




The Effectiveness of Gottman's Systemic Cognitive Couple Therapy on Marital Conflicts, Communication Patterns, and Alexithymia in Couples with Marital Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The increasing prevalence of marital conflicts in contemporary society, the risk of separation, and its negative impact on the mental health of couples and their children is one of the most significant issues, sometimes affecting even three generations of a family. The effectiveness of Gottman's Systemic Cognitive Couple Therapy on marital conflicts, communication patterns, and alexithymia in couples with marital conflict was examined.

Methods and Materials: This study utilized an applied and quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up, accompanied by a control group. The statistical population of this study included all couples who referred to counseling clinics in District 1 of Tehran from June to September 2023. Among them, 30 couples were selected through convenience sampling and randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. The interventions included seven sessions of Gottman's Systemic Cognitive Couple Therapy (2008) administered to the experimental group. Data were collected using the Christensen and Sullaway (1984) Communication Patterns Questionnaire, the Bagby, Parker, and Taylor (1994) Alexithymia Scale, and the Barati and Sanai (1996) Marital Conflict Questionnaire. The data were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA and SPSS-22 software.

Findings: The results of data analysis indicated that systemic cognitive couple therapy was effective on marital conflicts ($F=40.30, P<0.001$), communication patterns ($F=13.53, P<0.001$), and alexithymia ($F=3.59, P=0.036$) in couples with marital conflict ($P<0.01$).

Conclusion: It can be concluded that couple therapy can be utilized to improve marital conflicts, communication patterns, and alexithymia in couples experiencing marital conflict.

Keywords: Couple Therapy, Marital Conflict, Communication Patterns, Alexithymia, Marital Conflict

1. Introduction

Conflict in human relationships is common and inevitable, to the extent that conflict can be considered the most prevalent phenomenon in human interactions. Conflict arises when the behavior of one individual interferes with another, and as two individuals become closer, the potential for conflicts increases. Indeed, when interactions between individuals increase and encompass more diverse activities and topics, the likelihood of conflicts rises (Qu et al., 2023). Marital conflicts are among the common problems couples face in today's world (Surjadi et al., 2022). Marital conflicts stem from reactions to individual differences, and when the intensity of these conflicts leads to feelings of anger, hostility, resentment, hatred, jealousy, and verbal and physical abuse, it becomes an abnormal state (Uzun & Avci, 2021). The increasing prevalence of marital conflicts in contemporary society, the risk of separation, and its negative impact on the mental health of couples and their children are significant issues, sometimes affecting even three generations of a family, with substantial consequences for all sectors of society. Previous research has shown that many factors can contribute to these problems (Lee, 2023).

Communication problems are among the most common issues that couples, especially married women, report. Over 90% of distressed couples identify these problems as the primary issue in their relationships (Schmidt et al., 2016). Researchers believe that difficulties in establishing communication lead to relationship distress (Jolin et al., 2022). Marital communication is the process through which a husband and wife exchange feelings and thoughts, either verbally through speech or non-verbally through listening, pausing, facial expressions, and various gestures (Sadeghi et al., 2011). Communication patterns are the skills through which individuals engage in interpersonal interactions and the communication process, meaning the process by which individuals share information, thoughts, and feelings through verbal and non-verbal exchanges (Li & Johnson, 2018). Some couples report difficulty talking to each other, others complain about not understanding each other's intentions, and many couples lament painful discussions filled with blame, confrontation, nagging, and resistance, while some experience a combination of these problems (Rauscher et al., 2020). Some also admit that they rarely speak to each other, their conversations are superficial, and they grow more distant each day (Rancourt et al., 2017). Communication problems are a central issue in family communication theories. These approaches analyze conflicts

between couples not as separate problems of two individuals but as a dysfunctional relationship (Gusakova et al., 2021). These disputes often create a vicious cycle, making it meaningless to identify a starting point, as each partner believes their actions or words are a response to the other's behavior (Jitaru, 2020).

The ability to create and maintain a satisfying romantic relationship requires recognizing, understanding, and expressing emotions (El Frenn et al., 2022). Human emotional experience is complex, and often the words we use to convey our emotions to others seem inadequate (Lyvers et al., 2021). It is imaginable how challenging this is for someone who cannot differentiate between their basic emotional states (Mancinelli et al., 2021). Naturally, this problem negatively impacts social relationships. Alexithymia refers to difficulty identifying feelings, limited ability to distinguish emotions from bodily sensations, difficulty describing emotions to others, and an externally oriented thinking style (Renzi et al., 2020). Individuals with alexithymia, due to various reasons such as personality traits and difficulties in emotion regulation, especially in conflict situations, are prone to emotion regulation disorders (Mannarini et al., 2021). Guvensel et al. (2017) also demonstrated a positive and significant relationship between alexithymia and marital conflicts (Guvensel et al., 2017).

The growing importance of marital quality and reducing marital conflict, and their impact on problems, dissatisfaction, and marital discord, along with the consequent increase in divorce rates and their adverse effects in recent years, have highlighted the importance of addressing marital conflict. This issue has led to the development of numerous therapeutic models (Dattilio, 2017). The overall goal of these therapies is to provide psychological services to couples that identify interpersonal obstacles and problems, teaching appropriate problem-solving techniques and behavior patterns, thereby fostering constructive relationships and increasing marital satisfaction. However, most therapies address only one of these two key aspects. Despite the development of various therapies, identifying those with the most significant impact on these factors seems to be the best current approach (Brand, 2012). Among these, Gottman's integrative cognitive-systemic therapy applies to both providing psychological services and teaching appropriate behavior patterns, addressing both issues (Olekals, 2022). Gottman and Notarius (2002) believe that how couples communicate can predict how they resolve conflicts. Research has shown that approximately 78% of young couples' conflicts are

related to their communication style (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Today, Gottman is recognized as an influential figure in couple therapy, having developed various educational programs to strengthen couples' relationships and emotional intelligence. Gottman couple therapy focuses on the relationship as an independent unit rather than the couple themselves, similar to Johnson's emotion-focused couple therapy, emphasizing that effective couple therapy should be emotion-focused, experiential, and present-oriented. In Gottman couple therapy, it is believed that seven emotional command systems (the Sentinel, the Nest-Builder, the Explorer, the Commander-in-Chief, the Sensualist, the Playmate, and the Energy Czar) form the basic emotional foundation for a healthy relationship. Each partner possesses these systems to varying degrees, and the interaction of these systems determines the nature of their relationship. These seven systems, either alone or in combination, create the relative richness of couples' interactions (Gottman, 2018). The findings of Ajeli Lahiji and Basharat (2017) showed that Gottman couple therapy was effective in increasing marital adjustment, improving emotions, and fostering a positive attitude toward the spouse (Ajeli Lahiji & Besharat, 2017). Given the above, the present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of Gottman's systemic cognitive couple therapy on marital conflicts, communication patterns, and alexithymia in couples experiencing marital conflict.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study utilized a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, post-test, and three-month follow-up with a control group. The statistical population included all couples who referred to counseling clinics in District 1 of Tehran from June to September 2023. From this population, 30 individuals were selected using convenience sampling and randomly assigned to an experimental group (Gottman systemic cognitive couple therapy) and a control group (15 individuals in each group). The inclusion criteria were complete willingness to participate in the study, at least a middle school education, absence of chronic illness or physical and mental disabilities, and an age range of 30 to 50 years. The exclusion criteria included any chronic illness, physical and mental disabilities, substance abuse, use of sedatives, a history of psychiatric disorders, and missing more than three therapy sessions.

Ethical considerations included voluntary participation, informing participants about the study's details and

regulations before starting, respecting participants' attitudes and beliefs, allowing participants to withdraw at any stage, and offering the control group the same intervention as the experimental group after the study if desired. All documents, questionnaires, and records were confidential and accessible only to the researchers. Written informed consent was obtained from all volunteers.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Communication Patterns

Communication Patterns Questionnaire: This questionnaire was developed by Christensen and Sullaway (1984) and consists of 35 questions and three scales (Mutual Constructive, Demand/Withdraw, and Mutual Avoidance) rated on a 9-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 9 (very likely). Christensen and Shenk (1991) estimated the validity of the three subscales in a study comparing non-distressed, distressed, and divorcing couples. The Mutual Constructive Communication subscale discriminated between all three groups, while the Mutual Avoidance and Demand/Withdraw subscales only distinguished between distressed and non-distressed couples. Noller and White (1990) validated this questionnaire by correlating its scales with the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire. The correlation coefficients for the Mutual Constructive Communication, Mutual Avoidance, and Demand/Withdraw subscales were 0.58, -0.57, and -0.35, respectively, all significant at the 0.01 level (Sadeghi et al., 2011). In the present study, the reliability coefficients for the Mutual Constructive Communication, Demand/Withdraw, and Mutual Avoidance patterns were 0.78, 0.71, and 0.72, respectively, using Cronbach's alpha.

2.2.2. Alexithymia

The Toronto Alexithymia Scale is a 20-item measure with three subscales: Difficulty Identifying Feelings (7 items), Difficulty Describing Feelings (5 items), and Externally Oriented Thinking (8 items), rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A total alexithymia score is calculated. The psychometric properties of the TAS-20 have been confirmed in numerous studies. In the Persian version, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the overall alexithymia scale and the subscales Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings, and Externally Oriented Thinking were 0.85, 0.82, and 0.15, respectively, indicating good internal consistency. Test-

retest reliability over four weeks in a sample of 67 individuals ranged from 0.80 to 0.87 (Lyvers et al., 2021; Renzi et al., 2020).

2.2.3. Marital Conflict

This 42-item questionnaire assesses marital conflict in seven areas: 1) Decreased Cooperation, 2) Decreased Sexual Relations, 3) Increased Emotional Reactions, 4) Increased Individual Relationships with Relatives, 5) Decreased Family Relationships with Spouse's Relatives and Friends, 6) Separation of Financial Affairs, and 7) Increased Child Involvement. The MCQ categorizes conflict into four levels: no conflict (42-75), normal conflict (75-114), above-normal conflict (114-134), and severe conflict (above 135). The overall reliability of the MCQ was reported as 0.52 by Barati (1996) and 0.69 by Farahbakhsh (2004). In the present study, the reliability coefficients for the subscales were 0.71 for Decreased Cooperation, 0.66 for Decreased Sexual Relations, 0.63 for Increased Emotional Reactions, 0.67 for Increased Child Involvement, 0.80 for Increased Relationships with Own Friends and Relatives, 0.76 for Decreased Relationships with Spouse's Friends and Relatives, and 0.56 for Separation of Financial Affairs (Jahanbakhshian et al., 2019).

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Gottman and Silver's (2008) Systemic Cognitive Couple Therapy

The systemic cognitive couple therapy was conducted in seven weekly 90-minute sessions over two months based on Gottman and Silver's (2008) protocol (Gottman, 2018).

Session 1: Introduction and Assessment

In the first session, the therapist introduces the framework and goals of Gottman's Systemic Cognitive Couple Therapy to the couples. An overview of the seven emotional command systems is provided, and their relevance to the couples' interactions is explained. Initial assessments are conducted using the Communication Patterns Questionnaire, Toronto Alexithymia Scale, and Marital Conflict Questionnaire. Couples are encouraged to discuss their primary issues and goals for therapy, establishing a baseline understanding of their relationship dynamics.

Session 2: Enhancing Love Maps

This session focuses on enhancing couples' knowledge of each other through "Love Maps." The therapist guides couples to share intimate details about their personal

histories, preferences, and aspirations. Activities include structured exercises where each partner asks questions and listens attentively to build a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other's inner world. The goal is to strengthen the emotional connection and foundation of the relationship.

Session 3: Nurturing Fondness and Admiration

In the third session, couples work on nurturing fondness and admiration for each other. The therapist facilitates exercises that help partners recall positive memories and express appreciation and gratitude. Couples are encouraged to create "admiration maps" and share qualities they admire in each other. This session aims to rebuild positive feelings and counteract negativity that might have accumulated in the relationship.

Session 4: Turning Toward Each Other

This session emphasizes the importance of turning toward each other's bids for emotional connection. The therapist explains the concept of bids and how recognizing and responding to them can enhance relationship satisfaction. Couples engage in activities that help them identify and respond positively to each other's bids for attention, affection, and support. This practice helps build trust and a sense of partnership.

Session 5: Managing Conflict Constructively

In the fifth session, the focus shifts to managing conflict constructively. The therapist introduces strategies for softened start-ups, effective repair attempts, and physiological self-soothing. Couples learn to communicate their needs and feelings without criticism or contempt and practice de-escalation techniques during disagreements. The goal is to transform negative conflict patterns into constructive dialogues.

Session 6: Overcoming Gridlock

This session addresses "gridlocked" issues, where couples feel stuck and unable to resolve recurring conflicts. The therapist helps couples explore underlying dreams and values that fuel their positions on these issues. Through guided discussions and exercises, couples work towards finding common ground and developing compromises that respect both partners' core needs. The session aims to create movement and resolution in previously stagnant areas of conflict.

Session 7: Creating Shared Meaning

The final session focuses on creating shared meaning and rituals of connection. Couples are encouraged to develop shared goals, values, and traditions that give their relationship a deeper sense of purpose. The therapist guides

couples in establishing rituals, such as daily check-ins or weekly date nights, that reinforce their bond. The session culminates in a review of progress made and strategies for maintaining the gains achieved during therapy.

2.4. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each research variable. Inferential statistics, including repeated measures ANOVA, were performed using SPSS-22 software.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables in Pre-test, Post-test, and Follow-up Stages

Group	Research Variables	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Follow-up Mean (SD)
Control	Alexithymia	32.85 (6.53)	31.95 (6.00)	31.58 (6.44)
	Marital Conflict	36.89 (7.17)	35.51 (6.45)	36.00 (7.66)
	Communication Patterns	18.19 (5.13)	18.54 (5.56)	18.70 (5.62)
Experimental	Alexithymia	34.33 (8.15)	28.37 (5.26)	28.90 (5.36)
	Marital Conflict	35.72 (6.24)	26.34 (5.43)	25.72 (5.26)
	Communication Patterns	19.56 (6.10)	28.27 (8.96)	29.15 (9.93)

To examine the significance of the differences between the scores of marital conflicts, communication patterns, and alexithymia in the experimental and control groups, repeated measures ANOVA was used.

Before conducting the repeated measures ANOVA, several assumptions were checked and confirmed to ensure the validity of the analysis. The assumption of normality was verified using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which showed that the data for all variables (alexithymia, marital conflict, and communication patterns) were normally distributed ($p > .05$ for all tests). The assumption of sphericity was assessed with

3. Findings and Results

It can be observed that the majority of respondents were aged between 40 and 50 years, while the least number of respondents were aged between 30 and 35 years. The mean (standard deviation) age of participants in the experimental group was 44.70 (6.56) and in the control group was 43.11 (6.47). The two groups did not have a significant age difference.

Mauchly's test, and no significant violations were found for the within-subjects factor ($\chi^2(2) = 1.34, p = .512$). Homogeneity of variances was evaluated using Levene's test, which indicated equal variances across groups for each variable at all time points ($p > .05$). Additionally, the assumption of linearity was checked through scatterplots, revealing linear relationships among the variables. These confirmations (Shapiro-Wilk test: $p > .05$, Mauchly's test: $\chi^2(2) = 1.34, p = .512$, Levene's test: $p > .05$) ensured that the data met the necessary assumptions for conducting repeated measures ANOVA.

Table 2

Repeated Measures ANOVA for Comparing Pre-test, Post-test, and Follow-up of Marital Conflicts, Communication Patterns, and Alexithymia in Experimental and Control Groups

Scale	Source of Effect	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Eta Squared
Alexithymia	Time	3913.34	1.05	3714.65	284.22	<.0001	0.86
	Time*Group	2579.06	2.10	1224.06	93.65	<.0001	0.80
	Group	2679.01	2	1339.50	3.59	.036	0.13
Marital Conflict	Time	159.01	1.38	115.04	147.03	.001	0.76
	Time*Group	90.98	2.76	32.91	42.06	.001	0.65
	Group	1012.34	2	506.17	40.30	.001	0.64
Communication Patterns	Time	170.60	1.45	117.57	175.61	.001	0.86
	Time*Group	116.86	1.45	80.54	120.30	.001	0.81
	Group	211.60	1	211.60	13.53	.001	0.21

The results of Table 2 indicate that the ANOVA for the within-group factor (time) and the between-group factor were significant. This means that, considering the effect of

the group, the effect of time alone was also significant. Additionally, the interaction between group and time was

significant. Bonferroni post-hoc test was used for pairwise comparison of the groups.

Table 3

Results of Bonferroni Post-Hoc Test for Comparing Marital Conflicts, Communication Patterns, and Alexithymia

Variable	Stage	Stage	Mean Difference	p
Alexithymia	Pre-test	Post-test	6.36	.001
		Follow-up	6.58	.001
	Post-test	Follow-up	0.65	.546
Marital Conflict	Pre-test	Post-test	8.37	.001
		Follow-up	9.17	.001
	Post-test	Follow-up	1.13	.168
Communication Patterns	Pre-test	Post-test	9.64	.001
		Follow-up	10.73	.001
	Post-test	Follow-up	0.84	.132

The results of [Table 3](#) show that marital conflicts and alexithymia in the experimental group, compared to the control group, were lower in the post-test than in the pre-test, and communication patterns were higher than in the pre-test ($p < .01$). The post-test and follow-up stages did not have significant differences, indicating the stability of the treatment effect.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of Gottman's systemic cognitive couple therapy on marital conflicts, communication patterns, and alexithymia in couples experiencing marital conflict. The results showed that Gottman's systemic cognitive couple therapy was effective on marital conflicts, communication patterns, and alexithymia in couples experiencing marital conflict. This finding is consistent with the prior results ([Ajeli Lahiji & Besharat, 2017](#); [Brand, 2012](#); [Garanzini et al., 2017](#); [Gottman, 2018](#); [Gottman & Notarius, 2002](#); [Rajaei et al., 2019](#)).

In explaining this finding, it can be said that given the cognitive-systemic integrative approach of Gottman's therapy, it is expected that the therapist focuses significantly on cognitive issues and relationships among family members. Therefore, through Gottman's couple therapy and by eliminating and changing maladaptive cognitions and reinforcing adaptive cognitions, the factors supporting communication patterns and marital intimacy can be improved. Changing cognitions through their impact on attitudes about the marital bond and improving the quality of marital relationships can strengthen commitment, which can guarantee marital relationships. Additionally, Gottman's couple therapy can enhance marital intimacy by improving

marital conflicts, communication patterns, and alexithymia, as there is a relationship among these variables ([Garanzini et al., 2017](#); [Gottman, 2018](#)). This therapeutic method can also enhance marital intimacy by improving communication patterns, allowing couples to express love and affection more frequently. According to Gottman, the quality of interaction between spouses is a crucial predictor of marital intimacy. Gottman found that negative mood triggers negative cognitive processing, leading to selective attention to negative events. As a result of this selective attention, negative attributions are formed, leading to negative expectations about the future. His studies showed that couples with more negative communication are more likely to have distressed marriages or can be attributed to marital conflicts in the future. He found that couples with low marital intimacy use more negative emotions in their marital interactions than positive emotions. Couples can increase their chances of a successful marriage by changing negative verbal interactions, which is a dynamic behavioral factor, while relatively stable factors such as age at marriage and negative personality traits are challenging to change ([Burgess Moser et al., 2016](#)).

Furthermore, it can be said that the teachings of Gottman's systemic approach, by increasing couples' ability to develop and create positive intentions and motivations towards each other, improving problem-solving skills, emotional skills, modifying cognitive functions, and increasing self-disclosure, intimacy, and at the same time increasing individuation and self-actualization, help individuals achieve independence, self-victory, hope, and goodwill towards themselves, others, and the world. By choosing a healthy life situation in an intra-personal-interpersonal improvement process, this approach can lead

to the improvement of marital conflicts and alexithymia and enhance marital satisfaction. Gottman's systemic theory, with its broad and very effective application, is a very suitable method that helps individuals better understand themselves and others without using complex terminology (Garanzini et al., 2017). According to Gottman, couple therapy reduces the repetition of negative behaviors and increases positive behaviors, reduces spousal blame, and leads to gentler emotions. The couples' communication program helps distressed couples to continue their marital relationships and increase their problem-solving skills to work on their issues constructively, so they feel satisfied with the solutions obtained (Rajaei et al., 2019). Therefore, considering that Gottman's systemic cognitive couple therapy improves marital conflicts, communication patterns, and alexithymia in couples experiencing marital conflict, its application improves the relationship between husband and wife, bringing about marital intimacy for couples.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Since the study was conducted on couples referred to counseling clinics in District 1 of Tehran, caution should be taken in generalizing the results to couples in other regions. The subjects might have been influenced by multiple responses to the same questionnaire (pre-test and post-test), potentially reducing their accuracy in responses. This study was conducted cross-sectionally; future researchers are suggested to conduct qualitative and longitudinal studies. Future studies should control demographic variables such as economic status, religion, and ethnicity. Future research should include subjects with below high school education and a broader age range. Given the effectiveness of Gottman's systemic cognitive couple therapy, it is recommended to use this therapy to improve marital conflicts, communication patterns, and alexithymia in couples experiencing marital conflict.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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