

Examination of a Causal Model of Relationship Beliefs and Sexual Satisfaction with the Mediating Role of Marital Conflicts

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Abstract

Introduction: The goal of the present study was to determine the relationship between relationship beliefs and sexual satisfaction with the mediating role of marital conflicts.

Method: The population included all couples from Kerman (a city in south-eastern Iran with a population of about 800000). A sample of 200 (100 men and 100 women) was selected from the considered population through convenience sampling method. The data was collected through the Sexual Satisfaction Index (SSI), Relationship Behavior Index (RBI), and Marital Conflicts Questionnaire. In order to analyze data, structural regression was used as one of the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

Results: The results showed that relationship beliefs can significantly predict marital conflicts. Sexual satisfaction in couples who had negative beliefs was lower. More marital conflicts caused less sexual satisfaction and it played a mediating role between relationship beliefs and sexual satisfaction.

Conclusion: It seems that paying attention to the cognitive aspects of the marital conflicts i.e. the relationship beliefs can promote and improve couple's sexual satisfaction.

Keywords: Relationship Beliefs, Sexual Satisfaction, Marital Conflicts

Introduction

Marital conflicts are a kind of constant and meaningful disagreement between spouses which is reported by either of them. Meaningfully, we mean the effect of the disagreement on the spouses' function and we are referring to those conflicts which are not resolved over time (1). According to Davis and Shaver (2), conflicts are created when someone's behavior is not in harmony with another's expectation. Greef and Bruyne (3) also defined conflicts as a process in which one of the spouses realizes that the other is suppressing his/her interests.

There are many grounds and factors involved in creating or intensifying marital conflicts. One of the most important of which is sexual behaviors and matters. Many studies (4, 5, 6) show that couples have some potential and latent conflicts about their sexual affairs and keep it as a secret and avoid expressing it. A study conducted by Sprecher (7) showed that those who were dissatisfied with their sexual relationship were more willing to ask for a divorce and those who were more satisfied formed longer-lasting relationships. Movahed and Azizi (8), working on a group of 400 women, showed that the less satisfied the wives were in their sexual relationships, the more conflicts they had with their spouses. It is also reported that 80% of marital conflicts are due to dissatisfaction with sexual relationships (9).

Marital conflicts are also related to relationship problems in addition to sexual relationship satisfaction or dissatisfaction. One of the factors providing grounds for or intensifying relationship problems is relationship thoughts and beliefs. Nickl (10) divides relationship beliefs into two groups of rational beliefs and irrational ones.

Rational beliefs are those which are factual, compatible with reality, supported by reasoning, not an imperative, and are expressed as a willingness or preference. Irrational beliefs form self-destructive philosophy that is not compatible with reality, and is based on suspicion and incorrect primary information and is like an imperative commandment. Therefore, the one who believes in this cannot adopt a new attitude to the problem. Irrational beliefs about marital relationship evaluated by Epstein and Eidelson (11) are as follows: 1. The belief that disagreement is destructive which means not accepting conflicts and forming negative interpretations about them, 2. The belief that the spouse cannot change, 3. Mind-reading expectation, or expecting that the spouse should understand what his/her feelings, thoughts and needs are without expressing them, 4. Sexual perfectionism which means expecting the spouse to have sexual relationship in all situations regardless of the spouse's conditions, 5. The sexes are different which means a lack of proper understanding of cognitive and physiological differences between men and women and the sexes similarity or taking the congenital reasons to be the main principle in the differences between spouses (12).

In studies regarding marital conflicts and relationship beliefs, the results have shown that relationship beliefs are related to the times marital conflicts take place and the amount of compatibility or incompatibility (13). Using conflicts-resolving methods constructively or destructively is related to the type of beliefs spouses hold (14). There are some reports (12) confirming the negative relationship between irrational beliefs with positive emotions towards the spouse.

Regarding the previous findings, the issue to be evaluated in this study is whether relationship beliefs impact sexual satisfaction directly or the impact is created by affecting marital conflicts. In other words, our aim in this research is to study whether marital conflicts play a mediating role between relationship beliefs and sexual satisfaction.

Method

The population of this study included all the couples from Kerman (a city located in south-eastern Iran with a population of about 800000). The sampling model was conducted by selecting through convenience sampling. Based on sources related to structural equation sampling studies (15), selecting more than 100 people is suggested for carrying out the analysis. In the present study, to reduce the error rate, and increase the reliability of data, a sample of 200 people (100 men and 100 women) was selected. The research method was correlative with structural equations and to analyze the data, the structural regression was used which is a type of structural equation modeling. The tools used in this study are as follows:

Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS): For evaluating the level of couples' sexual satisfaction, the questionnaire by Hudson, Harrison and Crosscup, (16) was used. The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was reported 0.91 by Cronbach's Alpha and reliability coefficient was

reported 0.93 by retests with a one-week interval. The validity of the scale was evaluated by discriminant validity which can define couples with and without sexual problems.

Relationship Belief Inventory (RBI): This questionnaire was developed by Eidelson and Epstein (17). It aimed to evaluate the number of irrational relationship beliefs from different aspects (the belief that difference is destructive; the belief that spouses are unalterable, the expectation of mind-reading, sexual perfectionism, belief about sex differences). The reliability of this test and its subscales were reported to range from 0.72 to 0.81 using Cronbach Alpha (17, 11). The reliability of the test was reported 0.76 by retest (14).

Marital Conflicts Questionnaire (MCQ): This questionnaire is a tool with 42 questions which is used to evaluate conflicts between wives and husbands based on clinical experiences (18). The questionnaire assesses 7 aspects of marital conflicts which are: decrease cooperation, decrease in sexual relationships, increase in emotional reactions, increase in support sought from children, increase in individual relationships with own relatives, decrease in family relationships with spouse's family and friends, and separating financial matters from one another. The reliability of the questionnaire, using the Cronbach Alpha, for the whole questionnaire with a population of 270 was 0.96 and for the other 8 sub scales was 0.81 for the decrease in cooperation, decrease in sexual relationships 0.61, increase in emotional reactions 0.70, increase in support sought from children 0.33, increase in individual relationships with own relatives 0.86, decrease in family relationships with spouse's family and friends 0.89, separating financial matters from one another 0.71 and decrease of effective relationship 0.69. Based on Sanaei's report (18), the validity of the questionnaire was reported satisfactory using formal-content validation.

Statistical analyses

To examine our hypothesized model, where relationship beliefs predict sexual satisfaction via marital conflicts, we performed structural regression modeling using Mplus 5 (19). We used the Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) procedure to deal with the missing data. The model was evaluated using standard fit indices, including chi-square, the comparative fit index (CFI; 20), the root-mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; 21). A CFI score of more than .90 is considered as an acceptable model fit (22), and RMSEA and SRMR scores of less than .05 are regarded as a good model fit (21, 23).

We tested a basic model (see Figure 1), where three latent variables, relationship beliefs, marital conflicts and sexual satisfaction, are related to each other. We examined the direct and indirect (via marital conflicts) effects of relationship beliefs on sexual satisfaction. Five different scores on beliefs about sexual difference, sexual perfectionism, belief that lack of variability, expectation mindreading, believing destructive opposition were used as indicators of the latent variable representing relationship beliefs. Seven different scores including

increasing recruitment of child support, increase personal relationship, reduction of family relationship, separate financial officer, increased emotional reactions, decreased sexual, reduction of cooperation were used as indicators of a latent variable representing marital conflicts. It should be noted that because there was only one indicator for sexual satisfaction, we used a specific formula to convert the observed model to latent variable (15). After fitting the model, non-significant paths were removed for so long as their removal did not affect the model fit. At this point, we examined the paths of interest and estimated the direct and indirect effects.

Result

The results show that the final model fits the data well ($\chi^2(60) = 156.57$, CFI = .90; RMSEA = .09, SRMR = .09).

Standardized coefficients for studied variables have been demonstrated in Figure 1. Results showed that relationship beliefs significantly predicted marital conflicts ($\beta = 0.45$). Couples who reported more negative relationship beliefs demonstrated more marital conflicts. It is also shown that relationship beliefs was negatively associated with sexual satisfaction ($\beta = -.14$). Couples who have negative relationship beliefs show less sexual satisfaction. Marital conflicts was also negatively related to sexual satisfaction ($\beta = -.44$), which shows that a higher level of marital conflicts was associated with a lower level of sexual satisfaction.

Regarding the indirect effects of relationship beliefs on sexual satisfaction which operate via marital conflicts, the results show that marital conflicts mediated the influence of relationship beliefs on sexual satisfaction ($\beta = .20$).

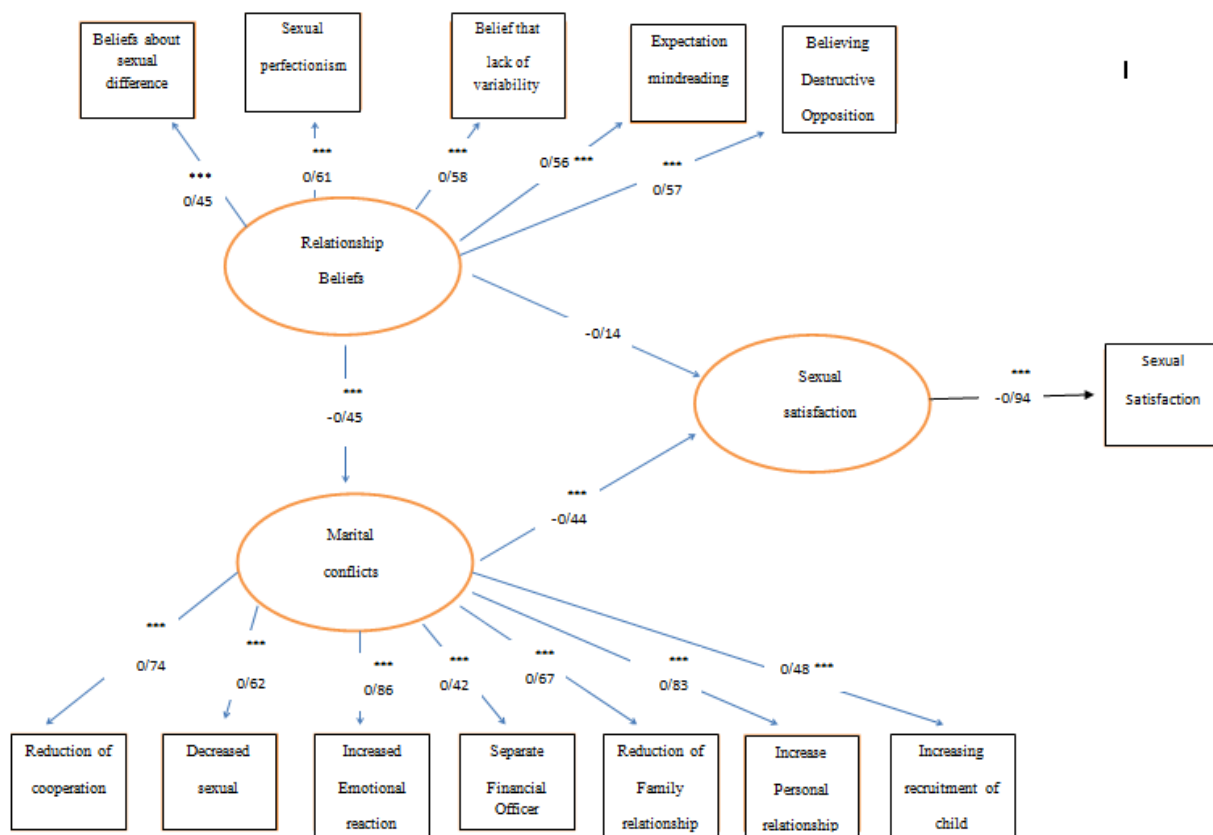


Figure 1. Causal model between relationship beliefs, marital conflicts, and sexual satisfaction

Discussion

The results showed that relationship beliefs can significantly predict marital conflicts. According to the beliefs and opinions people have on interpersonal interactions and their social relationships, there is evidence (24, 25, 26) that ineffective relationship beliefs are the main cause of many social conflicts. Also, in couples' interactions, noting the significance of the role men and women's beliefs and attitudes play is highlighted as a determining factor in the quality of couples' relationships (27). In addition, there are studies (28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 13) showing that irrational beliefs influence the decrease in marital compatibility and the increase in spouse's dissatisfaction.

The results also revealed that there was a significant relationship between relationship beliefs and marital conflicts sub scales in all items (except decrease in sexual relationship, increase in individual relationship with own relatives, decrease in family relationships with spouse's relatives and friends), and between marital conflicts and relationship belief sub scales in all items (except two items of sexual perfectionism in women and the expectation of mind reading in both men and women). In line with these results, Abdolmohammadi (33), comparing relationship beliefs with marital conflicts of men and women referring to courts, and Addis and Bernard (28), evaluating irrational relationship beliefs in married people who wanted to resolve their conflicts voluntarily, confirmed the relationship between relationship beliefs and marital

conflicts. They also concluded that irrational beliefs in those who had referred to resolve their conflicts, especially beliefs about needing to progress, needing to be approved of, expecting to be the ideal spouse and needing comfort and being comfort-loving were considerably higher compared to the normal group.

The results of the study also showed that the relationship between relationship beliefs and sexual satisfaction was negative. Sexual satisfaction was lower in those couples with more negative beliefs. In line with these research findings, Moller and Merwe's study (32) and Hamamci (13) revealed that couples who had irrational beliefs about the importance of the relationship, effective ways of resolving conflicts, the significance of family, and sexual roles experience more conflicts and collapse in their marital relationships compared to those couples who did not have such beliefs.

Marital conflicts, in addition, impacted sexual relationships negatively. That is to say, more marital conflicts leads to less sexual satisfaction. In Movahedi and Azizi's study (8), an inverse and significant relationship was also observed between women's sexual satisfaction and marital conflicts. According to the reports, the more women were sexually satisfied, the less they had conflicts with their husbands, and conversely, marital conflicts were more serious when women's sexual satisfaction had decreased. It could be said that sexual relationship between spouses is a significant part of their relationship and a failure in this part can make the case for conflicts, and if the conflicts is not resolved and lasts for a long time, it can seriously become grounds for decrease in satisfaction from sexual relationships. Shamloo (34) also emphasized that one of the inevitable consequences of marital conflicts is the decrease in sexual relationships. It could then be said that although a happy married life does not only depend on sex, sexual relationships are among the most determining factors which can lead to durable and stable married lives. If this relationship is not satisfying enough, feelings of deprivation and failure caused by the dissatisfaction will gradually be the grounds for and aggravates conflicts and can even lead to the disintegration of the family. As Sprecher's study (7) revealed, those who were sexually dissatisfied were more willing to get a divorce and those who enjoyed more sexual satisfaction, could form longer-lasting relationships.

Based on the results, marital conflicts have been able to play a mediating role between relationship beliefs and sexual satisfaction. As previous studies (13, 14) showed, there is a relationship between relationship beliefs and the number of times conflicts are created between the spouses and applying constructive / destructive methods to resolve the conflicts. Studies (32, 13) also showed that rational beliefs about the significance of relationships, effective ways to resolve conflicts, the importance of the family and sexes roles can improve marital relationships. Thus, it can be said that positive relationship beliefs, by helping the spouses with the timely resolution of their conflicts, will provide grounds for establishment and continuation of better relationships, and consequently,

they will lead to better responses to basic needs and to attaining a higher-level of sexual satisfaction. In other words, from the viewpoint of Molested, Mac duff, Bernstein (35), Jones and Stanton (36), relationship beliefs lead to both better resolution of conflicts through establishing a constructive relationship, and using this as a springboard, better satisfaction of each other's fundamental needs.

Conclusion

Noting the relationship between relationship beliefs and marital conflicts, it is necessary, as an educational interference, for marriage counselors to raise men and women's awareness about the impact of relationship beliefs on having a more dynamic marital relationship and while providing the interfering treatments, they should pay close attention to the cognitive aspect of the marital conflicts i.e. the relationship beliefs. Also, with respect to results of the study, it is inevitably necessary to teach effective methods to counteract marital conflicts. Holding educational workshops especially in pre marriage periods and attempting to develop and enhance special centers dealing with education and treatment of sexual issues is recommended.

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