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The Structural Relationships among Differentiation of Self, Conflict Resolution Styles, Emotional Intimacy, and Marital Stability

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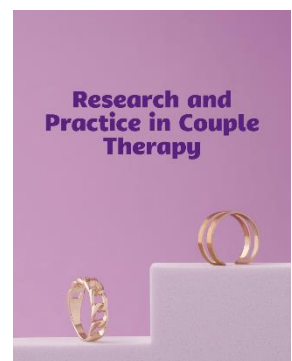
ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the structural relationships among differentiation of self, conflict resolution styles, emotional intimacy, and marital stability and to investigate the direct and indirect pathways through which these variables influence marital stability among married adults. This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design using structural equation modeling (SEM). The participants consisted of 642 married adults residing in the United States who were selected through online and community-based recruitment methods. Data were collected using the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R), the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI), the Emotional Intimacy Scale (EIS), and the Marital Instability Index (MII). Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analyses, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling were conducted using SPSS 29 and AMOS 29. Model fit was evaluated using multiple goodness-of-fit indices, and indirect effects were tested through bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples. The proposed structural model demonstrated satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 2.57$, CFI = 0.948, TLI = 0.942, GFI = 0.918, AGFI = 0.904, RMSEA = 0.050, SRMR = 0.047). Differentiation of self positively predicted positive problem-solving conflict resolution ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < .001$), emotional intimacy ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$), and marital stability ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < .001$), while negatively predicting conflict engagement ($\beta = -0.49$, $p < .001$) and withdrawal ($\beta = -0.53$, $p < .001$). Positive problem solving positively predicted emotional intimacy ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < .001$), whereas conflict engagement ($\beta = -0.21$, $p < .001$) and withdrawal ($\beta = -0.25$, $p < .001$) negatively predicted emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy emerged as the strongest predictor of marital stability ($\beta = 0.57$, $p < .001$). Significant indirect effects were observed between differentiation of self and marital stability through conflict resolution styles and emotional intimacy ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < .001$). The model explained 58% of the variance in emotional intimacy and 67% of the variance in marital stability. The findings indicate that differentiation of self contributes significantly to marital stability both directly and indirectly through constructive conflict resolution styles and enhanced emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy functions as a central mechanism linking individual psychological functioning and interpersonal relationship processes to marital stability. Interventions designed to strengthen self-differentiation, improve conflict management skills, and foster emotional intimacy may be effective strategies for promoting stable and satisfying marital relationships.

Keywords: Differentiation of Self; Conflict Resolution Styles; Emotional Intimacy; Marital Stability; Structural Equation Modeling

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Introduction

Marital relationships constitute one of the most significant interpersonal systems in adult life and play a central role in psychological well-being, family functioning, and social stability. Marriage provides emotional support, companionship, intimacy, and opportunities for personal growth; however, it also presents numerous challenges that require couples to navigate differences, regulate emotions, and maintain relational bonds over time. Contemporary societies have witnessed substantial changes in family structures, marital expectations, and relationship dynamics, making the maintenance of stable and satisfying marriages increasingly complex. Research has consistently shown that the quality of marital relationships influences mental health, physical well-being, parenting practices, and overall life satisfaction. Consequently, understanding the psychological and relational factors that contribute to marital stability remains a critical objective for family researchers and clinicians (Ashraf et al., 2024; Li et al., 2025; Sadeghian et al., 2025).

Marital stability refers to the durability, continuity, and resilience of a marital relationship despite the presence of stressors, disagreements, and life transitions. Stable marriages are characterized by commitment, mutual support, effective communication, emotional closeness, and constructive conflict management. In contrast, marital instability often manifests through chronic dissatisfaction, emotional disengagement, recurring conflicts, thoughts of separation, and eventual divorce. The growing prevalence of marital distress and divorce across many societies has intensified scholarly interest in identifying factors that protect marriages from deterioration. Studies examining divorce determinants have highlighted the roles of communication difficulties, unresolved conflicts, unmet expectations, emotional disconnection, and ineffective relational skills in predicting relationship dissolution (Gacinya, 2024; Mardani et al., 2024; Nazemi et al., 2023). Similarly, investigations into emotional divorce and marital dissatisfaction suggest that underlying psychological processes often precede observable relationship breakdowns (Dehno, 2023; Muturi, 2023). Therefore, examining the mechanisms that foster marital stability is essential for advancing theoretical understanding and informing preventive interventions.

Among the psychological constructs associated with healthy marital functioning, differentiation of self occupies a prominent position within Bowen Family Systems Theory. Differentiation of self refers to an individual's capacity to maintain a clear sense of identity while remaining emotionally connected to significant others. Highly differentiated individuals are capable of balancing autonomy and intimacy, regulating emotional reactivity, and making thoughtful decisions independent of relational pressures. In contrast, poorly differentiated individuals often experience emotional fusion, heightened reactivity, dependence on external validation, and difficulty maintaining personal boundaries. Theoretical perspectives suggest that self-differentiation facilitates adaptive relational functioning by enabling individuals to engage in intimate relationships without losing their sense of self. Empirical evidence supports this proposition, indicating that higher levels of self-differentiation are associated with greater marital satisfaction, emotional intimacy, emotional maturity, and lower levels of marital conflict (Dehno, 2023; Ghasemi, 2023; Kondari et al., 2023). Furthermore, self-differentiation has been identified as an important predictor of relationship adjustment and emotional connectedness, suggesting that it may play a foundational role in promoting long-term marital stability (Ghasemi, 2023; Kondari et al., 2023).

Another critical determinant of marital outcomes is the manner in which couples manage interpersonal disagreements. Conflict is an inevitable aspect of intimate relationships because partners differ in their needs, values, expectations, and behavioral preferences. While conflict itself is not inherently harmful, the strategies employed to resolve disagreements significantly influence relationship quality. Constructive conflict resolution involves open communication, collaborative problem solving, emotional regulation, and mutual respect. Destructive conflict resolution, on the other hand, includes hostility, criticism, withdrawal, avoidance, and coercive behaviors that undermine relational functioning. Extensive research has

demonstrated that couples who utilize constructive conflict management techniques report higher levels of marital satisfaction, trust, intimacy, and commitment, whereas destructive conflict patterns are associated with distress, instability, and divorce (Farooq et al., 2024; Radpour et al., 2023; Tolla, 2021). Studies examining intervention programs for distressed couples further indicate that improving conflict resolution skills leads to reductions in marital conflict and enhancements in communication quality and relationship satisfaction (Kordovani et al., 2024; Salehi et al., 2024). Moreover, cross-cultural evidence suggests that conflict negotiation styles influence marital burnout, emotional well-being, and relational outcomes across diverse populations (Obioma et al., 2025).

The significance of conflict resolution styles may be understood more comprehensively when considered alongside emotional processes occurring within intimate relationships. Emotional flooding, characterized by overwhelming physiological and emotional reactions during conflict, can impair communication, increase defensiveness, and reduce partners' ability to engage in constructive dialogue. Effective emotional regulation enables couples to navigate disagreements without escalating interpersonal tensions, thereby preserving relational bonds and facilitating mutual understanding. Research has shown that emotional regulation capacities are closely linked to relationship quality and can moderate the effects of marital conflict on intimacy and satisfaction (Castillo-López et al., 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Yousefpouri et al., 2024). These findings suggest that conflict resolution styles may serve as important pathways through which individual characteristics influence broader marital outcomes.

Emotional intimacy represents another fundamental dimension of healthy marital functioning. Emotional intimacy refers to the experience of psychological closeness, trust, empathy, openness, and mutual understanding between partners. Intimate relationships provide opportunities for emotional disclosure, validation, support, and connectedness, all of which contribute to relationship satisfaction and resilience. Emotional intimacy has consistently emerged as one of the strongest predictors of marital adjustment, relationship quality, and long-term commitment. Couples who experience higher levels of emotional intimacy tend to report greater satisfaction, stronger attachment bonds, more effective coping strategies, and increased relationship stability (Afshin et al., 2024; Bakhshi & Sadeghi, 2023; Hosseinpoor et al., 2022). Conversely, deficiencies in emotional intimacy are frequently associated with dissatisfaction, loneliness, conflict escalation, and relationship dissolution (Muturi, 2023; Nazemi et al., 2023).

The development and maintenance of emotional intimacy appear to be influenced by a variety of individual and relational factors. Attachment styles, emotional regulation, communication patterns, dyadic coping strategies, and interpersonal mindfulness have all been identified as significant contributors to intimacy within romantic relationships. Research based on attachment theory indicates that secure attachment facilitates trust, openness, and emotional closeness, whereas insecure attachment patterns may hinder intimacy development and increase vulnerability to relational distress (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Okonkwo, 2024; Wendołowska et al., 2022). Similarly, studies examining self-differentiation have reported positive associations between differentiation and marital intimacy, suggesting that individuals who effectively balance autonomy and connectedness are better able to establish emotionally intimate relationships (Ghasemi, 2023; Kondari et al., 2023). Furthermore, interpersonal mindfulness has been shown to mitigate the negative effects of marital conflict on intimacy, highlighting the dynamic interplay between personal characteristics and relational processes (Dehghanidowlatabadi et al., 2025).

A growing body of literature suggests that marital stability is not determined by isolated factors but rather emerges from complex interactions among psychological characteristics, interpersonal behaviors, and emotional experiences. For example, attachment styles influence communication patterns and conflict management strategies, which subsequently affect marital satisfaction and stability (Mardani et al., 2021; Okonkwo, 2024). Relationship beliefs and expectations also shape marital

functioning by influencing how partners interpret conflicts, evaluate relationship quality, and respond to challenges (Hashemi et al., 2023; Sadeghian et al., 2025). Irrational beliefs and marital stress have been found to undermine relationship satisfaction, partly through their effects on conflict resolution behaviors (Adibkia et al., 2022). Similarly, attitudes toward marriage, spouse selection criteria, and relational expectations contribute to variations in marital adjustment and relationship outcomes (Hashemi et al., 2023; Namazi & Kermani, 2023).

Recent investigations have further emphasized the importance of contextual and sociocultural influences on marital relationships. Cultural norms, family structures, social expectations, and evolving relationship forms affect how intimacy, conflict, commitment, and stability are experienced across different populations (K. & S., 2024; Li et al., 2025). Studies of marital connectedness during periods of societal disruption have demonstrated that relational resilience depends heavily on couples' abilities to maintain emotional bonds and adapt to changing circumstances (Tadros et al., 2022). Additionally, qualitative research has highlighted the significance of family interactions, interpersonal expectations, and emotional support systems in shaping marital experiences and relationship trajectories (Nazemi et al., 2023; Zahra et al., 2022). Humor, communication quality, and adaptive coping mechanisms have also been identified as protective factors that help couples manage stress and maintain relational harmony (Gyasi, 2023).

Despite substantial progress in understanding marital functioning, several gaps remain within the existing literature. Many studies have examined differentiation of self, conflict resolution styles, emotional intimacy, or marital stability independently, while fewer investigations have explored their simultaneous relationships within an integrated structural framework. Existing research frequently focuses on dyadic associations, limiting understanding of the indirect pathways through which individual characteristics influence marital outcomes. For instance, although self-differentiation has been linked to intimacy and conflict management, the mechanisms through which these variables collectively contribute to marital stability remain insufficiently understood. Likewise, studies examining conflict resolution often emphasize marital satisfaction rather than broader indicators of relational continuity and stability (Kordovani et al., 2024; Obioma et al., 2025; Salehi et al., 2024). Furthermore, evidence suggests that emotional intimacy may serve as a crucial mediating process connecting individual and relational factors to long-term marital outcomes, yet this proposition requires further empirical examination (Afshin et al., 2024; Bakhshi & Sadeghi, 2023; Dehghanidowlatabadi et al., 2025).

Given the theoretical significance of differentiation of self, the established importance of conflict resolution styles, and the central role of emotional intimacy in marital functioning, a comprehensive examination of their structural relationships may provide valuable insights into the determinants of marital stability. Understanding these interconnections can contribute to the development of more effective couple interventions, relationship enrichment programs, and preventive strategies aimed at strengthening marital relationships and reducing the risk of marital dissolution.

The aim of the present study was to examine the structural relationships among differentiation of self, conflict resolution styles, emotional intimacy, and marital stability among married adults.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design using structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the direct and indirect relationships among differentiation of self, conflict resolution styles, emotional intimacy, and marital stability among married adults in the United States. The study was conducted between January and June 2025 and targeted married individuals residing in various regions of the United States. A total of 642 married adults participated in the study. Participants

were recruited through community organizations, social media platforms, marital enrichment programs, and online survey panels. Eligibility criteria included being legally married for at least one year, being at least 21 years of age, and possessing sufficient English-language proficiency to complete the study questionnaires. Individuals who were currently undergoing divorce proceedings or who reported severe psychiatric disorders that could interfere with survey completion were excluded from participation. The final sample consisted of 642 participants, including 327 women and 315 men, ranging in age from 22 to 68 years ($M = 41.37$, $SD = 10.84$).

Measures

Differentiation of self was assessed using the Differentiation of Self Inventory–Revised (DSI-R) developed by Skowron and Schmitt (2003). The DSI-R is a widely used self-report measure designed to evaluate an individual's ability to maintain emotional autonomy while remaining emotionally connected to significant others. The instrument consists of 46 items distributed across four dimensions: Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others. Participants respond to each item using a six-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Higher scores indicate greater levels of self-differentiation. Previous studies have demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties for the DSI-R, including strong internal consistency, construct validity, and test-retest reliability across diverse populations.

Conflict resolution styles were measured using the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI) developed by Kurdek (1994). The CRSI consists of 16 items assessing the strategies individuals employ when managing marital disagreements and interpersonal conflicts. The inventory evaluates four primary conflict resolution styles: Positive Problem Solving, Conflict Engagement, Withdrawal, and Compliance. Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from never to always. Higher scores on each subscale indicate greater use of the corresponding conflict resolution strategy. Previous research has consistently reported acceptable reliability coefficients and evidence supporting the construct and criterion validity of the instrument in marital and family research.

Emotional intimacy was measured using the Emotional Intimacy Scale (EIS) developed by Sinclair and Dowdy (2005). The scale contains 17 items designed to assess the degree of emotional closeness, trust, openness, empathy, and mutual understanding experienced within intimate relationships. Participants rate each statement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Higher total scores reflect greater perceived emotional intimacy within the marital relationship. The Emotional Intimacy Scale has demonstrated strong internal consistency and convergent validity in studies involving married couples and long-term romantic partners. Marital stability was assessed using the Marital Instability Index (MII) developed by Booth, Johnson, and Edwards (1983). The instrument evaluates the degree of stability and permanence within marital relationships by examining thoughts, discussions, and actions related to separation or divorce. The scale contains 14 items rated on varying response formats depending on item content. Higher scores indicate lower marital stability and greater marital instability. For the purposes of this study, scores were reverse coded so that higher values represented greater marital stability, facilitating interpretation of the structural model. Previous investigations have established the reliability, predictive validity, and sensitivity of the measure in assessing marital outcomes and relationship continuity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29 and AMOS version 29. Prior to hypothesis testing, data were screened for missing values, outliers, and violations of statistical assumptions. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis values, were calculated for all study variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine bivariate associations among differentiation of self, conflict resolution styles, emotional intimacy,

and marital stability. The measurement properties of the latent constructs were evaluated through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Model fit was assessed using multiple goodness-of-fit indices, including the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Acceptable model fit was determined according to commonly recommended thresholds.

Structural equation modeling was subsequently employed to test the hypothesized relationships among the study variables. Direct effects of differentiation of self on conflict resolution styles, emotional intimacy, and marital stability were examined, along with indirect pathways linking differentiation of self to marital stability through conflict resolution styles and emotional intimacy. The significance of indirect effects was evaluated using bias-corrected bootstrap procedures with 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals. Statistical significance was established at $p < .05$. The final structural model was interpreted based on parameter estimates, explained variance coefficients (R^2), standardized path coefficients, and overall model fit indicators. This analytical approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of the complex relational processes underlying marital functioning and stability among married adults in the United States.

Findings and Results

A total of 642 married adults participated in the study. Among the participants, 327 (50.9%) were women and 315 (49.1%) were men. The mean age of the respondents was 41.37 years ($SD = 10.84$), with ages ranging from 22 to 68 years. The average duration of marriage was 12.56 years ($SD = 8.93$). Regarding educational attainment, 18.5% held a high school diploma, 27.3% had completed some college education, 35.4% possessed a bachelor's degree, and 18.8% held postgraduate degrees. Approximately 71.2% of participants reported being employed full-time, while 19.3% were employed part-time and 9.5% were unemployed or retired. The sample represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic regions across the United States, providing substantial variability in the study variables.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Normality Indicators for the Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness	Kurtosis
Differentiation of Self	174.82	24.67	108	238	-0.41	-0.27
Positive Problem Solving	19.45	3.88	8	28	-0.36	-0.18
Conflict Engagement	11.28	3.61	4	20	0.48	-0.11
Withdrawal	10.76	3.42	4	20	0.39	-0.23
Compliance	9.82	3.15	4	20	0.25	-0.36
Emotional Intimacy	65.91	10.73	29	85	-0.57	0.18
Marital Stability	52.34	8.65	21	70	-0.62	0.24

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and normality indicators for all study variables. The highest mean score was observed for differentiation of self ($M = 174.82$, $SD = 24.67$), while emotional intimacy ($M = 65.91$, $SD = 10.73$) and marital stability ($M = 52.34$, $SD = 8.65$) also demonstrated relatively high average levels among participants. Examination of skewness and kurtosis values revealed that all variables fell within the acceptable range of ± 2 , indicating no substantial departures from normality. Therefore, the assumptions required for structural equation modeling were considered satisfactory, and subsequent analyses were conducted using maximum likelihood estimation procedures.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Differentiation of Self	1						
2. Positive Problem Solving	0.58**	1					
3. Conflict Engagement	-0.49**	-0.44**	1				
4. Withdrawal	-0.53**	-0.39**	0.51**	1			

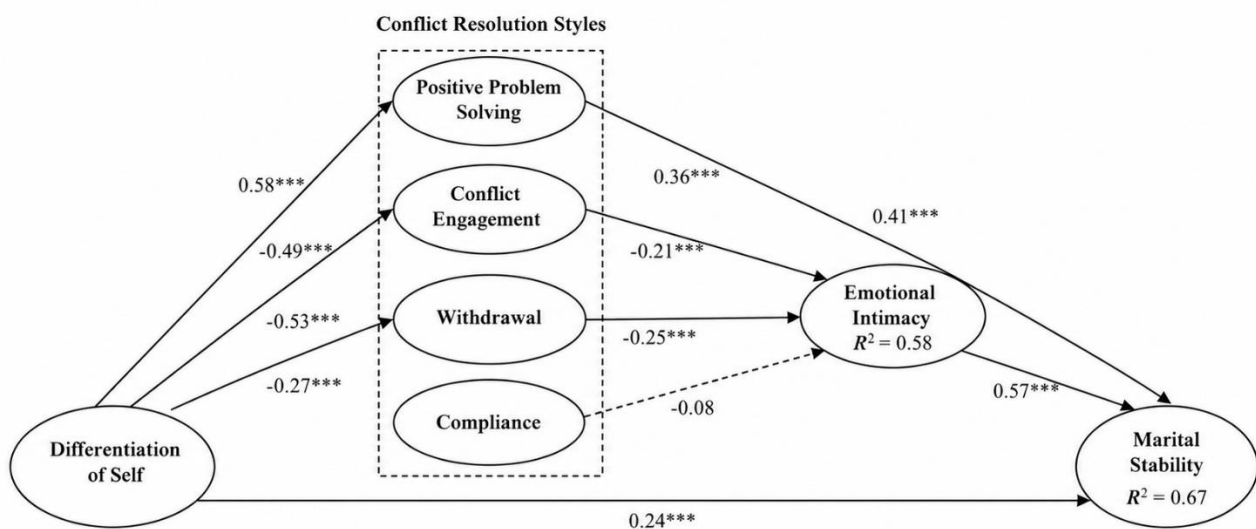
5. Compliance	-0.27**	-0.18**	0.31**	0.35**	1		
6. Emotional Intimacy	0.67**	0.61**	-0.54**	-0.57**	-0.22**	1	
7. Marital Stability	0.64**	0.56**	-0.59**	-0.62**	-0.25**	0.71**	1

The correlation analysis revealed significant associations among all major study variables. Differentiation of self demonstrated a strong positive relationship with emotional intimacy ($r = 0.67, p < .01$) and marital stability ($r = 0.64, p < .01$), suggesting that individuals with greater emotional autonomy and self-definition tended to report stronger emotional bonds and more stable marriages. Positive problem-solving style was positively associated with emotional intimacy ($r = 0.61, p < .01$) and marital stability ($r = 0.56, p < .01$). In contrast, conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance were negatively associated with emotional intimacy and marital stability. The strongest bivariate association was observed between emotional intimacy and marital stability ($r = 0.71, p < .01$), highlighting the central role of emotional closeness in maintaining stable marital relationships. The overall pattern of correlations provided preliminary support for the proposed structural model.

Table 3. Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Measurement and Structural Models

Fit Index	Recommended Value	Measurement Model	Structural Model
χ^2/df	< 3.00	2.34	2.57
CFI	> 0.90	0.957	0.948
TLI	> 0.90	0.951	0.942
GFI	> 0.90	0.926	0.918
AGFI	> 0.90	0.912	0.904
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.046	0.050
SRMR	< 0.08	0.041	0.047

The fit indices reported in Table 3 indicated that both the measurement and structural models demonstrated satisfactory fit to the observed data. The structural model yielded $\chi^2/df = 2.57$, CFI = 0.948, TLI = 0.942, GFI = 0.918, AGFI = 0.904, RMSEA = 0.050, and SRMR = 0.047. All indices met or exceeded recommended thresholds, suggesting that the hypothesized relationships among differentiation of self, conflict resolution styles, emotional intimacy, and marital stability adequately represented the observed covariance structure. These findings provided empirical support for proceeding with interpretation of the structural pathways.



Notes. Standardized path coefficients (β) are reported. Solid lines indicate significant paths ($p < .001$). Dashed line indicates non-significant path ($p > .05$). *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1. Final Structural Model of the Relationships among Differentiation of Self, Conflict Resolution Styles, Emotional Intimacy, and Marital Stability

The final structural model demonstrated that differentiation of self exerted significant direct effects on positive problem solving ($\beta = 0.58, p < .001$), conflict engagement ($\beta = -0.49, p < .001$), withdrawal ($\beta = -0.53, p < .001$), emotional intimacy ($\beta = 0.41, p < .001$), and marital stability ($\beta = 0.24, p < .001$). Positive problem solving positively predicted emotional intimacy ($\beta = 0.36, p < .001$), whereas conflict engagement ($\beta = -0.21, p < .001$) and withdrawal ($\beta = -0.25, p < .001$) negatively predicted emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy emerged as the strongest predictor of marital stability ($\beta = 0.57, p < .001$). Bootstrap analyses revealed significant indirect effects of differentiation of self on marital stability through conflict resolution styles and emotional intimacy ($\beta = 0.33, p < .001$), confirming the mediating role of these variables. Collectively, the predictors accounted for 58% of the variance in emotional intimacy and 67% of the variance in marital stability, indicating substantial explanatory power. The findings suggest that individuals with higher levels of self-differentiation are more likely to employ constructive conflict resolution strategies, experience greater emotional intimacy with their spouses, and maintain more stable marital relationships over time.

Table 4. Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects in the Structural Model

Path	Direct Effect (β)	Indirect Effect (β)	Total Effect (β)	p
Differentiation of Self → Positive Problem Solving	0.58	—	0.58	<0.001
Differentiation of Self → Conflict Engagement	-0.49	—	-0.49	<0.001
Differentiation of Self → Withdrawal	-0.53	—	-0.53	<0.001
Differentiation of Self → Emotional Intimacy	0.41	0.23	0.64	<0.001
Positive Problem Solving → Emotional Intimacy	0.36	—	0.36	<0.001
Conflict Engagement → Emotional Intimacy	-0.21	—	-0.21	<0.001
Withdrawal → Emotional Intimacy	-0.25	—	-0.25	<0.001
Emotional Intimacy → Marital Stability	0.57	—	0.57	<0.001
Differentiation of Self → Marital Stability	0.24	0.33	0.57	<0.001

The decomposition of effects shown in Table 4 demonstrated that differentiation of self influenced marital stability both directly and indirectly. The total effect of differentiation of self on marital stability was substantial ($\beta = 0.57, p < .001$), with more than half of this influence occurring through the mediating mechanisms of conflict resolution styles and emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy served as the strongest proximal determinant of marital stability, while positive problem-solving emerged as the most beneficial conflict management strategy. Conversely, conflict engagement and withdrawal exerted detrimental effects on emotional intimacy and subsequently reduced marital stability. These findings support the theoretical proposition that self-differentiation contributes to healthier marital functioning by fostering constructive interpersonal processes that strengthen emotional connection and long-term relationship stability.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the structural relationships among differentiation of self, conflict resolution styles, emotional intimacy, and marital stability among married adults in the United States. The findings revealed that differentiation of self was positively associated with positive problem-solving conflict resolution and negatively associated with conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance styles. Furthermore, differentiation of self demonstrated significant direct and indirect effects on marital stability through emotional intimacy and conflict resolution styles. Emotional intimacy emerged as the strongest predictor of marital stability, while positive problem-solving contributed positively to emotional intimacy and relationship stability. In contrast, conflict engagement and withdrawal negatively influenced emotional intimacy and ultimately weakened marital stability. Collectively, the proposed model explained a substantial proportion of variance in both emotional intimacy

and marital stability, supporting the theoretical proposition that individual psychological functioning, interpersonal conflict management, and emotional connectedness jointly contribute to the maintenance of stable marital relationships.

One of the most important findings of this study was the positive association between differentiation of self and constructive conflict resolution styles, alongside the negative association between differentiation of self and destructive conflict patterns. This finding is highly consistent with Bowen's theoretical framework, which proposes that differentiated individuals possess greater emotional regulation capacities, stronger personal boundaries, and enhanced abilities to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively during interpersonal tensions. Individuals with higher differentiation are less likely to become emotionally overwhelmed during disagreements and more capable of maintaining both autonomy and connection within close relationships. The present findings align closely with previous research demonstrating that self-differentiation predicts lower levels of marital conflict and healthier relational functioning (Dehno, 2023; Kondari et al., 2023). Similarly, the results support evidence suggesting that self-differentiation contributes to emotional maturity and adaptive interpersonal functioning, thereby reducing reliance on maladaptive conflict behaviors (Ghasemi, 2023; Kondari et al., 2023). The observed negative relationships between differentiation and conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance indicate that highly differentiated individuals are less likely to respond to disagreements through hostility, avoidance, or excessive submission, which are behaviors known to undermine relationship quality over time.

The findings also demonstrated that positive problem-solving conflict resolution was positively associated with emotional intimacy, whereas conflict engagement and withdrawal were negatively associated with emotional intimacy. This result reinforces the notion that the quality of conflict management directly influences the emotional climate of marital relationships. Constructive conflict resolution facilitates open communication, validation, empathy, and collaborative problem solving, all of which strengthen emotional bonds between partners. In contrast, hostile interactions and withdrawal behaviors disrupt emotional exchanges, decrease trust, and hinder opportunities for intimacy development. These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that effective conflict management serves as a protective factor against marital distress and promotes relationship satisfaction (Kordovani et al., 2024; Radpour et al., 2023; Salehi et al., 2024). Research examining marital burnout has similarly shown that destructive conflict negotiation styles contribute to emotional exhaustion and relational deterioration, whereas constructive approaches promote healthier relationship functioning (Obioma et al., 2025). Moreover, investigations into emotional flooding during couple interactions suggest that ineffective conflict responses often trigger emotional overwhelm, reducing partners' capacity for intimacy and mutual understanding (Castillo-López et al., 2024).

Another significant finding was the strong positive relationship between differentiation of self and emotional intimacy. This result suggests that individuals who maintain a healthy balance between autonomy and connectedness are more capable of forming emotionally intimate relationships with their spouses. The finding supports theoretical assumptions that intimacy does not arise from emotional fusion or dependence but rather from the ability to engage authentically while preserving individual identity. Individuals with higher differentiation may be more willing to engage in emotional disclosure, empathic understanding, and supportive interactions, thereby fostering deeper emotional bonds. This result is consistent with prior studies demonstrating positive associations between self-differentiation and marital intimacy (Ghasemi, 2023; Kondari et al., 2023). Furthermore, research examining attachment dynamics and relational outcomes has shown that emotionally regulated individuals are better equipped to establish secure and intimate partnerships (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Wendołowska et al., 2022). The present findings therefore extend previous literature by demonstrating that differentiation of self remains a significant predictor of emotional intimacy even when conflict resolution styles are simultaneously considered within a comprehensive structural model.

The finding that emotional intimacy emerged as the strongest direct predictor of marital stability deserves particular attention. Emotional intimacy represents the foundation upon which commitment, trust, support, and relational satisfaction are built. When couples experience high levels of emotional closeness, they are more likely to perceive their relationships as rewarding, meaningful, and worth preserving despite inevitable challenges and disagreements. The present results support extensive evidence indicating that intimacy is a central determinant of relationship quality and stability (Afshin et al., 2024; Bakhshi & Sadeghi, 2023; Hosseinpoor et al., 2022). Previous investigations have demonstrated that interventions designed to enhance emotional intimacy produce significant improvements in marital functioning and relational adjustment (Hosseinpoor et al., 2022; Safavi et al., 2022). Similarly, qualitative studies of stable marriages consistently identify emotional connection, mutual understanding, and psychological closeness as defining characteristics of successful long-term relationships (Nazemi et al., 2023). The strong effect observed in the present study suggests that emotional intimacy may function as a key mechanism through which psychological and behavioral factors influence marital outcomes.

The mediating role of emotional intimacy also represents an important contribution of this study. The results indicated that differentiation of self exerted substantial indirect effects on marital stability through emotional intimacy and conflict resolution styles. This finding suggests that self-differentiation enhances marital stability not only directly but also by promoting healthier relational processes that strengthen emotional bonds between spouses. Individuals who possess greater emotional regulation and self-definition appear more likely to engage in constructive conflict resolution, which in turn facilitates emotional intimacy and reinforces marital stability. These findings align with studies demonstrating that interpersonal mindfulness, emotional regulation, and attachment security mediate the effects of personal characteristics on marital outcomes (Dehghanidowlatabadi et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Wendołowska et al., 2022). The current results therefore support a process-oriented understanding of marital stability, emphasizing that enduring relationships emerge through interconnected psychological and interpersonal mechanisms rather than isolated factors.

The negative effects of conflict engagement and withdrawal on emotional intimacy and marital stability further highlight the destructive consequences of maladaptive conflict management strategies. Conflict engagement often involves criticism, defensiveness, hostility, and escalating confrontations, whereas withdrawal reflects emotional disengagement and avoidance of relational issues. Both patterns reduce opportunities for effective communication and undermine emotional security within the relationship. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that destructive conflict tactics predict marital dissatisfaction, emotional distance, and increased risk of separation or divorce (Farooq et al., 2024; Tolla, 2021). Studies exploring determinants of divorce have similarly identified chronic unresolved conflict and communication breakdown as primary contributors to marital dissolution (Gacinya, 2024; Mardani et al., 2024). The present findings therefore reinforce the importance of addressing maladaptive conflict patterns within marital interventions and relationship education programs.

The findings of this study may also be interpreted within broader theoretical frameworks concerning attachment, relationship beliefs, and interpersonal expectations. Attachment-based perspectives suggest that secure individuals possess greater emotional regulation capacities and more adaptive approaches to intimacy and conflict resolution (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Okonkwo, 2024). Similarly, marital beliefs and expectations influence how partners perceive conflicts, evaluate relationship quality, and respond to relational challenges (Sadeghian et al., 2025). Irrational beliefs and unrealistic expectations may contribute to dysfunctional conflict behaviors and reduced relationship satisfaction, whereas adaptive cognitive frameworks support healthier relational functioning (Adibkia et al., 2022). The present findings are therefore compatible with integrative models of marital functioning that emphasize the interaction of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes.

Furthermore, the results underscore the importance of considering sociocultural influences on marital stability. Although the present study focused on married adults in the United States, previous research indicates that relational dynamics are shaped

by cultural values, social expectations, and family norms (K. & S., 2024; Li et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the central roles of emotional intimacy, effective conflict resolution, and self-differentiation appear to transcend cultural boundaries. Similar patterns have been observed across diverse populations and relationship contexts, suggesting that these factors represent universal dimensions of healthy marital functioning (Dehghanidowlatabadi et al., 2025; Obioma et al., 2025; Wendolowska et al., 2022). The findings also complement evidence showing that relational connectedness serves as a protective resource during periods of stress and uncertainty (Tadros et al., 2022). Together, these observations strengthen confidence in the broader applicability of the study's conclusions.

Another notable implication concerns the prevention of marital instability and relational deterioration. Previous studies have linked marital dissatisfaction, emotional divorce, infidelity tendencies, and marital burnout to deficits in emotional connection and ineffective relational skills (Dehno, 2023; Namazi & Kermani, 2023; Obioma et al., 2025). The present findings suggest that strengthening differentiation of self and promoting constructive conflict resolution may reduce vulnerability to these adverse outcomes by enhancing emotional intimacy and relationship resilience. Such an interpretation is consistent with findings demonstrating the effectiveness of relationship education and couple therapy interventions in improving communication, intimacy, and conflict management (Hosseinpoor et al., 2022; Radpour et al., 2023; Salehi et al., 2024). Consequently, efforts to enhance marital stability should focus not only on reducing conflict but also on fostering the psychological and emotional capacities that support healthy relational functioning.

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the relationships among differentiation of self, conflict resolution styles, emotional intimacy, and marital stability. Second, all variables were assessed using self-report measures, creating the possibility of social desirability bias and common method variance. Third, although the sample was relatively large and diverse, it consisted exclusively of married adults in the United States, which may limit generalizability to other cultural contexts. Finally, the study did not include dyadic data from both spouses, preventing examination of partner effects and reciprocal influences within marital relationships.

Future research should employ longitudinal and experimental designs to investigate causal pathways among the study variables over time. Researchers may also examine additional mediators and moderators such as attachment security, emotional regulation, interpersonal mindfulness, personality traits, and cultural values. Future studies would benefit from collecting data from both spouses and applying dyadic analytical approaches to better understand mutual influences within marital relationships. Comparative cross-cultural investigations may further clarify the extent to which the observed relationships remain consistent across different sociocultural environments.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of incorporating self-differentiation training, emotional intimacy enhancement, and conflict resolution skill development into couple counseling and marital enrichment programs. Therapists and family counselors should help couples cultivate emotional regulation, healthy personal boundaries, constructive communication patterns, and collaborative problem-solving abilities. Relationship education initiatives can also focus on strengthening emotional closeness and fostering greater awareness of the ways individual psychological functioning influences marital dynamics. Such interventions may contribute substantially to the promotion of marital stability, relationship satisfaction, and long-term family well-being.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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