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# The Effectiveness of Family Therapy Based on Transactional Analysis in Communication Aggression and Marital Frustration of Couples with Emotional Divorce

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**Abstract**

## Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the effectiveness of family therapy based on transactional analysis in communication aggression and marital frustration of couples with emotional divorce. The present study method was an intervention with a pretest-posttest design with a control group and a 3-month follow-up. The statistical population of this research included couples who reffered to counseling centers in Isfahan in the second half of 2023. Sampling method was purposive based on the entry criteria. The participants included 20 couples, 10 couples were randomly assigned to the experimental group and 10 couples were assigned to the control group. The questionnaires used in the study were Nelson and Carroll's Covert Relational Aggression Questionnaire (2006) and Kayser's Marital Frustration Questionnaire (1993). The treatment intervention applied to the experimental group was transactional analysis according to Stewart and Joines (2012), and the control group did not receive any treatment. The results showed that family therapy based on transactional analysis could significantly reduce communication aggression and its components including withdrawal and ruining social image ($P<0.05$). The findings also showed that the treatment could significantly improve marital frustration and its components including attachment, emotional alienation and emotional support ($P<0.05$); these changes were stable until the follow-up period. In general, it can be concluded that family therapy based on transactional analysis can be used as an effective treatment method to improve communication aggression and marital frustration in couples with emotional divorce. It also improves the quality of relationships and life of couples.

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## Introduction

In developing countries, including Iran, the level of marital incompatibility and dissatisfaction (i.e., a situation that in many cases leads to emotional divorce) is increasing (Falehkar et al., 2020). In this vein, although couples may not be legally separated from each other, they often become emotionally and psychologically distant. They fail to support each other in challenges, and there is no sincere or encouraging relationship between them. Emotional divorce is a type of psychological break in a marital relationship during which love, intimacy, companionship, and feelings of friendship between husband and wife decrease or disappear (Jarwan & Al-ferehat, 2020). One of the most important factors affecting the quality of marital interactions is violence and aggression between couples (Curtis et al., 2017). Marital violence is a type of overt aggression in intimate relationships that can occur unilaterally or bilaterally and perpetuate a cycle of disharmony between partners (Johnson et al., 1994). In recent years, research on couple relationships has increasingly focused on covert relational aggression (Coyne et al., 2019). On the other hand, increasing levels of marital frustration and dissatisfaction gradually engage couples in a cycle of tension, frustration, and unresolved conflicts. The consistency of this situation over time weakens the emotional bond and erodes the foundation of the marriage. As a result, intimacy and empathy are replaced by emotional distance, indifference, and resentment (Damo et al., 2021). Among these, one of the effective approaches in this field is transactional analysis. By focusing on communication patterns between couples and identifying ego states (parent, child, and adult) in their interactions, this approach helps to gain a deeper understanding of the source of conflicts and paves the way for improving communication quality, increasing empathy, and reducing communication misunderstandings (Berne, 2016). Previous studies have confirmed the effectiveness of interaction analysis-based interventions in improving the quality of marital relationships, reducing conflict, and increasing intimacy. However, few studies have examined the effectiveness of this approach in emotionally divorced couples. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of interaction analysis-based family therapy on relational aggression and marital frustration in emotionally divorced couples. The main hypothesis of the study was that this intervention would significantly reduce relational aggression and marital frustration in the experimental group compared to the control group.

## Methodology

The present study was a quasi-experimental research with a pretest-posttest design with a control group and a three-month follow-up. The statistical population included couples with emotional divorce who referred to counseling centers in Isfahan in the second half of 2023. The research sample was purposively selected and included 20 couples (i.e., 40 individuals) who were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups (i.e., 10 couples in each group).

The research tools included the Gottman Emotional Divorce Scale (1994), Nelson and Carroll's Covert Relational Aggression Questionnaire (2006), and the Kaiser Marital Disaffection Scale (1996).

The experimental group participated in eight 90-minute family therapy sessions based on the transactional analysis of Stewart and Joines (2012). This intervention was implemented with an emphasis on increasing awareness of ego states, identifying dysfunctional interaction patterns, modifying psychological games, and strengthening adult-adult relationships. The control group did not receive any therapeutic intervention during the study. After the intervention, a posttest was administered, and a three-month follow-up was conducted to assess the consistency of the treatment effects. Data were analyzed through repeated measures analysis of variance and Bonferroni post-hoc test using SPSS software.

## Findings

The demographic information of the participants (i.e., age, duration of marriage, and level of education) was described. The results of statistical tests showed that there was no significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of demographic variables ($P < 0.05$). Thus, the homogeneity of the groups was confirmed. The findings showed that the assumptions of normal data distribution and homogeneity of variances were met ($P < 0.05$). The results of multivariate tests indicated a significant effect of the interaction analysis intervention on the dependent variables ($P < 0.01$).

***Table 1.*** *Results of repeated-measures analysis of variance for relational aggression and marital frustration*

| variable | Source of Variance | F | df 1 | df 2 | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total relational aggression score | Time | 15.60 | 3 | 46 | .001 |
| | Group × Time | 12.45 | 3 | 46 | .002 |
| Emotional withdrawal | Time | 14.30 | 3 | 46 | .001 |
| | Group × Time | 11.80 | 3 | 46 | .002 |
| Social image damage | Time | 13.50 | 3 | 46 | .001 |
| | Group × Time | 10.90 | 3 | 46 | .003 |
| Total marital frustration score | Time | 16.80 | 3 | 46 | .001 |
| | Group × Time | 13.50 | 3 | 46 | .002 |
| Attachment dimension | Time | 14.90 | 3 | 46 | .001 |
| | Group × Time | 12.30 | 3 | 46 | .003 |
| Emotional alienation dimension | Time | 15.40 | 3 | 46 | .001 |
| | Group × Time | 13.10 | 3 | 46 | .002 |
| Emotional support dimension | Time | 13.80 | 3 | 46 | .001 |
| | Group × Time | 11.90 | 3 | 46 | .003 |

The results of repeated measures analysis of variance (see Table 1) showed that the effect of time as well as the interaction effect of group × time for interactional aggression and marital frustration were significant ($P < 0.01$). Specifically, the scores of covert relational aggression and its components (i.e., emotional withdrawal and spouse image degradation) decreased significantly in the experimental group from pretest to posttest, and this decrease remained consistent at the three-month follow-up stage.

Moreover, the results showed that family therapy based on interaction analysis significantly reduced marital disaffection and its components (i.e., insecure attachment, emotional alienation, and lack of emotional support). The Bonferroni test showed that the difference in means between pretest and posttest and pretest and follow-up stages was significant ($P < 0.05$), while no significant change was observed in the control group. These findings indicate the effectiveness and sustainability of the interaction analysis intervention in improving interaction patterns of emotionally divorced couples.

## Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of family therapy based on interaction analysis on covert relational aggression and marital disaffection in emotionally divorced couples. The results showed that this therapeutic intervention significantly reduced covert relational aggression and marital disaffection in the experimental group compared to the control group. In addition, these effects remained consistent at the three-month follow-up stage. These findings indicated the effectiveness and durability of the interaction analysis intervention in improving interaction patterns in emotionally divorced couples.

The results of the present study are consistent with the findings of previous studies that have emphasized the effective role of interaction analysis in improving the quality of marital relationships, reducing conflict, and increasing emotional intimacy (Berne, 2016; Stewart & Joines, 2012). These findings are also consistent with Gottman's views on the role of covert negative interactions, emotional withdrawal, and damaging the spouse's image in the continuation of marital dissatisfaction (Curtis et al., 2017). From a theoretical perspective, it can be explained that interaction analysis reduces covert aggressive behaviors and, as a result, marital frustration by increasing couples' awareness of their ego states, identifying ineffective mental games, and replacing parent-child interactions with adult-adult interaction. From a practical perspective, the results of this study emphasize the necessity of using interventions based on interaction analysis in counseling centers and family psychological services. It is suggested that therapists and family counselors use this approach to prevent and intervene in emotional divorce. Moreover, future research with larger sample sizes, longer follow-up periods, and a design that compares this approach with other couples therapy interventions can help enrich the findings.

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**Conflict of Interest**

This article is derived from a master's thesis at the University of Kurdistan. According to the corresponding author, there was no financial support for the research and no conflict of interest.

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