



Effectiveness of Choice Theory Intervention on Emotional Divorce and Emotional Self-Differentiation in Women with Marital Conflict Referring to Psychological Centers of Isfahan: A Quasi-Experimental Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Marital conflict can lead to emotional detachment (emotional divorce) and hinder a woman's ability to manage her emotions effectively (emotional self-differentiation). Choice theory, with its emphasis on personal responsibility and need fulfillment, offers a potential framework for improving these outcomes. This study investigates the effectiveness of choice theory intervention on emotional divorce and emotional self-differentiation in women with marital conflict referring to the psychological centers of Isfahan.

Methods: The current study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test-post-test structure and a control group. The target population encompassed all women experiencing marital conflict who sought services at Isfahan's psychological centers during the year 2023. A convenience sampling method was utilized to recruit a sample of 30 participants (15 per group) who met the study's inclusion criteria. Random assignment procedures were employed to allocate participants to either the experimental or control group. Both groups completed the Emotional Divorce Inventory and the Differentiation of Self Inventory at both the pre-test and post-test stages. The experimental group then received the choice theory intervention, delivered in eight 90-minute sessions. Data analysis was conducted using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

Results: The experimental group demonstrated a significant decrease in emotional divorce scores from 56.13 ± 2.20 pre-intervention to 34.87 ± 3.98 post-intervention. In contrast, the control group showed no significant change in emotional divorce scores. The experimental group also exhibited a significant increase in emotional self-differentiation scores from 118.40 ± 8.11 pre-intervention to 183.80 ± 12.39 . The control group experienced a slight increase in emotional self-differentiation scores, but the change was not statistically significant. These findings suggest that the choice theory intervention is effective in reducing emotional divorce and enhancing emotional self-differentiation among women experiencing marital conflict ($P < 0.001$).

Conclusions: These results suggest that choice theory intervention has the potential to be a valuable tool for improving emotional connection and emotional regulation in women facing marital discord.

INTRODUCTION

The transition to marriage can be a period of significant adjustments, marked by both positive and negative experiences [1]. Chronic marital conflict disrupts family

stability, strains parent-child relationships, and contributes to marital dissatisfaction, emotional detachment (emotional divorce), infidelity, and

ultimately, divorce [2]. Conceptually, marital conflict refers to a state of open disagreement between spouses, leading to relationship problems and divergent perspectives. These conflicts often stem from unmet needs, self-centered behaviors, and a lack of commitment to marital obligations [3]. Research suggests that marital conflict is associated with decreased happiness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem, while also increasing symptoms of mental distress [4-6]. In general, the absence of intimacy in marital relationships is associated with a proclivity towards emotional divorce among women experiencing marital conflict [7]. Emotional divorce is a pressing social issue and a significant societal ill in today's world, characterized by rapid growth and profound economic, social, cultural, legal, and psychological consequences that permeate various facets of society [8]. In recent years, divorce rates in major cities have exceeded normal levels, reaching alarming figures [9]. Emotional divorce may stem from marital disillusionment. Marital frustration and emotional detachment represent a gradual decline in emotional attachment to one's spouse, accompanied by feelings of estrangement, disinterest, and indifference between partners, and the replacement of positive emotions with negative ones [10].

Conversely, emotional self-differentiation, a critical component of marital health and a mitigating factor in marital conflict, is fundamental to understanding the underpinnings of mutual intimacy and acceptance within marriage [11]. This construct refers to the ability to distinguish cognitive processes from emotional experiences. As a core personality trait, emotional self-differentiation significantly influences individuals' mental health and life outcomes [12]. Research examining emotional self-differentiation within couples has emerged as a pivotal area of inquiry in marital therapy [13, 14]. This body of literature investigates the association between couples' capacity to maintain healthy emotional boundaries and relationship quality. Findings suggest that couples with high levels of emotional differentiation exhibit greater intimacy, acceptance, and conflict-resolution skills [15]. Conversely, low levels of emotional self-differentiation are linked to marital dissatisfaction, emotional disconnection, and divorce. Understanding emotional self-differentiation within the context of couples therapy offers valuable insights into fostering healthier and more resilient partnerships [13].

In this vein, numerous approaches have emerged to enhance intimacy and consequently reduce marital conflict among couples. Each approach adheres to its own theoretical and practical framework, rooted in its philosophical underpinnings and understanding of human beings and the concept of family. Consequently,

each approach has developed its unique methodology for addressing issues such as marital conflict and intimacy [14, 15]. Choice theory intervention is one such approach. Glaser's choice theory [16], a prevalent therapeutic intervention in the realm of cognitive psychology, serves as a framework for describing human beings, establishing behavioral principles, and elucidating the path to satisfaction, happiness, and success. This therapeutic approach emphasizes confronting reality, accepting responsibility, recognizing fundamental needs, making moral judgments about the rightness or wrongness of behaviors, focusing on the here and now, exercising internal control, and ultimately achieving a sense of achievement identity, which is directly linked to self-esteem [17].

Overall, choice theory encompasses a collection of techniques, methods, and tools employed to assist individuals in transitioning from ineffective to effective behaviors, from destructive to constructive choices, and most importantly, from an unhappy to a happy lifestyle [18]. According to Glasser [16], individuals, whether healthy or unhealthy, make behavioral choices based on their decisions. Research findings have validated the effectiveness of choice theory intervention in reducing aggression, loneliness, and emotional divorce among internet-dependent married women [19], decreasing marital boredom and family instability among couples [20], improving social role-taking and self-differentiation in couples [21], enhancing cognitive flexibility and self-differentiation in mothers [22], and promoting self-differentiation in university students [23].

Marital conflict is a prevalent issue with significant negative consequences for couples and families. It can lead to emotional detachment (emotional divorce), decreased life satisfaction, and ultimately, divorce. Despite the prevalence and detrimental effects of marital conflict, limited research has focused on the specific needs of women experiencing these challenges, particularly in the context of seeking help from psychological centers. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of studies investigating the efficacy of choice theory interventions in addressing marital conflict among women. This research is essential as it examines the potential of choice theory intervention to address these issues specifically among women experiencing marital conflict who seek help from psychological centers in Isfahan. Accordingly, this study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of choice theory intervention on emotional divorce and emotional self-differentiation in married women. By addressing this gap in the literature, this research contributes to the understanding of effective interventions for marital conflict and aims to improve the well-being of women and families in Isfahan.

METHODS

A quasi-experimental pre-test-post-test control group design was employed for this study. The target population comprised women experiencing marital conflict seeking psychological services in Isfahan, Iran, between April and June 2023. Following coordination with local psychological centers, eligible participants were recruited through announcements detailing the therapeutic sessions and registration process. A convenience sample of 30 women ($n = 15$ per group) meeting the inclusion criteria was randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group. This random assignment was facilitated using a table of random numbers to ensure equal representation in both groups and minimize potential biases. Power analysis using G*Power software indicated an adequate sample size ($n = 30$) to detect a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$) with $\alpha = 0.05$ and power = 0.90. Participants were randomly allocated to either the choice theory intervention or the control group. Inclusion criteria required informed consent, secondary education or higher, age between 20 and 45, absence of substance abuse, and non-participation in concurrent treatment programs. Exclusion criteria included ongoing psychological treatment, psychiatric medication use, withdrawal from the study, or missing more than two sessions. Data collection occurred at pre-test and post-test. The study adhered to ethical guidelines (code: IR.IAU.AHVZ.REC.1403.114), with informed

consent obtained and participant confidentiality maintained.

Instrument

The Emotional Divorce Inventory (EDI): The EDI is a 22-item self-report measure assessing the level of emotional detachment within a marriage. Participants respond on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Always" (4) to "Never" (0), with total scores ranging from 0 to 88. Higher scores indicate a greater degree of emotional divorce. The EDI demonstrates good psychometric properties, with previous studies establishing content validity and internal consistency exceeding 0.9 [24]. In the present investigation, the EDI yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82, further supporting its reliability for measuring emotional divorce.

The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI): The DSI by Skowron and Friedlander [25] is a 45-item self-report measure designed to assess an individual's level of self-differentiation. Participants respond on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "completely agree" (1) to "completely disagree" (6) across four subscales: affective congruency, self-evaluation (replacing "my status"), emotional avoidance, and emotional reactivity. A total score is obtained by summing responses across all items. Previous research has demonstrated acceptable test-retest reliability for the DSI, with Ghavibazou et al. [26] reporting a coefficient of 0.84. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.83 for the questionnaire

Table 1. A summary of the choice theory intervention sessions

Sessions	Summary
1	Introduction to choose theory and session goals: Introduce the concept of choice theory and its basic principles; Outline the goals and objectives of the therapy sessions; Establish a supportive and collaborative group environment
2	Enhancing quality of life through choice theory principles: Introduce practical applications of choice theory to improve daily life; Explore techniques for identifying and meeting personal needs effectively; Discuss strategies for building positive relationships and enhancing overall well-being; Encourage participants to set goals and action plans for personal growth and fulfillment
3	Promoting self-acceptance and responsibility for behaviors: Explore the concept of self-acceptance and its importance in personal growth; Discuss strategies for embracing one's strengths and weaknesses; Encourage participants to take ownership of their actions and choices; Facilitate discussions on how to address past mistakes and move forward constructively
4	Understanding and addressing internal resistance from a choice theory perspective: Explore the concept of internal resistance and its impact on behaviors; Identify common forms of internal resistance, such as procrastination, avoidance, and self-sabotage; Discuss strategies for overcoming internal resistance and making positive choices; Encourage participants to develop self-awareness and self-motivation
5	Exploring fundamental needs and their impact on life choices: Delve into the concept of basic human needs according to choose theory; Discuss the role of needs in driving behaviors, emotions, and life choices; Help participants identify their own personal needs and motivations; Explore how unmet needs can lead to unhealthy behaviors and negative consequences
6	Problem-solving strategies and planning for present living: Introduce a structured approach to problem-solving and decision-making; Encourage participants to identify and analyze problems effectively; Develop strategies for generating creative and workable solutions; Promote the importance of planning and taking action to achieve goals
7	Enhancing commitment and responsibility for personal growth: Explore the concept of commitment and its role in achieving personal goals; Discuss strategies for increasing motivation, perseverance, and self-discipline; Encourage participants to develop a strong sense of personal responsibility; Provide support and guidance for overcoming obstacles and staying committed to change
8	Overcoming excuses and obstacles to achieving goals: Identify common excuses and self-defeating behaviors that hinder progress; Discuss strategies for challenging negative self-talk and overcoming limiting beliefs; Encourage participants to develop a growth mindset and embrace challenges as opportunities for learning; Provide support and guidance for implementing action plans and achieving personal goals

Intervention

Choice Theory Intervention: In the present study, choice theory intervention refers to therapeutic sessions based on Glasser's Choice Theory Practical Guide [16] implemented with the experimental group over 8

sessions lasting 90 minutes each. A summary of the sessions is presented in Table 1.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) in the SPSS 27 statistical software package.

RESULTS

Participants in the experimental group had a mean age of 30.37 (± 3.96) years, whereas those in the control group had a mean age of 32.14 (± 4.20) years. The average duration of marriage was 8.45 (± 2.89) years for the experimental group and 9.68 (± 2.32) years for the control group. Of the participants in the experimental group, 9 (60.0%) were housewives and 6 (40.0%) were employed, whereas in the control group, 11 (73.33%) were housewives and 4 (26.67%) were employed. No significant differences were found between the two groups in terms of age, marital duration, and employment status.

Table 2 illustrates the pre- and post-test means of the study variables for both experimental groups. As evident from the table, the experimental groups exhibited significant changes in the study variables from the pre-test to the post-test, while no noticeable changes were observed in the control group. The mean score for emotional divorce in the experimental group was 56.13 (± 2.20) on the pre-test, while on the post-test, the mean decreased to 34.87 (± 3.98). Regarding emotional self-differentiation, the experimental group exhibited a mean score of 118.40 (± 8.11) at the pre-test, and these values increased to 183.80 (± 12.39), at the post-test.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations (SD) of the results variables

	Pre-test	Post-test	P (within group)
Emotional divorce			
Experimental group	56.13 $\pm$ 2.20	34.87 $\pm$ 3.98	0.001
Control group	55.01 $\pm$ 2.10	54.60 $\pm$ 3.50	0.700
P (between-group)	0.165	0.001	-
Emotional self-differentiation			
Experimental group	118.40 $\pm$ 8.11	183.80 $\pm$ 12.39	0.001
Control group	122.53 $\pm$ 11.83	119.87 $\pm$ 11.12	0.531
P (between-group)	0.274	0.001	-

Data in Table are presented as Mean $\pm$ SD

Table 3. Results of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA)

	SS	df	MS	F	P	η^2
Emotional divorce	2808.22	1	2808.22	289.71	0.001	0.91
Emotional self-differentiation	31643.95	1	31643.95	290.10	0.001	0.92

Prior to conducting the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), the assumptions for its application were carefully examined. To ensure the normality of the data distribution, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test was employed. The results confirmed that there were no outliers significantly influencing the study variables, thus supporting the assumption of normal distribution. Additionally, Levene's test was utilized to assess the homogeneity of variances (equal variances between the experimental and control groups) for the variables of emotional divorce ($F = 0.17$, $P = 0.679$) and emotional self-differentiation ($F = 0.48$, $P = 0.496$). Based on the findings, the application of ANCOVA was deemed appropriate.

Subsequently, ANCOVA was employed to compare the experimental and control groups based on their post-test scores, while controlling for the effect of pre-test scores (Table 3). This analysis aimed to determine the impact of the choice theory intervention on emotional divorce and emotional self-differentiation in women experiencing marital conflict.

Table 3 presents the results of the ANCOVA conducted to assess the effects of the choice theory intervention on emotional divorce and emotional self-differentiation. Post-hoc comparisons revealed a statistically significant difference between pre-test and post-test mean scores for emotional divorce, with a large effect size ($\text{Eta} = 0.91$, $F = 289.710$, $P < 0.001$), when controlling for pre-test

scores. This finding indicates that the intervention was effective in reducing emotional divorce among participants. Similarly, the ANCOVA for emotional self-differentiation demonstrated a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores, with a large effect size ($\text{Eta} = 0.92$, $F = 290.10$, $P < 0.001$). These results suggest that the choice theory intervention was effective in enhancing emotional self-differentiation among women experiencing marital conflict.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of choice theory intervention on emotional divorce and emotional self-differentiation among women experiencing marital conflict who sought psychological counseling in Isfahan, Iran. The findings revealed that choice theory intervention was effective in addressing both emotional divorce and emotional self-differentiation in this population. The results demonstrated that choice theory intervention significantly reduced emotional divorce scores in women experiencing marital conflict. This finding aligns with the research of Jafari et al. [19] and Khandani et al. [20], further supporting the efficacy of this intervention in addressing emotional divorce. Choice theory posits that individuals tend to replicate their patterns in emotional relationships and marital life [16]. In other words, they often select partners based on unconscious

patterns, potentially leading to relationship deterioration and emotional divorce if these patterns are problematic or flawed. Individuals may unconsciously reject suitable partners and encounter new challenges with new relationships [20]. Based on choice theory, therapeutic and counseling interventions aimed at breaking negative patterns and strengthening healthy behavioral and relational patterns may be beneficial. By fostering self-awareness and enabling individuals to make conscious choices, choice theory intervention can empower women to navigate marital conflict more effectively, reducing the likelihood of emotional divorce [19].

Emotional divorce, a prevalent phenomenon in marital relationships, occurs when couples primarily base their decision to divorce on emotional factors rather than rational deliberation [10]. This type of divorce is often characterized by persistent marital conflict and an inability to effectively resolve relationship issues. When couples become embroiled in unresolved conflict, emotional responses may overshadow rational thought, leading to impulsive decisions to divorce. Regret often follows as couples later recognize the lack of sound reasoning underpinning their decision. To prevent emotional divorce, couples should prioritize open and honest communication to address underlying issues and strengthen their relationship before emotions dictate their choices [24]. Choice theory intervention empowers women experiencing marital conflict to make informed decisions and enhance their relationships by prioritizing their own needs, beliefs, and values while navigating marital challenges [20].

Furthermore, the study demonstrated a significant increase in emotional self-differentiation scores among participants in the intervention group. These findings align with previous research by Mazaheri Tehrani et al. [22], supporting the efficacy of choice theory in enhancing this construct. By facilitating the identification and understanding of behavioral patterns, choice theory empowers individuals to adopt a fresh perspective on marital challenges, fostering healthier and more enduring relationships [17]. Moreover, the intervention guides participants in modifying their thoughts and behaviors, leading to substantial improvements in relationship dynamics. Choice theory, developed by Glasser [16], posits that individuals possess a multitude of options and choices in every moment of their lives. This theory emphasizes that all our decisions and choices have a direct impact on our lives and overall well-being. Within the context of choice theory, emotional self-differentiation is viewed as a crucial aspect of personal growth. It entails cultivating a heightened awareness of one's available options and choices [18]. Emotional self-differentiation involves embracing oneself as a unique individual, recognizing one's strengths and capabilities, accepting one's weaknesses, and refraining from seeking constant

external validation. Choice theory empowers individuals by recognizing their inherent capacity to make choices and take responsibility for their actions. It instills the belief that we all possess the power to transform and enhance our relationships, taking ownership of our lives and shaping our destinies [21].

Marital conflict is a complex issue arising from various factors, including communication breakdowns, misunderstandings, and challenges in maintaining a healthy relationship dynamic [3]. While these factors are significant, choice theory posits that individual personality traits may also contribute to conflict [20]. By emphasizing personal responsibility for choices and behaviors [16], choice theory interventions empower women to address emotional self-differentiation and improve marital relationships. These interventions facilitate a shift from passive to responsive behaviors, enhancing communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills [21]. Emotional self-differentiation is crucial for navigating marital challenges, enabling couples to preserve individual identities while fostering emotional connection and collaboratively finding mutually agreeable solutions.

The study's findings may not apply broadly due to recruiting only from Isfahan's psychological centers (limited generalizability). Convenience sampling (selection bias) also raises concerns, as participants might be more motivated for help or readily available, potentially skewing the results. Lastly, the study only measured effects immediately after the intervention, leaving the long-term impact on emotional divorce and differentiation unknown. Further research is needed to assess the intervention's long-term effectiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides compelling evidence for the efficacy of choice theory intervention in addressing emotional divorce and promoting emotional self-differentiation among women experiencing marital conflict. The intervention significantly reduced emotional divorce scores and improved emotional self-differentiation scores, suggesting its potential to foster emotional well-being and positive coping mechanisms. These findings highlight choice theory as a valuable therapeutic tool for promoting marital well-being by enhancing emotional regulation and self-awareness. Further research is necessary to explore the intervention's long-term effects and applicability to diverse populations.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz branch (IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1403.114).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of the current research.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed significantly to the conception, design, execution, and analysis of the study. Mahboubeh Sadat Fatemi was primarily responsible for developing the research framework, designing the intervention, and supervising the implementation. Kobra Kazemian Moghaddam handled data collection, participant coordination, and contributed to the interpretation of results. Maryam Gholamzadeh Jofreh performed the statistical analysis and assisted with the drafting and revision of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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