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The Effectiveness of Premarital Attachment-Differentiation Training in Cognitive Flexibility and Adjustment in Couples Preparing for Marriage

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Abstract

Abstract

Marriage is a deep social and emotional bond between the husband and wife, which can lead to the physical and psychological well-being of couples. Couples who are cognitively flexible are more likely to accept personal differences and achieve optimal adjustment in their relationships. The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of pre-marital attachment-differentiation training in cognitive flexibility and adjustment in couples preparing for marriage. The research method was experimental, using a pretest and posttest design with a control group. The statistical population included all students preparing for marriage in Tehran, who had referred to the counseling center of Kharazmi University for pre-marital counseling in 2024. Among them, based on the inclusion criteria and using the convenience sampling method, 40 individuals (i.e., 20 couples) were selected; they were randomly assigned to the experimental group (i.e., 20 individuals; 10 couples) and the control group (20 individuals; 10 couples). The experimental group received seven 90-minute sessions of training based on the pre-marital attachment-differentiation model (ADPM), while the control group did not receive any intervention. To collect data, the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) were used. Data were analyzed using univariate covariance analysis (ANCOVA) in SPSS software (version 26). The results showed a significant difference between the posttest means of the two groups in terms of cognitive flexibility ($P < 0.001$, $F = 60.27$, $\eta p^2 = 0.620$) and marital adjustment ($P < 0.001$, $F = 206.61$, $\eta p^2 = 0.848$). It can be concluded that pre-marital attachment-differentiation training effectively improves cognitive flexibility and adjustment in couples preparing for marriage. Therefore, based on the findings, pre-marital attachment-differentiation training can be used to enrich couples' relationships.

Introduction

Marriage is one of the most important human values in all human societies, and the decision to marry is one of the most difficult and complex decisions in life (French et al., 2019). Creating and maintaining intimate relationships and satisfying emotional and psychological needs during the marriage is an art and skill that adds to the mental health of early experiences, which require having and acquiring rational attitudes, life skills, and performing individual and couple behaviors and duties (Umedjanova et al., 2022). The investigation of conflicts in marriage, due to their long-term and profound impacts on marital satisfaction and the wide-ranging consequences of life globally, has been a major topic of social science research for decades (Salinger et al., 2021).

Many factors can influence the success or failure of couples' lives (Birditt et al., 2022). One factor that has a great impact on a successful marriage is couple adjustment (Gopal & Valarmathi, 2020). Couple adjustment is a process by which couples, individually or collaboratively, change and modify their behavioral patterns to achieve maximum marital satisfaction in their relationship (Kim et al., 2018).

Another component that is related to couple relationship pathology is cognitive flexibility (Rikhye et al., 2018). Cognitive flexibility refers to the ability to learn from external and internal experiences; it determines how individuals respond to new experiences. Cognitive flexibility involves connecting with the present moment and detaching from internal psychological experiences and thoughts (Hosseini et al., 2023).

The proposed premarital attachment-differentiation model (ADPM) is a comprehensive and systems-based approach to premarital counseling. ADPM is a thorough assessment and treatment process with a ready-made manual that is based on clinical experience and studies on couple relationship dynamics, premarital interventions, and marital outcomes. The program is structured in a focused and easy-to-access manner, and all associated content is freely available. Although the steps of ADPM are clearly defined, its flexibility allows for adaptation to differences among couples. It is designed to be delivered by a trained therapist and typically lasts between 8 and 10 one-hour sessions. The framework is based on differentiation and attachment and applies to a wide range of situations. Therefore, considering the importance of the engagement period and the two aforementioned variables, namely cognitive flexibility and adjustment of couples, and the necessity of premarital education in the stability of marriage, the present study sought to answer whether premarital training based on the attachment-differentiation model is effective in the cognitive flexibility and adjustment of couples about to get married.

Methodology

The present research method was experimental, using a pretest and posttest design with a control group. The statistical population included all students preparing for marriage in Tehran, who had referred to the counseling center of Kharazmi University for premarital counseling in 2024. Among them, based on the inclusion criteria and using convenience sampling, 40 individuals (i.e., 20 couples) were selected and were randomly assigned to the experimental group (i.e., 20 individuals; 10 couples) and the control group (20 individuals; 10 couples). The experimental group received seven 90-minute sessions of ADPM training (Dell'Isola et al., 2021), while the control group did not receive any intervention. To collect data, the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI) (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976) were used. Data were analyzed using univariate covariance analysis (ANCOVA) in SPSS software (version 26).

Results

In this study, ten couples with a mean age of 23.35 and a standard deviation of 2.64 participated in the experimental group, and 10 couples with a mean age of 23.65 and a standard deviation of 2.21 participated in the control group. To compare the two groups in each of these variables, the effects test between the subjects was used in the univariate covariance analysis. As shown in Table 1, after adjusting for the pretest scores, there was a statistically significant difference between the mean posttest scores of the experimental and the control groups in terms of cognitive flexibility ($P < 0.001$, $F = 60.27$, $\eta p^2 = 0.620$). Therefore, the research hypothesis asserting that premarital attachment-differentiation model training was effective in cognitive flexibility of couples about to get married was confirmed.

As shown in Table 2, after adjusting for the pretest scores, there was a statistically significant difference between the mean posttest scores of the experimental and control groups in terms of couples adjustment ($P < 0.001$, $F = 206.61$, $\eta p^2 = 0.848$). Therefore, the research hypothesis asserting that the attachment-differentiation model training before marriage was effective in the adjustment of couples about to get married was confirmed.

Table 1. Results of univariate analysis of covariance to investigate the effectiveness of intervention in cognitive flexibility

Dependent Variable	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig	Eta squared
Cognitive Flexibility	**Pre-Test**	165.57	1	165.57	2.24	0.142	0.057
	Group	4440.79	1	4440.79	60.27	0.001	0.620
	Error	2726.17	37	73.68			

Table 2. Results of univariate analysis of covariance to investigate the effectiveness of intervention on couples adjustment

Dependent Variable	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig	Eta squared
Couples Adjustment	**Pre-Test**	629.50	1	629.50	8.86	0.050	0.193
	Group	14675.09	1	14675.09	206.61	0.001	0.848
	Error	2627.99	37	71.02			

Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of premarital attachment-differentiation model training in cognitive flexibility and adjustment of couples about to get married. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the posttest means in the experimental and control groups in terms of the cognitive flexibility of couples about to get married. Thus, premarital attachment-differentiation model training increased the cognitive flexibility of couples. The results of the present study are in line with the findings of Dell'Isola et al. (2021), Barraca et al. (2021), Khoshakhlagh and Mohammadi (2022), and Bazyari et al. (2023). In explaining the present findings, it can be stated that premarital attachment-differentiation model training teaches couples to modify their behaviors. Moreover, rebuilding couples' relationships and reducing couples' conflicts, this approach tries to increase flexibility and safe behaviors in their lives. The premarital attachment-differentiation model teaches couples to reveal important issues in their lives to their spouses, receive positive responses from their spouses, and be cared for by them. In addition, couples should increase their verbal and nonverbal interactions, express themselves, and show off in the relation with their spouses, express their thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires, and also become aware of each other's attachment types, differences, and distinctions, which leads to the identification and reduction of couples' dysfunctional cognitions; replacing them with more efficient cognitions can improve couples' mental health and overall cognitive flexibility (Naziryy et al., 2023).

Another finding of the study showed a significant difference between the posttest means in the experimental and control groups in terms of the adjustment of couples about to get married. Thus, training based on the attachment-differentiation model before marriage increased the adjustment of couples. The results of this study are in line with the results of Dell'Isola et al. (2021), Diamond et al. (2016), Khoshakhlagh and Mohammadi (2022), and Amini Nesab and Farahbakhsh (2015). In explaining this result, it can be stated that training based on the attachment-differentiation model before marriage leads to the establishment of positive relationships with the spouse and the correct management of life problems, and as a result, increases the adjustment of couples (Dell'Isola et al., 2021). Training based on the attachment-differentiation model before marriage creates many positive psychological characteristics in individuals and solves the problems of marital life and adjustment of couples. This training helps couples identify, discuss, and manage their deepest conflicts, and experience positive pleasurable emotions. Revealing underlying adjustment problems helps break the vicious cycle of communication and deepens intimacy and secure attachment (Mikulincer et al., 2019).

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Conflict of Interest

This article is based on a research project with the ethics code IR.UMA.REC.1403.039. In order to maintain compliance with ethical principles in this research, an attempt was made to collect data after obtaining the consent of the participants. Participants were also assured of confidentiality in maintaining personal information and presenting the results without mentioning the names and ID details of the individuals. There is no conflict of interest in this research.

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