



Effect of practical application of intimate relationship skills program in marital commitment of couples

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Original Article

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Abstract

Nowadays, due to the increasing rate of divorce and betrayals, the marital commitment has been concerned in marriage and family studies. The research aimed to evaluate the effect of Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) program in marital commitment of couples. The method was quasi-experimental and the design was pretest-posttest with a control group. The convenience sampling method was employed to choose 16 couples whose marital commitment score was below the mean in Isfahan, Iran. These couples were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups (N=8 in each group). Data gathering was carried out using Adams and Jones dimensions of commitment inventory (DCI) that was filled out by the members of both groups in the pretest stage. Then, the experimental group received the PAIRS training program in thirteen 90-minute sessions. 35 percent of the total variance belongs to the group membership due to the effectiveness of this educational program. This educational program attempts to make couples aware of themselves and their spouses, enhance, intimacy and empathy and develop effective relationship skills and problem-solving skills. The results demonstrated that the PAIRS program showed a positive effect on marital commitment. Hence, the PAIRS program can be employed to prevent divorce by increasing marital commitment in couples.

Keywords: Conflict, Education, Marriage

Introduction

Family is the smallest unit of the society. This social unit is the origin of human emotions and the core of the most intimate interpersonal relationships and interactions. Its importance is to the point that the health and development of any societies depends on the health and development of families in that society [1]. Marriage as the most important and highest social practice has always been in the center

of attention to meet the emotional needs of individuals [2].

When a marriage takes place, the partners swear to accompany each other in good or bad times. Everyone seeks an honest, loyal, and committed partner not to lag behind in the winding path of the life and to solve the problems encountering with patience, wisdom, advice, trust, and cooperation. The

partners wish to be the first and last love in the life of each other and to be committed to each other. The marital relations become superficial and impermanent without commitment [3]. Reynolds and Mansfield reported that after the factor of love and pleasure in marriage, commitment is the second most important factor guaranteeing the marriage [4].

Amato asserts that marital commitment means how much value and worth is placed on marital relationships and how much couples have motivation to stay in the marriage [5]. In general, commitment in a relationship means the agreement and intention of partners to have a committed and long-life relationship and refers to the stable conditions that keep the couples together and in fact, the stability is the main principle of commitment [6]. Adams and Jones define commitment as the couples' tendency to keep the marital relationship regardless of the fluctuating rate of satisfaction [7]. Johnson has presented a comprehensive model for marital commitment in which, marital commitment is divided into three different dimensions of personal commitment, moral commitment, and structural commitment.

Personal commitment means the individual's desire and interest to be involved in the marital relationship. Moral commitment indicates the individual's moral loyalty towards the marriage and structural commitment refers to have external constraints and barriers in leaving the relationship or the fear of possible consequences resulted from getting divorced and feelings of obligation and compulsion to remain in the marriage [8]. In general, the consequences of commitment are divided into two categories: 1) the effect on the relationship's performance; lack of commitment endangers the maintenance and continuance of marriage. 2) The effect on the stability of relationship; commitment can be considered as glue for a relationship. According to Laure, commitment leads to the maintenance of a relationship despite problems and difficult situations; whereas, lack of commitment can be considered as the most significant risk factor for divorce [9]. In recent years, the rate of divorce has been increased

than several years ago. Divorce makes knotty problems and threatens the mental health of individuals in both industrialized and developing nations. One of the main reasons of divorce, specifically in Iran, is the lack of familiarity and adequate skills of marital life. Couples on the verge of marriage take steps in a challenging pathway from falling in love to giving commitment and they need to learn skills in this passage [10].

Various programs have been introduced for marriage making interventions in marriage and marital issues such as couple's pre-marriage preparation programs [11], post-marriage enrichment programs [12], and counseling for maladaptive spouses [13]. One of the empowerment programs for intervention in couples' relationship in order to prevent the marital dissatisfaction and increase the intimacy and marital commitment is Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) program. PAIRS is an educational training program which was first introduced by Gordon. It aims to train the skills required for making an intimate relationship. PAIRS has been derived from the works of Fermo, Bowen, Perlz, and borden which are the most famous humanistic treatments in the second half of the twentieth century [14].

Gordon presented the principles of PAIRS in American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) in 1983. Gordon explained the goals of PAIRS knowing the character of individual and his or her partner for enjoying the personal differences instead of considering them as threats and knowing the personal viewpoints in peer relationships as an eternal source in shared enjoyments. The theoretical medley of psychodynamics, object-relations theory, systems theory, and attachment theory are the components of the (PAIRS program. It includes over eighty experiential, behavioral, and communicative techniques [15]. The program comprises the following items: Reorganizing the attitudes and beliefs about love peer relationships, family, and marriage, 2) training and developing the self-knowledge, emotional

literacy, and emotional empowerment, 3) effective change in dysfunctional behaviors through training the enhance intimacy skills and behaviors [16].

The PAIRS program presents a comprehensive system to enhance the self-knowledge and develop the ability to sustain pleasurable intimate relationships [17]. This program claims to make couples aware of interactions that are destructive to intimate relationships. When the inappropriate behaviors are identified, the couples learn how to decrease and replace maladaptive behaviors with healthy behaviors. This issue will promote effective behavior, generosity, goodwill, and sincerity and all these are essential sources of pleasure for intimate relationships [15]. Emotional literacy training, shared skills training to couples to create and sustain intimacy, providing information and useful strategies and approaches to keep family life alive, and creating dynamics in the marriage are the main objectives of the PAIRS program [18].

One of the basic principles of this program is sustainable intimacy. When the intimacy decreases, the basis of marriage becomes undermined and the problem-solving ability decreases. Therapy experiences have shown that when couples learn to create, reconstruct, and maintain the intimacy, important issues such as commitment, cooperation, loyalty, and creative management in personal differences are more quickly organized [19]. The PAIRS program provides a plan for couples to be able to assess their successes and failures [20]. In this educational program, the therapist tries to distinguish weaknesses in marital relationships and provide the necessary advices. Identifying and tackling these weaknesses help couples to reconstruct their relationships, and thus, increase their empathy, attachment, and emotional literacy [17].

Researches on the field of Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills program have demonstrated its effect in marital context. Durana assessed the effect of the program and concluded that this educational program can increase marital satisfaction [21].

Gordon and Durana employed the PAIRS program to increase the awareness and develop the ability of couples to sustain intimate relationships. The findings indicated that this program leads to the decreased anxiety and increased adjustment, satisfaction, and intimacy [22].

Turner's research aimed to evaluate the effect of PAIRS program on marital discord. In this study, both experimental and control groups were matched in terms of demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education, and duration of marriage. The results of the pretest stage and follow-up stage after 6 months showed that the experimental group improved significantly marital discord [23]. The results of a research entitled the effect of intimate relationship skills training in couples' attachment styles and emotional intelligence showed that the PAIRS program can significantly adjust and reform attachment styles and improve the emotional intelligence in couples [24]. Khodadadi in a study entitled the effect of PAIRS program in the quality of life and perceived social support of couples expecting child concluded that this educational program can improve the quality of life and couples' perceived social support [25].

Today, the status of commitment is of considerable importance due to the increasing rate of betraying and divorce in families. Given the importance of this concept in marriage, a need arises for taking some actions to improve family and marital relationships especially through increasing marital commitment in order to keep mental health in couples and in the society, as a result. Therefore, designing the training programs to increase the marital commitment and establishing the family bond is of crucial importance. The present research aims to assess the effect of Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills program in marital commitment owing to the following reasons: firstly, the initial step of healthy marital relationships is timely educational programs such as Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills

program, which its effect has been proven in various studies. Secondly, no research has shed light onto the effect of this program on the variable of marital commitment and the lack of clinical and controlled studies is felt in this area.

Method

The present research employed a quasi-experimental method with pretest, posttest design and a control group. The research population included all the couples who attended a training course on the improvement of marital relationship and increase of life satisfaction in response to the researchers' public announcement in the counseling and psychological services clinics of Isfahan, the center of Iran, in 2013. The sample was selected through one-stage, random cluster sampling method. First, four counseling centers were selected and then, 40 couples were chosen using convenience sampling among the couples referred to these centers. Adams and Jones marital commitment questionnaire was then administered on the participants. Based on the obtained results, 16 couples scored below the mean on the marital commitment questionnaire and they were included in the final sample. In the next step, these couples were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups (N=8 in each group).

The experimental and control groups filled out Marital Commitment Questionnaire in the pretest. The experimental group was exposed to thirteen 90-minute per week sessions of Intimate relationship skills training according to the group and step-by-step procedures, whereas the control group received no intervention and the members were placed on the waiting list. The educational protocol of sessions used in this research was designed based on a book on marital therapy written by Bita Hosseini [19]. Subsequent to the end of the educational sessions, the posttest was administered on both groups. It is worth mentioning that a one-day workshop was also held for the control group in accordance

to the ethical principles and in order to appreciate their cooperation in the research. No drop-out was observed throughout the sessions.

The headlines of sessions of Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills program have been presented in Table 1.

Marital commitment questionnaire: This questionnaire measures the loyalty amount and dimensions in individuals to their spouse and marriage. This questionnaire was designed by Adams and Jones and measures three dimensions of marital commitment. These dimensions include personal commitment: commitment toward the spouse based on the attractiveness of the spouse. Moral commitment: commitment toward the marriage based on the sanctity and dignity of marital relationship. Structural commitment: commitment toward the spouse and marriage based on the feeling of coercion to stay in the marriage or fear of consequences of getting divorced [26]. Each item is scored on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The majority of the questions are directly scored, except for the items of 11, 12, 16, 23, 28, 29, 30, 32, 34, 35, 36 and 38 that are reversely scored. The total scores ranges from 1 to 172 and the maximum score shows the couples' high commitment [26].

Adams and Jones administered this questionnaire on 417 married, 347 single, and 46 divorced individuals in order to obtain its validity and reliability. In these studies, the correlation of each item with the total score of the test was high and significant. Overall, the dimensions of this questionnaire benefited the highest level of theoretical and experiential support. Adams and Jones assessed the reliability of the dimensions of this test as following: personal commitment: 0.91, moral commitment: 0.89 and structural commitment: 0.86 [7]. In the studies by Abbasi Mavalid [26], Rezaei [27], and Shariati [28], the Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire was obtained as 0.85, 0.83, and 0.79, respectively. In the

present research, the internal consistency of the questionnaire was equal to 0.82. Subsequent to data gathering, the descriptive

(mean and standard deviation) and inferential (covariance) statistics were employed to analyze the data in the SPSS-18 software.

Table 1 *The structure of the sessions of practical application of intimate relationship skills program*

Number of sessions	Sessions
1st session	Introduction, registering and welcoming the members, introducing the leader and members, stating the objectives, rules and norms of the group such as confidentiality, mutual respect, regular attendance and so on, administration of the pre-test
2nd session	Training the definition of marital commitment, different types of marital commitment, the influencing factors in marital commitment, the dimensions of marital commitment, the influence of commitment on the self, children, and social relationships, academic and occupational performance and relationship with partner.
3rd session	Training the appropriate and basic strategies for primary feedback (strategies such as talking in the manner of PAIRS, love groups, if you loved me, you would know that...)
4th session	Evaluating the backgrounds of commitment and intimacy with members
5th session	Training the dialogue, clarification, and asking for opinion on the issues
6th session	Training the clarification of assumptions
7th session	Training the history and the unique self
8th session	Training the emotional relearning, emotional literacy, and creating the attachment fields
9th session	Training the acquisition of mood skills and maintaining intimacy in relationships
10th session	Training how to enjoy each other, sexiness, and sexuality
11th session	Training the attitude and strategies to establish long-lasting and successful relationships
12th session	Making a contract, stating and clarifying expectations
13th session	Reviewing the group process from the beginning to the end and finally, conclusion, termination and administration of the posttest

In this research, below instruments were used to collect data.

Results

The mean age of males and females participated in this study was 36.41 ± 5.1 and 30.8 ± 5.6 , respectively. The educational level of subjects was as following: third grade of junior high school (15%), diploma degree (37.5%),

bachelor's degree (35.5%) and Master's degree (12 %).

Table 2 shows the descriptive indices of the experimental and control groups in the pretest and posttest.

Table 2 *Mean and standard deviation of scores of marital commitment in the experimental and control groups*

Variable	Group	Pretest		Posttest	
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Marital Commitment	Experimental	103.75	8.52	126.44	6.67
	Control	100.56	6.77	102.12	7.36

As observed in Table 2, the mean score of the experimental group on marital commitment is higher than the control group.

In order to employ the covariance analysis, the statistical assumptions were first used to analyze the normality of distribution of scores,

homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of regression's slope and the linear relationship between control and dependent variables.

In order to assess the normality of distribution of scores, Shapiro-Wilk test was used and the results have been presented in Table 3.

Table 3 The results of Shapiro-Wilk test: the normality of the scores distribution of marital commitment in the experiential and control groups

Groups	Degree of freedom	Statistics	Level of significance
Experimental Group	16	0.949	0.473
Control Group	16	0.937	0.311

As observed in Table 3, the null hypothesis is based on the normality of the scores distribution of marital commitment in the remaining two groups. That is to say that, the sample scores are normal and homogenous with the society and the kurtosis and skewness

are accidental (all significant levels are above 0.05).

In order to assess the pre-assumption of the homogeneity of variances, Levene's test was used and the results have been presented in Table 4.

Table 4 The results of Levene's test: the homogeneity of variances of marital commitment scores in the experimental and control groups

Variable	Level of significance (P)	df2	df1	F
Marital commitment	0.542	30	1	0.381

The presented values in Table 4 indicate that Levene's test in the variables of marital commitment is not significant ($p=0.542$, $F=0.381$). Therefore, the variances of the experimental and control groups are not significantly different and the homogeneity assumption of variances is not confirmed.

In order to investigate the lack of interaction between the groups and the scores of pretest, the assumption of regression slope's equality was investigated and confirmed with respect

to the results ($F_{1,28}=1.05$ and $p>0.05$). Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no interaction between the groups and pretest. Moreover, it can be concluded that there is a linear relationship between the control variable and independent variable of marital commitment, because the regression slope's lines of dependent variable is parallel to its pretest. All the pre-assumptions were confirmed and hence, the employment of covariance analysis is permitted.

Table 5 Outcomes of unilateral covariance for analysis of experiment effects on the marital commitment variable

Source of change	Level of significance	F Test	Mean of squares	Degree of freedom	Sum of squares,	Effect size (Eta)
Pretest effect	0.001	559.51	1189.20	1	1189.20	0.943
Group effect	0.006	112.88	249.918	1	249.918	0.35
Error			20.368	29	591.194	

The results of table 5 indicate that there is a significant relationship between mean scores of marital commitment in the experimental and control groups in the posttest stage subsequent to the control of pretest scores ($p=0.01$). Therefore, the research hypothesis is confirmed. That is to say that, Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) program has increased the marital commitment among the couples. The effect size of this educational program on marital commitment was equal to 0.35 in the posttest. That is to say that, 35 percent of the total variance belongs to the group membership due to the effectiveness of this educational program.

Discussion

The present research aimed to investigate the effect of Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) program in marital commitment of couples. Results indicated that the PAIRS program significantly increased marital commitment in couples. The results of this research are in line with the results obtained by Durana who investigated the effect of this program in couples' intimacy and showed the positive effect of this program on couple's intimacy [29]. Gordon and Durana showed in their research that the PAIRS program can lead to the couples' less anxiety and more adjustment, satisfaction, and intimacy [22]. Peluso, Eisenberg, and Schindler showed in their research that the PAIRS program is effective in coping with interpersonal problems and improving social performance of couples [17]. Ebrahimi investigated the effect of the PAIRS program in increasing marital satisfaction and adjusting attachment dimensions among daughters of martyr families. Results indicated that such programs can increase marital satisfaction of those individuals.

Turner stated in his research that the PAIRS program has decreased couple's marital discord [23]. Moreover, our results are in line with the results obtained by Durana [21], Esmaeeli Niya [24], and Khodadadi [25].

In the explanation of the obtained results, it can be concluded that Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) program is a multi-dimensional model that integrates the concepts, values, and skills related to love, intimacy, and marriage [15]. Intimacy in couples is an important basis for the establishment of commitment to the spouse and marriage. We cannot make a healthy marital life, unless the commitment to the partner and marriage is seriously taken into account [30]. When the intimacy as a deep emotional experience in affective relationships is undermined, the strong pillars of marriage becomes unstable and the enthusiasm the ability to solve problems, overcome the barriers, fears, and doubts gets worse [19].

According to the previous researches, marital commitment is the second most influencing factor in marriage stability and the lack of commitment is the most significant factor in getting divorced [31]. Swensen and Trahaug reported that marriages with high levels of intimacy have higher marital commitment, more expressed love, and less observed conflict [32]. Meeting basic needs such as love, kindness, belongingness, and commitment are taken into account in the PAIRS program. Factors that are important in long-lasting healthy relationships in this approach are negotiation to solve problems, and perceiving the partner viewpoints. Marital quality is also a multi-dimensional concept that includes different dimensions of marital relationship such as adjustment, satisfaction, happiness, cohesion, and commitment [33]. The bottom line in the PAIRS program is that, the requirement for establishing long-lasting intimacy is the maintenance of long-lasting marriage.

In this viewpoint, the atmosphere of marriage gets unstable and unreliable when the emotional experience of love and intimacy is deemed in the marital relationship. In this situation, the ability to solve the problems, overcome the barriers, cope with fears and doubts is impaired

and impeded and premature burnout occurs. The PAIRS program stresses the necessity of intimacy and makes couples aware of the importance of establishing intimate relationships. Couples learn to establish intimacy in their relationships and become aware of pre-and-post marriage requirements such as commitment, cooperation, loyalty, and creative management of differences.

During the training sessions of the PAIRS program, the couples learn that the intimacy is the main pillar of long-lasting marital life. Couples feelings of satisfaction and intimacy act as the driving force and persuades them to stay in the relationship. In the educational sessions and during trainings to couples, the emotional bonds are strengthened and the couples become more satisfied with their interpersonal and sexual relationships and hence, they are more likely to keep the relationship and reinforce the commitment to the partner. In this therapeutic approach, in addition to strong intimacy and close relationships, the couples learn to develop empathy toward each other and bring about peace to their relationships which finally leads to the higher levels of commitment and loyalty. In the PAIRS program, the couples are trained to pay attention to their important responsibilities in making intimacy and learning effective skills of marital relationship. When a spouse feels responsible, S/he tries to fulfill the responsibilities to make the partner satisfied. As marital satisfaction is enhanced, the intimacy is established and by improved intimacy, perceived commitment is strengthened.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the effect of PAIRS program in marital commitment of couples. The results indicated that this educational program is effective in increasing couples' marital commitment. The getting married and making warm and intimate family in which the husband and wife are the main pillars should be on the basis of commitment. Lack of commitment in the family is like

the lack of qualified materials in a building that cannot guarantee the structures. Commitment is the state of loyalty in either sad or happy times. Commitment is one of the most important components of a successful marriage. Without commitment, the marital relationship is superficial and aimless and the couples cannot experience a deep love and intimacy imposed on commitment and loyalty. The PAIRS program is one of the preventive educational programs that aim to improve the couples' relationship. This educational program attempts to make couples aware of themselves and their partner, enhance intimacy and empathy, and develop effective skills and problem-solving skills in the peer relationship. Couples confront with various problems and issues in the passage of marital life. Sometimes these problems make distresses in marital relationships and adversely affect the couples' relationship due to the lack of appropriate management. Therefore, employing some interventions are quite necessary for the couples to improve the marital relationship and increase the intimacy and satisfaction.

Every research has its own limitation. This research was conducted in the city of Isfahan. Therefore, the generalization to other populations and areas should be cautiously. The present research was carried out on the 16 couples. The limited sample size also makes low levels of generalizability. The lack of research carried out in Iran on the effect of PAIRS program was another limitation to this research. The follow-up stage was not long enough to prove the long-term effects of this program in couples. Using a self-report tool was another limitation.

It is recommended that the effect of PAIRS program can be investigated on the other marital variables. It is also recommended that this program can be employed in the preventive realm of pathology of marriage and in the preventive programs of hygiene centers, universities, and schools due to the specific nature of commitment and its time-consuming effect. With regard to the research

results, it is recommended that counselors and family therapists use this educational program in counseling centers, psychological services clinics, and family education groups to improve the quality of marital relationships and increase marital satisfaction.

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Data collection and analysis: BCH

Manuscript preparation: BCH, KZ, BS

Conflict of Interest

"The authors declare that they have no competing interests."

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