



A Proposed Model to Investigate the Impact of Moral Intelligence and Early Maladaptive Schemas on Emotional Divorce Regarding the Mediating Role of Marital Burnout in Women Referring to Psychological Centers, Ahvaz, Iran

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Received: 02 Jul. 2020
Accepted: 17 Jul. 2020
ePublished: 01 Feb. 2021



Abstract

Background and Objective: Appropriate relationships in society are shaped based on healthy and intimate rapport in families. Divorce is regarded as one of the most important sources of damage to families and marriages. This study aimed to design and test a model to investigate the effect of moral intelligence and early maladaptive schemas on emotional divorce considering the mediating role of marital burnout in women referring to psychological centers in Ahvaz, Iran.

Materials and Methods: The statistical population of this descriptive-correlational study included all the women referring to psychological centers in Ahvaz, Iran, during 2019. In total, 264 individuals were selected using the convenience sampling method. The data were collected using an emotional divorce questionnaire, moral intelligence scale, early maladaptive schemas, and marital burnout questionnaire. Furthermore, the proposed model was evaluated using a path analysis method. A bootstrap test was utilized to test the indirect relationships. Pearson correlation coefficient and path analysis through AMOS software were employed to examine the relationships among the variables.

Results: The results of this study showed the significance of all direct paths of the early maladaptive schemas with emotional divorce. Indirect pathways were also significant through marital burnout with emotional divorce ($P < 0.001$).

Conclusions: The proposed model indicated an acceptable fit level and was regarded as an important step in recognizing the effective factors in the emotional divorce of women. Moreover, it can be useful as a model to develop stress management programs and control increased emotional divorce among women.

Keywords: Early maladaptive schemas, Emotional divorce, Marital burnout, Moral intelligence

Background

Appropriate relationships in society are shaped based on healthy and intimate rapport in families. Therefore, more proper relationships in the family lead to a better family sense of coherence, and consequently, a more stable community. Divorce is regarded as one of the most important sources of damage to families and marriages [1]. According to experts' opinions, official divorce statistics do not completely show the degree of couples' failure in the marital relationship since there is a broader concept called "emotional divorce" or "silent divorce" [2]. The reason is that many marriages do not end with a formal divorce, rather life continues in its uninteresting form without love and friendship [3]. Emotional divorce can be regarded as the first step in the divorce process and refers to a deteriorating marital relationship that is replaced

by a sense of alienation. This is a state of being in which couples do not enjoy being together since there is no intimacy between them [4]. During the past few years, the growth rate of divorce in major cities has exceeded the normal rate with alarming figures. Concerning the indubitable significance of the family in every society, it is of prime importance to inspect the reason, injuries, and conditions that individuals experience after divorce [5].

One of the factors that may have an impact on emotional divorce is moral intelligence. It is a new variable in the field of science that was first introduced by Link and Kiel [6]. This intelligence includes the dimensions of responsibility, honesty, forgiveness, and compassion [6]. Moral intelligence is important in terms of how one should use universal human principles in reaching his/her aims

and values in life. It is the capacity of a proper understanding of crime, possession of strong moral beliefs, and acting upon them. Those individuals who have a higher moral intelligence do the right thing, their actions are in line with their values and beliefs, they show high performance, and they always relate their doings to their ethical principles. Therefore, this variable is one of the most potent components that play a role in couples' satisfaction with life and emotional divorce [7]. According to a study conducted by Yoo et al. [8], moral intelligence showed a significant correlation with emotional regulation and marital adjustment.

On the other hand, it appears that early maladaptive schemata in females lead to an intensification in their emotional divorce. This term was first employed by Young and referred to a set of schema that possesses a ubiquitous cognitive, emotional, and self-harming pattern. These schemata are formed at the beginning of the development and could continue during life; however, they are highly ineffective [9].

The studies on couples who had an emotional divorce relationship showed that failure in solving marital life problems was significantly associated with schemas. These schemata are defined as an individual's profound and stable beliefs about him/herself, others, and the world, which are originated from the experiences of the first years of life [10]. Schema theory relationships are designed according to elementary cognitive behaviors of personality disorders [11]. The relationship of schemata with marital satisfaction and intimacy has been investigated in numerous studies. A study showed a significant impact of negative perfectionism and early maladaptive schemata on emotional divorce [12].

Another factor that affects emotional divorce is marital burnout. Couples' burnout in terms of different aspects of marital relationships leads to marital dissatisfaction. This level of satisfaction represents higher levels of conflict and includes lack of satisfaction with marital life and disagreement with his/her spouse [13]. Marital burnout is a painful state of physical, emotional, and psychological burnout of couples and affects those who expect to have an imaginative love and marriage that give meaning to their lives [14]. Burnout is a gradual affair and rarely occurs suddenly. Accordingly, love and interest gradually disappear, and along with that, general exhaustion appears.

In its worst cases, burnout leads to the fragmentation of the marital relationship [15]. According to Asadi et al. [16], marital burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and psychological

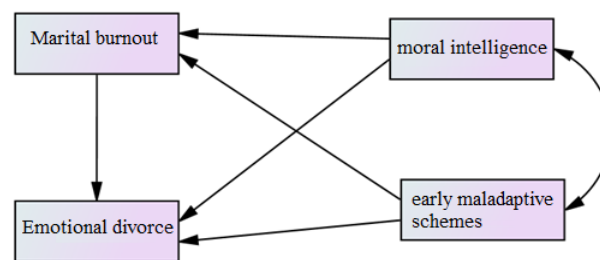


Figure 1. Proposed causal model of research

fatigue that results from a chronic disparity between expectations and reality. Previous studies have shown that the presence of conflict in marital life affects couples' relationships. According to a study conducted by Akbari et al. [17], marital dissatisfaction is a predictor of emotional divorce among married female teachers. As a social unit, it is the center of growth and development, healing and curing, and evolution of the injuries and complications; moreover, it is also the thriving and decaying base of relationships between its members [18]. Accordingly, it is of critical importance to investigate the influential factors of this system.

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed causal model of the research design.

Objectives

This study aimed to design and test a model for the investigation of the impact of moral intelligence and early maladaptive schemata on emotional divorce considering the mediating role of marital burnout in females referred to psychological centers in Ahvaz, Iran.

Materials and Methods

This descriptive-correlational study investigated the relationship between variables in the form of path analysis. The statistical population consisted of all females referring to the psychological centers in Ahvaz, Iran, during 2019. In total, 264 women were selected using a convenience sampling method. Subsequently, the participants were asked to complete the research questionnaires. The inclusion criteria were: 1) age range of 20-50 years, 2) a minimum of five years of marriage, and 3) possession of children. On the other hand, the participants who delivered incomplete information were excluded from the study.

Emotional Divorce Scale (EDS)

This 24-item scale was developed by Gottman (2008) and involved "Yes" (1) or "No" (0) responses to the items. The more "Yes" responses indicate a higher chance of an emotional divorce. Moreover, the scores within the range of 0-8, 8-16, and above 16 indicate the weak, moderate, and strong

possibilities of separation in life, respectively. After the sum of the "YES" responses, the scores of eight or higher represent that the marital life is at the risk of separation, and the individuals should pursue expert help. The reliability of this questionnaire was obtained at 83% using Cronbach's alpha. Moreover, according to the professors' opinions, the content validity of this scale was reported to be desirable [19]. In this study, Cronbach's alpha method was used to determine the reliability of this scale, which was determined at 0.86.

Moral Intelligence Questionnaire (MIQ)

A 40-item scale was employed in this study to measure moral intelligence. The mental intelligence questionnaire was developed by Lenik and Kiel in 2005 to evaluate the application of ethical and universal principles in one's ethics, goals, and attitudes through four subscales of honesty, accountability, compassion, and forgiveness. It is rated on a five-point Likert scale of 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=most of the time, and 5=all the time. Respondents, in general, obtain a score between 40 and 200, and the final score of this scale will be between 20 and 100 when divided by two. Moreover, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was estimated at 0.80. In Iran, Asl [20] standardized this questionnaire and reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 regarding its reliability. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha method was used to determine its reliability, which was estimated at 0.83 for the whole scale.

Early Maladaptive Schemes Questionnaire

This questionnaire was developed by Young (1990) consisting of 75 close-ended items scored on a six-point Likert scale of 5=totally true, 4=almost true, 3=slightly true, 2=more true than false, 1=almost false, and 0=completely false. The total score of this construct ranges from 0 to 375. This study utilized the total score of the early maladaptive schema test. The questionnaire assesses early maladaptive schemas in five domains of disconnection and rejection, impaired autonomy, impaired limits, other direction, and over-vigilance. The internal consistency values of this questionnaire were determined at 0.97 and 0.98 for females and males, respectively, using Cronbach's alpha method [21]. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was utilized to determine the reliability of the early maladaptive schema questionnaire, which was estimated at 0.85 for the whole scale.

Marital Burnout Scale (MDS)

This scale a self-rating instrument constructed by Pines in 1996 to measure the degree of marital

burnout between couples. The items include negative terms (n=16), such as fatigue, discomfort, and worthlessness, as well as positive terms (n=4), such as being happy and energetic. This instrument is rated on a seven-point Likert scale within the range from 1=never to 7=always, in which the participant chooses the frequency of occurrences of the stated terms regarding the marital relationship. It should be mentioned that the scoring of the four positive items is also reversed. Therefore, the marital burnout scores are ranged from 21 to 147, and a score of more than 60 on this scale shows greater burnout. Navidi [22] obtained a reliability coefficient of 0.86 for this questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha method on individuals (n=240), nurses (n=120), and teachers (n=120) [22]. In this study, the reliability of the whole scale was determined at 0.85 using Cronbach's alpha method. It is worth mentioning that the Pearson correlation coefficient and path analysis through AMOS software were used to examine the relationships between the variables.

Results

Table 1 tabulates the descriptive statistics (mean±SD) and research variables. The correlation matrix of the research variables is presented in Table 2, and Table 3 presents the goodness of fit indices of the primary and final models. The following table summarizes the findings related to the estimation of the path coefficients for examining the direct hypotheses.

Table 1. Mean±SD and the number of subjects regarding research variables

Variable	Mean	SD
Emotional divorce	64.82	27.65
Moral intelligence	119.01	30.22
Early maladaptive schemas	120.86	48.64
Marital burnout	135.26	45.29

As can be observed in Table 4, the first hypothesis ($\beta=-0.339$) is statistically significant at the level of $P<0.01$, and therefore, it is confirmed. However, the second hypothesis ($\beta=0.087$) is not statistically significant at the level of $P>0.05$, and it is not confirmed in this study. On the other hand, the third ($\beta=-0.470$), fourth ($\beta=0.387$), and fifth hypothesis ($\beta= 0.444$) are statistically significant at the level of $P<0.01$, and they are confirmed in this

Table 2. Pearson correlation matrix of the variables under study

Variable	1	2	3	4
Emotional divorce	1			
Moral intelligence	- 0.26**	1		
Early maladaptive schemas	0.35**	- 0.51**	1	
Marital burnout	0.47**	- 0.37**	0.40**	1

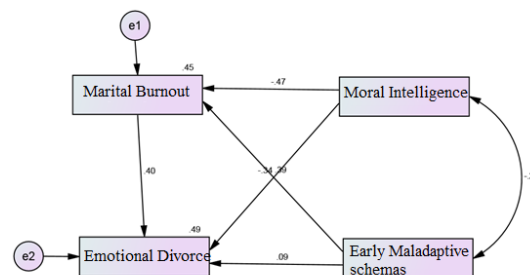
** $P\leq 0.01$

Table 3. Goodness of fit indices of the primary and final models

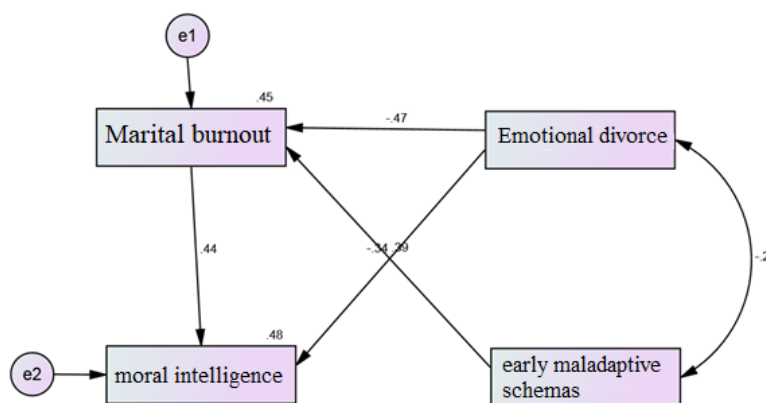
The goodness of fit indices	Primary model	Final model
χ^2	0.000	2.867
df	0	1
χ^2/df	-	2.867
p	-	0.090
IFI	1.00	0.99
TLI	-	0.96
CFI	1.00	0.99
NFI	1.00	0.99
RMSEA	0.466	0.084

study. The bootstrap method was used to determine the significance of intermediary relationships, the results of which are presented in Table 5.

Confidence levels of Table 5 represent the significance of the indirect path of moral intelligence related to emotional divorce with the mediating role of marital burnout ($\beta=-0.049$), which was statistically significant at the level of

**Figure 2.** Initial model in the standard state

$P<0.01$, and therefore, the sixth hypothesis was confirmed. Moreover, the indirect path of early maladaptive schemas related to emotional divorce with the mediating role of marital burnout was significant ($\beta=0.016$), which was statistically significant at the level of $P<0.01$, and therefore, the seventh hypothesis was confirmed in this study.

**Figure 3.** Final model in the standard model**Table 4.** Direct impact of path coefficients among the research variables in the initial and final model

Path	Initial model			Final model		
	Type of path	Standard path coefficients (β)	Sig.	Type of path	Standard path coefficients (β)	Sig.
Moral intelligence→Emotional divorce	Direct	- 0.345	0.001	Direct	- 0.339	0.001
Early maladaptive schemas → Emotional divorce	Direct	0.087	0.090	Direct	-	-
Moral intelligence→Marital burnout	Direct	- 0.470	0.001	Direct	- 0.470	0.001
Early maladaptive schemas → Marital burnout	Direct	0.387	0.001	Direct	0.387	0.001
Marital burnout →Emotional divorce	Direct	0.398	0.001	Direct	0.444	0.001

Table 5. Results of the Bootstrap Method in investigating indirect and intermediate routes

Predictor variable	Mediator variable	Criterion variable	Initial model		Final model	
			Bootstrap	Sig.	Bootstrap	Sig.
Moral intelligence	Marital burnout	Emotional divorce	- 0.044	0.001	- 0.049	0.001
Early maladaptive schemas	Marital burnout	Emotional divorce	0.015	0.001	0.015	0.001

Discussion

This study aimed to design and test a model for the investigation of the impact of moral intelligence and early maladaptive schemas on emotional divorce considering the mediating role of marital burnout in women referring to psychological centers in Ahvaz, Iran. According to the first finding in this study, there is a direct correlation between moral

intelligence and emotional divorce; accordingly, this hypothesis was confirmed in this study. This finding is in line with the results of the studies conducted by Leeker and Carlozzi [23], as well as Hembling and Andrinopoulos [24]. Conroy [25] showed a significant relationship of moral intelligence with emotional regulation and marital adjustment. It can be explained that emotional divorce

represents a deteriorating relationship between a husband and wife. This type of divorce creates growing tension between the couples over time and usually leads to their separation. Moreover, the first thing that fades away in the emotional divorce between the couples is their attraction and trust in each other [26]. Learning to be good consists of communication, feedback, socialization, and education that is ever-lasting. Moral intelligence is a concept that encourages people to perform the right affairs, thereby learning smart actions and achieving the best upright actions [27].

The second finding in this study indicated no direct and significant relationship between early maladaptive schemas and emotional divorce. Therefore, this hypothesis was not confirmed in this study and was not consistent with the results of the studies performed by Conti and Ryan [28], Fischer et al. [29], and Flink et al. [30]. They demonstrated that early maladaptive schemas of emotional deprivation, shame/defectiveness, failure, undeveloped self/enmeshment, subjugation, self-sacrifice, emotional inhibition, and emotional repression component in emotion regulation had a relationship with an emotional divorce.

The third finding signified a direct relationship between moral intelligence and marital burnout; accordingly, this hypothesis was confirmed in this study. Moral intelligence has a significant negative relationship with marital burnout. It can be explained from a psychoanalytic perspective that marital burnout is an experienced state of physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion that results from a severe discrepancy between expectations and reality [31]. Marital burnout emerges when the couples understand that regardless of all of their efforts, their relationship does not and will not make a difference in their life [32]. Moral intelligence means attention to human life and nature, economic and social welfare, free and honest communication, and citizenship rights [33].

A direct relationship was observed between early maladaptive schemas and marital burnout based on the fourth finding of this study, and therefore, this hypothesis was confirmed. Accordingly, marital burnout will decline with an increase in early maladaptive schemas in couples. This finding is consistent with the results of a study carried out by Olugbenga [34]. It can be argued that marital dissatisfaction is one of the important concepts concerning couples' relationships. At first, everybody begins his/her marital life, in its natural form, with love and interest, and his/her initial assumptions are used to strengthen this relationship; however, after some time, the

husband or wife or both of them may become doubtful about the depth and form of their relationship. Therefore, since they do not observe required cooperation between their expectations of life and existing realities in their marital life, they become frustrated and disaffected [35].

According to the fifth result obtained in this study, a direct relationship was reported between marital burnout and emotional divorce, and therefore, this hypothesis was also confirmed. That is to say, when marital burnout increases, it can be expected that emotional divorce will increase. This finding is in line with the results of a study conducted by Hasankhani et al. [36]. Additionally, the first and the most important things that disappear in an emotional divorce between a husband and wife are their attraction and trust in each other. When one of the couples is overwhelmed with unmet needs in their shared marital life, a feeling of gloom and hopelessness ensues [37], and after a short time, marital burnout leads to an emotional divorce between them. One of the factors leading to emotional divorce is marital burnout, which is a painful state of physical, emotional, and mental fatigue that has an impact on those who expect to receive meaning in their life from their dream love and marriage [37].

Conclusions

The proposed model indicated an acceptable fit level and was regarded as an important step in recognizing the effective factors in the emotional divorce of women. Moreover, it can be useful as a model to develop stress management programs and control increased emotional divorce among women.

Compliance with ethical guidelines

Regarding the ethical considerations, the participants were informed about the research objectives and procedures. Moreover, informed consent was obtained from the subjects, and they were all assured of the confidentiality of their information. Furthermore, the subjects were allowed to withdraw from the study if desired. They were also informed that they would be provided with the results of the study.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all participants who greatly cooperated in conducting this study.

Authors' contributions

Conceptualization [Mrayam Samalpoor Baba Ahmadi]; Methodology [Alireza Heidari]; Investigation [Parviz Asgari]; Writing-Original Draft [Behnam Makvandi]; Writing-Review and Editing, Author names [all authors]; Funding Acquisition, [all authors]; Resources, [all authors]; Supervision, [Alireza Heidari].

Funding/Support

This study received no specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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