

A Comparison between Dimensions of Alexithymia and Resilience in Divorce-Seeking Couples and Normal Couples of City of Gorgan

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Abstract

The current research aim is comparing alexithymia and resilience in divorce-seeking couples and normal couples. In this casual-comparative study, 200 couples (100 divorce-seeking couples and 100 normal couples) were chosen from the couples visiting Islamic revolutionary courts of city of Gorgan and they were matched in some of the variables such as age, sex, and academic level, and they were chosen by the use of convenience sampling, and they answered the questionnaires of Toronto alexithymia scale and resilience. Data were analyzed by independent t-test. Results showed that there is no difference between the alexithymia and some of its sub-scales (difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and an externally-oriented cognitive style) in two groups; and there is significant difference between subscale of difficulty describing feelings and resilience of divorce-seeking couples and normal couples. It could be concluded that psychological factors such as alexithymia and resilience may have an important role in formation of many interpersonal problems.

Keywords: Alexithymia, Resilience, Couples, Divorce.

Introduction

In the past few decades, divorce had a rapid growth and paying attention and concern toward this problem have become the center of attention of many experts and officials. This concern is about the rapid growth of divorce, evolution in divorce methods and also lack of mechanisms result in reduction of divorce or reducing its risky consequences (Malekzadeh, 2008). On one hand, family status and strengthening, relationships between the family members and its dissolution and collapse are reflections of social, cultural and economic conditions and family, as one of the parts of social system which has features of a social institution has mutual interaction, and on the other hand, it is caused by internal factors in family and its quality (Azadi et al., 2010). Two of the internal factors are couples' resilience and the ability to express emotions or alexithymia which is considered as one of the important factors of strengthening families. The concept of alexithymia that colloquially evokes apathy was first introduced by Peter Sifneos (Bayrami et al., 2011) meaning no words to express emotions. Alexithymia is a multi-dimensional concept and some of its features include disability to use emotions toward signs of emotional problems, critical thinking about the outer trivial facts, reduction of recalling dreams, difficulty distinguishing between feelings and the bodily sensations of emotional arousal, lack of emotional facial expressions, limited capacity for empathy and self-awareness, and failure to regulate emotions management (Taylor & Bagby, 2000). A few conducted researches in the field of surveying the temporal stability of alexithymia have stated this structure as a stable personality trait indicating a defect in cognitive process of emotional information (Taylor, 2000).

In contrast with this trait-based approach, some other researchers have indicated doubt about the temporal stability of alexithymia and have introduced it as a state (rather than a trait) of outcome of personal distress. Based on this approach, alexithymia is only a coping mechanism for protecting self against emotional distress related to highly traumatic situations (Besharat, 2008). One of the other important factors in strengthening and stability of the families is couples' resilience. Garmezy and Masten (1991) defined resilience as "a process, ability or consequence of successful adaptability despite the threatening conditions". In fact, resilience is positive adaptation in response to adverse conditions (Waller, 2001). Conducted researches indicate that some resilient individuals regain their typical level of performance after dealing with difficult life situations. In overall, features of resilient individuals could be considered as easily accepting the realities of life, believing that life is meaningful (Khalatbari & Bahari, 2010). Resilience is not just passive resistance against the threatening injuries or conditions; the resilient individual is an active and constructive participant in his surrounding environment. Resilience is the individual's capability to keep a bio-psycho-spiritual balance against threatening situations (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Kumpfer (1999) believes that resilience is returning to the basic balance or reaching a higher

balance (in threatening situation), and basically it should provide the requirements for successful adaptation in life. Meanwhile, Kumpfer states that positive adaptation with life can be both considered as the outcome of resilience and antecedent of a higher level of resilience (Mahmoudi et al., 2011).

Despite the vast amount of researches conducted to survey different dimensions of alexithymia and resilience with other variables, such as study by Tabatabaei and Ghareh Aghaji (2007) in which the social support and effective coping styles were determined as the promoting indicators of resilience, surveying the problems of individuals with alexithymia in interpersonal domains and interaction with others have recently caught the attention of researchers. In this regard, Monte Barocci et al (2004) found out that alexithymia has a relation with need to get confirmation from others, fear and discomfort from intimacy with others and lack of paying attention to the importance of interaction with others. Megan and Bogart (2007) showed that alexithymia has a relation with low levels of affection and bond with others, lack of expressing problems with others and inappropriate coping strategies in interpersonal situations. Based on the importance of these two variables in keeping, preserving and stability of the family and despite the wide range of researches surveying different dimensions of alexithymia and based on the fact that up to now no research in Iran has been conducted to survey the relation between alexithymia and resilience in divorce-seeking individuals, the current research aims to answer this question that is there any difference between alexithymia and resilience in divorce-seeking couples and normal couples or not?.

Methodology

This research is a casual-comparative study. The population includes all divorce-seeking males and females in city of Gorgan who visited Islamic revolutionary courts of city of Gorgan during 2012. From these individuals 50 couples (25 males and 25 females) were randomly chosen by convenience sampling. Also for the normal sample, 50 couples (25 males and 25 females) were chosen from the staff of department of justice through random sampling. At the stage of implementing the research, after providing basic information about the scales and aim of the test, answering method was fully explained to the participants of the test. About the ethical considerations, after obtaining the individuals' consent and providing the required information, they were ensured that the received information would only be used in the research, and they would be protected from all forms of abuse.

Measuring tools

- Alexithymia questionnaire: Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) is a 20-question questionnaire having three dimensions of difficulty identifying feelings (DIF) 7 articles, difficulty describing feelings (DDF) 5 articles, and externally-oriented thinking (EOT) 8 articles. Questions are graded on a 5-point Likert scale (from completely agree=1 to completely disagree=5). Scores of 60 and above are considered to have high alexithymia and scores of 52 and below are considered to have low alexithymia (Shahgholian et al., 2007). This questionnaire questions measure DIF, DDF, and EOT. Also an overall score is calculated from adding scores of three sub-scales for the overall alexithymia. Cronbach' alpha coefficient of this scale is 0.75. Correlation coefficient of this test with checklist of mental symptoms was reported to be in the range of 0.17 to 0.48. Internal consistency validity according to Cronbach's alpha in healthy Iranian sample for the overall scale of TAS-20 and dimensions of DIF, DDF, and EOT is respectively 0.79 0.75, 0.71, and 0.66 and the validity of the overall scale of TAS-20 and dimensions of DIF, DDF, and EOT in clinical Iranian sample by the use of retest method is respectively 0.77, 0.73, 0.69 and 0.65 (Mazaheri et al., 2011).
- Resilience questionnaire: This scale includes 25 items, and Connor and Davidson (2003) designed it by reviewing the research resources of 1979-1991 in resilience domain. Questions of this questionnaire are evaluated on a Likert scale (never, seldom, sometimes, often and always) (Khabbaz et al., 2011). This scale includes 5 components of competence, trust in one's instincts, tolerate the negative emotions, positive accept of changes/secure relationships, controls and spirituality (Khabbaz et al., 2011). The highest score is 100 and the lowest score is 0. Surveying the psychometric properties of this scale is conducted on 6 groups of general population, individuals who visit basic skills section, psychiatric outpatients, patients suffering from generalized anxiety disorder and two groups of patients with posttraumatic stress disorder. In Iran for its normalization before determining the validity, Mohammadi (2005) used factor analysis with method of main components of two indicators; the adequate sampling is equal to 0.87 and the Chi-square of Bartlett's test is equal to 5556.28, and both indicators showed adequacy of the evidences for conducting factor analysis. Reliability coefficient was achieved to be 0.89 by calculating Cronbach's alpha (Khabbaz et al., 2011). Independent t-test was used for data analysis. All calculations were conducted at level $\alpha \leq 0.05$ by the use of SPSS16 software.

Results

In this study 100 couples were surveyed in two groups. Demographic data show that the mean age of divorce-seeking males and females is respectively 34.64 and 30.88. Most cases of divorce occur for individuals with academic level of Diploma (38%). The highest rate of divorce (81%) occurs for individuals who have two children or less. Based on the information provided in table 1 it is observed that normal couples have better scores in resilience scale and difficulty describing feelings.

Table 1. Mean and SD of variables of resilience and alexithymia and its dimensions in divorce-seeking couples and normal couples.

	Resilience	DIF	DDF	EOT	Alexithymia
Divorce-seeking	41.58 ± 18.6	18.34 ± 5.1	15.56 ± 3.5	24.81 ± 5.2	58.71 ± 1.1

Normal	59.79 ± 14.3	18.2 ± 5.3	14.58 ± 3.3	25.4 ± 3.3	58.2 ± 8.56
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Results of t-test analysis showed that there is a significant difference ($p \leq 0.05$) between divorce-seeking couples and normal couples in resilience scale ($t = 7.647$) and DDF ($t = 2.055$). Other analyses did not show any significant difference in alexithymia, DIF, and EOT between divorce-seeking couples and normal couples ($p \geq 0.05$).

Discussion and Conclusion

The current research aim is comparing the dimensions of alexithymia and resilience in divorce-seeking couples and normal couples of city of Gorgan. Results did not show a significant difference in the overall score of alexithymia in two groups of divorce-seeking couples and normal couples. This result is consistent with the previous research results of Bagby et al (1994), Saarijarvi et al (2001), Hendrix et al (1991), Wise et al (1988), Dubey et al (2010), and Campbell-sills et al (2005). In a research Dubey et al (2010) showed that alexithymia has a relation with anxiety, major depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, hidden depression, and mental anorexia. Other results showed a significant difference in overall score of resilience between two groups. Along with current research results, this finding is consistent with previous research findings. Basu (2004) and Harmatt et al (2001) reported the life dissatisfaction as a result of these feelings in individuals. By effect on type of individuals' feelings and emotions, resilience results in positive attitude and life satisfaction. Kumpfer (1999) points out that positive adaptation with life can be both considered as an outcome of resilience and its antecedent and results in higher levels of resilience.

Researches of Antonsky (1987) and Lazarus (2004) showed that decreased resilience toward life events is accompanied by a type of feeling of mental pressure, anxiety, and depression (Mahmoudi et al., 2011). Researches by Letzring et al (2005) showed that resilient individuals do not have a self-destructive behavior; they are emotionally relaxed and have the ability to cope with adverse conditions. Also the research by Car (2004) showed that high levels of resilience help individual use positive feelings and emotions in order to leave behind the adverse experiences and return to the good condition (Bahadori et al., 2011). DIF between two groups was not different. Along with this research, this finding is inconsistent with previous research results. For example, research results of Marcceci et al (2000) showed that depressed patients have more problems related to detecting emotions compared to the normal people. Haviland et al (1988) also found out that there is a positive relation between DIF and DDF and depression and anxiety. In a research, Besarat (2011) and Mazaheri et al (2011) only the dimension of DDF can predict the changes about anxiety and depression.

As an explanation for this finding it could be argued that: alexithymia has a relative stability and it is a culture-dependent structure and the family educational model could have a role in formation of this feature; based on this it is probable that some of the inconsistencies in the history of research about the relation between dimensions of alexithymia and their predictability are justified in a relation with divorce causes. Other researches showed a significant difference between the score of describing feelings in two groups of divorce-seeking couples and normal couples. Along with this research, this finding is consistent with previous research results. Haviland et al (1998) also found out that there is a positive relation between the DDF and depression and anxiety. Saarijarvi et al (2001) showed that depression has a relation with two dimensions of DIF and DDF.

Research results of Besharat (2011), Mazaheri et al (2011) also showed that there is a positive and significant relation between alexithymia in two dimensions of DIF and DDF with depression and anxiety in psychological patients, which means increased alexithymia and its two dimensions increases depression and anxiety in these patients. It seems that two dimensions of DIF and DDF have a major role in prevalence of depression in university students; because the individuals with alexithymia do not have the ability to express their emotions due to the DIF caused by automatic process of information and emotion inhibition. If an individual cannot identify his feelings and emotions, and differentiate between them and physical senses usually existing in his body and they are perceived under severe conditions, he will definitely not be able to describe them and he cannot efficiently and easily express his emotions. There is no significant difference between the score of EOT in two groups of divorce-seeking couples and normal couples. Along with the current research results, this finding is inconsistent with research findings of Saarijarvi (2007), Besharat (2011), and Mazaheri et al (2011). There were some restrictions in conducting this research which barricaded the accurate comparison between research variables, such as lack of control of some of the variables such as time conditions, social-economic class, and intelligence level, also due to conducting this research in a specific region; generalization of its results is limited. Thus it is suggested to conduct a similar research in the future in a wider population with a bigger sample, and also it is suggested to survey other effective factors on divorce.

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