Development of a Pre-Marital Integrative Training Package Based on Bowen and Savickas Models and Comparison of Its Effectiveness with the SYMBIS Approach on Self-Awareness and Marital Choice Orientation

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Objective: The study aimed to compare the effectiveness of an integrative pre-marital training package based on Bowen's intergenerational theory and life design model with the SYMBIS approach on marital choice orientation.

Methods: A quasi-experimental research design with a pretest-posttest-follow-up model and two experimental groups and one control group was utilized. The statistical population consisted of university students in Isfahan. The sample included 45 female students selected through convenience sampling based on inclusion and exclusion criteria and randomly assigned to three groups (integrative training group, SYMBIS group, and control group), each containing 20 participants. The experimental groups received eight 90-minute training sessions, while the control group was placed on a waiting list. All three groups completed research instruments at the pretest, posttest, and follow-up stages. The research instrument was the Marital Choice Orientation Questionnaire (Yousefi, 2023). Data were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA.

Findings: Results indicated that both the integrative training group and the SYMBIS group significantly influenced marital choice orientation (F = 15.5, P = 0.001), and this effect remained stable during the follow-up phase (P < 0.05).

Conclusion: The findings revealed that both methods had a significant and comparable impact on improving the dependent variable, suggesting their utility in enhancing marital choice orientation.

Keywords: Pre-marital integration, SYMBIS, marital orientation

1. Introduction

Today, the process of marriage is widely recognized as one of the primary subjects of inquiry in the fields of social sciences and family psychology. Achieving a healthy society is evidently contingent on the health of families, which in turn relies on the psychological well-being of its members and their harmonious relationships—a foundation laid by a successful marriage (Jokar, Yousefi, & Torkan, 2022; Jokar, Yousofi, & Torkan, 2022). Marriage, as the precursor to family formation, emerges through marital bonds and serves as a cornerstone for societal survival. It is

a humanistic regulation of relationships between men and women based on appropriate foundations, agreements, and a combination of biological, psychological, social, and economic needs (Elrayes et al., 2023; Kavehei Sadeh et al., 2022; Kavehei Sadehi et al., 2020).

Adequate familiarity between couples before or at the time of marriage is of extraordinary importance and sensitivity. The nature of these relationships significantly influences the formation of attitudes, social feedback, and the development of social skills in family members. Transitioning from singlehood to married life, although considered a desirable and minimally complex phenomenon, is one of the most challenging transitional stages in the family life cycle. Accordingly, preparing for marriage has become a relatively novel approach to preventing dissatisfaction and failure in marital life, grounded in the perspective that couples can learn to cultivate successful and lasting marriages (Irby, 2024). Pre-marital skill training contributes to appropriate partner selection, marriage stability, reducing divorce rates, and enhancing marital quality of life (Pashib et al., 2016).

In parallel with the expansion of the positive psychology movement in the last decade, a growing focus has emerged on positive functioning, positive experiences, and human adaptive strengths—referred to as life orientation—such as optimism, happiness, and humor. Optimistic and pessimistic outlooks form the two poles of life orientation, considered fundamental personality traits that influence individuals' adaptation to life events, subjective expectations during challenges, and coping behaviors (Fasano et al., 2020). Optimism and pessimism are defined as generalized positive and negative expectations, respectively. This model suggests that general outcome expectations are significantly correlated with the psychological adjustment of both youth and older adults. If normal human perceptions are accompanied by a positive self-concept, personal control, and even an illusory optimistic outlook on the future, they not only assist in managing daily life but also aid in coping with stressful and threatening life events (Gallagher et al., 2020). Consequently, individuals confident about their future persist even in the face of significant adversity, whereas hesitant individuals may attempt to avoid challenges altogether.

There are considerable differences between optimistic and pessimistic young individuals regarding their attitudes and feelings toward marriage, which are expected to influence their behaviors and emotions in this domain. Consequently, single individuals, extended families, and

social injury prevention authorities all strive to minimize divorce rates. One effective strategy increasingly emphasized in recent years is pre-marital counseling. This counseling serves three main purposes: enabling couples to get to know each other, assess compatibility, and evaluate their capacity for interaction and commitment post-marriage (Kavehei Sadeh et al., 2022; Kavehei Sadehi et al., 2020).

Several counseling models have been introduced for marriage preparation, encouraging couples to discuss topics such as financial matters, communication, beliefs and values, marital roles, emotions, sexuality, willingness to have children, decision-making, anger management, and spending time together. For instance, Atashpour, Navabi-Far, and Golparvar (2019) developed a marital counseling model based on Enneagram typology (Atashpour et al., 2019); Khanbani, Golparvar, and Aghaei (2022a, 2022b) introduced a pre-marital counseling model titled "Successful Marriage" (Khanbani et al., 2022a, 2022b); and Jokar, Yousefi, and Torkan (2022) extracted a comprehensive successful marriage model (Jokar, Yousefi, & Torkan, 2022; Jokar et al., 2020; Jokar, Yousofi, & Torkan, 2022).

Additionally, Kaveh-Sedeh and colleagues (2020) presented an expert-centered marital counseling model (Kavehei Sadehi et al., 2020), and Jokar, Yousefi, and Torkan (2022) proposed a reality-based pre-marital counseling framework based on family therapy theory (Jokar, Yousofi, & Torkan, 2022). Each of these models focuses on psychological constructs relevant to pre-marital counseling, depending on their theoretical or cultural context.

One increasingly common scientific method for developing more effective practical applications is theoretical integration. This approach combines two theories, each with its principles, strategies, and techniques, aiming to address their respective critiques and create a more robust resource to meet clients' needs (Battey, Hewitt, & Hoffman, 2014). In this context, integrating Savickas's constructivist theory (2011, 2015) with Bowen's intergenerational theory (1993) appears to hold potential for advancing applied science in pre-marital counseling.

Savickas's constructivist theory (2019) has demonstrated its effectiveness in various aspects of young people's lives (Khabazshirazi et al., 2022; Yousefi et al., 2011). Key concepts in this theory—such as adaptability, life narrative, and personality—can be adapted to pre-marital counseling. These concepts address critical questions for significant life choices: "What spouse?", "Why this spouse?", and "How

can I manage my choice and marriage?" (Savickas, 2012, 2015, 2019).

Bowen's intergenerational theory (1993), on the other hand, focuses on reducing anxiety and increasing self-differentiation within families. As shown in related research, these goals contribute to family stability (Papero, 2014). Its fundamental and complementary concepts make it suitable for marital counseling. While these theories stem from separate domains, their integration through rigorous scientific processes can yield meaningful insights.

This study aimed to compare the integrated method with the SYMBIS (Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts) approach by Parrott and Parrott (2013). The SYMBIS method addresses seven critical areas: marital myths, love styles, communication skills, happiness strategies, gender differences, conflict resolution, and spiritual understanding of marriage (Parrott & Parrott, 2013). It has been validated in Iranian contexts (Rostami & Qazalsaflu, 2018).

To date, no published study has explored an integrated counseling model specifically combining these two theories. This research addresses the following question:

1. Does a pre-marital integrative approach based on Bowen's and Savickas's frameworks differ from the SYMBIS approach in its effects on self-awareness and marital choice orientation among couples intending to form families?

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Participants

Given that the aim of this study was to determine the effectiveness of a pre-marital integrative training package combining Bowen's and Savickas's approaches compared to the SYMBIS pre-marital training model on self-awareness and marital orientation, the second phase of the study employed a quasi-experimental design with pretest, posttest, and follow-up stages, and a control group. The statistical population consisted of all single male and female individuals in Isfahan in 2022. The sample was selected using convenience sampling from single female university students who registered for university-based pre-marital training programs. Following the dissemination of information at university counseling centers, 45 individuals meeting the inclusion and exclusion criteria were randomly divided into three research groups (15 participants per group) from 60 initial registrants. The first group underwent eight training sessions based on the integration of Bowen's approach and Savickas's constructivist life-design theory,

focusing on couple life planning and self-differentiation. The second group received pre-marital training through the SYMBIS model. The control group was placed on a waiting list and did not receive any intervention.

The inclusion criteria for participants included being single, expressing interest in participating in the training program, not having a history of substance or alcohol abuse (as assessed through direct questioning), not using psychiatric medications, and being at least 20 years old, with an age range of 20 to 36 years. The exclusion criteria included disinterest in continuing the sessions, disruption or irregular attendance during sessions (e.g., tardiness, deviation from the main topic, lack of commitment to assignments), participation in other psychological training programs within the last three months, failure to complete assignments, and having a history of divorce.

Two training packages were implemented in the quantitative phase. To conduct the study, the two experimental groups participated in eight research-based training sessions. All three groups were assessed using research instruments before and after the intervention. The first experimental group received SYMBIS pre-marital training, while the second group underwent integrated pre-marital training.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Orientation

The Marital Orientation Questionnaire was employed as the primary instrument to assess marital orientation among participants. This questionnaire, developed by Yousefi (2021) and utilized by Mokhtari et al., is a 15-item, researcher-designed instrument that evaluates optimism toward marriage. The scoring system is based on a 5-point Likert scale, with all items scored positively (not reversed). For example, "Strongly agree" receives the highest score (5), while "Strongly disagree" receives the lowest score (1). The internal consistency of the questionnaire, determined by Cronbach's alpha, was 0.85. Concurrent validity was confirmed through significant correlations with the positive life orientation scale. Furthermore, item-total correlations demonstrated positive and significant relationships, indicating robust construct validity (Mokhtari et al., 2022; Mokhtari et al., 2021a, 2021b).

2.3. Interventions

2.3.1. SYMBIS

The SYMBIS (Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts) intervention is designed to equip couples with knowledge and skills to build a strong foundation for their future marital life. The intervention addresses seven core questions, exploring various aspects of marriage, including dispelling myths, fostering love, enhancing communication, managing conflict, understanding gender differences, nurturing spiritual depth, and promoting long-term happiness. Each session systematically focuses on one of these domains, ensuring a comprehensive approach to marriage preparation (Parrott & Parrott, 2013; Rostami & Qazalsaflu, 2018).

Session 1: Introduction and Exploring Marriage Myths

The session begins with an introduction to the program, allowing participants to become familiar with the goals and structure of the counseling process. The first core question addresses myths about marriage, focusing on identifying and analyzing destructive and inaccurate beliefs that could harm future marital relationships. Participants engage in discussions to dispel harmful myths and adopt healthier perspectives. Pre-tests are administered to assess baseline marital orientation.

Session 2: Love Styles and Sustaining Romance

This session revisits the content from the first session before addressing the second core question, which pertains to couples' love styles. Participants learn about the components of love and strategies to keep love alive in their relationships. The session includes developing a plan to create and sustain enduring romantic bonds between partners.

Session 3: Building a Happy Marriage

Participants are guided to design a detailed plan for fostering happiness in their marital lives. This session explores fundamental attitudes that can enhance or undermine a marriage, exposing factors that could destroy happiness and revealing the secrets of joyful couples. Participants reflect on whether they can build a truly happy life together and explore practical steps to achieve this goal.

Session 4: Understanding and Communication

The fourth session focuses on helping couples improve mutual understanding and communication. Participants learn foundational communication skills essential for the early stages of marriage. Discussions also address common causes of marital breakdown, providing tools to establish effective communication and lay the groundwork for a successful relationship.

Session 5: Gender Differences

After a brief review of previous sessions, the fifth session delves into understanding gender differences. Participants explore their partner's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, gaining insights into the unique perspectives of the opposite gender. This understanding fosters empathy and mutual respect in the relationship.

Session 6: Conflict Resolution

This session addresses the sixth core question regarding conflict resolution. Couples learn strategies for addressing conflicts constructively, reducing aggression, and viewing disagreements as opportunities for growth in the relationship. The session introduces conflict management as a valuable component of a healthy marriage.

Session 7: Spiritual Dimensions of Marriage

The session focuses on the spiritual dimension of marriage as a vital aspect of a successful marital relationship. Participants discuss the role of spirituality and divine guidance in their marital lives. Specific tools are introduced to cultivate and nurture the spiritual essence of their partnership.

Session 8: Review and Post-Test

The final session reviews the content from the previous sessions, evaluates the assignments completed during and outside the sessions, and addresses participants' questions. A post-test is administered to measure changes in marital orientation, completing the intervention process.

2.3.2. Integrative Pre-Marital Counseling Intervention Protocol Based on Bowen and Savickas

This intervention merges Bowen's intergenerational family systems theory and Savickas's constructivist life-design approach to provide a holistic framework for enhancing self-differentiation and preparing couples for marriage. The sessions aim to improve participants' ability to navigate family dynamics, clarify values, and align personal goals with marital life (Ahmadi Mehr et al., 2021; Bowen, 1993; Papero, 2014; Savickas, 2012, 2015, 2019; Titelman, 2014).

Session 1: Family Emotional System

This session focuses on modifying participants' family emotional systems, emphasizing contextual factors rather than inherent traits. Decision-making skills are enhanced, helping individuals better understand their role within their family system and how it influences their marital choices.

Session 2: Intergenerational Learning and Life Narrative Revision

Participants explore and revise intergenerational patterns of behavior, beliefs, and coping strategies. Emphasis is placed on developing appropriate coping skills and reframing life narratives to foster a healthier outlook on marriage.

Session 3: Self-Differentiation and Life Roles

The third session enhances self-differentiation by helping participants identify life roles, clarify values, and strengthen decision-making abilities. Participants reflect on their personal and relational goals within the context of marital life.

Session 4: Avoiding Triangulation

This session focuses on preventing the formation of triangulation within family systems. Participants are guided to broaden their perspectives, revise life narratives, and pursue new goals, improving their ability to navigate family dynamics and marital relationships.

Session 5: Active Listening and Value Clarification

Participants learn the art of active listening and further refine their life narratives. This session emphasizes understanding personal and relational values and integrating them into a cohesive framework for marital success.

Session 6: Balancing Independence and Intimacy

The session addresses the balance between maintaining independence and fostering closeness in relationships. Participants develop decision-making skills and explore strategies for setting meaningful goals aligned with their marital aspirations.

Session 7: Managing Social Regression

The focus shifts to managing social regression by fostering goal-oriented behavior, clarifying values, and broadening perspectives. Participants learn strategies to overcome challenges and maintain emotional resilience in their marital relationships.

Session 8: Relationships with Extended Families

The final session addresses managing relationships with both their own and their spouse's extended families. Participants refine life narratives, strengthen coping skills, and learn strategies for improving sibling relationships. Goals are aligned with marital and family dynamics, ensuring long-term harmony.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed quantitatively at both descriptive (mean and standard deviation) and inferential levels (repeated measures ANOVA and post hoc tests). All calculations were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

3. Findings and Results

In the intergenerational constructivist group, 9 participants (60%) were aged 20 to 24 years, and 6 participants (40%) were aged 25 years or older. In the SYMBIS group, 8 participants (53.33%) were aged 20 to 24 years, and 7 participants (46.66%) were aged 25 years or older. In the control group, 7 participants (53.33%) were aged 20 to 24 years, and 8 participants (46.66%) were aged 25 years or older. The results of the chi-square test indicate that there is no significant difference in the age distribution across the three research groups ($p > .05$).

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of marital orientation across the pretest, posttest, and follow-up phases for the research groups.

Table 1

Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) of Marital Orientation Across Three Phases for the Research Groups

Variable	Time	Intergenerational Constructivist Group	SYMBIS Group	Control Group
Marital Orientation	Pretest	179.53 (34.82)	177.87 (39.88)	177.67 (34.77)
	Posttest	187.27 (35.17)	185.07 (43.70)	178.32 (35.78)
	Follow-Up	188.60 (34.85)	185.80 (43.50)	176.27 (35.65)

As shown in Table 1, the intergenerational constructivist group and the SYMBIS group demonstrated more significant changes in marital orientation than the control group in the posttest and follow-up phases.

The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that marital orientation was normally distributed in all three phases—pretest, posttest, and follow-up ($p > .05$). Homogeneity of error variance ($p > .05$) and equality of the variance-covariance matrix (via the M-Box test) ($p > .05$) were also confirmed. Furthermore, the Mauchly test was significant, indicating that the sphericity assumption was violated. Consequently, the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was used for the final analyses. The results of the repeated measures ANOVA for marital orientation are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of Repeated Measures ANOVA for Marital Orientation

Source of Effect	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Partial Eta Squared	Power
Within-Group: Time	1424.53	1.14	1247.94	92.57	.001	.60	1
Time × Group Interaction	185.69	2.28	81.44	6.04	.008	.24	.89
Error (Time)	646.44	47.94	13.48	-	-	-	-
Between-Group: Group	33311.24	2	16655.62	5.15	.01	.20	.80
Error	135830.49	42	3234.06	-	-	-	-

Due to the violation of the sphericity assumption, the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied. As shown in Table 2, the within-group effect of time (F = 92.57, df = 1.14, p < .01) and the time × group interaction (F = 6.04, df = 2.28, p < .01) indicate significant differences in marital orientation over time and across the three research groups. The partial eta squared for the time effect was .60, with a power of 1, and for the time × group interaction, it was .24, with a power of .89. This demonstrates that 60% of the variance in marital orientation was attributed to the time factor, and 24% was attributed to the interaction of time and group, both with high statistical power (100% and 89%, respectively).

For the between-group effect, a significant difference in marital orientation was found across groups (p < .01). The partial eta squared for the group effect was .20, with a power of .80, indicating that 20% of the variance in marital orientation could be attributed to differences between at least one of the experimental groups (intergenerational constructivist or SYMBIS) and the control group. Table 3 presents the Bonferroni post hoc test results for pairwise comparisons among the three research groups regarding marital orientation.

Table 3

Bonferroni Post Hoc Test Results for Pairwise Comparisons of Marital Orientation Across Groups and Time

Variable	Row	A	B	Mean Difference	SE	p
Time	1	Pretest	Posttest	-8.39	.83	.001
	2	Posttest	Follow-Up	-7.47	.86	.001
	3		Follow-Up	-.96	.69	.29
Group	4	Intergenerational Constructivist	SYMBIS	2.22	11.98	1
	5		Control	34.38	11.98	.02
	6	SYMBIS	Control	32.16	11.98	.03

As shown in Table 3, there were significant differences in marital orientation between the pretest and posttest as well as between the pretest and follow-up phases (p < .01). However, no significant difference was observed between the posttest and follow-up phases (p > .01), indicating that marital orientation increased from the pretest to the posttest and follow-up phases.

At the group level, significant differences were found between the intergenerational constructivist and control groups, as well as between the SYMBIS and control groups (p < .01). However, no significant difference was found between the intergenerational constructivist and SYMBIS groups. These results indicate that both the intergenerational constructivist and SYMBIS training approaches were more effective in enhancing marital orientation than the control

condition, with no significant difference between the two training approaches.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to compare the effectiveness of the integrative training package combining Bowen's intergenerational approach and life design with the SYMBIS approach on marital choice orientation. The results of repeated measures ANOVA showed that both training methods effectively improved marital orientation, with no significant difference in effectiveness between the two methods. Regarding alignment and divergence with other research, it should be noted that no prior study has directly examined this specific topic, making comparisons with existing research challenging. However, the finding that

both methods improved optimism aligns with previous studies that have demonstrated the positive effects of various approaches on optimism. For instance, Shahandeh and Abiyat (2019) showed the effectiveness of hope training on optimism (Shahandeh & Abiyat, 2019), while Naderi (2017) demonstrated the effect of flexibility training on optimism (Naderi & Farah, 2017).

In explaining the effectiveness of these two methods on marital orientation, it can be stated that marital orientation reflects an individual's overall attitude toward marriage, including expectations of positive or negative events following marriage and perceptions of marriage-related events. This orientation can significantly influence personal goal-setting and planning for marriage. Individuals with a positive marital orientation tend to anticipate favorable outcomes and expectations from marriage, whereas those with a negative orientation expect adverse events (VanderWeele & Kubzansky, 2021). It seems that these two methods include mechanisms that have succeeded in improving positive marital orientation.

In the intergenerational constructivist method, mechanisms such as enhancing self-differentiation, reducing anxiety through life narrative revision, expanding perspective, fostering goal-directedness, and learning to adapt to life conditions have contributed to improving self-awareness. These mechanisms help individuals better understand themselves, make more suitable partner choices during singlehood, adapt to new circumstances, and manage family heritage in familial matters. Additionally, participants learned to resolve conflicts with extended family members using specific techniques, leading to improved positive marital orientation.

Similarly, in the SYMBIS approach, the training provided participants with knowledge and skills that improved their self-awareness. These included identifying and correcting false mythological beliefs about marriage, understanding love styles aimed at preserving romantic excitement between couples, exploring factors contributing to happiness or hindering a spouse's happiness, learning effective communication techniques for conflict resolution, understanding gender differences that could challenge mutual understanding, mastering conflict resolution skills to address family issues, and recognizing the role of spirituality in marriage and family stability. These training sessions helped individuals review themselves in these areas, enhancing their positive orientation toward marriage.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

This study has several limitations, including its cross-sectional design, restriction of the statistical population to young university students, non-random sampling, and the use of the same individual as both trainer and researcher. Nonetheless, given that the integrative model was validated in an experimental study, it is recommended that counselors and educators in this field explore this model further and consider its principles and techniques.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript. The article is based on the doctoral thesis of the first author.

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.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

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

The ethical principles adhered to in this study included obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy, and maintaining confidentiality. This article is derived from the first author's doctoral dissertation approved at the Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) branch, under ethics code IR.IAU.KHUISF.REC.1402.260.

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