

Research Paper



Examining the Mediating Role of Self-compassion Between Communication Skills and Emotional Expression With the Empathy of Divorce Applicants

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Given the prevalence of divorce and the growing trend of marital problems, it is necessary to investigate the factors that affect the interpersonal relationships of couples. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the mediating role of self-compassion in explaining the causal relationship between communication skills and emotional expression with empathy in divorce applicants.

Methods: This was a descriptive-correlational study with path analysis. The statistical population consisted of all men and women who applied for a divorce (age range: 30-50) and were referred to the counseling centers of the Judiciary in Tehran City, Iran, during 2020-2021. The sample size included 396 cases and it was selected via the convenience sampling method. To collect the data, standard questionnaires of self-compassion, communication skills, couple empathy, and emotional expression were used. The data were analyzed using the SPSS software, v. 21, and AMOS v. 24.

Results: The results showed the fitness of the model (comparative fit index=0.953, goodness of fit index=0.954, adjusted goodness of fit index=0.895 and root mean square error of approximation=0.082). The model explained about 34% of the variance of a couple's empathy in divorce applicants.

Conclusion: Based on these findings, the relationship between a couple's empathy with communication skills and emotional expression is not a direct relationship and various factors, such as marital empathy can strengthen or weaken this relationship.

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Highlights

- A significant relationship was observed between emotional expression and communication skills.
- Emotional expression and empathy of couples showed a significant relationship.
- Self-compassion moderates the relationship between communication skills and the emotional expression of divorce applicants.
- Self-compassion moderates the relationship between communication skills and empathy in divorce applicants.

Plain Language Summary

The number of divorce applicants is increasing social problems. The health of society depends on the health of families. Divorce is the main cause of family breakup and it decreases the mental health of family members. This study investigates the importance of mediating variables in interpersonal marital relationships. According to the findings, a new perspective is given in terms of relationships between emotional expression and communication skills with empathy. These findings provide basic information for intervention design to teach communication skills based on empathy and improve marital life.

1. Introduction

Divorce is an increasing social phenomenon and can lead to various personal and psychological consequences. (Nazari et al., 2015). The number of divorces in the first 5 years of marriage has increased from 9982 in the spring of 2019 to 13 691 cases in the summer of 2020 (Zhiani et al., 2021).

Divorce is not a simple separation of two people who have lived together. It leads to serious personal and social consequences, especially if the couple has children. A significant number of women experience economic, financial, and cultural problems after divorce (Asgari et al., 2019). The social stigma of divorce in the family and work environment is one of the issues that bother people. Most people are excluded from family relationships after divorce and their social support diminishes (Hoy, 2018). In addition, failure in a marital relationship leads to severe negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, and addiction, and even increases the risk of suicide (Auersperg et al., 2019). Children of divorced couples experience numerous negative emotions, such as loneliness, blame, mental health problems, delinquency, academic failure, and decreased self-esteem (Demir-Dagdas et al., 2018).

When there is no empathy and sympathy between the couple, intimacy disappears gradually (Abdi et al., 2013). One of the conditions of a healthy marital life is the existence of empathy between couples. People

with high empathy experience more positive emotions and enjoy constructive interactions with others (Jomepour & Mahmoudipour, 2019; Mortelmans, 2020).

Marital empathy is known as the skills of couples to understand each other's feelings, respond to emotions and feelings of each other, and enjoy time with each other (Levesque et al., 2014). Empathy improves the quality of marital relationships through empathetic communication (Jomepour & Mahmoudipour, 2019). The way of expressing emotions and empathy is related to marital conflicts (Pietrzak et al., 2016). Emotional expression difficulties are potentially related to weaker marital empathy (Franco et al., 2020). Empathy expression in some studies is considered a communication skill and communication skills play a vital role in creating and maintaining relationships (Nabiei et al., 2020). Weak communication skills decrease the chance of interactions between family members (Hesse et al., 2017). Effective communication skills enhance marital adjustment (Haris & Kumar, 2018). Evidence shows the relationship between emotional expression and communication skills (Nguyen, et al., 2019). Emotional expression and communication skills are associated with compassion (Hajihassani & Sim, 2019; Zakeri et al., 2020).

Self-compassion is known as a protective factor that has a close relationship with positive emotions, i.e. social bonds and life satisfaction (Neff, 2003). To break the cycle of self-absorption, reduce the feeling of loneliness, and enhance the sense of self-worth, emotional

expression should accompany self-compassion (Neff et al., 2007). Empirical findings show that people with higher self-compassion are more likely to engage in social interactions (Bernard et al., 2011). Compassion for others is strongly associated with self-compassion (Noorbala, 2020). Previous studies have examined the effects of communication skills on emotional expression (Razmjouyi et al., 2017) and empathy skills (Botha et al., 2009). Zare & Etemadifard (2020) reported a relationship between emotional expression and communication skills with marital burn-out of divorce applicants. In a study conducted by Akbarzadeh et al. (2016), divorce applicants showed weaker communication skills, mental well-being, and emotional expression. Abdi et al. (2013) reported lower marital empathy in divorce applicants when compared to the control group. In a study by Papp et al. (2020), findings revealed a reverse relationship between marital empathy and marital conflict.

There was no study conducted in the form of a structural equation model to examine the pathways affecting empathy through emotional expression and compassion. In this study, the effects of communication skills, emotional expression, and compassion on couples' empathy of divorce applicants in Iranian culture are investigated. This study mainly examines whether couples' empathy relationship between communication skills and emotional expression is mediated by compassion.

2. Participants and Methods

This was a descriptive-correlational study with path analysis. The study participants consisted of couples in the age range of 30 to 50 years who applied for a divorce and were referred to counseling centers in Tehran City, Iran, from 2020-2021.

This study received the following Ethics code: IR.IAU.TMU.REC.1399.088. To refer to the court, a letter with the number 127299/805 was issued from the Islamic Azad University of Tehran. The questionnaires were approved by referring to the Judicial Training and the Science And Research Branch, Islamic Azad University Province. The sample size was determined with 396 cases (Kline, 2015) and the participants were selected via the convenience sampling method. The inclusion criteria were willingness to cooperate and lack of traumatic experience in the last 6 months. The exclusion criteria were chronic physical illness, using medication for psychological problems, and addiction.

Study instruments

Couples empathy scale

Developed by Jolliffe and Farrington (2004), the couples empathy scale includes 20 items with 2 subscales, namely emotional and cognitive empathy. This questionnaire is scored based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. The reliability of the questionnaire was obtained via the Cronbach α method. The reliability α coefficient of emotional and cognitive empathy were 0.84 and 0.71, respectively. The correlation of this scale with the Batson empathy scale is obtained at $r=0.68$ (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004). In addition, the validity of this questionnaire is obtained via the Cronbach α coefficient method and is reported to be 0.67 and 0.76 for the total score and the subscales.

Emotional expression questionnaire

The emotional expression questionnaire was developed by King and Emmons (1990) and includes 16 items and 3 subscales, namely positive emotional expression, love expression, and negative emotional expression. The questionnaire is scored based on the Likert spectrum and its scores range from 1 (completely true) to 5 (completely opposite). The Cronbach α of 0.70 was obtained by King and Emmons (1990). There was significant convergence between this questionnaire and the multidimensional personality questionnaire and the positive emotion scale, according to the obtained validity. The Cronbach α obtained by Hassani and Bahmani Yazdi ranged from 0.74 to 0.82 (Hassani & Bahmani Yazdi, 2015). In this study, for the total score and the subscales, the validity of 0.68 to 0.72 was obtained via the Cronbach α coefficient method.

Self-compassion questionnaire

The self-compassion questionnaire was developed by Neff (2003) and includes 26 items with 3 components, namely self-kindness, human sharing, and mindfulness. This questionnaire is scored based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The self-compassion questionnaire was standardized in Iran by Khosravi et al. (2013). The 3-factor structure of this tool was confirmed by the exploratory factor analysis method. Meanwhile, via the Cronbach α method, the validity of the whole scale was obtained at 0.86; in addition, the α coefficient for the subscales ranged from 0.76 to 0.84 (Khosravi et al., 2013). The validity of the questionnaire for the total score and the subscales was obtained at 0.69 and 0.78, respectively, via the Cronbach α coefficient method.

Table 1. Fitness indices

Indices	Initial Model	Edited Model	Cut-point
χ^2	58.26	30.62	-
df	13	12	-
df ² / χ	4.48	2.55	>5
GFI	0.961	0.979	<0.90
AGFI	0.195	0.950	<0.850
CFI	0.940	0.975	<0.90
RMSEA	0.094	0.063	>0.08

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GFI: goodness of fit; AGFI: adjusted goodness of fit; CFI: comparative fit index; RMSEA: root mean square error of approximation.

Communication skills questionnaire

The communication skills questionnaire was developed by Queen Dam (2001) and includes 34 terms. This questionnaire includes 5 subscales: the ability to receive and send messages, affect control, listening skills, insight into the communication process, and the components of assertiveness. Each item is scored based on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). In a study by Jaber et al. (2016), Cronbach α was obtained at 0.58 and 0.83 for the total score and the subscales, respectively (Jaber et al., 2016). In this study, we obtained the validity of the questionnaire at 0.67 for the total score and 0.78 for the subscales via the Cronbach α coefficient method.

Data analysis

The data were entered into the SPSS software, v. 21. Descriptive statistics (Mean \pm SD, percentage, and frequency) and inferential statistics (the Pearson correlation method) were utilized. In addition, we employed the AMOS v. 24 software for structural equations to determine the significance of the estimated path coefficient and fitness of the model.

3. Results

Study participants

In this study, the participants were 128 males and 268 females with the Mean \pm SD age and marriage duration of 37.28 \pm 6.18 and 5.57 \pm 3.65, respectively. The components of communication skills and emotional expression were positively correlated with couples' empathy at a significance level of 0.01. The negative

emotional expression was negatively correlated with couples' empathy ($P < 0.01$).

Study assumptions

The kurtosis and skewness of all variables were in the range of ± 2 which shows the normality of the data distribution. Meanwhile, all predictor variables had a tolerance coefficient of higher than 0.1. In addition, the variance inflation factor was less than 10. Accordingly, the alignment assumption was established.

Model measurements

The fitness of the model was tested using the confirmatory factor analysis method via maximum likelihood estimation (Table 1). Table 1 shows that fit indices support the initial model ($\chi^2=4.48$, comparative fit index [CFI]=0.940, goodness of fit index [GFI]=0.961, adjusted goodness of fit index [AGFI]=0.915, and root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA]=0.094). Following a correction by creating covariance between the errors of two indicators (insight into the communication process and the ability to send/receive messages), better fit indices were obtained for the model ($\chi^2=2.225$, CFI=0.975, GFI=0.979, AGFI=0.950, and RMSEA=0.063).

Table 2 demonstrates the impact analysis of the variables. Accordingly, compassion mediates the relationship between the negative expression of emotional empathy of the couple negatively at a significant level of 0.01.

Table 2. Impact analysis: standardized direct, indirect, and total effects

Variables	Path Coefficient	Self Compassion	Couple's Empathy
Positive emotion express	Direct	0.31	0.21
	Indirect	-	0.007
	Total	-	0.25
Negative emotion express	Direct	-0.21*	-0.02
	Indirect	-	-0.048
	Total	-	-0.074
Love express	Direct	0.167*	0.423
	Indirect	-	0.038
	Total	-	0.461
Communication skills	Direct	0.344*	0.05
	Indirect	-	0.078
	Total	-	0.13
Self-compassion	Direct	-	0.22
	Indirect	-	-
	Total	-	-

4. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrated that emotional expression and communication skills with empathy are correlated along with the mediating role of self-compassion. Accordingly, the proposed model explains 61% of the variance of empathy in couples who are getting a divorce. The findings of this study are in line with the results of [Rahmanifar et al. \(2018\)](#), [Jaberi et al. \(2016\)](#), [Lukman et al. \(2019\)](#), [Haris and Camer \(2018\)](#), [Karadağ and Koçak \(2017\)](#), [McDonald et al. \(2018\)](#), [Yedirir and Hamarta \(2015\)](#), [Levesque et al. \(2014\)](#), [Chung \(2014\)](#), and [Froyen et al. \(2013\)](#).

The findings demonstrated that emotional expression significantly impacts interpersonal relationships, including marital relationships and marital satisfaction ([Crawley & Grant, 2005](#)). The inability to share emotions is one of the common issues among couples; accordingly, negative emotions negatively affect the quality of their relationship. Whereas, proper expression of negative or positive emotions results in higher marital adjustment. On the other hand, improper expression of emotions reduces marital adjustment ([Haris & Kumar, 2018](#); [Jaberi et al., 2016](#)).

Family members who have good communication skills usually experience healthier relationships, whereas in incompatible families, verbal and non-verbal messages are not transmitted properly. Therefore, such relationships do not function well. Communication skills help people correctly express their emotions and needs; on the other hand, poor communication skills lead to negative interpersonal communication ([Kring & Sloan, 2009](#)). Emotional expression that avoids the suppression of emotion leads to higher intimacy in interpersonal relationships ([Perry & Hayaki, 2014](#)). Meanwhile, compassion is a part of the emotional expression system ([Gilbert et al., 2011](#)). This system leads to higher empathy expression by modulating negative emotions, and the process increases marital adjustment ([Long, 1994](#)).

Marital adjustment is positively impacted by higher empathy which is enhanced by proper emotional expression. However, marital adjustment reduces by low emotional expression and lower levels of empathy. It also negatively impacts communication skills in dealing with life-damaging factors ([Saeedpoor et al., 2019](#)). Interpersonal relationships with appropriate communication skills and the ability to understand the feelings

and thoughts of the other party lead to improvement and increase the couple's marital adjustment (Chung, 2014). While empathy gradually enhances and maintains intimate and satisfying relationships, the lack of it leads to a feeling of misunderstanding, insignificance, and negligence by the other party in the relationship which results in dissatisfaction (Pietrzak et al., 2016).

5. Conclusion

The findings of the present study demonstrated the crucial role of mediating variables in studying marital relationships; accordingly, emotional expression and communication skills with empathy couples are not directly correlated and various factors, such as compassion, can positively or negatively impact the relationship. The results showed direct and indirect paths between variables of emotional expression and communication skills with empathy. Based on the findings of this study, interventions can be designed to teach communication skills based on empathy to improve marital life. Accordingly, this variable should be considered in relation to emotional expression. This study faced some limitations. Firstly, the questionnaires were difficult and time-consuming, given the number of questions and participants. Hence, considering the COVID-19 pandemic, this posed a limitation to the present study. Meanwhile, considering the large difference in the sample size of males and females, we could not perform a gender-based study. In addition, it is necessary to investigate other variables based on the explained variance.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

All ethical principles were observed in this article. The participants were allowed to leave the study whenever they wished. The participants were aware of the research process. Their information was kept confidential. This study received the following Ethics Code: IR.IAU.TMU.REC.1399.088. To refer to the court, a letter with the number 127299/805 was issued from the Islamic Azad University of Tehran.

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Authors' contributions

All authors equally contributed to preparing this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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