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Comparison of Primary Maladaptive Schemas, Personality Traits, and Emotional Expression Style in Normal and Emotionally Divorced Couples in Tehran

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this research was to compare primary maladaptive schemas, personality traits, and emotional expression style in normal couples and couples experiencing emotional divorce.

Methods: The research method was descriptive-causal comparative. The statistical population of the study consisted of women referred to the Iranian Sexual Health Association Clinic in the year 2024. Based on the population, a sample of 120 individuals (60 women with emotional divorce and 60 normal women) were selected using convenience sampling. To collect data, Young's Schema Questionnaire-Short Form (YSQ-SF) (1988), the Revised NEO Personality Inventory Short Form (NEO-PI-R-SF) by Costa & McCrae (1992), and King and Emmons' Expressive Style Questionnaire (1990) were used. Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was employed for data analysis.

Results: The results showed a significant difference between primary maladaptive schemas, personality traits (except for the Neuroticism subscale), and emotional expression style in normal couples compared to couples experiencing emotional divorce.

Conclusions: It appears that attention to such variables plays an important role in primary and secondary prevention, and psychologists and counselors should pay attention to these variables in clinical and counseling settings.

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Introduction

The family is the most important and fundamental unit of societal structure. The foundation of the family is formed by a couple who have promised each other commitment, loyalty, and responsibility. The quality of marriage is determined by concepts such as compatibility, satisfaction, and happiness (Mutlu, Erkat, Baladizim & Gandogdu, 2018). The failure of couples to resolve marital disputes can manifest in various forms, each of which endangers the health of the marital relationship; one such conflict is emotional divorce between spouses.

Marriage, as the most significant social behavior for fulfilling emotional needs and gaining security, has always been a focus for psychologists, counselors, and other mental health professionals (Afshang, 2023). If one of the spouses cannot continue living peacefully with the other after marriage, they either separate or experience emotional divorce. In emotional divorce, feelings of affection and intimacy gradually disappear between the couple, and exhaustion and despair cast a shadow over the relationship. Those suffering from alienation feel that their lives are ruined and lack the patience to solve their marital problems. Because their marital life is problematic, they become depressed and have little energy left to devote to their children or work. This is because they feel they lack a suitable partner, so they do not establish good communication, consequently having a negative outlook on the possibility of changing their lives, and in severe cases, may resort to suicide due to depression (Faber, 2008).

Primary maladaptive schemas arise from the failure to meet essential childhood emotional needs. These fundamental needs include secure attachment to others, self-control, freedom to express needs and healthy emotions, spontaneity, and realistic limits (Jarvis, Padmanabhanuni & Chipes, 2019). These schemas operate at the deepest cognitive level, usually outside of awareness, making the individual psychologically vulnerable to developing distress such as depression, anxiety, dysfunctional communication, addiction, psychosomatic disorders, and marital conflicts (Kroek & Kurt, 2019). Based on various studies, one component associated with emotional divorce is primary maladaptive schemas in couples. Bi-Azari Kari, Heidari, and Asghari Ganji (2022) in their research showed that primary maladaptive schemas could significantly account for 36.8% of the variance in emotional divorce among couples with marital problems, and three schemas—Disconnection/Rejection, Unrelenting Standards/Hyper criticalness, and Excessive Vigilance/Inhibition—could significantly predict 88.5% of the variance in emotional divorce

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among them. The schemas proposed by Young are divided into five domains based on five unmet emotional needs: Disconnection and Rejection, Impaired Autonomy and Performance, Impaired Limits, Other-Directedness, and Over vigilance and Inhibition. When these schemas are activated, they can affect an individual's perception, reality, and cognitive processing (Shabani Khadiv & Ahmadian, 2019).

Other variables related to emotional divorce in couples are personality traits and emotional expression styles (Ebrahimi & Heidari, 2020). Personality traits are defined as the set of characteristics that are almost permanently present in an individual and distinguish them from others (Kim, Clark, Donlan & Burt, 2020). Based on Costa and McCrae's (2004) personality theories, personality is divided into components such as Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, which are called traits, used to predict a person's behavior by measuring these traits. The fundamental assumption of the trait perspective is that humans can be described in terms of the probability of their behavior, feelings, thoughts, and cognition in a specific manner (Pabon-Carrasco et al., 2020).

Emotion is a combination of an individual's perceptual inferences and environmental stimuli (Chakraborty et al., 2014). Emotional expression is the outward display of emotion (Esmailbeigi Mahanani, Eidi & Najafabadi, 2019), which involves behavioral changes accompanying the emotion, such as changes in vocal tone, facial expression, body language, and similar aspects (Lindsey, 2020). King and Emmons (1990) proposed three dimensions for emotional expression: Intimacy Expression, Positive Emotion Expression, and Negative Emotion Expression. In intimacy expression, the individual engages in dialogue and establishes an honest relationship with the other party. In this dimension, the individual shows their feelings, thoughts, beliefs, ideas, and existential reality to the other person. Happiness and joy are among the positive emotions that play an important role in improving an individual's mental health and personal and social functioning. Negative emotions, such as anger, rage, sadness, and grief, are also part of life, and prolonged exposure to these emotions causes individual, social, and familial harm (Keltner et al., 2019).

In alienation and emotional divorce, intimacy and love gradually fade between the couple, and feelings of exhaustion and despair overshadow the relationship (Bean et al., 2020). Those suffering from emotional divorce feel their lives are ruined and no longer have the patience to resolve their marital problems. Because they see their relationship as ruined, they are depressed and prefer to

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spend what little energy they have left on work and their children, as they feel they lack a suitable companion, thus having no positive outlook on the possibility of changes in their lives, and in more severe and acute cases, may attempt suicide due to emotional distress (Stratton & Alo, 2020).

Given the existing theoretical and empirical background regarding the influence of each variable on divorce and emotional alienation among couples, this study investigates primary maladaptive schemas, personality traits, and emotional expression style in normal and emotionally divorced couples for the first time.

According to the statistics from the National Organization for Civil Registration, the divorce rate in Iran has increased significantly, showing an increase of about 28% in the decade of the 2010s (from 2011to 2021). Out of 134,208 marriages in one year, 31,733 ended in divorce. The highest rates for this indicator were in Tehran and Alborz provinces, with 35 and 28.6 divorces per 100 marriages, respectively, and the lowest rates were in Sistan and Baluchestan and Ilam provinces, with 4.9 and 9.2 divorces per 100 marriages, respectively (National Organization for Civil Registration of Iran (2021). The noteworthy point is that this very high divorce statistic in the country only includes the portion of marital conflicts that have been referred to judicial authorities and resulted in separation, and it has been shown that conflict in families is not limited only to cases that end in divorce. This research can be a small step toward continuing and expanding previous studies to gain a deeper and more profound understanding of the factors involved in the creation and continuation of emotional divorce, as well as developing better and more effective intervention management methods by managing and correcting inefficient methods of managing marital problems. Given the researcher's review indicating that no study has been conducted focusing on comparing primary maladaptive schemas, personality traits, and emotional expression style in normal and emotionally divorced couples, this research will be carried out and will add to the theoretical knowledge in this field.

Material and Methods

The research method employed was descriptive-causal comparative. The statistical population of the study comprised women referred to the Iranian Sexual Health Association Clinic in the year 2024. Based on this population, a sample size of 120 individuals (60 women experiencing emotional divorce and 60 normal women) was selected using convenience sampling. Data

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collection was performed in the field using questionnaires. The sample size of 120 participants (60 women with emotional divorce and 60 normal women) was determined based on the statistical population and selected via convenience sampling. Due to the geographical scope of the study being Tehran city, sampling was restricted to counseling centers within District 5. The convenience sampling method was used for subject selection. Furthermore, the decision to choose this sample size was based on the willingness of this number of individuals from the target population to participate in the present study, following arrangements made with the Iranian Sexual Health Association Clinic. Specifically, the research objective was explained to the participants, and after obtaining their verbal consent, both groups were asked to complete the questionnaires.

Three questionnaires were used for data collection:

Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ): This questionnaire was developed by Jeffrey Young in 1988. It consists of 75 items designed to assess early maladaptive schemas. It measures 18 schemas across 5 domains corresponding to early developmental areas: Emotional Deprivation, Abandonment/Instability, Mistrust/Abuse, Social Isolation/Alienation, Defectiveness/Shame, Instability/Defectiveness, Interdependence/Impaired Self-Sufficiency, Impaired Limits, Other-Directedness, Overvigilance/Inhibition, and Defectiveness/Shame. Scoring is based on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *Completely False* to 6 = *Completely True*). Young et al. (1989) confirmed its validity through factor analysis. Its reliability, assessed by Cronbach's Alpha, was reported as 0.49 by Young, Klaasco, & Weishar (1999). In terms of validity, its correlation with Jones' Irrational Beliefs Inventory was reported as 0.43 by Barazandeh (2005). In Iran, Hati (2008) examined and confirmed its face and content validity, obtaining a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.88.

Revised NEO Personality Inventory Short Form (NEO-FFI): This questionnaire, based on the widely known Five-Factor Model of personality, was developed from the Revised NEO Personality Inventory by Costa and McCrae (1992). It assesses the five major personality factors: **a) Neuroticism (N):** Tendency to experience negative emotions and psychological distress in response to stressors. **b) Extraversion (E):** Degree of sociability, positive emotionality, and general activity level. **c) Openness to Experience (O):** Levels of curiosity, judgment, and conventionality. **d) Agreeableness (A):** Tendency toward kindness and empathy, cooperative inclinations. **e) Conscientiousness ©:** Level of self-control in planning and organization. This

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short version contains 60 items. Respondents rate each of the 60 statements based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Agree* to 5 = *Strongly Disagree*). The reported Alpha coefficients by the developers ranged from 0.74 to 0.98, with a mean of 0.81 across variables. In Iran, Hagh Shenas ([2008) calculated and confirmed its content validity, obtaining a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.83.

King and Emmons Expressive Style Questionnaire: Developed in 1990 to measure expressiveness, this questionnaire consists of 16 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Agree* to 5 = *Strongly Disagree*). The questionnaire has three subscales: Positive Expression, Intimacy Expression, and Negative Emotion Expression. King and Emmons reported Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for the overall scale and subscales as 0.70, 0.74, 0.63, and 0.67, respectively. This questionnaire was first examined in Iran by Rafihinia et al. (2006) using internal consistency and calculating Cronbach's Alpha, yielding coefficients of 0.68, 0.65, 0.59, and 0.68 for the subscales, respectively.

For data analysis, the statistical test of Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to ethical standards throughout the data collection process. Prior to participation, the purpose of the study was fully explained to all potential participants. Verbal consent was obtained from all women in both the emotionally divorced and normal groups before they proceeded to complete the questionnaires. Confidentiality was ensured, and participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Given that the study involved sensitive topics and a vulnerable population (individuals experiencing marital distress), the research procedures were coordinated with the Iranian Sexual Health Association Clinic to ensure participant comfort and anonymity.

Results

The results of Table 1 indicate that the mean scores for Primary Maladaptive Schemas and Emotional Expression Style are higher in the emotionally divorced group compared to the normal group. Conversely, the mean scores for Personality Traits are higher in the normal group than in the emotionally divorced group. The statistical significance of these differences is examined below.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Components	Emotionally Divorced Group	Normal Group
	Mean	SD
Primary Maladaptive Schemas		
Emotional Deprivation (ed)	15.60	7.82
Abandonment (ab)	15.11	7.07
Mistrust (ma)	15.15	6.19
Social Isolation (si)	11.13	4.99
Defectiveness (ds)	8.75	4.20
Failure (fa)	11.13	5.66
Dependence (di)	10.43	4.80
Vulnerability to Harm/Illness (vh)	11.66	5.66
Entrapment (em)	12.45	6.66
Self-Sacrifice (sb)	15.16	6.57
Self-Neglect (ss)	16.91	6.09
Emotional Inhibition (ei)	16.85	5.54
Unrelenting Standards (us)	19.51	5.21
Entitlement (et)	16.48	6.42
Insufficient Self-Control (is)	14.68	5.91
Personality Traits		
Neuroticism	23.76	6.42
Extraversion	19.78	4.34
Openness to Experience	22.43	3.36
Agreeableness	20.58	5.20
Conscientiousness	19.30	3.71
Emotional Expression Style		
Positive Emotion Expression	23.58	4.09
Intimacy Expression	16.46	2.72
Negative Emotion Expression	15.06	2.91

Table 2. Levene's Test Results (Assumption of Homogeneity of Variances)

Variable	F Value	df 1	df 2	Significance Level (p)
Emotional Deprivation (ed)	0.001	1	118	1
Abandonment (ab)	0.001	1	118	1
Mistrust (ma)	0.001	1	118	1
Social Isolation (si)	0.001	1	118	1
Defectiveness (ds)	0.001	1	118	1
Failure (fa)	0.001	1	118	1
Dependence (di)	0.001	1	118	1
Vulnerability to Harm/Illness (vh)	0.001	1	118	1
Entrapment (em)	0.001	1	118	1
Self-Sacrifice (sb)	0.001	1	118	1
Self-Neglect (ss)	0.001	1	118	1
Emotional Inhibition (ei)	0.001	1	118	1
Unrelenting Standards (us)	0.001	1	118	1
Entitlement (et)	0.001	1	118	1
Insufficient Self-Control (is)	0.001	1	118	1
Neuroticism	0.001	1	118	1
Extraversion	0.001	1	118	1
Openness to Experience	0.001	1	118	1
Agreeableness	0.001	1	118	1
Conscientiousness	0.001	1	118	1
Positive Emotion Expression	0.001	1	118	1
Intimacy Expression	0.001	1	118	1
Negative Emotion Expression	0.001	1	118	1

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Based on the findings in Table 2 and the F-value obtained from Levene's test, no significant difference was observed in the variances at the significance level (α). Therefore, the null hypothesis, which assumes homogeneity of variances, is accepted.

Given that the necessary preconditions for using MANOVA have been confirmed, the tables and results obtained for the research hypotheses are presented in the following section.

Table 3. Results of Multivariate MANOVA for Primary Maladaptive Schemas, Personality Traits, and Emotional Expression Style

Source	SS	DF	MS	F Value	P	Eta Squared (η^2)
Group						
Primary Maladaptive Schemas	16875	1	16875	44.55	0.001	0.27
Personality Traits	23970.13	1	23970.13	115.38	0.001	0.49
Emotional Expression Style	7680	1	7680	188.94	0.001	0.61

Based on the results mentioned and considering the F-value obtained in Table 3, a significant difference exists between the mean scores of the variables Primary Maladaptive Schemas, Personality Traits, and Emotional Expression Style in the normal group and the emotionally divorced group ($p < 0.05$).

Discussion

The results indicated a significant difference between the mean scores of the variables Primary Maladaptive Schemas, Personality Traits, and Emotional Expression Style in the normal and emotionally divorced groups ($p < 0.05$).

There was a significant difference between the mean scores of the subscales of Primary Maladaptive Schemas in the normal and emotionally divorced groups; therefore, the research hypothesis is confirmed ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the mean scores of maladaptive schemas were significantly lower in the normal group compared to the emotionally divorced group.

The results showed a significant difference between the mean scores of the subscales of Personality Traits, with the exception of the Neuroticism subscale, in the normal and emotionally divorced groups. The mean scores for personality traits were significantly higher in the normal group compared to the emotionally divorced group. Additionally, there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the Emotional Expression Style variable in the normal and emotionally divorced groups; thus, the research hypothesis is confirmed ($p < 0.05$), and the mean scores for

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emotional expression style were significantly lower in the normal group compared to the emotionally divorced group.

The obtained results are consistent with the findings of studies by Talebizadeh, Ranjbar, & Lotfi (2023), Babakhani (2023), Aghaei & Moghnizadeh (2023), Zare & Honarparvaran (2022), Nosrat Talab Haghi & Bakhshipour (2022), and Mousavi Khorrami, Doukanehie, & Khakpour (2020).

Based on the findings, it can be stated that the factor of Neuroticism is associated with emotional instability and negative affect, which usually impacts an individual's level of adjustment. Individuals high in Neuroticism tend to exhibit more impulsivity, aggression, and vulnerability, which can ultimately disrupt marital relationships. Neurotic individuals express more negative emotions toward their spouses, thereby contributing to the formation of negative interaction patterns in marital relationships. Furthermore, neuroticism encompasses various negative emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, and arousal. Such individuals are more likely to hold irrational beliefs and have less control over their desires and impulses. These behaviors lead to couples having less impulse control and a weaker degree of adjustment. The higher the level of neuroticism in either spouse, the more negative interactive behaviors are displayed toward the partner, and such behaviors reduce marital adjustment, increasing the tendency toward emotional divorce.

On the other hand, the inability to express emotions hinders marital satisfaction. Moreover, poor emotion management is associated with a lower mental capacity for processing environmental, interpersonal, and social information. Distressed couples become stuck in rigid patterns and interactive cycles reinforced and repeatedly enacted by themselves. Their inability to tolerate the emotions they are trapped in leads to their persistence in distress and further exacerbates unresolved issues. The formation of these emotionally unfavorable conditions in couples can lead to marital conflicts and disillusionment, where spouses continue their lives completely separated from one another, without any feeling or affection for each other, resulting in emotional divorce.

In interpreting these findings, it can be inferred that most psychological problems, including emotional divorce in couples with marital issues, stem from individuals' way of perceiving themselves and others, a method of perception referred to as a schema. Early Maladaptive Schemas are rooted in unpleasant childhood experiences, and schemas that form quickly are generally stronger. Schemas arise due to the unmet basic emotional needs of childhood and act as filters to

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confirm and validate childhood experiences. Accordingly, negative schemas develop more rapidly in individuals who have had problematic childhood experiences, and these schemas usually persist longer. A critical point is that individuals with early maladaptive schemas, particularly the schemas of Disconnection and Rejection, Mistrust and Abuse, Impaired Limits, Other-Directedness, and the schema of Failure/Incompetence, do not make sustained, consistent, and appropriate efforts for progress and success. Furthermore, they experience feelings of emptiness, confusion, and purposelessness in life. These factors cause couples with the aforementioned schemas to show inadequate effort and perseverance in resolving marital challenges, and an increase in maladaptive schemas and their components leads to an increase in emotional divorce among couples.

The current study was conducted among women referred to the Iran Sexual Health Association Clinic located in District 5 of Tehran; therefore, the findings are generalizable to this statistical population, and caution should be exercised when generalizing them to other statistical populations. Additionally, self-report questionnaires were used to gather data in this research, which inherently carries some limitations. It is therefore suggested that planning by therapists and health specialists to reduce emotional divorce, particularly by reducing problematic maladaptive schemas, should be prioritized. Furthermore, it is suggested that utilizing the existing capacities in educational workshops at family counseling centers should be considered to modify problematic schemas and reduce emotional divorce in couples. Finally, interventions focusing on training couples struggling with emotional divorce to overcome metacognitive beliefs, grow cognitive-emotional skills, and increase emotional maturity should be implemented to help reduce emotional divorce.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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