

# Modeling the Relationship Between Controlling Behavior and Differentiation With Spousal Violence Through the Mediation of Spiritual Well-being in Couples

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to determine the goodness-of-fit of a model assessing the relationship between controlling behavior and differentiation with spousal violence, mediated by spiritual well-being in couples seeking counseling in Tabriz. The research method was descriptive-correlational in nature. The statistical population consisted of all spouses who referred to the social emergency centers of Tabriz during the first half of 2023, totaling 305 individuals. Using simple random and purposive sampling based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, 240 participants were selected ( $n = 240$ ). Data collection tools included the Haj-Yahya Violence Against Women Questionnaire (1999), the Revised Controlling Behaviors Scale by Graham-Kevan and Archer (2005), the Differentiation of Self Inventory by Skowron and Friedlander (1998), and the Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire by Gomez and Fisher (2003). Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and LISREL software. Pearson correlation analysis indicated that controlling behavior has a direct and statistically significant positive effect on spousal violence ( $p < .05$ ,  $\beta = .374$ ); differentiation has a direct and statistically significant negative effect on spousal violence ( $p < .05$ ,  $\beta = -.421$ ). Findings from structural equation modeling revealed that controlling behavior indirectly and negatively influences spousal violence through the mediation of spiritual well-being ( $p < .05$ ,  $\beta = -.508$ ); similarly, differentiation indirectly and negatively influences spousal violence via spiritual well-being ( $p < .05$ ,  $\beta = -.578$ ). Therefore, the model of the relationship between controlling behavior and differentiation with spousal violence, mediated by spiritual well-being, fits well with the empirical data collected from couples seeking counseling services in Tabriz. These results may assist clinical professionals in promoting compassion and empathetic understanding while reducing spousal violence, enabling them to develop effective treatment plans by considering predictive factors in this population.

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**Keywords:** *Controlling behavior, differentiation, spousal violence, spiritual well-being.*

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## 1. Introduction

The family is the first institution in which an individual is raised, and the vitality and stability of this institution depend on the existence of correct and stable relationships between spouses. Women play a pivotal role in the family and have a significant impact on both individual and societal well-being. Due to their central role in the family and the interactions they have with other family members, women often face more life challenges than other members, which can undermine their mental health. One of the factors threatening women's mental health within the family is violence. Domestic violence, or violence against women within the family, is the most common form of spousal violence, where aggressive behavior is typically perpetrated by one family member (usually the man) against another (usually the woman) (Hossain et al., 2025; Koçyiğit & Uzun, 2025). In the study by Derakhshanpour et al. (2014), the most common type of violence against women was psychological violence, with a prevalence of 54%, followed by verbal (31%), physical (24.8%), and sexual violence (6.8%) (Derakhshan Pour et al., 2014).

One of the psychological and behavioral factors contributing to violence is controlling behavior (Lynch, 2018; Lynch et al., 2015). Controlling behavior refers to an excessive tendency to dominate others and exercise power over them, to the extent that the other person's actions, behaviors, and decisions are dictated by the controller's desires and preferences. Key personality traits of controlling individuals include an inability to accept criticism, aggression, verbal and physical violence, egocentrism, selfishness, exaggeration of others' faults, and jealousy (Chapman & Goldberg, 2011). Factors such as gender roles, personality characteristics, and psychological trauma can facilitate or trigger controlling behavior (Hamberger et al., 2017). Therefore, women are typically the primary victims of controlling behavior in the family, followed by children and, ultimately, men (Ziaei, 2015).

The negative consequences of controlling behavior include impaired interpersonal functioning between couples (Baucom et al., 2019), reduced marital relationship quality

(Moblian et al., 2022), decreased marital satisfaction (Hammett et al., 2021), and marital burnout (Rahmani, 2018). In the study by Gou et al. (2019), controlling behavior by women predicted depression and marital dissatisfaction in men, whereas controlling behavior by men predicted marital dissatisfaction in women (Gou et al., 2019).

Among the most influential perspectives on family dynamics is the theory of differentiation, which emphasizes early family relationships and their impact on future relational patterns (Peleg et al., 2006). Differentiated individuals possess characteristics that can positively influence marital outcomes. Spouses with high levels of differentiation remain unaffected by intense negative emotions and exhibit controlled responses. These individuals have a strong sense of identity, behave appropriately under stress, maintain self-definition in intimate relationships, and do not become emotionally fused with others, thereby reducing marital conflicts. Furthermore, they possess clear thoughts and emotions and do not alter themselves to meet others' expectations (Rodríguez-González et al., 2020). In marital systems, high levels of differentiation among couples increase the likelihood of effective conflict resolution and reduce emotional reactivity (Buser et al., 2019). The study by Yuan et al. (2022) found that individuals with high emotional reactivity provoke avoidant responses in their spouses, which decreases marital quality (Yuan et al., 2022). Similarly, in the study by Rafezi et al. (2022), the emotional cutoff subscale of self-differentiation had a significant negative correlation with marital intimacy (Rafezi & Sabouri, 2022). Studies by Jafarzadeh et al. (2020) and Haji et al. (2018) revealed that increased differentiation was associated with reduced spousal violence (Jafarzadeh et al., 2020).

Given that spirituality and family both emphasize shared values, researchers have predicted a close relationship between the two (Moslehi & Ahmadi, 2013). With growing recognition of the role of spirituality in well-being, the concept of spiritual well-being—defined as the sense of connection to something greater than oneself that provides life with meaning, purpose, and personal values—has been explored in depth (Dastyar et al., 2022). Spiritual well-being

involves a confident relationship with God and combines religious, social, and psychological dimensions that foster peace and life satisfaction (Haryanto & Muslih, 2025), which can positively impact spousal relationships. In this context, the study by Zahedi-Rad and Hosseini (2016) showed that greater family religiosity was associated with lower levels of violence reported by women (Zahedi Rad & Hosseini, 2016). Seifi and Taghavi (2019) found that enhancing spiritual well-being enabled couples to improve marital satisfaction strategies and thus enhance life satisfaction (Seifi & Taghavi, 2019).

Regarding the relationship between differentiation and spiritual well-being, previous studies such as Sandage and Jankowski (2010) and Meteyard et al. (2012) have provided evidence for an association between self-differentiation and spiritual growth (Meteyard et al., 2012; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010). Jankowski and Vaughn (2009) concluded that spiritual development is positively related to the degree of individual differentiation, and spiritual efforts may predict levels of spiritual transformation and differentiation (Jankowski & Vaughn, 2009).

As discussed, few studies have examined the relationship among the variables in the present study within its specific population. While some research has separately explored associations between some of these variables, no study has yet investigated the simultaneous relationships among all components in the form of a causal model. This research gap highlights the importance of conducting further studies. The findings of the current study are expected to contribute to improving couples' quality of life. Therefore, the current study seeks to answer the following question: Does the model of the relationship between controlling behavior and differentiation with spousal violence, mediated by spiritual well-being, fit the empirical data from couples attending counseling centers in Tabriz?

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive-correlational design aimed at examining the relationships between variables within a causal model. The statistical population comprised all women who referred to the Social Emergency Center of Tabriz during the first half of 2023, all of whom had experienced domestic violence by their spouses. The total number of these women was 305 ( $N = 305$ ). Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: female gender, age between 20 and 40 years, having at least

one child, and holding at least a high school diploma. Exclusion criteria included the use of psychiatric medication within the past three months, diagnosis of a severe physical illness such as cancer or multiple sclerosis, and receipt of psychological or counseling services during the three months prior to the study.

Sampling was conducted using a combination of simple random and purposive sampling. Based on Klein's (2016) recommendation, the required sample size was determined to be 231 participants. To account for potential attrition, 245 questionnaires were distributed, and data from 240 participants were ultimately analyzed ( $n = 240$ ).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Spiritual Well-Being

The Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire developed by Gomez and Fisher (2003) consists of 20 items and includes four subscales: personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very low to 5 = very high). Gomez and Fisher (2003) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92 for the overall scale and alpha values of 0.89, 0.86, 0.76, and 0.79 for the personal, transcendental, environmental, and communal subscales, respectively. For construct validity, the questionnaire showed a significant negative correlation with the psychoticism subscale of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire and a positive correlation with happiness (Gomez & Fisher, 2003). Dehshiri et al. (2013) reported Cronbach's alpha values of 0.92 for the total scale and 0.87, 0.88, 0.88, and 0.80 for the respective subscales (Deheshiri et al., 2013). Golparvar (2018) found that five items from the questionnaire loaded on a single factor, identified as transcendental spiritual well-being, with an overall alpha of 0.90 (Golparvar, 2018). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was calculated at 0.831, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

#### 2.2.2. Spousal Violence

To assess spousal violence, the Violence Against Women Questionnaire developed by Haj-Yahya (1999) was utilized. This instrument is derived from the Conflict Tactics Scale by Straus (1979), the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory by Tolman (1999), the Abuse Assessment by Rodenburg and Fantuzzo (1993), the Spouse Abuse Index by Hudson and McIntosh (1981), and the Violent Behavior Checklist by Shepard and Campbell (1992). It includes 32

items measuring psychological abuse, physical violence, sexual abuse, and economic abuse. Items are rated on a three-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = once, 3 = twice or more). Based on a national Palestinian survey with a sample of 2,410 women, Haj-Yahya (1999) reported Cronbach's alpha values of 0.71 (psychological abuse), 0.86 (physical violence), 0.93 (sexual abuse), and 0.92 (economic abuse), confirming the scale's reliability (Haj-Yahia, 1999). Amiri Shamili (2014) translated the instrument and confirmed its face validity through expert review; the reliability of the Persian version was calculated at 0.86 using Cronbach's alpha (Amiri Shamili, 2014). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha for the full questionnaire was 0.878, demonstrating strong internal consistency.

### 2.2.3. Controlling Behavior

To measure controlling behavior, the revised Controlling Behaviors Scale (CBS-R) by Graham-Kevan and Archer (2005) was employed. The 24-item original version was created in 2003 based on data from a domestic violence intervention program in the UK, which identified controlling behavior as a key issue. The revised 2005 version includes 29 items and five subscales: economic control, threatening control, intimidating control, emotional control, and isolating control. For couples with children, an additional subscale—control through children—was included, resulting in six subscales in this study, as all participants had at least one child. Respondents rate both their own and their partner's behaviors on a five-point Likert scale (0 = never to 4 = always), with higher scores indicating more coercive control. In a UK sample of 2,000 individuals, Cronbach's alpha was 0.90 for women and 0.89 for men. The CBS-R demonstrated good convergent validity with the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2005; Sleath et al., 2018). In Iran, Ziaei (2015) examined its psychometric properties and found results consistent with the original study (Ziaei, 2015). Kia Darbandsari et al. (2021) reported alpha values of 0.95 for the full scale, and 0.71, 0.88, 0.69, 0.84, 0.90, and 0.82 for the economic, threatening, intimidating, emotional, isolating, and children-related subscales, respectively (Kia Darband Sari et al., 2022). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha for the full scale was 0.864, indicating satisfactory reliability.

### 2.2.4. Differentiation of Self

To measure differentiation, the study used the Differentiation of Self Inventory developed by Skowron and Friedlander (1998). This 43-item instrument assesses individuals' differentiation within key relationships, particularly with their family of origin. It contains four subscales: emotional reactivity, "I" position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. Items are rated on a six-point Likert scale (1 = not at all like me to 6 = very much like me), with higher scores indicating greater differentiation. Skowron and Friedlander (1998) reported Cronbach's alpha values of 0.84 (emotional reactivity), 0.74 (fusion with others), 0.83 ("I" position), 0.82 (emotional cutoff), and 0.88 (total scale) (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). In a study by Shariat et al. (2021), the internal consistency of the total scale was 0.87 (Shari'at et al., 2021). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the entire instrument was 0.925, confirming excellent internal consistency.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient and structural equation modeling (SEM). Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26 and LISREL version 8.

## 3. Findings and Results

The descriptive findings related to 240 women who had experienced domestic violence and sought help from the Social Emergency Center in Tabriz during the first half of 2023 indicated that 127 participants (52.92%) were aged between 20 and 30 years, while 113 participants (47.08%) were between 30 and 40 years old. Regarding occupational status, 131 participants (48.34%) were employees, 119 (49.58%) were homemakers, 37 (15.42%) reported freelance work, and 84 (35%) reported employment in self-owned businesses. In terms of education level, 116 participants (48.33%) held a bachelor's degree, 72 (30%) had a diploma or associate degree, and 52 (21.67%) had a master's degree or higher. The duration of marriage for 116 participants (46.33%) ranged from 11 to 15 years, 81 (33.75%) had been married for 1 to 5 years, and 43 (17.91%) had been married for more than 15 years. Regarding the number of children, 119 participants (49.58%) had one child, 94 (39.17%) had two children, and 27 (11.25%) had three or more children.

**Table 1**

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables*

Variable	Mean	SD	Max	Min	Skewness	Kurtosis
Economic control	12.61	2.491	16	8	-0.254	-1.197
Threatening control	12.44	2.531	16	7	-0.176	-1.228
Intimidation control	12.48	2.483	16	8	0.118	-1.292
Emotional control	12.49	2.532	16	8	0.179	-1.305
Isolation control	12.24	2.595	16	8	-0.044	-1.369
Child-related control	12.55	2.468	16	8	-0.178	-1.210
Total controlling behavior	74.80	4.408	96	48	-0.176	-1.173
Psychological abuse	31.50	3.751	45	16	0.096	-1.199
Physical violence	20.45	4.310	30	10	0.070	-0.127
Sexual abuse	4.80	1.507	9	3	1.224	1.474
Economic abuse	4.25	1.123	6	2	-0.175	-0.690
Spousal violence (total)	61.00	5.226	79	40	0.263	-0.719
Personal spiritual well-being	13.68	3.186	25	6	0.423	-1.177
Communal spiritual well-being	13.92	4.261	25	6	0.381	-1.227
Environmental well-being	13.70	4.138	25	6	0.395	-1.213
Transcendental well-being	13.78	3.171	25	6	0.380	-1.222
Spiritual well-being (total)	55.08	4.340	100	24	0.378	-1.192
Emotional reactivity	52.05	3.731	65	14	-1.462	-0.736
“I” position	52.30	3.578	68	14	-1.491	-0.850
Emotional cutoff	51.90	3.720	65	14	-1.411	-0.581
Fusion with others	52.13	3.673	65	14	-1.487	-0.801
Differentiation (total)	208.39	4.460	261	56	-1.477	-0.791

As shown in Table 1, within the controlling behavior variable, the highest mean was for economic control ( $M = 12.61$ ), and the lowest was for isolation control ( $M = 12.24$ ). In the spousal violence variable, the highest mean was for psychological abuse ( $M = 31.50$ ), and the lowest was for economic abuse ( $M = 4.25$ ). Regarding spiritual well-being,

the highest mean was found in the communal dimension ( $M = 13.92$ ), and the lowest was in the personal dimension ( $M = 13.68$ ). In the differentiation variable, the highest mean was for the “I” position ( $M = 52.30$ ), and the lowest was for emotional cutoff ( $M = 51.90$ ).

**Table 2**

*Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Research Variables*

Variables	Spousal Violence
Controlling behavior	0.374
Spiritual well-being	-0.561
Differentiation	-0.421

The Pearson correlation results in Table 2 revealed a significant positive correlation between controlling behavior and spousal violence ( $r = 0.374$ ,  $p < .01$ ); a significant negative correlation between differentiation and spousal violence ( $r = -0.421$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and a significant negative correlation between spiritual well-being and spousal violence ( $r = -0.561$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Before conducting path analysis, assumptions of multivariate normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and independence of errors were verified. The skewness and kurtosis statistics for all research variables fell within the

acceptable range of  $-2$  to  $+2$ , confirming the assumption of normality. To assess multicollinearity, tolerance values and variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics were evaluated. All VIF values were below 10, and all tolerance values exceeded 0.1, confirming no multicollinearity. The Durbin-Watson statistic was calculated at 2.38, falling within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5, confirming independence of errors.

Given the confirmation of all statistical assumptions, the fit of the proposed model was evaluated using path analysis via SPSS version 26 and LISREL version 8. The proposed model aimed to examine the relationship between



controlling behavior and differentiation with spousal violence through the mediating role of spiritual well-being

among couples attending counseling centers in Tabriz. The final standardized model is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Table 3**

*Model Fit Indices*

Fit Index	Value	Criterion	Interpretation
Absolute Fit			
Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ )	178.40	–	–
Degrees of freedom (df)	88	–	–
Significance level	0.001	< 0.05	Acceptable
$\chi^2/df$	$178.40 \div 88 = 2.03$	< 3	Good fit
Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	0.917	> 0.90	Good fit
Adjusted GFI (AGFI)	0.866	> 0.85	Good fit
Incremental Fit			
Relative Fit Index (RFI)	0.938	> 0.90	Good fit
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	0.921	> 0.90	Good fit
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.926	> 0.90	Good fit
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	0.924	> 0.90	Good fit
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	0.913	> 0.90	Good fit
Parsimonious Fit			
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.043	< 0.10	Good fit
Parsimonious Normed Fit Index (PNFI)	0.669	> 0.50	Good fit
Parsimonious Goodness of Fit Index (PGFI)	0.677	> 0.50	Good fit

The results in Table 3 show that the chi-square value ( $\chi^2$ ) is 178.40 with 88 degrees of freedom. The  $\chi^2/df$  ratio equals 2.03, which is less than 3, indicating an excellent model fit. The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) is 0.917, confirming a good fit. The Adjusted GFI (AGFI) is 0.866, which exceeds the 0.85 threshold, also indicating a good model fit. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is 0.043, which is below the 0.10 threshold, confirming that the research model is acceptable. Additional fit indices—NFI (0.913), TLI (0.924), CFI (0.926), and RFI (0.938)—further support the conclusion that the proposed model fits the data well.

Considering the above information and the quantitative fit indices, the theoretical model of the study is acceptable. Therefore, we proceed to the analysis of the model's internal relationships and standardized regression coefficients between latent variables. To test the hypotheses, the p-value for each path was assessed. A relationship is considered statistically significant when its p-value is less than 0.05. Consequently, the model examining the relationship between controlling behavior and differentiation with spousal violence through the mediating role of spiritual well-being in couples attending counseling centers in Tabriz demonstrates a satisfactory fit.

**Table 4**

*Standardized Path Coefficients for Direct Effects Between Variables*

Pathway	Standardized Coefficient	Standard Error	Critical Ratio	p-value
Controlling behavior → Spiritual well-being	–0.498	0.321	–5.47	0.0005
Controlling behavior → Spousal violence	0.374	0.248	4.35	0.0005
Differentiation → Spiritual well-being	0.584	0.129	6.57	0.0005
Differentiation → Spousal violence	–0.421	0.208	–4.50	0.0005
Spiritual well-being → Spousal violence	–0.565	0.410	–6.54	0.0005

The results in Table 4 indicate that controlling behavior has a significant negative direct relationship with spiritual well-being ( $\beta = -0.498$ ,  $p < .01$ ); a significant positive direct relationship with spousal violence ( $\beta = 0.374$ ,  $p < .01$ ); differentiation has a significant positive direct relationship

with spiritual well-being ( $\beta = 0.584$ ,  $p < .01$ ); a significant negative direct relationship with spousal violence ( $\beta = -0.421$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and spiritual well-being has a significant negative direct relationship with spousal violence ( $\beta = -0.565$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 5**

*Bootstrapping Results for Indirect and Mediated Effects*

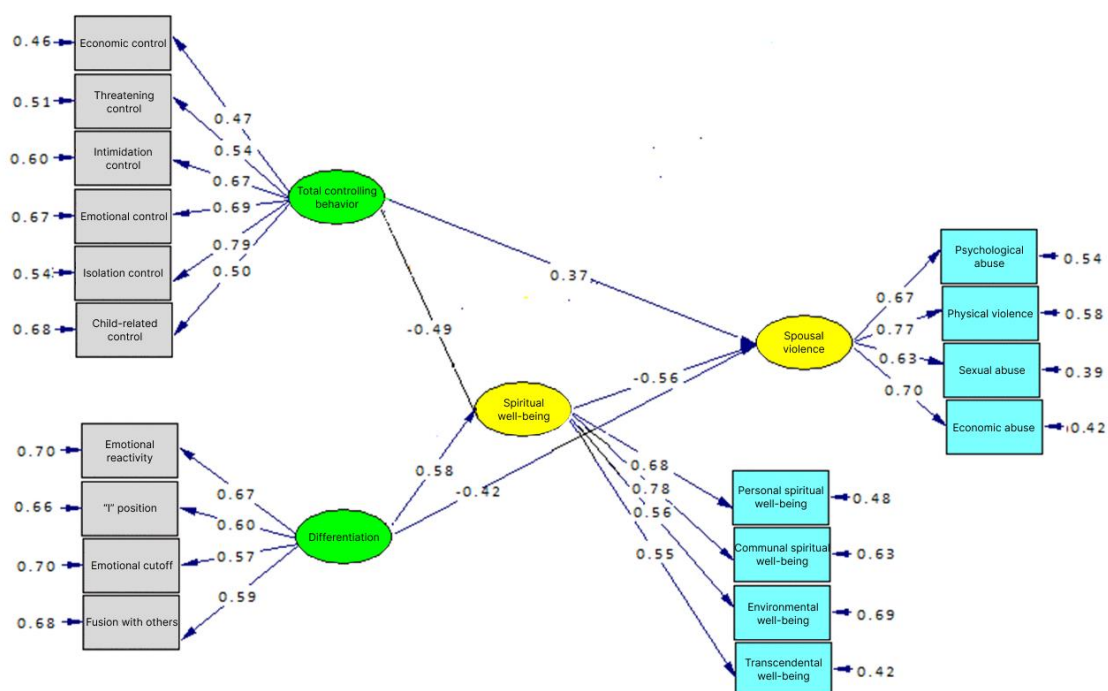
Exogenous Variable	Mediator	Endogenous Variable	Estimate	Upper CI	Lower CI	p-value
Controlling behavior	Spiritual well-being	Spousal violence	-0.508	0.129	0.103	0.001
Differentiation	Spiritual well-being	Spousal violence	-0.578	0.340	0.132	0.001

The confidence intervals in Table 5 indicate that the indirect effect of controlling behavior on spousal violence through the mediating role of spiritual well-being is statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.508$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Similarly, the indirect effect of differentiation on spousal violence through

spiritual well-being is also statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.578$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Because the confidence intervals do not include zero, these indirect pathways are considered statistically significant.

**Figure 1**

*Model with Beta Coefficients*



Chi-Square=178.40, df=88, P-value=0.00000, RMSEA=0.043

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study was conducted with the aim of evaluating the fit of a model examining the relationship between controlling behavior and differentiation with spousal violence through the mediation of spiritual well-being in

couples attending counseling centers in Tabriz. The findings showed that controlling behavior had an indirect and negative effect on spousal violence through the mediation of spiritual well-being. Regarding the relationship between controlling behavior and spousal violence, the results are

consistent with the prior findings (Abedi et al., 2024; Baucom et al., 2019; Bedir Akpınarlı & Eryücel, 2024; Davoodifar & Esmaeilian, 2024; Gou et al., 2019; Hakimi Dezfouli & Ebrahimpour, 2024; Hammett et al., 2021; Moblian et al., 2022; Rahmani, 2018; Taghipour & Panah Ali, 2023). Indeed, undesirable interpersonal functioning between spouses (Baucom et al., 2019), decreased marital relationship quality (Moblian et al., 2022), lower marital satisfaction (Hammett et al., 2021), and marital burnout (Rahmani, 2018) are among the adverse consequences of controlling behavior. Gou et al. (2019) found that controlling behavior by men predicted marital dissatisfaction in women (Gou et al., 2019). This finding can be explained by the fact that controlling behavior is often a hidden social harm that takes shape in the private setting of the home, leading to insecurity and fragmentation within the family unit. Ziaei (2015) reported that women are the primary victims of controlling behavior in the family, followed by children, and lastly, men (Ziaei, 2015). Violating individual freedoms and exerting control leads to negative emotions such as guilt and fear in the partner, which in turn reinforces further control and can escalate into violence within the relationship.

The core assumption behind controlling behavior is that when we are dissatisfied in a relationship, we do not perceive ourselves as responsible for that feeling but rather blame others or external factors. In this way, unconscious psychological projection onto others functions as a defense mechanism that helps the individual avoid harm. However, the only person who can truly control our behavior is ourselves. When a relationship is unsatisfactory, instead of trying to change the other person, we should explore what we can do to improve it. In almost all cases, when controlling behavior ceases, the partner also begins to change. To achieve this goal, we must replace our behaviors with six loving habits: listening, supporting, encouraging, respecting, trusting, and accepting. These six traits strengthen communication skills, increase empathy, and reduce violence in romantic relationships.

Regarding the relationship between spiritual well-being and spousal violence, the results of Seifi and Taghavi (2019) align with the current study's findings, showing that spiritual well-being positively influences psychological resilience, which in turn contributes to marital satisfaction (Seifi & Taghavi, 2019). Similarly, Zahedi-Rad and Hosseini (2016) found a negative relationship between family religiosity and violence reported by women (Zahedi Rad & Hosseini, 2016). Spiritual well-being refers to a sense of connectedness to something greater than oneself, which gives life meaning,

purpose, and personal values. It embodies a confident connection with God and encompasses religious, social, and psychological dimensions, promoting peace and life satisfaction and positively affecting spousal relationships. Moreover, spirituality can serve as a psychological and social resource for coping with stress. When spiritual well-being is threatened, individuals may experience psychological disturbances such as loneliness, depression, and a loss of meaning, which can undermine adaptability and even a sense of existential wholeness. Given that spirituality and family emphasize similar values (Moslehi & Ahmadi, 2013), scholars predict a close connection between the two. Thus, spirituality can enhance family values such as intimacy, empathetic understanding, and resilience in facing challenges. Individuals with spiritual tendencies tend to respond better to stress and trauma and demonstrate greater mental health, as spirituality and religion act as buffers against distress, thereby reducing psychological disorders and enhancing mental well-being. Spiritual well-being increases self-awareness, social connectedness, and access to social support during relational conflicts, fostering a sense of purpose, security, and meaning in life, thereby improving psychological and physical health and increasing marital adjustment, which in turn reduces spousal violence.

Although no prior studies were found specifically addressing the relationship between controlling behavior and spiritual well-being, this association can be explained as follows: controlling behavior refers to an individual's desire to dominate the environment, relationships, and the actions of others, which may negatively affect spiritual well-being. Individuals who exhibit controlling tendencies often experience heightened anxiety and attempt to manage their surroundings to alleviate it. This behavior undermines spiritual well-being, as excessive control reduces psychological flexibility and resists change and acceptance—traits that are foundational to spiritual well-being, which requires surrender and trust in transcendental processes such as spiritual beliefs. Controlling behavior impedes intimacy and disrupts emotional connection, while spiritual well-being in marital relationships requires a sense of security, acceptance, and deep emotional bonds. Control is in conflict with spiritual concepts such as surrender and reliance on a higher power, values emphasized across many religions and spiritual traditions. Individuals lacking inner spirituality may attempt to create psychological safety through external control. However, this approach increases existential anxiety and diminishes spiritual well-being. Conversely, individuals with high levels of spiritual well-



being feel supported by a larger system (e.g., God, the cosmos, destiny), reducing their need to control others.

The study also found that differentiation had an indirect and negative effect on spousal violence through spiritual well-being. Regarding the relationship between differentiation and spousal violence, the findings are consistent with prior findings (Haji et al., 2018; Jafarzadeh et al., 2020). Jafarzadeh et al. (2020) showed a significant association between differentiation and domestic violence among women visiting urban health centers. Haji et al. (2018) found a significant negative relationship between differentiation and violence against women (Haji et al., 2018). These findings can be interpreted through Bowen's family systems theory (1978), which posits that differentiation occurs at both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. Intrapersonal differentiation refers to the ability to separate emotional from intellectual processes, while interpersonal differentiation involves the ability to maintain autonomy in the presence of intimacy—skills that promote healthy boundaries in relationships. Couples who establish such normative boundaries are more likely to have intimate relationships, preventing the emergence of aggression and violence.

Beyond levels of differentiation, Skowron and Friedlander (1998) identified four core components that influence emotional processes within families: emotional reactivity, "I" position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. Emotional reactivity reflects how individuals respond to stimuli with hypersensitivity or emotional volatility. The "I" position represents clarity in personal beliefs and loyalty to these beliefs under pressure. Emotional cutoff refers to fear of intimacy and vulnerability in relationships. Fusion with others indicates a need for approval and emotional dependence on others (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Differentiation is thus a complex integration of emotional maturity, rational thinking in emotionally charged situations, and the ability to maintain close emotional bonds. At the intrapersonal level, low differentiation manifests when individuals cannot separate emotions from thoughts and become overwhelmed. At the interpersonal level, under-differentiated individuals may either absorb others' emotions—leading to psychological distress—or react antagonistically, potentially resulting in spousal violence.

Regarding the relationship between spiritual well-being and spousal violence, spiritual well-being is a state of being that reflects one's cognitions, behaviors, and emotions in relation to oneself, others, a transcendent force, and nature.

It fosters identity, unity, satisfaction, happiness, contentment, love, beauty, respect, positive attitudes, inner peace, coherence, purpose, and direction in life. Spiritual well-being can enhance adaptation to difficulties and regulate bodily functions, and research shows significant correlations between spiritual well-being and variables such as mental health, emotional well-being, life satisfaction, and quality of life. It is characterized by harmonious connections with others, personal stability, peace, and relationships with God and society, promoting structured emotional ties and effective functioning in intimate relationships. Spirituality emphasizes meaning and life philosophy and is associated with attributes such as self-esteem and hope. This orientation cultivates love, respect, inner peace, and meaningful direction in emotional relationships, enabling individuals to endure hardship and find meaning, thereby reducing domestic violence and marital conflict.

Regarding the relationship between differentiation and spiritual well-being, previous studies (Meteyard et al., 2012; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010) have documented a link between self-differentiation and spiritual growth. Jankowski and Vogen (2009) concluded that spiritual development is positively related to levels of differentiation and that spiritual engagement can predict levels of both spiritual transformation and differentiation. These findings suggest that stronger religious or spiritual ties are associated with greater differentiation. Highly differentiated individuals demonstrate integration across intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, acting with agency and clarity about themselves, others, and their environment. They possess emotional stability and maintain their identity across contexts. Differentiation theory emphasizes the importance of early family relationships in shaping later interactions. Differentiated individuals exhibit qualities conducive to personal growth and psychological health. This growth is reflected in spiritual well-being and its personal, social, environmental, and transcendental dimensions, which also enhance marital quality. In the face of intense negative emotions, differentiated spouses maintain control and preserve their sense of self, demonstrating resilience and meaningful living. Spiritual well-being, characterized by a relationship with something greater than the self, supports this development and brings peace and satisfaction, positively influencing marital dynamics. The relationship between differentiation and spiritual well-being may also be reciprocal.

Therefore, based on the analyses presented, the mediating role of spiritual well-being in the relationship between

controlling behavior and differentiation with spousal violence among couples in Tabriz counseling centers is confirmed. Offering educational workshops for couples focusing on strengthening differentiation and spiritual well-being—while simultaneously reducing controlling behaviors—can help reduce domestic violence and improve marital relationships.

### Authors' Contributions

This article is derived from the first author's PhD dissertation at the Tabriz Branch of Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran. 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

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. It has received ethical approval under the code IR.IAU.TABRIZ.REC.1402.316 from the Research Ethics Committee of the Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch.

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