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The Development and Validation of the Functional Marital Relationship Scale based on Minuchin's Structural Theory

Reza Ghasemi Jobaneh [1*], Saba Siyahmansour [2], Mojtaba Janalipor Chenarrodkhani [3]

1. Assistant Professor of Counseling, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Lorestan University, Khorramabad, Iran
2. M.A Student in Family Counseling, Lorestan University, Khorramabad, Iran
3. M.A in Family Counseling, Uuniversity of Guilan, Rasht, Iran

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Abstract

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According to Minuchin's theory, the marital relationship possesses characteristics whose assessment is essential for family counselors to implement constructive interventions. The present study aimed to develop and validate the functional Marital Relationship Scale based on Minuchin's structural theory. In this correlational study, the statistical population consisted of teachers living in Rasht. In the present study, 280 people were selected for exploratory factor analysis and 200 people for confirmatory factor analysis using voluntary sampling method. They responded to the Functional Marital Relationship Scale (FMRS), Relationship Quality Scale (RQ), and Couple Burnout Measurement (CBM). Data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS software. Content validity was confirmed based on the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and Content Validity Index (CVI). Exploratory factor analysis showed that the Functional Marital Relationship Scale consists of three factors: Constructive Communication, Clear Boundaries, and Acceptance of differences. The results of confirmatory factor analysis also confirmed the three-factor structure. Furthermore, correlations were found between the Functional Marital Relationship Scale and Marital Quality ($r = 0.82$, $p < 0.01$) and Couple Burnout ($r = -0.66$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, convergent and divergent validity were confirmed. Discriminant validity was also confirmed based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion. The reliability coefficients using Cronbach's alpha for the subscales of constructive communication, clear boundaries, and acceptance of differences were reported as 0.92, 0.84, and 0.88, respectively, while the composite reliability (CR) values were 0.89, 0.81, and 0.86, respectively. Accordingly, it is recommended that family counselors utilize the Functional Marital Relationship scale for assessment and intervention.

*Corresponding author:
Email: ghasemi.r@lu.ac.ir

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Introduction

Minuchin (1974) developed structural family therapy, a prominent approach within systemic family intervention. A core focus of this model is the marital subsystem, whose primary tasks include meeting each other's needs within a secure couple relationship and providing psychosocial support (Delghandi & Namani, 2024). Structural couple therapy, which evolved from structural family therapy, places a strong emphasis on enhancing the functioning of this subsystem, specifically, fostering mutual accommodation within an effective marital relationship (Gurman et al., 2015). According to Minuchin's theory (1974), a functional marital relationship is characterized by clear, well-defined boundaries as well as a tolerance for, and even an openness to, a partner's differences, viewing them as opportunities. Conversely, dysfunctional marital relationships are marked by either diffuse or rigid boundaries and a low tolerance for differences between partners (Gurman et al., 2015). Furthermore, functional couples possess problem-solving skills that allow them to address relationship challenges constructively; this, in turn, reduces the occurrence of maladaptive patterns such as triangulation and detouring (McCauley & Fosco, 2022). Assessment plays a crucial role in the marital process, serving as a foundation for constructive interventions aimed at improving the couple's relationship (Finn, 2015). In this context, one effective tool for assessing and gathering information about couples is the use of validated scales and questionnaires; these serve as a supplement to interviews, providing essential support for counselors and therapists. Given this, a tool focused on effective marital relationships is necessary. Since there is currently no scale specifically designed to assess couples' marital relationships based on Minuchin's theory, the present study undertook the development and validation of the Functional Marital Relationship Scale, grounded in Minuchin's structural theory.

Methods

In this study, the statistical population consisted of teachers residing in Rasht. For the present research, 280 individuals were selected for exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and 200 individuals for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using a voluntary sampling method; they filled out the Functional Marital Relationship Scale (FMRS), the Relationship Quality (RQ) questionnaire, and the Couple Burnout Measurement (CBM) online. To develop the scale, a literature review was first conducted, focusing on key terms such as couple, marital subsystem, marital relationship, and functional couple within sources related to structural family therapy (Minuchin, 1974) and structural couples therapy (Gurman et al., 2015); an initial version of the scale was drafted. In this study, reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability (CR). Construct validity was evaluated through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, while convergent and divergent validity were assessed using Pearson correlation coefficients, the average variance extracted (AVE), and the Fornell-Larcker criterion (1981). Data were analyzed using SPSS (version 23) and Amos (version 24) software at a significance level of 0.01.

Results

Following the assessment of content validity for the items, based on the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and Content Validity Index (CVI), the eligible items were subjected to Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to examine the factor structure. Initially, EFA was conducted using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation; items with a factor loading below 0.40, or those that loaded onto more than one factor, were excluded. Based on the EFA results for 15 items, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.94, and Bartlett's test was significant at the 0.001 level. The EFA indicated that the Functional Marital Relationship Scale consists of three factors: Constructive communication, clear boundaries, and acceptance of differences. The first factor, with an eigenvalue of 8.82, accounted for 58.23% of the total variance; the second factor, with an eigenvalue of 1.13, accounted for 7.55% of the total variance; and the third factor, with an eigenvalue of 1.03, accounted for 6.87% of the total variance. In total, the three extracted factors explained 73.21% of the scale's variance.

Table 1. Rotated Matrix

No	Factors		
	1	2	3
1	.74	-	-
2	.68	-	-
3	.74	-	-
4	.69	-	-
5	.78	-	-
6	.77	-	-
7	.77	-	-
8	-	.64	-
9	-	.83	-
10	-	.66	-
11	-	.67	-
12	-	.59	-
13	-	-	.79
14	-	-	.86
15	-	-	.81

Table 1 shows that items 1 through 7 constitute the first factor, labeled constructive communication; items 8 through 12 form the second factor, labeled clear boundaries; and items 13 through 15 comprise the third factor, labeled acceptance of differences. All factor loadings for the items of the Functional Marital Relationship Scale were found to range between 0.59 and 0.86 ($p < 0.01$). The results of the confirmatory factor analysis confirmed a three-factor structure. The chi2/df was calculated at 2.01 (below 3); the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Normed Fit Index (NFI) were all reported above 0.90; the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was estimated at less than 0.08. These findings indicate that the research model possesses a valid fit. Furthermore, significant correlations were observed between the Functional Marital Relationship and both Marital Quality ($r = 0.82$, $p < 0.01$) and Marital Burnout ($r = -0.66$, $p < 0.01$), thereby confirming convergent and divergent validity. Divergent validity was also supported based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Regarding reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the factors of constructive communication, clear boundaries, and acceptance of differences were 0.92, 0.84, and 0.88, respectively, while the corresponding composite reliability (CR) values were 0.89, 0.81, and 0.86.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to develop and validate the Functional Marital Relationship Scale based on Minuchin's structural theory. The findings indicate that the scale consists of three factors: constructive communication, clear boundaries, and acceptance of differences. All three factors can be explained, either directly (Minuchin, 1974) or indirectly (Gurman et al., 2015), within the framework of Minuchin's theory. Specifically, a spouse who scores high on these dimensions adopts a constructive and collaborative approach to their marital relationship and actively strives to foster an effective partnership. Clear boundaries, defined as maintaining individual and couple autonomy while engaging in beneficial external connections, are reflected in items assessing a spouse's availability and responsiveness, respect for personal privacy, and constructive communication with others. The third factor, acceptance of differences, encompasses items that reflect a positive attitude toward a partner's individual differences; such differences are viewed as a valuable asset, a resource that contributes to the growth of the relationship.

This study was conducted among teachers in Rasht using a voluntary sampling method; therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings. Future replications of this study across diverse occupational groups and with greater demographic variety could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychometric properties of this scale. Based on the findings of the present study, the Functional Marital Relationship Scale possesses valid psychometric properties (validity and reliability). Family counselors specializing in marriage counseling and couples therapy may utilize this scale for further relevant research, as well as for effective assessment and constructive communication.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in the present study.

Author Contributions

The first author: Research design, methodology, data analysis; the second author: Drafting the initial manuscript, reviewing, and editing the article; The third author: Data collection, reviewing, and editing the article. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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Data Availability Statement

Data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Artificial Intelligence Usage Statement

In the preparation of this article, artificial intelligence tools were used solely for minor editing of certain parts of the text. The authors bear full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and final content of the article.

Ethical Approval

In this study, ethical principles derived from the Declaration of Helsinki, including obtaining informed consent, explaining the study's objectives to participants, maintaining data confidentiality, and ensuring the right to voluntary withdrawal, were strictly observed.

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