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The Effectiveness of the Mother and Daughter-in-Law Relationship Enhancement Program in Forgiveness of Resentment and Marital Satisfaction among Couples

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Abstract

Abstract

Interfamilial relationships among couples, particularly interactions between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law, play a significant role in shaping marital quality of life and couples' emotional experiences. The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of the Mother and Daughter-in-Law Relationship Enhancement Program in forgiveness of resentment and marital satisfaction among couples. This study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest–posttest and follow-up using a nonequivalent control group. The statistical population consisted of all daughters-in-law and their husbands who referred to counseling centers in Khorramabad in 2024. Using purposive sampling method, 32 participants were selected and were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups (i.e., 16 participants in each group). Data were collected using the Marital Offense-Specific Forgiveness Questionnaire (Paleari et al., 2009) and the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire (Olson et al., 1989). Participants in the experimental group received eight 90-minute sessions of intervention based on the Mother and Daughter-in-Law Relationship Enhancement Program (Ferasat et al., 2025). Data were analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The results indicated that the intervention was effective, with significant differences between the experimental and control groups in terms of forgiveness of resentment ($F = 339.37$, $p < .001$) and marital satisfaction ($F = 151.45$, $p < .001$). Based on eta-squared values, 0.919 of the variance in forgiveness of resentment and 0.835 of the variance in marital satisfaction were attributable to the intervention. These findings suggest that training interventions aimed at improving family-of-origin relationships can enhance forgiveness processes and marital satisfaction among couples; they may be incorporated into educational and cultural programs focusing on daughter-in-law and mother-in-law relationships.

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Introduction

Marriage is a fundamental social institution that plays a crucial role in individuals' development and psychological well-being (Tamannaeifar et al., 2025). However, research has shown that many marriages face challenges over time which can reduce relationship quality and satisfaction (Umeaku, 2025). Marital satisfaction is a key indicator of relational health, reflecting the extent to which partners feel their emotional, psychological, and interpersonal needs are met (Okoli, 2023). It is influenced by factors such as the quality of spousal interactions, family role organization, and relationships with in-laws (Youvan, 2024; Mubarok et al., 2025).

Among these factors, interfamily relationships, particularly the mother and daughter-in-law relationship, are especially important (Youvan, 2024). This relationship is one of the most complex relationships within family systems and a frequent source of conflict in many Asian cultures (Abbaspour, 2021). Its quality can serve as either a source of support or tension, directly affecting marital interactions, satisfaction, and family cohesion (Marker, 2024). In Iran's collectivist cultural context, where mothers play a central role, this relationship becomes even more significant. Studies have identified it as a key predictor of marital quality, conflict, mental health, and marital stability (Abbaspour et al., 2025; Marker, 2024).

Since tension in this relationship influences the couple's emotional climate, interpersonal forgiveness of resentment becomes particularly important. Forgiving behaviors, such as expressing emotions, setting boundaries, and adopting new perspectives, can enhance well-being and reduce family tensions (Fincham & Beach, 2006). These processes may also improve the mother-in-law–daughter-in-law relationship and, in turn, marital satisfaction (Abbaspour et al., 2025).

Despite its importance in Iran, limited research has examined this relationship and its impact on marital outcomes. Cultural and intergenerational dynamics highlight the need for context-specific studies. Recently, the Mother and Daughter-in-Law Relationship Enhancement Program (Ferasat et al., 2025) was developed to address mother and daughter-in-law conflicts in line with Iranian cultural needs. Therefore, this study examines the effectiveness of this program in improving forgiveness of resentment and marital satisfaction among couples.

Method

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest–posttest control group design, including one experimental group and one control group. The statistical population consisted of all couples (wives and their husbands) in Lorestan Province who attended family counseling centers in Khorramabad due to conflicts with their mothers-in-law in 2025. Based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, 32 married women who scored one standard deviation below the mean (score=16) on the Mother and Daughter-in-Law Relationship Quality Scale (Abbaspour, 2021) were selected through purposive sampling method. They were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups.

Data were collected using the Marital Offense-Specific Forgiveness Scale (Paleari et al., 2009) and the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire (Olson et al., 1989). The experimental group participated in eight 90-minute sessions based on the Mother and Daughter-in-Law Relationship Enhancement Program (Farasat et al., 2025), while the control group received no intervention during the study period.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed: participation was voluntary, no fees were required, participants could withdraw at any time, and confidentiality of data was ensured. Data was analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) using SPSS (version 25).

Findings

Table 1. *Results of Univariate Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA)*

Variable	Stage	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value	Effect Size (η^2)	Statistical Power
Forgiveness of Resentment	Pretest	40.50	1	40.50	0.221	0.642	0.007	0.074
	Posttest	25538	1	25538	339.375	0.001	0/919	1
Marital Satisfaction	Pretest	4.50	1	4.50	0.438	0.513	0.014	0.098
	Posttest	6815.28	1	6815.28	151.45	0.001	0.835	1

The results of univariate ANCOVA indicated a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of forgiveness of resentment ($F=339.37$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2= 0.919$), demonstrating the effectiveness of the intervention program. Similarly, a significant difference was observed in marital satisfaction ($F=151.45$, $p< 0.001$, $\eta^2=0.835$), indicating that the program significantly improved marital satisfaction. Statistical power for both variables was 1.00, confirming the adequacy of the sample size.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that the Mother and Daughter-in-Law Relationship Enhancement Program significantly increased both forgiveness of resentment and marital satisfaction. This effectiveness can be attributed to the program's structured content, particularly sessions two through five, which focused on emotional regulation, anger management, problem-solving, and managing high-conflict situations. In addition, training in adaptive emotional expression, psychological acceptance, and cognitive reframing of conflicts played a critical role in modifying couples' interaction patterns. Notably, the use of the "tug-of-war with a monster" metaphor helped participants recognize the futility of attempting to control or change their mothers-in-law, highlighting how such efforts may exacerbate emotional exhaustion and prolong conflict. This insight encouraged a shift from control-oriented behaviors toward conscious acceptance and more adaptive responses.

Furthermore, teaching clear, respectful, and non-aggressive emotional expression facilitated emotional self-disclosure, mutual understanding, and the reduction of accumulated negative emotions, thereby improving conflict resolution in the mother and daughter-in-law relationships. Overall, the integration of identifying ineffective coping strategies, fostering psychological acceptance, promoting adaptive emotional expression, and strengthening forgiveness responses contributed to reducing intergenerational tensions and enhancing marital interactions. These processes, in turn, played a significant role in improving forgiveness of resentment and marital satisfaction among couples.

A key limitation of this study was the absence of mothers-in-law in the intervention sessions, primarily due to difficulties in convincing them, given traditional and cultural beliefs. Their presence might have increased tension rather than promoting forgiveness and relationship improvement. Future research should consider appropriate safeguards to facilitate their involvement and directly assess the intervention effects on the mother and daughter-in-law relationship. However, based on family systems theory, changes in couples' behaviors and skills can indirectly improve overall family interactions, suggesting that this limitation did not substantially compromise the intervention's effectiveness.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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