



The Relationship between Marital Satisfaction and Marital Justice through the Mediating Role of Anxiety in Married Students

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Abstract

Introduction: Marital satisfaction and justice are crucial components of a healthy marriage, yet little is known about the psychological factors that may influence this relationship. Understanding the role of anxiety in the relationship between marital satisfaction and justice can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of marital relationships and inform interventions to improve marital well-being. This research aims to investigate the direct and indirect effects of marital justice on marital satisfaction, with anxiety as a potential mediator, among married students.

Methods: This descriptive study employed structural equation modeling (SEM). A sample of 356 married students from Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran, was selected in 2023 using stratified random sampling. Research instruments included the Marital Satisfaction Scale, Marital Justice Scale, and State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. Data were analyzed using SEM with SPSS-26 and Amos-26 statistical software.

Results: The results indicated that marital justice had a significant negative correlation with anxiety ($\beta = -0.21$, $P = 0.002$). Additionally, both marital justice ($\beta = 0.25$) and anxiety ($\beta = -0.19$) were significantly correlated with marital satisfaction ($P < 0.01$). The results also indicated an indirect relationship between marital justice and marital satisfaction through the mediation of anxiety ($P = 0.011$).

Conclusions: The study found a strong negative correlation between marital justice and anxiety, indicating that increased marital fairness leads to decreased anxiety. Additionally, the research confirmed that marital justice positively impacts marital satisfaction both directly and indirectly by reducing anxiety levels.

INTRODUCTION

The marital relationship, often the most enduring partnership individual's experience, is a cornerstone of family life. However, the prevalence of marital dissatisfaction, a key factor contributing to the high rates of marital dissolution (approximately half of marriages end in divorce), underscores the importance of understanding the factors that contribute to successful and satisfying marriages [1]. Healthy marital relationships are essential not only for the well-being of the spouses themselves but also for the stability and functioning of the family unit as a whole. Because marital relationships form the core of the family system, individual satisfaction within the marriage is closely linked to overall family well-being. Conversely, low marital satisfaction is associated with diminished happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and mental health, significantly impacting an individual's overall quality of life [2]. Marital satisfaction is a multifaceted construct encompassing numerous components, including sexual fulfillment, perceived partner support, involvement in decision-making, in-law relationships,

social support networks, psychological well-being, and overall life satisfaction [3]. Achieving and maintaining marital satisfaction is an ongoing process requiring continuous effort from both partners, particularly during the initial years of marriage when the relationship may be more vulnerable [4]. Spouses tend to experience greater marital satisfaction when their relationship aligns with their expectations [5]. Research suggests that both individual and contextual factors can influence marital quality; among these, perceived marital injustice, anxiety, and relationship duration have emerged as significant predictors [6].

Married students face a unique confluence of challenges as they simultaneously navigate the complexities of marital life and academic pursuits. These demographic experiences the typical stressors associated with marriage, such as balancing emotional needs, managing finances, and negotiating household responsibilities, while also contending with the distinct pressures of higher education [7]. The combined demands of rigorous coursework, potential financial strain related to

tuition and living expenses, and family obligations, which may include childcare or elder care, can place considerable stress on their marital relationships. These competing demands can create a challenging environment for maintaining marital satisfaction and stability, potentially impacting both academic performance and relationship well-being [8]. While precise statistics on marital dissolution specifically among student populations are not readily available, the general challenges faced by married students suggest that their marital relationships may be particularly vulnerable to stress and require further investigation.

As used in family studies, a fundamental assumption of the behavioral framework is that positive marital behaviors enhance spouses' overall feelings about the marriage, while negative behaviors decrease positive feelings and damage perceptions of the relationship. Since the concept of justice is linked to humanistic and ethical standards and describes how we interact with others, it is considered an important positive social behavior and may therefore influence interpersonal relationships between spouses [9]. Marital justice refers to the degree of equality and fairness in the distribution of family responsibilities, power, respect for others, and attention to needs, reflecting a sense of equality and justice among spouses. In other words, marital justice and establishing fair relationships based on the duties of married life are associated with marital satisfaction, especially for women [10]. In developing countries, marriages are generally arranged by parents, women have little say in choosing their partners, and are largely dependent on their husbands for their livelihood and well-being. This reflects the relative bargaining position of women within the family and the widespread mistreatment and overt discrimination experienced by women who lack independence [11].

The ideals and values underpinning marriage have undergone significant transformations over the past century. As marriage becomes increasingly deinstitutionalized, traditional commitments that reinforced obligatory obligations have given way to a gendered contract that is more grounded in reciprocal and symmetrical roles. Among the principles governing marital life, the acceptance of a fair division of labor (and leisure time) has gained prominence [12]. The issue of marital justice is a prevalent one in our daily lives, as it reflects a fundamental concern in most couples' interactions with one another. In this regard, research findings have reported that justice can impact self and individual identity (personal goals and self-enhancement), relational (reliance on interactional goals, role expectations, and dyadic communication), and collective levels [13]. Some studies confirm that inequity in spousal duties and expectations leads to marital disappointment and emotional dissatisfaction [14]. Here, the concept of marital justice reflects normative beliefs about how resources should be

allocated. Consistent with this conceptualization, empirical evidence consistently shows that when individuals perceive their relationship as unfair, marital quality decreases [15].

If marital satisfaction is absent in a shared life between couples, dissatisfaction in a relationship can act as a trigger for the development of anxiety disorders and may also be responsible for shaping, exacerbating, and maintaining these disorders [16]. The elements of distress involved in the creation or control of anxiety disorders are diverse, and it is sometimes difficult to identify the so-called aggravating and alleviating factors. However, factors such as couples' attitudes towards marital justice can be mentioned [17]. Anxiety disorders, as one of the most common mental disorders, are debilitating not only for those who suffer from them but also for those close to them [18]. Studies show that anxiety disorders have a negative impact on the social functioning of the patient, including their partner's life [19].

Anxiety disorders can be a burden for both the patient and their family, impacting interpersonal relationships, making family members' adjustment difficult, and consequently leading to disruptions in family functioning, particularly in marital relationships [20]. In societies with traditional structures, a woman marries not only one man but also a large family, and for this reason, extended families have a significant impact on the quality of marriage. Pressures from the extended family sometimes exacerbate psychosocial stress. Psychosocial stressors, in turn, are a strong predictor of anxiety disorders and marital problems [21]. The fact that anxiety disorders, like any mental disorder, may cause or be a consequence of marital discord and decreased marital satisfaction is not fully understood. As research has reported a negative correlation between anxiety and marital satisfaction, it has shown that the anxiety of both partners can be associated with a decrease in the quality of marital satisfaction [19].

Considering the aforementioned points and a review of the research literature, the possibility of the impact of anxiety disorders on marital satisfaction, on the one hand, and the potential role of marital justice in controlling couples' anxiety and its impact on marital satisfaction, on the other hand, raises concerns for researchers. By identifying factors affecting marital satisfaction, researchers aim to increase the success of couples in marriage and reduce the alarming divorce rates. Accordingly, this research aims to investigate the relationship between marital satisfaction and marital justice through the mediating role of anxiety in married students.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive and predictive design to investigate the relationships between marital justice,

anxiety, and marital satisfaction. Utilizing structural equation modeling (SEM), the research aimed to examine the associations between the predictor variable (marital justice) and the criterion variable (marital satisfaction), with a particular focus on the mediating role of anxiety. A conceptual model was developed and subsequently tested (Figure 1). The study population consisted of married students aged 20 to 40 years, both male and female, pursuing education from Associate's degrees to PhDs at Azad University of Ahvaz (Iran) in 2023. A sample of 356 participants was selected from this population using stratified sampling. The stratified sampling method involved dividing the student population into strata based on academic level (Associate's, Bachelor's, Master's, PhD) and then randomly selecting participants from each stratum in proportion to its size within the overall population. This ensured representation from each academic level within the sample. Inclusion criteria were: (1) current marital status; (2) age between 20 and 40 years; (3) enrollment as a student at the Azad University of Ahvaz pursuing an Associate's, Bachelor's, Master's, or PhD degree; (4) willingness to participate; and (5) provision of informed consent. Exclusion criteria included: (1) divorce; (2) unwillingness to continue participation; (3) omission of more than 10% of questionnaire items; (4) self-reported diagnosis of any physical or mental health condition that could significantly impact emotional or relational functioning; and (5) self-reported presence of sexual dysfunction. The required sample size was determined based on the number of variables in the research model, using a power analysis conducted with G*Power software. While a power analysis based on a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), a desired power of 0.80, and an alpha level of .05 for multiple regression (suitable for mediation analysis) suggested a minimum of approximately 350 participants, the final sample size was also considered in relation to the complexity of the model being tested. To account for potential attrition and incomplete data, 360 participants were initially recruited. After data cleaning, which involved the removal of cases with excessive missing data or invalid responses, the final sample consisted of 356 participants. This represents a response rate of 98.9% (356/360).

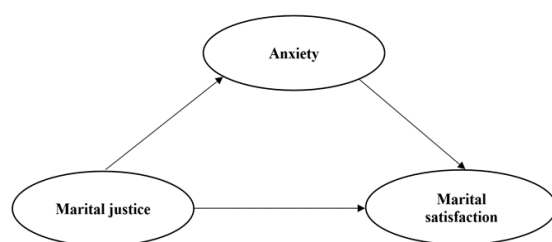


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the research

Research Instrument

The Marital Satisfaction Scale

The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction scale, a comprehensive 35-item instrument, assesses various facets of marital relationships, including idealization, satisfaction, personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, intimacy, social relationships, gender roles, religious beliefs, family cohesion, and marital change. Responses to each item are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "completely agree" to "completely disagree," with higher scores indicating greater agreement [22]. Total scores range from 35 to 175, with a cut-off score of 78 often used, above which higher scores denote greater marital satisfaction. The Persian version of the Marital Satisfaction Scale was validated by Arab Alidousti et al. in 2015 [23]. While the Persian version of the scale previously demonstrated satisfactory reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.74 [23], the present study found a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76 for the scale.

The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI)

The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), developed by Spielberger [24], measures both temporary (state) and enduring (trait) anxiety levels. It consists of 40 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater anxiety. Scores on this scale range from 40 to 160. A cut-off score of 45 or higher is also considered. The Persian version of the STAI was validated by Abdoli et al. in 2020 [25]. In the current study, the reliability of the STAI, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was 0.89 for the trait anxiety subscale and 0.86 for the state anxiety subscale.

Marital Justice Scale

The Marital Justice Scale, a 20-item instrument developed by Ghaffari et al. [26], measures perceived fairness within marital relationships. This scale encompasses two subscales: distributive justice and procedural/interactive justice. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting greater perceived justice. Total scores range from 20 to 100, and a cut-off score of 60 or above is often considered. Ghaffari et al. [26] reported high internal consistency for the scale, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.97. In the present study, the Marital Justice Scale demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88.

Data Analysis

Data obtained after screening and meeting the assumptions of normality (assessed through skewness and kurtosis) were analyzed using structural equation modeling with SPSS-26 and Amos-26 statistical software. Bootstrapping was also used to assess the mediation effect, as it is a robust method that does not rely on strict normality assumptions and is particularly useful for assessing indirect effects in mediation models.

RESULTS

The participants in this study consisted of 356 married students. The sample included 184 (51.70%) women and 172 (48.3%) men. Of the student participants, 27 (7.58%) were aged 20-25, 88 (24.72%) were aged 25-30, 150 (42.14%) were aged 30-35, and 91 (25.56%) were aged 35-40. Regarding their education level, 94 (26.41%) were pursuing associate degrees, 169 (47.47%) were pursuing bachelor's degrees, 69 (19.38%) were pursuing master's degrees, and 24 (6.74%) were pursuing doctoral degrees. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation (SD), skewness, kurtosis, and correlation coefficients among the study variables. Data normality, a key assumption for many statistical analyses, including structural equation modeling, was assessed by examining skewness and kurtosis. The skewness and kurtosis coefficients for all variables were within the acceptable range of -2 to +2, indicating no substantial deviations from a normal distribution. Consequently, the assumption of normality was considered to be adequately met.

The results indicated a significant negative correlation between marital justice and anxiety among married students. Moreover, there was a significant positive correlation between marital justice and marital satisfaction among married students. Consistent with the findings, anxiety showed a significant negative correlation with marital satisfaction (Table 1).

A structural equation model (SEM) was employed to test the hypothesized relationships between marital satisfaction (dependent variable), marital justice (independent variable), and anxiety (mediating

variable). Model fit was assessed using a range of indices, including the chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), the normed fit index (NFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), the incremental fit index (IFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). As presented in Table 2, the model demonstrated acceptable fit to the data. Specifically, the fit indices were as follows: $\chi^2/df = 2.79$, NFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.91, CFI = 0.95, and RMSEA = 0.07. The proposed model is depicted in Figure 2.

The direct and indirect effects among the study variables are reported in Table 3. The results indicated that the path coefficient between marital justice and anxiety was -0.21, suggesting a significant negative effect of marital justice on anxiety among married students ($P = 0.002$). Additionally, the path coefficients between marital justice and anxiety, and anxiety and marital satisfaction were 0.25 and -0.19, respectively, indicating significant relationships between marital justice, anxiety, and marital satisfaction ($P < 0.01$). The values presented in Table 3 support the mediating role of anxiety in the relationship between marital justice and marital satisfaction ($P = 0.011$).

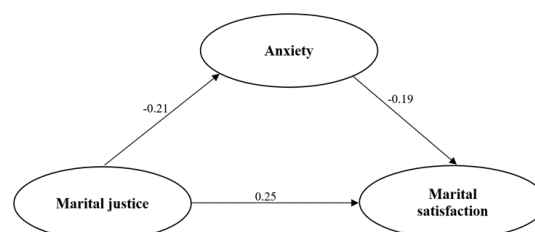


Figure 2. Proposed model of the research

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation (SD), skewness, kurtosis, and Pearson correlation coefficients of the studied variables

Variables	Mean $\pm$ SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1- Marital justice	55.51 $\pm$ 9.85	-0.02	-0.16	1	-	-
2- Anxiety	80.17 $\pm$ 10.54	0.01	-0.63	-0.19*	1	-
3- Marital satisfaction	71.79 $\pm$ 8.98	-0.44	-0.52	0.39**	-0.35**	1

*, $P < 0.05$; **, $P < 0.01$

Table 2. Fit indicators of the proposed model

Fit indicators	χ^2	df	(χ^2/df)	NFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Proposed model	432.28	155	2.79	0.93	0.93	0.91	0.95	0.07
Acceptable ranges	-	-	<3.00	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	<0.08

Table 3. Direct and indirect path in the proposed model

Paths	Proposed model	
	β	P
Marital justice $\rightarrow$ Anxiety	-0.21	0.002
Marital justice $\rightarrow$ Marital satisfaction	0.25	0.001
Anxiety $\rightarrow$ Marital satisfaction	-0.19	0.010
Marital justice $\rightarrow$ Marital satisfaction through anxiety	0.04	0.011

DISCUSSION

This study examines the direct and indirect effects of marital justice on marital satisfaction, with anxiety as a potential mediator, among married students. The first finding revealed a significant negative correlation

between marital justice and anxiety among married students, indicating that as marital justice increased, anxiety levels decreased. Although direct studies investigating the effects of marital justice on anxiety were not found, indirect support for this finding was observed in previous research. For instance, Bijani et al.

[27] argued that marital justice refers to couples' perception of fairness and equity in five sub-scales: power, respect for others, power, division of family responsibilities, and attention to needs. Therefore, couples in their marital life seek to compare the investment and reward they receive from their partner. Consequently, couples are relatively satisfied when there is no significant difference between their investment and reward. However, if they receive less reward relative to their investment, they feel a sense of injustice and experience a relationship characterized by dissatisfaction and anxiety [27]. Thus, it seems that the existence of injustice, based on equity theory, can contribute to anxiety and distress in some aspects of a relationship [20]. Additionally, results from other studies indicate that couples who perceive a higher level of marital justice and share decisions equally with their spouses often experience less conflict and anxiety and have higher levels of marital satisfaction [28].

The results of the present study indicated that marital justice had a significant positive impact on marital satisfaction among married students. This finding is consistent with previous research [29] that has shown the importance of equity in marital relationships for promoting marital satisfaction. While marital justice can have a significant impact on marital satisfaction, the specific mechanisms through which it operates may vary depending on factors such as gender, sensitivity to justice, perception of justice, and cultural context [6]. Generally, when one spouse receives fewer benefits, especially when both partners have similar working hours and income, it may have destabilizing effects on the marital relationship. In some cultures (particularly Iranian culture), the breadwinner model is associated with more stable marital relationships and higher marital satisfaction [9]. Perceptions of fairness in resource distribution, equitable division of responsibilities, and a fair balance of effort and reward, as well as being heard, having needs considered before making decisions, and receiving honest and transparent information, can prevent the development of emotional withdrawal and destructive social behaviors towards the spouse. Perceptions of injustice, as a stressor, can lead to a decline in mood, increased experience of distress and negative emotions that contribute to the occurrence of interpersonal aggression, and thus negatively impact marital quality. Moreover, emotional withdrawal and social undermining resulting from perceived injustice may create a vicious cycle of decreasing marital quality, further reducing marital justice, and increasing marital conflict [26].

Another key finding of this study was the negative relationship between anxiety and marital satisfaction. As anxiety increased, marital satisfaction decreased among married students. This finding is consistent with previous research, which demonstrated that couples' anxiety has a significant impact on their marital

satisfaction [16, 30]. Study. To explain the relationship between anxiety and marital satisfaction, it can be argued that anxiety predicts lower levels of marital satisfaction. In general, anxiety disorders often have detrimental effects on marital and interpersonal relationships, leading to decreased marital satisfaction. Due to its nature and symptoms, anxiety has a negative impact on marital life, and there is usually a strong negative correlation between anxiety disorders and marital distress [31]. Assuming a bidirectional relationship between anxiety and marital satisfaction, it is possible that an anxious spouse, on the one hand, may disrupt the marital relationship with their anxiety and, on the other hand, the disruption of the marital relationship may increase their anxiety. This vicious cycle seems to be associated with decreased marital satisfaction, especially when a decrease in one spouse's satisfaction has a negative impact on the other spouse's marital satisfaction [30].

In addition, the study examined the indirect effect of marital justice on marital satisfaction through the mediating role of anxiety. In essence, the findings suggest that marital justice may indirectly influence marital satisfaction by reducing anxiety levels. This mediating effect highlights the importance of fostering a sense of fairness and equity within marital relationships to promote emotional well-being and relationship satisfaction. While previous research has not explicitly explored the mediating role of anxiety in the relationship between marital justice and satisfaction, studies have shown that marital justice can have a negative impact on anxiety, leading to reduced anxiety levels [6]. Moreover, previous research has consistently demonstrated a negative correlation between anxiety and marital satisfaction [31]. Therefore, it is plausible that the reduction in anxiety could subsequently lead to increased marital satisfaction. To elaborate on this finding, the perception of marital justice, encompassing fair distribution of resources, equitable effort-reward cycles, shared decision-making, attention to needs, and relationship transparency, can significantly reduce threats, potential risks, and anticipated harm within the relationship, thereby decreasing anxiety levels in couples. In turn, reduced anxiety can contribute to lower levels of relationship distress and hostility, potentially leading to increased relationship quality and marital satisfaction.

Limitations

While the present study provides valuable insights into the relationships among marital justice, anxiety, and marital satisfaction, several limitations warrant consideration and suggest directions for future research. The tested model, despite demonstrating acceptable fit indices, likely represents a simplification of the complex interplay of factors influencing marital well-being. As previously noted, numerous other variables, including

individual characteristics such as depression and self-esteem, and external factors like social support and stress, can substantially influence marital dynamics. Furthermore, the study's specific sample-married students at Azad University of Ahvaz, Iran-limits the generalizability of findings to other populations. The results may not be fully transferable to married individuals from different cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, or other demographic characteristics. Although both men and women participated, the current model did not explicitly explore potential gender-based differences in these relationships, an area ripe for further investigation. Additionally, the cross-sectional design precludes definitive conclusions regarding causality; while associations were observed, the direction of influence between variables remains unclear. Finally, the reliance on self-report measures introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, wherein participants may provide responses they deem socially acceptable rather than fully accurate.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between marital justice, anxiety, and marital satisfaction among married students, with implications for Iranian society. As hypothesized, a strong negative association was observed between marital justice and anxiety, indicating that individuals perceiving greater fairness in their marital relationships tend to experience lower anxiety levels. Furthermore, both marital justice and anxiety emerged as significant predictors of marital satisfaction, underscoring the importance of these factors for marital well-being. Consistent with our hypotheses, the results also revealed a significant indirect effect of marital justice on marital satisfaction through the mediating role of anxiety. This suggests that marital justice influences marital satisfaction not only directly but also indirectly by mitigating anxiety. Within the context of Iranian society, where family and marital relationships hold significant cultural value, these findings have several potential applications. Promoting marital justice, through education and counseling programs, could contribute to reduced anxiety and enhanced marital satisfaction among married students. Addressing perceptions of unfairness in spousal relationships may be a particularly effective target for intervention, potentially leading to improvements in both individual and marital well-being. By reducing anxiety and fostering greater marital satisfaction, interventions informed by this research could contribute to greater relationship stability and longevity among married students, a group facing unique academic and life stage stressors. While the study focuses on students, the principles of marital justice and the mediating role of

anxiety likely have broader applicability within the general married population in Iran. Future research should expand upon the present model by incorporating these potentially influential variables to achieve a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of marital satisfaction. Further studies could explore additional mediating or moderating variables that may influence the relationships between these constructs. Moreover, longitudinal research designs would offer valuable insights into the temporal dynamics of these variables.

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

B.B.: Conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, conducted data collection, performed statistical analyses, and drafted the initial manuscript. P.A.: Provided supervision, contributed to the study design, reviewed and validated the statistical analyses, and revised the manuscript for intellectual content. F.N.: Assisted in developing the theoretical framework, contributed to the interpretation of results, and critically edited the manuscript to ensure scientific rigor and clarity. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The Ethics Review Board of Islamic Azad University Ahvaz Branch, approved the present study with the following number: IR.IAU.AHVZ.REC.1402.055.

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