

Differentiation of Self and Life Satisfaction in Married Women: Moderating Role of Mental Wellbeing

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This research aimed to examine the relationship of differentiation of self and life satisfaction among married women in the presence of mental wellbeing as a moderator. The study followed a quantitative, co-relational survey research design. The participants consisted of 147 married women, aged between 20 to 50 years ($M = 30.87$; $SD = 6.84$) approached through purposive convenient sampling technique. Self-report measures such as Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (Skowron & Friedlander, 1988) Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, 1993) and Warwick Edinburg Mental Well-being Scale (Brown et al., 2007) were used to collect data. Results showed that mental wellbeing did not play a moderating role in relating differentiation of self and life satisfaction, however it was found that differentiation of self and mental wellbeing were independently significant predictors of life satisfaction among married women. Furthermore, results revealed I-position to be the strongest predictor of mental wellbeing from the subscales of differentiation of self, whereas the subscale of emotional cutoff predicted both life satisfaction and mental wellbeing, with stronger predictions for life satisfaction. The current findings have implications in individual and family therapy, self, and overall personality development of women.

Keywords. Differentiation of Self, Mental wellbeing, Life satisfaction, Quantitative Correlational survey design, Married women

Bowen (1978) was the first to introduce the term differentiation of self by dividing it into two aspects: intrapsychic differentiation and interpersonal differentiation. The first one refers to the ability to tell

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apart thoughts from emotions also known as self-awareness while the later is being able to distinguish an individual's personal experience from that of others they are connected to (Takieddine, 2017). Individuals with greater differentiation can move towards more calm and logical reasoning when the situation calls for it. They demonstrate flexibility, adaptability, have the capability to handle stress and maintain a measure of individuality in their relationships. On the other hand individuals with lower differentiation tend to be more emotionally reactive (Lampis et al., 2019). This study focuses on married women who belong to the collectivistic culture of Pakistan. Collectivistic cultures emphasize on a person's identification with a group, such as their country, occupation, caste, and their families (parents, siblings, spouses, etc.). Hence, expectations, duties, and roles that come with being a member of a group is seen as the primary source to understand the individual (Carducci, 2012).

According to Bowen (1978) four factors indicate an individual's level of differentiation of self: emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, fusion with others, and ability to maintain an I-position. Emotional reactivity is the tendency to react by irrational emotional flooding during times of stress. Emotional cutoff is the tendency to end interpersonal relationships and cut them off in order to deal with stress and conflict in symbiotic relationships. Fusion with others refers to how inclined one is to form complex and dependent relationships with significant others and I-position taps into an individual's ability to stand up for themselves and independently express their will. Lower emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, fusion with others, and higher I-position indicates greater differentiation of self in an individual (Skowron & Friedlander, 1988). As women in Pakistan have to play multiple roles and fulfill several responsibilities that are attributed by the cultural norms (e.g. domestic chores, looking after children, managing elders) hence, their mental wellbeing and life satisfaction becomes vulnerable and needed to be studied with reference differentiation of self.

Research has shown how differentiation of self or lack of it may affect a person in various aspects of their lives. One research found differentiation of self to be a predictor of intimacy, desire, and couple satisfaction (Ferreira et al., 2014). Self-differentiation was significantly associated with a higher feeling of stress (Kinga, 2014). Gender differences have also been revealed, with women reporting more emotional reactivity and fusion than men do (Cavaiola et al., 2012), that is why the focus of the study is on women.

Previous research has linked differentiation of self with life satisfaction and marital adjustment showing a positive association

among the them (Işık et al., 2020). Life satisfaction is sometimes interchangeably used with happiness but these two are different concepts. According to Diener (1993) it is an over all assessment of feelings and attitudes about one's life at a certain point in time. It is also one of the major indicators of well-being. Studies revealed that women have an average level of life satisfaction in all age levels (Prasoon & Chaturvedi, 2016). A study examining relationships between satisfaction with life and differentiation of self among Jewish and Arab women living in Israel found satisfaction with life satisfaction to be negatively correlated with emotional-cutoff in both ethnic groups and positively correlated with I-position, marriage duration, and education among the group of Arab women (Peleg & Biadisy-Ashkar, 2013). According to the authors, the study supports the argument that differentiation of self is an important factor that may influence life satisfaction in all cultures. Other than life satisfaction well-being has also found to be related with differentiation of self where Chung and Gale (2006), and Skowron and Friedlander (2008) explored the relationship of self-differentiation with two components of psychological well-being (self-esteem & depressed mood). Their researches supported the claim that higher self-differentiation translates into better psychological well-being.

According to Seligman (2018), well being is a multi-dimensional construct involving more than just being in a good mood or feeling happy. It refers to a positive psychological and emotional state of health indicating an individual's ability to cognitively and emotionally function in a productive and fulfilling manner. Mental wellbeing has an integral part in over all health. In general, it may be viewed as the state of thriving in various areas of life such as work, play, relationships etc. Previous research has exhibited differentiation of self to be related to mental wellbeing (Ross & Murdock, 2014) and life satisfaction (Işık et al., 2020; Peleg & Biadisy-Ashkar, 2013). Moreover, mental wellbeing has also been previously related to life satisfaction (Fatima et al., 2021; Muntean et al., 2022) however, scarce literature is present exploring these three constructs together. Hence current is focusing on the exploration of mental wellbeing as the moderator between differentiation of self and life satisfaction.

Differentiation of self is one of the eight interlocking concepts proposed in the family systems theory. This theory reported the interaction and relationships of individuals within a family as an interlocking connection. This phenomenon was observed to be governed by the life forces of togetherness as well as individuality such that an imbalance or complication faced by an individual member of the family is viewed as a symptom of imbalance in the

entire family unit. This is where the system is tested, as the family now gets caught in unconscious ways of regulating anxiety (Watson et al., 2012). Married women, as wives and mothers, often have to take up additional responsibility, exposing themselves to more pressure, when one or more member of the family succumbs to anxious situations; which cause imbalance in the family. It is important to note that the ability to develop and sustain mutually healthy relationships identifies with mental well-being and life satisfaction (Stewart-Brown & Janmohamed, 2008). According to the Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA) theory of well-being, our connections to other people, amplify our well-being as a feeling of belongingness, gives our life purpose and meaning, ultimately leading to greater life satisfaction (Seligman, 2018). Similarly, the basic psychological needs theory proposed that needs such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness contribute to well-being within different relationships of a person, ultimately leading to greater life satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2017). According to the bottom-up theory; overall life satisfaction is the sum of the satisfaction in specific domains of life such as employment, family, and social status. While the top-down theory suggests satisfaction with domains of life to mainly be an outcome of overall life satisfaction, which itself largely depends on personality traits and other fixed dispositional factors (Ackerman, 2019).

A mentally well individual is more likely to experience positive emotions in life, to deal with life stressors in a healthy way, to stay resilient in the face of challenges, and finally to evaluate his life experiences in a balanced way rather than focusing on the bad. This as a result would ensure greater life satisfaction (Fredrickson, 2004). On the other hand, it has been observed in collectivistic cultures that not being financially independent or in-charge of the family finances puts women at an inferior position than men. Women, therefore, do not get their due credit for all the work that they do to keep the family together and satisfied; this ignorance as opposed to acknowledgement may cause dissatisfaction among the married women in collectivistic cultures (Sarwar & Imran, 2019). Moreover, these events and experiences, which continue to make women feel more and more inferior and less important member of the family leads to the negative evaluation of life by women and thus they may report greater dissatisfaction in life. Consequently, a transition in the status of married women in Pakistan is reportedly being observed as more and more women are now continuing their education, developing their careers, which has prompted an overall transition in how women cope with their lives (Munir et al., 2022). Thus, they are able to become

differentiated individuals, capable of handling complex tasks and situations, and having a positive outlook on their lives.

Significance of the Study

It is observed that married women living in the collectivistic society of Pakistan often deal with stereotypical constructions of division of labor which includes child rearing and managing the household. Preconceived gender roles expect them to compromise their own education and career goals in order to maintain marital satisfaction (Carducci, 2012). Married women with careers have to balance work and household responsibilities together and their financial contributions are also often not met with the same level of support and enthusiasm as men. The current research aims to study this experience of married women in Pakistan by examining the association between Differentiation of self and Life satisfaction with Mental wellbeing acting as a moderator. Differentiation of self has been studied previously but has not been explored with these two concepts together within the cultural context of Pakistan. Based on the findings mentioned above, the current study aims to investigate the moderating role of mental wellbeing in the relationship between differentiation of self and life satisfaction. The current research formulated the following hypotheses:

1. Mental wellbeing and differentiation of self has a positive predictive role in Life satisfaction among married women.
2. Mental wellbeing plays a moderating role in the relationship between differentiation of self and life satisfaction of married women.

Method

Research Design: The study followed a quantitative, correlational survey design.

Participants

The participants of the research were 147 married women, approached through purposive and convenient sampling. Participants aged between 20 to 50 years ($M = 30.87$, $SD = 6.84$) had been married for a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 30 years ($M = 7.21$, $SD = 6.72$). The sample consisted of 44.2% of working women (private job 33.3%, public job 8.2%, business 2.7%) having a

minimum experience of 6 months and maximum of 30 years ($M = 6.54$, $SD = 6.49$) within several service providing professions. Participants also included 55.8% homemakers. Participants were all married women with a minimum of 1 years and maximum of 30 years of marriage ($M = 7.21$, $SD = 6.72$) having 0-5 children. Participants belong to both nuclear (38.8%) and joint (61.2%) family structures. Participants who were married for at least six months, lived in Pakistan, and understood the English language were included in the study. Participants who had children diagnosed with any special needs were excluded from the study.

Measures

Self-reported measures were utilized in this study to evaluate the chosen constructs in the participants.

Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised

The Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R; Skowron & Friedlander, 1988) is a self-report measure with 46 items focusing on adults, their significant relationships, along with their current relations with family of origin. It includes four subscales: Emotional Reactivity (ER = 11 items), I-position (IP = 11 items), Emotional Cutoff (EC = 12 items), and Fusion with Others (FO = 12 items). Except for the subscale of I-Position all other three subscales are reverse scored. A sample item is “*People have remarked that I’m overly emotional*” (ER). Participants are required to respond to items on a six-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all true for me*) to 6 (*very true for me*). The score is calculated by adding scores from all sub-scales with a total range of 46-276 with no cutoff score mentioned by the author and hence also not used within the current study. Internal consistency reliabilities calculated using Cronbach’s alpha were high for the subscales and full scale: DSI-R full scale = .92, FO = .86, ER = .89, IP = .81, EC = .84 (Skowron & Friedlander, 1988). For current study Cronbach alpha reliabilities are found to be .89, .83, .70, .80, and .70 respectively.

Satisfaction with Life Scale

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, 1993) measures an individual’s cognitive evaluation of their satisfaction with their life as a whole. It contains 5 items that ask the participants to judge how they feel about each of the statements using a 7-point Likert style response scale, where; 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

The possible range of scores is 5-35, where a score of 20 represents a neutral point on the scale. Scores that range between 5-9 indicate respondent's extreme dissatisfaction with life, whereas scores between 31-35 indicate extreme satisfaction of the respondent with their life. The scale has a coefficient alpha ranging from .79 to .89, which indicates its high internal consistency. The scale was also found to have good test-retest correlations .84, .80 over a month interval (Diener, 1993). For current study Cronbach alpha reliability is found to be .83.

Warwick-Edinburg Mental Well-being Scale

The Warwick-Edinburg Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS; Brown et al., 2007) consists of 14-items, designed to measure mental wellbeing in the general population. Each statement is worded positively, covering aspects of both feeling and functioning in mental wellbeing. Participants completing the questionnaire are asked to rate each statement based on their experience over the last 2 weeks using a 5-point Likert style response scale the response ranges are, 1 = *none of the time* to 5 = *all of the time*. The responses are all added to provide a single score where the minimum scale score is 14 whereas, the maximum is 70. making the scale suitable for monitoring mental wellbeing in population samples. The scale was not designed to identify individuals with exceptionally high or low positive mental health, hence no 'cut off' score has been provided. The construct validity of the scale was .77 and .76, which demonstrates high construct validity. Moreover, the scale has a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .89, indicating that it has high internal consistency (Brown et al., 2007). For current study Cronbach alpha reliability is .90.

Procedure

To conduct this research, permission was taken from the Institutional review board of Institute of Professional Psychology, Bahria University. Permission for all instruments being utilized was also taken from their respective authors. As participants of the research were married women including both working women and homemakers, they were approached via Facebook groups for participant ease. Data was also collected during the period of COVID-19 which entailed measures for social distancing hence, online data collection was performed. Scope, aim, and inclusion criteria of the research was posted on various social media groups for voluntary participation. Participants who met the inclusion criteria were sent the respective consent form, demographic information form, and scales

via Google Form. Purposive Convenient sampling was utilized for this process. Participants were provided with the consent form first which informed them that their participation in the research was completely voluntary, they had the right to withdraw from the research at any point and that their information would be kept confidential. After gaining consent, they were provided the demographic information form followed by administration of scales. The participants faced no harm of any kind and were thanked towards the end for their participation.

Results

Results of the current study were calculated using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM-SPSS Version 23) by performing various statistical analyses. Stepwise regression was used to find out the role of predicting variable and moderation analysis was done through model 1 through process macro (Hayes, 2015).

Table 1 provides that a unit change in the predictor variable of Differentiation of Self will result in a significant change in the criterion variable of Life Satisfaction with a predictive change of 21% and Mental Wellbeing with a predictive change of 29%, respectively.

Table 1

Simple Linear Regression Analysis Showing Differentiation of Self Predicting of Life Satisfaction and Mental Wellbeing (N =147)

Variables	Differentiation of Self					95% CI	
	R	R ²	ΔR^2	β	p	LL	UL
Life Satisfaction	.46	.21	.21	.46	.00	.06	.13
Mental Wellbeing	.54	.29	.29	.54	.00	.12	.20

Table 2 shows that I-position and emotional cutoff are the two significant predictors of mental wellbeing. A change in the predictor variable of I-position will result in a significant predictive change of 26% on mental wellbeing, whereas in the presence of i-position, the predictor variable of emotional cutoff will cause 14% change in mental wellbeing. It also shows that emotional cutoff is a significant predictor of life satisfaction. A change in the predictor variable of emotional cutoff will cause a significant predictive change of 27% on life satisfaction. Moreover, in the presence of emotional cutoff, the predictor variable of I-position is also causing a minor change of 4% on life satisfaction.

Table 2
Stepwise Regression showing Subscales of DSI Predicting Mental Well-being and Life Satisfaction (N =147)

Criterion: Mental Wellbeing							
Predictors	R	R ²	ΔR ²	β	p	95% CI	
						LL	UL
Step I							
I-position	.51	.26	.26	.51	.00	.38	.67
Step II							
I-position	.64	.40	.14	.49	.00	.37	.62
Emotional Cutoff				.37	.00	.19	.39
Emotional Reactivity				-.01	.84		
Fusion with Others				-.06	.41		
Criterion: Life Satisfaction							
Step I							
Emotional cut off	.52	.27	.27	.52	.000	.21	.36
Step II							
Emotional Cutoff,	.56	.31	.04	.51	.000	.20	.35
I-position				.20	.004	.04	.24
Emotional Reactivity				.07	.41		
Fusion with Others				-.13	.12		

As shown in [Table 3](#) there is nonsignificant moderation effect between differentiation of self and satisfaction with life. The p value of 0.77 (being greater than 0.5) indicates that the predictor variable (DSI) and the criterion variable (MWB) do not work together to cause any moderation.

Table 3
Moderating Role of Mental Wellbeing between Differentiation of Self and Life Satisfaction (N =147)

Predictors	B	SD	β	p	ΔR ²	ΔF
(Constant)	7.82	.69	7.82	.49	.28	28.97**
DSI	.04	.59	.04	.55		
MWB	.14	.56	.14	.58		
DSI x MWB	.00	.30	.00	.77		

** p < .01.

Discussion

This study was conducted to explore the experience of married women in Pakistan by examining the relationship between differentiation of self and life satisfaction with mental wellbeing acting as a moderator. The finding of the study revealed that differentiation of self is a positive predictor of life satisfaction and mental well-being. These findings are consistent with prior literature where differentiation of self has not only been found to be a significant predictor of life satisfaction but marital adjustment as well (Işık, et al., 2020). Whereas Lee (1997) found that differentiation of self leads to higher mental wellbeing. Furthermore, differentiation of self plays a significant role in the development of couple satisfaction (Ferreira, et al., 2014), marital satisfaction (Kinga, 2014; Lim & Jennings, 1996) and spirituality (Jankowski & Vaughn, 2009); all these factors are also found to be contributing factors of life satisfaction (Kasapoğlu & Yabanigül, 2018; Mincu & Taşcu, 2015; Yaden et al., 2022) and mental wellbeing (Kumar, 2015; Pauly et al., 2023; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2017; Yousefi, et al., 2009).

Additionally, the results of stepwise regression showed that I-position and emotional cutoff (subscales of differentiation of self) positively predicted mental wellbeing. These findings differ from previous studies where higher levels of emotional cutoff have been associated with anxiety (Lampis, et al., 2019), depression, hostility, psychoticism, somatization, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Bell, 2000). Bowen (1978) theorized that being emotionally cutoff is linked to unsuccessfully resolving attachment with families of origin by creating some form of emotional isolation or physical distance. Pakistani culture is known to place greater parental and spousal physical and psychological control over women. Hence, it can be inferred that emotional cutoff may be used as a means to cope when one is not able to self-differentiate or adjust to a changing environment, this helps in reducing emotional stress during interactions with the family (Haefner, 2017). This also explains the limited role of I-position in mental wellbeing as women may find it easier to emotionally distance themselves from someone rather than having to speak and stand up for their own needs, opinions, and rights to deal with the situation. Since Pakistan consists of a collectivistic society where the group is given more importance it is understandable that some level of fusion with others would be required to make necessary connections within the family for the personal wellbeing of the individual.

Additionally, emotional cutoff and I-position positively predicted life satisfaction. These findings are not like prior literature (Diener,

1993; Peleg & Biadisy-Ashkar, 2013). As in current study emotional cutoff and I-position are creating positive variance while prior literature has indicated that emotional cutoff is a negative predictor of life satisfaction (Bell, 2000; Lampis, et al., 2019). These findings can be attributed to the change in the perception of women's role in the family (Haefner, 2017); now women are found to be passionate for both family and careers and hence they use emotional cutoff as a coping mechanism to deal with familial pressures as still family satisfaction is the greatest predictor of life satisfaction in Pakistan (Ahmad et al., 2018).

Results from the moderation analysis showed that mental wellbeing does not have any significant moderation effect between differentiation of self and life satisfaction. It can be inferred that differentiation of self and mental wellbeing independently work in promoting life satisfaction but do not work in combination. The detailed analysis of the subscales provides the justification for these nonsignificant findings as they are highlighting the role of emotional cutoff and I-position. Where in indigenous culture life satisfaction is determined by family satisfaction more (Ahmad et al., 2018; Böhnke, 2008) hence personal mental wellbeing is being compromised and neglected for familial accomplishment.

Limitations and Recommendations

Current research has highlighted that differentiation of self particularly I-position and emotional cutoff are being used as coping mechanism hence qualitative research is required for deeper understanding of these constructs. The focus of the current study was limited to married women only, future researches can explore the same variables in unmarried population. Future researches should emphasize on collectivistic cultures when it comes to differentiation of self, as the study of differentiation has its roots in a more individualistic society, therefore, future intervention programs need to be directed towards the awareness of differentiation among collectivistic cultures.

Implications

Findings of the current study can be utilized in exploring and devising intervention plans in order to increase the efficiency of marital and family-based interventions. Thus, the results may facilitate further studies and interventions in family therapy and relationship coaching in general, in order to increase awareness among

Pakistani women about seeking professional support. Further analysis may also shed light on collectivistic culture in Pakistan and other countries. In addition, devising programs that cater to personal development focusing on increasing awareness of differentiation of self, mental wellbeing, and how to incorporate these phenomena into their lives may be proven beneficial for married women.

Conclusion

Results from the current study are further additions in the literature showing differentiation of self is an important factor that influences life satisfaction and mental wellbeing in married women living in the collectivistic society of Pakistan. Moreover, differentiation of self and mental well-being does not work together to increase life satisfaction of married women. A new finding which differs from preceding researches was that emotional cutoff was seen to increase both life satisfaction and mental wellbeing in women. It is inferred that both differentiation of self and mental well-being predicts life satisfaction in married women independently which is why it is important to work on them. Findings of the current study are an addition to the extensive literature based on family system's theory, mental wellbeing as well as life satisfaction. Moreover, it supports the importance of considering these elements when it comes to marital life of Pakistani women and their mental health.

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