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The Structural Relationship of Self-Differentiation and Childhood Trauma and Mothers' Marital Conflict of Children with Special Needs: The Mediating Role of Psychological Capital

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Abstract

Abstract

Family atmosphere plays an important role in the quality of life of family members. If it suffers from conflicts, it can lose its status as a secure psychological foundation. Marital conflicts have been identified as one of the most common problems in families, especially in families with children with special needs. Thus, the current research study tried to investigate the mediating role of psychological capital in the relationship of childhood trauma and self-differentiation with marital conflict of mothers of children with special needs. This research study was a cross-sectional descriptive study using structural equation modeling. The statistical population of the study included mothers of children with special needs in Rasht in 2023. Among them, 220 mothers of children with special needs in Rasht were selected as samples. To collect data, Childhood Trauma (Bernstein et al., 2003), Self-Differentiation (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), Marital Conflict (Sanaei Zaker & Barati, 2005), and Psychological Capital (Luthans et al., 2007) questionnaires were used. The research findings showed that Psychological Capital played a mediating role in the relationship of childhood trauma and self-differentiation with marital conflict of mothers of children with special needs ($P < 0.05$). Therefore, it can be concluded that psychological capital can moderate the relationship of self-differentiation and traumatic childhood experiences with marital conflicts.

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Introduction

Based on the literature, parents of children with special needs experience many marital conflicts and tensions, such as low levels of positive emotions and satisfaction (Aali et al., 2015). Moreover, researchers (e.g., Ben-Naim et al., 2018) found that this group of parents has lower marital satisfaction than other parents. Chan and Leung (2020) showed that child disorder symptoms are associated with higher levels of parental stress and parental conflicts, which in turn is associated with increased marital conflicts and decreased marital affection among these parents. Meanwhile, it seems that self-differentiation as one of the important variables in regulating interpersonal relationships can play a decisive role in reducing or increasing these conflicts. Differentiation refers to the ability to establish a balance between togetherness and individuality. The result of this variable is the balance that an individual establishes between his independence and maintaining relationships with important people in life (Alibakiyan & Afsharineya, 2020) .

On the other hand, traumatic childhood experiences as an effective variable can lead to an increase in marital conflicts in adulthood. In such a way, negative experiences and psychological injuries in childhood may lead to the formation of unhealthy patterns in marital relationships (Mofid et al., 2022). Children who have experienced maltreatment in their early years have more mental health problems (Pournaghash-Tehrani et al., 2019). Researchers pointed out the low levels of psychological capital of mothers of children with special needs (Ramezanloo et al., 2020). Therefore, according to the importance of the issue and the research gap, the researchers tried to find out how the modeling of marital conflicts of parents of children with special needs is based on their differentiation and childhood trauma with the mediation of psychological capital.

Methodology

The current research is a descriptive-correlational study using structural equation modeling. The statistical population included all parents of children with special needs in Rasht in 2023. The sample size was calculated using Klein's formula. Based on this, a sample size of 10 to 20 participants was suggested for each parameter to be estimated (Kline, 2011). Therefore, according to the number of general components of the research variables, to achieve more valid results considering the possibility of not filling out the questionnaires, the sample size was 220. The sample was collected through available sampling method. The inclusion criteria included being in the age range of 20 to 50 years, being literate, having at least one child with special needs, and not suffering from chronic debilitating mental and physical diseases (according to the individual's claim). In addition, the exclusion criteria were not completing more than 20% of the questionnaires, death of spouse, substance abuse, and unemployment. To collect data, the Self-Differentiation Questionnaire (DSI), Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ), Childhood Traumatic Experiences Questionnaire (CTQ), and Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ) were used. To analyze the data, SPSS and Amos software (version 24) were used, and the bootstrap method was applied to check the direct and indirect effects.

Results

Two hundred and twenty individuals participated in this study. The mean age of them was 37.71 with a standard deviation of 7.496. The data had a normal distribution. It was shown that marital conflict had a significant relationship with self-differentiation, traumatic childhood experiences, and psychological capital ($P < 0.05$). A negative and significant correlation was observed between self-differentiation and marital conflict. In addition, a positive and significant correlation was observed between traumatic childhood experiences and marital conflict, and a negative and significant correlation was observed between psychological capital and marital conflict. Moreover, structural equation modeling was used to investigate the mediating role of psychological capital in the relation of self-differentiation and traumatic childhood experiences with marital conflict of parents with children with special needs. The results showed that the indicators obtained from the model in the initial state did not have a good fit. Therefore, paths were drawn between the variables of physical negligence and emotional negligence, physical abuse and sexual abuse, integration and my status, emotional reaction and my status, and the reduction of cooperation between couples and the reduction of sexual relations so that the modified model had a good fit ($df/2\chi = 1.753$, CFI = 0.970, IFI = 0.971, NFI = 0.934, TLI = 0.964, and RMSEA = 0.059).

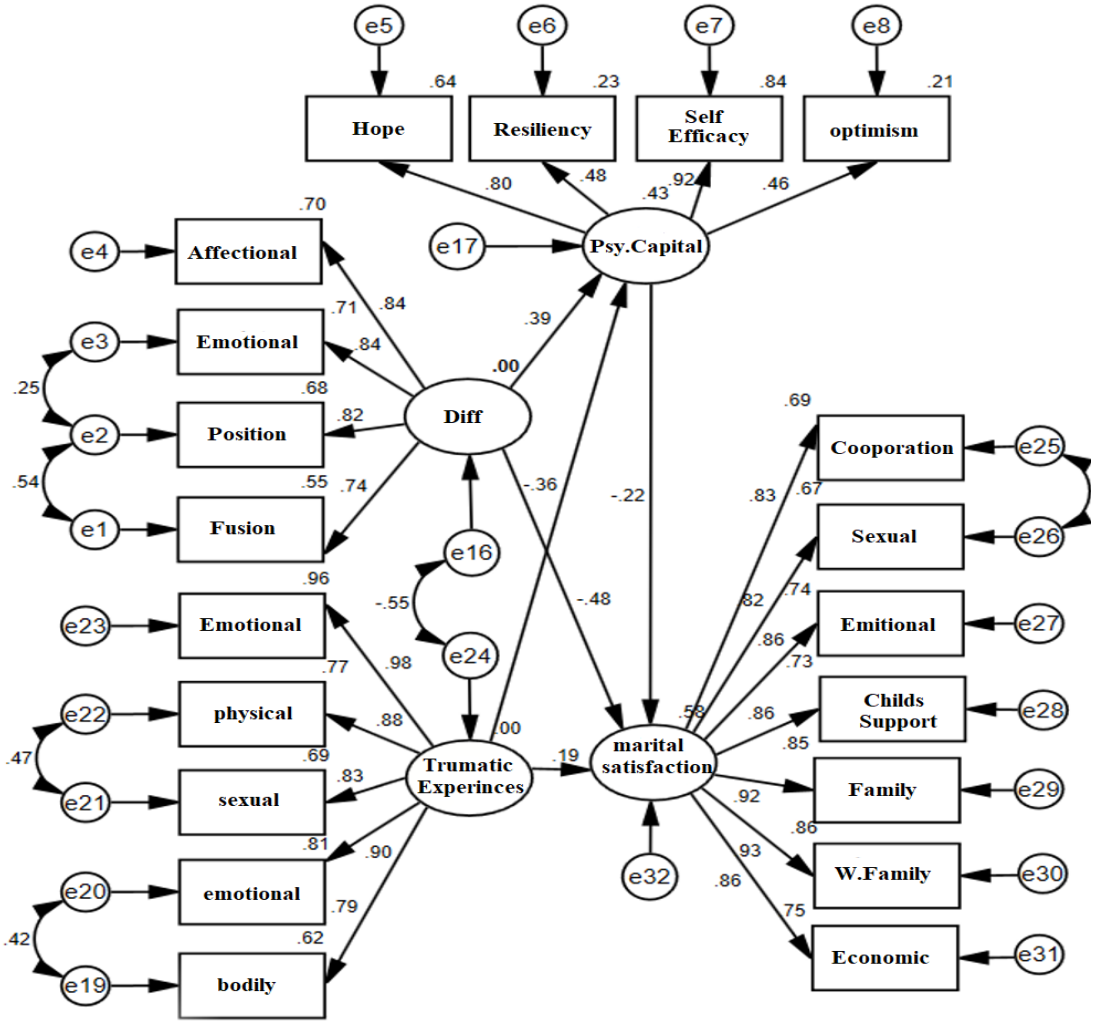


Figure 1. Structural equation model of marital conflicts

The results of structural equation modeling of marital conflicts of parents of children with special needs showed that the mediating or indirect path of psychological capital was significant in the relationship of self-differentiation and childhood trauma with marital conflicts of parents of children with special needs. Therefore, psychological capital played a mediating role in the relationship of self-differentiation and childhood trauma with marital conflicts of parents of children with special needs. The results showed that self-differentiation with the path coefficient of $\beta = 0.39$ had a positive and significant effect on psychological capital ($P < 0.05$). In addition, childhood trauma had a negative and significant effect on psychological capital with the path coefficient of $\beta = 0.360$ ($P < 0.05$). Moreover, psychological capital with the path coefficient of $\beta = -0.22$ had a negative and significant effect on marital conflicts ($P < 0.05$). Finally, the results of the bootstrap test showed that self-differentiation with the path coefficient of $\beta = 0.084$ and traumatic childhood experiences with the path coefficient of $\beta = 0.078$ with the mediating role of psychological capital had an indirect effect on marital conflict.

Conclusion

This study examined the mediating role of psychological capital in the relationship of self-differentiation and traumatic childhood experiences with marital conflicts in mothers with children with special needs. The results are in line with some studies that point to the relationship between psychological capital and self-differentiation in life satisfaction (Haji-Rostamloo et al., 2023). Differentiated people can manage their emotions and feelings and can manage the loss of a source of emotional attachment. People with higher levels of psychological capital have more ability to gain independence and autonomy. A person with higher hope, resilience, optimism, and self-

efficacy behaves less emotionally in the face of environmental anxieties (e.g., the presence of a child with special needs) and makes correct decisions by trusting his values. People who have higher self-efficacy do not react emotionally when faced with others' rejection. The results showed that childhood trauma had a direct and significant negative effect on psychological capital. This finding is in line with the studies that found that childhood injuries caused emotional and psychological injuries in adulthood (Azizpour et al, 2021). In explaining these results, it can be stated that childhood is a critical period for physical and mental development. Thus, childhood experiences of abuse and negligence have been confirmed as risk factors for various mental disorders and personality disorders. In a study on the impact of childhood trauma on health in adulthood, Pournaghash-Tehrani et al. (2019) found that those who reported childhood physical or psychological victimization had lower levels of mental health.

Moreover, this study showed that childhood trauma could partially predict marital conflict through psychological capital. High psychological capital - as a necessary psychological resource for the positive development of people - could overcome obstacles in life. Psychological capital includes the four positive psychological resources of self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience. Research studies have confirmed that the history of trauma experiences in childhood is related to less optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy. In addition, this study showed that psychological capital had a significant and negative direct effect on marital conflicts. This is in line with Shabani et al.'s (2019) study because it reported psychological capital as a strong predictor of marital conflict. In explaining this finding, it can be stated that conflicts are the result of disagreements in the context of personal goals, motivations, values, or behavioral priorities of couples (Zeidner & Kloda, 2013). Chan and Leung (2020) showed that parents with special needs show high levels of marital conflict. The presence of a child with special needs is anxiety-provoking due to special educational needs, medical and treatment expenses, and various job restrictions for parents. Finally, the results of this study showed that self-differentiation and traumatic childhood experiences, with the mediating role of psychological capital, had an indirect effect on marital conflict. In this regard, Mohammadi et al. (2019) also showed that self-differentiation affected marital satisfaction. The finding that indicates that self-differentiation with the mediating role of psychological capital had an indirect effect on marital conflict could be explained by referring to the fact that people who have high differentiation usually develop positive characteristics such as hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy. These features help people to act with a more positive attitude and more effective behavior in the face of marital problems and conflicts.

Conflict of interest

This article is taken from a master's thesis in the psychology department of Gilan University. According to the corresponding author, there was no financial support and conflict of interest.

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