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Research Paper

The relationship between domestic violence and marital adjustment: The moderating role of marital virtues



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between domestic violence and couple adjustment: the moderating role of marital virtues.

Methods: The method of the present research is correlational. The statistical population of this study was all married women living in Bandar Mahshahr, from which 330 people participated in this study using a convenience sample. The data collection tools were the Domestic Violence Questionnaire, the Marital Adjustment Questionnaire (DAS) (Spiner, 1976), and the Marital Virtues Profile (MPV) (Fawcett et al., 2013). The collected data were analyzed using correlation analysis, moderation regression methods and AMOS software version 26.

Results: The findings showed that there is a direct and significant relationship between the research variables ($P < 0.01$). However, indirect path coefficient of marital virtues in the relationship between domestic violence and marital adjustment is not significant ($p = 0.11$). This finding aligns with previous research, underscoring the detrimental role of violence in couple relationships.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that in relationships characterized by violence, possessing virtues such as forgiveness or tolerance alone is insufficient to prevent the deterioration of marital adjustment, and other supportive and intervening factors must also be considered.

1. Introduction

Couples typically experience numerous conflicts due to a wide range of differences between them (Gottman, 2017). One of the variables that contributes to resolving these conflicts is marital adjustment (Jbir et al., 2023). Marital adjustment is a gradual process that occurs over the course of a marriage and refers to a state in which, most of the time, spouses feel satisfied and content with their relationship. This process requires the regulation of

preferences, understanding of personality traits, the establishment of behavioral guidelines, and the development of healthy communication and interaction patterns (Azhdari et al., 2024). Marital adjustment consists of four key elements: marital satisfaction, marital agreement, mutual bonding, and friendly dialogues (Chis et al., 2022). Marital adjustment has been identified as a vital factor in determining the

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stability and longevity of a marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). When spouses strive to achieve balance and harmony in different aspects of their marital life, marital adaptation is formed. As marital adaptation develops, destructive interactions between spouses decrease, while marital satisfaction, happiness, agreement on core life values, and overall peace and stability within the family improve (Ebenuwa-Okoh, 2010; Naeem & Rezaei Sharif, 2016; Khanjani et al., 2020).

Based on research, it can be said that one of the variables that affects marital adjustment is domestic violence (Eslami & Sadeghabadi, 2021; Arefi & Razavieh, 2003). Currently, domestic violence is considered the most prevalent form of human violence (Wahhab et al., 2023). Domestic violence is a pattern of aggressive behavior in which individuals with power exert their strength and dominance over weaker individuals to achieve personal goals through various forms of violence, including physical, sexual, verbal, and psychological abuse (Wahhab et al., 2023). Domestic violence may be directed toward women, men, children, elderly individuals, or between other family members (Ahmad, 2019). Victims of domestic violence often suffer from a wide range of mental health problems and psychiatric disorders, including post-traumatic stress symptoms, anxiety, and depression (Lagdon et al., 2014), as well as increased prevalence of borderline and paranoid personality disorders (Pico-Alfonso, 2008), and suicidal ideation (Devries et al., 2011). The persistence of such violence poses a serious threat to the integrity and survival of the family. Research shows that women, more than men, experience fear, pain, humiliation, and anger in response to domestic violence (Romito et al., 2013). Regarding the causes of spousal violence, studies point to factors such as interference from the husband's family, the husband's personality and moral traits, lack of mutual understanding, and patriarchal beliefs (Okolie et al., 2021; Nwosu, 2020; Tubalawony et al., 2019; Aslani et al., 2019). Moreover, women who do not perceive themselves as capable of confronting their husbands often adopt passive coping strategies, such as tolerating a violent life, concealing the abuse, and ultimately resorting to self-defense during violent episodes (Saeidi et al., 2020).

In addition, one of the important variables influencing family relationships and interactions is marital virtues (Shirmardi, 2020; Tahmasby & Khorramabadi, 2025). This concept, rooted in positive psychology, refers to personal strengths or positive character traits that contribute to a meaningful and fulfilling life (Fowers, 2000). These virtues operate at both individual levels - such as courage, capacity to love, and forgiveness—and social levels—such as moderation and responsibility (Khojasteh Mehr et al., 2018). Within the structure of

marriage, these virtues include friendship, sacrifice, forgiveness, fairness, and understanding (Hawkins et al., 2007). The mechanism of action of virtues is such that they help reduce or neutralize the negative effects of stressful or adverse situations (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In doing so, they positively influence relationship quality, reduce negative interactions (Veldorale-Brogan et al., 2010), and enhance marital adjustment (Khojasteh Mehr et al., 2017; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Fowers, 2000; Hawkins et al., 2007; Veldorale-Brogan et al., 2010). Research has shown that marital virtues contribute to enhanced well-being, patience, adaptability, and self-regulation within intimate relationships (Mousavi, 2022) and increase intimacy and love between spouses (Gottman & Driver, 2005). However, the effectiveness of virtues across various marital situations—particularly in the context of domestic violence—has yielded mixed results. While some studies confirm the positive role of virtues in increasing marital adjustment and quality of life, others have not fully supported these claims (Asadi et al., 2016). Because violence, in addition to damaging marital relationships, has serious consequences for women's physical and psychological health and, more broadly, for their safety; consequences that may disrupt women's capacity to forgive their husbands, exacerbate attachment injuries, endanger children's well-being, and increase the likelihood of self-harming behaviors among women (Johnson, 2006; translated by Bahrami & Etemadi, 2022; Mohammadi et al., 2021; Khojasteh Mehr et al., 2023). Therefore, considering the destructive nature of domestic violence and its widespread psychological and social consequences for all family members and society at large, one preventive and corrective approach is to examine all potential variables that may play a role in this phenomenon. This would allow for a multi-dimensional analysis and lead to the development of diverse and situation-specific interventions. On the other hand, the focus of this study on violence against women is due to the fact that research has shown women experience violence more frequently than men (Nikrouy et al., 2024; Pournaghash et al., 2018). Being trapped in the cycle of violence can have detrimental consequences for women, including impairments in fulfilling their familial roles and regulating their personal and social functioning, increased vulnerability to various psychological and physical disorders, and threats to the health of other family members (Mikaeili et al., 2025). These consequences, in turn, can impose substantial costs on society. Moreover, given the importance of marital virtues and their role in intimate relationships, the need for further investigation into their relationship with other influential variables in spousal dynamics is evident. A key point justifying the

present study is the lack of prior research explicitly examining the moderating role of marital virtues in the relationship between domestic violence and marital adjustment. Previous studies have either examined these variables separately or in combination with other unrelated factors, and often with contradictory findings. Accordingly, the present study aimed to examine the relationship between domestic violence and marital adjustment, with a focus on the moderating role of marital virtues.

2. Materials and Methods

The method of the present research is correlational. The statistical population consisted of all married women residing in Bandar Mahshahr. Based on methodological recommendations indicating a minimum sample size of 250 participants for research conducted in the form of a model (Bashlideh, 2017), questionnaires were initially distributed to 338 participants. After excluding eight incompletely filled questionnaires, the final sample consisted of 330 individuals, selected through convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria were being married, having at least one year of marital duration, and having children. The exclusion criterion was incomplete completion of the questionnaires. Given that the target population comprised married women, participants meeting the inclusion criteria were recruited from public places such as schools, parks, and daycare centers. After explaining the research objectives, addressing ethical considerations (including respect for confidentiality and privacy of information, consent to participate in research, and freedom to leave the research), and providing instructions on how to complete the questionnaires, participants were asked to complete the survey instruments. The data were analyzed using correlation analysis, moderator regression methods and AMOS software version 26.

Instrument:

Domestic Violence Questionnaire: This 32-item questionnaire, developed by Haj-Yahya (1999), assesses four main components of domestic violence. The first component (items 1–16) evaluates psychological violence, the second (items 17–28) measures physical violence, the third (items 29–30) assesses sexual violence, and the fourth (items 31–32) addresses economic violence. The total score ranges from 32 to 96, with higher scores indicating greater levels of experienced violence. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the four subscales were reported as 0.71, 0.86, 0.83, and 0.92, respectively (Haj-Yahia, 2000). The validity of this questionnaire has been confirmed by several experts; In a study by Khosravi and Khaghanifard (2004), the overall reliability coefficient

of the scale was reported as 0.97. Additionally, in the study by Golmohammadi et al. (2021), the reliability of this tool was reported as 0.89 through Cronbach's alpha. In the present study, the reliability of this questionnaire was obtained as 0.94 through Cronbach's alpha.

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS): The DAS, developed by Spanier (1976), is designed to assess the quality of adjustment between couples living together. It consists of 32 items rated on a Likert scale and evaluates the respondent's perceived marital adjustment. The total score ranges from 0 to 151. Factor analysis of the DAS identifies four dimensions: Dyadic Satisfaction, Dyadic Cohesion, Dyadic Consensus, and Affectional Expression. The scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties. Spanier (1976) reported a reliability coefficient of 0.96 and validity coefficients of 0.94, 0.84, 0.90, and 0.73 for the four respective subscales. In Iran, the scale was used by Molazadeh (2002), who reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.95. In the present study, the reliability of this questionnaire was obtained as 0.94 through Cronbach's alpha.

Marital Virtues Profile (MVP): The MVP is a 15-item self-report instrument that assesses five core marital virtues: admiration, understanding, sacrifice, fairness, and forgiveness (Fawcett et al., 2013). Item 6 was excluded due to a factor loading below 0.30. The profile evaluates virtues at two levels: individual (admiration, forgiveness, and acceptance) and relational (fairness, appreciation, understanding, sacrifice, responsibility, and loyalty) (Hawkins et al., 2007). Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. Total scores range from 15 to 75, with higher scores reflecting greater marital virtues. Fawcett et al. (2013) reported internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for the subscales as follows: admiration (women: 0.79, men: 0.76), understanding (women: 0.68, men: 0.77), sacrifice (women: 0.78, men: 0.79), fairness (women: 0.71, men: 0.76), and forgiveness (women: 0.82, men: 0.76). Overall reliability was 0.75 for women and 0.71 for men. In a study by Shirmardi (2020), convergent validity of 0.49 was found through correlation with a relationship assessment scale, and internal consistency was reported as 0.83. In the present study, the reliability of this questionnaire was obtained as 0.89 through Cronbach's alpha.

3. Results

In this study, a total of 338 women with ages ranging from 25 to 60 years participated. Of these, 148 were employed and 190 were homemakers. Additionally, 301 had at least one child, whereas 37 had none. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the variables under study.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Marital Adjustment	116.75	24.44	-1.45	1.98
Domestic Violence	42.43	12.57	1.83	2.92
Marital Virtues	55.22	10.85	-0.49	-0.04

Based on the results presented in Table 1, the mean scores for marital adjustment, domestic violence, and marital virtues were 116.75, 42.43, and 55.22, respectively, with standard deviations of 24.44, 12.57,

and 10.85. The skewness and kurtosis values ranged between -3 and +3, indicating that the distribution of scores for the study variables was approximately normal.

Table 2. Correlation Between the Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Marital Adjustment	—	-0.74**	0.55**
2. Domestic Violence	-0.74**	—	-0.37**
3. Marital Virtues	0.55**	-0.37**	—

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

The results indicate a significant negative correlation between domestic violence and marital adjustment ($r = -0.74$, $p < 0.01$), a significant positive correlation between

marital virtues and marital adjustment ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$), and a significant negative correlation between domestic violence and marital virtues ($r = -0.37$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 3. Moderating Role of Marital Virtues in the Relationship Between Domestic Violence and Marital Adjustment

Variable	F	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	Sig.
Domestic Violence	301.75	0.80	0.64	0.64	-0.80	0.26	-0.42	<0.01
Marital Virtues	—	—	—	—	1.08	0.24	0.48	<0.01
Domestic Violence × Marital Virtues	202.99	0.80	0.65	0.64	-0.008	0.005	-0.22	0.11

Table 3 shows that the F-value for the regression model containing domestic violence and marital virtues as predictors was 301.75 ($p < .01$). The standardized beta coefficients for domestic violence and marital virtues were -0.42 and 0.48, respectively, both of which were significant ($p < .01$). Moreover, the inclusion of the moderator variable increased the explained variance (R^2) to 0.65; however, the beta coefficient for the interaction

term was -0.22 with a p-value of 0.11, indicating a non-significant moderating effect of marital virtues on the relationship between domestic violence and marital adjustment. To illustrate these results, the scores for domestic violence and marital virtues were divided into low and high groups based on a median split, and their interaction is presented in Figure 1.

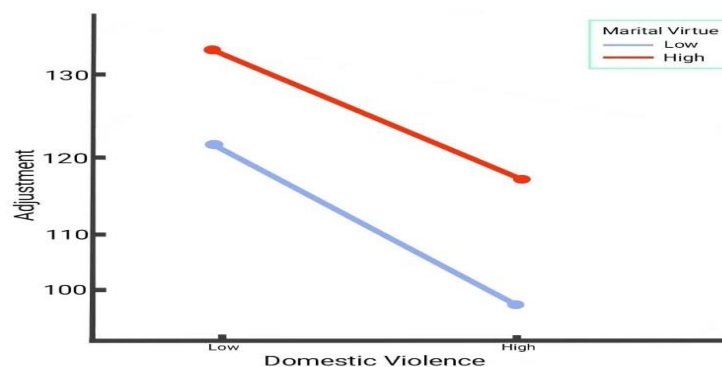
**Figure 1. The Moderating Role of Marital Virtues**

Figure 1 shows an inverse relationship between domestic violence and marital adjustment, with higher levels of domestic violence linked to lower marital adjustment. This pattern was consistent across both low and high levels of marital virtues.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between domestic violence and marital adjustment, focusing on the moderating role of marital virtues. The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between domestic violence and marital adjustment.

This result is consistent with the findings of Jbir et al. (2023), Eslami and Sadeghabadi (2021), and Arefi and Razavi (2003), who reported a negative association between aggression and marital compatibility. This finding can be explained by the fact that aggressive behaviors, whether verbal, such as insults, or physical, such as hitting, can harm the marital relationship and expose the affected individual to emotional difficulties (Arefi & Razavi, 2003). The damage caused by anger leads to the suppression of genuine emotional expression between spouses and creates many misunderstandings, which in turn fosters withdrawal and emotional separation (Johnson, 2006; translated by Bahrami & Etemadi, 2022). Anger, by creating grounds for resentment and distress between spouses, results in dissatisfaction and contributes to a vicious negative cycle that exacerbates anger and deterioration in the marital relationship (Tafreshi, 2013).

Moreover, this study revealed a significant positive relationship between marital virtues and marital adjustment. This finding aligns with the results of Faryabi et al. (2020) and Zandipour and Shafieinia (2010), who reported a positive relationship between forgiveness and marital adjustment. Forgiveness, as a marital virtue, can promote satisfaction by releasing negative feelings, cognitions, and behaviors toward the offender (Faryabi et al., 2020). The forgiveness process enables the harmed spouse to listen to the offender's statements and express their own hurt feelings. It also facilitates mutual acceptance of each other's emotions, whereby the harmed spouse accepts the offender's request for forgiveness and grants them a chance for recompense (Johnson, 2006; translated by Bahrami & Etemadi, 2022). This process fosters adjustment between spouses following dissatisfaction in the relationship (Faryabi et al., 2020). After the expression of emotions and increased understanding of each other's needs, conditions for enhanced marital adjustment are established. On the other hand, the virtue of empathy, through increased empathetic responses by regulating emotions and adopting perspectives that improve accuracy in empathy, provides positive feedback for individuals; this facilitates communication and adjustment between spouses after experiencing harm (Zarei et al., 2022). Additionally, the virtue of self-sacrifice, defined as selflessness and willingness to put others and the family first, along with a long-term perspective on marital life and affection for the spouse, enables the self-sacrificing partner to forgive the spouse's mistakes more readily for the sake of the relationship and family (Khojasteh Mehr et al., 2018).

Additionally, this study found a significant negative relationship between domestic violence and marital virtues. This finding is consistent with the results of Kaji

Isfahani et al. (2017), who reported an association between virtues and violence. It can be explained that individuals engaged in an emotional and empathetic relationship are better able to manage their negative emotions and exhibit appropriate behaviors because they feel understood and accepted by others (Teymoori et al., 2022). Conversely, individuals with lower levels of empathy are more likely to demonstrate antisocial behaviors (Kaji Isfahani et al., 2017). In fact, understanding others' psychological states in various situations and refraining from imposing one's own demands in interactions contribute to experiencing a safe relational context, thus preventing increased frustration and anger expression in response to the relationship (Kaji Isfahani et al., 2017).

Finally, the results indicated that the moderating role of marital virtues in the relationship between domestic violence and marital adjustment was not significant. This finding aligns with the studies by Asadi et al. (2016), which indicated the ineffectiveness of forgiveness therapy on aggression, and Shamsaie et al. (2022), which reported a negative relationship between marital intimacy and domestic violence. However, it contradicts the findings of Malekzadeh et al. (2017), who found that forgiveness skill training effectively reduced marital conflict and parental aggression. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that domestic violence in marital relationships generally reduces marital satisfaction (Talebi & Farahbakhsh, 2023; Mirshekari et al., 2023) and increases spouses' inclination toward emotional separation (Latifian et al., 2016). Domestic violence, regardless of its type, has numerous negative consequences for the family, especially the marital relationship, with effects ranging from fear, anger (Romito et al., 2013), and humiliation, as well as psychological disorders (Lagdon et al., 2014; Pico-Alfonso, 2008). Domestic violence can disrupt the structure and balance of the family and create distance between spouses, seriously harming their physical and mental health as well as relationship stability (Latifian et al., 2016). Although marital virtues such as forgiveness can play an effective role in reducing negative emotions and marital conflicts (Shirmardi, 2020), it can be argued that couples need awareness and training to prevent the accumulation of negative emotions, the eruption of these emotions in the form of violence, and even to successfully engage in the process of forgiveness. In this regard, numerous studies have emphasized the necessity of marital skills training in different populations to enhance couples' adjustment. This is particularly important because, in the absence of such training within families and educational settings, improving couples' adjustment seems to be a challenging task (Khojasteh Mehr et al., 2023; Ebrahimi & Almasi, 2022; Saadatmand et al., 2017;

Malekzadeh et al., 2017; Asadi et al., 2016). Moreover, many psychological theories, including Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy—which employs forgiveness as a key therapeutic technique to reduce negative emotions between spouses even in cases of infidelity—consider the presence of violence in marital relationships as a critical issue. They recommend suspending counseling sessions until the violence is fully resolved (Johnson, 2006; translated by Bahrami & Etemadi, 2022). Violence in the relationship seems to be a significant red line for many individuals, who may be unwilling to experience virtues such as forgiveness, intimacy, and understanding when it occurs within the marital context. Thus, the findings suggest that marital virtues do not have a significant moderating impact on the relationship between domestic violence and marital adjustment.

Limitations: This study faced several limitations, including its implementation solely in Mahshahr city, which necessitates caution in generalizing the results to other cities. Additionally, the sample consisted exclusively of married women within a specific age range, limiting the generalizability to other groups such as men of various ages. Furthermore, the study sample represented a normative population, and the results cannot be generalized to clinical populations experiencing domestic violence. Moreover, due to the use of convenience sampling for participant selection, women who are victims of severe violence may not have been included (because of social isolation). Finally, to avoid lengthy questionnaires and reduce participant fatigue, only one moderating variable was examined. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the results.

Recommendations

1. Future research should investigate this topic across diverse samples, including men and women of various ages and residents of other cities.
2. Future studies should examine this issue within clinical populations and with other mediating and moderating variables, comparing the findings to those of the present study.
3. Future research should specifically focus on clinical populations or women directly affected by violence.

5. Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

In this study, all ethical considerations, such as maintaining participant confidentiality, ensuring the right to withdraw from the study, and obtaining written informed consent, were strictly observed. This research received ethical approval (code: scu.ec.ps.403.1114) from Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz.

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Authors' contributions

All authors participated in the design, implementation, and writing of the present study.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this study.

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