

# Research Paper: The Effectiveness of the Self-differentiation Training Based on the Bowen Theory on Marital Satisfaction



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Marital satisfaction is a basis of other social organization health. The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of the self-differentiation training based on the Bowen Theory to increase marital satisfaction.

**Methods:** The research method was semi-experimental and the pre-test-posttest design with the control group. In this intervention, the population of this study was selected by the convenience sampling method and 38 married women were randomly assigned to the experimental (n= 12) and control (n= 12) groups in Tehran in 2018. The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI) and Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI) were completed by married women. The control group received no training. The intervention included 10 sessions of self-differentiation training based on the Bowen theory. Twelve women participated in this semi-experimental project selected by convenience sampling as an experimental group and twelve women as a control group. The brief couple-based therapy was taught in 10 sessions based on techniques of Bowen therapy and four components of differentiation. The data were analyzed by SPSS v. 23 software.

**Results:** There was a significant difference between the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups. In addition, training based on the DST approach could significantly increase marital satisfaction ( $t= 21.62$ ,  $df= 22$ ,  $P<0.001$ ).

**Conclusion:** The results indicated that there was a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group. Therefore, the training could significantly increase the self-differentiation of married women. These findings can be used to design interventional programs to improve conflict, adaptation, intimacy, and marital satisfaction of the couples.

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## 1. Introduction

The involvement of families' who dress in beautiful clothes can be one of the main pillars of conflict and marital dissatisfaction from the beginning to the end of every marriage. Indistinguishable allows this interference from an original family. Self-differentiation is one of the key concepts in the theory of Bowen [1]. This concept reflects the individuals' ability to have an independent life apart from their family or the ability to distinguish between thoughts, emotions, and feelings. The theory of the Bowen family system consists of both internal and interpersonal dimensions [2, 3]. Bowen (1978) refers to an incompatible family relationship as a fusion of family members. Bowen's theory emphasizes the need for differentiation at behavioral and cognitive levels for intrapersonal and interpersonal interaction, and defines individuals with differentiation of self, as those who control the situation by knowing the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in very emotional situations. Differentiation of self would lead to the creation, commutation, or reduction of a variety of psychological constructs. On the other hand, undifferentiating people are not capable of decision-making and are tenderable to psychological symptoms [4]. Differentiation is linked to psychological adjustment, well-being, and self-control [5].

The Bowen theory provides a comprehensive explanation of the improvement and long-life marital relationships [6]. Furthermore, the healthy relationships between family members with a higher degree of happiness and self-differentiation are linked to marital satisfaction, stable relationships with the opposite gender, and effective parent-child communication. In addition, self-differentiation in connection with intellectual and emotional functioning helps to maintain individual identity and positive interpersonal relationships, in which increased life satisfaction, stable emotional levels, and positive attitudes toward marriage can be observed [7]. The Bowen theory suggests that a person can reach the level of emotional maturity when he is capable of communicating with the primary family rather than responding to various situations in an unwanted way. The level of differentiation of each person indicates his ability to separate intellectual and emotional processes [8].

Different studies have shown that self-differentiation training programs, aiming at reducing chronic anxiety [9, 10], increasing family functioning, coping with stress, anxiety, and depression in married women [11], and increasing marital satisfaction [12, 13] affects marital conflicts among married women [9]. BFST found and

successfully implemented the interventions targeting marital conflict [14], sexual problems [15], and adolescent identity development [16]. Researches have shown that the relationship between safe attachment and interpersonal satisfaction, sexual functioning, marital satisfaction, and care are very close [17].

Many difficulties are preventable by training and developing mental health. On the other hand, the family's training is indispensable. The family is a system and changes in each component of this system can affect and change it [18]. Because differentiation is a part of the identity and taught, self-differentiation training can help improve differentiation and marital satisfaction.

This study investigated the self-differentiating training in women as a person of the whole system to find out if using the considered training they can improve their marriage and develop skills, such as lack of coalitions, lack of separation, and family tension, to help improve marital esthetics.

## 2. Methods

The present study was semi-experimental research with pre-test and post-test design. The statistical population of this study consisted of all the women who were referred to counseling centers in Tehran in 2018. Due to the population type, convenience sampling was used to select 24 women and they were randomly assigned to the experimental (n=12) and control (n=12) groups. Regarding the aim of this study to help improve marital satisfaction, 38 married women aged 35-25 years were evaluated for marital satisfaction and using differentiation questionnaires. Out of the responses given to the differentiation questionnaire, 24 individuals with a low degree of distinction were selected. Among the women who responded to these questionnaires, 24 individuals were identified as having a lower differentiation. For the assignment, these subjects were assigned to two experimental and control groups (n=12). The control group kept away from the educational process during the training sessions. The experimental group was trained weekly at a counseling center (Sokhane Ashena) for 10 weeks and the each session lasted 90-120 minutes [19].

Both groups were measured at the end of the training sessions. Data were collected concerning socio-demographic characteristics, such as age and education during an interview. The Babaie Khakian et al.'s [20] approach was used in the preparation of this training program.

**Enrich Marital Satisfaction Scale:** this scale has two types of 115 and 125 questions that identify difficult and gratifying backgrounds and determine the need for counseling for couples. According to Olson [21], mean reliability of 0.79, which was 0.86 using a test-retest method after 4 weeks was obtained for this scale. Its validity using correlation coefficient was reported from 0.41 to 0.60 [22].

Skowron and Schmitt [23] obtained Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.93. The scale including 115 questions makes the subjects fatigue; thus, a short version of it has been developed. Therefore, after calculating the correlation coefficient of each question with the questionnaire, 47 questions were considered. The reliability of the questionnaire was 0.95 using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. In the current research, the scale with 47 questions was used and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.92.

The options to answer the questions were "totally agree", "agree", "neither agree nor disagree", "disagree", and "totally disagree". The contribution of each of the items from right to left is 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. The maximum score on the scale is 235, which is a higher mark of happiness in marital life.

**Differentiation of Self Inventory-revised (DSI-R):** This scale is perhaps the most commonly used and well-validated scale in this field. This inventory enables respondents to report their relationship with other members of their family [24]. Skowron [25] reported the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this scale to be 0.88. Fakhari et al. [26, 27] obtained Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.79. In the current research, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.80.

Each question has six options from "very good for me" to "it's never about me right" and is scored on a 6-point Likert scale. The DSI full-scale score is calculated by reversing raw scores of all items on the ER, EC, and FO subscales and one item on the IP sub-scale and summing them so that the higher scores reflect the greater differentiation (less emotional reactivity, less difficulty in maintaining I-positions, and less emotional cut off and less fusion).

In this research, the data were described using the tables, mean, and standard deviation, and compared with a t-test. The Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to compare the mean scores in the two groups. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Group differences were evaluated using multivariate MANOVA and the contribution of each variable in the prediction of the quality of life of working and non-working women was determined by multivariate regression analysis. The purpose, content, and the training program in each meeting are presented in Table 1.

### 3. Results

The Mean $\pm$ SD of age in the experiment group was 30.58 $\pm$ 3.61 years, while it was 29.92 $\pm$ 3.18 years in the control group. Furthermore, both groups were homogeneous regarding the educational level. In the experimental group 33.3% had a high school, 41.7% had a bachelor's degree, and 25% master's degree, while in the control group, 25% had a high school 50% a bachelor's degree, and 25% a master's degree. In the beginning, it was necessary to ensure from the ANCOVA test assumptions that Levene's test was used for this purpose based on the homogeneity of the variance of two groups for a variable.

The results of the t-test ( $t= 0.138$ ,  $df= 22$ ;  $F= 0.183$ ) showed that the two experimental and control groups were homogenous in the pre-test in terms of marital satisfaction. Because the significance level was higher than the critical value of 0.05 for both pre-test and post-test scores of marital satisfaction, this variable was concluded to follow a normal distribution.

There was a significant difference between the post-test scores of marital satisfaction (Table 2) so that its mean scores in the post-test (Mean= 152) in the experimental group were significantly higher than the control group (Mean= 128.67). In other words, self-differentiation training caused an increase in marital satisfaction in the experimental group. Therefore, the hypothesis of "there is a significant difference in marital satisfaction between married women who participated in self-differentiation training based on the Bowen Theory and this training is effective in increasing marital satisfaction, was confirmed.

Table 3 shows that the marital satisfaction in the two experimental and control groups was compared with independent t-tests and the t-test ( $t= 21.62$ ,  $df= 22$ ) results indicated the significant effect of passing the course of self-differentiation training on marital satisfaction in the experiment group.

### 4. Discussion

It was assessed whether self-differentiation can help people improve their marriage. Although the findings of Marcos [28] were inconsistent with other studies and he found no relationship between self-differentiation and marital satisfaction but the relationship between the self-differentiation and marital satisfaction has been shown in various studies. Equivalence of spouses' differentiation has also been reported in some studies [29]. In addition, studies have shown that self-differentiation can predict intimacy, adjustment, marital satisfaction, and quality of

Table 1. Content of the training program

Sessions	Contents
1	<p>Aim: A reciprocal relationship between the familiarity of the members with the group's leader, creating a sense of commitment to continue the meetings, awareness of the goals, profits, and regulations of the group.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Creating incentives, attracting members' opinions to the general content of meetings, and reviewing members' suggestions.</li> <li>2. Reviewing each member's perception of the subject (self-differentiation) and what each member hopes to achieve from these meetings.</li> <li>3. Answering questions in the context of the program.</li> <li>4. Statement of the rules of the sessions, which include secrecy, respect for each other, active participation in the meetings, and the exact performance of the duties.</li> <li>5. Determining the time of the next meeting with the agreement of the members.</li> </ol> <p>Homework: Members were asked to record each of their three events and then write their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a table like an example.</p>
2	<p>Aim : Awareness of the degree of convergence – separation, with the original family</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The previous session was reviewed.</li> <li>2. How to interfere with our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors with the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of others, and the degree to which the individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of others.</li> <li>3. Explaining that the others have thoughts and feelings that can differ from one's own thinking or feeling.</li> <li>4. Review and comparing the role of rational and non-rational thoughts and beliefs about the type of feeling created in a person.</li> </ol> <p>Homework: Members were asked to pay attention to their links with others throughout the week. Every day note an event and their impressions of the event.</p>
3	<p>Aim: Knowledge of people about the meaning of the facts and their interpretation and subjective interpretation.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A double-minded study of issues and links (we look at all events, in two ways, what are they and what we mean to them).</li> <li>2. How to mean realities or interpret and interpret events and examine the consequences.</li> <li>3. The role of values taken on the mind and creation of the mental world.</li> <li>4. Investigating the role of society in imposing values.</li> <li>5. How to create a relationship of value to others and create a superficial and productive life.</li> <li>6. The role of mold in the differences and incompatibilities of humans and the loss of awareness and freedom.</li> </ol> <p>Homework: Evaluating the way to express feelings and dealing with it in the main family and respond to the following questions: Have you been comfortable in expressing your feelings (positive and negative) in your main family? Turning them on to something reminded of them. What was the reaction of the other members to her when a member of the family showed up her feelings? How does it feel in the current family?</p>
4	<p>Aim: A paid attention to the feelings and expressing it right and the way to deal with the feelings of the spouse and other family members.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Review of the previous session in expressing feelings in the original family as well as in the current family.</li> <li>2. Awareness of the links between the way, in which the feelings of the current family and their families are expressed.</li> <li>3. Training the correct way of expressing their inner feelings and using the role-playing technique to express one of the feelings that have never been expressed, but not understood by the spouse.</li> <li>4. Training how to respond to the negative emotions of the spouse and other family members.</li> </ol> <p>Homework: Identify and express one of the feelings that have not been expressed so far.</p>
5	<p>Aim: Knowledge of the type of attachment style (how to communicate with a caregiver) and past experiences and their impacts on the individual's life</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explaining the types of attachment styles and their relationship with the next growth of competence in social relationships.</li> <li>2. The effect of existing personality styles on spouse's choice.</li> <li>3. Investigating the role of cultural and family background and individual priorities in the choice of attachment style.</li> </ol> <p>Homework: Childhood memo notes and how their previous attachment was affected by their current behavior.</p>
6	<p>Aim: Familiarity with the process of multi-generation transmission and awareness of how the current problem arises with generation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Review of the position of the parents, marital status, divorce, and death, ... in the main family.</li> <li>2. Investigation of the level of a person-to-family mix, core family's emotional system, and parental euphoria, family transmission process, and triangle examination.</li> <li>3. Review of multi-generation transmission</li> <li>4. An examination of how to choose a spouse using the generated graph.</li> <li>5. Examining the patterns of interaction among the individuals and their wives with the members of the original family and comparing it with the patterns of interaction in common life.</li> </ol> <p>Homework: The members were asked to draw the backgrounds of their families for themselves and their husbands in a pictorial way.</p>

Sessions	Contents
7	<p>Aim: Differentiating the misplaced roles assigned to each person in his or her original family to play a role in the present family.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explaining the various roles in the family and examining the roles of each individual in the original family.</li> <li>2. Review of the roles that individuals have in their current lives.</li> <li>3. Awareness of how misleading roles left to people in the mainstream are in their current lives.</li> <li>4. Teaching the role of being a woman.</li> <li>5. Determining the true role that each individual must play in the current family by the members themselves</li> </ol>
8	<p>Aim: The decoration of incorrect links formed in the original family</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Review of the association of each member with the family members.</li> <li>2. Review of the topic of conversations when people are with their family members.</li> <li>3. Review of the length of time people spend with their family members.</li> <li>4. Identifying the feeling created in people if they did not see their family members one day.</li> <li>5. Examining the effect of the level and manner of communication with the members of the main family on their current lives.</li> </ol> <p>Homework: Determining a new pattern in terms of how to communicate with the main family members.</p>
9	<p>Aim: Awareness of the defense mechanisms and how they are transferred from previous generations. People are aware of the contradiction between what they are and what they should be and the result they bring</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The previous session was reviewed.</li> <li>2. Explaining the types of defense mechanisms (repression, return, projection, intrusion, compensation, rebound, reverberation, reverse reaction, etc.)</li> <li>3. Investigation of the members' experience in the field of defense mechanisms and determining the most used defense mechanism.</li> <li>4. Examining the contradictions in each member and examining the consequences of contradictions.</li> </ol> <p>Homework: The question of who I am and what should I be? Moreover, indicating a sense of how they answered each question at the end.</p>
10	<p>Aim: End of the period and summing up</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The previous session was reviewed.</li> <li>2. Review of the lessons learned at these meetings.</li> <li>3. Receiving feedback from the members on their thoughts and feelings from these meetings.</li> <li>4. Acknowledgments to the members for their active participation in the meetings.</li> </ol>



life [30]. Bowen showed that highly differentiated individuals are more satisfied with their lives [31], well-being [32], and marital relations [33]. The impact of differentiation on marital satisfaction was found to be stronger in men than women, and marital satisfaction in women decreased with age while it increased in men [34].

Those with higher levels of differentiation are not influenced by the emotional reactivity of others, but rather by their values and sense of self. Thus, a more differentiated partner will be able to separate the anxiety due to symptoms and act toward the other in ways that would maintain relationship satisfaction and be supportive of one

**Table 2.** Analysis of marital satisfaction averages in the pre- and post-test in the experimental and control groups

Groups	Stage	Mean±SD	df	t	P
Experimental	Pre-test	129.42±26.13	11	23.99	0.001
	Post-test	152±26.29			
Control	Pre-test	128±24.13	11	1.77	0.104
	Post-test	128.67±23.43			



**Table 3.** Comparison of marital satisfaction mean scores in the experimental and control groups using t-test

Groups	Mean±SD	df	t	P
Experimental	3.262±2.58	22	21.62	0.001
Control	1.3±0.66			



another [35]. More differentiated persons are expected to establish greater autonomy in a relationship without experiencing debilitating fears of abandonment and can achieve emotional intimacy in that same relationship without fear of feeling smothered [36].

Emami Rizi and Borun demonstrated the effect of training for self-differentiation on marital satisfaction among female married students. Previous studies have reported the usefulness of self-differentiation training to improve the mental health of divorced people [37] and women experiencing domestic violence [38].

Bowen (1978) explained many personality characteristics in terms of differentiation. For instance, highly differentiated people were capable of thoughtful consideration, connection with significant others while maintaining a separate self and setting a more objective life course, and they were more flexible, adaptable, and emotionally independent when compared with their lower differentiated counterparts [39].

A study was carried out to identify factors affecting marital satisfaction among married women and its results showed that self-differentiation in the family of origin had a mediator effect when the experience of the family of origin influenced marital satisfaction. Also, various practical solutions, including consultation with the family, treatment, and the need for marital education improved marital satisfaction of married women [40].

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of the present research showed the importance of the training based DST on increasing marital satisfaction. Therefore, it can be used in educational programs for increasing performance among women. Moreover, the improvement of their family function should also consider in addition to conduct certain programs for improving marital satisfaction among the women. Finally, the lack of a follow-up and using only one gender (married women), from one counseling center in one city make it necessary to generalize results with more caution. In future research, it is suggested that a wider statistical population be used and statistical samples are selected from both genders (men and women).

Based on the shortcomings observed in the current research, it is recommended that this research be carried out on the women with their husbands. Since this research was done on one of the couples (women), it is suggested to the couples simultaneously and compare the results with this study.

## Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

This study was approved by the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Education Science and Psychology, Payame Noor University (Code: IR.PNU.REC.1400.066). All ethical principles are considered in this article. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and its implementation stages. They were also assured about the confidentiality of their information. They were free to leave the study whenever they wished, and if desired, the research results would be available to them.

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### Authors' contributions

Both authors equally contributed to preparing this article.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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