



Associations between Thinking Styles and Differentiation with Emotional Divorce in Divorcing Couples: The Mediating Role of Dysfunctional Beliefs

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Abstract

Introduction: One of the challenges of married life is divorce, whose rising rate has prompted family researchers to investigate its causes and contributors. The present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of dysfunctional beliefs in the relationships between thinking styles and differentiation with emotional divorce in divorcing couples.

Methods: This study employed a descriptive correlational research design. The statistical population comprised all divorcing persons visiting clinics and family counseling centers in the city of Isfahan in 2021. A convenient sample of 226 men and women were recruited. They completed the Emotional Divorce Questionnaire, Differentiation of Self Inventory, Thinking Styles Questionnaire, and Dysfunctional Relationship Beliefs Questionnaire. The data analysis involved using Pearson correlation coefficient analysis and structural equation modeling.

Results: According to the results, the direct paths from judicial thinking, executive thinking, and dysfunctional beliefs to emotional divorce were statistically significant ($P < 0.001$). Additionally, the paths from legislative thinking, executive thinking, and differentiation to dysfunctional beliefs were significant ($P < 0.001$). The indirect effects of legislative thinking ($P = 0.006$), executive thinking ($P = 0.035$), and differentiation ($P = 0.002$) on emotional divorce were statistically significant.

Conclusions: Based on the fit indices results, it can be concluded that the assumed model was acceptable. It is important to address the problems caused by emotional divorce and focus on thinking styles, differentiation, and dysfunctional beliefs to improve couples' relationships.

INTRODUCTION

The family institution may encounter crises that disrupt the family's balance and ultimately result in the collapse of the family system. One of the challenges of married life is divorce, whose rising rate has prompted family researchers to investigate its causes and contributors [1]. Divorce is a process that begins with both couples' emotional crises and ends with the couple attempting to resolve the conflict by stepping into a new situation and adopting new roles [2]. Based on what has been mentioned, some of the consequences of divorce include a decrease in relationships and the development of psychological and behavioral issues [3]. However, divorce is not always apparent but can be hidden. In the latter case, it can be more detrimental than an open

divorce. In emotional divorces, couples maintain the appearance of a family while, in reality, the family lacks substance. These couples are compelled to continue living together [4, 5].

Because the precise statistics regarding emotional divorces are unknown, research like this can help lower mental illnesses such as depression and mitigate social harm [6]. Emotional divorce is commonly recognized as the first stage of divorce, leading to instability within the family unit and a decline in interactions and relationships between couples [7]. Based on the information provided and the significance of emotional divorce, one may note various consequences and harms associated with divorce. These include the loss of vitality

within the family structure, financial hardships leading to poverty, health problems, a decline in the living standards of couples, and negative impacts on the couple's mental well-being [8, 9]. It is worth mentioning that maintaining emotional control, thinking realistically about emotional issues, and having differentiation are key factors for fostering a harmonious family atmosphere [10]. From a different perspective, the degree of differentiation has a significant impact on family structure and relationships [11].

Differentiation is an internal emotional state in which individuals with a low level of differentiation spend a significant portion of their lives maintaining their relationships with others. They tend to make their primary decisions with the goal of avoiding conflict and any issues that could disrupt their lives. However, the rational functioning of individuals who are differentiated can help them maintain their autonomy [12, 13]. Differentiation of self is developed under psychological independence and emotional maturity. It is an ongoing and dynamic notion, as individuals consistently strive to uphold their psychological well-being, resulting in reduced anxiety [14].

People with high differentiation are mindful of their emotions and can assess a situation thoughtfully. These people can develop their selves independently in intimate relationships and maintain peace in deep relationships to adjust their tensions and comfort, thereby avoiding inner emotional fusion [15]. On the other hand, less differentiated individuals tend to either fuse with others, which can ruin them as they become disconnected from important individuals in their lives, or succumb to emotional detachment. Consequently, they exhibit anxious reactions when confronted with emotional intimacy [16]. In differentiated marital systems, spouses allow each other to cultivate a more intimate and flexible relationship. They tolerate each other's differing opinions and exhibit reduced emotional reactivity [17]. In fact, individuals who have developed strong differentiation skills exhibit greater flexibility and adaptability when confronted with stress and anxiety. Consequently, they are less likely to succumb to weakness and disability in the face of anxiety [18, 19].

Among the various variables that have been addressed in relation to emotional divorce, one notable factor is thinking styles [20]. Thinking styles pertain to the manner in which individuals behave in various situations and employ their abilities [21]. According to Hammad and Awed [22], there are thirteen thinking styles that can be categorized into five dimensions: function, form, level, scope, and learning. In 1997, Sternberg categorized thinking styles based on their function as legislative, executive, and judicial. In the legislative thinking style, individuals focus on formulating, visualizing, and planning tasks. The executive style focuses on the implementation and compliance with what they have been told, whereas those with the judicial

style judge, evaluate, and compare. In general, thinking styles tend to be more judicial than logical, leading to biases in one's thought processes [23]. According to what was stated, thinking styles can determine an individual's performance and understanding in maintaining relationships.

Dysfunctional beliefs constitute a further issue brought up in emotional divorce. These beliefs consist of images or cognitions that emerge due to cognitive schemas or core beliefs that are triggered in a specific situation and reflect an individual's interpretation of it [24]. This being said, a person's schemas can be influenced by their dysfunctional thoughts, suggesting the presence of reasoning and cognitive errors in which the person is engaged. This dysfunctional pattern can cause a negative bias in individuals under unfavorable circumstances [25]. The current research focuses more on the role of dysfunctional relationship beliefs and their connection to emotional divorce. In this regard, Busby and Holman [26] examined the dysfunctional beliefs of couples as potential predictors of divorce. Specifically, Gottman [27] explored how cognitive beliefs can impact marital satisfaction and lead to conflicts.

Given the issues raised above and the fact that emotional divorce is characterized by dissatisfaction and collapse in relationships, it follows that ignoring these tensions has negative effects on the mental health of the family. Also, only census studies have looked at divorce, even though there is a knowledge gap arising from disparate examination of study variables. Therefore, based on the issues outlined above, the main objective of the current study was to investigate the mediating role of dysfunctional beliefs in the relationships between thinking styles and differentiation with emotional divorce in divorcing couples.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive correlational research design. The statistical population comprised all divorcing persons visiting clinics and family counseling centers in Isfahan in 2021. According to Kline [28], a sample size of at least 200 people is considered acceptable when determining sample size in structural models. As such, 226 men and women were recruited using convenience sampling and given research questionnaires to complete. The inclusion criteria for the study encompassed the following: referral to the center's counselors for marital conflicts and problems, a minimum of one year since marriage, an age range of 20 to 50 years, a middle school diploma or higher, and voluntary and informed consent to participate. The exclusion criteria were as follows: the presence of physical disabilities or severe symptoms of illness, a patient file-based diagnosis of acute psychiatric disorders, and failure to answer all the questions in the questionnaires. Additionally, the principles of

confidentiality were observed. Indeed, participants signed written consent forms, and they participated voluntarily.

Instruments

Emotional Divorce Checklist: This checklist, developed by Gottman [29], consists of statements regarding various aspects of life to which respondents may agree or disagree. This scale consists of 24 items and requires a yes or no response for each item. A "yes" answer receives a score of "1," while a "no" answer receives a score of "0." The greater the number of affirmative responses, the greater the likelihood of experiencing emotional divorce. If the total number of "yes" answers is 8 or higher, it indicates that the couple's life is in danger of separation [30].

Differentiation of Self Inventory: This self-assessment questionnaire was developed by Skowron and Schmitt in 2003. This questionnaire consists of 46 items scored on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from completely disagree to completely agree. It includes four subscales: emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cut-off, and fusion with others [31]. Fakhari et al. [32] evaluated the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.75 for the questionnaire.

Thinking Styles Questionnaire: This questionnaire, developed by Sternberg and Wagner [33], consists of 24 items that measure the three styles of legislative, executive, and judicial thinking. The items are responded to on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Not at all true of me") to 6 ("Completely true of me"). Ghanbari et al. [28] reported this instrument's Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.78.

Dysfunctional Relationship Beliefs Questionnaire: The questionnaire was developed by Eidelson and Epstein in 1982. This questionnaire consists of 40 items that are answered on a Likert scale, ranging from completely false to completely true. The measure consists of five subscales that assess five dysfunctional relationship beliefs: "Disagreement is destructive" (assumption), "Mindreading is expected" (standard), "Partners cannot change" (assumption), "Sexual perfectionism" (standard), and "Sexes are different" (assumption) [34]. Navid et al. [35] evaluated the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.75 for the tool.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using dispersion indices (variance and standard deviation) and descriptive statistics indices (frequency, percent, and mean). Assumptions and structural equation tests were used for inferential statistics. All statistical analyses were carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 and AMOS version 24.

RESULTS

The demographic characteristics revealed that 52.65% (n=119) of the research participants were men, while 47.35% (n=107) were women. Additionally, the mean age of the sample was 37.41, with a standard deviation of 8.66. The demographic variables of men and women were reported in Table 1. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for the research variables.

Table 1. Demographic Variables of the Participants

Variables	N	Percentage
Age (years)		
20-30	45	19.91
30-40	109	48.23
40-50	72	31.86
Education		
High school education	123	54.42
College education	103	45.58
Duration of the marriage (years)		
1-10	54	23.89
10-20	93	41.15
20-30	79	34.96
Gender		
Male	119	52.65
Female	107	47.35

Table 2. Mean, standard deviation (SD), and correlation between research variables

Variables	Mean ± SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1- Executive thinking	40.23 ± 8.52	1					
2- Legislative thinking	38.19 ± 9.27	0.67**	1				
3- Judicial thinking	37.53 ± 7.93	0.71**	0.57**	1			
4- Differentiation	151.44 ± 19.78	0.22*	0.31**	0.32**	1		
5- Dysfunctional beliefs	101.58 ± 16.40	-0.01	0.18*	0.10	0.41**	1	
6- Emotional divorce	14.95 ± 8.00	0.04	0.07	0.16*	0.28*	0.30**	1

** : P<0.01; * : P<0.05

Table 3. Fit indicators in the proposed model

Fit indicators	χ^2	df	(χ^2 /df)	GFI	AGFI	TLI	IFI	NFI	CFI	RMSEA
Model	3.63	1	3.63	0.90	0.83	0.83	0.90	0.84	0.88	0.069

Table 4. Standard path coefficient related to direct relationships between the researches variables

Direct Paths	β	P
Judicial thinking to emotional divorce	0.34	0.001
Legislative thinking to emotional divorce	0.07	0.174
Executive thinking to emotional divorce	-0.21	0.001
Differentiation to emotional divorce	0.07	0.169
Judicial thinking to dysfunctional beliefs	-0.09	0.152
Legislative thinking to dysfunctional beliefs	0.26	0.001
Executive thinking to dysfunctional beliefs	-0.25	0.001
Differentiation to dysfunctional beliefs	0.42	0.001
Dysfunctional beliefs to emotional divorce	0.27	0.001

Table 5. Results of analysis of indirect relationships between the research variables

Predictor variable	β	Upper limit	Lower limit	P
Judicial thinking to emotional divorce through dysfunctional beliefs	-0.02	-0.12	0.03	0.405
Legislative thinking to emotional divorce through dysfunctional beliefs	-0.07	0.02	0.17	0.006
Executive thinking to emotional divorce through dysfunctional beliefs	0.07	-0.18	-0.02	0.035
Differentiation to emotional divorce through dysfunctional beliefs	0.12	0.05	0.24	0.002

According to the results from Table 2, emotional divorce correlated positively and significantly with judicial thinking ($r = 0.16$, $P < 0.05$), differentiation ($r = 0.27$, $P < 0.05$), and dysfunctional beliefs ($r = 0.30$, $P < 0.01$). Furthermore, there was a positive and significant correlation between dysfunctional beliefs and both legislative thinking ($r = 0.18$, $P < 0.05$) and differentiation ($r = 0.41$, $P < 0.01$).

The goodness of fit results for the model are presented in Table 3. Based on the fit indices results, it can be concluded that the assumed model is acceptable, suggesting its good fit. The normalized chi-square value was 3.63. The proposed model is desirable as this value is smaller than 5.

Table 4 provides the direct and indirect effect coefficients and the sum of all research variables so that the direct and indirect relationships among the variables can be examined. Based on the findings in results, the direct paths from judicial thinking ($\beta = 0.34$; $P < 0.001$), executive thinking, ($\beta = -0.21$; $P < 0.001$) and dysfunctional beliefs ($\beta = 0.27$; $P < 0.001$) to emotional divorce were statistically significant. Additionally, the paths from legislative thinking ($\beta = 0.26$; $P < 0.001$), executive thinking ($\beta = -0.25$; $P < 0.001$), and differentiation ($\beta = 0.42$; $P < 0.001$) to dysfunctional beliefs were significant.

The bootstrap method was employed to assess the significance of the obtained indirect coefficients. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 5. The confidence level for the lower and upper bounds was 95%, and the number of bootstrap repetitions was 2000. Based on the findings presented in Table 5, the indirect effects of legislative thinking ($\beta = -0.07$; $P = 0.006$), executive thinking ($\beta = 0.07$; $P = 0.035$), and differentiation ($\beta = 0.12$; $P = 0.002$) on emotional divorce were statistically significant. This suggests that dysfunctional beliefs about marital relationships may act

as a mediator between legislative and executive thinking styles and emotional divorce among couples.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of dysfunctional beliefs in the relationships between thinking styles and differentiation with emotional divorce in divorcing couples. There were significant direct paths from judicial thinking and dysfunctional beliefs to emotional divorce. Similarly significant were the paths from legislative and executive thinking to differentiation and emotional divorce. Consistent with the outcomes of this study, the researcher conducted an exhaustive search of the existing literature but did not identify any prior research that directly addressed the specific topic under investigation. This absence of relevant scholarly work underscores the novelty and originality of the current study, highlighting the need for further exploration and analysis in this area of research. Indeed, since marriage is a long-term commitment and can involve restrictions, thrill-seekers may find it difficult to accept these limitations. As a result, their compatibility and satisfaction with marriage may decline [12]. The quality of interaction and the couple's interactive models may also play a role. Despite an abundance of false beliefs, couples are able to tolerate them because of emotional investment, romantic relationships, loyalty, love, and hope for the future [36]. From a different perspective, couples may have differing interpretations and evaluations of their spouse's behavior, often influenced by irrational beliefs, which can ultimately lead to the decision to separate. However, when considering the thinking styles and limited problem-solving abilities of divorce applicants, one may note that individuals who persist in using their own thinking styles are more likely to engage in activities according to their own preferences, tend to judge and

evaluate others' actions, prioritize their own activities, and interact with others. From a different perspective, understanding thinking styles helps individuals understand why certain activities suit them while others do not [23].

Finally, when explaining the obtained result, it can be stated that individuals with a legislative thinking style tend to make decisions independently without seeking input from their spouses or others. This thinking style is found to have a negative and inverse correlation with personal matters, such as understanding one's spouse, as well as marital relationship issues, such as respecting the beliefs and feelings of the partner [37]. Since legislators determine who they can communicate with, this way of thinking is directly related to the influence of family and friends.

There was a significant positive and direct relationship between the executive thinking style and activities related to leisure time, relatives, and friends. This relationship can be explained as follows: executive individuals prioritize rule obedience and tend to agree and conform with their partners and others. There is a positive and direct relationship between this characteristic and the component of relatives and friends. A positive relationship was observed between the component of monarchical thinking style and the component of marriage and children. One possible reason for this relationship may be that these individuals are determined and strong-willed. They make an effort to prevent others from interfering in their choice of a spouse and decision to have children. A negative relationship was identified between the hierarchical thinking style and the components of personal issues and conflict resolution. Perhaps the reason for this relationship is that a hierarchical person is someone who prioritizes goals and does not focus on personal issues or the attitudes of others. The oligarchic thinking style had a direct and positive relationship with personal issues, marital relations, conflict resolution, financial management, marriage and children, and relatives and friends. A potential explanation may be that the oligarch strives to perform his/her job to the best of their ability but encounters difficulty in prioritizing tasks. They try to comprehend their spouses' character and behavior while also being mindful of the dynamics within their marital relationships. They consult their spouses about having children, the number of children, and financial management. These individuals typically have good compatibility in their relationships with relatives and friends. Lastly, thinking styles can improve relationships and reduce dysfunctional beliefs, ultimately leading to a decrease in emotional divorce.

The findings also revealed that emotional divorce can be predicted by differentiation through the mediation of dysfunctional beliefs. This finding is consistent with the research results of previous studies [38, 39]. This

finding can be explained as follows: a moderate to high level of differentiation allows a person to interact with others without fear of fusion. Differentiated people have a clear sense of who they are and what they believe. They can determine their path in life and maintain their composure during intense emotional situations, such as emotional breakdowns, where others often display involuntary behaviors and make unwise choices. Instead, they make decisions based on reason and logic [11]. Additionally, individuals with high levels of differentiation possess a heightened awareness of their emotions. They can develop their independent self (I-position) and maintain their peace and comfort in deep relationships, thereby avoiding emotional fusion or emotional separation to resolve tensions. Less differentiated people, on the other hand, tend to fuse with others, and as a result, they perish by being separated from important people or succumb to emotional separation. Therefore, when confronted with emotional intimacy, they exhibit an anxious response, which further intensifies their emotional divorce [12].

An alternative perspective, grounded in the rational-emotional-behavioral theory, posits that a succession of irrational thoughts and beliefs may result in marital discord and the breach of the marital contract. Therefore, individuals who hold irrational beliefs are likely to be more susceptible to experiencing symptoms of emotional divorce [15]. In other words, differentiation is a multifaceted blend of emotional maturity, the capacity to think logically in emotional contexts, and the aptitude to sustain intimate relationships. Individuals with low levels of differentiation tend to experience heightened anxiety in marital conflicts and exhibit emotional responses or emotional detachment. If individuals have destructive and illogical thoughts and beliefs, their reactions and behaviors become disastrous. Moreover, they may exhibit a low tolerance for failure in various situations or life problems, which ultimately prompts them to exit relationships and emotionally withdraw during stressful circumstances. This pertains to the fundamental premise of the rational-emotional theory, which posits that irrational beliefs influence an individual's interpretation and evaluation of reality. Besides, the resulting behavioral responses stemming from these interpretations contribute to the perpetuation of unhealthy behaviors.

The current research, like other studies, has limitations. For instance, the research results are limited to divorcing couples seeking assistance from clinics and family counseling centers in Isfahan. Additionally, it was not possible to select the sample randomly. The lack of homogenization of the subjects is a further limitation of the present research, as social class and economic conditions are important and influential factors in emotional divorce.

CONCLUSION

Our findings indicate that emotional divorce holds a relationship with thinking styles and differentiation in couples applying for divorce. Additionally, emotional divorce in couples seeking divorce can be predicted by thinking styles and differentiation, which are in turn mediated by dysfunctional beliefs. Psychologists and experts are recommended to design a specialized psychological program aimed at enhancing thinking styles, metacognitive beliefs, and differentiation for individuals going through a divorce. Additionally, active experts in this field should consider formally integrating this therapeutic-educational intervention. Furthermore, couples can enhance their relationships by participating in courses and educational workshops that address ineffective beliefs and improve emotional processing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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