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# The Role of Spiritual Intelligence and Differentiation in Predicting Marital Adjustment of Married Iranian Students

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The aim of this study was to investigate the role of spiritual intelligence and differentiation in predicting marital adjustment of Iranian students. The participants of this study were 312 married students from Yazd University. The instruments used in this study were the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) to measure marital adjustment, Differentiation of Self-Inventory, and the Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SISRI). The results of the study demonstrated that spiritual intelligence predicted the marital adjustment of married students ( $p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, spiritual intelligence explains 7% of the variance in the marital adjustment index. Among the predictive components, existential thinking, criticism, and the production of personal meaning demonstrated significant predictive effects on the marital adjustment index in students. The results also showed that differentiation does not predict the students' marital adjustment, and the subscales of marital solidarity and agreement were positively correlated.

**Keywords:** *spiritual intelligence, differentiation, marital adjustment, Iranian couples*

Family is one of the smallest societal units yet potentially the largest and most influential educational unit in society. The family is the foundation of the individual's personal and social life, and at the core of many families are marital dyads (Rosen-Grandon et al., 2004). Marital adjustment is how married individuals, individually or with each other, adapt to the continuation of the marriage (Graham & Unterschute, 2015). Marital adjustment has been noted as one of the essential factors in determining the stability and continuity of married life. It has been regarded as the general sense of pleasure and satisfaction with the marriage in the couples (Rani, 2013).

Moreover, marital adjustment is characterized as couples' happiness in their marriage (Yesiltepe, 2011). According to Martin (2007), marital adjustment is the quality of the marriage relationship itself. Marital adjustment is considered a prominent factor related to people's subjective wellbeing and

quality of life, both concurrently and over time (Whisman, 2000). Wiseman (2000) defined marital adjustment as the degree to which understanding and sharing activities are associated with satisfaction and success in life. Regardless of definitions, researchers disagree about how to conceptualize and operationalize marital adjustment (Delatorre & Wagner, 2020; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Heyman et al., 1994; Norton, 1983; Spanier & Cole, 1976). More specifically, many researchers disagree about the dimensions of marital adjustment, with some researchers proposing it as a multidimensional construct, others as a unidimensional construct (Delatorre & Wagner, 2020; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Norton, 1983). One research study found that multidimensional constructs explain more significant variance than the unidimensional conceptualizations (Fletcher et al., 2000), with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) being the most used measure (Spanier, 1976).

There are many factors affecting marital adjustments, such as ages of couple, duration of the marriage, communication between partners, fulfilling their desires and expectations, making joint decisions, relations with their families and relatives, agreeing on leisurely activities, and family budget (Kışlak-Tutarel & Göztepe, 2012). According to Gurman (1975), marital problems go back and forth on the continuum of marital adjustment and are considered a reflection of the interactive elements of human experience.

Various factors are effective in creating marital compatibility. Two components that have received less attention in the present literature are spiritual intelligence (SI) and differentiation. The term spiritual intelligence coined by Zohar and Marshall (2000) combines psychology, physics, philosophy, and religion, in their book *Spiritual Intelligence: Fundamental Intelligence*. SI has been described as a distinct aspect of intelligence involved in processing higher meaning, transcendence, and values (Emmons, 1999, 2000a; Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Emmons (2000a, 2000b) conceptualized SI as the potential to achieve transcendence, the capacity of attaining elevated spiritual states, the potential to make routine life events sanctified, and applying spirituality to solve life problems. Some researchers have proposed existential intelligence (EI) as an alternative to SI (Gardener, 1993, 1999; Halama & Striženec, 2004). EI relates to perceiving and understanding existential meaning (Halama & Striženec, 2004). While these concepts seem similar, SI is more specific in how individuals search for meaning (Skrzypin'ska, 2021). Griffin (2017) perceived SI as a higher aspect of intelligence tied to wisdom and self-awareness. King (2008) defined spiritual intelligence as the cognitive potential to apply transcendence and spirituality to life. More specifically, King contended that spiritual intelligence consists of individuals':

1. Potential for critical existential thinking.
2. Personal meaning-making.
3. Transcendental awareness.
4. The expansion of consciousness.

Research has found that SI displays a positive correlation to conscientiousness, agreeableness,

extraversion, mindfulness, resiliency, Meaning in Life, Metapersonal Self-Construct, Mysticism, Intrinsic-Extrinsic Religiosity, Life Satisfaction, and Emotional Intelligence (Amram et al., 2011; King, 2008; King & DeCicco, 2009; Madalaimuthu & Kadhiravan, 2016; Pargament & Saunders, 2007; Salmabadi et al., 2016; Subramaniam & Panchanatham, 2015). In regard to marriage, research has positively linked SI to marital satisfaction (Rostami & Gol, 2014) and life satisfaction among married couples (Kalantarkousheh et al., 2014).

Another variable that seems to be related to marital adjustment is differentiation. Self-differentiation is defined as the ability to balance intrapersonal psychology and transpersonal (interpersonal) levels between individuals (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). According to intra-psychological functions, differentiation shows the ability to separate emotional processes from intellectual processes; and according to interpersonal functions, the ability to experience intimacy within independence in interpersonal relationships and the proper balance between them (Tuason & Friedlander, 2000). The more differentiated a person is, the better his mental health will be, and conversely, the lower the differentiation, the more mental disorders a person will have (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). More differentiated persons tend to form greater autonomy in a marriage without fear of rejection and attain emotional closeness in that similar relationship without fear of feeling restricted (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

One of Bowen's fundamental views is that people usually attract and choose to marry people who have the same level of differentiation that they do (Bowen, 1978). According to Bowen, individuals marry within different lifestyles or levels of differentiation that arise in their original family through the process of family projection (Skowron, 2000). Researchers have yet to explore in a sample of married students from Iran. This study sought to explore the intersections of spiritual intelligence, differentiation, and marital satisfaction in a sample of 312 married Muslim students from Yazd University using measures previously validated in Farsi, including the Spiritual Intelligence Self Report Inventory (King, 2008; Raghil et al. 2010), the Self-Differentiation Questionnaire (Drake, 2011; Yousefi

et al., 2009), and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Isanezhad et al., 2012; Spanier & Cole, 1976).

### Methods

This study investigated the role of spiritual intelligence and differentiation in predicting marital adjustment of married Iranian students using correlational and regression analysis. A combination of applied research and descriptive correlation was used to collect data and information as a research design.

#### Participants

Inclusion criteria were that the participants had to be married student couples above 20 years old. Potential participants were excluded if they included incomplete answers to items, self-reported physical illness, or have taken psychiatric medication in the last six months. Given that the unit of analysis was couples, subjects were also excluded if their partner did not participate. Eight couples were excluded because a lack of participation from one member of the couple.

#### Recruitment

This study was a convenience sample. Available participants were recruited through link within ads and information posted on the University. Participants were not provided any financial benefit or reward.

#### Instruments

Multiple questionnaires were implemented for data collection. In this study, three questionnaires were used:

##### ***Differentiation of Self Inventory—Short Form (DSI-SH).***

The Self-Differentiation Questionnaire (DSI-SH) was developed by Drake (2011) and translated into Farsi and modified for Iranian participants (Yousefi et al., 2009). This scale measured a person's potential in a family of origin to perceive themselves as an individual (Drake 2011). It consists of 20 questions and four comparative subscales: I-position, the person's ability to present their own perspectives, beliefs, and values despite stress and pushback from others; fusion with others, the propensity to become enmeshed with a significant other in order to strengthen one's own identity; emotional cutoff, the need to escape, avoid, or

ignore situations of emotional intensity in stressful events; and emotional reactivity, the potential to become overwhelmed with affect in emotional situations. Items are rated on a six-point scale from 1 (not at all true of me) to 6 (very true of me). The highest possible score is 120, and the lowest score is 20. Drake (2011) examined the reliability of this subscale through the analysis of Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's alpha for I-position subscale was 0.85; for fusion with others, 0.70; for emotional cutoff, 0.79; and for emotional reactivity, 0.88. This measure demonstrated satisfactory reliability with Cronbach's alpha of .82 among Iranian Participants (Yousefi et al., 2009). Chronbach's alpha for this measure in this study was .76.

##### ***Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS).***

This scale was used to measure marital adjustment. This 32-item scale was developed by Spanier and Coll (1976) to measure marital compatibility and satisfaction. It was modified for Iranian participants and translated into Farsi (Isanezhad et al., 2012). This scale measures the four dimensions: dyadic satisfaction (the degree of satisfaction felt with the partner), dyadic cohesion (the degree to which partners participate in activities together), dyadic consensus (the degree to which partners agree), and affectional expression (the degree to which partners agree regarding emotional affection). This scale had strong internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha of .96. This scale demonstrated adequate reliability with Cronbach's alpha of .79 and good test-retest reliability among Iranian participants. The DAS was used in this study because it is the most used measure and validated in Farsi. Cronbach Alpha for this measure was .81.

##### ***The Spiritual Intelligence Self Report Inventory (SISRI).***

This questionnaire was designed and developed by King (2008) and modified for Iranian students (Raghib et al., 2010). This inventory measured the cognitive potential for self-transcendence and ability to apply spirituality to their lives. It has 24 items and four subscales: critical thinking, described as consideration of the purpose or existence of a person and the relationship to the universe, including existential notions, such as life and death, reality, etc; discovery of personal

meaning, the ability to create meaning and purpose in one's life; transcendental awareness, the ability to see a larger picture beyond the physical and usual experience that can also be perceived in others; and development of awareness, the power to control and move into a higher spiritual space through practices such as prayer and meditation. A higher score points to higher spiritual intelligence. Scoring is based on a Likert scale with five options (not true at all to me = 1 to 5= completely true to me), with possible scores ranging from 24-120. The original Cronbach's alpha was .95.

Moreover, a modified questionnaire translated into Farsi demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of .88 among Iranian students (Raghib et al., 2010). Research also found that the Iranian measure had good face validity, content validity, and displayed convergent validity with Gobari's Spiritual Experience Questionnaire alpha .66 (Raghib et al. 2010). Since King's (2008) was a validated Iranian measure, this study employed the SISRI measure for Spiritual Intelligence. Cronbach for the SISRI in this study was .83.

### Procedures

Participating couples completed the surveys in person. Informed consent was obtained from subjects prior to any data collection.

### Treatment of Data

To assure confidentiality, surveys were coded and collected anonymously. After completion of the work, the original surveys were destroyed. In this study, to analyze the data, descriptive statistical methods (concentration criteria, scattering criteria, and frequency tables with relevant graphs) were used. The Pearson correlation test and multiple regression method software SPSS were used.

### Results

The population in this study were all married students attending Yazd during 2017–2018. The sample included 312 married couples who met the selection criteria. This sample size was determined using 30 participants per a variable to obtain a power of .8 (Cohen, 1988). Four couples were excluded due to incomplete questionnaires and answers.

Descriptive statistics in Table 1 show demographics categorized by ten-year age cohort.

Most participants were under 39 years, regardless of sex, with the majority under 29, and women were slightly younger than men.

**Table 1. Participant Sex by Age in Years (N= 312)**

Sex	N	Lowest Age	Highest Age	Mean
<b>Ages 20 to 29</b>				
Female	81	20	28	24
Male	70	23	28	25.5
<b>Ages 30 to 39</b>				
Female	51	30	37	33.5
Male	57	31	39	35
<b>Ages 40 to 49</b>				
Female	16	40	47	43.5
Male	18	18	49	45.5
<b>Ages 50 to 59</b>				
Female	8	50	53	51.5
Male	11	51	56	53.5

Table 2 shows total scores on the Differentiation of Self Inventory—Short Form by sex and age cohort. Scores on differentiation increased with age for both men and women, and women's average scores were slightly lower than men's in each age cohort.

**Table 2. DSI-SH Total Scores by Sex and Age (N = 312)**

Sex	N	Mean	SD
<b>Ages 20 to 29</b>			
Female	81	44.99	2.36
Male	70	49	1.14
<b>Ages 30 to 39</b>			
Female	51	51.4	2.03
Male	57	53.2	3.55
<b>Ages 40 to 49</b>			
Female	16	53.12	3.1
Male	18	56.8	2.48
<b>Ages 50 to 59</b>			
Female	8	52.6	2.44
Male	11	57.6	3.20

Table 3 shows subscale scores on the Differentiation of Self Inventory—Short Form by sex. Women scored lower than men on all subscales except I-position, where their scores were slightly higher.

	Female		Male		Total Mean
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
<i>I-Position</i>	17.69	4.62	17.46	4.98	17.58
<i>Fusion with Others</i>	9.63	4.31	11.69	4.78	10.67
<i>Emotional Cutoff</i>	7.81	3.40	8.50	3.28	8.15
<i>Emotional Reactivity</i>	12.85	4.60	13.62	5.77	13.23

Table 4 shows total scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, which was used to assess marriage adjustment, categorized by sex and age. Females show greater couples' satisfaction on the total scores of this inventory than males, with the greatest similarity in scores in the 40–49-year cohort.

Sex	N	Mean	SD
<b>Ages 20 to 29</b>			
<i>Female</i>	81	57.32	3.25
<i>Male</i>	70	53.00	3.15
<b>Ages 30 to 39</b>			
<i>Female</i>	51	59.4	3.10
<i>Male</i>	57	53.00	4.11
<b>Ages 40 to 49</b>			
<i>Female</i>	16	56.68	3.9
<i>Male</i>	18	55.00	2.52
<b>Ages 50 to 59</b>			
<i>Female</i>	8	56.6	3.36
<i>Male</i>	11	53.6	4.97

Subscale scores for the DAS appear in Table 5. Interestingly the subscales show that except for the satisfaction subscales, women scored slightly lower than men on this inventory, despite their total scores reported in Table 4.

	Female		Male		Total Mean
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
<i>Dyadic Satisfaction</i>	27.42	6.15	26.49	6.18	26.95
<i>Dyadic Cohesion</i>	71.34	9.66	72.40	10.70	71.87
<i>Dyadic Consensus</i>	69.46	8.15	68.37	11.11	68.91
<i>Affectional Expression</i>	12.62	1.83	12.75	1.66	12.68

Table 6 shows total scores on the Spiritual Intelligence Self Report Inventory, categorized by sex and age cohort. Spiritual Intelligence scores rose with age for females under 49, but dropped sharply for women over 50 to their lowest level. Mens' scores were more mixed, increasing up to age 39, dipping for the 40–49 year cohort, and then rising again after age 50. Women scored higher than men prior to age 50, with a particularly large gap in the 40–49 year cohort.

Table 7 shows the mean subscale scores for men and women on the SISRI. Men's and women's scores were close to equal on all subscales, with the largest gap on the Discovery of Personal Meaning subscale.

The correlation matrix in Table 8 shows that the I-position subscale on the Differentiation of Self Inventory displayed a significant relationship with dyadic cohesion ( $r = 0.13, p < 0.05$ ) and dyadic agreement ( $r = 0.13, p < 0.05$ ). The fusion with others subscale was also shown to have a significant positive relationship with the affectional expression dimension of marital adjustment ( $r = 0.12, p < 0.05$ ). No significant relationship was observed between other subscales.

Sex	N	Mean	SD
<b>Ages 20 to 29</b>			
Female	81	61.6	3.11
Male	70	57	3.41
<b>Ages 30 to 39</b>			
Female	51	63.4	3.14
Male	57	61.52	3.26
<b>Ages 40 to 49</b>			
Female	16	64.08	3.15
Male	18	45.8	4.25
<b>Ages 50 to 59</b>			
Female	8	45.04	3.96
Male	11	59.88	3.44

	Female		Male		Total Mean
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Critical Existential Thinking	15.82	4.93	16.59	4.73	16.21
Personal Meaning Production	12.11	3.68	13.21	3.22	12.66
Transcendental Awareness	15.46	4.41	15.59	3.94	15.52
Consciousness State Expansion	9.34	3.74	9.34	3.74	9.64

Self-Differentiation Subscales	Dyadic Adjustment Scale Subscales			
	Dyadic Satisfaction	Dyadic Solidarity	Dyadic Agreement	Affectional Expression
<i>I-Position</i>	-0.06	*0.13	*0.14	0.30
<i>Fusion with Others</i>	-0.06	-0.01	-0.01	*0.12
<i>Emotional Cutoff</i>	-0.04	.001	0.01	-0.06
<i>Emotional Reactivity</i>	-0.05	0.01	0.06	0.10

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

The results of the correlation matrix in Table 9 show that the existential critical thinking dimension of spiritual intelligence has a significant positive relationship with the couples' solidarity ( $r = 0.29, p < 0.01$ ) and agreement ( $r = 0.30, p < 0.01$ ). The subscale generates personal meaning displayed a significant positive relationship with the couples' solidarity ( $r = 0.28, p < 0.01$ ), agreement ( $r = 0.27, p < 0.01$ ), and affective expression ( $r = 0.17, p < 0.01$ ). The component transcendent consciousness was also shown to have a significant positive relationship with couples' solidarity ( $r = 0.20, p < 0.01$ ), agreement ( $r = 0.21, p < 0.01$ ), and affective expression ( $r = 0.19, p < 0.01$ ). Also, the expansion of consciousness subscale has a significant positive relationship with the couples' solidarity ( $r = 0.14, p < 0.01$ ) and agreement ( $r = 0.15, p < 0.01$ ).

As shown in Table 10, analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that none of the dimensions of the self-differentiation variable displayed a significant predictive effect on the marital adjustment index in students ( $F = 0.404, p = 0.8$ ).

The results of multiple regression displayed in Table 11 show that the dimensions of spiritual intelligence explain 7% of the variance of the dyadic adjustment index in students. Among the predictive components, critical thinking ( $t = 2.032$  Beta = 0.31,  $p < 0.05$ ) and generates personal meaning ( $t = 2.71$  Beta = 55,  $p < 0.01$ .) have a significant predictive effect on marital adjustment in students.

**Table 9. Pearson correlation analysis of the relationship between SISRI and DAS Subscales (N = 312)**

Spiritual Intelligence Subscales	Marital Adjustment Questionnaire Subscales			
	Dyadic Satisfaction	Dyadic Solidarity	Dyadic Agreement	Affectional Expression
<i>Critical Existential Thinking</i>	-0.07	0.29**	0.30**	0.10
<i>Personal Meaning Production</i>	-0.43	0.28**	0.27**	0.17**
<i>Transcendental Awareness</i>	-0.01	0.20**	0.21**	0.19**
<i>Consciousness State Expansion</i>	0.03	0.14**	0.15**	0.09

Note: \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01

**Table 10. The predictive effect of differentiation subscales on marital adjustment (N = 312)**

Model	Non-Standard Coefficients		Standard Coefficients		
	B	Standard Error	Beta	T	Significance
<i>Constant</i>	114.117	2.682		42.552	0.000
<i>I-Position</i>	0.143	0.115	0.071	1.239	0.216
<i>Fusion with Others</i>	-0.035	0.147	-0.17	-0.239	0.811
<i>Emotional Cutoff</i>	0.001	0.174	0.001	0.009	0.933
<i>Emotional Reactivity</i>	0.022	0.129	0.012	0.170	0.865

Note: \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01

**Table 11. The predictive effect of spiritual intelligence subscales on marital adjustment (N = 312)**

Model	Non-Standard Coefficients		Standard Coefficients		
	B	Standard Error	Beta	T	Significance
<i>Constant</i>	107.86	2.321		46.471	0.00
<i>Critical Existential Thinking</i>	0.312	0.154	0.156	2.032	0.04
<i>Personal Meaning Production</i>	0.547	0.202	0.197	2.715	<0.001**
<i>Transcendental Awareness</i>	-0.224	0.199	-0.097	-1.124	0.26
<i>Consciousness State Expansion</i>	0.018	0.196	0.007	0.092	0.93

Note: \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01

### Discussion

Self-differentiation was not a significant predictor of marital adjustment. The results concerning differentiation and marital satisfaction were not related ( $F=0.404, p=0.8$ ). A more detailed study of the correlation between the subscales of differentiation

and those of marital adjustment shows a significant relationship between I-position and the subscales of marital cohesion and consensus, consistent with the results of Ghobari Bonab and colleagues (2007) and Skowron and Platt (2005). Explaining this finding, differentiation does go back to emotional independence from the family, which can be related



to marital adjustment and satisfaction, as interpreted in the context of Bowen's (1978) theory and repeats Bowen's findings concerning these factors.

The I-position subscale of differentiation had a significant relationship with marital adjustment, but the overall differentiation variable was not a significant predictor of marital adjustment. This may be due to the sample population examined in this study. More specifically, the variance of differentiation among students may be limited, which could impact the results. Another explanation for this finding is that Iranian people tend to be more collectivistic (Kormi-Nouri, et al., 2013) and have a collectivistic self-construal (Oetzel, 1998) that may impact the value of differentiation among Iranian couples.

The results provided evidence that spiritual intelligence is a significant predictor of marital adjustment, and that a significant positive relationship exists between subscales of spiritual intelligence and dyadic adjustment subscales. In other words, the higher the couple's spiritual intelligence, the higher the level of their marital adjustment. However, this study demonstrated that the dimensions of differentiation of self did not significantly predict marital adjustment.

The results are consistent with the investigations of George et al. (2000), Naderi et al. (2010), Hamid et al. (2012), Saghravani and Ghayur (2009), and Ghobari and colleagues (2007), which show a relationship between spiritual intelligence and marital adjustment cross-culturally. These findings suggest that strengthening aspects of spiritual intelligence, such as spiritual awareness, the ability to create meaning and purpose in life, to see a larger picture beyond the physical world, to respect others, and to move into a spiritual space through practices such as meditation and prayer may have implications for relationships between human beings, especially couples. It should be noted that the effect size was small despite statistical significance. This could suggest that, despite the utility of spiritual intelligence to marital adjustment, other factors play a more prominent role than SI.

In addition, individual components of SI were correlated with various factors in marital adjustment. All three components were positively correlated with the couple's solidarity and

agreement, while only generating personal meaning and transcendent consciousness were positively associated with affectional expression. These findings could suggest that developing personal meaning and transcendental consciousness have a greater influence on prosocial behavior than the other components. For instance, individuals could generate personal meaning through their connection to others or by transcending themselves, which may lead to a feeling of common human experience, similar to self-compassion (Neff, 2003).

This study expands on this relationship by demonstrating that spirituality plays an important role in marital adjustment by providing a compromising force in the connection between married couples through a broad vision and horizon in the human mind. Kirkpatrick (1999) presented a transformational evolutionary approach to the psychology of religion, stating that spirituality works to solve various mundane human problems of survival adaptation, especially those of interpersonal relationships. From this study, spiritual intelligence can be effective in marital adjustment, solving marital problems, and reducing the adverse effects of related stressors. It should be noted that despite obtaining statistical significance in the relationship between spiritual intelligence and differentiation of self, the effect size is small. This is an important note, given that this impact is only mild, which indicates that other factors may play a more prominent role in self-differentiation than spiritual intelligence among this population.

#### **Limitation**

This study has fundamental limitations of note. One key limitation is that this study is based upon self-report, and self-report measures are vulnerable to bias (Howard & Daily, 1979; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Another limitation is that this study involved students, which may also bias the results. More specifically, students are a subpopulation that is more homogenous and younger than the Iranian population, and the variables included in this study may impact nonstudent members of the population differently.

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the results of this study demonstrated that spiritual intelligence was a modest positive predictor of marital adjustment.

Considering that spiritual intelligence can be promoted, it is possible that nurturing the spiritual intelligence of individuals can help married couples achieve the desired goals of life that can lead to the improvement of their marital adjustment. It should also be noted that differentiation of self was not a positive predictor of marital adjustment, possibly due to cultural differences. More studies could provide more information in this domain to promote spiritual intelligence.

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