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## ORIGINAL ARTICLES

### Moderating Effect Of Gender On The Association Between Autonomy And Intimacy Of Iranian Married Students

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#### ABSTRACT

The main purposes of the present study were first to examine the association between autonomy and intimacy among married Iranian students and second to examine the degree to which gender moderates the relationship between autonomy and intimacy. Data from 220 participants were examined using measures of autonomy and intimacy. The results indicated that autonomy is positively related to intimacy. Although, based on gender, there are some differences between intimacy and autonomy; gender differences did not lead to the conclusion that gender has a moderating influence on the association between autonomy and intimacy.

**Key words:** Autonomy, Intimacy, Moderator, Gender, Iranian married.

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#### Introduction

Marriage is defined as the term commonly used to refer to a formally-written, verbal, or tradition long-term agreement between a man and a woman for the production of children, food and other commodities in a domestic context (Becker, 1981). It shapes the lives of most adults, regardless of whether the agreement to be together is formal or informal or do not marry by choice or circumstance (Bailey, 2003). Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg (2010) maintain that people do not come to a marriage without any preconceived attitudes or emotional patterns. They would have developed certain types of conflict avoidance, peace seeking, affectionate behaviour in a positive way or negatively, they could lack confidence and have little faith in the permanence of their marriage and anticipate eventual marital breakdown if their own parents were divorced.

In a marriage, marital satisfaction refers to the level of satisfaction or happiness derived from the union (Locke & Wallace, 1959). The level of marital satisfaction determines the survival of any marriage and as such there have been studies and investigations on the factors that affect marital satisfaction since the 1990s (Bradbury, Fincham & Beach, 2000).

According to Martinson (2005), various factors such as socio-cultural interactions and environment, work, friends, etc, family-of-origin have been recognized that influence the development and behavior of an individual. These factors are highlighted when a person get marriage.

Family of origin is an instance that has important role even a marriage happened for a person. Indeed, the experiences that we go through with our family, whether positive or negative, influence the way we develop as individuals and determine our values and attitudes in our future adult relationships and we replicate behavioral patterns we witnessed or learned in our family in relationships with our partners. In this regard, psychologists and counselors have a brilliant attention to family of origin. Hovestadt and his colleagues (1985) indicated that, family-of-origin is a dimension includes several aspects of human beings. The aspects such as psychological, physical and emotional beginnings of human being are more critical and highlighted in family of origin. Furthermore, some intrapersonal relationships during childhood with parents or primary caregivers have crucial role in a quality of relationships in future specifically in adult life (Falcke, Wagner & Mosmann, 2008). Hoshino (2008) believes that "the past is not disregarded; indeed, family therapists often explore family-of-origin issues to understand the interplay of current dynamics and dysfunction" (p.27). Falcke *et al.* (2008) stated that the basis of conjugal choice is related to the inclination to replicate the family-of-origin.

Intimacy defined as an interpersonal interaction consisting of self-disclosure and partner responsiveness (Reis & Shaver, 1988) is regarded as a significant component of dating relationships that is the basis for an individual's decision to marry and for gaining marital satisfaction at later stages of life (Larson, Benson, Wilson & Medora, 1998; Waring *et al.*, 1980).

Waring *et al.* (1980) found that interpersonal relationships among young adults were significantly affected by the intimacy level of their parents' relationship.

Rovers (2000) showed that achievement of intimacy may necessarily follow individuation since individuals' independence grows into interdependence. The basic differences in male and female identities may give rise to gender differences in intimacy. While the basic feminine self is characterized by connectedness to others and is related to attachment and relational matters, the masculine self is known to be separate and has less permeable boundaries (Gilligan, 1982; Gottman, 1994; Levant & S, 1995). Larson *et al.* (2000) showed that young adults raised in families with more dysfunctional rules achieve less intimacy in their dating relationships compared to those from families with more functional rules.

Autonomy is another factor of family of origin to be considered. According to Jozefik and Pilecki (2010) autonomy is a process which starts from childhood through which an individual modifies their relationship with their parents in order to define their own identity and gain independence. Rather than being just external freedom, autonomy includes the ability to act on that external freedom. By creating conditions in which an individual values his life and makes use of his autonomy, marital love improves autonomy more and better than friendship can (Johns, 2010).

Autonomy has been referred to as being behaviorally and emotionally independent, being comfortable with having differences with others, feeling secure with self, and relying on self, while intimacy is defined as support, trust, closeness and being connected to other individuals (Sharabany, Gershoni & Hoffman, 1981).

Autonomy and intimacy were defined as independent relational processes for many years (Taradash *et al.*, 2001). But there has been a shift towards acknowledging an interplaying role of intimacy and autonomy (Baxter, 1988) and (Guisinger & Blatt, 1995), and it has been suggested that these two are processes developing together so that autonomy develops within a relational context created by intimacy (Allen, Hauser, Bell & O'Connor, 1994). Focusing on parent-adolescent relationships, theorists initially emphasized the necessity of emotional detachment from parents in order for adolescents to gain autonomy and independence (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Investigating parent-adolescent relationships, theorists initially theorized that it was necessary for adolescents to detach from their parents emotionally in order to gain autonomy and independence (Steinberg *et al.*, 1986).

Allen *et al.* (1994) emphasized that for healthy adolescent development, a balance between autonomy and relatedness in the parental relationships should be maintained. Intimacy and autonomy are two essential conditions for an optimal functioning of a marriage (Gordon, 2006).

A bulk of research has been conducted on the crucial role of intimacy and autonomy in a quality marriage in various forms and terms such as differentiation of self (Bowen, 1974), I-position beside congruency (Satir, Banmen, Gerber & Gomori, 1991), and I-Thou communication (Kalantarkousheh, Hassan, Kadir & Talib, 2011a). Moreover, the mentioned studies employed concepts that resulted in the claim that intimacy and autonomy are meaningful components if they are support each other and are acknowledged together.

Hovestadt *et al.* (1985) consider autonomy and intimacy as intertwined concepts which involved in the healthy functioning of a marriage. In Bowen's theory, differentiation of self allows the individual to have his/her own points of view and to have personal feelings not directly shaped by their intimate relationships. Thus, the differentiated individual is capable of, and comfortable with, autonomous behavior and close relationships. Bowen (1978) asserts that an individual needs to have the capacity for both autonomy and intimacy to become mature and to adjust personally.

According to Satir (1971) a healthy marriage is characterized with a clear, honest, direct and respectful communication. Kalantarkousheh *et al.* (2011b) distinguish between I-Thou and I-It communication concepts, stating that a quality marriage has tokens of I-Thou communication such as being there for each other, not looking at each other as property, respecting their partner's freedom, and admitting partner's opinions, that all result in autonomy and intimacy. Thus, although intimacy is regarded to be an important factor for a successful marriage, each individual's autonomy needs should be responded appropriately in a well-satisfied relationship as well (Gordon, 2006).

There are gender differences regarding intimacy and autonomy in relationships so that women are more resistant to peer conformity compared to men (Steinberg *et al.*, 1986). They are also more emotionally autonomous in their relationships with their parents (Berndt, 1979; Steinberg *et al.*, 1986). Since girls are more autonomous than boys in their parent and peer relationships, they appear to be more autonomous in their romantic relationships as well (Taradash *et al.*, 2001).

A study of 441 college students suggests that theories proposed by Gilligan and Chickering both provide a better understanding of autonomy and intimacy development. The results showed that intimacy is the strongest predictor of autonomy and intimacy is predicted by autonomy, gender-role attitudes, and gender (Greeley & Tinsley, 1988).

In a cross-sectional study on relatedness and autonomy in relationships, Rankin-Esquer *et al.* (1997) reported the existence of gender differences as well. Studying a sample of couples who were married for 18 years on average, they showed that in long-lasting marriages, autonomy and relatedness both lead to high husband

relationship satisfaction independently, while wives needed both autonomy and relatedness support from their husbands to feel satisfied with their relationships, otherwise they would feel abandoned by their husbands (Rankin-Esquer *et al.*, 1997).

The existent literature shows the important of autonomy and intimacy among married individuals. Furthermore, gender differences of intimacy and autonomy are evident in the existent literature. Nevertheless, gender differences of intimacy and autonomy among an Iranian sample have not been reported in the literature. Therefore, the present research aimed to examine gender differences and impact of the gender as a moderator on the association between autonomy and intimacy among a sample of married Iranian women.

#### *Methods:*

##### *1.1 Participants and Procedure:*

The participants included in this study were married postgraduate Iranian students in Universiti Putra Malaysia. Students were randomly recruited to participate in the study through their emails addresses. Data for this study were obtained by administering the survey instruments to the participants via an online survey. The total number of respondents reached 220. The raw data from the online survey instruments were downloaded from the website in which the survey was administered and imported into a computer spreadsheet for analysis. The sample consisted of 220 married students including 117 females and 107 males aged from 25 to 61.

##### *1.1.1 Instruments:*

In addition to the demographic questionnaire, the instrument used in this study was Family-of-Origin Scale (FOS; Hovestadt *et al.*, 1985). FOS measure taps an individual's perceptions of his or her family origin. This 5-point Likert-type scale consists of 40-items which, according to the test authors Hovestadt *et al.* (1985) tap 10 relational characteristics that are thought to influence an individual's capacity regarding the two dimensions of autonomy and intimacy. Items were translated into Farsi to make it feasible for administration to participants. The translation, and evaluation the validity and reliability was done in Iran by a panel of experts (Sanai, 2009).

Autonomy; twenty of the items are designed to measure autonomy. The autonomy dimension is comprised of five subscales: Clarity of Expression - thoughts and feelings are clear in the family; Responsibility - family members claim responsibility for their own actions; Respect for Others - family members are allowed to speak for themselves; Openness to Others - family members are receptive to one another; Acceptance of Separation and Loss - separation and loss are dealt with openly in the family.

Intimacy; twenty of the items are designed to measure the encouragement of intimacy. The intimacy dimension consists of five subscales: Range of Feelings - family members express a wide range of feelings; Mood and Tone - a warm positive atmosphere exists in the family; Conflict Resolution - normal conflicts are resolved without undue stress; Empathy - family members are sensitive to one another; and Trust.

Demographics; Demographics information included age, gender, current educational level, marriage duration, and number of children .

##### *1.1.1 Data Analysis:*

The questionnaires were administered among married postgraduate Iranian students in Universiti Putra Malaysia. They were ensured of the confidentiality of information. The measures were self report questionnaires and were completed individually by the participants.

Beside some descriptive statistics, independent sample t-test was calculated to examine gender differences among the variables. Additionally, Pearson's correlations were calculated to estimate the relationship between the variables. Multiple regression analysis was another statistical activity to examine the accurate prediction of a predictor. Furthermore, to determine the role of gender differences in the association of autonomy and self acceptance, Fisher's  $r$ - to Z-transformation was performed. According to Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003), the Fisher's Z transformation of the correlation coefficient  $r$  is used to compare correlations across independent groups of subjects. In the last part of the statistical analysis, in order to examine the potential of moderating effect of gender on the association of autonomy and self acceptance, ANOVA was used.

#### *Results:*

##### *1.1 Descriptive Statistics:*

As we can see in Table 1 the average of autonomy ( $M = 66.1$ ,  $SD = 5.89$ ) and intimacy ( $M = 71.74$ ,  $SD = 7.51$ ) dimensions scores for men are higher than autonomy ( $M = 65.39$ ,  $SD = 6.56$ ) and intimacy ( $M = 67.76$ ,

SD = 10.30) scores for women. Further, Descriptive statistics for some demographic variables such as age, education, duration of marriage and number of children are indicated in Table 2.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics for Autonomy and Intimacy, for the Total Sample and by Gender

	Variables	No. of Items	Total Group		Men		Women	
			Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Autonomy	20	65.69	6.23	66.01	5.89	65.39	6.56
	Intimacy	20	69.70	9.25	71.74	7.51	67.76	10.30

Note: N total = 220, N men = 107, N women = 113

**Table 2:** Descriptive Statistics for Demographics Variables, for the Total Sample and by Gender

		Percent for All (n=220)	Percent For Males (n=107)	Percent For Females (n=113)
Age	25-35	54.1	52.3	55.8
	36-45	40.9	42.1	39.8
	46-60	4.5	5.6	3.5
	61 and more	.5	0	.9
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Education	Master	41.8	28.0	54.9
	Doctoral	58.2	72.0	45.1
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Duration of Marriage	1-17	86.8	87.9	85.8
	17-34	13.2	12.1	14.2
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of Children	1	34.5	29.9	38.9
	2	18.6	25.2	12.4
	3	4.5	4.7	4.4
	None	42.3	40.2	44.2
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

### 1.1 Bivariate Analysis:

In the first step, the association between autonomy and intimacy was examined for the whole sample and for each gender separately through bivariate analyses. It was hypothesized that first "there is a significant association between autonomy and intimacy among Iranian married university students", second "there is a significant association between autonomy and intimacy among married Iranian male university students" and finally "there is a significant association between autonomy and intimacy among married Iranian female university students".

As can be inferred from Table 3, the autonomy and intimacy in the whole sample [Pearson's  $r(220) = .683$ ,  $p < .05$ ], among men [Pearson's  $r(107) = .66$ ,  $p < .05$ ] and women [Pearson's  $r(113) = .71$ ,  $p < .05$ ] were significantly correlated and therefore, all three above-mentioned hypotheses were retained. The coefficients were positive; therefore, the more autonomy defined the higher the level of intimacy in a person, whether man and woman, experienced and vice versa. Surprisingly, on assessment of the effect sizes of these correlations, it appears that they have large effects.

**Table 3:** Correlation Coefficient

Variable	All (n=220)			Males (n=107)			Females (n=113)		
	$r$	$P <$	Effect Size	$r$	$P <$	Effect Size	$r$	$P <$	Effect Size
Autonomy	.683**	.0001	.83	.666**	.0001	.82	.710**	.0001	.84
Intimacy									

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### 1.1 Multiple Regression Analysis:

When two variables were correlated perfectly, multiple regression analysis was performed to provide an opportunity to assess the importance of each of the predictors to the overall relationship (Ho, 2006). Therefore, in this section, multiple regression analysis was performed to evaluate the extent to which autonomy factor accurately predicts intimacy for the total and by gender. The hypotheses, in this part, are addressed as follows: (1) "Autonomy is a significant predictor of intimacy among Iranian married university students", (2) "Autonomy

is a significant predictor of intimacy among Iranian married male students" and (3) "Autonomy is a significant predictor of intimacy among Iranian married female university students".

The results of regression analysis for autonomy and intimacy are presented in Table 4. The  $R^2$  value for the total was 0.467 and it is significant on the 5% level [ $F= 190.96$ ,  $P < .05$ ]. Therefore, it can be concluded that 46% of the variance in intimacy for the total is accounted for by the autonomy. Further, the multiple regression analysis by gender signifies that for men, autonomy factor accounted for 44% of the variance in intimacy and the result was statistically significant as well [ $F= 83.515$ ,  $P < .05$ ]. Regarding women, the  $R^2$  value is 50%, i.e. a significant percentage [ $F= 113.026$ ,  $P < .05$ ] of variance in intimacy is accounted for by autonomy. Therefore, it was concluded that all of three hypotheses in this part were retained and autonomy factor significantly predicts and explains intimacy for all and in terms of gender. Surprisingly F-statistic for all ( $F = 190.96$ ,  $p < .05$ ), for men ( $F = 83.515$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and for women ( $F = 113.026$ ,  $p < .05$ ) indicated that the model fits the data and therefore, there was a linear relationship between intimacy and the predictor variable.

**Table 4:** Results of the multiple regression analysis for the total group and by gender

Group	$R^2$	F	P
All	.467	190.96	.000
Men	.443	83.515	.000
Women	.505	113.026	.000

\*Sig.p<.05

#### *Gender Differences in the relationship between men and women:*

Now that the correlation between autonomy and intimacy for all and by gender is evident, to find significant differences based on gender Z- values were calculated as recommended by Howell (2009). In this study, calculated p-value (Table 5) indicated that gender differences do not lead to significant effect on the association between self-acceptance and autonomy (p-value = 0.51,  $p > .05$ ). Therefore, the hypothesis, namely, "there is a significant relationship between autonomy and intimacy in terms of gender among married Iranian university students" was rejected.

**Table 5:** Result of the association between autonomy and intimacy in terms of gender

Variable	Males (n=107)	Females(n=113)	Z	Sig.p
	r	r		
Autonomy Self acceptance	.666	.710	0.61	0.541

#### *Test of Moderation:*

To examine the moderating influence of gender on the association between autonomy and intimacy, autonomy was dichotomized into categories of low or high. Since in the present study, the participated individuals scored between 48 and 82 in autonomy scale, individuals with scores between 48 and 64.99 were placed in the low autonomy category, and individuals with scores between 65 and 84 were placed in the high autonomy category. A 2(gender: male or female)  $\times$  2 (autonomy: low or high) ANOVA with intimacy as the dependent variable was conducted. As we can see in Table 6, there was not an effect of gender,  $F(1, 219) = 3.66$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .017$  on the association between autonomy and intimacy. Therefore, the hypothesis that "gender is a moderator of the association between autonomy and self-acceptance among Iranian married university students" was rejected.

**Table 6:** Analysis for Moderating influence of Gender on the relationship between autonomy and intimacy

Variables	N	Mean	SD	F	P	Partial Eta Squared
Autonomy	220	65.69	6.23			
Intimacy	220	69.69	6.24			
Autonomy*Gender	220	-	-	3.666	.057	.017

\*Predictors: Autonomy and Gender. Dependent Variable: Intimacy

#### *Discussion:*

The present study has built on the work of researchers who are interested in gender differences in intimacy and autonomy among a married Iranian sample. The current study had two goals. The first goal was evaluating the association between autonomy and intimacy among married Iranian students. The second was to examine the degree to which gender moderated the association of autonomy and intimacy. Findings support the hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between intimacy and autonomy. However, the results of the analyses did not support the moderational hypothesis. Although autonomy as a predictor accounted for a more variance for men rather than for women, the different accounting of variance in men and women did not result

in gender moderating on the association between autonomy and intimacy. The results of this study are promising in developing further insight into factors that affect association between autonomy and intimacy.

The limitation of this study that lies in the Iranian sample population implies that the results of this study may not be widely generalizable to populations in other countries and cultures. Consequently, the scope of future work would require the application of this kind of research in a larger and broadly stratified sample, on couples, various socio-cultural settings, or in a longitudinal study.

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