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# Developing a Package of Marital Skills Based on Eclecticism Approach and Determining its Effectiveness in Marital Controlling and Conflict Resolution strategies in Conflicting Couples

Rahim Rabet[1], Ali Rezaeisharif[2*], Hossein Qamari Kivi[3]

1. PhD Candidate in Counseling, Department of Counseling, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.
2. Professor, Department of Counseling, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.
3. Professor, Department of Counseling, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.

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**Abstract**

**Abstract**

Marriage is a bond between two people whose health, happiness, and durability depend on the couple's commitment to marital skills. The present study aimed to develop a package of marital skills based on eclecticism and examine its effectiveness in marital controlling and conflict resolution strategies of conflicting spouses. The method of this study was mixed methods, with the Delphi and a quasi-experimental study with a pretest-posttest design with a control group and a two-month follow-up phase. The research population in the qualitative section consisted of all experts in the field of marriage counseling, 30 of whom were selected through purposive sampling method. In the quantitative part, all couples referring to Zanjan counseling centers were included. Among them, 50 couples whose scores on the Graham-Kevan and Archer's (2003) Controlling Behaviors scale and Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory (1983) were high were selected through convenience sampling method. They were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups (25 people in each). The experimental group received training based on the developed protocol during eight two-hour sessions, while the control group received no training. The data were analyzed using the Kendall coefficient and the analysis of covariance. The content validity of the package was satisfactory, and the expert panel reached a strong agreement in the fourth Delphi round. In the quantitative section, the findings indicated that the developed package could reduce marital control in the experimental group compared to the control group; it changed their unconstructive conflict resolution strategies to constructive ones ($p < 0.05$). This difference was also significant in the follow-up phase. Moreover, to compare pairs of groups, the Bonferroni post hoc test was used, which showed that the difference in means was significant only in the experimental group. The results indicated that the developed package could reduce marital conflicts by equipping conflicting spouses with marital skills.

***Corresponding author**
**Email:** rezaeisharif@uma.ac.ir

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## Introduction

Marriage is a fundamental institution that shapes societies and individuals (Harsono et al., 2024). A harmonious family is one in which there is intimacy between couples with effective communication patterns and minimum conflict (Musthof & Lutfia, 2024). However, recently, worrying trends have been reported in the field of marriage and the tendency to divorce; the divorce rate is increasing in most countries (Aami BandehGharaei, 2023; Sbara & Coan, 2017), which has also affected Iranian society in this regard (Khani, 2023; Jafari et al., 2021). Iran ranks fourth in the world in terms of divorce (Sarfarazi & Sadattabatabayi, 2023); therefore, interventions and training programs for couples in the field of marital skills seem necessary.

Research has identified several problems for conflicting spouses, including controlling behaviors and deficits in conflict resolution strategies (Salimi et al., 2024). Marital control is a variety of non-physical abusive behaviors used to control a partner (Lohmann et al., 2024). When conflicting couples use control to put each other in stressful situations, what helps them manage this stress and conflict is conflict resolution strategies (Saeeda et al., 2023). The various potential solutions to deal with the destructive effects of conflicts in the family environment are called conflict resolution strategies or styles (Karimzadeh et al., 2024).

Experts have cited various reasons for this critical situation (e.g., the lack of couples equipped with marital skills) (Modirzare et al., 2021; Xyrakis et al., 2024). When such skills are taught to couples, it is referred to as marital enrichment programs. Research suggests that combining approaches to education (i.e., eclecticism) is more effective (Wedding & Corsini, 2019).

The present study, by developing a marital skills enrichment package based on eclecticism, has presented various skills and interventions for conflicting couples using a technical eclecticism method. On the other hand, it has sought to answer the question of whether the developed package is effective in marital control and conflict resolution strategies of conflicting spouses.

## Method

The present study is a developmental research in terms of objective and a mixed-methods study in terms of data collection method. In the qualitative part, the Delphi method was used for validation. The research design in the quantitative part is a quasi-experimental with a pretest-posttest design with a control group and a two-month follow-up phase.

The statistical population of the Delphi section included all Iranian specialists in the fields of marriage, family, and couple counseling. Among them, 30 individuals were selected through purposive sampling method to be part of the Delphi expert panel. In the quantitative section, all couples who were referred to counseling centers in Zanjan constituted the statistical population of the present study, from which 50 couples whose scores on the Graham-Kevan and Archer (2005) Controlling Behaviors Questionnaire and the Rhim (1983) Unconstructive Conflict Resolution Strategies Questionnaire were high were selected through convenience sampling. They were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups (25 couples in each group). The experimental group received training based on the developed protocol for eight two-hour sessions, while the control group received no training. After completing the training sessions, both groups were evaluated by a posttest. The experimental group was re-evaluated after a two-month follow-up period. Data were analyzed using Kendall's coefficient of agreement (W), univariate analysis of covariance, and the Bonferroni post hoc test in SPSS.

## Findings

In this qualitative research (Delphi method), the number of participants in the expert panel was 30, who reached a definitive and high-level agreement in the fourth round (see Table 1). The Delphi method used in this research consisted of four rounds. In the first round, based on the developed package, expert panel members extracted indicators. After collecting, organizing, classifying, analyzing, and reviewing the opinions, 36 indicators were finally developed.

***Table 1.*** *Comparison of central tendencies and Kendall's correlation coefficient (W) in three Delphi stages*

| Round | Mod | Median | Mean | Standard Deviation | Kendall Value (W) | Significance Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2nd | 3 | 3 | 3.44 | .77 | .496 | .000 |
| 3rd | 4 | 4 | 4.09 | .57 | .856 | .000 |
| 4th | 6 | 5 | 4.74 | .43 | .894 | .000 |

The descriptive indicators of the control variable in the experimental and control groups are conducted in three stages: pretest, posttest, and follow-up. The results are as follows. The mean score of control in the pretest stage in the experimental groups was 20.93 and that of the control group was 56.97, both of which were considered high scores based on the questionnaire norm; however, after the experimental group was exposed to the eclectic marital skills package, the mean score decreased to 24.48, and the mean score of the control group remained high (56.98). The mean score of the experimental group in the follow-up stage decreased after two months (21.64), but it increased in the control group (48.101), which indicated the effectiveness of the developed educational package. This trend was also true for all subscales of marital control.

The descriptive indicators of the conflict resolution strategies of the experimental and control groups in the three stages of pretest, posttest, and follow-up are as follows: The scores of both experimental and control groups in constructive styles (i.e., integrative, accomodating, and committed) were low; those of the unconstructive styles (i.e, avoidant and dominant) were high, which indicated that both groups had avoidant and dominant conflict resolution strategies before the training, and the experimental group's score in constructive styles increased after the training sessions and decreased in unconstructive styles. This situation remained almost constant after two months; however, this trend was not the case for the control group. In other words, the scores of constructive conflict resolution styles were low, and the scores of unconstructive styles were high. This trend was similar in the follow-up stage.

The results of the analysis of covariance showed that, after controlling for the pretest effect, there was a significant difference between the couples in the experimental and control groups in terms of marital control ($p < 0.05$, $F = 2977.440$), integrated style ($p < 0.05$, $F = 1652.272$), accomodating style ($p < 0.05$, $F = 888.386$), committed style ($p < 0.05$, $F= 643.500$), avoidant style ($p < 0.05$, $F = 702.537$), and dominent style ($p < 0.05$, $F= 1359.657$). In other words, the developed training package could improve the control of couples in the experimental group and changed their unconstructive conflict resolution strategies to constructive ones. It is worth mentioning that the effectiveness of this intervention for marital control, integrative style, accommodating style, commited style, avoidant style, and dominant style was 98%, 92%, 95%, 93%, 94%, and 97%, respectively. The significance of the effect in the follow-up phase was also reliable for the experimental and control groups; it was evident in terms of marital control ($p < 0.05$ and $F = 166.841$), integrative style ($p < 0.05$ and $F = 40.879$), accommodating style ($p < 0.05$ and $F=42146$), committed style ($p < 0.05$ and $F=12.208$), avoidant style ($p < 0.05$ and $F= 845.21$), and dominant style ($p < 0.05$ and $F=25.272$). In other words, the psycho-educational package of marital skills based on eclecticism could create a positive, significant, and stable effect on the conflicting couples of the experimental group for at least two months.

To compare the changes of the groups at different stages, the Bonferroni post hoc test was used, the results of which are presented in Table 2. This table indicates that the mean differences between the pretest and posttest, pretest and follow-up, and posttest and follow-up were significant only in the experimental group ($P = 0.05$).

***Table 2.*** *Results of the Bonferroni post hoc test for comparing the differences in the means of marital control and conflict resolution strategies*

| Variables | Groups | Bonferroni post hoc test | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Pretest-posttest | Pretest-follow-up | Posttest-follow-up |
| Marital control | Experimental | 27.400* ($p < 0.001$) | 19.540* ($p < 0.001$) | 11.845* ($p < 0.001$) |
| | Control | 0.500 ($p > 0.05$) | 0.400 ($p > 0.05$) | 0.100 ($p > 0.05$) |
| Conflict resolution strategies | Experimental | 28.568* ($p < 0.001$) | 32.450* ($p < 0.001$) | 9.354* ($p < 0.001$) |
| | Control | 2.548 ($p > 0.05$) | 3.450 ($p > 0.05$) | 0.495 ($p > 0.05$) |

## Discussion

The present study aimed to develop and validate a marital skills package based on an eclectic approach to enhance marital control and conflict resolution strategies for couples experiencing conflict. The results of the qualitative study indicated that the present educational package possesses good content validity, and the expert panel reached a strong level of agreement in this regard. This finding is consistent with the findings of studies that have shown that enrichment and treatment packages based on an eclectic approach have high validity and effectiveness (Amirbeik et al., 2021; Beyrami & Azhideh, 2025; Jalalvand et al., 2023; Kavehei Sedeh et al., 2022; Mehrjou & Fatehizadeh, 2023; Mostajeran et al., 2021; Namdarppour et al., 2023; Pirsaghi, 2024; Tashakori & Sedrpoushan, 2023).

In the quantitative part, the effectiveness of the package developed as an eight-session training on marital control and conflict resolution strategies was examined. The data analysis showed that the marital skills package based on eclecticism could reduce the level of marital control of conflicting couples in the experimental group compared to the control group; it transformed their unconstructive conflict resolution styles into constructive conflict resolution styles. The findings of this study are consistent with those of studies that have examined the approaches of strategic model, intergenerational theory, structural family therapy, schema therapy, solution-focused couple therapy, and dialectical behavior therapy on improving marital control and conflict resolution strategies of conflicting spouses and have been confirmed (Abdoli et al., 2023; Alkan et al., 2023; Barakat et al., 2022; Khayatan et al., 2025; Lee & Arora, 2023; Soroush et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2021)

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## Conflicts of interest

This article is taken from the PhD dissertation in counseling at the University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, and there is no conflict of interest in conducting it.

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