KMAN PUBLISHING INSTITUTE
Journal Website

Article history:
Received 26 December 2025
Revised 26 March 2026
Accepted 30 March 2026
Initial Published 14 April 2026
Final Publication 13 April 2026

KMAN Counseling & Psychology Nexus

Volume 4, pp 1-11

E-ISSN: 3041-9026

Structural Model of Marital Conflict Based on Self-Differentiation and Alexithymia with the Mediating Role of Frustration Tolerance in Divorce-Seeking Individuals

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A r t i c l e I n f o

Article type:
Original Research
Section:
Family and Couple Therapy

How to cite this article:
Hosseini, S., Mousavi, S. A. M., & Shomalyoskoei, A. (2026). Structural Model of Marital Conflict Based on Self-Differentiation and Alexithymia with the Mediating Role of Frustration Tolerance in Divorce-Seeking Individuals. *KMAN Conseling and Psychology Nexus*, *4*, 1-11.
http://doi.org/10.61838/kman.fct.psynexus.5224

A B S T R A C T

The present study aimed to examine the structural model of marital conflict based on self-differentiation and alexithymia with the mediating role of frustration tolerance in individuals seeking divorce. This study was fundamental in purpose and descriptive-correlational in design. The statistical population consisted of all divorce-seeking individuals who referred to family counseling centers affiliated with the judiciary in Karaj and Hashtgerd between February 2025 and October 2025. A sample of 250 participants (139 women and 111 men) was selected using convenience sampling and completed the research instruments voluntarily. Data were collected using the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (Sanaei et al., 2008), the Self-Differentiation Inventory (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Bagby et al., 1994), and the Frustration Discomfort Scale (Harrington, 2005). Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 26 through Maximum Likelihood estimation. Model fit was evaluated using standard fit indices including χ^2/df, GFI, AGFI, CFI, and RMSEA. The results indicated that the proposed structural model demonstrated acceptable fit with the data (χ^2/df = 1.67, CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.05). Alexithymia had a positive and significant direct effect on marital conflict ($\beta = 0.206$, $p < .05$), whereas self-differentiation had a negative and significant direct effect ($\beta = -0.276$, $p < .01$). Frustration tolerance significantly predicted marital conflict ($\beta = 0.431$, $p < .001$) and also mediated the relationships between alexithymia and marital conflict ($\beta = 0.167$, $p < .001$) and between self-differentiation and marital conflict ($\beta = -0.156$, $p < .001$). The model explained 55% of the variance in marital conflict ($R^2 = 0.55$). The findings suggest that alexithymia and self-differentiation play significant roles in predicting marital conflict both directly and indirectly through frustration tolerance, highlighting the importance of emotional processing and coping capacity in marital dynamics and offering implications for targeted psychological interventions.

Keywords: *Marital conflict, self-differentiation, alexithymia, frustration tolerance, structural equation modeling*

1. Introduction

Marital conflict is one of the most pervasive and complex phenomena in the domain of family psychology, representing a multidimensional construct that reflects dysfunctional interaction patterns, emotional dysregulation, and breakdowns in communication between spouses. Contemporary research increasingly conceptualizes marital conflict not merely as overt disagreement but as a dynamic interplay of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes that unfold within the relational system. Empirical evidence indicates that marital conflict is strongly associated with adverse psychological outcomes, including decreased marital satisfaction, increased emotional distress, and heightened risk of divorce, thereby underscoring its significance as a critical focus of scientific inquiry (Arini, 2023; Sadeghi et al., 2022). Within this framework, identifying the underlying psychological determinants of marital conflict becomes essential for both theoretical advancement and clinical intervention.

Among the key psychological variables implicated in marital conflict, self-differentiation has received substantial attention, particularly within Bowenian family systems theory. Self-differentiation refers to an individual's capacity to maintain emotional autonomy while remaining emotionally connected to significant others. Individuals with higher levels of differentiation are better able to regulate emotional reactivity, maintain a stable sense of self, and engage in adaptive conflict resolution strategies. In contrast, low differentiation is associated with emotional fusion, heightened reactivity, and maladaptive interpersonal dynamics that exacerbate marital discord. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that self-differentiation is negatively associated with marital conflict and positively associated with marital satisfaction and relational stability (Jo & Lee, 2025; Sarhani & Homaei, 2023). Moreover, recent structural models have highlighted the mediating role of differentiation in linking emotional and cognitive variables to marital outcomes, suggesting its central role in the architecture of marital functioning (Habibi Kordabad & Darbani, 2023; Sadeghi et al., 2022).

Another critical construct in understanding marital conflict is alexithymia, defined as a deficit in the ability to identify, describe, and process emotions. Individuals with high levels of alexithymia tend to exhibit externally oriented thinking, limited emotional awareness, and impaired emotional expression, all of which contribute to communication breakdowns and relational dissatisfaction. The literature consistently indicates that alexithymia is a significant predictor of marital conflict, emotional distancing, and reduced intimacy within couples (Esmaeili Anamogh et al., 2024; Lyvers et al., 2022). For instance, alexithymia has been linked to maladaptive schemas and increased emotional reactivity, which in turn intensify conflictual interactions between spouses (Alizadeh et al., 2024). Furthermore, clinical and experimental studies have shown that interventions targeting alexithymia, such as cognitive-behavioral and rational-emotive approaches, can lead to significant reductions in marital conflict and improvements in emotional functioning (Mohammadi et al., 2025; Salehi et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance of alexithymia as both a risk factor and a potential therapeutic target in marital relationships.

In addition to self-differentiation and alexithymia, frustration tolerance—or conversely, distress intolerance—has emerged as a crucial mediating mechanism in the relationship between individual psychological characteristics and marital outcomes. Frustration tolerance refers to an individual's capacity to endure emotional discomfort, cope with unmet expectations, and persist in goal-directed behavior despite adversity. Low frustration tolerance is associated with heightened emotional reactivity, impulsivity, and maladaptive coping strategies, which can exacerbate interpersonal conflicts and undermine relationship stability. Research has demonstrated that distress tolerance is significantly related to marital satisfaction, emotional regulation, and overall psychological well-being in couples (Rauf et al., 2023; Shahabi et al., 2021). Moreover, higher levels of tolerance for ambiguity and distress have been shown to facilitate adaptive marital adjustment and resilience, particularly in the face of relational stressors (Montazer & Razavi Nematollahi, 2024; Ramzy, 2023).

The interplay between alexithymia and frustration tolerance is particularly noteworthy, as individuals with limited emotional awareness are often less capable of effectively managing distressing experiences. This combination can lead to maladaptive patterns of avoidance, withdrawal, or aggression, thereby intensifying marital conflict. Empirical findings suggest that alexithymia is positively associated with emotional dysregulation and marital burnout, which are themselves linked to reduced distress tolerance and increased relational dissatisfaction (Amirkhosravi et al., 2022; Ghasemi et al., 2023). Similarly, interventions aimed at enhancing emotional literacy and distress tolerance have been shown to improve marital

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E-ISSN: 3041-9026

quality and reduce conflict among couples, highlighting the interconnected nature of these constructs (Gholipour et al., 2022; Kazemi et al., 2021).

Despite the growing body of research on these variables, there remains a need for integrative models that simultaneously examine the direct and indirect relationships among self-differentiation, alexithymia, and marital conflict, particularly with the inclusion of mediating mechanisms such as frustration tolerance. Previous studies have often focused on bivariate relationships or isolated predictors, thereby limiting the ability to capture the complex, multivariate nature of marital dynamics. For instance, while alexithymia has been identified as a significant predictor of marital conflict in divorce-seeking populations, the mechanisms through which it exerts its influence remain underexplored (Moayed et al., 2018). Similarly, although self-differentiation has been linked to reduced conflict and improved relational outcomes, the pathways through which it interacts with emotional and cognitive variables warrant further investigation.

Furthermore, the context of divorce-seeking individuals represents a particularly critical population for examining these relationships, as they are likely to exhibit heightened levels of conflict, emotional dysregulation, and psychological distress. Understanding the structural relationships among key psychological variables in this population can provide valuable insights into the etiology of marital breakdown and inform the development of targeted interventions. Recent studies have emphasized the importance of examining these variables within culturally specific contexts, as sociocultural factors may influence the expression and impact of psychological constructs on marital relationships (Ashouri et al., 2023; Salehi et al., 2024). Additionally, research has highlighted the role of cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance in mitigating marital burnout and enhancing relationship functioning, further supporting the inclusion of these variables in comprehensive models of marital conflict (Emadoleslami et al., 2021).

In light of these considerations, there is a clear need for a comprehensive structural model that integrates self-differentiation, alexithymia, and frustration tolerance in predicting marital conflict among divorce-seeking individuals. Such a model would not only contribute to the theoretical understanding of marital dynamics but also provide practical implications for clinical assessment and intervention. By examining both direct and indirect pathways, researchers can identify key leverage points for therapeutic change and develop more effective strategies for reducing conflict and promoting relational well-being.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to examine the structural model of marital conflict based on self-differentiation and alexithymia with the mediating role of frustration tolerance in individuals seeking divorce.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was fundamental in terms of purpose and descriptive-correlational in terms of data collection method. In this study, the relationships among variables were examined without any manipulation, using structural equation modeling (SEM). Accordingly, self-differentiation and alexithymia were considered exogenous variables, frustration tolerance as the mediating variable, and marital conflict as the endogenous variable, all of which were analyzed within the proposed model. The statistical population consisted of all individuals seeking divorce in the cities of Karaj and Hashtgerd whose divorce cases were registered and under review in family counseling centers affiliated with the judiciary between February 2025 and October 2025. The sample included 250 divorce-seeking individuals (men and women) who had filed cases in these counseling centers during the specified period and voluntarily participated by completing the research instruments with full informed consent. Participation was entirely confidential, and no personally identifiable information (such as name, national identification number, or case file number) was collected. No restrictions were imposed regarding age, gender, or educational level, as the aim was to capture the natural diversity within the population of divorce applicants. To ensure participants' rights, data confidentiality was guaranteed, and the questionnaires were used solely for scientific purposes. Given the field nature of the study, administrative and ethical requirements, collaboration with official judicial centers, and limited access to the entire population, a convenience sampling method was employed. Due to practical constraints (such as lack of access to a complete population list, the need for coordination with the judicial system, and voluntary participation), sampling was conducted among individuals who were present at counseling centers during the specified period and expressed willingness to participate. Inclusion criteria included having an active divorce case in family counseling centers of Karaj and Hashtgerd during the specified period, having at least one child, absence of

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substance addiction, and voluntary participation with informed consent. The requirement of having children was due to the presence of child-related items in the marital conflict questionnaire, and the absence of addiction was considered to control its potential effects on frustration tolerance and other emotional variables. These criteria were verified through self-report, review of available case documents, and consultation with counselors at the family counseling centers. The sample size of 250 participants was determined based on the use of structural equation modeling and in accordance with the recommendations of Tabachnick and Fidell (2019), which suggest a minimum of 5 to 10 participants per model parameter and at least 200 participants for complex models. This sample size is also consistent with the guidelines proposed by Stevens (1996) regarding the ratio of observations to parameters, ensuring adequate conditions for model estimation and goodness-of-fit evaluation. Smaller sample sizes may lead to non-convergence, improper solutions, or reduced accuracy in parameter estimation, particularly in standard errors.

2.2. Measures

The Revised Marital Conflict Questionnaire (Sanaei et al., 2008) is a 54-item instrument designed to assess marital conflict across eight dimensions, including reduced cooperation, reduced sexual relationship, increased emotional reactions, increased child support-seeking behaviors, increased individual relationships with one's own relatives, decreased family relationships with spouse's relatives and friends, financial separation, and reduced effective communication. Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always), with total scores ranging from 54 to 270, where higher scores indicate greater marital conflict. Several items (Items 3, 11, 14, 26, 30, 33, 45, 47, and 54) are reverse-scored. The maximum score for each subscale is determined by multiplying the number of items by five. Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was reported as 0.96, and for the subscales ranged from 0.61 to 0.89. The questionnaire demonstrates strong content validity, and all items were retained following preliminary analysis due to adequate item-total correlations. Content and construct validity have been confirmed by experts in psychology and family studies (Sanaei et al., 2008).

The Self-Differentiation Inventory (DSI) developed by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) is a 46-item instrument comprising four subscales: emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. The questionnaire is rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 6 (completely true of me), with total scores ranging from 46 to 276. Lower scores indicate lower levels of self-differentiation. Internal consistency coefficients reported by Skowron and Friedlander were 0.88 for the total scale, and 0.84, 0.83, 0.82, and 0.74 for the subscales, respectively. Jahanbakhsh et al. (2011) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.69 for the total scale and values ranging from 0.61 to 0.75 for the subscales. Construct validity has been supported through factor analysis confirming the four-factor structure (Amani et al., 2015). In another study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales ranged from 0.53 to 0.72, and 0.81 for the total scale. Content validity based on internal consistency was reported as 0.83.

The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), developed by Bagby et al. (1994), is a 20-item measure assessing alexithymia across three dimensions: difficulty identifying feelings (7 items), difficulty describing feelings (5 items), and externally oriented thinking (8 items). Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with total scores ranging from 20 to 100, where higher scores indicate greater alexithymia. Items 4, 5, 10, 18, and 19 are reverse-scored. Reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.78 for difficulty identifying feelings, 0.75 for difficulty describing feelings, 0.66 for externally oriented thinking, and 0.81 for the total scale (Taylor et al., 1994). In a study by Karami Rad (2013), Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.69 for the total scale, and ranged from 0.55 to 0.74 for the subscales. Basharat (2007) reported alpha coefficients of 0.85 for the total scale and between 0.72 and 0.82 for the subscales, indicating strong internal consistency. Evidence for construct validity has been supported in previous studies, confirming the three-factor structure in Persian samples.

The Frustration Discomfort Scale, developed by Harrington (2005), assesses individuals' tolerance of frustration in goal attainment. This instrument uses a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and comprises four factors: emotional intolerance (e.g., inability to tolerate stress), discomfort intolerance (e.g., inability to tolerate problems), achievement intolerance (e.g., intolerance of delayed progress), and entitlement (e.g., intolerance of unfairness). Lower total scores indicate higher frustration tolerance, whereas higher scores reflect lower tolerance. In a study by Baba Reisi and Alimahdi (2014), Cronbach's alpha was 0.84 for the total scale, and ranged from 0.50 to 0.71 for the

subscales. Construct validity was assessed using confirmatory factor analysis, with factor loadings exceeding 0.30 and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of approximately 0.04, indicating acceptable model fit and supporting the four-factor structure proposed by Harrington (2005).

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM) in SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 26.

3. Findings and Results

In the present study, 250 participants (139 women and 111 men) seeking divorce were included. Among them, 47 individuals (18.8%) were under 30 years of age, 63 individuals (25.2%) were between 31 and 35 years, 56 individuals (22.4%) were between 36 and 40 years, 53 individuals (21.2%) were between 41 and 45 years, and 31 individuals (12.4%) were older than 45 years. Regarding educational level, 39 participants (15.6%) had less than a high school diploma, 97 participants (38.8%) had a high school diploma, 19 participants (7.6%) had an associate degree, 72 participants (28.8%) had a bachelor's degree, and 23 participants (9.2%) had a master's degree or higher. In terms of marital duration, 89 participants (35.6%) had less than 5 years of marital experience, 73 participants (29.2%) had 6 to 10 years, 51 participants (20.4%) had 11 to 15 years, and 37 participants (14.8%) had more than 15 years of marital life. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients among the components of self-differentiation, alexithymia, frustration tolerance, and marital conflict.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables

V	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1	72.40	10.61	—																		
2	39.28	9.19	.44**	—																	
3	38.02	9.60	.48**	.51**	—																
4	41.28	10.59	.56**	.46**	.56**	—															
5	18.05	4.83	-.20**	-.13*	-.15*	-.18**	—														
6	13.79	3.69	-.16*	-.21**	-.19**	-.20**	.51**	—													
7	23.83	5.10	-.15*	-.18**	-.08	-.12	.35**	.37**	—												
8	19.86	4.54	.24**	-.30**	-.23**	-.30**	.21**	.24**	.29**	—											
9	20.27	4.08	.17**	-.28**	-.18**	-.24**	.23**	.22**	.33**	.58**	—										
10	18.33	4.88	.25**	-.32**	-.20**	-.31**	.28**	.28**	.35**	.63**	.54**	—									
11	37.16	9.29	.28**	-.35**	-.31**	-.33**	.26**	.30**	.22**	.65**	.59**	.61**	—								
12	11.02	3.26	-.29**	-.37**	-.22**	-.30**	.18**	.19**	.21**	.38**	.42**	.39**	.48**	—							
13	14.00	3.67	-.20**	-.27**	-.33**	-.21**	.09	.14*	.26**	.25**	.31**	.32**	.35**	.44**	—						
14	12.98	3.30	-.27**	-.32**	-.28**	-.24**	.20**	.23**	.14*	.30**	.29**	.38**	.33**	.30**	.31**	—					
15	13.82	3.61	-.25**	-.34**	-.28**	-.24**	.21**	.24**	.20**	.28**	.32**	.36**	.30**	.42**	.36**	.41**	—				
16	14.30	3.66	-.18**	-.27**	-.25**	-.22**	.28**	.31**	.30**	.22**	.29**	.33**	.35**	.46**	.22**	.35**	.56**	—			
17	18.43	4.68	-.14*	-.20**	-.22**	-.25**	.32**	.28**	.24**	.29**	.35**	.30**	.38**	.44**	.38**	.34**	.41**	.41**	—		
18	35.17	7.14	-.29**	-.31**	-.26**	-.27**	.25**	.31**	.33**	.36**	.39**	.41**	.34**	.40**	.35**	.36**	.32**	.32**	.44**	—	
19	22.96	5.36	-.26**	-.22**	-.27**	-.23**	.10	.15*	.15*	.17**	.25**	.22**	.32**	.36**	.41**	.48**	.50**	.53**	.31**	.27**	—

1 = Self-differentiation – Emotional reactivity; 2 = Self-differentiation – I-position; 3 = Self-differentiation – Emotional cutoff; 4 = Self-differentiation – Fusion with others; 5 = Alexithymia – Difficulty identifying feelings; 6 = Alexithymia – Difficulty describing feelings; 7 = Alexithymia – Externally oriented thinking; 8 = Frustration tolerance – Emotional intolerance; 9 = Frustration tolerance – Discomfort intolerance; 10 = Frustration tolerance – Achievement intolerance; 11 = Frustration tolerance – Entitlement; 12 = Marital conflict – Reduced cooperation; 13 = Marital conflict – Reduced sexual relationship; 14 = Marital conflict – Increased child support-seeking; 15 = Marital conflict – Increased relationship with own relatives; 16 = Marital conflict – Decreased relationship with spouse's relatives; 17 = Marital conflict – Financial separation; 18 = Marital conflict – Reduced effective communication; 19 = Marital conflict – Increased emotional reactions. *p<0.05; **p<0.01.

Based on the results presented in Table 1, the correlation coefficients among the variables were in the expected direction and consistent with the theoretical framework of the study. It should be noted that, according to the scoring instructions of the questionnaire used to assess frustration tolerance, higher scores indicate lower frustration tolerance and vice versa; therefore, the directions of the obtained correlations are logical and interpretable. In this study, to evaluate the assumption of univariate normality, the skewness and kurtosis of each variable were examined. The results showed that the skewness and kurtosis values of all components fell within the range of ±2. This finding

indicates that the assumption of univariate normality was satisfied in the data. In addition, the assumption of multicollinearity was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance coefficient. The results indicated that the multicollinearity assumption was also satisfied, because the tolerance values of the predictor variables were greater than 0.10 and the VIF values for all variables were less than 10. According to Myers et al. (2006), a tolerance value smaller than 0.10 and a VIF value greater than 10 indicate violation of the multicollinearity assumption. Furthermore, to assess the assumption of multivariate normality, information related to Mahalanobis distance was analyzed. The skewness and kurtosis values of the Mahalanobis distance data were 0.67 and 0.94, respectively, indicating that both indices were within the range of ±2; therefore, the assumption of multivariate normality was also met. Finally, the homogeneity of variances assumption was evaluated by examining the scatterplot of standardized residual variances, and the results showed that this assumption was likewise satisfied in the present dataset.

After evaluating the assumptions, the data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). For this purpose, AMOS version 26.0 and Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation were employed. In the proposed model, it was hypothesized that the structural model of marital conflict based on self-differentiation and alexithymia, with the mediating role of frustration tolerance, would fit the data collected from divorce-seeking individuals. As shown in Figure 1, self-differentiation, alexithymia, frustration tolerance, and marital conflict were treated as latent variables. It was assumed that self-differentiation would be measured by the indicators of emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others; alexithymia by the indicators of difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking; frustration tolerance by the indicators of emotional intolerance, discomfort intolerance, achievement frustration intolerance, and injustice intolerance; and marital conflict by the indicators of reduced cooperation, reduced sexual relationship, increased child support-seeking, increased relationship with one's own relatives, decreased relationship with spouse's relatives, financial separation, reduced effective communication, and increased emotional reactions. Table 2 presents the fit indices of the research model.

Table 2

Fit Indices of the Research Model

Fit Index	Model Value	Cutoff Point
Chi-square	243.66	—
Model degrees of freedom	146	—
χ^2/df	1.67	< 3
GFI	0.909	> 0.90
AGFI	0.882	> 0.85
CFI	0.942	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.052	< 0.08

Table 2 shows that the fit indices obtained from the analysis support an acceptable fit of the research model to the collected data. Table 3 presents the path coefficients in the model.

Table 3

Total, Direct, and Indirect Path Coefficients Among the Research Variables in the Proposed Model

Effect Type	Path	B	SE	β	p
Direct	Alexithymia → Frustration Tolerance	0.432	0.116	0.388	0.001
Direct	Self-Differentiation → Frustration Tolerance	-0.255	0.058	-0.362	0.001
Direct	Frustration Tolerance → Marital Conflict	0.166	0.040	0.431	0.001
Direct	Alexithymia → Marital Conflict	0.089	0.040	0.206	0.017
Direct	Self-Differentiation → Marital Conflict	-0.075	0.026	-0.276	0.009
Indirect	Alexithymia → Marital Conflict	0.072	0.025	0.167	0.001
Indirect	Self-Differentiation → Marital Conflict	-0.042	0.013	-0.156	0.001
Total	Alexithymia → Marital Conflict	0.161	0.044	0.374	0.001
Total	Self-Differentiation → Marital Conflict	-0.118	0.029	-0.432	0.001

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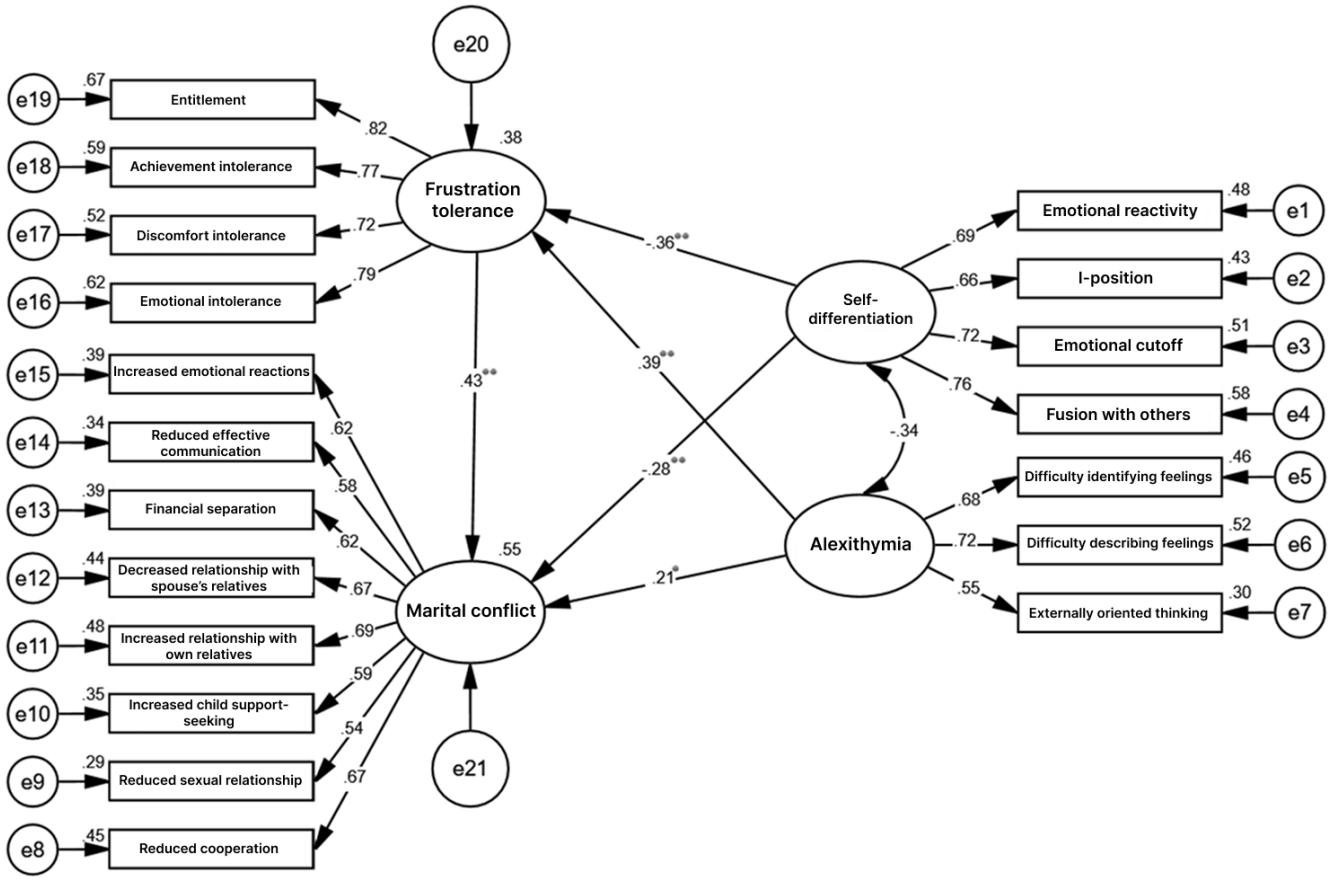
Table 3 shows that the total path coefficient between alexithymia and marital conflict was positive and significant (β = 0.374, p = 0.001), whereas the total path coefficient between self-differentiation and marital conflict was negative and significant (β = -0.432, p = 0.001). In addition, the path coefficient between frustration tolerance and marital conflict was positive and significant (β = 0.431, p = 0.001). It should again be noted that, according to the scoring instructions of the frustration tolerance questionnaire, higher scores indicate lower frustration tolerance and vice versa; therefore, the obtained results are logical and interpretable. Finally, the indirect path coefficient between alexithymia and marital conflict was positive and significant (β = 0.167, p = 0.001), whereas the indirect path coefficient between self-differentiation and marital conflict was negative and significant (β = -0.156, p = 0.001). Accordingly, it was concluded that frustration tolerance significantly mediated the relationship between alexithymia and marital conflict in a positive direction, and the relationship between self-differentiation and marital conflict in a negative direction. Figure 1 illustrates the research model based on standardized estimates.

Figure 1

Standardized Parameters in the Research Model



The figure shows that the squared multiple correlations (R^2) for the marital conflict variable were equal to 0.55. This indicates that self-differentiation, alexithymia, and frustration tolerance together explained 55% of the variance in marital conflict among divorce-seeking individuals.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to examine a structural model of marital conflict based on self-differentiation and alexithymia with the mediating role of frustration tolerance among individuals seeking divorce. The findings indicated that the proposed model demonstrated an acceptable fit with the empirical data, suggesting that the selected variables and their hypothesized relationships provide a coherent and theoretically grounded explanation of marital conflict in this population. Specifically, the results revealed that alexithymia had a positive and significant effect on marital conflict, whereas self-differentiation had a negative and

significant effect. Furthermore, frustration tolerance significantly predicted marital conflict and served as a meaningful mediator in the relationships between both alexithymia and marital conflict, and self-differentiation and marital conflict. These findings underscore the multidimensional nature of marital conflict and highlight the interplay between emotional processing, personality structure, and coping capacity.

The positive association between alexithymia and marital conflict is consistent with a substantial body of literature emphasizing the detrimental role of emotional unawareness and impaired emotional expression in intimate relationships. Individuals with high levels of alexithymia often struggle to identify and articulate their feelings, leading to ineffective communication, emotional withdrawal, and increased misunderstandings between partners. These patterns can escalate minor disagreements into persistent conflicts. Previous studies have similarly demonstrated that alexithymia is significantly associated with marital dissatisfaction, emotional disengagement, and relational instability (Esmaeili Anamogh et al., 2024; Lyvers et al., 2022). Additionally, alexithymia has been linked to maladaptive schemas and heightened emotional reactivity, which further exacerbate conflict dynamics in marital relationships (Alizadeh et al., 2024). The current findings also align with research indicating that alexithymia is a significant predictor of marital conflict in women seeking divorce, suggesting that deficits in emotional processing may play a critical role in the breakdown of marital relationships (Moayed et al., 2018). Moreover, intervention-based studies have shown that reducing alexithymia through therapeutic approaches such as rational-emotive behavior therapy can lead to improvements in emotional functioning and reductions in marital conflict, further supporting the causal role of this construct (Mohammadi et al., 2025; Salehi et al., 2024).

The negative relationship between self-differentiation and marital conflict observed in this study is also supported by theoretical and empirical evidence. Self-differentiation reflects an individual's ability to maintain a balance between emotional autonomy and relational connectedness, which is essential for adaptive functioning within intimate relationships. Individuals with higher levels of differentiation are more capable of regulating their emotions, managing interpersonal stress, and engaging in constructive conflict resolution strategies. Consequently, they are less likely to experience intense and prolonged marital conflicts. This finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating that self-differentiation is positively associated with marital satisfaction and negatively associated with conflict and relational dysfunction (Jo & Lee, 2025; Sarhani & Homaei, 2023). Furthermore, structural models have shown that self-differentiation plays a central role in mediating the effects of emotional and cognitive variables on marital outcomes, highlighting its importance as a protective factor in marital relationships (Habibi Kordabad & Darbani, 2023; Sadeghi et al., 2022). The present study extends this body of research by demonstrating that self-differentiation not only directly influences marital conflict but also exerts an indirect effect through its impact on frustration tolerance.

The significant role of frustration tolerance as both a predictor and mediator of marital conflict provides important insights into the mechanisms underlying relational dysfunction. As indicated by the results, higher levels of frustration intolerance (i.e., lower tolerance) were associated with increased marital conflict, which is consistent with prior findings linking distress intolerance to emotional dysregulation and maladaptive interpersonal behaviors. Individuals with low frustration tolerance are more likely to respond to stressors with impulsivity, irritability, and avoidance, which can intensify conflictual interactions with their partners. This finding is supported by studies demonstrating that distress tolerance is positively associated with marital satisfaction and negatively associated with psychological distress and conflict (Rauf et al., 2023; Shahabi et al., 2021). Additionally, research has shown that tolerance for ambiguity and distress plays a crucial role in facilitating marital adjustment and resilience, particularly in the face of relational challenges (Montazer & Razavi Nematollahi, 2024; Ramzy, 2023). The mediating role of frustration tolerance observed in this study suggests that it serves as a key mechanism through which individual differences in emotional processing and personality structure translate into relational outcomes.

The mediating effect of frustration tolerance in the relationship between alexithymia and marital conflict highlights the importance of emotional regulation processes in understanding the impact of alexithymia on relational functioning. Individuals with high levels of alexithymia are likely to experience difficulties in coping with emotional distress, which may reduce their tolerance for frustration and increase their vulnerability to conflict. This interpretation is supported by research indicating that alexithymia is associated with emotional dysregulation, marital burnout, and reduced coping capacity (Amirkhosravi et al., 2022;

Ghasemi et al., 2023). Similarly, interventions aimed at enhancing emotional literacy and distress tolerance have been shown to improve marital quality and reduce conflict, suggesting that these constructs are closely interrelated (Gholipour et al., 2022; Kazemi et al., 2021). The present findings therefore provide empirical support for a mediational pathway in which alexithymia influences marital conflict through its effect on frustration tolerance.

Likewise, the mediating role of frustration tolerance in the relationship between self-differentiation and marital conflict underscores the importance of coping capacity as a mechanism linking personality structure to relational outcomes. Individuals with higher levels of self-differentiation are better equipped to tolerate emotional distress and manage interpersonal challenges, which in turn reduces the likelihood of conflict escalation. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on self-differentiation, which emphasizes its role in promoting emotional stability, adaptive coping, and relational resilience (Jo & Lee, 2025; Sarhani & Homaei, 2023). Moreover, the integration of self-differentiation and frustration tolerance within a single model provides a more comprehensive understanding of the pathways through which individual differences influence marital functioning.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the present study contribute to the existing literature by providing an integrative model that captures the complex interplay between emotional processing, personality structure, and coping capacity in predicting marital conflict. By demonstrating both direct and indirect effects, the study highlights the importance of considering multiple pathways and mechanisms in understanding relational dynamics. The results also have important implications for clinical practice, suggesting that interventions aimed at improving emotional awareness, enhancing self-differentiation, and increasing frustration tolerance may be effective in reducing marital conflict and promoting relationship stability.

One limitation of the present study is the use of a convenience sampling method, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of married individuals. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study precludes causal inferences and limits the ability to examine changes in the variables over time. Another limitation is the reliance on self-report measures, which may be subject to response biases such as social desirability and recall bias. Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on individuals seeking divorce, which may not fully represent the dynamics of marital conflict in non-clinical or more stable populations.

Future research is recommended to employ longitudinal designs to better understand the causal relationships and temporal dynamics among self-differentiation, alexithymia, frustration tolerance, and marital conflict. Researchers may also consider using multi-method approaches, including observational and qualitative methods, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these constructs. Expanding the sample to include diverse populations and cultural contexts would enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, future studies could explore other potential mediators and moderators, such as communication styles, attachment patterns, and personality traits, to further elucidate the mechanisms underlying marital conflict.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study suggest that therapeutic interventions targeting emotional awareness, self-differentiation, and frustration tolerance may be effective in reducing marital conflict. Clinicians and counselors working with couples, particularly those at risk of divorce, may benefit from incorporating strategies that enhance emotional literacy, promote adaptive coping, and strengthen individual autonomy within the relationship. Educational programs aimed at improving communication skills and emotional regulation may also contribute to the prevention and reduction of marital conflict.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed 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.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

E-ISSN: 3041-9026

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

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

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E-ISSN: 3041-9026