



Research Paper

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Marital Satisfaction and Self-esteem: The Mediating Roles of Alexithymia and Communication Skills

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Article Info.	Abstract
Received: 29.04.2023 Accepted: 19.07.2023	Abstract Marriage, as one of the oldest links between humans and the origin of the family, nurtures human character; as a small natural group, it has been the focus of many researchers. Among all the important relationships in human life, marital relationship is one of the most important relationships for human well-being. A desirable marital relationship not only fulfills the need for connection but also is an intimate and reliable relationship which creates a deep sense of connection and belonging. The present study was conducted to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and marital satisfaction with the mediation of alexithymia and communication skills. The study's method was of the correlational type and the statistical population was made up of all married students of Tehran universities who had been married for at least one year. Among the population, 212 students were voluntarily selected through the available sampling method. They filled out Enrich's Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS), Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (SES), Toronto's Alexithymia (TAS-20), and Queen Dam's Communication Skills (CSTR). The data was analyzed using the structural equation modeling method ($df/X^2 = 1.62$, CFI = 0.975, GFI = 0.966, and RMSEA = 0.054). The results showed that communication skills had a positive and significant effect and alexithymia had a negative and significant effect on marital satisfaction. Communication skills mediated the relationship between self-esteem and marital satisfaction positively. In addition, self-esteem with the mediation of alexithymia could positively affect marital satisfaction ($P < 0.05$). It showed that self-esteem had a positive and significant relationship with marital satisfaction. Considering that marital satisfaction is one of the most important determinants of the efficiency and health of the family, paying attention to the factors affecting it can consider the physical and mental health of people as family members.
Keywords: <i>marital satisfaction,</i> <i>self-esteem,</i> <i>alexithymia,</i> <i>communication skills</i>	

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Introduction

Among all important relationships in human life, marital relationship is one of the most important relationships for human well-being. A desirable marital relationship is an intimate and reliable relationship which creates a deep sense of connection and belonging (du Plooy & de Beer, 2018). Marital satisfaction is a positive attitude that the husband and wife have regarding various aspects of their marital relationship. It includes the satisfaction experienced by the couple (Masoud Maydanchi et al., 2020). Various factors affect marital satisfaction and can predict higher levels of marital satisfaction in couples (Sayemiri et al., 2020). One of these factors is self-esteem which refers to an individual's evaluations of his values. In other words, it examines how worthy and competent an individual sees himself (Wang et al., 2022). More specifically, self-esteem is an individual's belief in his possessions, abilities, and success; it reflects the value of an individual (Shokri et al., 2021).

Among other factors affecting marital satisfaction are the communication skills of spouses (Rajabi et al., 2021). Communication skills can be used to engage in interpersonal interactions and communication patterns. They are the processes in which people share their thoughts, information, and feelings through the exchange of verbal and non-verbal messages (Maleki et al., 2019; Yosefi, 2006).

One of the most important obstacles to creating and maintaining a romantic and satisfying relationship is alexithymia (Garofalo et al., 2017). Alexithymia is the inability to recognize and verbally describe emotions as well as a defect in symbolic thinking related to the expression of desires and feelings (Shabanloo et al., 2018). People with alexithymia have difficulty expressing their needs and cannot solve interpersonal challenges in social situations (Puscasu & Usaci, 2016). Moreover, they have limitations in fulfilling the expectations of others and theirs (Zare Derakhshan & Roshan, 2020).

Undoubtedly, a deep study of marital satisfaction and the factors affecting it will lead to the improvement of couples' relationships, and their greater satisfaction in life in general. The present study was conducted to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and marital satisfaction with the mediation of alexithymia and communication skills.

Methodology

The design of this study was descriptive and correlational, which was analyzed by the structural equation model. The statistical population included all married students of universities in Tehran province in 2023 who had been married for at least one year. Among them, 212 students were selected through the available sampling method. Moreover, Enrich's Marital Satisfaction scale (EMS), Rosenberg's Self-Esteem scale (SES), Toronto's Alexithymia (TAS-20), and Queendom's Communication Skills Test-Revised (CSTR) were used to collect data. To carry out the research study, first, the online versions of the questionnaires were chosen due to the ease and accuracy in collecting data, error reduction in the research results, lack of bias, and time and place limitations in filling out the questionnaires. The demographic questions were added to the online version of the questionnaires by Porsa software. Then, the link to the questionnaire and the explanation about the confidentiality of the participants' data were provided to the participants through virtual social networks. The data was analyzed using the structural equation modeling method. The completed questionnaires were analyzed by SPSS and AMOUS statistical software. In addition, the collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency, percentage, standard deviation, and mean), and inferential statistics.

Results

Two hundred and twelve students (i.e., 150 women, and 62 men) participated in the present study. Among the participants, 14 students (6.6 %) were less than 25 years old, 48 students (22.6 %) were 25 to 27 years old, 47 students (22.2 %) were 27 to 30 years old, 51 students (24.1 %) were 30 to 35 years old, and 52 students (24.5%)

were more than 35 years old. With regard to the experience of marital life, 85 students (40.1 %) had less than 3 years, 44 students (20.8 %) had 3 to 6 years, 25 students (11.8 %) had 6 to 9 years, 16 students (7.5 %) had 9 to 12 years, and 42 students (19.8 %) had more than 12 years of marital life experience. Table 1 represents the mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficients between self-esteem, components of communication skills (i.e., ability to receive and send messages, emotional control, listening skills, insight into the process of communication, and communication with determination), alexithymia (i.e., difficulty in recognizing, and difficulty in describing and thinking objectively), and marital satisfaction.

Table 1 also shows that the total path coefficient between self-esteem and marital satisfaction ($\beta = 0.435$, $P = 0.001$) was positive; the path coefficient between alexithymia and marital satisfaction ($P = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.336$) was negative, and the path coefficient between communication skills and marital satisfaction ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.268$) was positive and significant. Furthermore, the indirect path coefficient between self-esteem and marital satisfaction ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.319$) was positive and significant. Therefore, it could be stated that the two variables of communication skills and alexithymia mediated the relationship between self-esteem and marital satisfaction in a positive and significant way. Despite this significance/non-significance, the role of each of the two mediating variables (i.e., communication skills and alexithymia) in the relationship between self-esteem and marital satisfaction was not determined. Thus, Baron and Kenny's (1986) formula were used to examine the significance of the mediating role of each of the two mediator variables. Baron and Kenny's formula showed that the coefficients of the indirect path between self-esteem and marital satisfaction through alexithymia ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.195$) and communication skills ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.124$) were positive and significant. Thus, the results of the present study showed that both alexithymia and communication skills mediated the relationship between self-esteem and marital satisfaction in a positive and significant way.

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation, and correlation matrix of the research variables

Research variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Self-esteem	-									
Communication skills - the ability to receive and send messages	** .40	-								
Communication skills - emotional control	.10	** .35*	-							
Communication skills - listening skills	** 0.34	** .61	** .32	-						
Communication skills - insight into the communication process	** .23	** .29	** .23	** .28	-					
Communication skills - communication with determination	** .21	** .39	** .27	** .37	** .20	-				
Alexithymia- difficulty in diagnosis	** -.53	** -.40	-.10	** -.37	** -.21	** -.11	-			
Alexithymia - difficulty in describing	** -.47	** -.44	-.11	** -.39	** -.23	-.11	** .70	-		
Alexithymia - difficulty in objective thinking	** -.36	** -.38	** -.20	** -.34	** -.18	-.13	** .55	** .42	-	
10. Marital satisfaction	** .43	** .37	** .22	** .36	** .27	** .24	** .43	** .48	** .39	-
Mean	6.18	31.26	27.78	20.04	16.07	14.52	17.68	12.74	19.44	166.85
Standard deviation	2.01	6.97	6.52	5.96	4.03	4.37	4.18	3.90	4.30	19.12

In addition, Figure 1 shows the structural model of the research study and explains the relationship between self-esteem and marital satisfaction with the mediation of communication skills and alexithymia. It also shows that the sum of the squared multiple correlations (R^2) for the marital satisfaction variable was equal to 0.32, which indicated that self-esteem, alexithymia, and communication skills explained 32% of the total variance.

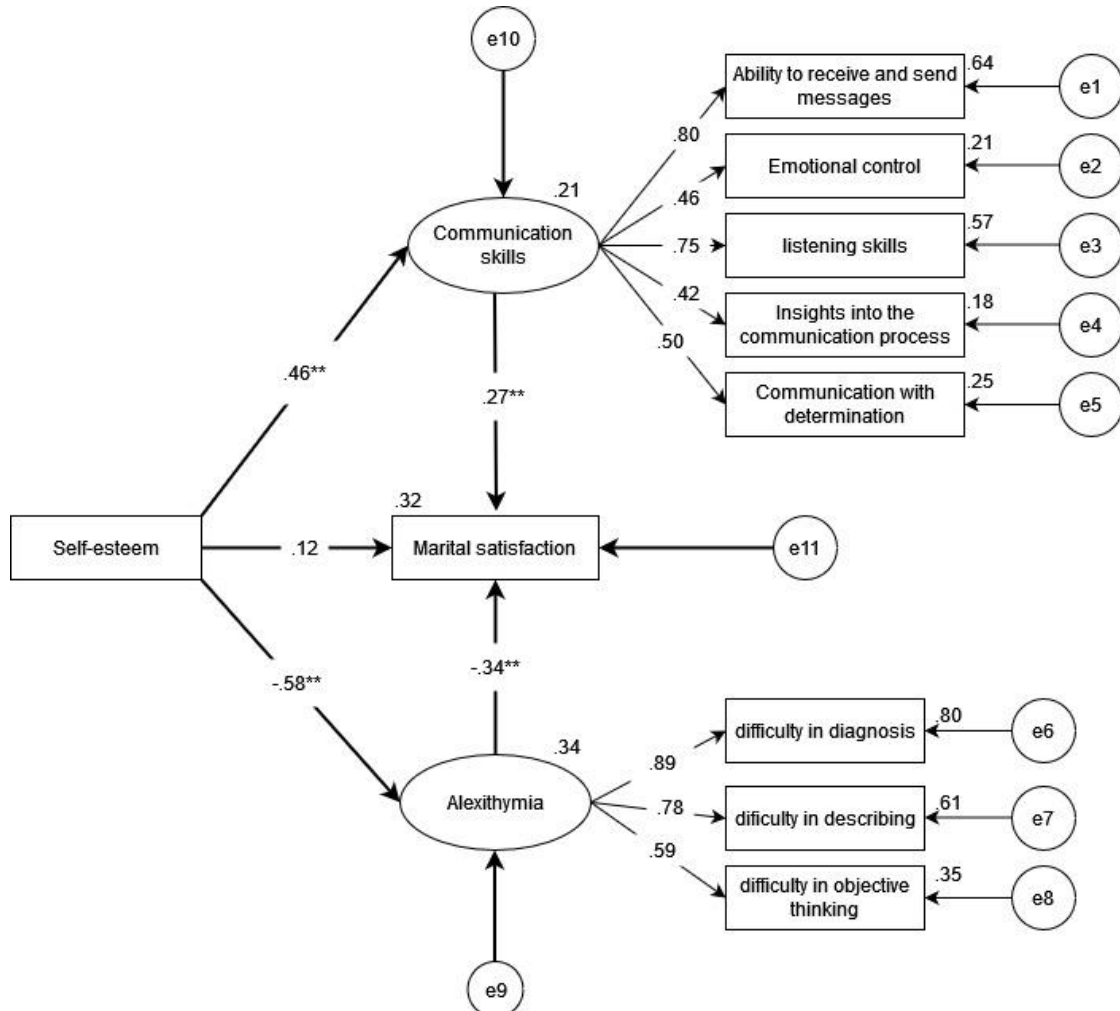


Figure 1. Standard parameters in the structural model

Conclusion

The results showed that communication skills had a positive and significant effect, and alexithymia had a negative and significant effect on marital satisfaction. Communication skills positively and significantly mediated the relationship between self-esteem and marital satisfaction; self-esteem could positively affect marital satisfaction through the mediation of alexithymia. These findings are in line with the results of previous studies (e.g., Abreu-Afonso et al., 2022; Ersogutcu & Kargin, 2022; Etesamipour et al., 2020; Tong et al., 2021; Zare Derakhshan & Roshan, 2020). Research studies show that low self-esteem is associated with a variety of psychological and personal problems (Leary, 1999). People with high self-esteem are not afraid to freely express their desires, feelings, emotions, and needs. This clear expression of feelings prevents misunderstandings in marital relations and leads to higher marital satisfaction. Considering the important role of emotions in intimate relationships between couples, alexithymia causes a decrease in marital satisfaction because the basic characteristics which are needed to establish an intimate relationship are few in people with alexithymia, and this issue has a negative impact on marital satisfaction of couples (Bahreini et al., 2019). Moreover, people with

alexithymia suffer from emotional and cognitive confusion and helplessness due to difficulties in correctly recognizing emotions and inability in the process of cognitive processing and perception. It is natural that as a result of this disturbance, the individual's self-esteem (i.e., the negative or positive mental evaluation of the individual towards himself) would decrease. As a result of the reduction of self-esteem as one of the main predictors of marital satisfaction, the satisfaction of couples decreases; this explains the role of alexithymia in the reduction of self-esteem and marital satisfaction.

Researchers have found that dissatisfied couples suffer from a lack of communication skills, which makes them unable to communicate effectively. It significantly contributes to marital dissatisfaction (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). A possible explanation could be the fact that factors such as commitment, love, and trust are expressed to the other party through different communication methods (Du Plooy & De Beer, 2018). Couples who lack the necessary and effective communication skills to regulate emotional expression and establish successful communication tend to be defensive or withdraw from challenging situations; these behaviors predict dissatisfaction with marital relationship (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005).

It is suggested that researchers replicate the present study in other contexts and cultures while examining a more homogeneous statistical population. It is also suggested that the questionnaire be filled out by both husbands and wives to compare the obtained data, and to clarify new dimensions of marital satisfaction from the viewpoints of men and women. Moreover, programs to improve self-esteem and communication skills should be included in the educational agenda of universities, organizations, and medical centers.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest on the part of the authors in this article.

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