

## Research Paper

# The Relationship Between Emotion Regulation and Marital Satisfaction Using the Actor-partner Interdependence Model



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Emotions, Emotion regulation, Marriage, Marital satisfaction, Interpersonal relations.

## ABSTRACT

**Objectives** The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between emotion regulation dimensions and marital satisfaction along with assessing the moderating role of gender factor.

**Methods** This is a descriptive/correlational study. Participants were 156 married couples living in Tehran, Iran who were recruited using a convenience sampling method. They were measured using the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) and Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). In order to explore dyadic relationships, data were analyzed using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM).

**Results** Both in husbands and wives, the emotion regulation ability was predictive of their marital satisfaction. Wives' scores in all 6 dimensions of emotion regulation and their husbands' scores in all dimensions except in "awareness" was positively associated with their marital satisfaction. Acceptance of emotions, goal-directed behavior, impulse control, and access to regulation strategies in men predicted their wives' marital satisfaction, while impulse control, access to regulation strategies, and understanding of emotions in women predicted their husbands' marital satisfaction. The results did not support the moderating role of gender.

**Conclusion** The findings highlight the importance of focus on emotion regulation and its multiple dimensions in assessment and treatment of problems in couples. The use of dyadic data analysis is recommended to better understand the interpersonal phenomena.

## Extended Abstract

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, researchers have paid attention to the role of emotion regulation in interpersonal relationships. According to Gross [4], emotion regulation refers to a set of processes by which "individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions". Emotion regulation is often formed in social situations, is influenced by social contexts, and affects

the quality of social relations. Studies have shown that individuals who are more able to regulate their emotions, experience more positive social interactions and less conflict with their peers [6].

Given the high levels of intimacy between couples, emotion regulation processes are expected to play a pivotal role in marital relationships. Since intimacy requires certain degrees of openness and vulnerability, intimate relationships are emotionally challenging. In order to effectively respond to these challenges, couples need to have some emotional skills including the ability to identify, express, and manage

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emotions appropriately [7, 8]. In the context of romantic relationships, each spouse's behaviors, emotional responses, and emotion regulation strategies may act as emotional stimuli for the other spouse. Therefore, maintaining an optimal emotional atmosphere in the relationship relies on the emotional regulation capacities of both spouses.

The most of studies in this field have neglected the multi-dimensional nature of emotion regulation. Based on Gratz and Roemer's theory, emotion regulation is not limited to controlling emotional responses but rather consists of a set of dimensions including awareness and understanding of emotions, acceptance of emotional responses, impulse control, access to emotion regulation strategies, and ability to engage in goal-directed behavior while experiencing negative emotions [11]. Some empirical evidence suggests that the dimensions of emotion regulation may independently be related to the marital satisfaction. For example, studies on couples seeking therapy have shown that their access to emotion regulation strategies was positively associated with their marital satisfaction. The ability of impulse control in women predicted satisfaction in their husbands. There was no association between overall emotion regulation and marital satisfaction. These studies, however, were conducted on a small clinical population and cannot be generalized to the community population [20].

The present study aimed to investigate the association of different dimensions of emotion regulation with marital satisfaction in Iranian couples. Considering that few studies have been conducted on the role of gender in this association, the present study also attempted to assess the moder-

ating role of gender in the relationship between emotion regulation and marital satisfaction.

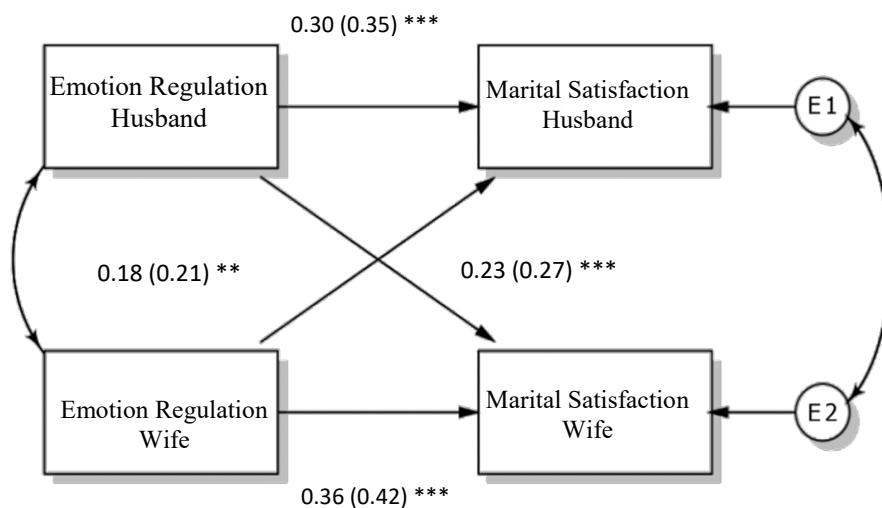
## 2. Methods

This is a descriptive/correlational study using dyadic data analysis. A group of 156 married couples living in Tehran, Iran were recruited by using a convenience sampling method. Using the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS), participants' emotional regulation skills were measured based on its 6 subscales. Their marital satisfaction was measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) was used to assess their dyadic relationships. Actor and partner effects and the effect of gender (as a discriminant variable) were estimated by Structural Equation Modeling.

## 3. Results

As shown in Figure 1, the emotion regulation ability of couples (wife and husband) predicted their marital satisfaction. The model accounted respectively for 25% and 20% of the variations in marital satisfaction.

Estimated actor and partner effects for each emotion regulation dimensions are presented in Table 1. It can be seen that wives' scores in all 6 dimensions and the score of their husbands in all dimensions except in "awareness", predicted their marital satisfaction. Acceptance of emotions, goal-directed behavior, impulse control, and access to emotion regulation strategies in men had positive association with the marital satisfaction of their wives, while impulse control, access to regulation strategies, and understanding



**Figure 1.** APIM for overall emotion regulation  
\*P<0.05; \*\*P<0.01; \*\*\*P<0.001

**Table 1.** APIM estimates for dimensions of emotion regulation

Dimension	Gender	Effect	Estimate	95% CI	$\beta$	P
Awareness	Women	Actor	1.54	0.77-2.31	0.33	<0.01
		Partner	0.37	-0.43-1.71	0.08	0.36
	Men	Actor	0.61	-0.16-3.81	0.13	0.09
		Partner	0.68	-0.12-4.71	0.14	0.054
Understanding	Women	Actor	2.28	1.44-3.12	0.41	<0.001
		Partner	0.67	0.26-1.6	0.12	0.16
	Men	Actor	1.16	0.2-0.31	0.21	0.006
		Partner	1.32	0.39-2.25	0.24	<0.001
Acceptance	Women	Actor	0.92	0.34-1.5	0.25	0.002
		Partner	0.77	0.14-1.4	0.21	0.017
	Men	Actor	0.92	0.34-1.5	0.25	0.001
		Partner	0.36	0.27-0.99	0.1	0.168
Impulse Control	Women	Actor	1.39	0.87-1.90	0.38	<0.001
		Partner	1.07	0.50-1.64	0.30	<0.001
	Men	Actor	1.31	0.79-1.83	0.36	<0.001
		Partner	0.82	0.25-1.39	0.23	<0.001
Goal-directed Behavior	Women	Actor	1.35	0.51-2.19	0.24	0.002
		Partner	1.73	0.82-2.64	0.31	<0.001
	Men	Actor	1.71	0.87-2.55	0.31	<0.001
		Partner	0.62	0.29-1.53	0.11	0.097
Overall	Women	Actor	1.17	0.74-1.61	0.39	<0.001
		Partner	0.85	0.38-1.32	0.28	<0.001
	Men	Actor	0.96	0.53-1.4	0.32	<0.001
		Partner	0.65	0.18-1.12	0.23	0.001

of emotions in women had association with the marital satisfaction of their husbands.

The SEM results indicated that the interaction between the effects of gender and actor ( $X^2=1.52$ ,  $P=0.22$ ), and between gender and partner effects were not statistically significant ( $X^2=0.07$ ,  $P=0.93$ ). The interaction of gender effect with combined effect of actor and partner was not significant, either ( $X^2=3.67$ ,  $P=0.16$ ). Therefore, it can be said that gender factor has no moderating role.

#### 4. Discussion

Findings supported the hypothesis that emotion regulation is positively associated with marital satisfaction. The results are consistent with the results of previous studies, highlighting the effects of emotion regulation skills on the quality of relationships [10, 20, 40]. Bloch et al. and Rick et al. found the partner effects of emotion regulation only for wives [10, 20], while in the present study significant partner effects were reported for both husbands and wives. Hence, the results emphasize the interdependence between partners in terms of emotions. Since gender could not moderate the relationships between emotion regulation and marital satisfaction, husbands and wives' emotion regulation abilities seem to predict their marital satisfaction, equally.

Based on clinical observations, Levenson et al. stated that, although couples seeking therapy have different issues, almost all of them struggle with a same problem with the regulation of positive or negative emotions [9]. Many approaches to psychotherapy including mindfulness-based therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy and emotion-focused therapy, focus on the problems related to emotions and their regulation [13, 50, 51]. The present study found a significant relationship between dimensions of emotion regulation and marital satisfaction, indicating the importance of understanding emotion regulation as a multidimensional construct. In couple assessment, paying attention to the different dimensions of emotion regulation in them can help therapists determine specific interventions for them.

#### Ethical Considerations

##### Compliance with ethical guidelines

The participants were informed about the objectives and methods of the study. Questionnaires were coded and placed in individual envelopes in order to ensure the confidentiality of obtained data. All subjects signed a written informed consent form.

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#### Authors contributions

Conceptualization, validation, review and editing: all authors; Methodology, data analysis, resources, writing: Fatemeh Riahi; Supervision: Mahmoud Golzari, Fereshteh Mootabi.

#### Conflicts of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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