



The Relationship between Hostile Attribution and Divorce Proneness: Investigating the Mediating Role of Self-Differentiation in Women

Seyedeh Liba Yadegari ¹ , Parisa Peyvandi ^{1*} , Marjan Hosseinzadeh Taghvaei ¹ , Mohammadreza Beliad ¹ , Saeed Mahmoodinia ¹

¹ Department of Psychology, Ka.C., Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran

*Corresponding author: Parisa Peyvandi, Department of Psychology, Ka.C., Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran. E-mail: parisa.peyvandi@iau.ac.ir

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Abstract

Introduction: Hostile attribution, interpreting a partner's ambiguous actions as malicious, significantly contributes to marital conflict by perpetuating negative interaction cycles and eroding trust. This investigation aimed to explore the association between hostile attribution and divorce proneness in women, specifically examining the mediating influence of self-differentiation.

Methods: This study adopted a cross-sectional correlational design. Data were gathered from a convenience sample of 350 married women residing in Karaj, Iran, during 2024. Participants completed a battery of standardized self-report measures, specifically the Hostile Attribution Scale, the differentiation of Self Inventory, and the Divorce Propensity Questionnaire. The collected data underwent statistical analysis using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to thoroughly assess the hypothesized direct and indirect relationships among the variables.

Results: Findings indicated a significant positive correlation between hostile attribution and divorce proneness ($r=0.40$, $P<0.001$). Additionally, hostile attribution was negatively correlated with self-differentiation ($r=-0.30$, $P<0.001$). Furthermore, self-differentiation was negatively correlated with divorce proneness ($r=-0.50$, $P<0.001$). Crucially, self-differentiation emerged as a statistically significant mediator in the relationship between hostile attribution and divorce proneness. The structural model demonstrated good fit ($\chi^2/df=1.78$, CFI=0.94, RMSEA=0.045).

Conclusions: These results suggest that hostile attribution contributes to a diminished capacity for self-differentiation, which, in turn, increases a woman's predisposition to divorce. Understanding this psychological pathway is vital for developing targeted interventions aimed at fostering healthier relational cognitions and enhancing marital resilience.

INTRODUCTION

The stability and quality of marital relationships serve as foundational pillars for both individual well-being and the broader health of society. Nevertheless, modern Iranian society, alongside other global contexts, frequently witnesses a concerning prevalence of challenges to marital endurance, which impose considerable personal and familial burdens on individuals [1]. This strain is often disproportionately experienced by women, who frequently navigate specific societal expectations such as traditional gender roles, familial obligations, and economic dependency within their marital contexts. In Iran, these pressures are compounded by cultural norms that emphasize family cohesion and social reputation, which can intensify the emotional and social stakes of marital discord [2]. The

breakdown of a marriage, or even the prolonged experience of marital discord, can lead to profound and multifaceted repercussions for women, encompassing significant psychological, social, and economic consequences that detrimentally impact their overall life satisfaction, mental health, and general functioning [3, 4]. Consequently, there exists a compelling imperative to delve deeply into the nuanced psychological mechanisms that render a woman susceptible to marital breakdown, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of underlying vulnerabilities and identifying potential pathways for interventions aimed at bolstering relational resilience and promoting healthier marital outcomes.

Central to comprehending the complexities of interpersonal dynamics within marriage is the concept of hostile attribution. This cognitive bias refers to an individual's pervasive tendency to interpret the ambiguous actions, intentions, or behaviors of their partner as deliberately negative, malicious, or hostile [5]. For instance, a delayed response to a text message might be interpreted as intentional neglect, or a forgotten task as a deliberate act of disrespect. Such interpretations, even in the absence of clear evidence, can significantly fuel relational conflict and amplify feelings of distress between partners [6]. When individuals consistently engage in hostile attributions, these cognitive biases can perpetuate vicious cycles of negative interaction, gradually eroding mutual trust by fostering misinterpretations that escalate conflict and reduce relational empathy [7]. Understanding the roots and manifestations of hostile attribution is thus critical for addressing dysfunctional communication patterns and promoting healthier marital environments.

Another pivotal psychological construct highly relevant to the trajectory of marital relationships is divorce proneness. This concept describes an individual's psychological inclination, readiness, or vulnerability towards the dissolution of their marriage [8]. It encompasses a range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral indicators that suggest a predisposition to consider or pursue divorce, even before actual separation occurs. Divorce proneness is not merely an outcome but often a state of mind characterized by diminished commitment, increased thoughts of separation, and reduced efforts to resolve marital difficulties [9]. It serves as a crucial predictor of actual marital outcomes, reflecting an individual's internal landscape concerning the stability of their relationship [10]. Various factors, including unresolved conflicts, unmet needs, and individual psychological vulnerabilities, can contribute to heightened divorce proneness, making its examination essential for identifying individuals at risk and informing preventative strategies aimed at strengthening marital bonds.

Within the framework of understanding marital resilience, self-differentiation emerges as a critical psychological resource. Derived from Bowen Family Systems Theory, self-differentiation represents an individual's inherent capacity to maintain a distinct sense of self, personal autonomy, and emotional independence, even while deeply engaged in intimate emotional relationships [11]. In simpler terms, it is the ability to balance emotional closeness with a partner while preserving one's own identity and emotional regulation, avoiding excessive emotional dependence or withdrawal. This involves the crucial ability to distinguish between one's cognitive and emotional processes, allowing for thoughtful, principle-based responses rather than impulsive emotional reactivity. A

well-differentiated individual can uphold their convictions and identity without either becoming emotionally fused with others (loss of self in a relationship) or resorting to emotional cutoff (avoidance of emotional closeness) [12]. Such individuals are typically more adept at managing stress, engaging in constructive conflict resolution, and fostering genuinely interdependent rather than enmeshed or avoidant relationships, thereby contributing significantly to greater emotional stability and resilience within marital partnerships [13, 14].

The interplay among hostile attribution, self-differentiation, and marital outcomes presents a compelling and underexplored area for research, particularly concerning women's marital experiences. While hostile attributions can directly undermine relational harmony and foster an environment of conflict, a robust sense of self-differentiation may serve as a crucial buffer against such negative cognitive biases and their destructive impact on relationships. The present study seeks to fill a notable gap in the existing literature by thoroughly exploring the specific mediating role of self-differentiation in the correlation between hostile attribution and women's divorce proneness. Understanding this psychological pathway offers significant theoretical contributions to family psychology by elucidating the precise mechanisms through which maladaptive cognitive patterns interact with individual psychological development to contribute to marital vulnerability. Furthermore, the findings are poised to yield substantial practical implications for marital counseling and preventative interventions, particularly within cultural contexts like Iran where societal nuances might shape these psychological experiences. The primary objective of this research is therefore to ascertain whether self-differentiation mediates the relationship between hostile attribution and the propensity for divorce in married women.

METHODS

Study Design and Setting

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships among hostile attribution, self-differentiation, and divorce proneness. The research was conducted in Karaj, a prominent urban center in Alborz Province, Iran, throughout 2024.

Participants

The target population comprised married women residing in Karaj, Iran. A convenience sampling method was utilized, yielding a sample of 350 married women. The sample size was determined through a power analysis, considering three latent variables (hostile attribution, self-differentiation, and divorce proneness) and targeting a minimum of 200 participants to ensure

sufficient statistical power for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), with an additional buffer to account for potential incomplete responses. Inclusion criteria required participants to be legally married, residents of Karaj, aged 18 or older, and capable of providing informed consent. Exclusion criteria encompassed individuals with severe psychological disorders requiring ongoing clinical treatment (e.g., schizophrenia or bipolar disorder) or those currently engaged in marital therapy, to maintain a focus on non-clinical populations. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IR.IAU.K.REC.1404.066), with rigorous measures implemented to ensure participant anonymity and data confidentiality.

Procedure

Following ethical approval, participants were recruited through community centers, local organizations, and public venues such as parks and cultural events in Karaj during 2024. While this recruitment strategy facilitated access to participants, it may have introduced response bias due to the public nature of the settings, a limitation acknowledged in the discussion. Prior to participation, each individual was fully informed about the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Written informed consent was obtained, accompanied by detailed explanations regarding data usage, confidentiality safeguards, and participants' rights to access study findings upon request, in accordance with ethical research standards. Self-report questionnaires were administered, with assurances of complete anonymity and confidentiality, and responses were used exclusively for research purposes. The questionnaire completion process typically required 20–25 minutes.

Instruments

Hostile Attribution Scale (HAS): The Hostile Attribution Scale (HAS), a 20-item self-report instrument, assesses an individual's tendency to interpret ambiguous interpersonal situations, particularly within romantic relationships, as having malicious intent [15]. Respondents typically rate various scenarios on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating the likelihood of a hostile interpretation (1=very unlikely, 5=very likely). Higher aggregate scores denote a greater predisposition towards hostile attribution. This scale effectively gauges a critical cognitive bias that can significantly contribute to relational conflict and distress. In prior validation studies, the HAS has consistently demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients generally above 0.86 [16]. For the current study, the HAS showed strong reliability (Cronbach's alpha=0.84).

Divorce Propensity Questionnaire (DPQ): The Divorce Propensity Questionnaire (DPQ), developed by Rusbult et al. [17], comprises 14 items designed to

ascertain an individual's psychological inclination towards marital dissolution. This self-report measure explores a spectrum of thoughts, feelings, and behavioral intentions regarding the stability of one's marital relationship. Responses are typically provided on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never, 7 = constantly), with a summed total score reflecting the degree of divorce proneness; higher scores indicate a greater predisposition. Past research has established the DPQ's robust psychometric properties across diverse populations, consistently reporting Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.78 [18]. In the present study, the DPQ demonstrated commendable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha=0.86).

Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI): The differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI), a 45-item self-report instrument created by Skowron and Friedlander [19], evaluates an individual's capacity to maintain a distinct self while engaging in close emotional bonds. Rooted in Bowen Family Systems Theory, the DSI assesses four key subscales: Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Fusion with Others, and Emotional Cutoff. Items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true of me, 6 = very true of me), with higher aggregate scores reflecting a more advanced level of differentiation of self, indicative of enhanced emotional regulation and autonomy in relationships. Previous validation studies consistently report strong reliability for the overall scale and its subscales, with Cronbach's alpha values typically above 0.81 [20]. For this investigation, the DSI showed excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha=0.83).

Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software (Version 26) for descriptive statistics and correlation analyses. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using SmartPLS software (Version 3) to rigorously test the hypothesized direct and indirect effects among the study variables.

RESULTS

A detailed examination of the demographic characteristics of the 350 married women from Karaj, Iran, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample

	Values
Age (years)	
25-35	184 (52.6%)
35-45	116 (33.1%)
45-55	50 (14.3%)
Education	
University degree	283 (81.0%)
High school diploma	67 (19.0%)
Employment	
Homemakers	140 (40.0%)
Employed professionals	210 (60%)
Marital Duration	10.15 ± 6.72 years

Data in table are presented as No.(%) or Mean ± SD

Participants' ages were categorized into three ranges: 25-35 years ($n=184$, 52.6%), 35-45 years ($n=116$, 33.1%), and 45-55 years ($n=50$, 14.3%), with a mean age of 34.23 years ($SD=7.84$). Educationally, 283 participants (81.0%) held university degrees (Bachelor's to postgraduate levels), while 67 (19.0%) had high school diplomas. Employment status showed 140 participants (40.0%) as homemakers and 210 (60%) as employed professionals. The duration of marriage ranged from 1 to 30 years, with a mean of 10.15 years ($SD=6.72$).

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the study's central psychological variables. The mean scores for hostile attribution, self-differentiation, and divorce proneness reflect their typical distributions within the sample, consistent with

their respective scale ranges. All psychological variables exhibited skewness and kurtosis values within the acceptable range of -2 to +2, as recommended for parametric analyses, indicating an approximately normal distribution and confirming their suitability for advanced statistical analyses like SEM. The correlational analysis yielded statistically significant relationships, aligning with the study's theoretical postulates. Specifically, hostile attribution showed a significant positive correlation with divorce proneness ($r=0.40$, $P<0.001$), while a significant negative correlation was observed between hostile attribution and self-differentiation ($r=-0.30$, $P<0.001$). Furthermore, self-differentiation was significantly negatively correlated with divorce proneness ($r=-0.50$, $P<0.001$).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of research variables

Variable	Mean $\pm$ SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1. Hostile Attribution	62.45 $\pm$ 14.22	0.35	-0.18	1.00		
2. Self-differentiation	180.61 $\pm$ 25.36	-0.20	-0.10	-0.30**	1.00	
3. Divorce proneness	56.83 $\pm$ 12.77	0.25	0.12	0.40**	-0.50**	1.00

Note: ** $P<0.001$

Table 3. Fit indices of the final structural model

Fit index	Observed value	Acceptable value
χ^2	110.20	-
df	62	-
χ^2/df	1.78	< 3.0
CFI	0.94	> 0.90
NFI	0.91	> 0.90
TLI	0.93	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.045	< 0.08
SRMR	0.050	< 0.08

Table 4. Direct and indirect effects in the research model

Path	β	SE	t	P
Hostile attribution $\rightarrow$ Divorce proneness	0.22	0.03	7.33	0.001
Hostile attribution $\rightarrow$ Self-differentiation	-0.28	0.04	-7.00	0.001
Self-differentiation $\rightarrow$ Divorce proneness	-0.45	0.03	-15.00	0.001
Hostile attribution $\rightarrow$ Self-differentiation $\rightarrow$ Divorce proneness	0.13	0.02	6.50	0.001

Table 3 displays the goodness-of-fit indices for the proposed structural model, providing empirical evidence of its congruence with the collected data. While the Chi-square value was statistically significant ($P<0.001$), a common occurrence in studies with larger sample sizes, other critical fit indices collectively pointed to a satisfactory model fit. The Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio ($\chi^2/df=1.78$) remained well below the generally accepted threshold of 3.0, suggesting a parsimonious and well-specified model. Furthermore, the Comparative Fit Index ($CFI=0.94$), Normed Fit Index ($NFI=0.91$), and Tucker-Lewis Index ($TLI=0.93$) all surpassed the recommended 0.90 criterion, indicating a strong model fit. Additionally, both the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation ($RMSEA=0.045$) and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual ($SRMR=0.050$) were comfortably below the 0.08 benchmark, further affirming the model's

robust fit to the data and its adequate representation of the observed relationships.

Table 3 meticulously details the direct and indirect pathways within the final structural model. All hypothesized direct effects were found to be statistically robust ($P<0.001$). Specifically, Hostile Attribution displayed a significant positive direct effect on divorce proneness ($\beta=0.22$), indicating that a greater propensity for hostile interpretations directly contributes to an increased psychological inclination towards marital dissolution. Hostile attribution also demonstrated a significant negative direct effect on self-differentiation ($\beta=-0.28$), suggesting that individuals with higher hostile attribution tendencies tend to exhibit lower levels of self-differentiation. Furthermore, self-differentiation exerted a significant negative direct effect on divorce proneness ($\beta=-0.45$), underscoring its pivotal role as a protective factor. Crucially, the indirect effect of hostile attribution on divorce proneness via self-

differentiation was also statistically significant ($\beta=0.13$, $P<0.001$). This confirms that self-differentiation partially mediates the relationship, implying that hostile attributions influence divorce proneness not only directly but also by adversely impacting an individual's capacity for self-differentiation.

DISCUSSION

The current investigation meticulously explored the associations among hostile attribution, self-differentiation, and divorce proneness in married women, with a particular emphasis on the critical mediating function of self-differentiation. The study's findings provide robust empirical support for the hypothesized structural model, offering significant insights into the cognitive and psychological mechanisms that underpin marital stability. These results extend existing scholarship by illuminating how maladaptive attributional styles can indirectly amplify an individual's vulnerability to marital dissolution through their detrimental impact on self-differentiation. The coherence of these findings with prior research is supported by studies such as Ellison et al. [21], which linked marital attributions to depressive symptoms, and Heyman et al. [22], which explored conflict behaviors associated with relationship dissatisfaction, reinforcing the role of cognitive biases in marital outcomes.

The initial and pivotal finding of this study reveals a direct positive association between hostile attribution and divorce proneness. This outcome aligns with theoretical perspectives positing that a consistent tendency to interpret a partner's ambiguous behaviors as malevolent significantly erodes trust and escalates conflict within a marriage [21, 22]. When individuals attribute negative intentions to their spouse, it initiates and perpetuates a destructive cycle of defensive reactions, reduced empathy, and diminished marital satisfaction. This pervasive atmosphere of suspicion and resentment can gradually increase a woman's psychological inclination towards divorce, as the relationship becomes a persistent source of distress rather than support, thereby rendering separation a more appealing, albeit painful, prospect [23].

Furthermore, the study established a significant negative direct association between hostile attribution and self-differentiation. This implies that a greater propensity for hostile interpretations is linked to lower levels of self-differentiation. The constant preoccupation with perceived threats or malicious intent from a partner can fundamentally undermine an individual's capacity to maintain a clear and stable sense of self, as well as their ability to regulate emotional boundaries [24]. When emotional energy is perpetually consumed by external vigilance and reactivity, it diverts resources from the internal processes of self-definition and emotional regulation that are crucial for developing

and maintaining a differentiated self, making it challenging to establish and maintain a healthy, autonomous "I-position" within the relationship [19].

Conversely, a significant negative direct effect was observed between self-differentiation and divorce proneness, underscoring its profound protective influence on marital stability. Individuals who are highly differentiated possess an enhanced capacity to manage their emotional intensity, articulate their needs authentically without becoming emotionally fused, and navigate interpersonal conflicts with greater composure and constructiveness [25]. Their ability to maintain personal autonomy and emotional distinctiveness within the marriage minimizes the risks of over-entmeshment or emotional cutoff, fostering more resilient and adaptive marital bonds. This psychological strength enables them to adeptly manage inherent marital challenges, thereby reducing their subjective readiness for marital dissolution and promoting sustained relational well-being [26].

The most critical finding of this investigation highlights the significant mediating role of self-differentiation in the relationship between hostile attribution and divorce proneness. This implies that hostile attribution contributes to divorce proneness not only through a direct pathway but also, critically, by impairing an individual's self-differentiation. Specifically, the tendency to interpret a partner's actions maliciously diminishes one's capacity for self-differentiation, and it is this reduced self-differentiation that subsequently increases a woman's psychological predisposition to divorce [27]. This mediation pathway elucidates a vital cognitive-relational mechanism: maladaptive attributional styles adversely affect the development of a stable and autonomous self-structure, which, in turn, compromises marital stability and increases the likelihood of considering marital dissolution.

These findings carry substantial implications for clinical practice and preventative interventions aimed at enhancing marital well-being. Given the profound impact of hostile attribution and self-differentiation, therapeutic approaches should concurrently target both. Interventions could focus on cognitive restructuring techniques to challenge and reframe hostile attributional biases, alongside strategies to foster self-differentiation—such as enhancing emotional literacy, promoting clearer self-definition, and reducing emotional reactivity within relationships. Such integrated approaches can empower women to develop healthier internal frameworks and relational dynamics. Furthermore, acknowledging the specific cultural nuances prevalent in contexts like Iran is vital, as they may influence both attributional styles and the developmental processes of self-differentiation, thereby necessitating culturally sensitive adaptations in therapeutic strategies.

This study employed a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to infer causality among the variables. Reliance on self-report measures introduces the potential for social desirability bias. Additionally, the use of a convenience sample and the administration of questionnaires in public and community settings may have introduced response bias and restricted the generalizability of findings to broader populations. The absence of data on marital duration as a potential confounding variable further limits the interpretation of divorce proneness.

CONCLUSION

Based on the comprehensive findings of this study, it can be concluded that hostile attribution significantly predicts divorce proneness among married women. Crucially, the research empirically confirms that self-differentiation serves as a vital psychological mediator in this relationship. Elevated hostile attribution is associated with a diminished capacity for self-differentiation, which, in turn, increases a woman's predisposition to marital dissolution. This mediation pathway reveals that a tendency to interpret a partner's actions maliciously can undermine the fundamental clarity and autonomy of the self, thereby weakening the psychological foundations necessary for resilient intimate partnerships. These insights underscore the profound importance of targeted interventions aimed at challenging hostile attribution patterns and cultivating self-differentiation to enhance marital resilience and women's psychological well-being.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

This research was granted ethical clearance by the Institutional Review Board under approval code IR.IAU.K.REC.1404.066, ensuring compliance with ethical standards for human participant research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm that they have no conflicts of interest associated with the conduct or publication of this study.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Seyedeh Liba Yadegari: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Data Curation. Parisa Peyvandi (Corresponding

Author): Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing, Project Administration. Marjan Hosseinzadeh Taghvaei: Investigation, Data Collection, Resources, Writing – Review & Editing. Mohammadreza Beladi: Software, Formal Analysis, Validation, Visualization. Saeed Mahmoodinia: Methodology, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision. All authors contributed meaningfully to this study and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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