Pre-Marital Education Based on Eric Berne's Theory and Expert-Centered Pre-Marital Education on Emotional Experiences Related to Marriage

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A r t i c l e   I n f o

Article type:
Original Research

How to cite this article:

A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of pre-marital education based on Eric Berne's theory and expert-centered pre-marital education on emotional experiences related to marriage.

Method: The research was quasi-experimental with a pre-test, post-test design, including two experimental groups and one control group. The statistical population comprised all students on the verge of marriage, and the sample included 45 students who were voluntarily selected and randomly distributed into three groups of 15. The research instrument was the Emotional Experience towards Marriage Questionnaire (Yousefi et al., 2023). While the control group was on the waiting list, the experimental groups received eight ninety-minute sessions of pre-marital education based on Eric Berne's theory and expert-centered approach. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (multivariate analysis of covariance).

Findings: The results showed that expert-centered pre-marital education did not improve positive emotional experiences; however, it improved both dimensions of emotional experiences towards marriage.

Conclusions: Based on these results, it can be concluded that pre-marital education based on Eric Berne's theory is stronger than the expert-centered method and has the potential to improve emotional experiences related to marriage.

Keywords: pre-marital education, negative emotional experience, positive emotional experience

1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the most significant, if not the most significant, decisions in an individual's life. Mistakes in this area can lead to irreparable personal and social costs. On the other hand, it can play a crucial role in the growth and development of an individual's personal, social, and spiritual life. One of the recent concerns is that many marriages may end in divorce, and this unfortunate event is on the rise. Consequently, many new marriages in recent years have led to divorce. Hence, the importance of pre-marital counseling is becoming increasingly evident, and people are seeking more precise choices with the help of pre-marital counseling to experience more successful and long-lasting marriages. Marriage counseling provides an unbiased framework for clients to gain sufficient knowledge and familiarize themselves with necessary marriage skills before encountering marital problems (Mokhtari et al., 2022). Various models for marriage counseling have been introduced so far. These models encourage couples to discuss financial issues, communication, beliefs and values, roles in marriage, emotions and sexual issues, desire for childbearing, decision-making, handling anger, and spending time together (Jokar et al., 2022; Jokar et al., 2023; Khanbani et al., 2022). Some consider this counseling to include conflict resolution, evaluation of individual values, financial decisions, occupational and educational activities, family planning, issues related to the extended family, intimacy and romance, social interactions, religion, and household management (Raki et al., 2023).

Overall, sufficient familiarity before or during marriage is of extraordinary importance and sensitivity for couples. The quality of these relationships plays a significant role in shaping attitudes and social feedback, readiness, and the development of social skills in future family members. Although the transition from being single to becoming a couple is often considered a pleasant phenomenon with minimal complexity, it is one of the most complex and challenging transitional stages in the family life cycle. Therefore, preparing for marriage is a relatively new approach to preventing dissatisfaction and failure in marital life. This approach is based on the perspective that couples can learn how to have successful and stable marriages (Ali et al., 2024; Gholizadegan Rayat et al., 2024). Pre-marital skills training helps in making suitable choices, strengthening and stabilizing marriages, reducing divorce rates, and enhancing the quality of marital life (Rostami et al., 2020).

In any case, the increasing divorce rates in Iran have caused young people to experience concerns in this regard, leading them to develop negative attitudes towards marriage. The range of emotions experienced during marriage can vary widely, from positive experiences such as love, affection, optimism, hope, and liking, to negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, worry, despair, depression, or anger towards marriage, which form the two categories of positive and negative emotions. These emotions, resulting from experiencing a situation, are known as emotional experiences (Jokar et al., 2023). In this context, emotional experiences towards marriage refer to these two categories of positive and negative emotional experiences related to marriage. If a young person can have positive emotional experiences in the path of marriage and control negative emotional experiences, it can be hoped that they can cope with this decision. It seems that pre-marital education can be helpful in this area.

In Iran, several models for marriage counseling have been introduced. For instance, Mokhtari et al. (2023) introduced a model based on untimely singleness among girls and a model based on schema therapy to correct constructs related to marriage, focusing on cognitive and emotional behavioral errors and modeling among single girls (Mokhtari et al., 2022). Additionally, Razavi et al. (2017) introduced a native model for marriage counseling, covering important marriage criteria, dowry and living arrangements, education on personality traits of couples, management of family intervention, sexual restrictions during engagement, education on financial and occupational challenges, social media, and marital relations (Rahmati et al., 2024). They organized pre-marital education based on timely marriage, aiming to encourage students to marry at the right time and consider important factors in choosing a partner. Raki et al. (2023) introduced an integrated model for marriage counseling, combining intergenerational methods and constructivism to present a comprehensive counseling model (Raki et al., 2023).

Various studies on marriage have been conducted so far. For example, Rostami et al. (2019) studied pre-marital damages; Abbasi (2019) showed the effectiveness of the individual awareness program on personal choices in marriage (Rostami et al., 2020); Kaveh Sedehi et al. (2021) demonstrated the effectiveness of expert-centered pre-marital education on correcting the ideal image of a spouse and perfectionism (Kavehi Sedehi et al., 2020); Mokhtari et al. (2023) showed the effectiveness of schema-based pre-marital education on schema mindsets and the tendency to

marry among single girls (Mokhtari et al., 2022); Khanbani, Golparvar, and Aghaei (2023) introduced a pre-marital counseling model titled "Successful Marriage." (Khanbani et al., 2022)

One of the pre-marital counseling models introduced by Kaveh Sedehi et al. (2021) is expert-centered pre-marital counseling. This model aims to provide a comprehensive counseling approach by analyzing the perspectives of marriage counseling experts. It includes six main components: cognitions, skills, requirements, boundary setting, power and control regulation, and intimacy formation and maintenance. Each component encompasses various subcategories that cover different aspects of couple and family life from past to future. Due to its foundation on the experiences of skilled marriage counselors and its precise development process, this model is suitable for practical application in marriage counseling and education (Kavehi Sedehi et al., 2020). The effectiveness of this method on pre-marital fears and marriage self-efficacy has been previously examined.

In this regard, one theory that seems adaptable to marriage counseling is Eric Berne's transactional analysis theory. In this approach, individuals are viewed as a dynamic system interacting with each other (Berne, 1996; Colledge, 2002); thus, its communicative teachings appear suitable for improving exchanges between individuals, including couples about to marry. Effective communication between a couple is the most important aspect of well-functioning families. However, since communication occurs on both verbal and non-verbal levels, one main reason for the failure in romantic relationships is the inconsistency of messages simultaneously conveyed by these two levels. Transactional analysis, by teaching the analysis of personality structures in relationships and exchanges between structures in complementary, crossed, and ulterior transactions (Heidardokht Nazari et al., 2015), can equip individuals about to marry with effective communication skills to make optimal choices and then interact optimally. In other words, it equips them with skills to recognize their own and their partner's "ego states," especially considering verbal and non-verbal cues, enabling them to make the right decision for choosing a spouse and then interact with them. Given the potential of this method for adaptation to marriage counseling, the pre-marital education package based on transactional analysis, previously developed and validated by researchers, was implemented, and its effectiveness was evaluated in this study.

Given the youth population of the country, the increasing divorce rates in recent years, and the fact that the community's psychosocial health is linked to family health, which in turn is related to suitable marriages, the necessity for validating pre-marital education becomes more prominent day by day. Such education is not only effective in addressing gaps related to healthier interactions and exchanges between couples and preventing divorce but also helps couples achieve self-awareness, which is the foundation of any optimal interaction. Therefore, this study aimed to answer the question: Does pre-marital education based on transactional analysis theory have a significant effect on improving emotional experiences towards marriage compared to expert-centered pre-marital education?

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

Given that the aim of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the pre-marital education package based on Eric Berne's theory compared to the expert-centered pre-marital education model, the research design was experimental, quasi-experimental with a pre-test and post-test design with a control group. The statistical population included all single girls in Isfahan in 2024 who were on the verge of marriage. The sample was selected by convenience sampling from single and university-registered girls who signed up to participate in pre-marital education courses. From the 60 girls who registered, 45 were selected based on inclusion and exclusion criteria and were randomly divided into three research groups (each with 15 members). The first group received eight sessions of pre-marital education based on Berne's theory, and the second group received expert-centered pre-marital education. The control group was on a waiting list and did not receive any intervention.

The inclusion criteria for all three groups were as follows: being single, applying to participate in the educational course, not suffering from substance abuse or alcohol addiction, not taking psychiatric medications (assessed through direct questions), and being at least 20 years old. Exclusion criteria included: lack of willingness to continue the sessions from any participant, disrupting the flow of sessions (irregular attendance, deviating from the main topic and digressing, failing to complete tasks and assignments), participating in other psychological educational courses in the last three months, failing to complete assignments, and having a history of divorce.

To conduct the research, the two experimental groups were exposed to eight sessions of educational interventions. Before starting the course and after completing it, all three groups were assessed using the research instruments. The educational interventions were conducted in a student counseling center. The first experimental group received pre-marital education based on Berne's method, and the second group received expert-centered pre-marital education. The sessions were held weekly for 90 minutes each.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Emotional Experiences Related to Marriage

This scale was prepared by Yousefi et al. (2023). The initial version was designed to measure emotional experience variables towards a spouse and contains nine subscales (fear, anger, jealousy, sadness, anxiety and worry, joy and hope, love, hatred) towards a spouse. Each subscale contains five questions scored on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5), and overall scores are categorized into two subscales of positive and negative emotional experiences. Yousefi et al. (2023) reported Cronbach's alpha above 0.90 for each subscale. The construct validity of this questionnaire was assessed and confirmed through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Additionally, the scores of each subscale had a positive and significant relationship with the total score, indicating the construct validity of this scale. They also reported a positive and significant test-retest reliability through Pearson correlation after two administrations. In this study, after adapting the questions to remarriage, Cronbach's alpha was assessed in a preliminary study, and scores above 0.86 were obtained for each subscale in the statistical population (Rahmati et al., 2024).

2.3. Interventions

2.3.1. Expert-Centered Pre-Marital Education

The expert-centered pre-marital education intervention (Kavehi Sedehi et al., 2020) aims to prepare individuals for marriage by enhancing their self-awareness, understanding of values, and interpersonal skills. The program comprises eight sessions, each focusing on different aspects of personal and relational development critical for a successful marriage. Each session includes specific tasks and worksheets to reinforce the learning objectives and encourage participants to apply the concepts to their own lives.

Session 1: Understanding the Importance of Values

The first session introduces the role and importance of values in marriage. Participants learn about how values impact marital life and couple exchanges, and they work on clarifying their own values.

*Assignment: Complete the Life Compass worksheet.

Session 2: Self-Awareness and Marriage Success

This session emphasizes the importance of self-awareness in marital success. Participants explore their strengths and weaknesses across various life domains, including physical, psychological, occupational, and educational aspects. They also articulate their fears, desires, expectations, goals, and needs.

*Assignment: Complete the Self-Awareness worksheet.

Session 3: Root Causes of Personal Traits

Participants delve into the roots of their fears, desires, expectations, goals, plans, needs, and roles through the lenses of family, values, growth, and social contexts. The session highlights the importance of identity in making informed marital choices.

*Assignment: Complete the Identity Monitoring worksheet.

Session 4: Recognizing Risk Factors in Marriage

This session focuses on identifying individual and familial risk factors that can impede a successful marriage, such as anxiety, stubbornness, and pessimism. Participants learn self-awareness and other-awareness techniques to manage these risk factors.

*Assignment: Complete the Monitoring Risk Factors worksheet.

Session 5: The Role of Family in Marriage

Participants explore how family characteristics, such as adaptability and cohesion, facilitate or complicate marriage. They analyze marital role models in their families and assess problem-solving resources.

*Assignment: Complete the Marital Role Model worksheet.

Session 6: Marriage Requirements Based on Attachment Styles

This session addresses the role of attachment styles in marital success, including emotion and impulse control post-marriage. Participants learn about the importance of boundaries and how attachment influences family dynamics.

*Assignment: Complete the Attachment Style Monitoring worksheet.

Session 7: Interpersonal Relationship Requirements

Participants learn about the significance of addressing sexual needs within marriage, understanding gender-specific

needs, and healthy power dynamics. The session emphasizes communication and power-sharing strategies.

*Assignment: Complete the Self-Awareness and Sexual Needs worksheet.

Session 8: Essential Skills for a Successful Marriage

The final session covers critical life and interpersonal skills necessary for a stable marriage, including problem-solving, financial management, assertiveness, and relationship-building with the spouse and in-laws.

*Assignment: Complete the Life Skills Monitoring worksheet.

2.3.2.   *Pre-Marital Education Based on Berne's Theory*

The pre-marital education program based on Eric Berne's transactional analysis theory (Rahmati et al., 2024) aims to equip individuals with a deep understanding of personality structures and interpersonal transactions. The program consists of eight sessions designed to enhance self-awareness and improve relational skills crucial for marital stability and satisfaction.

Session 1: Importance of Personality in Marital Interactions

Participants are introduced to the significance of personality in forming relationships and the factors that facilitate or hinder interpersonal interactions. They learn about overt and covert communication.

*Assignment: Complete the Facilitating Personality Traits worksheet.

Session 2: Understanding Personality Structures

This session explores the three ego states—Child, Parent, and Adult—and their verbal, physical, and psychological manifestations. Participants learn about achieving balance among these states.

*Assignment: Complete the Self-Awareness Based on Personality Dimensions worksheet.

Session 3: Personality Structures in Interpersonal Transactions

Participants learn about complementary, crossed, and ulterior transactions and how to create complementary relationships to enhance relational stability.

*Assignment: Complete the Identifying Complementary Relationships worksheet.

Session 4: The Four Life Positions and Their Role in Relationships

Participants explore the four life positions ("I'm OK, You're OK," "I'm not OK, You're not OK," "I'm OK, You're not OK," and "I'm not OK, You're OK") and their impact on

relationships. They also learn about relational games and their pitfalls.

*Assignment: Complete the Monitoring Games and Life Positions worksheet.

Session 5: Role of the Child Ego State in Spouse Selection

This session focuses on the influence of the Child ego state in marital choices, highlighting both its destructive role in emotional reasoning and its beneficial role in bringing excitement to marital life.

*Assignment: Complete the Monitoring Child Ego State in Spouse Selection worksheet.

Session 6: Role of the Parent Ego State in Spouse Selection

Participants learn about the impact of the Parent ego state on marital choices, including the influence of parental teachings and prohibitions in selecting a spouse.

*Assignment: Complete the Monitoring Parent Ego State in Spouse Selection worksheet.

Session 7: Role of the Adult Ego State in Optimal Marital Choices

This session emphasizes the role of the Adult ego state in balancing personality structures and making optimal marital choices for sustained marital stability.

*Assignment: Complete the Monitoring Adult Ego State in Spouse Selection worksheet.

Session 8: Role of Life Positions in Relationship Stability

Participants learn about the impact of life positions on forming healthy, stable relationships and how to manage other life positions that might interfere with relational health.

*Assignment: Complete the Monitoring Life Positions in Marital Relationships worksheet.

2.4.   *Data Analysis*

In this study, descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (multivariate analysis of covariance) were used to analyze the data via SPSS-26.

3.   Findings and Results

Emotional experience towards marriage (positive and negative emotions) at both the pre-test and post-test stages showed a normal distribution ($p > .05$), equality of error variance ($p > .01$ and $p > .05$), and equality of the variance-covariance matrix (via Box's M test) ($p > .05$). The interaction results of pre-test and group membership indicated that the assumption of equality of regression slopes was also met. Table 1 presents the mean and standard

deviation of the pre-test and post-test stages of emotional experience towards marriage (positive and negative emotions) in the research groups.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Emotional Experience Towards Marriage (Positive and Negative Emotions) in Research Groups at Two Time Points

Variable	Time	Control Group	Expert-Centered Group	Transactional Analysis Group
Positive Emotion	Pre-test	49.60 (17.06)	42.67 (6.51)	46.93 (12.97)
	Post-test	49.59 (7.06)	44.60 (7.07)	52.52 (10.85)
Negative Emotion	Pre-test	56.47 (17.19)	62.87 (20.22)	58.47 (25.96)
	Post-test	54.48 (17.09)	50.33 (15.30)	45.07 (14.48)

As observed in Table 1, concerning emotional experience towards marriage (positive and negative emotions), especially negative emotional experience towards marriage, the expert-centered group and the transactional analysis group showed more significant changes in the post-test stage compared to the control group.

The results of univariate covariance analysis within multivariate covariance analysis for the variable of emotional experience towards marriage (positive and negative emotions) are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of Univariate Covariance Analysis within Multivariate Covariance Analysis for Emotional Experience Towards Marriage (Positive and Negative Emotions)

Variable and Source of Effect	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Significance	Eta Squared	Power
Positive Emotion	Pre-test	1732.24	1	1732.24	83.93	.001	.68
	Group	52.55	2	26.27	1.27	.29	.06
	Error	825.55	40	20.64	-	-	-
	Total	3340.80	43	-	-	-	-
Negative Emotion	Pre-test	5473.78	1	5473.78	74.60	.001	.65
	Group	537.08	2	268.54	5.51	.008	.24
	Error	1948.48	40	48.71	-	-	-
	Total	9574.57	43	-	-	-	-

As seen in Table 2 for positive emotion, the group factor (F = 1.27, df = 2, p > .05) is not significant. This indicates that there is no significant difference (p > .05) in positive emotion among the three research groups. This result shows that there is no confirmed difference in positive emotion between the two experimental groups (expert-centered education and transactional analysis-based education) and the control group.

Additionally, as seen in Table 6 for negative emotion, the group factor (F = 5.51, df = 2, p < .01) is significant. This indicates that there is a significant difference (p < .01) in

negative emotion among the three research groups. For negative emotion, the eta squared for the group factor is .24 and the power of the test is .82. This result shows that for negative emotion, 24% of the difference is due to the implementation of education for the two experimental groups and the lack of education for the control group, which is confirmed with 82% power.

Table 3 presents the results of the Bonferroni post-hoc test for pairwise comparisons of the three research groups in negative emotional experience towards marriage.

Table 3

Results of Bonferroni Post-hoc Test for Pairwise Comparisons of the Three Research Groups in Negative Emotional Experience Towards

Marriage

Variable	Base Group	Comparison Group	Mean Difference	Standard Error	Significance
Negative Emotion	Control	Expert-Centered Group	9.05	3.28	.036
		Transactional Analysis Group	9.41	3.15	.025
	Expert-Centered Group	Transactional Analysis Group	5.26	3.19	.002
Positive Emotion	Control	Expert-Centered Group	-4.09	3.50	.560
		Transactional Analysis Group	8.40	3.36	.003
	Expert-Centered Group	Transactional Analysis Group	6.60	3.09	.002

As seen in Table 3, for negative emotional experience, there is a significant difference only between the control group and the expert-centered education group ($p < .01$). The method based on Eric Berne's theory has been effective on both dimensions of emotional experience.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to compare the effectiveness of two pre-marital education methods based on Eric Berne's theory and expert-centered pre-marital education on emotional experience towards marriage. The results of multivariate covariance analysis showed that only the expert-centered method had a significant effect on negative emotional experience, while the positive emotional experience variable did not change under this education. Pre-marital education based on Eric Berne's theory did not change any dimensions of emotional experience towards marriage.

In alignment or misalignment with other findings demonstrating the effectiveness of various education methods in this field on pre-marital variables, it can be said that pre-marital education based on Eric Berne's theory, like other educational methods, was able to modify the psychological constructs of emotional experiences. Hence, it aligns with other results showing the effectiveness of other methods on pre-marital variables (Abbasi, 2019; Kavehi Sedehi et al., 2020; Khanbani et al., 2022; Mokhtari et al., 2022; Rahmati et al., 2024; Rostami et al., 2020). These studies have improved pre-marital constructs through their educational interventions.

To explain the effectiveness of the expert-centered method on negative emotional experience towards marriage and its ineffectiveness on positive emotional experience towards marriage, it can be said that significant life situations can evoke various emotions in individuals. A situation such as marriage, which is multi-tasking and requires young people to have various skills to manage married life, also requires logical and emotional preparation for a long-term family path, the ability to trust the opposite sex, to love them, to be willing to forgive, and to be ready to take on family and marital responsibilities. These new events, responsibilities, and demands of life, along with the heavy costs of such a choice, might create anxiety in an individual, making them prone to worry, stress, and other negative emotions. On the other hand, new experiences, the effects of new events, having more independence, having a child, and having more decision-making power compared to the primary family, having a companion who understands, supports, and loves them, and providing an opportunity to support and love can all create a perspective that can evoke positive emotions such as love, affection, enthusiasm, kindness, hope, and optimism. Having more positive emotional experiences towards marriage can ease the path to marriage and make its problems solvable.

Regarding the effectiveness of the pre-marital counseling method based on Berne's theory, the result was as expected since the main goal of this method was self-awareness and understanding personality strengths and weaknesses based on personality structure and interpersonal transactions. This method helped individuals achieve balance in their child, parent, and adult ego states, adopt an "I'm OK, You're OK" stance, avoid crossed and ulterior transactions, and reduce interpersonal problems within the educational group. It improved problem-solving abilities, increased self-efficacy, and made marriage-related problems solvable, thereby modifying their emotional experiences in both negative and positive dimensions towards marriage.

In any case, the results show that the expert-centered method is capable of reducing negative emotional experiences but does not have the power to increase positive emotions. Therefore, it seems that the expert-centered method has mechanisms that can reduce negative emotions. Increasing awareness and structuring pre-existing information has helped young people reduce confusion and anxiety. This awareness has shown young people that negative emotions are natural among individuals on the verge of marriage. In fact, in the group discussions, they realized that most young singles experience these fears and anxieties, and this understanding has reduced their negative emotions. Finally, it seems that the education and learning of important pre-marital topics have led to the acquisition of knowledge that has corrected their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, reducing negative emotional experiences.

Regarding the unexpected result of the ineffectiveness of this method on positive emotional experience, it can be said that emotional experiences might originate from constructs other than individual skills and awareness, such as social constructs like societal narratives on marriage, family constructs like family support for marriage, or cultural constructs like customs and traditions, which might make young people feel that such education is insufficient to cope with these norms.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Overall, it can be concluded that the method based on Eric Berne's theory is suitable for improving emotional experiences towards marriage. However, to obtain more accurate results for the expert-centered method, it is necessary to provide more time for practice and repetition in real-world settings and then re-evaluate. These results also indicate that pre-marital education needs to address social issues, marriage stereotypes, and family and cultural topics to be more effective. Like other studies, this research had limitations, including the non-random selection of the sample and the lack of follow-up evaluations. It is recommended that future studies consider multi-dimensional education and follow-up assessments.

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 thank all those who assisted us in conducting this research, including the staff of the Research Deputy and university counseling centers and the participating students.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest. There is no conflict of interest among the authors.

Funding

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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