

Examination of a Causal Model of Family-of-Origin's Health, Attachment Styles, and Marital Commitment with the Mediating Role of Self- Differentiation

Mahin Togholi Pour Grighani¹, S. M. Hossein Mousavi Nasab², Abbas Rahmati³

¹Master degree of Counseling, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Kerman, Iran

²Assistant Professor of Psychology, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Kerman, Iran

³Associate Professor of Counseling, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Kerman, Iran

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Corresponding Author:

S. M. Hossein Mousavi Nasab,
Department of Psychology,
Faculty of Literature and Humanities,
Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman,
Kerman,
Iran
E-mail: hossein.mousavi-nasab@uk.ac.ir

Abstract

Introduction: The aim of the current study was to investigate the mediating role of self-differentiation between family-of-origin health and attachment styles with marital commitment.

Method: The present study was a descriptive correlational research. The population included all couples from the city of Kerman. A sample of 223 married people was selected through convenience sampling method. The data was collected through Dimensions of Commitment Inventory (DCI), Family of Origin al Scale (FOS), Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI), and Adult Attachment Scale (AAS). To analyze data, structural regression was used as one of the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

Result: The results of this study showed that the family-of-origin health and attachment styles can only predict marital commitment via the mediating role of self-differentiation. In other words, the variable of self-differentiation, between the family-of-origin health and attachment styles with marital commitment plays a full mediator role.

Conclusion: Although changing some basic characteristics such as family-of-origin and attachment styles is difficult, marital commitment can enhance via enhancing of self-differentiation.

Keywords: Marital Commitment, Family of Origin Health, Attachment Styles, Self- differentiation

Introduction

Commitment is one of the marital virtues and a fundamental characteristic of romantic relationships that plays an important role in the success of marriage and quality of romantic relationships (1). Marital commitment is defined as the person marries and remains with a particular partner. In other words, marital commitment refers to the fact that couples are dependent on each other and desire to maintain their marriage for a long time. In this type of commitment, there are social, interpersonal and legal intricacies which are not found in other types of relationships (2, 3).

Individuals who are strongly committed to their marriage, see couple problems as solvable, believe that they can and must work to solve their problems, and act in manners that promote marital health and longevity (4). They also tend to develop an altruistic mindset towards their partner and share normative and social resources with their partner. As a result, such efforts can help marriage happiness and more marriage satisfaction (5). In contrast, low levels of marital commitment often show that couples devote themselves less to marriage, and have lower levels of marital satisfaction. They may also be less optimistic that marital problems can be solved, and thus less likely to remain in marriages that do not go well (6).

Studies show that individuals obtain opinions about commitment from their families of origin and if families provide a basic framework for marriage and relationships, it is possible for individuals to obtain opinions about committing in romantic relationships (7).

Therefore, one of the factors that can affect marital commitment is the family of origin's health. Studies on commitment to marriage have found a link between experiences of the individual in the family of origin's health and later romantic relationships (8).

In fact, as individuals grow in the family, they experience a wide variety of family situations. People learn about the importance of the dynamics of relationships such as love, respect, honesty and communication, or lack of these for the first time through their families (9). Some people belong to stable families that are characterized by love and healthy communication. Other people experience family conditions such as parental divorce, volatile conflicts, chronic hardship and parental infidelity. Therefore, through these family experiences, individuals both directly and indirectly learn a wide variety of lessons about how their personal relationships should be.

Research findings also suggest that both husbands' and wives' perceptions of their family of origin's experiences emerge as significant factors influencing marital adjustment. In addition, a relationship has been seen between one's family of origin's health and the quality of future personal and marital relationships (7, 10). Also, a study found that children facing parental divorce would see their marriage end in divorce almost twice as more. The results of this study showed that children whose parents have divorced, have an elevated risk of seeing their marriage with a divorce ending because they have a relatively weak commitment to the norm of lifelong marriage (6).

In another study, the effects of parental divorce and marital conflict on young adult children's romantic relationships were examined. The results showed that parents' divorce was associated with low levels of youth relationship quality through negative attitudes towards marriage (positive attitude towards divorce) and non-commitment to their current relationships. However, marital conflicts were associated with a low level of relationship quality of young adults' through their conflict behavior with their partner (11).

Another factor that can affect marital commitment is attachment styles. Both in infancy and in adulthood, the purpose of the attachment system is a sense of protection by maintaining proximity to attachment figures. This sense of protection involves a sense of security, which is a psychological state, that the attachment figure is available and responsive (12).

Attachment includes three types of secure attachment, avoidance attachment and anxiety attachment (13). Research in this field have shown that there is a significant relationship between attachment styles and marital quality (14). Findings consistently show that secure individuals, as compared to insecure individuals, are more likely to be involved in long-term couple relationships,

and have more stable marital relationships, and suffer from fewer problems in their relationships (15).

One interesting factor that seems to be affected by family-of-origin health and attachment styles and to impress marital commitment and couples' relationships is differentiation of self. Differentiation of self is the central concept in Bowen's account of individual developmental trajectories. In Bowen's model, the differentiation of self is a universal developmental target; every individual must learn to balance the need for autonomy with the ability to make and maintain intimate connections with others (16, 17). Many studies have shown that individuals who report a good differentiation are more satisfied with their relationship and experience less communication conflicts than individuals who report less self-differentiation (17, 18, 19).

Accordingly, this research has been designed not only to find relations between family-of-origin health, attachment styles, differentiation of self, and marital commitment, but also to answer this question that whether differentiation of self has a mediating role in relationship between family-of-origin health and attachment styles with marital commitment or not?

Method

The present study was a descriptive correlational research. The population of this study included all couples from Kerman (a city located in southern Iran with a population of about 800000). The sampling model was conducted through convenience sampling. Based on structural equation sampling studies (20), selecting more than 100 people is suggested for carrying out analysis. In the present study, in order to reduce error rate, and increase the reliability of data, a sample of 223 people (93 men and 130 women) was selected. The research method was correlative with structural equations. For analyzing data, the structural regression was used which a type of structural equation is modeling.

The used instruments in this study are as follows:

Dimensions of Commitment Inventory (DCI): The Dimensions of Commitment Inventory (DCI) was used for evaluating the level of marital commitment (21). This inventory includes 44 items which measures three dimensions of personal, moral, and structural commitment. The answers to items are based on a 5 Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Higher scores means higher marital commitment. Formal and content validity of inventory has been supported. The reliability of this inventory was confirmed on Iranian samples; Cronbach's Alpha was 0.85 (22).

Family of Origin Scale (FOS): The Family of Origin Scale is a 40 item instrument. In this scale, individual's rate the family in which they were raised (23). Each item is rated on a 1 to 5 Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The 40 items are grouped into two overarching dimensions including autonomy dimension and intimacy dimension. Psychometric characteristics of this scale have been confirmed in several studies (24). This scale has been shown to have adequate validity and reliability (25). The construct validity of this scale has been

supported. Internal consistency reliability was 0.86 and test-retest reliability was 0.92.

Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI): The Differentiation of Self Inventory is a multidimensional instrument of differentiation which measures significant relationships and current relations with the family of origin (26). The scale has 46 items which are rated from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very). This inventory has four subscales including Emotional Reactivity, I Position, Emotional Cutoff, Fusion with Others. Results of the main component analysis and varimax rotation reveal that the differentiation of self-inventory can determine 32.46 percent of the total variance. Moreover, Cronbach’s Alpha was 0.77 (27).

Adult Attachment Scale (AAS): The scale was developed by decomposing the original three prototypical descriptions (28) into a series of 18 items. The scale was scored on a 5 point Likert scale that measures adult attachment styles named “Avoidant”, “Anxious”, and “Secure”. Coolins and Reads studied psychometric characteristics of this scale and they extracted three factors in their study. Also, Cronbach’s Alpha was 0.79 (29). Rahimian et al. revealed that this scale has good psychometric characteristics (30). Results demonstrated that concurrent validity was 0.80 and test-retest reliability for two weeks was 0.94.

Statistical analysis was carried out by using M-plus 5. To analyze the data, structural regression was used which is a type of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

Results

To examine the hypothesized model, where attachment styles and family of origin predict marital commitment via differentiation of self, a structural regression modeling was performed using Mplus 5 (31). The Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) procedure was used to deal with missing data. The model was evaluated using standard fit indices, including chi-square, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Root-Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root

mean square residual (32). A CFI score of more than .90 is considered as an acceptable model fit (33), and RMSEA and SRMR scores of less than .05 are regarded as a good model fit (32, 34).

A basic model (see Figure 1) where six observed variables, three different attachment styles, one family of origin, one differentiation of self, and one marital commitment which are related to each other were tested. The direct and indirect (via differentiation of self) effects of three types of attachments including avoidant, anxious, and secure and family of origin on marital commitment were examined. After fitting the model, non-significant paths were removed for so long as their removal did not affect model fit. At this point, the paths of interest were examined and the direct and indirect effects were estimated.

The results show that the final model fits the data well ($\chi^2(4) = 3.37$, CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = 0.01, SRMR = .23). Standardized coefficients for studied variables have been demonstrated in Figure 1. Results showed that all attachment styles including secure, avoidant, and anxious significantly predicted differentiation of self (respectively, $\beta = 0.20$, $\beta = -0.29$, and $\beta = -0.31$). Married people who reported higher levels of secure attachment demonstrated more differentiation of self. Also, people who have lower levels of avoidant and anxious attachment showed more differentiation of self. At the same time, family of origin significantly predicted differentiation of self ($\beta = 0.14$). It is also shown that differentiation of self was negatively associated with marital commitment ($\beta = 0.36$). No adult attachment styles and family of origin could directly predict marital commitment.

Regarding the indirect effects of attachment styles and family of origin on marital commitment which operate via differentiation of self, the results show that differentiation of self-mediated the influence of all predictor variables on marital commitment ($\beta = .20$). Indirect effects have been showed in Table 1.

Figure 1. Final model of attachment styles and family of origin on marital commitment via differentiation of self

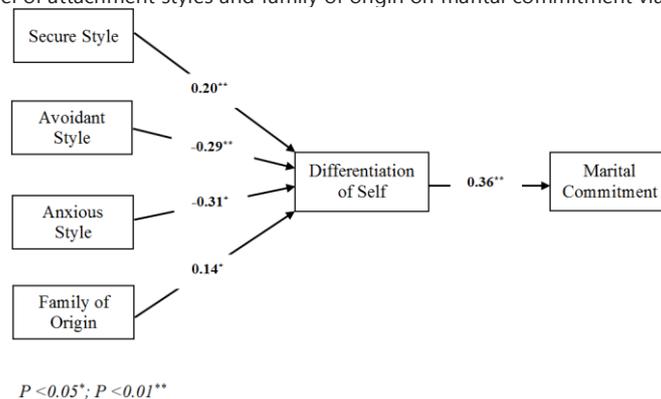


Table 1. Indirect effects of adult attachment styles and family of origin on marital commitment via differentiation of self

Predictive variables	Differentiation of self	Marital commitment	
		Direct effect	Indirect effect
Secure attachment	0.20	-	0.07
Avoidant attachment	-0.29	-	-0.10
Anxious attachment	-0.31	-	-0.11
Family of origin	0.14	-	0.05

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the causal model of the family-of-origin's health and attachment styles with marital commitment through the mediating role of self-differentiation. The results of this study showed that the family-of-origin's health and attachment styles can only predict marital commitment through mediating differentiation of self. In other words, the variable of self-differentiation, between the family-of-origin's health and attachment styles with marital commitment plays a full mediating role.

These results are consistent with those studies which show that individuals and couples who report good self-differentiation are more satisfied with their relationship and experience less relational conflict (17, 18). Some studies have also shown that higher levels of self-differentiation predict greater marital satisfaction (26), and there is also a positive relationship between self-differentiation and relationship satisfaction (35).

In the present study, the relationship between the family-of-origin's health and marital commitment was significant only through self-differentiation, which refers to the ability to emotionally self-regulate and to balance individuality and togetherness in relationships (36). This finding states that the existence of factors such as parental divorce and the disturbed marital relations in the origin family can have negative effects on marital commitment and confidence (6, 8). Some studies have shown that the experience of people in their family-of-origin is related to their marital outcomes through their relationship self-regulation (37). Based on this strategy, spouses try to improve their relationship satisfaction (38).

Research has also shown that targeting the level of differentiation can reduce the negative effects of family emotional climates. In other words, self-differentiation can be a key mechanism that can reduce the effects of family's negative emotional climate on the physical and mental health of individuals (39, 40).

In fact, self-differentiation is a construct which is present both in the intimate partner relationship and in other family relationships. When one has a better self-differentiation he/she is able to manage their emotions in times of high stress or conflict, and they are able to maintain close connections without giving up their sense of self. At the same time, when a person has a poor differentiation, he/she has strong emotional reactions which can lead them to fuse or cutoff from partners or other family members and as a result, all of these factors can affect marital commitment (36). It can be said that, commitment is associated with positive relationship behaviors such as repair efforts, remaining faithful, sacrificing for the good of the relationship, and decreasing conflicts (41).

Therefore, these factors can be somewhat influenced by the high level of differentiation in individuals, which causes people to stay connected with others when relational tensions arise (42). Maintaining a connection with others is consistent with marital commitment, which is to stay with a particular partner (43).

Also, the findings of this study showed that attachment

styles are only able to predict marital commitment through the mediating role of self-differentiation. Research has shown that the sense of secure attachment plays an important role in the formation and maintenance of couples' relationships and is a main variable that explains changes in the quality of marital relationships (15).

Several studies have shown that attachment security is associated with a greater commitment to marriage, while attachment avoidance is associated with lower levels of commitment (44). Additionally, couples who described themselves as securely attached reported higher marital satisfaction and intimacy (45).

Therefore, secure attachment predicts the independence of the relationship, commitment, trust and the successful resolution of conflicts (46). In this regard, studies on differentiation have also shown that differentiation, facilitates forgiveness in couple relationships (42). The more highly differentiated person has more flexibility and fewer emotional responses (emotionally reactive) (47). Also, a person with a high level of differentiation retains his or her autonomy while being related to others (42). So attachment styles can also affect marital commitment through self-differentiation.

Conclusion

In the present study, it was found that the effect of attachment styles and family-of-origin's health on marital commitment was mediated via self-differentiation. This result shows an important role of self-differentiation in marital commitment. One of the limitations of this research was the time consuming and non-cooperation of some participants in completing the questionnaires. Since this research has been carried out in Iran as a collectivistic country, this model needs to be considered in other cultures, especially in individualistic cultures. In this study, the effects of a limited number of variables on marital commitment were studied, other studies can examine the effects of other factors in a more comprehensive model. It is also suggested that couples' awareness of the impact of childhood and family relationships on marital commitment can be discussed in pre-marriage counseling programs. Although changing some basic characteristics such as family-of-origin and attachment styles is difficult, marital commitment can increase via enhancing self-differentiation.

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