

*Original Article*

## The Indirect Association between Self-Differentiation and Familism with Marital Conflicts through Intimacy: A Cross-Sectional Study in Married Individuals in Isfahan, Iran

Arshiya Iranpour<sup>1</sup>, Nahid Ramezani<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Isf.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran.

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### Abstract

**Background and Aim:** Marital conflicts significantly impact relationship satisfaction, family stability, and psychological well-being. However, the interplay of individual and cultural factors, such as differentiation of self and familism, particularly with the mediating role of intimacy, has been underexplored. This study aimed to investigate the indirect associations between differentiation of self, familism, and marital conflicts among married individuals, with intimacy as a mediating factor.

**Materials and Methods:** This study employed a correlational and path analysis design. The population consisted of all married individuals residing in Isfahan, Iran, in 2025. A sample of 258 participants was selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Differentiation of Self Inventory by Skowron and Dendy (2004), the Familism Scale by Steidel and Contreras (2003), and the Intimacy Scale by Walker and Thompson (1983), and the Marital Conflicts Questionnaire by Sanaei, Barati, and Bostanipour (2008). Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling with SPSS-22 and AMOS-24 software.

**Results:** The results indicated that differentiation of self and familism were not directly associated with marital conflicts but showed significant indirect associations through intimacy, with intimacy acting as a partial mediator (VAF values of 0.74 and 0.71, respectively). The model explained 68% of the variance in marital conflicts.

**Conclusion:** These findings underscore the central role of intimacy in mediating the associations between self-differentiation and familism, on the one hand, and marital conflicts, on the other. However, given the cross-sectional nature of the study, causal inferences cannot be established. Accordingly, future longitudinal research is needed to clarify and confirm these indirect associations.

**Keywords:** Differentiation of self; Familism; Intimacy; Marital conflicts; Married individuals

**\*Corresponding Author:** Nahid Ramezani, Department of Psychology, Isf.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran.  
Email: nahid595@yahoo.com  
ORCID: 0000-0003-0434-2959

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## Introduction

The sustainability and quality of marital relationships depend on a delicate equilibrium between individual autonomy and the prevailing cultural values within the family system (1). Marital relationships, as one of the most important forms of human interpersonal connections, are influenced by a myriad of factors including personal characteristics, cultural norms, and communication quality (2, 3). Furthermore, marital conflict represents a significant concern, especially when persistent, they can undermine marital satisfaction (4), family stability (5), the psychological well-being of spouses, and even the health of children. Consequently, identifying the predictors of marital conflict is imperative (6).

Marital conflicts refer to disagreements and tensions between spouses that can range from minor arguments to severe incompatibilities. These conflicts typically stem from differences in expectations, values, or goals between partners (7), and may manifest both verbally and nonverbally (8, 9). Moreover, interactional patterns such as criticism, blame, and withdrawal have been identified as key predictors of marital dissatisfaction and conflict (10). According to the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model, conflict is viewed as the outcome of interactions between external stressors—such as financial problems—and individual characteristics, including coping skills (11, 12). From the perspective of family systems theory, conflict is conceptualized as resulting from imbalances within the family system and unhealthy interactions among its members (13). Personality traits such as impulsivity and poor emotion regulation can exacerbate marital conflicts (11). Communication problems, sexual issues, and feelings of loneliness also play a role in the persistence of conflicts (14). Marital conflict is associated with various variables, including quality of life (15), self-esteem (16), moral well-being (17), mental health, and perceived stress (18). Unresolved conflicts can diminish the psychological well-being of couples, increase the risk of divorce, and negatively impact children's development (19, 20). Recent survey data indicate that lack of commitment (21), infidelity (22), and marital disenchantment (23) are leading factors in the dissolution of marital relationships. Studies have

shown that chronic conflict can lead to more physical health problems, especially among couples with poor communication skills (24). Consequently, relationship quality can significantly affect individual health (25).

Differentiation is a significant construct that has recently garnered increasing attention from researchers. Differentiation refers to an individual's ability to maintain a balance between personal autonomy and intimacy with others, encompassing the preservation of intellectual and emotional independence alongside emotional connection (26). It is recognized as a key factor in psychological health and relational functioning. Individuals with high levels of differentiation are able to sustain their intellectual and emotional autonomy without severing emotional ties with their families; furthermore, under stressful conditions, higher differentiation enables more considered responses. Greater differentiation allows individuals to better regulate their emotions and more effectively cope with life stressors, whereas those with low differentiation are typically more emotionally reactive and less capable of effective decision-making in stressful contexts (27). Attachment theory links differentiation with secure attachment styles (28). According to attachment theory, securely attached individuals are capable of maintaining a balanced capacity for both autonomy and intimacy (29, 30). The significance of differentiation lies in its function as a protective factor against relational dysfunction, supporting individuals in maintaining a balance between autonomy and closeness, especially in stressful contexts such as marriage. Core dimensions of differentiation include emotional reactivity, the "I-position," emotional cutoff, and fusion, reflecting one's capacity for self-regulation within relationships (27, 31). Evidence indicates that differentiation is associated with marital conflict (32), marital satisfaction (30), mental health—including anxiety, stress, and depression (33) and relationship quality (31). Longitudinal studies have also shown that differentiation affects couples' long-term adjustment (34). Interventions based on differentiation training can enhance marital satisfaction, particularly for couples residing in collectivist cultures (35, 36). In addition, clinical intervention findings also indicate that increasing self-differentiation can be associated with better emotion regulation and reduced marital

maladjustment (37). In a study of women with early and typical marriages, lower self-differentiation was linked to more dysfunctional communication patterns and greater marital problems (38). These findings underscore the vital role of differentiation in fostering resilience (39) and family health (40), providing clearer guidance for therapeutic interventions aimed at improving individual and couple functioning.

Familism is another influential factor affecting the quality and sustainability of marital relationships, particularly in collectivist societies where family obligations are prioritized. It plays a crucial role in explaining both individual and interpersonal behaviors and can potentially strain marital communication. While the core of this construct centers on loyalty and mutual interdependence among family members (41, 42), excessive adherence to familism may lead to dependency, conflict with personal needs, and excessive self-sacrifice (43).

Considered a key cultural value, familism emphasizes support, attachment, loyalty, honor, and commitment to the family, all of which are critical in shaping family dynamics and individual adjustment (44)—values that are especially salient in collectivist societies (42). This construct is comprised of three dimensions: (1) structural, which encompasses social boundaries and family distance (45); (2) attitudinal, reflecting familial relationships and member commitment; and (3) behavioral, referring to actions driven by familial sentiments (46). Both cultural-ecological theory (47) and family systems theory (13) highlight the role of familism as a pivotal element in systemic balance and resilience.

Familism evolves across societies through acculturation processes (48), and its dynamic, context-sensitive nature is an important consideration when designing culturally sensitive interventions (49, 50). While research indicates that moderate levels of familism are associated with reduced perceived stress and enhanced emotional support (42, 51), its excessive manifestation may result in over-dependence and interpersonal conflict (43). Indeed, familism is a significant predictor of caregiving expectations, commitment (52), psychological well-being, autonomy, and marital conflict (41). Collectively, these findings suggest that while a balanced integration of familism promotes adaptation and

resilience (44, 53), its extreme expression may heighten the likelihood of relational conflict (43).

Intimacy—defined as the degree of emotional closeness, mutual understanding, trust, and empathy between spouses—is a fundamental determinant of marital quality and acts as a potential mediator between individual characteristics and marital conflict. As a multidimensional construct, it encompasses emotional, social, physical, cognitive, recreational, and spiritual domains (54). Beyond its role in maintaining a balance between closeness and autonomy (55), intimacy is closely linked to secure attachment styles, which facilitate the formation of stable, intimate bonds (28). Functioning as a buffer against life stressors, intimacy not only enhances mutual support (57) but also serves as a protective factor, as couples with high levels of emotional and cognitive intimacy exhibit a lower risk of divorce (58).

Research consistently demonstrates a positive correlation between high intimacy and both marital satisfaction (54) and psychological well-being (59, 60). Furthermore, extensive inquiry has established associations between intimacy and marital commitment, anxiety (61), communication quality (62), and mindfulness (63). Evidence suggests that intimacy may even mitigate stress-related systemic inflammation (24), while therapeutic interventions that cultivate intimacy have been shown to enhance relationship stability and marital adjustment (65). These findings underscore the vital role of intimacy in sustaining marital relationships and provide a robust framework for designing couple-based interventions.

The conceptual model of this study is grounded in Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978) and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969). According to Bowen, differentiation of self—the capacity to maintain emotional autonomy while remaining connected to significant others—is a critical antecedent to relationship health. Individuals with higher differentiation are hypothesized to regulate emotions more effectively and exhibit less reactivity during marital interactions. However, Bowen's framework posits that differentiation does not operate in isolation; rather, it influences relational outcomes through mechanisms such as emotional closeness and intimacy. Attachment theory posits that secure attachment fosters the development of intimacy, which in turn serves as a

buffer against relational distress. Intimacy—defined as emotional closeness, mutual understanding, and responsiveness—is proposed as the mechanism through which individual capacities (differentiation) and cultural values (familism) translate into marital functioning. Specifically, when individuals possess higher differentiation, they are better able to engage in intimate self-disclosure and emotional attunement, reducing the likelihood of marital conflict. Similarly, moderate familism, when accompanied by emotional closeness, can strengthen intimacy and thereby reduce conflict, whereas excessive familism may undermine intimacy by creating divided loyalties.

Thus, intimacy is hypothesized to function as a mediating mechanism rather than merely a correlate of marital conflict. This model is consistent with contemporary approaches in family psychology that emphasize transactional processes in understanding marital dynamics.

Despite advances in family psychology, a significant research gap remains in understanding how differentiation and familism interact in relation to marital conflict, a gap exacerbated by the limited examination of intimacy as a mediating factor. Existing studies often investigate differentiation—which is critical for autonomy and emotional regulation (31)—and familism—which functions as a cultural driver of family cohesion (43)—separately, overlooking their combined impact on marital discord. This fragmented approach makes it unclear whether high differentiation mitigates or amplifies familism's potential to generate tension within marital relationships, a dynamic that has been debated but rarely empirically tested (50).

Analyses of cultural factors show that traditional gender roles and communication constraints exacerbate the detrimental effects of conflict, aligning with Sabogal's familism framework but extending it to conflict dynamics. However, no study has systematically compared how familism functions within individualistic versus collectivistic populations

(66). Moreover, although intimacy is recognized as a core component of marital quality, its mediating role between these constructs and marital conflict remains underexplored, leaving unanswered questions about how emotional closeness influences the attenuation or exacerbation of relational tensions (8, 9). This research gap is critical because marital conflict affects over 60% of married individuals annually and necessitates comprehensive insights for designing effective interventions (20). Accordingly, the present study aims to examine a conceptual model of the indirect associations among differentiation, familism, and marital conflict, with intimacy as a mediator, in married couples. This investigation seeks to enrich the theoretical literature in family psychology and provide a foundation for developing effective marital counseling interventions. Therefore, this study addresses the question of whether intimacy mediates the indirect associations among differentiation, familism, and marital conflict in married individuals.

## Methods

### Research Design

This study employed a descriptive correlational design. The population consisted of married individuals living in Isfahan, Iran, in 2025. A sample of 258 married individuals was selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected from individual participants (not from both spouses in a dyadic design); therefore, the unit of analysis is the individual respondent. According to Kline's (2016) recommendation regarding sample size in structural equation modeling, a minimum case-to-parameter ratio of 10:1 is acceptable; thus, the present sample of 258 was adequate, yielding approximately 13 cases per parameter (67).

### Instruments

All instruments demonstrated acceptable reliability in this study. Table 1 presents the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each instrument.

**Table 1.** Reliability Coefficients of the Instruments

| Instrument                        | Cronbach's Alpha |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| Marital Conflicts Questionnaire   | 0.87             |
| Differentiation of Self Inventory | 0.90             |
| Familism Scale                    | 0.91             |
| Intimacy Scale                    | 0.85             |

**Marital Conflicts Questionnaire:** The instrument used included the standardized Marital Conflicts Questionnaire developed by Sanaei, Barati, and Bostanipour (2008), comprising 54 items across 8 dimensions (68). The questionnaire items utilized a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.”

The tool measures seven aspects of marital conflict: reduced cooperation (items 3, 9, 19, 21, 27), decreased sexual relationship (items 4, 10, 15, 28, 33), increased emotional reactions (items 5, 11, 16, 22, 29, 34, 39, 41), increased child support-seeking (items 7, 18, 24, 31, 36), increased individual relationships with relatives (items 6, 12, 17, 23, 30, 35), decreased family relationships with spouse’s relatives and friends (items 1, 19, 25, 37, 40, 42), and financial separation between spouses (items 2, 8, 13, 20, 26, 32, 38).

**Differentiation of Self Inventory:** Differentiation was assessed using Skowron and Dendy’s (2004) Differentiation Questionnaire, consisting of 46 items across four subscales: emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. This questionnaire employs a 6-point response scale ranging from 1 (not true of me at all) to 6 (completely true of me) (69). The questionnaire focuses on important life relationships and ongoing interactions within the family of origin.

**Intimacy Scale:** Intimacy was assessed using the Walker and Thompson (1983) Intimacy Questionnaire, which consists of 17 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). This scale is a subscale of a broader instrument that covers multiple dimensions of intimacy but is reported independently by the developers (60). Intimacy is defined as the attention and importance family members accord to one another and includes emotional closeness expressed through affection, self-sacrifice, satisfaction, and contentment. It encompasses the perception that the relationship is important, open, respectful, mutually supportive, and committed.

**Familism Scale:** Familism was assessed using the Familism Questionnaire developed by Steidel and Contreras (2003) (70), which was validated for use in Iran by Rajabi (2013) (71). The questionnaire consists of 16 items encompassing four dimensions: family precedence over self, family interconnectedness,

family honor and dignity, and obedience to family. Responses are rated on a 10-point Likert scale, with sample items such as “Everyone should value the time they spend with relatives.” In the Iranian validation study, content, face, and criterion validity were confirmed, and Cronbach’s alpha coefficients exceeded 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency (72). In the present study, the internal consistency of the instruments was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha coefficients.

The obtained coefficients were 0.87 for marital conflicts, 0.90 for differentiation, 0.91 for familism, and 0.85 for intimacy, demonstrating high reliability for all study measures.

#### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) with IBM SPSS Statistics version 22 and IBM SPSS Amos version 24. Model fit was evaluated using multiple fit indices, including  $\chi^2/df$ , the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Parsimonious Comparative Fit Index (PCFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA).

The significance of indirect effects was examined using a bias-corrected bootstrap procedure with 5,000 resamples, and the Variance Accounted For (VAF) index was calculated to determine the extent of the mediation effect.

## Results

The mean age of the participants was 39.15 years ( $SD = 10.48$ ). The sample consisted of 197 females (76.4%) and 61 males (23.6%). With respect to educational attainment, 75.4% of the participants held a bachelor’s degree (Figure 1).

Descriptive statistics for the study variables, including demographic characteristics and control variables (age, education, economic status, and number of children), are presented in Table 2. Table 3 presents the descriptive results and internal correlations of the research variables. Table 4 presents the bivariate correlations among the study variables, all of which were statistically significant. To examine the proposed model in which the relationships between differentiation, familism, and marital conflicts were mediated by intimacy, structural equation modeling

(SEM) was conducted.

The structural model consists of a set of structural equations describing causal relationships among the variables. The proposed model in this study includes four variables: two exogenous (independent) variables, one endogenous (dependent) variable, and one mediating variable.

The proposed structural model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data. Table 4 presents the fit indices, including the Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), relative Chi-square ( $\chi^2/df$ ), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Parsimonious Comparative Fit Index (PCFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). As shown in Table 4, the relative Chi-square ( $\chi^2/df = 2.64$ ) is below the recommended threshold of 5, indicating an acceptable model fit. The incremental fit indices IFI (0.921) and CFI (0.919) both exceed 0.90. The PCFI value (0.842) is above 0.50, reflecting good fit. The RMSEA value (0.077) indicates an acceptable model fit (less than 0.08).

The index indicates the amount of explained variance in the endogenous latent variables. Chin (73) (1998) describes values of 0.6, 0.3, and 0.2 in structural equations as strong, moderate, and weak, respectively. The determination coefficient for the criterion variable, marital conflicts, is 0.68, indicating that the exogenous and mediating variables can predict 68% of the variance in marital conflicts, which is considered strong. To assess the significance of each indirect association between the independent and dependent variables, the bootstrap method was used in AMOS

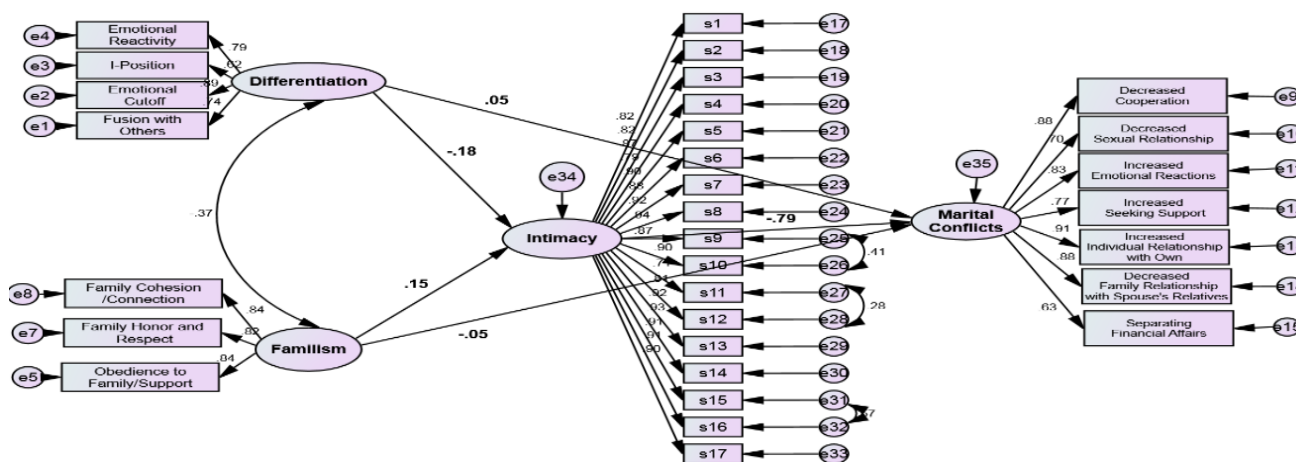
software with 5,000 resamples.

To examine the strength of the indirect association mediation when mediation is confirmed, the Variance Accounted For (VAF) index is used, calculated by the formula:  $VAF = a \times b / ((a \times b) + c)$ . If the VAF index is greater than 0.2, the indirect association is considered acceptable; if it exceeds 0.8, it indicates full or strong mediation. Values between 0.2 and 0.8 indicate partial mediation. The results of the direct and indirect associations among variables in the model are presented in Table 5. Table 5 shows that the direct relationship of differentiation with marital conflicts

( $\beta = 0.055$ ,  $p = 0.24$ ) and familism with marital conflicts ( $\beta = -0.051$ ,  $p = 0.271$ ) was not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, the association of intimacy with marital conflicts ( $\beta = -0.795$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), differentiation's relationship with intimacy ( $\beta = -0.182$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ), and familism's relationship with intimacy ( $\beta = 0.155$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ) were significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Findings also indicate that both indirect associations of differentiation on marital conflicts through intimacy ( $\beta = -0.123$ ,  $p = 0.038$ ) and familism on marital conflicts with intimacy as a mediator ( $\beta = 0.145$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ) were significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Given that the VAF index values for the indirect effect of differentiation on marital conflicts via intimacy and the indirect effect of familism on marital conflicts via intimacy were 0.74 and 0.71, respectively—falling between 0.2 and 0.8—it can be concluded that intimacy partially mediates the relationship between differentiation and marital conflicts as well as between familism and marital conflicts.



**Figure 1.** Structural equation model of the indirect association between self-differentiation and Familism with Marital Conflicts Through Intimacy

**Table 2.** Demographic characteristics of the study sample

| Demographic characteristics |                   | Frequency | %    |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|-----------|------|
| Gender                      | Female            | 197       | 76.4 |
|                             | Male              | 61        | 23.6 |
| Education                   | High School       | 63        | 24.4 |
|                             | Associate Degree  | 19        | 7.4  |
|                             | Bachelor's Degree | 118       | 75.4 |
|                             | Master's Degree   | 35        | 13.6 |
|                             | Ph.D.             | 23        | 8.9  |
| Number of Children          | 0                 | 72        | 27.9 |
|                             | 1                 | 71        | 27.5 |
|                             | 2                 | 85        | 32.9 |
|                             | 3                 | 23        | 8.9  |
|                             | <4                | 7         | 2.8  |
| Economic Status             | Weak / Poor       | 9         | 3.5  |
|                             | Moderate          | 117       | 45.3 |
|                             | Above Average     | 116       | 45   |
|                             | High              | 16        | 6.2  |
| Number of Siblings          | 1                 | 20        | 7.8  |
|                             | 2                 | 62        | 24   |
|                             | 3                 | 65        | 25.2 |
|                             | 4                 | 55        | 21.3 |
|                             | 5>                | 56        | 21.8 |

**Table 3.** Descriptive findings and internal correlations of the research variables

| Variable          | M      | SD    | Skewness | Kurtosis | Marital Conflicts | Differentiation | Familism | Intimacy |
|-------------------|--------|-------|----------|----------|-------------------|-----------------|----------|----------|
| Marital Conflicts | 119.76 | 24.26 | 0.9      | 0.779    |                   |                 |          |          |
| Differentiation   | 160.53 | 15.37 | 0.215    | 1.75     | 0.162**           |                 |          |          |
| Familism          | 81.34  | 20.42 | 0.057    | 1.69     | -0.23**           | -0.295**        |          |          |
| Intimacy          | 84.25  | 23.44 | -0.526   | -0.692   | -0.71**           | -0.126*         | 0.222**  |          |

\*\*p&lt;0.01, \*p&lt;0.05

**Table 4.** Model fit indices

| Fit Index   | Value in Model | Acceptable Threshold | Status      |
|-------------|----------------|----------------------|-------------|
| GFI         | 0.905          | > 0.90               | Acceptable  |
| CFI         | 0.919          | > 0.90               | Acceptable  |
| PCFI        | 0.842          | > 0.50               | Acceptable  |
| RMSEA       | 0.077          | < 0.08               | Acceptable  |
| IFI         | 0.921          | > 0.90               | Acceptable  |
| $\chi^2/df$ | 2.64           | < 5                  | Acceptable  |
| $\chi^2$    | 1120.102       | -                    | -           |
| df          | 425            | -                    | -           |
| P-value     | 0.001          | < 0.05               | Significant |

**Table 5.** Direct and indirect associations resulting from structural equation modeling

| Independent Variables | Path | Dependent Variables | Estimates                            |         |                                      |         |      |
|-----------------------|------|---------------------|--------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|---------|------|
|                       |      |                     | Direct Association                   |         | Indirect Association (via Intimacy)  |         |      |
|                       |      |                     | Standardized Coefficient ( $\beta$ ) | p-value | Standardized Coefficient ( $\beta$ ) | p-value | VAF  |
| Self-Differentiation  | →    | Marital Conflicts   | 0.055                                | 0.24    | -0.123                               | 0.038   | 0.74 |
| Familism              | →    |                     | -0.051                               | 0.271   | 0.145                                | 0.032   | 0.71 |
| Intimacy              | →    |                     | -0.795                               | 0.001   | -                                    | -       | -    |
| Self-Differentiation  | →    | Intimacy            | -0.182                               | 0.012   | -                                    | -       | -    |
| Familism              | →    |                     | 0.155                                | 0.032   | -                                    | -       | -    |

Overall, the coefficient of determination ( $R^2 = 0.68$ ) indicated that 68% of the variance in marital conflicts was explained by differentiation, familism, and intimacy. In line with the criteria proposed by Chin (1998), this reflects strong explanatory power and supports the theoretical adequacy of the study's conceptual model.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the indirect associations between differentiation and familism with marital conflicts among married individuals, focusing on the mediating role of intimacy. The results revealed that neither differentiation nor familism showed direct associations with marital conflicts; rather, their associations with marital conflict were mediated by intimacy. This finding suggests that intimacy serves as a central relational mechanism linking individual and cultural factors to marital outcomes. These findings are consistent with previous research by Kamarani Dastjerdi and Salehi (61), Sabatelli and Bartle-Haring (2003), and Najaflooei (32), all of which identified intimacy as a key mechanism underlying positive marital functioning. The mediating role of intimacy observed in the present study is also supported by the theoretical framework of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), which posits that emotional closeness and secure attachment are fundamental to reducing relationship distress and promoting healthier marital interactions (74). Collectively, these findings enhance our understanding of how individual differentiation and cultural values operate through intimacy to influence marital conflict.

The indirect effect of differentiation on marital conflicts through intimacy is consistent with Bowen's family systems theory (26), which proposes that the capacity for self-regulation influences relationship functioning through interpersonal processes. Individuals with higher levels of differentiation are more likely to engage in authentic self-disclosure, emotional responsiveness, and mutual attunement, thereby fostering greater intimacy and reducing marital conflict. Consistent with this interpretation, the VAF value of 0.74 indicates that intimacy explains a substantial proportion of the effect of differentiation

on marital conflict, underscoring its pivotal mediating role. The positive indirect effect of familism on marital conflict through intimacy ( $\beta = 0.145$ ) warrants careful interpretation.

One possible explanation lies in the multidimensional nature of familism. Moderate levels of familism may promote emotional closeness, mutual support, and stronger dyadic bonds, thereby protecting against marital conflict.

In contrast, when familism is characterized by excessive self-sacrifice, blurred interpersonal boundaries, or competing family loyalties, it may undermine couple intimacy and increase vulnerability to marital conflict. Consistent with this interpretation, the VAF value of 0.71 suggests that a substantial proportion of the effect of familism on marital conflict is transmitted through intimacy, highlighting its role as a key mediating mechanism. The present findings suggest that higher levels of differentiation are associated with lower marital conflicts, supporting the view that individuals who can maintain a balance between autonomy and emotional connectedness are better equipped to manage interpersonal disagreements constructively.

In contrast, familism exhibited a more nuanced pattern, with moderate levels of familism being associated with lower marital conflict, whereas excessive familism appeared to exacerbate relational tension by creating divided loyalties. Collectively, these findings highlight the potential role of intimacy in strengthening the protective effects of differentiation while mitigating the adverse relational consequences associated with excessive familism.

## Limitations

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; therefore, the indirect associations identified are correlational and should not be interpreted as evidence of causal mediation. Second, data were collected from only one partner in each couple rather than from both spouses, limiting the ability to examine dyadic processes or actor-partner effects.

Third, the sample consisted predominantly of women (76.4%) and individuals with bachelor's degrees or higher (75.4%), which may limit the generalizability of

the findings to more diverse populations. Fourth, all measures were based on self-report, which may have introduced social desirability bias. Fifth, the use of convenience sampling in Isfahan may limit the generalizability of the findings to married individuals in other regions of Iran, including rural areas. Sixth, potentially important confounding variables, such as marriage duration, prior mental health history, and attachment styles, were not controlled for. Finally, the exclusion of 38 outliers (15% of the sample) may have reduced the representativeness of the sample and, consequently, the generalizability of the findings.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs, dyadic data collection, and random sampling methods and include comprehensive control variables to address these limitations.

## Conclusion

This study provides evidence of statistically significant indirect associations between differentiation of self and marital conflicts, as well as between familism and marital conflicts, through intimacy among married individuals in Iran. The findings suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing intimacy may contribute to the reduction of marital conflict, particularly in collectivist cultural contexts in which familism plays a central role.

Nevertheless, the cross-sectional design precludes causal conclusions and limits the ability to determine the temporal direction of the observed associations. Longitudinal and experimental studies are therefore needed to clarify the directionality of these relationships and provide stronger evidence regarding the proposed mediating role of intimacy. Future research should also incorporate dyadic data collected from both spouses and adjust for potentially confounding variables, such as the duration of marriage and socioeconomic status.

Despite these limitations, the findings underscore the potential importance of intimacy as a therapeutic target in couple counseling. Interventions designed to foster emotional closeness, self-disclosure, and responsive communication may help couples manage tensions arising from the interplay between individual needs for differentiation and culturally shaped family obligations.

## Ethics Approval

In the present study, informed consent forms were completed by all participants.

## Authors' Contributions

A.I.: conceived the study, analyzed data, and wrote the manuscript. N.R.: collected data and reviewed the manuscript.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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