

## Effectiveness of Bowen Intergenerational Family Therapy on Marital Conflicts and Interpersonal Forgiveness

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### Article Info

#### Article type:

Original Research

#### How to cite this article:

Bustin, S., Mirzaei, S. H., & Ghasemi Motlagh, M. (IN PRESS). Effectiveness of Bowen Intergenerational Family Therapy on Marital Conflicts and Interpersonal Forgiveness. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.6.x.x>



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The objective of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of Bowen intergenerational family therapy on reducing marital conflicts and enhancing interpersonal forgiveness.

**Methodology:** This research employed a quasi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test, and follow-up phases, incorporating a control group. The statistical population consisted of families who visited the counseling and psychology center in District 1 of Karaj in 2023. Eight families were selected through convenience and voluntary sampling and were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups, each comprising four families. Data were collected using the Differentiation of Self Inventory, the Forgiveness Questionnaire, and the Marital Conflict Questionnaire. The intervention, based on Bowen intergenerational therapy, was conducted over eight weekly group sessions, each lasting 90 minutes. Data analysis involved univariate and multivariate covariance analyses using SPSS software.

**Findings:** The findings revealed that Bowen intergenerational therapy significantly impacted both marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness. Specifically, the experimental group showed a marked decrease in marital conflict scores from 154.1 (SD = 11.3) in the pre-test to 139.4 (SD = 10.9) in the post-test, which remained stable at 139.2 (SD = 10.3) in the follow-up phase. Similarly, interpersonal forgiveness scores increased from 78.4 (SD = 5.7) in the pre-test to 114.2 (SD = 9.9) in the post-test and remained at 111.1 (SD = 8.9) during the follow-up phase. These changes were statistically significant compared to the control group, which showed no significant changes.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that Bowen intergenerational family therapy is effective in reducing marital conflicts and enhancing interpersonal forgiveness. The findings align with previous research, underscoring the therapy's potential to address relational issues and improve emotional regulation within families.

**Keywords:** Bowen intergenerational therapy, marital conflicts, interpersonal forgiveness, family therapy, emotional regulation, psychological health.

## 1. Introduction

The family is considered the most fundamental institution and structure throughout human history and civilization and is deemed the most important pillar of society. From our religious and cultural perspective, the family holds special importance, having formed in response to the innate needs of humans. Based on their nature and inherent needs, humans require companionship, intimacy, and the comfort of sharing and interacting with others. The family is the institution that naturally, deeply, and soothingly fulfills this fundamental human need (Navabinejad et al., 2024; Yang & McDonnell, 2024). Therefore, the foundation of the family is formed based on the marital bond between husband and wife, aiming to experience a peaceful and prosperous life together. Unfortunately, abundant evidence indicates that couples in today's society face significant and widespread difficulties in establishing and maintaining intimate and friendly relationships. One of the common problems in marital relationships that has drawn the attention of therapists is marital conflict (Yang & McDonnell, 2024).

Evidence suggests that marital conflict leads to the emergence of negative emotions and responses. Psychologically, many individuals experience conflict in marital relationships as highly stressful. The occurrence of conflicts and struggles results in a reduction in positive emotional expression, inefficient emotional communication, lack of intimacy and love, and disruption in marital relationships (Salah et al., 2024; Yu, 2024). Forgiveness, according to Meiren (1990), is a means by which we can save ourselves without compromising our feelings. In fact, forgiveness can be a key method for restoring lost trust (Abedi et al., 2024; Baher Talari et al., 2024). Enright and Zell (1989) define forgiveness as a process between two individuals where one has been deeply and seriously hurt emotionally, physically, or morally. The injured party gradually goes through an internal process, releasing themselves from negative emotions and having no intention of revenge. A new idea presented in forgiveness research is that forgiveness involves relinquishing the right to revenge and freeing oneself from negative feelings towards the offender. Forgiveness can also be defined as the process of stopping resentment caused by others' transgressions, considered a fundamental concept in social life (Abu-Raiya & Ayten, 2020; Nihayah et al., 2023; Reihanian et al., 2023; Safari et al., 2023).

Marital conflict is a contributing factor to various psychiatric disorders (Wong et al., 2022). When couples face

marital conflict and cannot successfully overcome crises and challenges, they will experience psychological distress, significantly disrupting the normal flow of daily life and affecting emotional, social, and cognitive aspects (Nasresfahani et al., 2022). Forgiveness is one coping method for perceived wrongs, enabling individuals to change their negative responses and exhibit a positive response toward forgiving the wrongdoing (Fincham & May, 2023). Fincham's (2021) findings show that forgiveness is related to satisfaction and improved marital relationships, enhancing constructive reciprocal communication patterns among couples and ultimately increasing marital quality of life. Individuals with higher levels of forgiveness also display more positive behaviors in their relationships (Fincham & May, 2023).

Despite the growing attention to marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness among couples, there is still a significant gap in information about interventions that can influence these components and their processes and outcomes (Jakimowicz et al., 2021; Koranian et al., 2021; Lampis et al., 2019). One well-known method in family therapy is Bowen's intergenerational approach. Bowen (1976) views the family as an emotional unit of relationships, thus focusing on the whole family rather than individual parts, calling it the family emotional system and scientifically organizing human emotional functioning (Bowen, 1976). This therapy, based on Bowen's systemic theory, emphasizes the role of differentiation and chronic anxiety in the formation of chronic physical illnesses. According to this theory, the family emotional system is the most important source of chronic anxiety. Bowen (1976) believes that individuals and families live within an emotional system that plays a crucial role in the quality of interpersonal relationships, psychological symptoms, and their health (Bowen, 1976). Therefore, the main goal of Bowen's therapy is to reduce chronic anxiety by increasing awareness of the family emotional system, enhancing the level of differentiation, and focusing on self-change rather than trying to change others (Jakimowicz et al., 2021; Koranian et al., 2021; Lampis et al., 2019). This theory consists of eight interrelated concepts that can explain the factors of divorce, disintegration, or family cohesion. These concepts include differentiation of self, emotional triangles, the nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, emotional cutoff, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, and societal regression. Numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of Bowen's therapy, confirming its significant impact on flexibility, rational

behavior, and proper anxiety management (Bridge, 2019; Calatrava et al., 2022; Healy & Allen, 2020; Jakimowicz et al., 2021; Koranian et al., 2021; Lampis et al., 2019; Morgan-Jones et al., 2019; Paknejad & Ahmadi, 2022; Ranaee et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2021).

Given the importance of family issues and the damage caused by marital conflicts, further investigation of psychotherapeutic interventions, including Bowen's intergenerational therapy, to reduce its harmful and destructive effects is needed. Previous research on the effectiveness of Bowen's intergenerational therapy on improving couple relationships, marital infidelity, physical and mental health, empathy, aggression, positive emotional responses, life satisfaction, reducing stress in relationships, and as a variable of well-being have been reported. However, none of these studies have examined the effectiveness of Bowen's intergenerational therapy on various dimensions of marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness in couples. Therefore, the need for psychological interventions to empower couples is evident. An appropriate therapeutic program in this area can effectively improve the quality of couples' lives (Bayat Asghari, 2015). This study was conducted with the hope of filling the existing gap in this area. Therefore, this research was formed to answer whether Bowen's intergenerational therapy affects marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

This study is fundamental research in terms of its nature and quasi-experimental in terms of methodology, with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design with a control group. The study population comprised all families who visited the counseling and psychology center in District 1 of Karaj in 2023, responding to the researcher's call for participation in the therapy program. From among the families visiting the counseling and psychology centers in District 1 of Karaj in 2023 and eligible to participate in the sessions, eight families were selected through convenience and voluntary sampling and were randomly assigned to two groups: the experimental group and the control group (each consisting of four families). Bowen's intergenerational therapy interventions were conducted separately for each family. The inclusion criteria for participants were: 1- age range 25-45 years, 2- at least one year of marital experience, 3- no severe psychological or personality disorders based on clinical

interviews and scores on the revised Symptom Checklist, 4- completion of the treatment consent form, 5- not seeking divorce, 6- commitment to attending all sessions and not receiving individual counseling services outside the therapy sessions. The exclusion criteria were: 1- having psychological disorders based on clinical interviews and scores on the revised Symptom Checklist, 2- taking psychiatric medications, and 3- participating in individual or group psychotherapy sessions at counseling centers and clinics in Karaj.

Before starting the therapy sessions, the researcher explained the nature and goals of the sessions to the participants and answered any questions. It was explained to the families that the purpose of the therapy sessions was to help improve their marital relationships, and they were informed that they were participating in a research study. Participants in the control group were assured that therapy sessions would be held for them after the experimental group's sessions ended. Thus, informed consent was obtained, and all participants declared that they participated in the research willingly. After completing the Marital Conflict and Interpersonal Forgiveness Questionnaires by both the experimental and control groups in the pre-test phase, Bowen's intergenerational therapy sessions were conducted for the experimental group families, while the control group families did not receive any intervention and were placed on a waiting list for future therapy sessions.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Forgiveness

The Forgiveness Questionnaire, developed by Ehteshamzadeh et al. (2010), consists of 25 items. Twelve items measure the first factor (reconnecting and controlling revenge), six items measure the second factor (controlling resentment), and seven items measure the third factor (realistic understanding). For scale construction and validation, Ehteshamzadeh et al. used a sample of 400 students from Ahvaz universities (237 women and 163 men). For scoring, a total score for interpersonal forgiveness and three subscale scores are obtained. Items 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25 are scored as strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4), and the remaining items are reverse scored. The maximum score for the entire scale is 100, and the minimum is 25. A high score indicates a strong ability to forgive others' mistakes. The first subscale, reconnecting and controlling revenge (12 items), has a maximum score of 48 and a minimum score of 12. A high score indicates a good ability

to reconnect with the offender and a low desire for revenge. The second subscale, controlling resentment (6 items), has a maximum score of 24 and a minimum score of 6. Higher scores indicate better control of resentment and less rumination on victimhood. The third subscale, realistic understanding (7 items), has a maximum score of 28 and a minimum score of 7. Higher scores indicate the ability to understand human characteristics and the context of the offense (Ehteshamzadeh et al., 2010). Content validity was assessed using the content validity ratio index and the opinions of five psychology professors with doctoral degrees, yielding a value above 0.6 for all items, indicating good content validity. The reliability of this questionnaire was reported as 0.90 in Ehteshamzadeh et al.'s (2010) study, demonstrating good reliability and validity (Ehteshamzadeh et al., 2011).

### 2.2.2. Marital Conflict

The Marital Conflict Questionnaire by Sanaei (2008) is a 54-item tool designed to measure marital conflicts. It assesses eight dimensions of marital conflict: reduced cooperation (5 items), reduced sexual relations (5 items), increased emotional reactions (8 items), increased support-seeking from children (5 items), increased individual relationships with one's relatives (6 items), reduced individual relationships with the spouse's relatives and friends (6 items), financial separation (7 items), and reduced effective communication (12 items). Each question has five response options, scored from 1 to 5. The maximum total score is 270, and the minimum is 54. Subscale questions include: reduced cooperation (questions 4, 12, 18, 25, 34), reduced sexual relations (questions 5, 13, 19, 35, 40), increased emotional reactions (questions 6, 14, 20, 27, 36, 42, 49, 51), increased support-seeking from children (questions 9, 22, 31, 38, 44), increased individual relationships with one's relatives (questions 8, 15, 21, 29, 37, 43), reduced individual relationships with the spouse's relatives and friends (questions 1, 23, 32, 46, 50, 53), financial separation (questions 2, 10, 17, 24, 33, 39, 48), and reduced effective communication (questions 3, 7, 11, 16, 26, 28, 30, 41, 45, 47, 52, 54). Higher scores indicate greater conflict, and lower scores indicate better relationships and less conflict. The response options are: never (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), always (5). Items 3, 11, 14, 26, 30, 33, 45, 47, and 54 are reverse scored. Sanaei reported the reliability of this questionnaire with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.96 based on a sample of 270 participants. The reliability of

the eight subscales is: reduced cooperation (0.81), reduced sexual relations (0.61), increased emotional reactions (0.70), increased support-seeking from children (0.33), increased individual relationships with one's relatives (0.86), reduced relationships with the spouse's relatives and friends (0.89), financial separation (0.71), and reduced effective communication (0.69). The Marital Conflict Questionnaire has good content validity. In the content analysis stage, no questions were eliminated due to their appropriate correlations with the total questionnaire and subscales (Darbani et al., 2020).

## 2.3. Intervention

### 2.3.1. Bowen Intergenerational

The therapy package was based on Bowen and Carr's (1988) method. The intervention included assignments and skills related to family interactions, such as examining family relationships, the self-differentiation scale, and efforts to reduce dependence on the family of origin. In Bowen's family therapy, the emotional system was first assessed through interviews and evaluation techniques, followed by intervention in eight sessions, as briefly described. Bowen's intergenerational therapy protocol was validated in Iran by Razavi and Liorjani (2020), with a content validity ratio of 0.80 based on expert opinions. This protocol has been used in numerous domestic studies, indicating its stability in the Iranian context (Koranian et al., 2021; Paknejad & Ahmadi, 2022; Ranaee et al., 2022).

#### Session 1: Establishing Contact and Initial Assessment

In this introductory session, the therapist establishes a connection with the group members, outlining the group's rules, the overall approach, and the duration of the sessions. A brief interview and assessment are conducted to gather information about the behavioral and personality traits of the group members. This session focuses on creating a safe and communicative environment, introducing the therapy method and structure, and receiving initial feedback from the group.

#### Session 2: Understanding Differentiation of Self

This session revolves around activating members' minds with thought-provoking questions and explaining the concept of self-differentiation. The therapist helps the participants link their relational issues to their levels of self-differentiation. The goal is to impart a clear understanding of self-differentiation and assess and evaluate the participants' differentiation levels.

#### Session 3: Triangles and Triangulation

The therapist introduces the logic of triangulation within the family, its effects, and its role in family dynamics, particularly in marital relationships. Techniques to understand and counteract the impacts of triangulation during periods of anxiety and psychological pressure are taught. The session includes reviewing assignments and providing feedback. The aim is to enhance the participants' understanding of the effects of triangulation.

**Session 4: The Family Emotional System**

In this session, the therapist evaluates and describes the family's emotional model, examining how emotions influence marital relationships. The connection between emotions and issues, conflicts, and marital dynamics is explored. Strategies for improving the emotional systems of the family of origin and the current family are provided. Assignments are reviewed, and feedback is given to raise awareness of emotional reactions and reduce their impact.

**Session 5: The Family Projection Process**

This session defines the family projection process and assesses its connection with the parents' lack of differentiation. The relationship between parental differentiation and the subsequent impact on children is discussed, including the negative outcomes. The therapist also explores sibling positions, birth order, and their effects. The goal is to understand how parental lifestyles and differentiation are transmitted to future generations.

**Session 6: Emotional Cutoff**

The concept of emotional cutoff is introduced, with examples and discussions on its impact on marital relationships. Techniques for addressing emotional issues through cutoff processes are taught. The relationship between emotional cutoff, anxiety, and attachment to the family of origin is examined. Assignments are given to help participants understand the processes and consequences of emotional cutoff.

**Session 7: The Multigenerational Transmission Process**

The therapist explains the multigenerational transmission process, helping participants identify its connection to their current issues. The use of a genogram technique is taught to visualize and clarify these problems. The session includes exercises and assignments on how differentiation from previous generations can be achieved. The goal is to learn ways to transform from emotional fusion to self-differentiation.

**Session 8: Summarizing the Sessions**

In the final session, a summary of the concepts discussed in previous sessions is provided. Assignments and exercises are reviewed, and members' questions are answered. The session concludes with a group discussion for final conclusions and emphasizes the importance of continuing the exercises and assignments outside therapy sessions. The aim is to consolidate the learning and ensure the members are equipped to apply the strategies independently.

**2.4. Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted using univariate and multivariate covariance analysis, and effect sizes were calculated using the eta coefficient, performed with SPSS version 22.

**3. Findings and Results**

At the pre-test stage, the mean score for marital conflicts in the experimental group receiving Bowen intergenerational therapy was 154.1, which decreased to 139.4 in the post-test phase and remained at 139.2 in the follow-up phase. In the control group, the mean score for marital conflicts was 155.1 at both the pre-test and post-test stages with no change.

**Table 1**

*Comparison of Marital Conflicts and Interpersonal Forgiveness Scores Between Experimental and Control Groups in Pre-test, Post-test, and Follow-up Phases*

Stage	Variable	Bowen Intergenerational Therapy	Control
		M (SD)	M (SD)
Pre-test	Marital Conflicts	154.1 (11.3)	155.1 (13.2)
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	78.4 (5.7)	79.3 (7.7)
Post-test	Marital Conflicts	139.4 (10.9)	155.1 (13.2)
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	114.2 (9.9)	79.3 (7.7)
Follow-up	Marital Conflicts	139.2 (10.3)	-
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	111.1 (8.9)	-

At the pre-test stage, the mean score for interpersonal forgiveness in the experimental group was 78.4, which increased to 114.2 in the post-test phase and remained at 111.1 in the follow-up phase. In the control group, the mean score for interpersonal forgiveness was 79.3 at both the pre-test and post-test stages with no change.

The results in Table 2 show that considering the pre-test scores of "marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness," the difference between the trained group receiving Bowen intergenerational therapy and the control group in the post-test phase is significant ( $p < .05$ ). The research hypothesis is supported.

**Table 2**

*Results of Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA)*

Source of Variation	Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (P)	Eta Squared
Marital Conflicts	Marital Conflicts	107.376	1	107.376	24.534	.000	.690
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	.040	1	.040	.010	.924	.001
Interpersonal Forgiveness	Marital Conflicts	7.497	1	7.497	1.713	.217	.135
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	32.720	1	32.720	7.762	.018	.414
Group	Marital Conflicts	1256.753	1	1256.753	287.146	.000	.963
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	4853.279	1	4853.279	1151.000	.000	.991
Error	Marital Conflicts	48.144	11	4.377			
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	46.370	11	4.215			
Total	Marital Conflicts	327044.000	16				
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	148229.000	16				

**4. Discussion and Conclusion**

The aim of the present study was to determine the effectiveness of Bowen intergenerational family therapy on marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness. The research findings showed that Bowen intergenerational therapy impacts marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness.

In a comparative analysis regarding the hypothesis, the findings of this study align with the results of both domestic and international researchers (Healy & Allen, 2020; Jakimowicz et al., 2021; Koranian et al., 2021; Lampis et al., 2019; Morgan-Jones et al., 2019; Paknejad & Ahmadi, 2022; Ranaee et al., 2022; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003; Thomas et al., 2021) Thus, Bowen's method is effective for improving family relationships and systemic variables among married women in Isfahan.

The present study's results align with previous research indicating that marital conflict is a significant factor in various psychological disorders, including depression and anxiety disorders (Papp, 2018; Sanamnejad et al., 2021). Furthermore, the reduction in marital conflicts observed in the experimental group suggests that Bowen intergenerational therapy can effectively mitigate these psychological stressors. This aligns with prior findings that emphasized the role of chronic family emotional systems in maintaining psychological health. By focusing on increasing differentiation and reducing chronic anxiety, Bowen's therapy provides a structured approach to improving

emotional regulation and relational dynamics within families (Silvestre & Tarquinio, 2022; van der Hoeven et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2022).

Additionally, the improvement in interpersonal forgiveness observed in the experimental group supports the notion that forgiveness is crucial in enhancing marital quality and satisfaction (Fincham & May, 2023). As highlighted by prior studies (Nasresfahani et al., 2022), increased forgiveness can lead to better emotional adjustment and reduced distress in couples. This study's findings suggest that Bowen intergenerational therapy effectively fosters forgiveness by addressing underlying emotional and relational patterns within the family system. This approach not only helps couples resolve past grievances but also builds a foundation for healthier future interactions, thereby enhancing overall marital satisfaction.

**5. Suggestions and Limitations**

Despite the promising results, this study faced several limitations, including its restriction to families visiting the counseling center in Karaj and the use of a convenience sample. Future research should consider more diverse populations and random sampling methods to enhance the generalizability of findings. Moreover, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term effects of Bowen intergenerational therapy on marital conflicts and forgiveness. Integrating follow-up phases and exploring the therapy's effectiveness across different age groups and

genders will provide deeper insights into its applicability and impact. Overall, the study underscores the potential of Bowen intergenerational therapy as a valuable tool in marital counseling, warranting further exploration and application in clinical practice.

### Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

### Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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