

Structural Relationships Between Self-Criticism and Sexual Self-Concept in Married Individuals: The Mediating Role of Emotional Processing

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Sexual self-concept is considered one of the key components of sexual health, and scholars have consistently emphasized identifying the factors that shape and predict it. The present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of emotional processing in the relationship between self-criticism and sexual self-concept among married individuals.

Methods: This applied and developmental research employed a descriptive–correlational design. The statistical population included all married clients who visited family counseling centers in Tehran during the spring of 2022, from which a sample of 322 participants was selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Self-Criticism/Self-Reassurance Scale (Gilbert et al., 2004), the Emotional Processing Scale (Baker et al., 2010), and the Multidimensional Sexual Self-Concept Questionnaire (Snell, 1995). Pearson correlation and structural equation modeling were used for data analysis with SPSS (version 27) and AMOS (version 24).

Results: The findings showed a significant negative relationship between self-criticism and emotional processing ($p < .05$, $\beta = -0.58$). Self-criticism did not have a significant direct relationship with sexual self-concept ($p > .05$), while emotional processing showed a significant negative relationship with sexual self-concept ($p < .05$, $\beta = -0.47$). Moreover, emotional processing significantly mediated the relationship between self-criticism and sexual self-concept ($p < .05$), with an indirect effect size of 0.272.

Conclusions: These results suggest that emotional processing plays an important mediating role in how self-criticism relates to the sexual self-concept of married individuals. Future research should examine additional contributing factors using diverse samples and alternative measurement tools.

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Introduction

A variety of factors contribute to strengthening and sustaining marital relationships and preventing marital boredom and burnout. One such factor is sexual self-concept (de Neuville et al., 2022). In recent years, researchers and health organizations have increasingly emphasized the emotional and psychological dimensions of sexual well-being as essential components of overall sexual health. Within this framework, sexual self-concept is considered one of the key determinants that can shape individuals' sexual behaviors (Ng et al., 2022). Sexual self-concept not only helps explain sexual behaviors but also serves as a strong predictor of sexual health (Hamidi et al., 2019). It forms part of one's individuality or sexual self; in other words, it reflects a person's understanding of their own sexual tendencies and orientations (Balghanabadi et al., 2018). Both sexual self-concept and communication with one's partner regarding sexual issues significantly contribute to the quality of sexual life (Wu & Zheng, 2021).

Among the important factors influencing sexual self-concept are intrapsychic conflicts between partners (Ziaei et al., 2017). Research in family studies indicates that marital conflicts have become increasingly common, with nearly 50% of couples experiencing some form of conflict in their relationship. Individuals typically enter marriage with certain expectations; however, when marital life fails to meet those expectations, feelings of disappointment and frustration emerge, ultimately leading to marital boredom (Grover & Helliwell, 2019). This process is gradual rather than sudden, as declining love and intimacy progressively result in overall marital exhaustion, which, in its most severe form, may culminate in the dissolution of the marital relationship (Mahmoudpour et al., 2020). The reduction of marital intimacy and satisfaction further diminishes family adjustment (Mehdipour Bazkiayi & Sedaghatifard, 2015) and consequently decreases life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Abdizadeh et al., 2016). Today, couples are increasingly exposed to emotional, cognitive, and legal divorce due to declining marital satisfaction and intimacy. Identifying the nature of divorce as the most harmful manifestation of marital conflict is thus necessary for planning effective interventions aimed at reducing divorce rates (Imanzadeh et al., 2021).

Intrapsychic conflict—one of the most prevalent marital difficulties—often arises from mismatches in expectations, personal desires, and patterns of irresponsible behavior within the relationship (Jafarimanesh et al., 2020). Such conflicts may lead to marital hostility, heightened depression, reduced self-esteem in children, emotional insecurity, depressive symptoms, lower happiness, separation, divorce, emotional disengagement, and marital burnout (Jafarimanesh et al., 2020).

Self-criticism is one form of these internalized, dichotomous conflicts. It can be defined as a tendency to hold excessively high expectations of oneself and to ruminate over perceived inadequacies (Iancu et al., 2015). Self-critical individuals often set unattainable standards for themselves, perceive their performance as deficient, and consequently withdraw from social networks (James et al., 2015). Self-criticism is associated with numerous negative outcomes, including emotional distress, hopelessness, interpersonal problems, depression, and anxiety. Those high in self-criticism are more likely to experience depressive reactions to failure and to generalize self-attacking cognitions to others (Meshkak et al., 2021).

Various factors may influence the relationship between self-criticism and the sexual self-concept of married individuals, one of which is emotional processing. Emotional processing is the mechanism through which emotional disturbances diminish, allowing other behaviors and experiences to proceed without interference (Himachi et al., 2018). Effective emotional processing strategies enhance emotional skills and help reduce emotional and psychological distress (Raietnia et al., 2020). Although many individuals successfully process distressing life events, some are unable to resolve or adaptively process emotional distortions. As a result, they remain in states of heightened arousal for extended periods and are more vulnerable to various psychological disorders (Padmala et al., 2019).

Given the above and considering that no prior study appears to have investigated this specific relationship, the present research seeks to answer the following question: Does emotional processing mediate the effect of self-criticism on the sexual self-concept of married individuals?

Material and Methods

The present study employed a correlational design using structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population consisted of all married individuals who visited family counseling centers in Tehran during the spring of 2022. According to Kline (2011), a minimum sample size of 200 participants is recommended for SEM studies. In the current research, which utilized SEM, a total of 322 participants were selected through convenience sampling—exceeding Kline's (2011) recommended threshold.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- (a) age between 20 and 40 years;
- (b) at least one year having passed since marriage and experience of sexual intercourse;
- (c) absence of severe psychological disorders, substance abuse, or use of medications with major sexual side effects;
- (d) willingness to participate and provide informed consent.

After collecting the required data from the sample of 322 individuals, the data were analyzed using SPSS (version 27) and AMOS (version 24).

Instruments

Self-Criticism and Self-Reassurance Scale: This 22-item scale was developed by Gilbert et al. (2004) to assess levels of self-criticism and self-reassurance. It includes two subscales: Self-Criticism and Self-Reassurance. Gilbert et al. (2004) reported a reliability coefficient of 0.90, with internal consistency of 0.83 for the entire sample and 0.78 and 0.85 for men and women, respectively. In the Iranian validation study by Rajabi et al. (2015), psychometric properties were deemed satisfactory; Cronbach's alpha was 0.64 for the total scale, and its validity coefficient with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was reported as -0.36 .

Emotional Processing Scale (Baker et al., 2010): This 25-item instrument was designed by Baker et al. (2010) to assess components of emotional processing. Baker and colleagues reported acceptable construct and content validity, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.81 for Suppression, 0.87 for Unregulated Emotion, 0.84 for Unintegrated Emotion, 0.80 for Signs of Unprocessed Emotion, 0.78 for Avoidance, and 0.89 for the total scale. In Lotfi's (2010) Iranian study, construct and content validity were confirmed, with Cronbach's alphas ranging

from 0.74 to 0.81 for the subscales and 0.83 for the full scale. Sangani et al. (2019) also reported a reliability coefficient of 0.86 for the overall scale.

Multidimensional Sexual Self-Concept Questionnaire: This standardized 100-item questionnaire was developed by Snell (1995) to evaluate different components of sexual self-concept. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the instrument have been reported between 0.84 and 0.94 (Snell et al., 1995). In the Iranian psychometric evaluation by Ramazani et al. (2012), reliability and validity were assessed as satisfactory, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 for the total scale and coefficients ranging from 0.713 to 0.854 across subscales.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the objectives of the study, assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and informed that participation was voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology for research involving human subjects. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences, and no identifying information was collected to ensure anonymity.

Results

Table 1 presents the model fit indices. After estimating the model parameters, the key question is the extent to which the proposed model is compatible with the empirical data. This question can only be addressed by examining the model fit. Therefore, in structural equation modeling, the researcher must ensure acceptable model fit after parameter estimation and prior to interpreting the results (Kalantari, 2008). An important point in interpreting model fit indices is that model fit should be evaluated using multiple indices to assess the adequacy of the model from different perspectives.

Table 1. Research Model Fit Indices

Index	Acceptable Range	Result	Fit Interpretation
GFI	> 0.90	0.92	Acceptable Fit
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.070	Acceptable Fit
CFI	> 0.90	0.87	Moderate Fit
NFI	> 0.90	0.79	Acceptable Fit
IFI	> 0.90	0.86	Moderate Fit
AGFI	> 0.90	0.73	Acceptable Fit
PGFI	> 0.70	0.78	Acceptable Fit
Chi-Square /df	Between 1 and 5	3.41	Acceptable Fit

Overall, evaluation of the fit indices in Table 1 indicates that the obtained indices demonstrate a relatively acceptable model fit. None of the indices show weak values. Two indices (CFI and IFI) fall within the moderate range, while six other indices meet acceptable thresholds. Therefore, the model can be considered to have an overall acceptable level of fit, indicating adequate support for the hypothesized model.

The coefficient of determination for the dependent variable *sexual self-concept* was 0.30. Thus, the independent and mediating variables (self-criticism and emotional processing) explained 30% of the variance in sexual self-concept.

Model Path Analysis

Table 2 presents the results of direct effects, including standardized coefficients, unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, t-values, and significance levels.

Table 2. Direct Effects Based on Structural Equation Modeling

Path	Beta	B	Std. Error	T value	P	Result
Self-Criticism → Emotional Processing	0.58	-1.01	0.148	-6.82	0.001	Supported
Self-Criticism → Sexual Self-Concept	0.12	0.106	0.067	1.57	0.115	Not Supported
Emotional Processing → Sexual Self-Concept	-0.47	-0.239	0.043	-5.53	0.001	Supported

Mediation Analysis

Table 3 reports the results of testing the mediating effect of emotional processing using the bootstrapping method.

Table 3. Mediation Analysis Using Bootstrapping

Path	Indirect Effect	SE	T value	p
Self-Criticism → Emotional Processing → Sexual SC	0.272	0.062	4.39	0.001

The results of Table 3 indicate that the mediating role of emotional processing in the relationship between self-criticism and sexual self-concept is statistically significant ($p < .05$). The magnitude of the indirect effect was 0.272, confirming the fourth research hypothesis.

Discussion

The present study was conducted with the aim of determining the mediating role of emotional processing in the relationship between self-criticism and sexual self-concept among married individuals. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between self-criticism and emotional processing ($p < .05$). In other words, an increase in self-criticism is associated with a decrease in emotional processing, and vice versa ($\beta = -0.58$). Self-criticism did not show a significant negative association with sexual self-concept ($p > .05$). Emotional processing, however, demonstrated a significant negative relationship with sexual self-concept ($p < .05$), indicating that higher emotional processing is associated with lower levels of sexual self-concept ($\beta = -0.47$).

Furthermore, the results confirmed the mediating role of emotional processing in the relationship between self-criticism and sexual self-concept ($p < .05$), with an indirect effect size of 0.272. Thus, emotional processing can function as a mediator in the association between self-criticism and sexual self-concept among married individuals.

One of the key psychological factors influencing sexual functioning is sexual self-concept, which refers to individuals' positive or negative perceptions and feelings about themselves as sexual beings. Sexual self-concept plays an important role in both sexual and mental health and forms the core of an individual's sexual tendencies. Self-critical individuals, due to negative self-evaluations, feelings of inadequacy, lack of competence, and the adoption of idealistic and unattainable standards, tend to feel less capable of establishing and maintaining satisfying sexual relationships.

Moreover, self-critical individuals often display emotional biases, placing greater emphasis on negative emotions than positive ones. As a result, their emotional processing is impaired. Deficiencies in emotional processing can in turn lead to the increased use of maladaptive

emotion regulation strategies, sexual maladjustment, and sexual dysfunction. Consequently, disturbances in sexual relations negatively affect individuals' evaluations of themselves as sexual beings, ultimately reducing their sexual self-concept. Therefore, emotional processing can be considered a mediating mechanism linking self-criticism to sexual self-concept among married individuals.

In the present study, the mediating role of emotional processing in the relationship between self-criticism and sexual self-concept was examined, and the results confirmed that emotional processing indeed serves as a mediating variable in this association. Nevertheless, future research should consider additional influencing factors that may contribute to these findings and should evaluate participants with different characteristics using other appropriate measurement tools.

The limitations of the present study are as follows:

The first limitation concerns the sample, which consisted solely of married individuals who attended family counseling centers in Tehran during the spring of 2022. Thus, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other populations. Additionally, the study employed self-report instruments to measure the predictor variables. Although the tools used in this study have demonstrated acceptable validity and reliability and have been widely utilized in prior research, the validity of self-report measures ultimately depends on the honesty and accuracy of participants when responding to questionnaire items.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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