

The Mediating Role of Triangulation in the Family on the Relationship Between Differentiation and Marital Conflict in Parents with Disabled Children

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to investigate the mediating role of triangulation in the family on the relationship between differentiation and marital conflict in parents with disabled children. This descriptive study was correlational in nature. The population consisted of all families with disabled children attending rehabilitation centers in District 7 of Tehran. In this study, 150 individuals were selected through convenience sampling and sample size was determined using Morgan's table. For data collection, the Skowron and Friedlander (1998) Differentiation of Self Inventory, the Barati (1996) Marital Conflict Questionnaire, and the Dehghani et al. (2017) Family Triangulation Questionnaire were used. For data analysis, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (correlation coefficient, univariate regression analysis) were utilized. The results indicated that there is a significant relationship between differentiation and marital conflict in parents with disabled children, and triangulation in the family plays a mediating role in the relationship between differentiation and marital conflict in parents with disabled children.

Keywords: *Triangulation, Differentiation, Marital Conflict.*

1. Introduction

The intricate dynamics of marital conflict and its repercussions on children's psychological well-being and adjustment have long been a focal point of psychological

research. The exploration into this realm has uncovered multifaceted pathways through which the adverse effects of marital discord permeate the developmental milieu of children, highlighting the significance of parental relationships, the psychological mechanisms at play, and the

broader familial context. This article seeks to delve into these intricate dynamics, drawing on a wealth of research that sheds light on the nuanced ways in which children navigate the complexities of their parents' marital conflicts.

A cornerstone of this discussion is the concept of triangulation, where children find themselves entangled in their parents' conflicts, serving as a critical lens through which the impact of marital discord on children can be understood (Ablow et al., 2009). Triangulation not only distorts the child's perception of familial harmony but also actively involves them in conflicts, thereby exacerbating the stress and anxiety associated with such familial disturbances. The manner in which children perceive and are drawn into their parents' disputes has been identified as a pivotal factor influencing the extent to which marital conflict disrupts children's emotional and behavioral adjustment (Ablow et al., 2009).

Further compounding the issue is the quality of the parent-child relationship itself, which has been shown to mediate the impact of marital conflict on children's adjustment. Zhou (2022) underscores the mediating role of this relationship, suggesting that a strong, supportive parent-child bond can buffer the negative effects of marital discord on children's psychological adjustment. This mediation underscores the resilience mechanisms that can be activated within supportive familial structures (Zhou, 2022).

Moreover, the parenting styles and practices adopted by parents amidst marital strife play a critical role in mediating the relationship between marital conflict and children's well-being (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2017; Xiao et al., 2021). This aspect highlights the variability in outcomes based on how parents choose to navigate their roles amidst conflicts. The emotional security hypothesis further enriches this narrative by positing that a child's sense of security within the family unit is paramount in determining the extent of the impact of marital conflict (Harold et al., 2004). This hypothesis suggests that the emotional climate of the family serves as a crucial backdrop against which the effects of marital discord are either magnified or mitigated.

Children's cognitive appraisals and interpretations of their parents' conflicts also play a mediating role in the relationship between marital discord and adjustment outcomes (Stocker et al., 2003; Tina & Cummings, 2007; Tina et al., 2004). This cognitive-emotional processing underscores the importance of children's perceptions and the meanings they ascribe to their parents' conflicts, further elucidating the psychological pathways through which marital discord influences child development.

Recent research has also highlighted the role of fathers in mediating the effects of marital conflict on children's socioemotional development, emphasizing the need to consider both parents' contributions to the family dynamic (Gong et al., 2023). This perspective broadens the lens through which the familial impacts of marital conflict are viewed, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of parental roles.

Additionally, factors such as parental dysphoria, parenting stress, and co-parenting behaviors have been identified as significant influences on the impact of marital conflict on children (Chan & Leung, 2020; Han & Lee, 2019; Tina & Cummings, 2007; Tina et al., 2004). These factors highlight the complex interplay between individual parental well-being, the co-parenting relationship, and the overall family environment in shaping children's experiences and responses to marital conflict.

In sum, the body of research explored in this article illuminates the profound and multifaceted ways in which marital conflict influences children's psychological adjustment and well-being. Through the lenses of triangulation, parental relationships, cognitive appraisals, and broader familial dynamics, this article aims to deepen the understanding of the intricate pathways through which marital discord impacts children, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced comprehension of family psychology.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The current study is a cross-sectional and descriptive-correlational research. The population included all families with disabled children attending rehabilitation centers in District 7 of Tehran. The sampling method in this study was convenience sampling, and the sample size was determined to be 150 individuals using Morgan's table.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Differentiation of Self

The initial form of the Differentiation of Self Inventory was developed by Skowron and Friedlander in 1998 and was later revised by Skowron and Smith in 2003. This inventory examines four subscales (Emotional Reactivity, I Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others) and consists of 45 items, evaluating Emotional Reactivity (11 items=ER), Emotional Cutoff (11 items=EC), I Position (11 items=IP), and Fusion with Others (11 items=FO). Scoring is based on

a six-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree), with the minimum and maximum scores being 45 and 276, respectively. Lower scores indicate lower levels of differentiation. Skowron and Smith (2003) reported a total inventory reliability of .92, with .89 for Emotional Reactivity, .84 for Emotional Cutoff, .81 for I Position, and .81 for Fusion with Others. Construct validity was confirmed through factor analysis, supporting the four factors. In Iran, Yousefi (2006) reported test-retest reliability coefficients for the total inventory at .85, and for the components as .77 for Emotional Reactivity, .60 for I Position, .65 for Emotional Cutoff, and .70 for Fusion with Others. Aghajani, Shoghi, and Naeimi (2014) reported overall inventory reliability of .83 and test-retest reliability of .81, with component coefficients ranging from .77 to .85 (Parsakia et al., 2023).

2.2.2. Marital Conflict

Developed by Barati (1996), the MCQ consists of 42 items covering six areas of couple conflict: decrease in cooperation, decrease in sexual relationship, increase in emotional reactions, increase in seeking children's support, increase in individual relations with spouse's relatives and friends, and financial separation. Scores range from 1 to 5, with "always" scoring 5 and "never" scoring 1. Higher scores indicate more severe conflict. Craddock et al. (2004) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .87, with Barati reporting a reliability of .52 and Farahbakhsh (2006) finding a reliability of .69 (Darbani et al., 2020; Darbani & Parsakia, 2022).

2.2.3. Triangulation

This questionnaire consists of 18 items scored on a five-point scale from agree to strongly disagree, assessing the tendency to manage communication problems by involving a third party. It includes three subscales (Negative

Triangulation, Supportive Triangulation, and Triangulation with Children) resulting from exploratory factor analysis. Dehghani et al. (2017) reported construct validity through confirmatory factor analysis, item-total correlation analysis, and confirmed convergent validity, with a reliability of .84 for the questionnaire (Tajalli & Sabaghi Renani, 2021; Yousefi et al., 2023).

2.3. Data analysis

In this study, SPSS 22 software was used for data analysis. Considering the nature of the hypotheses and the types of variables, descriptive statistical methods such as tables and means were utilized to describe the statistical sample and compare collected information from respondents. In the inferential statistics section, correlation coefficients were used to describe relationships among variables in the study groups.

3. Findings and Results

The mean decrease in cooperation was 13.7, decrease in sexual relationship 15.3, increase in emotional reactions 24, increase in seeking support from children 14.4, increase in individual relations with one's own relatives 18.5, decrease in family relationship with the spouse's relatives 18.2, separating financial matters from each other 21.7, and the decrease in effective communication 41.4, resulting in an overall mean of marital conflicts being 167.2. The mean scores obtained were 37.7 for emotional reactivity, 36.1 for emotional cutoff, 36.2 for I position, and 28.2 for fusion with others. Furthermore, the overall mean of differentiation was 138.2. The mean scores for negative triangulation were 19.3, for support 19.5, and for triangulation with child 19.5, with the overall mean of triangulation being 58.2 (Table 1).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics Findings

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Decrease in Cooperation	13.7	3.8
Decrease in Sexual Relationship	15.3	5.1
Increase in Emotional Reactions	24.0	6.8
Increase in Seeking Support from Children	14.4	4.0
Increase in Individual Relations with Own Relatives	18.5	5.9
Decrease in Relationship with Spouse's Relatives and Friends	18.2	5.4
Separating Financial Matters from Each Other	21.7	4.9
Effective Decrease	41.4	7.2
Total Score of Marital Conflicts	167.2	32.3
Emotional Reactivity	37.7	6.9

Emotional Cutoff	36.1	7.2
I Position	36.2	7.2
Fusion with Others	28.2	6.7
Total Score of Differentiation	138.2	24.5
Negative Triangulation	19.3	4.9
Supportive	19.5	4.7
Triangulation with Child	19.5	6.3
Total Score of Triangulation	58.2	12.9

Prior to conducting the main analyses, we thoroughly checked and confirmed the assumptions underlying our statistical tests to ensure the validity and reliability of our results. Specifically, we assessed the assumption of normality by examining skewness and kurtosis values for each variable. All variables displayed skewness and kurtosis within the acceptable range of -2 to +2, indicating no significant departure from normality. For instance, the skewness value for the variable "emotional reactivity" was -0.15, and the kurtosis value was 0.04, suggesting a symmetric distribution. The assumption of homogeneity of variances was verified using Levene's Test, with all p-values exceeding the .05 threshold, indicating no significant differences in variances across groups. For example, the

Levene's Test for equality of variances in marital conflict yielded a p-value of .07. Additionally, the assumption of linearity and homoscedasticity was confirmed through visual inspection of scatterplots between independent and dependent variables, revealing a linear relationship with evenly distributed residuals across the range of predicted values. Lastly, the assumption of multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) scores, with all variables showing VIF scores well below the commonly used cutoff of 10, indicating no multicollinearity issues (e.g., the highest VIF score observed was 1.8 for "differentiation"). These checks affirm that our data met the necessary assumptions, allowing for the accurate interpretation of the subsequent statistical analyses.

Table 2

Results of Multiple Correlation in Regression Model

Model	R	R ²	R ² _{adj}	SE	F	P
Regression	0.451	0.203	0.195	0.90	9.45	<0.01

The result of the multiple correlation coefficient indicates that triangulation in the family has a correlation coefficient

of 0.451 and explains 20.3% of the variance in marital conflict among parents with disabled children (Table 2).

Table 3

The Results of Analysis of Variance in Regression Model

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	p
Regression	70.32	2	35.15	25.5	0.001
Residual	275.81	147	1.87		
Total	346.13	149			

In the information from Table 3, the analysis of variance observed (f=25.5, df=147 and 2) indicates that triangulation in the family is significant as a mediator in the relationship between differentiation and marital conflict among parents with a disabled child (p<0.05). Differentiation (p<0.01, t=4.2) and triangulation (p<0.01, t=2.9) lead to marital conflict among parents with a disabled child (p<0.05). Thus, the effect of differentiation on the factor of marital conflict among parents with a disabled child is evaluated in the presence of the mediating factor of triangulation.

Table 4 information shows that since the significance values are below the significance level of 0.05 in all cases, it follows that: 1- Both factors of differentiation and triangulation directly and indirectly affect the marital conflict among parents with a disabled child. 2- The indirect effect of the differentiation factor in the presence of the triangulation factor on marital conflict among parents with a disabled child has occurred, indicating the effective mediating role of the triangulation factor. Since the beta regression coefficient value is higher in direct cases than

indirect, the triangulation factor strengthens the effect of the differentiation factor on marital conflict among parents with a disabled child. Therefore, the path analysis model can be proposed and illustrated in Figure 1.

Results from Figure 1 show: Differentiation and triangulation affect marital conflict among parents with a

disabled child by 36.7% and 33.3%, respectively. Differentiation through triangulation nearly affects 18% of marital conflict among parents. Based on the aforementioned evidence, the research hypothesis is confirmed.

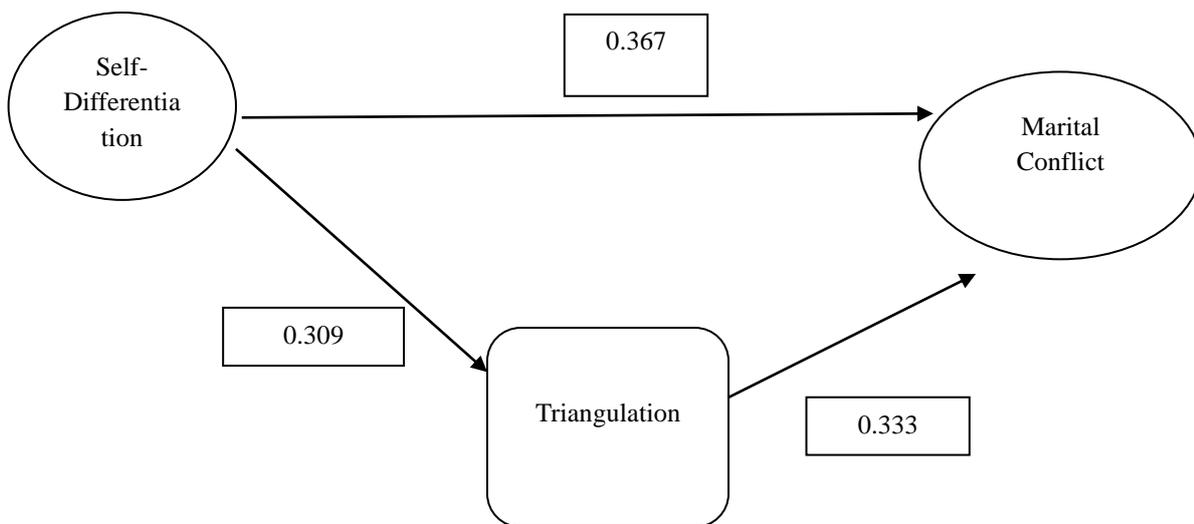
Table 4

The Results of Direct and Indirect Effects

From	Direct/Indirect	To	Beta	SE	B	t	P
Self-Differentiation	Direct	Marital Conflict	0.367	0.05	0.385	7.22	0.001
Triangulation	Direct	Marital Conflict	0.333	0.05	0.343	6.43	0.001
Self-Differentiation	Direct	Triangulation	0.309	0.05	0.297	5.40	0.001
Self-Differentiation	Indirect	Marital Conflict	0.102	0.05	0.152	2.61	0.001

Figure 1

Final Model with Standard Coefficients (Beta)



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the mediating role of triangulation in the family on the relationship between differentiation and marital conflict. Our findings revealed a significant impact of triangulation on this relationship, suggesting that as children become embroiled in their parents' conflicts, it not only exacerbates marital discord but also negatively affects their own psychological adjustment. The results underscore the complexity of family dynamics, illustrating how triangulation can serve as both a symptom and a catalyst of deeper familial issues.

The findings of the present study, highlighting the significant role of triangulation in the family as a mediator between differentiation and marital conflict, offer a substantial contribution to the literature on family psychology. This study's results align with and expand upon previous research by Fosco & Bray (2016) and McCauley et al. (2021), which identified triangulation as a pivotal mechanism linking interparental conflict to youth maladjustment (Fosco & Bray, 2016; McCauley et al., 2021). Specifically, our findings elucidate the nuanced ways in which children and adolescents become enmeshed in their parents' disputes, underscoring the psychological distress and adjustment difficulties that can ensue.

The significance of triangulation in affecting adolescent adjustment is further corroborated by our findings, which resonate with the insights provided by McCauley et al. (2021). These authors have shown that triangulation can lead to increases in both positive conflict resolution strategies and verbally abusive behavior in adolescent dating relationships (McCauley et al., 2021), a dynamic also reflected in our study's outcomes. Such dual effects underscore the complex impact of triangulation on adolescent relational skills and highlight the need for nuanced interventions targeting family dynamics.

Moreover, our study's findings on the mediating role of triangulation in the relationship between differentiation and marital conflict add a critical dimension to understanding how family systems operate. The family systems theory, as described by Stiles et al. (2009), provides a valuable theoretical framework for interpreting these results (Stiles et al., 2009). By conceptualizing the family as an interconnected emotional unit, this theory elucidates how triangulation disrupts family functioning by altering emotional connections and interactions among family members (Bresin et al., 2017).

Additionally, the observed correlation between triangulation and overprotective parenting practices (Petegem et al., 2021) suggests that triangulation may foster an environment of heightened anxiety and overprotection. This environment, in turn, could exacerbate anxiety symptoms among adolescents, indicating a vicious cycle of emotional distress within families experiencing marital conflict. Therefore, interventions aimed at reducing triangulation and promoting healthy family dynamics could play a crucial role in mitigating these adverse outcomes.

The broader implications of our findings for family psychology underscore the importance of addressing triangulation within therapeutic and intervention contexts. By fostering open communication and healthy conflict resolution strategies among family members, practitioners can help mitigate the negative effects of triangulation. Additionally, enhancing differentiation within family systems may serve as a preventative strategy, reducing the likelihood of triangulation and its associated negative outcomes on adolescent adjustment.

In conclusion, our study contributes to a growing body of literature emphasizing the complex interplay between marital conflict, differentiation, and family dynamics. By highlighting the mediating role of triangulation, this research not only deepens our understanding of the mechanisms through which marital conflict impacts children and

adolescents but also points toward potential pathways for intervention. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, focusing on longitudinal studies and intervention-based research to further elucidate the causal relationships and develop effective strategies for promoting family well-being.

Despite the insights provided by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits our ability to infer causality between triangulation, differentiation, and marital conflict. Second, the reliance on self-reported measures introduces the potential for bias and inaccuracies in the data collected. Additionally, the sample was drawn from a specific cultural and geographical context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations. These limitations suggest caution in interpreting the results and highlight the need for further research.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to better understand the causal relationships between triangulation, differentiation, and marital conflict. Additionally, incorporating objective measures and multiple informants, such as children, parents, and external observers, can provide a more nuanced understanding of family dynamics. Exploring these relationships in diverse cultural contexts would also enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide deeper insights into how cultural factors influence triangulation and its impact on family relationships.

The findings of this study have important implications for practitioners working with families experiencing marital conflict. Interventions aimed at reducing triangulation could include family therapy sessions focused on improving communication skills, conflict resolution strategies, and fostering a better understanding of family roles. Encouraging parents to maintain clear boundaries and avoid involving children in their disputes can help mitigate the negative effects of triangulation. Additionally, enhancing differentiation within the family system may offer a preventative approach to reducing marital conflict and its impact on children. By addressing these issues, practitioners can support families in creating healthier, more supportive environments that promote the well-being of all members.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.