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Original Article

Correlation of Negative Meta-emotion and Divorce Propensity in Women: Mediating Role of Differentiation of Self

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Abstract

Background and Objective: Emotional regulation is a cornerstone of marital well-being, with meta-emotions—an individual's feelings about their own emotions—playing a significant role in shaping interpersonal dynamics. This investigation was therefore designed to explore the intricate correlation between negative meta-emotion and divorce propensity among women, with a particular focus on ascertaining the mediating influence of differentiation of self in this relationship.

Materials and Methods: Adopting a correlational research design, the study collected data in 2024 from a convenience sample comprising 350 married women residing in Karaj, Iran. Participants completed a set of standardized self-report instruments, which included the Negative Meta-Emotion Scale, the Differentiation of Self Inventory, and the Divorce Propensity Questionnaire. For statistical analysis, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to thoroughly assess both the direct and indirect relationships among the variables under investigation.

Results: The analytical findings indicated significant positive direct effects of negative meta-emotion on divorce propensity, as well as a significant negative direct effect of negative meta-emotion on differentiation of self (P<0.001). Furthermore, differentiation of self was found to be a significant negative predictor of divorce propensity (P<0.001). Crucially, the analysis revealed that differentiation of self emerged as a robust and statistically significant mediator in the relationship between negative meta-emotion and the propensity for divorce.

Conclusion: These findings collectively suggest that negative meta-emotions not only directly contribute to divorce propensity but also do so by leading to a diminished capacity for differentiation of self, which, in turn, increases a woman's susceptibility to marital dissolution.

Keywords: Differentiation of self, Divorce, Meta-emotion, Women

Background

The foundation of individual well-being and societal health largely rests upon the stability and quality of marital relationships. Despite this, contemporary societies frequently encounter profound challenges to the longevity of marriages, imposing significant personal and familial burdens on individuals [1]. This impact is particularly pronounced for women, who often navigate distinctive societal expectations and relational pressures [2]. The dissolution of a marriage, or even the protracted experience of marital discord, can precipitate severe psychological, social, and economic repercussions for women, profoundly affecting their overall life satisfaction and mental health [3]. Consequently, there is a compelling need to thoroughly investigate the nuanced psychological factors that contribute to a woman's susceptibility to marital breakdown, thereby fostering a more comprehensive understanding of underlying vulnerabilities and identifying potential avenues for intervention aimed at bolstering relational resilience.

A pivotal concept for comprehending the intricacies of marital dynamics is negative meta-emotion. Meta-emotions denote an individual's feelings about their own emotions; for instance, experiencing shame regarding sadness or annoyance about happiness [4]. Specifically, negative meta-emotions involve unfavorable judgments of one's emotional experiences, which can manifest as worry about being anxious or disapproval of feeling anger [5]. These second-order emotional responses can significantly hinder effective emotional regulation, leading to internal psychological conflict and a diminished capacity for adaptive coping with life's inevitable stressors [6]. When individuals consistently hold adverse feelings about their emotional states, they are less inclined to process emotions constructively, potentially resulting in emotional suppression or dysregulation [7]. Within interpersonal contexts, especially intimate relationships, this dynamic can undermine authentic communication and engender a pervasive sense of relational strain, ultimately affecting overall marital satisfaction and stability [8].

A crucial psychological construct profoundly relevant to fostering relational strength is differentiation of self [9]. Rooted in Bowen Family Systems Theory, differentiation of self signifies an individual's inherent capacity to maintain a distinct sense of self and personal autonomy, even when deeply involved in emotionally intense relationships [10]. This involves the ability to clearly distinguish between one's cognitive and emotional processes, facilitating thoughtful responses rather than impulsive emotional reactivity. A highly differentiated individual can uphold their convictions and identity without succumbing to emotional fusion with others or resorting to emotional cutoff [11]. Such individuals are typically more adept at managing stress, engaging in constructive conflict resolution, and cultivating genuinely interdependent rather than enmeshed or avoidant relational patterns. Extensive research consistently affirms that a higher level of differentiation of self serves as a vital psychological asset, contributing substantially to greater emotional stability and resilience within marital partnerships [12, 13].

The complex interplay among negative meta-emotion, differentiation of self, and marital outcomes presents a compelling frontier for scholarly inquiry. While negative meta-emotions have the potential to undermine adaptive emotional processing and generate both internal and relational distress, a robust sense of differentiation of self may act as a crucial buffer. The present study is designed to address a notable gap in the existing literature by thoroughly exploring the specific mediating role of differentiation of self in the correlation between negative meta-emotion and women's divorce proneness. Gaining a deeper understanding of this psychological pathway promises significant theoretical contributions to family psychology by elucidating the intricate mechanisms through which internal emotional processes contribute to marital vulnerability. Furthermore, the anticipated findings are poised to offer substantial practical implications for marital counseling and preventive interventions, particularly within cultural contexts, such as Iran, where societal nuances may distinctly shape these psychological experiences.

Objectives

The overarching objective of this research is, therefore, to ascertain whether differentiation of self mediates the relationship between negative meta-emotion and the propensity for divorce in married women.

Materials and Methods
Design

This investigation employed a quantitative correlational design to explore the proposed relationships. The study cohort consisted of all married women residing in Karaj, Iran, during 2024. From this larger group, a non-probability convenience sampling technique was utilized to recruit participants through community centers and social networks in Karaj. The final sample consisted of 350 married women. The inclusion criteria mandated that participants must be legally married, reside in Karaj, be at least 18 years of age, and provide fully informed consent for their participation. Exclusion criteria were defined as a diagnosed severe psychological disorder or active engagement in marital therapy, ensuring the generalizability of findings to a non-clinical population. Ethical approval was secured from the relevant institutional review board, and stringent measures were implemented throughout the study to safeguard participant anonymity and data confidentiality.

Procedure
Following the selection and random assignment of participants, both the experimental and control groups underwent a pre-test assessment using the Anxiety Sensitivity Index (ASI) and the Self-Differentiation Questionnaire (SDQ). The experimental group then commenced the transdiagnostic treatment program, which consisted of 10 ninety-minute sessions conducted weekly. During this period, the control group received no specific intervention, aside from routine care as needed. Immediately following the completion of the 10 sessions, both groups completed the post-test assessments. A two-month follow-up assessment was also conducted for both groups to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of the transdiagnostic treatment. Data collection was meticulously managed by trained research assistants to ensure consistency and minimize bias.

Measure
Meta-Emotion Scale (MES)
The MES, developed by Mitmansgruber et al. [14], originally comprises 28 items. For this study, a specific subset of 16 items pertaining to negative meta-emotion was administered. This segment evaluates an individual's negative feelings about their own emotions (e.g., feeling angry about feeling sad). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting greater negative meta-emotion. In previous research, the MES demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85 [15]. In the current study, this subscale exhibited strong reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87).

Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI)

The DSI, designed by Skowron and Friedlander [16], is a 45-item self-report questionnaire that assesses an individual's ability to maintain personal autonomy and emotional distinctiveness within intimate relationships. Grounded in Bowenian theory, it encompasses four dimensions: Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Fusion with Others, and Emotional Cutoff. Responses typically use a 6-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true of me, 6 = very true of me), with total scores ranging from 45 to 270. Elevated scores signify a more developed differentiation of self, correlating with improved emotional management and relational independence. Prior research indicates robust psychometric properties, with alpha coefficients often exceeding 0.80 [17]; the internal consistency in the present study was also acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = 0.82).

Divorce Propensity Questionnaire (DPQ)

The DPQ, a 14-item tool developed by Rusbult et al. [18], is a self-report measure that evaluates an individual's subjective readiness or psychological predisposition towards marital separation. This instrument probes diverse aspects of intentions and sentiments concerning a marriage's durability. Items are typically rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never, 7 = constantly), with total scores ranging from 14 to 98. A greater aggregate score denotes an increased susceptibility to divorce. Reliability studies consistently report good internal consistency for the DPQ, with alpha coefficients typically exceeding 0.75 [19]. In this investigation, the DPQ exhibited satisfactory reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the SPSS (version 27) software for descriptive statistics and correlation analyses. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was performed using SmartPLS 3 software to thoroughly examine the proposed direct and mediating relationships among the study variables. Model fit indices, including the Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), were utilized to evaluate the overall fit of the model to the observed data.

Results

A comprehensive analysis of the demographic profile of the 350 married women participants from Karaj, Iran, revealed a diverse sample composition. Their ages spanned from 25 to 55 years, with an average age of approximately 34.23 years (SD=7.84). Regarding educational attainment, a substantial majority (81%) reported possessing university qualifications, ranging from Bachelor's to postgraduate degrees, while the remaining 19% held high school diplomas. In terms of employment status, the cohort displayed a nearly balanced distribution, with roughly 40% identifying as homemakers and 60% as employed professionals.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the study's primary variables. The mean scores for negative meta-emotion, differentiation of self, and divorce propensity indicate their average tendencies within the sample, consistent with their respective scale ranges. The skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were confined within acceptable limits (between -2 and +2), signifying an approximately normal distribution, which confirms their suitability for advanced parametric statistical analyses, including SEM. Crucially, the correlational analysis unearthed statistically significant relationships consistent with the study's underlying hypotheses. Specifically, negative meta-emotion demonstrated a notable positive correlation with divorce propensity (r=0.42, P<0.001), suggesting that higher levels of negative meta-emotion are associated with an increased predisposition towards divorce. Moreover, differentiation of self exhibited significant negative correlations with both negative meta-emotion (r=-0.35, P<0.001) and divorce propensity (r=-0.55, P<0.001), indicating that greater differentiation of self is associated with less negative meta-emotion and a reduced inclination towards divorce.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of research variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
Negative Meta-emotion	53.20	11.48	0.25	-0.12	1.00		
Differentiation of self	180.61	25.36	-0.15	-0.10	-0.35**	1.00	
Divorce Propensity	56.83	12.77	0.30	0.15	.042**	-0.55**	1.00

Table 2 presents the goodness-of-fit indices for the developed structural model, providing empirical evidence of its alignment with the collected data. While the Chi-square value was statistically significant, a common occurrence in larger sample sizes, other critical fit indices collectively pointed to a satisfactory model fit. The Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df=1.78) remained well below the

accepted threshold of 3.0, suggesting a parsimonious and well-specified model. Furthermore, the CFI, NFI, and TLI all surpassed the recommended 0.90 criterion, with values 0.95, 0.92, and 0.94, respectively, confirming a strong model fit. Additionally, both the RMSEA (0.046) and SRMR (0.052) were comfortably below the 0.08 benchmark, further affirming the model's robust fit to the data.

Table 2. Goodness-of-fit indices for the research model

Fit index	Observed value	Acceptable value
x^2	115.60	-
df	65	-
x^2/df	1.78	< 3.0
CFI	0.95	> 0.90
NFI	0.92	> 0.90
TLI	0.94	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.046	< 0.08
SRMR	0.052	< 0.08

Table 3 details the direct and indirect pathways within the final structural model. All hypothesized direct effects were found to be statistically significant (P<0.001). Specifically, negative meta-emotion displayed a significant positive direct effect on divorce propensity (β=0.25), indicating that elevated levels of negative meta-emotion directly contribute to an increased psychological inclination towards marital dissolution. Negative meta-emotion also demonstrated a significant negative direct effect on differentiation of self (β=-0.32), suggesting that individuals experiencing more negative meta-emotion tend to exhibit lower levels of differentiation of self. Furthermore, differentiation of self exerted a significant negative direct effect on divorce propensity (β=-0.48), underscoring its pivotal role as a protective factor. Crucially, the indirect effect of negative meta-emotion on divorce propensity via differentiation of self was also statistically significant (β=0.15, P<0.001). This finding confirms that the differentiation of self partially mediates the relationship, implying that negative meta-emotions influence divorce propensity not only through a direct pathway but also by adversely impacting an individual's capacity for differentiation of self. The final structural equation model is depicted in Figure 1.

Table 3. Direct and mediating relationships in the research model

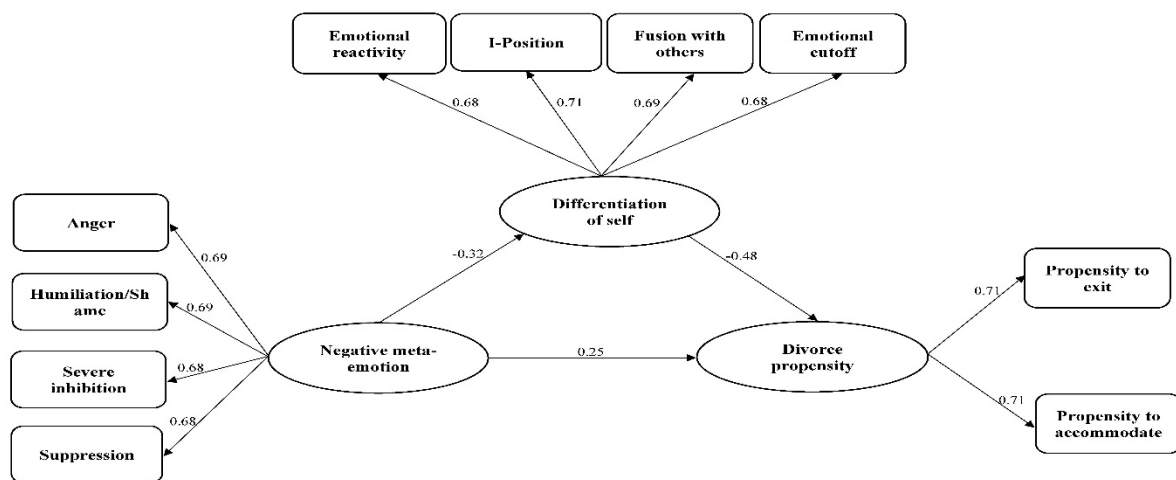| Path	β	SE	t	P
Negative Meta-emotion → Divorce Propensity	0.25	0.03	8.33	0.001
Negative Meta-emotion → Differentiation of Self	-0.32	0.04	-8.00	0.001
Differentiation of self → Divorce Propensity	-0.48	0.03	-16.00	0.001
Negative meta-emotion → Differentiation of Self → Divorce Propensity	0.15	0.02	7.50	0.001

Figure 1. Final structural equation model

Discussion

The present study comprehensively investigated the intricate relationships between negative meta-emotion, differentiation of self, and divorce proneness among married women, focusing on the crucial mediating role of differentiation of self. The findings robustly support the hypothesized structural model, offering significant empirical contributions to the understanding of psychological mechanisms that influence marital stability. These results extend the existing literature by illuminating how maladaptive emotional experiences can indirectly heighten an individual's vulnerability to marital dissolution through their impact on the differentiation of self. The coherence of these findings with established theoretical frameworks and prior research underscores their importance in delineating the complex internal dynamics that shape marital trajectories.

The first significant finding reveals a direct positive association between negative meta-emotion and divorce proneness. This result aligns with psychological perspectives suggesting that an individual's feelings about their own emotions profoundly influence their ability to navigate relational challenges [20, 21]. When women experience negative judgments about their emotions, such as shame or anger regarding their sadness or anxiety, it can hinder adaptive emotional processing [22]. This internal emotional struggle often manifests as pervasive marital dissatisfaction and an increased psychological inclination towards divorce, as individuals find it challenging to engage in constructive emotional expression and coping within their partnership, ultimately eroding relational satisfaction [23].

Furthermore, the study established a significant negative direct association between negative meta-emotion and differentiation of self. This issue implies that greater negative meta-emotion is associated with lower levels of differentiation of self. The persistent judgment of one's emotions can undermine the clarity of one's emotional and intellectual self, a foundational aspect of differentiation [24, 25]. This internal conflict impedes the capacity to maintain a distinct "I-position" and effectively regulate emotional reactivity, thereby inhibiting the development and expression of an autonomous self [26]. Consequently, individuals become more prone to emotional fusion or cutoff, diminishing their ability to function as separate yet connected entities within intimate relationships.

Conversely, a significant negative direct effect was observed between differentiation of self and divorce proneness, highlighting its protective influence on marital stability. Highly differentiated individuals possess a greater capacity to manage emotional intensity, communicate their needs authentically without reactivity, and engage in constructive conflict resolution [27]. Their ability to maintain personal autonomy within the relationship minimizes the likelihood of emotional enmeshment or distance, fostering resilient marital bonds. This psychological fortitude allows them to navigate inherent marital complexities effectively, thereby reducing their subjective readiness for marital dissolution and enhancing overall relational well-being [28].

The most notable finding of this investigation is the significant mediating role of differentiation of self in the relationship between negative meta-emotion and divorce proneness. This issue indicates that negative meta-emotion contributes to divorce proneness not only through a direct pathway but also indirectly by impairing an individual's differentiation of self. Specifically, negative judgments about one's emotions undermine the development of a differentiated self, and this reduced differentiation subsequently predisposes individuals to greater marital vulnerability [27]. This mediation elucidates a critical psychological pathway, revealing how an individual's internal emotional landscape and their capacity for self-clarity profoundly shape their marital stability and potential for dissolution.

These findings carry important practical implications for marital counseling and intervention programs designed for women. Given the profound impact of negative meta-emotion and differentiation of self, therapeutic approaches should concurrently target both. Interventions could focus on enhancing emotional literacy, challenging maladaptive beliefs about emotions, and strengthening individual autonomy within relationships. Strategies aimed at fostering a more differentiated self—such as promoting clear self-definition and reducing emotional reactivity—can serve as crucial preventative measures against marital distress. Acknowledging the cultural nuances in contexts like Iran is also vital, as they may influence emotional expression and the development of differentiation.

While the cross-sectional design offers valuable correlational insights into the associations among negative meta-emotion, differentiation of self, and divorce propensity, it limits the ability to infer causal directions, as temporal precedence cannot be established. Longitudinal studies would be essential to track changes over time and clarify whether negative meta-emotions precede reductions in differentiation of self or vice versa. Additionally, reliance on self-report measures may introduce

biases, such as social desirability, especially in a culturally conservative setting like Iran, where disclosures about negative emotions or marital issues could be influenced by stigma. Incorporating objective measures, such as partner reports or behavioral observations, could provide a more balanced assessment. Finally, the convenience sampling from a single urban area (Karaj) may limit generalizability to rural populations, men, or women from diverse socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds in Iran or internationally. Future research should prioritize probability sampling and include comparative groups to enhance external validity and explore potential moderators, such as cultural factors.

Conclusion

According to the comprehensive findings of this study, it can be concluded that negative meta-emotion significantly predicts divorce proneness among married women. Crucially, the research empirically confirms that differentiation of self serves as a vital psychological mediator in this relationship. Elevated negative meta-emotions are associated with a diminished capacity for differentiation of self, which subsequently increases a woman's susceptibility to marital dissolution. This mediation pathway reveals that judging one's own emotions negatively can undermine the fundamental clarity and autonomy of the self, thereby weakening the foundations necessary for resilient intimate partnerships. These insights underscore the profound importance of cultivating adaptive emotional regulation and strengthening differentiation of self in clinical and preventative interventions. Such efforts can empower women to navigate relational complexities with greater psychological fortitude, ultimately fostering more stable and fulfilling marital relationships.

Ethical Considerations

The present study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board under the code IR.IAU.K.REC.1404.066.

Authors' Contributions

Each author participated in drafting and reviewing the manuscript and assumes responsibility for its contents.

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