



# The mediating role of attachment styles in the relationship between marital intimacy and self-differentiation in couples

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## Original research article

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### Abstract

**Aim:** This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of attachment styles in the relationship between marital intimacy and couples' self-differentiation. **Method:** This research is descriptive-correlation type. The statistical population of the present study included all couples working in private offices in the 7th district of Tehran in 2022. Among these people, 100 couples (200 people) were selected by the available sampling method. In order to collect data, Collins' (1996) Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire, Thompson and Walker's (1995) Marital Intimacy Questionnaire and Skowron and Friedlander's (1995) Self-Differentiation Inventory were used. Pearson's correlation coefficient and regression analysis were used for the statistical analysis of the data. **Results:** The findings showed a direct relationship between marital intimacy and couples' differentiation. Also, the results showed that attachment style moderates the relationship between marital intimacy and couples' differentiation. **Conclusion:** Based on the findings, a secure attachment style can strengthen the relationship between marital intimacy and couples' self-differentiation. Also, an insecure attachment style can weaken the relationship between marital intimacy and couples' self-differentiation.

**Keywords:** attachment style; marital intimacy; self-differentiation; couples.

## Introduction

Family is the most important institution of human society, which is the most fundamental and the first institution of society, and the first step to establish this social institution is marriage. Marriage is considered an important issue in all societies, and having a successful married life is considered a major and ideal goal for most people. In other words, the family is known as the most important unit of societies, and marriage is the most basic human relationship because it forms the primary structure of creating family relationships and the growth of subsequent generations (Navabinejad et al., 2023). Marriage is the most sacred and complex relationship between two people of two opposite sexes, which has wide and deep dimensions and multiple goals. Marriage is a covenant and a sacred bond between two opposite sexes based on reliable sexual, emotional and spiritual relationships and based on the conclusion of a Shariah, social and legal contract that creates obligations for the couple; Therefore, marriage is a delicate and complex decision that must be considered before any action (Darbani & Parsakia, 2022).

One of the most important variables in marital relationships is marital intimacy. Intimacy is the feeling of closeness, similarity, and romantic or emotional relationships with another person, and one of its essentials is deep knowledge and understanding of the other, as well as the expression of thoughts and feelings that indicate their similarity to each other (Labrecque & Whisman, 2019). According to the definition of Bagarozzi (2001), marital intimacy is a process in which couples share their information, thoughts, and feelings with each other and receive a response indicating a feeling of being understood and accepted (Bagarozzi, 2001).

One of the important variables that have been shown to be important in marital relationships in various types of research is attachment styles. The theorists of attachment theory believe that people's expectations when entering a romantic relationship, often based on previous intimate relationships with primary caregivers, affect their attachment style and the way they communicate with their spouse and their married life (Adl Parvar et al., 2022). Three attachment styles, secure, avoidant and ambivalent, have been described in childhood and have been confirmed in adulthood. According to Bowlby (1977), insecurity in attachment leads to personality disorders and also leads to debilitating anxiety in close relationships and inability to regulate strong negative emotions (Shirazi et al., 2023). Attachment is a deep emotional connection that a person establishes with special people in his life so that when he interacts with them, he feels cheerful, and when he is stressed, he feels relaxed because he is with them (Eslami et al., 2022). The couple's attachment style is one of the important factors in the strength of the marital relationship because it provides a framework that helps to better and accurately understand this relationship and ways to deal with couple conflicts (Bosmans et al., 2020). Romantic relationships can be conceptualized as an attachment process. Attachment provides a framework that helps to better and accurately understand marital relations and ways to deal with marital conflict. Attachment is an important concept in the study and understanding of couple communication practices (Kent et al., 2018). Studies show that, like childhood attachment, adult love and emotional attachment also affect relationship satisfaction and do so with security or insecurity (Eslami et al., 2022). In other

words, attachment in adulthood works in the same way as the childhood system (Kimmes et al., 2016).

Differentiation is the basis of Bowen's theory, which defines a person's ability to differentiate mental and emotional processes, intimacy, and independence from others (Magee & Biesanz, 2019). The concept of differentiation is often equated with independence or individuality. Although differentiation is similar in some ways to individuality or separation, this concept does not exactly mean separation. Differentiation is the ability to reduce people's emotional response so that a person can express his thoughts and opinions regardless of social pressures (Buser et al., 2019). In the family system, when couples' differentiation is high, couples are more likely to adapt properly to conflicts, have less anxiety and emotional reactions, and ultimately less fusion (Jakimowicz et al., 2021).

Therefore, according to the mentioned materials, the current research aims to answer the following question:

Does attachment style play a mediating role in the relationship between marital intimacy and couples' differentiation?

## Method

This research is descriptive-correlation type. The statistical population of the present study included all couples working in private offices in the 7th district of Tehran in 2022. Among these people, 100 couples (200 people) were selected by the available sampling method. In order to collect data, Collins' (1996) Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire, Thompson and Walker's (1995) Marital Intimacy Questionnaire and Skowron and Friedlander's (1995) Self-Differentiation Inventory were used. Pearson's correlation coefficient and regression analysis were used for the statistical analysis of the data.

## Results

Considering the 5% error, it can be concluded that the correlation between marital intimacy and differentiation ( $r = 0.203$  and  $p < 0.05$ ), secure attachment style and differentiation ( $r = 0.319$  and  $p < 0.01$ ), secure attachment style and marital intimacy ( $r = 0.320$  and  $p < 0.01$ ), anxious attachment style and differentiation ( $r = 0.350$  and  $p < 0.01$ )  $r$  and  $p > 0.01$ ), anxious attachment style and marital intimacy ( $r = -0.334$  and  $p > 0.01$ ), avoidant attachment style and differentiation ( $r = -0.328$  and  $p > 0.01$ ) and avoidant attachment style and marital intimacy ( $r = -0.328$  and  $p > 0.01$ ) are significant; So that the relationship between differentiation with marital intimacy and the relationship between secure attachment style with marital intimacy and direct differentiation and the relationship between anxious and avoidant attachment styles with differentiation and marital intimacy are inverse.

If the index of chi square ratio to the degree of freedom is less than 3 and the GFI, AGFI, CFI, NFI indices are higher than 0.9 and the RMSEA index is less than 0.1, it can be said that the model has a very favorable fit. According to the findings, it can be concluded that this model has a good fit.

The findings indicate that the direct effect of differentiation on marital intimacy is significant ( $\beta = 0.24$  and  $t = 2.90$ ). Also, the direct effect of differentiation on secure attachment style ( $\beta = 0.20$  and  $t = 2.86$ ) is significant. Also, the direct effect of differentiation on avoidant attachment style ( $\beta = -0.25$  and  $t = 2.93$ ) is significant. Also, the direct effect of secure ( $\beta = 0.30$  and  $t = 3.17$ ), anxious ( $\beta = -$

0.31 and  $t = 3.22$ ) and avoidant ( $\beta = -0.38$  and  $t = 3.51$ ) attachment style is significant.

### Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of investigating the mediating role of attachment style in the relationship between marital intimacy and couples' differentiation. The results obtained from the statistical analysis of the findings showed that attachment styles can strengthen the relationship between differentiation and marital intimacy by acting as a mediator.

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