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Self-Compassion and Forgiveness: Major Predictors of Marital Satisfaction in Young Couples

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ABSTRACT

This study examined *self-compassion* and *forgiveness* versus *marital satisfaction* in 200 couples aged 20-40 years, with a marriage history of 1-10 years. We collected the data, using the *Enrich couple, self-compassion and family forgiveness* scales. Pearson's correlation and multiple regressions for women showed that marital satisfaction was associated with self-compassion; however, *forgiveness* predicted marital satisfaction in men. Self-compassion primarily and forgiveness, to a lesser extent, could predict marital satisfaction in the total samples. These variables were the predictors of marital satisfaction in the young couples. Family counselors should encourage couples to improve upon these attributes to enhance their marital relationships.

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KEYWORDS

Marital satisfaction; self-compassion; forgiveness; predictors of happy marriage; young couples

Introduction

Failing to pay attention to all aspects of the marital relationship eventually results in tension, discontent, emotional and physical separation of couples, leading to destructive effects not only on the foundation of family but ultimately on the society at large (Gadassi et al., 2016). Therefore, exploring the various factors that contribute effectively to marital satisfaction is of utmost significance in family therapy. Since marital satisfaction, as the dependent variable, is an essential element of marriage, this study examined the effect of two independent variables, i.e., self-compassion and forgiveness, as the predictors of overall marital satisfaction. Couples with a strong sense of self-compassion have a supportive view of themselves that is associated with positive outcomes, such as conflict resolution, constructive problem solving and favorable stability in their marital relations (Baker & McNulty, 2011). Forgiveness is an important factor in positive psychology

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and is considered an invaluable skill in human relationships, especially in marriage (Smith, 2006). Following a review of literature, the interactions among the three variables are interpreted for women, men and the total groups who participated in this study.

Literature review

Marital satisfaction

Marriage is an important foundation for building a family, and marital satisfaction in couples is a crucial indicator of the quality of married life (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). Marital satisfaction is a true reflection of the individual's happiness with the family. This is an essential factor underlying the physical and psychological growth of not only the family but also those of the society at large (Edalati & Redzuan, 2010). Further, marital satisfaction is believed to be an emotional response arising from the internal evaluation of the couples toward their marriage, and it encompasses all aspects of the relationship.

Self-compassion is one of the positive psychology variables that impacts marital satisfaction. Neff (2003) has described self-compassion as a three-dimensional entity consisting of such attributes as self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. These may be contrasted with self-judgment, isolation and over identification, respectively. Studies have reported that self-compassion not only makes us healthier and happier but may also be regarded as a predictor of our romantic relationship (Baker & McNulty, 2011; Jacobson, Wilson, Kurz, & Kellum, 2018; Neff & Beretvas, 2013). These authors found that self-compassion helps us receive emotional support from those with whom we associate. In contrast, those with a high degree of self-judgment experience less satisfaction and intimacy with their spouse (Lynch, Robins, & Morse, 2001). A more recent study on 140 couples has supported the notion that self-compassion can indeed predict the status of marital satisfaction (Janjani, Haghazari, Keshavarzi, & Rai, 2017).

Forgiveness contributes effectively to the development and strength of marital satisfaction (Agu & Nwankwo, 2019; Backus, 2009; Braithwaite, Selby, & Fincham, 2011; Miller & Worthington, 2010; Park, Enright, Essex, Zahn-Waxler, & Klatt, 2013; Tse & Yip, 2009). Forgiveness is believed to be a voluntary and intentional effort on the part of the resented person toward the transgressor (Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989; Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007). Forgiveness can replace hostility with positive feelings and emotions (Macaskill, 2012). Studies have demonstrated that forgiveness encompasses three dimensions: benevolence, avoidance and retaliation (Bell, Kamble, & Fincham, 2018; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). Benevolence by wives had a

positive effect on conflict resolution; however, retaliation or avoidance by husbands led to poor conflict resolution in their families. Fincham et al. (2004) argue that forgiving one's spouse is a major step toward reconciliation between them. These authors assert that forgiveness can have a considerable therapeutic impact on resolving, both short-term and long-term family conflicts.

Although the association of marital satisfaction with self-compassion or forgiveness has been studied separately among couples in Western countries (Braithwaite et al., 2011; Breines & Chen, 2012), the three variables have not been examined all in one study. In view of the rising dissatisfaction among the young couples in Iran over the past decade, examining the factors contributing to this issue is of significance in the context of family relationships. In the few studies that have been conducted among Iranian couples, the roles of both self-compassion and forgiveness, as independent variables have not been examined versus marital satisfaction, as the dependent variable (Hajilhasani & Sim, 2019; Mirzadeh & Fallahchay, 2012; Tavakol, Behboodi Moghadam, Nikbakht Nasrabadi, Iesazadeh, & Esmaeili, 2016). However in these studies, the age and duration of marriage were not controlled. It is known that these variables, when tested separately, have considerable influence on marital satisfaction among couples (Koivumaa-Honkanen, Honkanen, Koskenvuo, & Kaprio, 2003; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010). Further, a recent study conducted in Mississippi, USA, has suggested that the role of age, gender and marriage duration should be controlled versus marital satisfaction (Jacobson et al., 2018).

To our knowledge, no study has been conducted to date among young Iranian couples with short marriage duration to examine the association of marital satisfaction with both self-compassion and forgiveness. The useful information can fill the existing knowledge gap on the three variables examined by this study. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to examine the roles of compassion or affection toward self and others as predictors of marital satisfaction. Specifically, we investigated whether both self-compassion and forgiveness can predict the marital satisfaction in young couples aged 20-40 years with a marriage history of 1-10 years.

Methods and materials

Participants

The participants were recruited from an available population of respondents who met the selection criteria following posting announcements on the Internet and public social media, such as Instagram, Telegram and WhatsApp. The selected participants consisted of 99 women (49.5%) and 101 men (50.5%) between the ages of 20 to 40 years old who were married

between 1 to 10 years. They were native Persian speakers, resided in Tehran, Iran, and consented freely to participate in the study. The sample size was determined based on those used in previous studies (Backus, 2009; Baker & McNulty, 2011; Burchard et al., 2003; Edalati & Redzuan, 2010). The study took approximately three months to complete.

Materials

This descriptive study conducted correlation and regression analyses of the data on one dependent variable (*marital satisfaction*) and two independent variables (*self-compassion & forgiveness*). We used the data from the participants' responses to the three questionnaires on *marital satisfaction* (Fowers & Olson, 1993), *self-compassion* (Raes, Pommier, Neff, & Van Gucht, 2011) and *forgiveness* (Pollard, Anderson, Anderson, & Jennings, 1998) scales. The three questionnaires were completed anonymously by each participant in one session in a private office at a psychology clinic and research center in Tehran, Iran. The sessions were held weekly for groups of 3-10 participants. Each session was supervised by the first author who answered the participants' questions and made sure that the three questionnaires from each individual were complete and without missing responses. All of the completed questionnaires were kept in a locked filing cabinet, and they were only accessible to the authors.

Dependent variable - marital satisfaction scale

To examine the participants' *marital satisfaction*, we used the short form of Enrich Marital Satisfaction Scale (Fowers & Olson, 1993). This questionnaire, which has a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 92%, consists of 47 items, and each response is scored on a Lickert scale of 1-5.

Independent variable - self-compassion scale

To survey the participants' status of love and affection toward self, i.e., *self-compassion*, we used the short form of Self-compassion Scale (Raes et al., 2011) with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 93%. It consists of 12 items and each response is scored on a Lickert scale of 1-5.

Independent variable - family forgiveness scale

To explore the participants' level of *forgiveness* toward their spouse and family, we used the Family Forgiveness Scale developed by Pollard et al. (1998). This questionnaire has a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 93%, consisting of 40 items and each response is scored on a Lickert scale of 1-4.

Table 1. Mean scores attained by the subjects in response to the questionnaires.

Questionnaire	Question number	Score per Q.	Min. score*	Max. score*	Women score ^Ω	Men score ^Ω	Women (% Max)	Men (% Max)
Marital Satisfaction ^a	47	1-5	47	235	157.25	158.50	66.91	67.44
Self-compassion ^b	12	1-5	12	60	37.94	38.43	63.23	64.05
Family forgiveness ^b	40	1-4	40	160	107.90	107.66	67.43	67.28
Total	99		99	455	303.09	304.59	197.57	198.77

^aDependent variable.

^bIndependent variables.

Q = Question * = Minimum and maximum score attainable.

^Ω = Actual mean score attained.

Data analyses

To examine the study assumptions, the data were analyzed for their normal distribution, scattering around the means, correlation and regression, using SPSS version 21.

Results

Participants

The participants consisted of 99 women (49.5%) and 101 men (50.5%), all of whom married between 1-10 years at the time this study was conducted. The participants' age brackets were 20-25 (9.5%); 26-35 (55%) and 36-40 (35.5%) years old, with the mean age being 32 years of age. They had been married for 1-5 years (54.5%) and 6-10 years (45.5%) at the time of conducting this study. The male and female groups scored very similarly to each other for their responses to each questionnaire compared to the maximum that could be attained for each (Table 1). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov goodness of fit and *Chi* square tests indicated that the data were normally distributed and were appropriate for the Pearson's correlation and regression analyses.

Marital satisfaction versus gender

As shown in Table 2, the means of data from the "marital satisfaction", "self-compassion" and "forgiveness" questionnaires in both gender groups were close; however, the means for marital satisfaction and self-compassion in men was slightly and insignificantly higher than those in women. Conversely, the mean for forgiveness was slightly higher in women than in men.

As shown in Table 3, the regression model fitted the data well and the analyses could explain 32.1% and 9.8% of marital satisfaction, respectively, in women ($f=22.67$) and men ($f=5.34$). The results of both Tables 3 and 4 were consistent, indicating that the main variable associated with marital

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of dependent^a vs independent^b variables.

Gender	Variable	Mean	SD	N
Female	Marital satisfaction ^a	157.25	22.57	99
	Self-compassion ^b	37.94	7.09	99
	Forgiveness ^b	107.90	7.38	99
Male	Marital satisfaction ^a	158.50	26.35	101
	Self-compassion ^b	38.43	6.27	101
	Forgiveness ^b	107.66	9.71	101
Total	Marital satisfaction ^a	157.88	24.50	200
	Self-compassion ^b	38.19	6.67	200
	Forgiveness ^b	107.78	8.61	200

^aDependent variable.^bIndependent variables.

SD = Standard deviation; N = Number of participants.

Table 3. Predictors of marital satisfaction based on the analysis of variance of dependent variable^a vs independent variables^b.

Gender	Predictors	Sum of Squares	df	Means Squared	<i>f</i> -test	Sig.	R	R ²
Female	Self-compassion ^b Vs Forgiveness ^b	16030.50	2	8015.25	22.67	.001	.566	0.321
Male	Self-compassion ^b Vs Forgiveness ^b	6824.17	2	3412.08	5.34	.006	.313	0.098
Total	Self-compassion ^b Vs Forgiveness ^b	16464.95	2	8232.48	15.73	.001	.371	0.138

^aDependent variable: marital satisfaction.^bIndependent variables: self-compassion & forgiveness.

satisfaction in women was *self-compassion* while that in men was *forgiveness*, and explained 13.8% of the *marital satisfaction* for the whole sample ($f = 15.73$).

Marital satisfaction versus the whole sample

As shown in Table 4, the regression analyses predicted the significant relationship between *marital satisfaction* and *self-compassion*, as the dependant and independent variables, respectively, for both women and the whole sample. Overall, the regression model predicted marital satisfaction in women better than it did in men.

Based on this model, *forgiveness* was not as significant as *self-compassion* for its association with *marital satisfaction* neither in women nor in the whole sample.

Discussion

Since *marital satisfaction* is an important indicator of married life, this study examined the effect of established variables, i.e., *self-compassion* and *forgiveness*, as the predictors of overall *marital satisfaction*. In this section, the interactions among the three variables are interpreted for women, men and the total groups that participated in this study.

Marital satisfaction in female group

Based on the analyzed data, *self-compassion* could significantly predict marital satisfaction in the female group of this study. This finding was

Table 4. Predictors of marital satisfaction^a based on multiple regression analyses of independent variables^b.

Gender	Predictors	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		Statistical co-linearity		
		B	S.E.	Beta	t-test	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF*
Female	Self-compassion ^b	1.86	0.28	0.58	6.73	0.000	0.94	1.06
	Forgiveness ^b	-0.35	0.26	-0.11	-1.32	0.189	0.94	1.06
Male	Self-compassion ^b	0.48	0.41	0.11	1.17	0.247	0.97	1.03
	Forgiveness ^b	0.74	0.26	0.27	2.78	0.006	0.97	1.03
Total	Self-compassion ^b	1.20	0.25	0.33	4.83	0.000	0.96	1.04
	Forgiveness ^b	0.34	0.19	0.12	1.79	0.075	0.96	1.04

^aDelendent variable.^bIndependent variable.

S.E. = Standard Error; *VIF = Variance inflation factor.

consistent with those reported by numerous previous studies (Baker & McNulty, 2011; Jacobson et al., 2018; Lynch et al., 2001; Neff & Beretvas, 2013; Yarnell & Neff, 2013). Also, Figley (2002) has shown that compassion toward self and others is more dominant in women than in men. Vettese, Dyer, Li, and Wekerle (2011) have suggested that this psychological characteristic in woman is likely to be related to the greater degrees to which women are affected by environmental stimuli than men. In this context, Breines and Chen (2012) have suggested that people with strong *self-compassion* are better able to overcome their weaknesses and improve upon emotional issues, while having fairly strong affection toward other than those with weak self-compassion.

A reasonable interpretation of this finding may be that women in modern times have acquired improved and more realistic views toward gender differences, thus they have become more aware of their own emotional characteristics and, therefore, have blamed themselves less than women in traditional societies. Today's women are kinder to self, blame themselves less, and understand stressful events of life easier than women with traditional views. As a result, they have higher and more effective problem solving skills than those in traditional societies of the past. These views and skills can lead such women to experience greater satisfaction in their married lives compared to those traditional women.

Marital satisfaction in male group

This study showed that *forgiveness* could significantly be associated with *marital satisfaction* in men. This finding is consistent with those reported by a number of earlier studies (Backus, 2009; Braithwaite et al., 2011; Miller & Worthington, 2010; Park et al., 2013). These authors have shown a significant and positive association between *marital satisfaction* and *forgiveness*. Also, another study (Backus, 2009) has reported that while men can be more forgiving than women, this feature helps men control tension

and hostile responses from others, and can lead to improved satisfaction in their marital relationship. Another study suggests that *forgiveness* is an essential element in building and strengthening love, affection and trust, especially among couples (Patrick, Beckenbach, Sells, & Reardon, 2013).

It appears that men are aware of *forgiveness* as a means of enhancing satisfaction in their marital lives. Also, *forgiveness* is a social skill that people learn early in parental families, and then improve upon it through life interactions with others in the society. Humankind's ability to develop strong relationship with others largely relies on the sense of forgiving self and others as well as being forgiven. This is justified by the notion that resentment, destructive behaviors and habits that bar the sense of forgiveness in individuals are road blocks to happiness and prosperous marital foundations.

Marital satisfaction versus the total sample

The results from the regression analyses in this study indicated that *self-compassion* could significantly predict *marital satisfaction* among couples. Our finding was consistent with those reported by previous studies conducted by Jacobson et al. (2018), Janjani et al. (2017), Neff and Beretvas (2013), Yarnell and Neff (2013), Baker and McNulty (2011), and Lynch et al. (2001). One study has shown that the extent to which people are compassionate toward self is directly related to the degree they treat their spouse with warmth and affection (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Those with a high sense of self-compassion have more pleasant relationship with their spouse and allow for independence in making decisions than those with low self-compassion (Leary, Tate, Adams, Batts Allen, & Hancock, 2007).

Such people are capable of tolerating their spouses' limitations, thus enjoying higher *marital satisfaction* (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Breines and Chen (2012) have reported that an individual with high self-compassion skills experience much less discontent and resentment in marital life, since they easily apologize to their spouse for irritations and misunderstandings. Judgmental attitudes, harsh self-criticism, isolation and harboring negative emotions can prevent the building of a warm and sincere relationship between couples (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). People who lack self-compassion tend to control their spouses and dictate their decisions and ideas, rather than working toward joint decisions on equal basis (Gilbert & Miles, 2000; Mongrain, Vettese, Shuster, & Kendal, 1998).

One reason that self-compassion is a good indicator of marital satisfaction is that individuals with adequate self-compassion have learned to genuinely like themselves. This does not mean that they do not need to improve upon their attitudes and actions. Rather, they should be open to

change and stop blaming themselves for old views and behaviors, which now appear to them as being less than perfect. Improving upon such skills enables us to avoid being judgmental toward self and others, although this may not be easily attainable.

Consistent with our finding, Burchard et al. (2003) reported that *forgiveness* did not have a prime role in predicting the status of marital satisfaction. However, this finding is not consistent with those published by Braithwaite et al. (2011) and Mbam, Oginyi, and Onyishi (2015) and Bell et al. (2018), who suggested a significant association between *forgiveness* and *marital satisfaction*. Nevertheless, it is understood that *forgiveness* among couples relieves tensions and enhances the quality of marital satisfaction (Backus, 2009). It is also understood that family members cannot entirely avoid having conflicts at times. What aggravates marital relationship is hurting the spouse that has already been hurt and lack of forgiveness toward the one who initiated the hard feeling (Worthington, 1998). There are conflicting opinions on the effect of *forgiveness*. Some believe that it relieves tensions and bitter feelings, but some others believe that it encourages the guilty person.

As mentioned earlier, this study did not find a significant association between *forgiveness* and *marital satisfaction* in young couples with 1-10 years of marriage, a factor that had not been controlled in other studies. Perhaps, we can argue that *forgiveness* may not be a major predictor of *marital satisfaction* in early years of marriage. At this stage, couples may be after controlling each other in the hope of changing each other. However, with the passage of time and getting disappointed about changing their spouses, they may grow toward accepting and respecting each other. Perhaps there is a positive relationship between age and the effect of *forgiveness* among couples, i.e., the older we get, the more forgiving we may become. Therefore, we can argue that the lack of strong association between *forgiveness* and *marital satisfaction* in this study might stem from the fact that the number of subjects (N = 200) was limited to 20-40 years old, with a marriage history of 1-10 years. In future studies, the role of marriage duration in *forgiveness* versus *marital satisfaction* should be investigated.

Implications for family therapy theory

The findings of this study have the potential to contribute positively to family therapy with the aim of improving upon marital satisfaction among young couples. Since the predictors of marital satisfaction between the women and men in our study population were different (*self-compassion* versus *forgiveness*), we can argue that the differences may primarily stem from the gender factor. Otherwise, the two groups were very statistically

similar, if not identical, to each other regarding age, marriage duration, nationality, and culture. Interestingly, the very close scores the two groups received in responding to the 99 items in the questionnaires reflect the similarities in their innate attitudes toward self-compassion and forgiveness (see Table 1). In this context, the theoretical implication for family therapy is to promote tolerance and respect for the differences between married men and women regarding self-compassion and forgiveness as the predictors of marital satisfaction among young couples.

Implications for family therapy practice

Based on the findings of the study, family counselors and other practitioners are encouraged to emphasize the following points when providing consultation to young couples and their families on potential elements that improve marital satisfaction and minimize conflicts:

Young married women should be encouraged to:

- Appreciate their sense of self-compassion, sociability and mindfulness, which help reduce the incidence of depression and anxiety for the individuals and the family.
- Improve upon their sense of forgiveness and benevolence to minimize the resultant mental and physical isolation, and to support desirable mental health for the children.
- Show awareness and admire incidence of forgiveness and benevolence in their husband.
- Avoid judgment, isolation, over identification and retaliation toward self and spouse.

Young married men should be encouraged to:

- Appreciate the sense of forgiveness and benevolence in self and spouse.
- Improve upon their sense of self-compassion, sociability and mindfulness of the wife.
- Show awareness and admire self-compassion, sociability and mindfulness in the wife.
- Avoid judgment, isolation, blaming, over identification and retaliation toward self and spouse.

Recommendations

Since this study was conducted in the capital city, Tehran, we recommend that future studies be conducted in other major cities of this nation and

elsewhere, with a focus on the economic and social differences found in this study. We also, recommend that such studies employ a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the various factors that influence marital satisfaction. Caution should be exercised to supervise the participants while completing the questionnaires in a comfortable and private meeting room. They should be seated away from each other far enough to keep their privacy and eliminate exchanges among them. Also, they should not take the questionnaires home or out of the sight of the investigators at any time.

Limitations

Since this study used a limited number of available participants, we caution against generalizing the results to other cultures. However, our findings can be useful to comparative studies in multicultural populations, such as the U.S. Another limitation was the self-report nature of our method. However, we could not verify the accuracy and truthfulness of the statements made by the participants.

Conclusions

In this study, *self-compassion* and family *forgiveness* were found to be the significant predictors of marital satisfaction in the married women and men groups, respectively. However, regression analyses indicated that *self-compassion* and, to a lesser extent, *forgiveness*, could significantly predict the status of marital satisfaction in the sample population. Family counselors should encourage couples to improve upon own gender-specific attribute while improving upon the stronger attribute of the spouse in an effort to enhance the quality of marital life and to bring happiness and lasting harmony not only to their relationship but also to the lives of their children.

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Authors' contributions

Ms. Farimah Fahimdanesh and Dr. Azam Noferesti proposed the assumptions, research questions and drafted the initial research methods. Ms. Fahimdanesh recruited the subjects,

conducted the data collections, and performed the statistical analyses supervised by Dr. Noforesti. The first author wrote the first draft of the manuscript in Persian language. Dr. Tavakol reviewed, revised and assisted in the translation the Persian draft into English. Also, he designed and organized the tables and the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interests

There was no conflict of interest whatsoever in the course of conducting this study.

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