marital infidelity in the participating women. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies [29]. It seems that individuals with a fear of intimacy are neither understood nor understood since they lack internal experiences such as thoughts, feelings, and emotions, which may have a source of anxiety. As a result, each spouse may feel dissatisfied with their close relationships and turn to extramarital relationships. In fact, intimacy improves couples' emotional abilities and capacity to express feelings. However, unlike emotional skills, fear of intimacy decreases spouses' empathy and affects marital satisfaction, which in turn can increase the tendency toward infidelity [30]. In other words, avoiding intimacy and distancing oneself from others, which is a trait of avoidant people, is thought to be a significant factor leading to dissatisfaction and infidelity among couples. Thus, it could be stated that personal traits, emotional and sexual dissatisfaction in marriage, family and social issues, and background are predisposing and facilitating factors that increase an individual's inclination to marital infidelity.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that there is a direct association between fear of intimacy and sexual satisfaction in women. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies [12]. When people's capacity to express intimacy is impaired, they develop a fear of intimacy. One of the essential advantages of secure attachment is the ability to trust others and form or experience a close relationship with them. Put differently,

human sexual responses in a couple's relationship are triggered not mechanically but rather in the context of the couple's experience of intimacy. Accordingly, only the interplay of the three components of intimacy, sexual passion, and commitment results in an ideal couple experience. Affection, integrity and adjustment, sexual orientation, autonomy, and identity are all components of marital intimacy. Intimacy requires the establishment of a basis for intimacy and close interactions. When a person's ability to communicate thoughts, emotions, and other aspects of intimacy with a close person (e.g., a spouse) is restricted, fear of intimacy arises. Anxiety emerges under these conditions, and normal sexual responses are disrupted.

In addition, the results showed no direct association between self-differentiation and marital infidelity in women. Personal experiences and traits are tied to marital commitment. As a personal trait, differentiation of self is linked with marital commitment. In fact, the degree to which a person can prevent automatic behavioral compliance with emotions reflects the degree of self-differentiation [31,32]. Accordingly, its fundamental objective is to achieve a balance between emotions and cognition. In this manner, more differentiated individuals tend to have more autonomy in their relationships and want more intimacy without sinking in emotions. These traits of differentiated individuals strengthen the couple's relationship and increase marital commitment.

Another finding in this study suggested a direct association between self-differentiation and sexual satisfaction in women. Self-differentiation focuses on the foundations of couples' intimacy and mutual acceptance. It is expected that spouses with low degrees of self-differentiation be more likely to have a lower emotional maturity and a limited capacity for intimacy or unity at the time of marriage. In contrast, in differentiation-based marital relationships, spouses enable each other to play a more flexible role, form an intimate relationship, accept disagreements, and have fewer emotional reactions. Thus, poor self-differentiation in one of the spouses may undermine marital relationships and cause marital problems, which might eventually have a negative impact on the effective sexual relationship of the spouses.

According to the results, there was a direct relationship between sexual satisfaction and marital infidelity in the participating women. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies [33]. The quality of marital relationship and intimacy is complex as it includes different dimensions of a couple's relationship such as happiness, adjustment, satisfaction, sense of unity, and commitment. High levels of relationship satisfaction, optimistic attitudes toward the spouse, and low levels of hostility and destructive behaviors all represent the optimal quality of marital intimacy. One factor in providing a secure married life in married women is the

quality of relationships and marital intimacy, particularly sexual satisfaction [33]. As a result, married women with greater levels of intimacy, happiness, agreement, and marital unity do not typically have a positive attitude toward infidelity.

Finally, the findings indicated an indirect association between fear of intimacy and marital infidelity in women through sexual satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies [16,34]. Fear of intimacy develops when a person's ability to express intimacy deteriorates. This implies a limited capacity or emotional inhibition to disclose personal thoughts and emotions with a significant other such as a spouse. These factors may reduce sexual satisfaction in couples and lead to marital infidelity [34]. According to the findings, there was an indirect association between self-differentiation and marital infidelity through sexual satisfaction. No other study was found with a similar result. In this sense, it may be stated that since people with high self-differentiation have a more efficient understanding of social and interpersonal situations, they possess a higher emotional ability, face challenges of personal life more easily, and enjoy a higher level of psychological health. Furthermore, compared with individuals who are unable to comprehend and articulate their emotional states, these people are more successful in dealing with negative experiences, and they demonstrate greater and more proper adaptation to others or the environment.

The statistical population in this study comprised all women with marital conflict visiting the consulting centers in Ahvaz (Iran). As the results may have been limited by the demographic characteristics of this city, they should be generalized to other populations with caution. Moreover, some confounding variables such as socioeconomic status, family background, and personality disorder of one of the couples could have affected the results.

5. Conclusion

It could be concluded that fear of intimacy and self-differentiation can predict marital infidelity through the mediation of sexual satisfaction. As a result, self-differentiation may increase women's sexual satisfaction and diminish their tendency for marital infidelity. Sexual satisfaction effectively acted as a mediator in the association between self-differentiation and marital infidelity in this study. Therefore, family counselors should take these factors into account in order to reduce the psychological problems of women experiencing marital conflict and improve their marital relationships.

Competing Interests

The authors declared no conflict of interests.

Ethical Approval

The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of

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