WJARR

World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews

World Journal Series INDIA

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

Check for updates

Differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning among middle adulthood married couples

Rutuja Bhadsavale * and Deena Dixon

Department of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning among middle-aged married couples in India. The study utilized a purposive sampling method, evaluating 200 participants (100 males and 100 females) aged 40 to 60 years through self-report questionnaires, including the Relationship Assessment Scale, the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Short Form, and the FACES IV Questionnaire. The analyses using regression and correlation techniques revealed significant relationships among differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning. Additionally, no differences were found between nuclear and joint family types, potentially reflecting evolving societal norms and diminishing distinctions between these family structures. This data will further explore the complex interplay between differentiation of self and relationship quality of married couples and how these factors influence family functioning in middle adulthood.

Keywords: Differentiation of Self; Relationship Quality; Family Functioning; Married Couples; Middle Adulthood

1. Introduction

Differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning among married middle adulthood couples addresses a crucial area of study that delves into the intricacies of marital dynamics during middle adulthood—a phase of life often marked by significant transitions and adaptations within family structures. By focusing on the nexus between family functioning, differentiation of self, and relationship quality, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the complexities of marital relationships during this pivotal stage.

Family functioning, as a central aspect of this study, holds immense importance in the contemporary society. Families serve as the bedrock of social order, influencing individual development and interpersonal relationships. Understanding the nuances of family dynamics, including problem-solving techniques, role distribution, emotional states, and communication styles is crucial for comprehending human behavior and fostering healthy relationships (Astedt-Kurki et al., 2009). The Circumplex Model, proposed by Olson (2000), elucidates the balanced interplay of cohesion, flexibility, and communication within families, highlighting the optimal conditions for harmonious family functioning.

Moreover, the concept of differentiation of self (DoS) offers valuable insights into individual behavior within familial contexts. Murray Bowen's Systems Theory underscores the importance of separating one's thoughts and emotions from those of significant others, leading to enhanced emotional maturity and interpersonal competence (Bowen, 1978; Rodríguez-González et al., 2019a). Higher levels of DoS have been linked to better psychological and physical health, as well as improved parental competency (Peleg et al., 2018; Skowron et al., 2010).

Additionally, relationship quality plays a pivotal role in shaping the well-being of married couples during middle adulthood. High-quality relationships are characterized by trust, affection, effective communication, and conflict

* Corresponding author: Rutuja Bhadsavale.

resolution skills (Dash & Amato, 2005; Goleman, 2006). Understanding the subjective perceptions of relationship quality provides valuable insights into couples' overall satisfaction and   well-being, impacting their individual and family dynamics.

1.1. Need and significance of the study

The significance of this research lies in its potential to advance theoretical understanding and practical interventions in the realm of marriage and family dynamics. By empirically examining the interplay between family functioning, differentiation of self, and relationship quality among middle-aged married couples, this study aims to enrich family systems theory and inform therapeutic practices tailored to enhance relationship satisfaction between the couple.

1.2. Research Gap

This study delves into the complex interplay between differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning among middle-aged married couples, a demographic previously underexplored. By examining these variables together within the frameworks of nuclear and joint family types, it aims to shed light on how these factors influence family dynamics, filling a gap in existing research by applying Bowen's family systems theory to understand the critical impacts on family dynamics during middle adulthood.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Research Design

Using a Quantitative design, this study will employ survey to quantify differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning among middle-aged married couples, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of their dynamics.

2.2. Objectives of the study

- To investigate the relationship between differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning among married couples in middle adulthood.
- To examine differences among family type (nuclear or joint) in relation with differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning among married couples in middle adulthood.

2.3. Hypotheses

- $H_0 1$. There is no relationship between differentiation of self and relationship quality among married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0 2$. There is no relationship between differentiation of self and balanced cohesion and flexibility among married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0 3$. There is no relationship between differentiation of self and unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic among married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0 4$. There is no relationship between differentiation of self and balanced systems among married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0 5$. There is no relationship between relationship quality and balanced cohesion and flexibility among married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0 6$. There is no relationship between relationship quality and unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic among married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0 7$. There is no relationship between relationship quality and balanced systems among married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0 8$. There is no significant impact of differentiation of self and relationship quality on balanced cohesion and flexibility among married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0 9$. There is no significant impact of differentiation of self and relationship quality on unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic among married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0 10$. There is no significant impact of differentiation of self and relationship quality on balanced systems among married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0 11$. There is no difference in differentiation of self among nuclear and joint family type of married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0 12$. There is no difference in relationship quality among nuclear and joint family type of married couples in middle adulthood.

- $H_0$13. There is no difference in balanced cohesion and flexibility among nuclear and joint family type of married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0$14. There is no difference in unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic among nuclear and joint family type of married couples in middle adulthood.
- $H_0$15. There is no difference in balanced systems among nuclear and joint family type of married couples in middle adulthood.

2.4. Operational Definition

2.4.1. Family functioning

The ability of the family to maintain cohesion, communication, adaptability, problem-solving abilities, roles and boundaries within the family, emotional expression, and the level of support among family members. It involves various dimensions including cohesion and flexibility, disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, chaotic, and communication and satisfaction.

2.4.2. Differentiation of self

An individual's capacity to manage emotions, make decisions autonomously, maintain clear boundaries, and remain connected to others without being emotionally reactive or enmeshed.

2.4.3. Relationship quality

The overall evaluation of a relationship including several aspects such as stability, satisfaction, intimacy, trust, communication effectiveness, conflict resolution skills, and perceived support within the relationship.

2.4.4. Middle adulthood

Individuals who are currently between 40-60 years old.

2.4.5. Married Couples

Any two individuals- males and females who are legally bound in a marital union recognized by law.

2.5. Variables

- Independent Variable- Differentiation of self and Relationship quality
- Dependent Variable- Family functioning (balanced cohesion and flexibility, unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid and chaotic, and balanced systems- communication and satisfaction)

2.6. Demographic variables

- Age
- Gender
- Religion
- Educational qualification
- Occupation
- City of residence

2.7. Universe of the study

A diverse group of middle-aged married couples in the age group of 40-60 years.

2.8. Geographical area

This research includes individuals from all over India.

2.9. Sample distribution- Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

2.9.1. Inclusion Criteria

- Participants between the ages of 40 to 60 years.
- Only married couples will be considered eligible for participation.

- Participants must be residing in India.
- Couples must have been married for at least five years to ensure an adequate understanding of long-term marital dynamics.
- Participants who possess the ability to read in English to be able to relate to the experiences and perspectives and then fill the form.

2.9.2. Exclusion criteria

- The sample collected from locations outside of India was not included in the study.
- The study omitted data from other age categories.
- Participants who have experienced separation, divorce, and remarriage.
- Individuals who have significant mental health illnesses or psychiatric disorders that could hinder their ability to take part in the study or understand the study materials may be ineligible for participation

2.10. Sample and Techniques

The sample size consisted of 200 participants (100 males and 100 females) with the age range between 40 to 60 years old. Purposive sampling method was used that involves selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. A self-report questionnaire through google form was sent to all the participants of the study.

2.11. Research ethics followed

This research study adheres to ethical guidelines and standards to ensure the well-being, rights, and confidentiality of participants. Here are some key research ethics considerations-

2.11.1. Informed consent

The data was collected from the participants who have given and filled the consent form ensuring they understood the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study before agreeing to participate.

2.11.2. Voluntary participation

Participation in the study was a voluntary decision and they were free to withdraw at any time without penalty or repercussion.

2.11.3. Confidentiality

The research aim was clearly briefed to the participants and the confidentiality and anonymity of participants' data was conveyed.

2.11.4. Avoiding harm

Ensured that the research procedures, questions, or interventions do not cause physical, psychological, or emotional harm to participants

2.12. Tools for the study

- Differentiation of Self Inventory- Short Form
- Relationship Assessment Scale
- The Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale IV (FACES-IV)

2.13. Description of the tools

2.13.1. Differentiation of self.

The DSI-SF Full scale score had an internal consistency estimate of (α = .89). For scoring, the tool used is a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all characteristic of me) to 6 (very characteristic of me).

2.13.2. Relationship quality.

The internal consistency of the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) is high, α = .86 and the correlation coefficients ranged from .83 to .51. For scoring, the tool used is a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction).

2.13.3. Family Functioning.

The Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale IV (FACES-IV) (62 items) known for their reliability and validity. An alpha reliability analysis was conducted to examine the internal consistency of the six scales. Reliability of the six FACES IV scales is as follows: Enmeshed = .77, Disengaged = .87, Balanced Cohesion = .89, Chaotic = .86, Balanced Flexibility = .84, Rigid = .82. In general, the alpha reliability was very good for all six scales. Alpha reliability for The Family Satisfaction Scale (Olson, 1995) .93. Content validity for the four unbalanced scales was found based on family therapists from AAMFT who described the items as accurately representing the four unbalanced areas. Construct validity was demonstrated by confirmatory factor analysis and concurrent validity was found using three other family scales. Predictive validity was demonstrated by the findings from the discriminant analysis. However, this is only the first validation study of FACES IV and studies with more diverse populations are needed. For scoring, the tool used is a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3. Results

The present study investigated the relationship between differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning among married couples in middle adulthood. The findings revealed significant associations between these variables, highlighting the importance of individuation and dyadic dynamics in shaping family systems.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the sample

Variables	N	M	SD
DoS score	200	77.56	13.847
RQ score	200	28.06	5.011
Balanced Cohesion and Flexibility	200	54.20	7.622
Unbalanced Disengaged, Enmeshed, Rigid, and Chaotic	200	77.56	13.156
Balanced Systems	200	78.11	15.052

The table 1 displays the criterion distribution and it shows the number of participants and the dispersion of the data that is depicted by the mean and the standard deviation.

Table 2 Relation between differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning

SN.	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	DoS score	77.56	13.847	1	0.278** 0.000	0.204** 0.004	-0.279** 0.000	0.239** 0.001
2	RQ score	28.06	5.011	0.278** 0.000	1	0.564** 0.000	-0.201** 0.004	0.621** 0.000
3	Balanced Cohesion and Flexibility	54.20	7.622	0.204** 0.004	0.564** 0.000	1		
4	Unbalanced Disengaged, Enmeshed, Rigid, and Chaotic	77.56	13.156	-0.279** 0.000	-0.201** 0.004		1	
5	Balanced Systems	78.11	15.052	0.239** 0.001	0.621** 0.000			1

** denotes correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2 shows the Pearson correlation analysis to see the relationship between differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning among middle adulthood married couples.

The table above presents the correlation between differentiation of self (M=77.56, SD= 13.847) and relationship quality (M=28.06, SD= 5.011) among married couples in middle adulthood. It was found to be .278, $p < .01$ indicating a significant positive correlation. The null hypothesis H_01. "There is no relationship between differentiation of self and relationship quality among married couples in middle adulthood" was hence rejected.

The above table shows the correlation between differentiation of self (M=77.56, SD= 13.847) and balanced cohesion and flexibility (M=54.20, SD=7.622) among married couples in middle adulthood. It was found to be .204, $p < .01$ signifying positive correlation. The null hypothesis H_02. "There is no relationship between differentiation of self and balanced cohesion and flexibility among married couples in middle adulthood" was hence rejected.

Table 2 shows the relation between differentiation of self (M=77.56, SD=13.847) and unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid and chaotic (M=77.56, SD=13.156) among married couples in middle adulthood. Conversely, to the above results, it demonstrates a negative correlation -.279, $p <.01$. The null hypothesis H_03. "There is no relationship between differentiation of self and unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic among married couples in middle adulthood" was hence rejected.

Above mentioned table shows the relation between differentiation of self (M=77.56, SD=13.847) and balanced systems (M=78.11, SD=15.052) among married couples in middle adulthood. Here, it was found to be .239, $p<.01$ signifying positive correlation. The null hypothesis H_04. "There is no relationship between differentiation of self and balanced systems among married couples in middle adulthood" was hence rejected.

Table 2 shows the relation between relationship quality (M=28.06, SD= 5.011) and balanced cohesion and flexibility (M=54.20, SD= 7.622) among married couples in middle adulthood. It was found to be .564, $p<.01$ signifying positive correlation. The null hypothesis H_05. "There is no relationship between differentiation of self and balanced systems among married couples in middle adulthood" was hence rejected.

According to the Table 2 the relation between relationship quality (M=28.06, SD= 5.011) and unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid and chaotic (M=77.56, SD=13.156) among married couples in middle adulthood. It was found to be -.201, $p<.01$ signifying negative correlation. The null hypothesis H_06. "There is no relationship between differentiation of self and balanced systems among married couples in middle adulthood" was hence rejected.

The above table presents the relation between relationship quality (M=28.06, SD= 5.011) and balanced systems (M=78.11, SD=15.052) among married couples in middle adulthood. It was found to be .621, $p<.01$ signifying positive correlation. The null hypothesis H_07. "There is no relationship between differentiation of self and balanced systems among married couples in middle adulthood" was hence rejected.

According to these results indicate a positive correlation between differentiation of self and relationship quality with aspects of balanced cohesion, flexibility, and overall balanced family systems. Higher scores in differentiation of self and relationship quality are associated with increased levels of balanced cohesion and flexibility within the family system. Conversely, the observed negative correlations with unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic family dynamics suggest that higher scores in differentiation of self and relationship quality correlate with fewer characteristics of these dysfunctional dynamics. This suggests that greater differentiation of self and higher relationship quality is linked to more balanced and functional systemic family dynamics, while also being associated with a reduced presence of dysfunction within the family system.

Simple linear regression was conducted to assess whether there is a significant impact of differentiation of self and relationship quality of middle adulthood married couple on family functioning.

The findings revealed that there is a significant impact of differentiation of self and relationship quality on balanced cohesion and flexibility. In relation with relationship quality, n=200, $p < 0.05$. The R square value of .567 indicates that the score is accounting for a substantial proportion of the variance in Balanced Cohesion and Flexibility, $R^2 = .321$. This suggests that as the relationship quality score increases, Balanced Cohesion and Flexibility significantly increases, with the Relationship Quality score explaining approximately 32.1% of the variance in Balanced Cohesion and Flexibility outcomes.

Table 3 Indicates B score, standard error, beta value, F score, t score, p value, R score, and R square score between differentiation of self and relationship quality on Balanced Cohesion and Flexibility

Variables	Unstandardized coefficients B	Std. error	Standardized coefficients Beta	Model Summary
DoS Score	0.028	0.034	0.051	F= 46.553 t=.839 sig= .403 r= .567 R^2= .321
RQ Score	0.837	0.093	0.550	F= 46.553 t= 9.001 sig= .000 r= .567 R^2= .321

Dependent Variable: Balanced Cohesion and Flexibility

Conversely, the Differentiation of Self (DoS) score did not significantly predict Balanced Cohesion and Flexibility, p = .403. This indicates that the DoS Score, within the context of this analysis, does not have a significant impact on Balanced Cohesion and Flexibility, suggesting that other factors may be more influential in determining Balanced Cohesion and Flexibility outcomes. Hence, the null hypothesis $H_0 8$. "There is no significant impact of differentiation of self and relationship quality on balanced cohesion and flexibility among married couples in middle adulthood" is partially accepted as relationship quality has an impact but differentiation of self does not have an impact on balanced cohesion and flexibility.

Table 4 B score, standard error, beta value, F score, t score, p value, R score, and R square score between differentiation of self and relationship quality on Unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic

Variables	Unstandardized coefficients B	Std. error	Standardized coefficients Beta	Model Summary
DoS Score	-0.229	0.067	-0.241	F= 10.253 t= -3.420 sig= .001 r= .307 R^2= .094
RQ Score	-0.352	0.185	-0.134	F= 10.253 t= -1.901 sig= 0.059 r= 0.567 R^2= 0.321

Dependent Variable: Unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid and chaotic

The above table indicates the influence of the Differentiation of self (DoS) and Relationship Quality on a composite measure of unbalanced states, including disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic. In relation with Differentiation of Self, it significantly negatively predicted the composite measure of unbalanced states, p <.01 with a standardized coefficient (Beta) of -.241. This indicates that higher Differentiation of Self scores are associated with lower levels of unbalanced disengagement, enmeshment, rigidity, and chaos. Conversely, the Relationship Quality scores were p = .059, with a standardized coefficient (Beta) of -.134. Although the Relationship Quality scores showed a negative association with the composite measure of unbalanced states, this relationship did not strongly support the hypothesis that relational affectivity significantly influences these unbalanced states within the current sample. Hence, the null

hypothesis $H_0 9$. "There is no significant impact of differentiation of self and relationship quality on unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic among married couples in middle adulthood" is partially accepted as differentiation of self has an impact but relationship quality does not have an impact on unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic.

Table 5 B score, standard error, beta value, F score, t score, p value, R score, and R square score between differentiation of self and relationship quality on Balanced Systems

Variables	Unstandardized coefficients B	Std. error	Standardized coefficients Beta	Model Summary
DoS Score	0.078	0.063	0.072	F= 63.181 t= 1.243 sig= .215 r= .625 R^2= .391
RQ Score	10.806	0.174	0.601	F= 63.181 t= 10.386 sig= .000 r= .567 R^2= .321

Dependent Variable: Balanced Systems

The results indicate that the Relationship Quality score significantly predicted Balanced Systems, B = 1.806, t(10.386) = 10.386, p < .001, with a standardized coefficient (Beta) of .601. This significant relationship suggests that higher Relationship Quality scores are associated with more balanced systems, accounting for a considerable amount of variance in Balanced Systems, as evidenced by the square of the correlation coefficient (R^2 = .321). The Relationship Quality score's large Beta coefficient underscores its substantial impact on Balanced Systems, suggesting that relational affectivity plays a crucial role in promoting balance within systems.

Conversely, the Differentiation of Self score did not significantly predict Balanced Systems, B = .078, t(1.243) = 1.243, p = .215, with a standardized coefficient (Beta) of .072. The lack of statistical significance indicates that the Differentiation of Self score does not have a substantial impact on the balance of systems. Hence, the null hypothesis $H_0 10$. "There is no significant impact of differentiation of self and relationship quality on balanced systems among married couples in middle adulthood" is partially accepted as differentiation of self has an impact but relationship quality does not have an impact on balanced systems.

Independent sample t-test was performed to see whether there is no difference in differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning among nuclear and joint family type.

Table 6 Independent t-test of difference in family type (nuclear and joint) on each dimension of family functioning, differentiation of self, and relationship quality.

Variables	Family Type	N	Mean Rank	SD	T value
DoS Score	Joint	66	77.06	14.765	-0.357
	Nuclear	134	77.81	13.4224	
RQ Score	Joint	66	28.62	4.748	1.102
	Nuclear	134	27.79	5.130	
Balanced Cohesion and Flexibility	Joint	66	53.58	8.334	-0.812
	Nuclear	134	54.51	7.260	

Unbalanced Disengaged, Enmeshed, Rigid, and Chaotic	Joint	66	80.06	13.774	1.899
	Nuclear	134	76.33	12.712	
Balanced Systems	Joint	66	75.77	17.006	-1.547
	Nuclear	134	79.26	13.914	

For differentiation of self, the analysis revealed no significant difference between Joint Family Type (M= 77.06, SD = 14.765), t = -.357 and sig. (2 tailed)= .721 and Nuclear Family Type (M = 77.81, SD = 13.42); t = -.346 sig. (2 tailed)= .730, suggesting that both the type of family structure does not significantly impact the level of family functioning. The null hypothesis H_011. is accepted indicating that no significant differences were found in differentiation of self across the examined family types.

For relationship quality, the analysis revealed no significant difference between Joint Family Type (M = 28.62, SD = 4.74), t = 1.102 and sig. (2 tailed)= .272 and Nuclear Family Type (M = 27.79, SD = 5.13); t = 1.132 sig. (2 tailed)= .260, suggesting that both the type of family structure does not significantly impact the level of family functioning. The null hypothesis H_012. is accepted indicating that no significant differences were found in relationship quality across the examined family types.

In family functioning, for dimension balanced cohesion and flexibility, the analysis revealed no significant difference between Joint Family Type (M = 53.58, SD = 8.334), t = -.812 and sig. (2 tailed)= .418 and Nuclear Family Type (M = 54.51, SD = 7.260); t = -.775 sig. (2 tailed)= .440, suggesting that both the type of family structure does not significantly impact the level of family functioning. The null hypothesis H_013. is accepted indicating that no significant differences were found in balanced cohesion and flexibility across the examined family types.

In family functioning, for dimension unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic, the analysis revealed no significant difference between Joint Family Type (M = 80.06, SD = 13.774), t = 1.899 and sig. (2 tailed)= .059 and Nuclear Family Type (M = 76.33, SD = 12.712); t = 1.848 sig. (2 tailed)= .067, suggesting that both the type of family structure does not significantly impact the level of family functioning. The null hypothesis H_014. is accepted indicating that no significant differences were found in balanced cohesion and flexibility across the examined family types.

In family functioning, for dimension balanced systems, the analysis revealed no significant difference between Joint Family Type (M = 75.77, SD = 17.006), t = -1.547 and sig. (2 tailed)= .124 and nuclear Family Type (M = 79.26, SD = 13.914); t = -1.445 sig. (2 tailed)= .151 suggesting that both the type of family structure does not significantly impact the level of family functioning. The null hypothesis H_015. is accepted indicating that no significant differences were found in balanced cohesion and flexibility across the examined family types.

4. Discussion

According to Bowen's family systems theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), higher levels of differentiation of self were linked to more balanced family cohesion and flexibility. This aligns with previous research indicating that well-differentiated individuals can maintain emotional connectedness while preserving a solid sense of self (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Conversely, lower differentiation predicted greater family disengagement, enmeshment, rigidity, and chaotic dynamic patterns that are associated with emotional fusion and reactive behavior (Jankowski & Hooper, 2012). These findings underscore the relevance of differentiation for cultivating adaptive family functioning.

The positive association between differentiation and relationship quality corroborates prior studies (Peleg, 2008; Skowron, 2000). As theorized, being able to balance intimacy and autonomy facilitates more satisfying partnerships (Knudson-Martin, 2013). This finding extends this connection to the middle adulthood stage of the family life cycle. Relationship Quality emerged as a robust predictor of balanced cohesion, flexibility, and overall systemic health. This aligns with evidence that couple discord disrupts family processes (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000), while positive couple dynamics foster greater family adaptability (Rohner & Britner, 2002). The emotional climate between partners appears to reverberate through the wider family system.

Notably, family type (nuclear versus joint) did not significantly impact the key variables, contrasting some past research suggesting greater stresses in joint families (Chadda & Deb, 2013).

5. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to understand the relationship between differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning among middle adulthood married couples. Along with it, the study also sought to determine the differences in family type (nuclear/joint) of the married couples. The Differentiation of Self Inventory- Short Form, Relationship Assessment Scale, and the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale IV (FACES-IV) was used to gather online data of 100 married couples- 100 males and 100 females between the age group 40-60 years, throughout India. For statistical analysis, the data was first imported into Microsoft Excel and subsequently exported to SPSS 25.

The results interpreted showed the hypothesis that there is no relationship between differentiation of self and relationship quality among married couples in middle adulthood ($H_0$1.) is rejected since the correlation between the two variables that was computed revealed a positive relationship. The results have also rejected following hypotheses due to presence of relationship seen in- $H_0$2. There is no relationship between differentiation of self and balanced cohesion and flexibility among married couples in middle adulthood, $H_0$3. There is no relationship between differentiation of self and unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic among married couples in middle adulthood, $H_0$4. There is no relationship between differentiation of self and balanced systems among married couples in middle adulthood, $H_0$5. There is no relationship between relationship quality and balanced cohesion and flexibility among married couples in middle adulthood, $H_0$6. There is no relationship between relationship quality and unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic among married couples in middle adulthood, $H_0$7. There is no relationship between relationship quality and balanced systems among married couples in middle adulthood.

The study further checked the impact using Simple Linear regression of the following hypotheses- The null hypothesis $H_0$8. There is no significant impact of differentiation of self and relationship quality on balanced cohesion and flexibility among married couples in middle adulthood is partially accepted as relationship quality has an impact but differentiation of self does not have an impact on balanced cohesion and flexibility. The null hypothesis $H_0$9. There is no significant impact of differentiation of self and relationship quality on unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic among married couples in middle adulthood is partially accepted as differentiation of self has an impact but relationship quality does not have an impact on unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic. The null hypothesis $H_0$10. There is no significant impact of differentiation of self and relationship quality on balanced systems among married couples in middle adulthood is partially accepted as differentiation of self has an impact but relationship quality does not have an impact on balanced systems.

Further, the study analyzed using an independent t-test whether there was a difference in differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning in family type [nuclear/ joint] among middle adulthood married couples. The results accepted the hypotheses that there is no difference in differentiation of self among nuclear and joint family type ($H_0$11.); there is no difference in relationship quality among nuclear and joint family type ($H_0$12.); there is no difference in balanced cohesion and flexibility among nuclear and joint family type of married couples in middle adulthood. ($H_0$13.); there is no difference in unbalanced disengaged, enmeshed, rigid, and chaotic among nuclear and joint family type of married couples in middle adulthood. ($H_0$14.); and there is no difference in balanced systems among nuclear and joint family type of married couples in middle adulthood. ($H_0$15.)

This research examined differentiation of self and relationship quality among middle adulthood married couples situated within India on family functioning. Through parametric analysis using Pearson correlation, a relation was found between all the variables indicating stronger well-differentiated individuals and couples with high-quality relationships are more adept at navigating life's challenges, including those specific to the middle adulthood stage, such as parenting adolescents or dealing with aging parents. These competencies contribute to the overall health and adaptability of the family system. These findings are central to the concept of Bowen's family systems theory, refers to an individual's ability to maintain their sense of self while being emotionally and functionally interdependent within relationships. This balance between autonomy and intimacy contributes to higher relationship quality, as individuals are better able to express their needs, manage conflicts constructively, and provide emotional support to their partners.

By understanding the positive impact of differentiation of self and relationship quality on family functioning, psychologists and therapists can design more effective interventions and counseling strategies. These interventions can help couples improve their relationship dynamics, leading to healthier family environments. The findings can be incorporated into marital education programs, providing couples with the tools to focus on developing communication skills, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution strategies that promote balanced family functioning. Community centres and religious organizations could develop support groups or workshops based on the study's findings. These could serve as platforms for middle-aged couples to share experiences and strategies for improving family cohesion and flexibility.

Limitations

The current study has some limitations focused that can be helpful for further research. Since, the data was collected online, there was no control on extraneous variables that may have impacted the results of the study.

Suggestions for future studies

Future research should consider longitudinal design to track changes in differentiation of self, relationship quality, and family functioning over time. This could provide deeper insights into how these relationships evolve with life transitions and challenges. Also, there is a need for intervention-based studies to test the effectiveness of specific strategies aimed at improving differentiation of self and relationship quality. This could help in identifying the most effective approaches for enhancing family functioning.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

As I reflect on the journey of completing this thesis, my heart is filled with gratitude for the myriad of support I have received from various quarters. Foremost, I extend my profound gratitude to the divine, who has been my constant source of strength, wisdom, and resilience throughout this challenging yet rewarding journey. It is with a sense of immense gratitude that I acknowledge the unwavering love, support, and encouragement of my family. I am thankful to my friends for their constant support throughout the several stages of this research. I extend my sincere appreciation to the participants of this study, whose openness to share their thoughts and experiences has enhanced the research findings and greatly increased its depth and applicability. Lastly, I am immensely grateful to Kristu Jayanti College, Autonomous, Bengaluru, for giving me the invaluable opportunity to conduct my thesis. I would also like to extend my special thanks to the Department of Psychology, its faculty, and staff for their relentless encouragement.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

The present research work does not contain any studies performed on animals by any of the authors.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

References

[1] Calatrava M, Martins MV, Schweer-Collins M, Duch-Ceballos C, Rodríguez-González M. Differentiation of self: A scoping review of Bowen Family Systems Theory's core construct. Clinical Psychology Review. 2022 Nov;91(1):102101.

[2] Chadda RK, Deb KS. Indian family systems, collectivistic society and psychotherapy. Indian Journal of Psychiatry [Internet]. 2013 Jan;55(6):299–309. Available from: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3705700/

[3] Farooqi SR. The Construct of Relationship Quality. Journal of Relationships Research. 2014;5.

[4] Jankowski PJ, Hooper LM. Differentiation of self: A validation study of the Bowen theory construct. Couple & Family Psychology [Internet]. 2012 Sep 1;1(3):226–43. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027469

[5] Kerr ME, Bowen M. Family evaluation : an approach based on Bowen theory [Internet]. 1988. Available from: https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA2951180X

[6] Knudson-Martin C, Huenergardt D, Lafontant K, Bishop L, Schaepper J, Wells M. Competencies for Addressing Gender and Power in Couple Therapy: A Socio Emotional Approach. Journal of Marital and Family Therapy. 2014 May 20;41(2):205–20.

[7] Krishnakumar A, Buehler C. Interparental Conflict and Parenting Behaviors: A Meta-Analytic Review. Family Relations. 2000 Jan;49(1):25–44.

[8]   Olson DH. Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems. Journal of Family Therapy. 2000 May;22(2):144–67.

[9]   Päivi Åstedt-Kurki, Marja-Terttu Tarkka, Marjo-Riitta Rikala, Lehti K, Eija Paavilainen. Family Functioning, Health and Social Support Instrument. PsycTESTS Dataset. 2002 Jan 1;

[10]   Peleg O. The Relation Between Differentiation of Self and Marital Satisfaction: What Can Be Learned From Married People Over the Course of Life? The American Journal of Family Therapy. 2008 Sep 18;36(5):388–401.

[11]   Rohner RP, Britner PA. Worldwide Mental Health Correlates of Parental Acceptance-Rejection: Review of Cross-Cultural and Intracultural Evidence. Cross-Cultural Research. 2002 Feb 1;36(1):16–6.

[12]   Sanders C, Bell J. The Olson Circumplex Model: A systemic approach to couple and family relationships | APS [Internet].   psychology.org.au.   2011.   Available   from: https://psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/2011/february/sanders

[13]   Skowron EA. The role of differentiation of self in marital adjustment. Journal of Counseling Psychology. 2000;47(2):229–37.

[14]   Skowron EA, Friedlander ML. "The Differentiation of Self Inventory: Development and initial validation": Errata. Journal   of   Counseling   Psychology   [Internet].   2009   Oct   1;56(4):597–8.   Available   from: https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016709

[15]   Taylor PR. Differentiation of Self: An Overview & Why It's Important in Relationships [Internet]. Choosing Therapy. 2021. Available from: https://www.choosingtherapy.com/differentiation-of-self/