




# The effectiveness of McMaster's systemic couple therapy on self-differentiation and marital burnout and intimacy of couples with emotional divorce

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** In the field of counseling and family psychology, various approaches have been created to reduce conflicts and communication disturbances between couples. The purpose of the present study was the effectiveness of McMaster's systemic couple therapy on self-differentiation and marital burnout and intimacy of couples with emotional divorce.

**Methods and Materials:** It was a quasi-experimental study with a pre-test-post-test design and a control group. The research population consisted of all the couples referred to counseling centers in Shiraz in 2021-22, from which 24 couples with emotional divorce were selected as a sample. The current research tools included a self-differentiation questionnaire, marital burnout, and couples' intimacy. McMaster's systemic couple therapy intervention was performed during ten sessions of 1.5 hours, but the control group did not receive any intervention.

**Findings:** The research data was analyzed by multi-way covariance analysis. The findings showed that McMaster's family therapy effectively affects self-differentiation, marital burnout and intimacy of couples with emotional divorce ( $P < 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** It can be concluded that McMaster's couple therapy is effective in self-differentiation and marital burnout and intimacy of couples with emotional divorce.

**Keywords:** McMaster's systemic couple therapy, differentiation of self, marital burnout, couple's intimacy, emotional divorce.

## 1. Introduction

The family is the most important institution of society and the shaper of human talents and personality (Parker et al., 2022; Pirzadeh & Parsakia, 2023). In the family system, factors such as desirability, satisfaction,

satisfaction, quality and optimal functioning are very effective factors that cause the prosperity, growth and progress of family members (Nurmawati & Hasan, 2022). How couples agree on their differences and adapt to each other's needs to create complementary roles can predict the stability of marital life and its flexibility against life

circumstances (Ramos et al., 2022). One of the topics that has occupied the minds of most thinkers and even the public in recent years is the issue of divorce. Currently, this phenomenon in Iran is a social problem and has caused many problems for individuals and families facing divorce. About 20% of divorces are due to couples not knowing each other properly. Despite many benefits, rapid cultural, social, technological and communication developments have created many problems for contemporary humans. The growing wave of *emotional divorce*, interpersonal conflicts, neuroses, and psycho-social conflicts are undeniable realities of current human societies (Anghel, 2016).

Women are one of the vulnerable groups of society that are often more affected by emotional divorce and the environmental and social pressures caused by it (Domar et al., 2000). Meanwhile, divorce and parental conflicts are more important—divorce and conflicts in the family environment cause many problems in its members (Janbozorgi, Darbani, & Parsakia, 2020). Disruption of emotional relationships and feelings of insecurity resulting from emotional divorce and marital conflicts can endanger personal security and couples' relationships and lead to divorce (He et al., 2018).

Emotional divorce is a loss that overshadows a person's adjustment and, creates adverse effects in this context and disrupts subjective satisfaction (Radetzki, Deleurme, & Rogers, 2022). Lack of control, reduced self-confidence and low self-worth, and depression are consequences and losses that may be experienced in interpersonal trauma during stressful events such as emotional divorce (Harris et al., 2017; Khalili, Khalili, & Jafari, 2022; van Dijk et al., 2021).

Differentiation is one of the important variables that cannot be ignored in emotional divorce. Differentiation includes a person's ability to remain connected with another while maintaining "self-awareness." Differentiated people can maintain their independence without fear of becoming one while experiencing intimacy in close relationships (Rizkalla & Rahav, 2016; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Bowen (1978) believes that when the level of differentiation of both couples is low, more emotional intercourse occurs, which leads to a decrease in marital quality and low compatibility in marital relationships (Pirzadeh & Parsakia, 2023). On the other hand, couples who have the least emotional intercourse together have the most individuality, and this gives them the possibility of being together more stable and stronger (Carr, 2019).

*Differentiation* is an integral component of a person's ability to develop intimacy, and the level of differentiation

seems to be related to how one views marital infidelity. For example, spouses with low levels of differentiation who are enmeshed may not understand what they want from each other to improve their relationship. When these couples face other variables such as changing roles, low levels of differentiation may add to their difficulties in finding a better solution due to their lack of ability to differentiate between themselves (Rizkalla & Rahav, 2016).

On the other hand, marital heartbreak and emotional divorce are two issues related to marital relations. *Marital burnout* refers to problems in marital relationships between couples and can lead to emotional divorce. Marital heartbreak is a situation in which couples realize that despite their efforts, their relationship has not and will not give meaning to life (Fahimi & Taghvaei, 2022). This situation may be caused by many couples' conflicts, marital arguments and fights, inactivity and lack of novelty in joint life, etc. (Wang & Zhao, 2023).

Another variable that can be effective in emotional divorce is the couple's intimacy. Marital intimacy means a feeling of closeness, love, and emotional connection between spouses. This concept has been investigated in various researches. Some of these studies have examined the mediating role of marital intimacy about other factors such as communication documents, sexual self-efficacy, marital commitment and couple compatibility (Inman, 2023).

The McMaster model is one of the most effective models in the family field. This model, based on a systemic approach, describes the structure, organization, and exchange pattern of the marital unit and allows family or marital relationships to be tested in a superficial spectrum, from mental health status to severe mental disorder (Waraan et al., 2023). In the system perspective, each element is dependent on its environment and other system elements of which it is a part. From this point of view, everything should be defined in terms of its relationship with other elements (Beet & Ademosu, 2023).

In this way, it is thought that the issues that happen in the relationship result from a complex cycle of interaction in which both couples participate. Circular causality means that the interactive pattern of the relationship forms a system of feedback loops; Therefore, a person influences others and is influenced by them (Hahlweg & Baucom, 2023). From this point of view, the problem of adaptability in couples is considered as a problem in the family system like any other problem (Lee et al., 2023).

According to the studies, the positive effect of McMaster's systematic counseling approach among couples

has been confirmed. Nevertheless, in each of the mentioned researches, the absence of a control group has made the reliability and generalizability of the results difficult. Marital intimacy, differentiation and marital love are important in increasing or decreasing marriage stability, improving relationships between couples and improving adaptability in couples with emotional divorce. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct more studies to check this common model's effectiveness in family therapy. Therefore, the current research aimed to determine the effectiveness of McMaster's systemic couple therapy on self-differentiation, marital burnout, and intimacy of couples with emotional divorce.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The current research method was quasi-experimental, with a pre-test-post-test-follow-up plan and a control group. The statistical population included all couples referred to counseling centers in Shiraz in 2021-22. In this study, 24 couples with marital incompatibility were selected in an available manner and randomly divided into two groups, including 12 couples in the McMaster family therapy intervention group and 12 couples in the control group. They were homogenized in terms of age and education level. The criteria for entering the research include couples with marital incompatibility, the age range of 25 to 40 years, willingness to cooperate and participate in meetings and criteria for exiting the research were participating in other treatment groups at the same time, obvious psychological disorders according to the diagnosis of psychologists and therapists of counseling centers, absence of more than two sessions in therapeutic interventions. From the ethical considerations of the research, it is also mentioned that all the sample people were assured that their names would not be mentioned in any part of the research and only the data results would be used. In order to conduct the research, an orientation meeting was held and the consent form and questionnaire containing demographic information were distributed among the participants. For anonymity and to guarantee the participants' privacy, a corresponding code was assigned to each participant. After selecting and assigning the subjects and before the implementation of the treatment sessions, the subjects of both groups were evaluated through the measures. Then, the experimental group underwent a 10-session intervention based on 1.5-hour sessions once a week. The control group did not receive any intervention. After the end of the intervention sessions, the subjects of both groups were

re-evaluated with research tools, and after the last two months, a follow-up was also done.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI)

The self-differentiation questionnaire was prepared by Scorn and Dandy in 1998 and gives an estimate of the individual's differentiation or ability to separate rational and emotional processes from each other. This questionnaire has 45 items, graded on a 6-point Likert scale from completely disagree to completely agree. Reliability or reliability of a tool is the degree of its stability in measuring whatever it measures, i.e. how much the measuring tool gives the same results under the same conditions. Skowron and Friedlander (1998) reported an acceptable internal consistency for DSI and all its four subscales, which was 0.898 (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Cronbach's alpha reported in the present study was 0.901.

#### 2.2.2. Marital Burnout Scale

Pines created this scale (1996); It has 20 items, and its purpose is to evaluate the dimensions of people's citizenship behavior (altruism, conscientiousness, chivalry, politeness and kindness, and civic virtue). The marital burnout scale is a self-assessment tool designed to measure the degree of marital burnout among couples. This scale is adapted from another self-report tool used to measure burnout. (Pines, 1996; Pines, 2002; Pines & Nunes, 2003). In the present study, the reported Cronbach's alpha was 0.756.

#### 2.2.3. Marital Intimacy Scale

This questionnaire was prepared and set up by Bagarozzi in 2001. which includes 41 items and is designed for intimacy needs in 8 dimensions (emotional, psychological, rational, sexual, physical, spiritual, aesthetic, recreational-social). The subject answers each item in a graded form from 1, which means there is no such need at all, to 10, which means a great need (Bagarozzi, 2014). The content validity of this scale was confirmed by Iranian researchers. The reliability coefficient of the whole questionnaire was also obtained by Cronbach's alpha method of 0.94 (Fatemi, Karbalaeei, & Kakavand, 2016). In the present study, the reported Cronbach's alpha was 0.881.

2.3. *Intervention*

2.3.1. *McMaster Systematic Couple Therapy*

**Table 1**

*The content of couple therapy sessions*

Sessions	Content
1	Explaining the goals of the workshop and the importance of the McMaster family model, stating the rules of the group and making a contract and making a commitment
2	Identifying the problem solving process, factors preventing problem solving, finding alternative solutions, considering the consequences and results of the work
3	Explaining and expressing the role of effective communication in male-female relationships and various communication problems
4	Listening as one of the components of problem solving and understanding and intimacy and different conversation styles (passive aggressive style, frank, etc.)
5	Examining and how to deal with the main families and explaining the importance of personality such as self-differentiation or the dependence of men and women on their own families
6	Explaining how men and women think about marital relationships and their expectations from this relationship, getting to know gender differences, teaching scientific techniques of expressing affection.
7	Getting to know the main reasons for anger in the family; Providing solutions for dealing with an aggressive spouse and how to manage anger
8	Training and strengthening empathic conflict between couples
9	Explaining how and the necessity of controlling behavior and the field of psychological needs; Social biology, family and resilience against problems
10	Final review and evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of the trainings, identification of obstacles to the implementation of the trainings, summation and implementation of the post-examination.

2.4. *Data analysis*

The data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 and the statistical method of analysis of covariance.

**3. Findings and Results**

The mean of the age for the sample of the present study by groups: For the experimental group, 36.5±4.27 in women and 37.5±2.93 in men and 37.2±3.22 in women and 38.2±2.52 in men were reported. The minimum age of female participants in this research is 28 and the maximum is 40. Also, the minimum age reported for male participants was 29, and the maximum age was 40. Also, according to the significance level greater than 0.05, there was no significant difference between the three groups; the three groups were homogeneous regarding age. The sample group was also examined regarding education level, and the results showed that the three groups are homogeneous. The results of the descriptive findings of the research are presented in [Table 2](#), separately from the three stages of the research into three groups.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive statistics results*

Variable	Group	Post-test		Post-test	
		M	SD	M	SD
Self-differentiation	Experimental	169	8.46	180.2	7.64
	Control	167.4	8.61	167.9	9.55
Burnout	Experimental	50.3	6.92	39.8	6.53
	Control	49.4	6.19	48.8	7.05
Intimacy	Experimental	67.6	5.51	85.8	2.90
	Control	66.07	5.06	65.8	5.79

The findings of [Table 2](#) indicate that the mean of the research variables in both groups is close to each other in the pre-test stage. However, in the post-test stages, the intervention group faces a significant increase compared to the control group.

**Table 3**

*The summary of MANCOVA results*

Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	Df1	Df2	Sig	Partial eta <sup>2</sup>
Group	0.032	232.1	3	21	0.001	0.968

As the information in the [Table 3](#), the Wilks' Lambda index is significant at 0.01 by controlling the effect of pre-

tests. (Wilks' Lambda = 0.032, F = 232.12, P = 0.001,  $0\eta^2 = 0.968$ ). In other words, it can be claimed that there is a

significant difference between the control and experimental groups in at least one of the research variables.

**Table 4**

*MANCOVA results in details*

Source	Variable	SS	df	MS	F	Sig	Partial eta <sup>2</sup>
Group	Differentiation	833.1	1	833.1	33.7	0.001	0.575
	Burnout	2543.8	1	2543.8	250.7	0.001	0.909
	Intimacy	2597.04	1	2597.04	176.5	0.001	0.876
Error	Differentiation	616.4	20	24.6			
	Burnout	253.6	20	10.1			
	Intimacy	367.7	20	14.7			
Total	Differentiation	912200	24				
	Burnout	126925	24				
	Intimacy	176089	24				

As the results of the analysis show (Table 4), by controlling the effect of the pre-tests, F was obtained in the research variables at the level of 0.01. In other words, there is a significant difference in the post-test scores of "differentiation, marital satisfaction and marital intimacy", "experimental group" and "control group". As the information in Table 2 also shows, the mean of these variables increased in the post-test in the intervention group. Therefore, it can be said that McMaster's systemic couple therapy has been effective in differentiation, marital burnout and marital intimacy in couples with emotional divorce. The effect size shows that about 57.5% of the changes in "differentiation", 90.9% of the changes in "marital burnout", and 87.6% of the changes in "marital intimacy" of married women are under the influence of "McMaster Systemic Couple Therapy" (Table 4).

**4. Discussion and Conclusion**

The present research results showed that McMaster's systemic couple therapy is effective in self-differentiation, marital burnout, and intimacy of couples with emotional divorce. The results are consistent with the results of some previous researchers (Beet & Ademosu, 2023; Carr, 2019; Lee et al., 2023; Waraan et al., 2023).

The whole process of McMaster's family therapy counseling, the theoretical foundations and the exercises provided can effectively improve irrational beliefs, destructive opposition, the immutability of spouse, the expectation of mind reading and gender differences. Also, the process of meetings and improvement in couples' relationships and communication patterns gradually and

during counseling sessions and couples' feeling more satisfied with their joint life and relationships have increased compatibility (Mostofi Sarkari, Ghamari, & Hoseinian, 2019).

It can also be said that this approach helps couples to change their thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors. This treatment method enables the therapist to train couples to improve and grow their relationship. This type of treatment makes therapists flexible in using different approaches, tools and techniques to change the system, facilitate individual psychological internal transformations, and understand how changes happen at the behavioral level. This therapy is an effective therapeutic strategy due to the use of rich theories to expand the development of all couples' functions, thinking and behavior (Beet & Ademosu, 2023).

In this approach, the therapist changes the goal of the treatment; that is, instead of changing the marital relationship, he only tries to teach skills that will improve the next conversation of the couple because during the conflict, the couple's emotions intensify, their ability to use these skills is likely to decrease. At the same time, it should be changed from the increased positive and negative emotions and the ruling patterns of negative emotions to the ruling patterns of positive emotions so that eventually, it will cause the couple to consider each other's anger as an individual attack on them instead. This is achieved through increasing the awareness of couples about each other's inner world, paying attention to each other instead of not paying attention to each other in daily interactions, physiological relaxation to oneself and the partner, expressing love and admiration for each other, a compensatory reaction (Waraan et al., 2023).

In addition, this type of intervention includes organized programs and methods, which is called regular and logical therapeutic process and is designed to deepen friendship, strengthen conflict management, and create common meaning and goal-setting in the relationship of couples. In this method, one not only looks at what these conflicts are related to but also looks beyond those conflicts and actually into life's dreams. Therefore, this method has increased marital compatibility in the studied couples (Hahlweg & Baucom, 2023).

This type of intervention helps people change couples' thoughts, perceptions and behaviors. This type of intervention focuses on awareness and attention to the here-now and access to emotions to increase the intimacy and quality of couples' relationships. This intervention helped people change their thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors. It can also be said that this method has taught couples to improve and grow their relationships. This type of intervention made the therapist flexible in using different approaches, tools and techniques to change the system and, facilitate the internal psychological transformations of the individual and understand how the changes happen at the behavioral level. It helped the couple in increasing marital compatibility (Lee et al., 2023).

## 5. Limitations

This research has limitations that make it difficult to generalize to the society. Among these limitations are the

following: The sample of the current study consists of couples who refer to counseling centers in Shiraz, which makes it difficult to generalize the results to other people and other places.

## 6. Suggestions and Applications

It is suggested that the future research should be sampled with other age and gender groups and from other communities and social environments. Based on the findings of this research, McMaster family therapy has been effective in differentiation, marital burnout and marital intimacy in couples. Therefore, this method can be used by counselors in counseling centers and in family courts to counsel couples in resolving conflicts and incompatibility in couples.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethics principles

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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