Predicting Emotional Divorce Based on Self-Differentiation and Marital Expectations in Women Consulting Psychological Counseling Centers

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Article Info	Abstract
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1. Introduction

Divorce is one of the most significant family damages that leads to individual, familial, and social collapse, with emotional divorce being a precursor to formal divorce. Emotional divorce is a hidden and unregistered phenomenon where, although couples are not officially separated, they live together in a house without any emotional connection (Mosadegh et al., 2023). According to Gottman (1995), emotional divorce is a state where couples, although still officially married, feel so isolated that there is little difference between being married and living alone (Gottman et al., 1995). This type of divorce pertains to families who, due to reasons such as prevailing family traditions, incorrect

beliefs and negative societal attitudes towards divorced women, fear and anxiety of loneliness, loss of children, or inability to meet life's necessities, decide to live under one roof with their spouse out of compulsion (Barzoki et al., 2015). Various factors can play a role in the emergence of emotional divorce in a marriage, among which this article points to self-differentiation and marital expectations.

The concept of self-differentiation was first introduced by Bowen (1978) and refers to creating clear boundaries. He believed self-differentiation has two levels: intrapersonal and interpersonal. The intrapersonal level means the ability to differentiate between cognitive and emotional processes, and the interpersonal level means the ability to experience autonomy while maintaining intimacy (Rafezi & Saboori, 2022). Besides the levels of self-differentiation, its four factors were also identified by Skowron and Friedlander (1998), which affect emotional processes within the family: emotional reactivity, "I position," emotional cut-off, and fusion with others. Self-differentiation is a complex combination of emotional maturity, the ability to think logically in emotional situations, and the ability to maintain close emotional relationships (Drake, 2011), which leads to an individual's mental and family health (Grossmann et al., 2016; Willis et al., 2021). In marital systems, when couples' self-differentiation is high, the probability of appropriately adapting to conflicts increases, and emotional reactions decrease (Buser et al., 2019). Yuan et al.'s (2022) research showed that higher emotional reactivity in an individual increases the partner's avoidance behaviors and reduces marital quality (Yuan et al., 2022). Lempis et al.'s (2017) study indicated that self-differentiation plays a role in romantic attachment styles and couple relationships (Lampis et al., 2017). Ishik et al.'s (2020) research demonstrated that self-differentiation is associated with higher levels of marital compatibility and leads to life satisfaction (Işık et al., 2020). Alavi and Mahur's (2023) study showed a relationship between self-differentiation, family health, and divorce tendency in divorce applicants (Alavi & Mahoor, 2023). Jalili et al.'s (2022) research suggested the indirect effect of self-differentiation on emotional divorce through the perception of spousal sacrificial behaviors (Jalili et al., 2022). Alijani et al. (2022) demonstrated a positive correlation between self-differentiation and its components with emotional divorce (Alijani et al., 2022). In Rafezi et al.'s (2022) study, the emotional cut-off subscale of self-differentiation was inversely and significantly related to marital intimacy (Rafezi & Saboori, 2022). Rezvani and Saeemi (2019) also showed a negative correlation between

self-differentiation and emotional divorce. However, the findings of Rodriguez-Gonzalez et al. (2019) indicated that women's emotional cut-off negatively affects psychological distress and mutual adaptation of spouses.

Self-differentiation, along with marital expectations, appears to be a predictor of emotional divorce. Marital expectations include behaviors, roles, and responsibilities that men and women expect from each other as life partners (Ali et al., 2022). The extent to which individuals' expectations about a romantic relationship are met is a significant predictor of marital relationship outcomes (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2018). Kenny and Acitelli (2001) believe that accurate expectations enable individuals to appropriately assess their partner's needs and predict each other's behaviors; as a result, feelings of control, predictability, and security are nurtured, leading to adaptive interactions and high levels of marital satisfaction (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001). In this regard, Habibi et al.'s (2022) research indicated a direct effect of marital expectations on emotional divorce (Habibi et al., 2022).

As mentioned, emotional detachment between spouses increases the likelihood of emotional divorce. Emotional divorce is a significant threat to the foundation of the family, and statistics confirm serious and fundamental threats to the family system, highlighting the importance of research in this area and understanding the factors influencing emotional divorce. However, academic studies in Iran have paid less attention to emotional divorce as a hidden dimension of couples' divorce, focusing more on formal divorce. Considering that emotional divorce is a hidden and influential aspect of formal divorce, it is necessary to examine the role of predictors of this phenomenon. Therefore, the current study aimed to predict emotional divorce based on self-differentiation and marital expectations in women.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

The current research method was correlational. The population included women consulting psychological counseling centers in the cities of Nowshahr and Chalus. The sample size, considering all indices of the current study's regression model and 20 samples per index, was estimated at 160, selected through convenience sampling. Criteria for participation in the study included having at least middle school education, willingness to cooperate, personal consent, and absence of physical and mental illness. Criteria

for exclusion from the study were providing incomplete information or lack of cooperation. To consider ethical considerations in research, all participants were verbally informed about the study and participated voluntarily; they were assured that all information would be confidential and used only for research purposes, and in order to respect privacy, participants' names and surnames were not recorded. Data were collected through questionnaires.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Emotional Divorce

To assess emotional divorce in this study, the Gottman Emotional Divorce Scale (1995) was used. This scale includes items that measure both emotional divorce and the emotional state of loneliness and consists of 24 yes-no questions. 'Yes' answers are scored 1 and 'no' answers are scored 0, resulting in a minimum score of 0 and a maximum score of 24. Scores between 0 to 8 indicate a low probability of separation in life, scores between 8 to 16 indicate a medium probability, and scores above 16 indicate a high probability of separation. The face validity of this scale was confirmed by four experts in the field after translation, and its reliability was reported as Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 for both husbands and wives (Gottman et al., 1995; Hashemi & Asghari EbrahiAbad, 2016). In the study by Mousavi and Rahimi Nejad (2015), the overall reliability of this test was 0.93 using Cronbach's alpha, and its face validity was confirmed by experts (Mousavi & Rahiminezhad, 2015).

2.2.2. Self-Differentiation

To measure self-differentiation in this study, the Skowron and Friedlander Self-Differentiation Inventory (1998) was used. This questionnaire consists of 43 statements and has four subscales: emotional reactivity, "I position," emotional cut-off, and fusion with others. It uses a six-point Likert scale from 1 ('not at all like my characteristics') to 6 ('exactly like my characteristics'). Higher scores on this questionnaire indicate a higher level of differentiation. Skowron and Friedlander (1998) reported internal consistency for the total score and subscales as follows: emotional reactivity 0.84, fusion with others 0.74, "I position" 0.83, emotional cut-off 0.82, and total scale score 0.88 (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). In the study by Shariat et al. (2021), the internal consistency of this questionnaire was calculated as 0.87 using Cronbach's alpha (Shariat et al., 2021).

2.2.3. Marital Expectations

To assess marital expectations in this study, the Omidvar et al. Marital Expectation Questionnaire (2009) was used. This questionnaire includes 32 items measuring three subscales: expectations of the spouse as a friend and supporter, expectations of marital life, and expectations of an ideal relationship. Scoring is on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'never' (0) to 'always' (4), with the lowest score being 0, the medium score 64, and the highest score 128. Very high and very low scores indicate unrealistic and inefficient marital expectations. Scores between 0 to 42 indicate low marital expectations, scores between 42 to 64 indicate medium expectations, and scores 64 and above indicate high expectations. The creators of this questionnaire reported its reliability using Cronbach's alpha as 0.92 for the total questions and 0.70, 0.80, and 0.91 for the subscales, respectively (Omidvar et al., 2009). In the study by Rezaei and Rezaei (2018), the reliability of the questionnaire was 0.77 using Cronbach's alpha (Rezaei & rezaei, 2018).

2.3. Data Analysis

In the current study, the collected data were analyzed according to the research method through questionnaires using appropriate statistical techniques and presented using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics included measures such as mean and standard deviation, and inferential statistics used regression analysis.

3. Findings and Results

The sample size in this research was 160 women consulting psychological counseling centers in the cities of Nowshahr and Chalus, with the mean age of participants being 31.51, ranging from a minimum of 20 to a maximum of 47 years. Among the population, 32 individuals (20%) were aged 20-25 years, 29 individuals (18.12%) were 26-30 years, 57 individuals (35.62%) were 31-35 years, 26 individuals (16.25%) were 36-40 years, and 16 individuals (10%) were over 40 years old. In terms of education, 24 individuals (15%) had a high school diploma, 39 individuals (24.37%) had an associate degree, 81 individuals (50.62%) had a bachelor's degree, and 16 individuals (10%) had a master's degree or higher. In terms of employment status, 83 individuals (51.87%) were homemakers, 45 individuals (28.12%) were employees, and 32 individuals (20%) were self-employed. Descriptive statistics such as mean and

standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Minimum Value	Maximum Value	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Self-Differentiation	128	168	151.45	4.888	0.840	0.347
Emotional Reactivity	32	42	38.05	2.231	-0.875	0.479
"I Position"	31	42	37.88	2.380	-0.852	0.226
Emotional Cut-off	42	31	37.71	2.373	-0.783	0.088
Fusion with Others	32	42	37.81	2.390	0.760	0.055
Marital Expectations	70	106	89.78	4.461	0.360	0.026
Expectations as Friend/Supporter	10	28	14.64	3.524	0.472	-0.334
Expectations from Marital Life	30	42	37.59	2.440	-0.810	0.192
Expectations from Ideal Relationship	29	42	37.55	2.487	0.773	0.202
Emotional Divorce	17	24	20.65	1.760	0.210	-0.677

Results from Table 1 show that the highest mean for the self-differentiation variable was for the emotional reactivity component, with a mean of 38.05 and a standard deviation of 2.231, and the lowest mean was for the emotional cut-off component, with a mean of 37.71 and a standard deviation of 2.373. The highest mean for the marital expectations variable was for the marital life expectations component, with a mean of 37.59 and a standard deviation of 2.440, and the lowest mean was for the expectations as a friend and supporter component, with a mean of 14.64 and a standard deviation of 3.524. Additionally, the mean and standard deviation for the emotional divorce variable were reported as 20.65 and 1.760, respectively. Furthermore, as observed, the skewness and kurtosis indices of the research variables indicate a range of skewness between -3 and 3 and kurtosis between -5 and 5, suggesting a normal distribution and allowing the use of parametric tests (Pearson correlation coefficient and multiple regression).

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Matrix Between Components of Research Variables

Variables	Emotional Reactivity	I Position	Emotional Cut-off	Fusion with Others	Expectations as Friend/Supporter	Expectations from Marital Life	Expectations from Ideal Relationship	Emotional Divorce
Emotional Reactivity	1	0.458*	0.318*	0.504*	0.149	0.597*	0.682*	-0.322*
I Position	-	1	0.417*	0.515*	0.144	0.610*	0.494*	-0.337*
Emotional Cut-off	-	-	1	0.585*	0.168	0.482*	0.567*	-0.287*
Fusion with Others	-	-	-	1	0.126	0.774*	0.763*	-0.307*
Expectations as Friend/Supporter	-	-	-	-	1	0.159	0.161	-0.250*
Expectations from Marital Life	-	-	-	-	-	1	0.458*	-0.258*
Expectations from Ideal Relationship	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-0.279*
Emotional Divorce	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1

*p<0.01

The findings indicate that there is a significant relationship between the components of self-differentiation (emotional reactivity, "I position," emotional cut-off, fusion with others) and emotional divorce. This is evident as the observed significance level (sig = 0.0001) is less than the predicted error value of 0.01. Therefore, with 99% confidence, it can be concluded that the relationship proposed in the research hypothesis is confirmed. Also, given the negative value of the correlation, it can be inferred that there is a significant negative relationship between the components of the self-differentiation variable and emotional divorce. The findings from Table 2 also show that there is a significant relationship between the components of the marital expectations variable (expectations as a friend and supporter, expectations from marital life, and expectations from an ideal relationship) and emotional divorce; again, because the observed significance level (sig = 0.0001) is less than the predicted error value of 0.01.

Consequently, with 99% confidence, it can be concluded that the relationship proposed in the research hypothesis is confirmed. Moreover, considering the negative correlation value, it can be concluded that there is a significant negative relationship between the components of the marital expectations variable and emotional divorce. To examine the

relationship between emotional divorce as the dependent variable (Y) with the components of the self-differentiation variable and the components of the marital expectations variable as independent variables (X), after reviewing the adequacy indices of the model presented in Table 3, the processed model will be presented.

Table 3

Summary of Regression Model

Model Component	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	S.E	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	T-value	p	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	30.098	-	-	-	-	-	-
"I Position" (Model 1)	-0.249	0.055	-0.337	-4.504	0.0001	1	1
Constant	30.736	-	-	-	-	-	-
"I Position" (Model 2)	-0.227	0.055	-0.307	-4.135	0.0001	0.978	1.023
Friend and Supporter (Model 2)	-0.102	0.037	-0.204	-2.748	0.0001	0.978	1.023

In the Table 3, all variables are significant. Therefore, to judge the impact of each variable on emotional divorce, we look at the column of standardized beta coefficients in the final model. It is observed that both existing components ("I position" and expectations as a friend and supporter) can be suitable predictors for emotional divorce. Also, the "I position" variable has the greatest predictive power; for each unit change in the "I position" variable, there is a change of -0.337 units in the emotional divorce variable. Consequently, given the significance of the relationship between the "I position" component and expectations as a friend and supporter with emotional divorce with a probability of 0.99, it is concluded that self-differentiation ("I position") and marital expectations (expectations as a friend and supporter) are suitable predictors for emotional divorce.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to predict emotional divorce based on self-differentiation and marital expectations in women. The findings indicate that self-differentiation ("I position") and marital expectations (expectations as a friend and supporter) are suitable predictors of emotional divorce.

Regarding the role of self-differentiation in emotional divorce, the results of this study are consistent with several studies (Alavi & Mahoor, 2023; Alijani et al., 2022; Khosravi et al., 2021; Rezvani & Saemi, 2019; Yousefi & Bagheryan, 2012), suggesting that self-differentiation is negatively related to emotional divorce and reduces the inclination towards divorce. Rafezi et al. (2022) also found that self-differentiation increases marital intimacy (Rafezi &

Saboori, 2022). Yuan et al. (2022) demonstrated that higher emotional reactivity in an individual increases avoidance behaviors in the spouse and decreases marital quality (Yuan et al., 2022). Lempis et al.'s (2017) study showed that self-differentiation plays a role in romantic attachment styles and couple relationships (Lampis et al., 2017). Ishik et al.'s (2020) research indicated that self-differentiation is associated with higher levels of marital compatibility and leads to life satisfaction (Işık et al., 2020). Differentiation in the interpersonal realm refers to the ability to experience autonomy and intimacy with others. More differentiated individuals can experience more independence in their relationships without feeling overlooked or experiencing fears and anxieties of separation. In contrast, less differentiated individuals might separate themselves from others based on their emotions, deny the importance of family, and exhibit an extreme view of independence. In fact, differentiation is one of the necessary grounds for relational adjustment and is important because it shows the influence of the family on the thinking, feeling, and behavior of family members (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Buser et al. (2019) showed that when couples' differentiation is high, the likelihood of appropriately adapting to conflicts increases, emotional reactions decrease, thus facilitating the resolution of marital conflicts and reducing the possibility of emotional divorce (Buser et al., 2019).

The current study also found that among the components of self-differentiation, "I position" is a suitable predictor of emotional divorce. Rezvani and Saeemi (2019) in their study also showed a negative relationship between "I position" and emotional divorce. Individuals with strong self-

differentiation or a strong "I position" do not change their behaviors and beliefs for the sake of pleasing others. Increased self-differentiation helps individuals successfully control various situations and a greater ability to establish "I position" in interpersonal communications, ensuring an increased quality of marital life and reducing emotional divorce (Rezvani & Saemi, 2019).

Regarding the role of marital expectations in emotional divorce, the findings of the present study align with previous research (Ali et al., 2022; Habibi et al., 2022; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2018). Habibi et al. (2022) showed that marital expectations have a direct significant effect on emotional divorce (Habibi et al., 2022). Marital expectations include behaviors, roles, and responsibilities that men and women expect from each other as life partners, and according to Vannier and Sullivan (2018), they are important predictors of marital relationship outcomes (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2018). Kenny and Acitelli (2001) believe that accurate expectations lead to better assessment of the partner's needs and prediction of each other's behaviors; thereby fostering feelings of control, predictability, and security, leading to adaptive interactions and high levels of marital satisfaction, and thus potentially reducing emotional divorce (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001). Fulfillment of expectations in an intimate relationship like marriage likely creates a sense of perceived social support from the spouse. Spouses talking about mutual expectations not only gain a better understanding of each other and become familiar with each other's needs but also reinforce these expectations and reiterate them when necessary. This increases the level of positive emotional interactions and engagements between spouses and reduces indifference, disillusionment, and emotional divorce. The current study also identified expectations as a friend and supporter among the components of marital expectations as a suitable predictor of emotional divorce (Ghezelseflo et al., 2019). In fact, some marriages do not end in divorce but become hollow marriages lacking love, intimacy, and friendship, where spouses just go along with family life and pass the time. Expecting the spouse to be a friend and supporter increases emotional support and creates a strong and effective bond in the relationship between spouses, increases attachment, and possibly reduces emotional divorce.

5.   Limitations and Suggestions

Based on the findings of this research, it seems that self-differentiation and marital expectations play a significant role in predicting emotional divorce in couples. Undoubtedly, this relationship is not linear, and multiple factors act as mediators. Further research is recommended to identify other psychological factors as mediators. Among the limitations of this study was the use of a non-probabilistic sampling method, suggesting that future studies should employ probabilistic sampling methods and a larger sample size. Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that in pre-marriage education programs and in couple therapy, attention to the role of differentiation and fusion in the spouse's relationship, as well as marital expectations, can be important in identifying and treating couple issues and preventing emotional divorce.

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