

Examining the Effectiveness of the Imago Therapy Approach on Marital Adjustment and Love Styles in Married Students with Early Marriages

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the Imago therapy approach on marital adjustment and love styles in married students with early marriages.

Methods and Materials: The research employed a semi-experimental method with a pre-test and post-test design with a control group. The statistical population studied included second-year high school students from vocational and technical schools in Mashhad during the 2021-2022 academic year. A purposive sampling method was used, and the participants were randomly assigned to a 15-member experimental group and a 15-member control group. The experimental group underwent 10 sessions of Imago therapy intervention and training. Subsequently, post-tests were conducted using questionnaires on both groups, and follow-up tests were administered at the end. To measure the level of marital adjustment, the Spanier Marital Adjustment Questionnaire (1976) was used, and to assess attitudes toward love, the Hendrick Love Attitudes Scale (1986) was utilized. The data were analyzed using inferential statistics through the SPSS statistical software.

Findings: The results of the covariance analysis indicated that the Imago therapy model was effective in increasing marital adjustment and love styles, suggesting that this approach can be used in therapeutic and counseling sessions.

Conclusion: The findings of this study indicate that Imago therapy significantly improves marital adjustment and love styles in married students with early marriages. Post-intervention scores in the experimental group showed a meaningful increase in marital adjustment and strong attitudes toward love compared to the control group. Thus, Imago therapy is an effective intervention for enhancing marital satisfaction and relationship quality in this population.

Keywords: Imago therapy, marital adjustment, love styles, early marriage, students.

1. Introduction

Marriage, as the most important and supreme social tradition for meeting individuals' emotional needs, has always been affirmed and is a complex, delicate, and dynamic human relationship. The primary reasons for marriage are mainly love and affection, having a partner and companion in life, satisfying emotional and psychological expectations, and increasing happiness. Contemporary psychology believes that an effective relationship is one of the strongest tools humans have for healthy living. An effective relationship is mutually beneficial, purposeful, improves the mental and psychological conditions of both parties, and nurtures the best talents of the individual, fulfilling the need for attachment and security better than any other human relationship (Ghezelseflo et al., 2023).

Adaptation can underlie good performance, facilitate social roles, and increase life satisfaction. Conversely, maladjustment can create problems in the aforementioned areas, lead to social and moral deviations, and cause a decline in individual cultural values. Adaptation is a set of normal personality traits that individuals display in response to the environment with the aim of achieving peace and comfort (Shahovisi et al., 2019; Zarean, 2017). Adaptation is a dynamic, complex, and continuous process through which an individual aligns their constantly changing needs with the ever-changing social environment. Additionally, it involves the individual effecting changes in the external environment. If this process is successful, it is termed adaptation, and if unsuccessful, it is termed maladaptation (Abbaszadeh et al., 2015; Kardavani & Ghavam, 2021).

Moreover, love and love styles are psychological states that significantly impact the quality of relationships. Individuals have different attitudes toward love and romantic relationships, and these differences have important consequences for them. In marital adjustment and satisfaction, the variable of love is a strong factor that significantly reduces conflicts and increases marital adjustment (Maghsoodi et al., 2021).

One of the most influential stages in building the foundations of marital life is having an appropriate age and reaching a suitable level of psychological and physical maturity regarding marriage and the nature of marital life. This appropriate insight helps individuals to develop realistic views and more logical expectations (Esmaeel Talaie et al., 2019; Hassanabadi et al., 2012). Age at marriage is very important in achieving adjustment. Research shows that those who marry early lack familiarity

with marital roles, and this lack of awareness leads to the absence of intimacy formation and, consequently, marital instability (Shahovisi et al., 2019; Zarean, 2017; Zarei & Sabet, 2015).

Identifying the factors influencing marital adjustment can be a significant step in the field of marital relationships, necessitating research to increase adjustment and appropriate love styles. In the current situation of our society, where many programs and policies are focused on facilitating young people's marriages, it is essential to better prepare and educate young people to build successful marriages. The crucial point is that the family is the cornerstone of society and plays a vital role in the stability of social relationships and the growth of community members. Efforts to strengthen the family and stabilize relationships within this system create the foundation for ethical health and public happiness. The family is an agent of socialization, transmitting moral principles and social skills from one generation to the next, and monitoring and controlling the behavior of its members. The family can influence the development of individuals' potential abilities through care during childhood, adolescence, and youth and play a major role in establishing order and discipline in society. What is important in marriage is marital adjustment and satisfaction, and in marital life, in addition to facilities and amenities, specific skills and abilities are required (Hassanabadi et al., 2012; Maghsoodi et al., 2021). Conducting such research can take a significant step in recognizing these abilities. Our individual society is built by people who today enter into marital commitments with one another. Therefore, studies conducted in the field of marriage can be a guiding path for the builders of tomorrow's society (Maghsoodi et al., 2021). Given the importance of marital adjustment and love styles, the need to understand the effectiveness of different couple therapies, and the increasing need in society to identify more effective therapies in this regard, this study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of Imago therapy on marital adjustment and love styles in couples.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research is a semi-experimental study with a pre-test and post-test design with a control group and an experimental group. The independent variable is the intervention based on Imago therapy training and treatment. The statistical population included all married students of the

second level of vocational and technical high schools in the Tabadkan region of Mashhad during the 2021-2022 academic year. A total of 30 participants were divided into two groups of 15, including one experimental group and one control group, selected using purposive sampling and randomly assigned to either group. The experimental group received 10 sessions of Imago therapy intervention and training. Subsequently, post-tests were conducted using questionnaires on both groups, and follow-up tests were administered at the end. Inclusion criteria included couples under 18 years of age who had not undergone medication or psychotherapy in the past six months, had low adjustment scores, and in the experimental group, marriages were of the participants' own choosing. Exclusion criteria included absence from more than one session or divorce and separation during the treatment process.

To implement the integrated couple therapy model and Imago therapy protocols, after obtaining permission from the Islamic Azad University of Mashhad and Abbas Zadegan Research Center of Mashhad and coordinating with the relevant officials of the Tabadkan Education Department, approval was obtained for implementing the plan in girls' high schools. Coordination was made with the principals of two schools, Hazrat Zainab Vocational School and Art and Thought Technical School. Subsequently, among the married students who expressed consent to participate in the sessions, an ethical consent form was provided. Thus, two experimental groups were selected: 14 participants from Hazrat Zainab School and 15 from Art and Thought School, with 15 more participants from these two schools forming the control group. The Spanier Marital Adjustment Questionnaire and Hendrick Love Attitudes Scale were administered as pre-tests to both experimental and control groups. Couple therapy and educational sessions for the experimental groups were conducted by the researcher, each lasting one and a half to two hours once a week for two months, based on the protocols and objectives set for each session in one of the school's classrooms. No intervention was conducted in the control group. At the beginning of each session, the previous session's topics and assigned tasks were reviewed, and their implementation during the week was discussed. Then, the topic and agenda for the session were carried out according to the main protocol, and at the end of each session, homework was assigned based on the therapeutic protocol. After the couple therapy sessions ended, the Spanier Marital Adjustment Questionnaire and Hendrick Love Attitudes Scale were administered as post-tests, and the results of the two groups were compared.

During the post-test administration, 29 students were present in the experimental group and 15 in the control group. To observe ethical considerations, couple therapy and educational sessions were also offered to the control group students who wished to participate after all research phases were completed.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Adjustment

This 32-item scale assesses the quality of marital relationships from the perspective of the husband, wife, or both individuals living together. The tool can measure overall satisfaction in an intimate relationship by obtaining total scores. Factor analysis indicates that this scale measures four dimensions of the relationship: dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, dyadic consensus, and affectional expression. With modifications, it can also be used for interviews. The "Dyadic Adjustment Scale" was created using a sample of married individuals ($n = 218$) and divorced individuals ($n = 94$). The average age of married individuals was 35.1 years, and the average age of divorced individuals was slightly lower at 30.4 years. The average length of marriage in the sample of married individuals was 13.2 years, and the average length of marriage for divorced individuals was 8.5 years. The mean total score for the "Dyadic Adjustment Scale" for married individuals was 114.8 with a standard deviation of 17.8, and the mean score for divorced individuals was 70.7 with a standard deviation of 23.8. The reliability and total scale score with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.96 indicates significant internal consistency. The internal consistency of the subscales ranges from good to excellent: dyadic satisfaction = 0.94, dyadic cohesion = 0.81, dyadic consensus = 0.90, and affectional expression = 0.73. This scale also has concurrent validity and correlates with Locke and Wallace's Marital Adjustment Scale. Additionally, Yarmohammadian, Bankdar Hashemi, and Asgari (2010) obtained a validity coefficient of 0.94 for this questionnaire using criterion validity. In a study by Malazadeh, Ejei, and Kia Manesh (2002), the internal consistency of this tool was found to be 0.95 (Maghsoodi et al., 2021).

2.2.2. Love Attitudes

Developed by Hendrick and Hendrick in 1986 based on Lee's model of love, confirmatory factor analysis has shown that Lee's proposed structure can be applied across different

cultures (Neto et al., 2000). The original questionnaire had 42 items, but subsequent factor analysis reduced the number of items to 24. The Love Attitudes Scale uses a Likert-type scale to quantitatively and continuously measure the six dimensions of love. The responses range from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," with the score indicating the individual's level of attitude toward each subscale. A high score indicates a strong tendency toward the relevant subscale, while a low score indicates a lesser tendency (Pato, 1991; Neto et al., 2000). The Persian translation of this questionnaire is taken from Pato's (1991) research and was first translated and implemented by Dr. Mortezavi. In various studies, alpha coefficients ranged from 0.68 for the storge subscale to 0.83 for agape, with test-retest reliability coefficients ranging from 0.70 for mania to 0.82 for ludus. Confirmatory factor analysis reduced the number of items to 24. Selected statements by Hendrick and Hendrick and colleagues (1998) yielded alpha values for the love attitudes subscales ranging from 0.56 for ludus to 0.77 for storge in the Iranian sample. The factor structure of this questionnaire in the Iranian community was examined and confirmed by Bayat (2008) (Shahovisi et al., 2019). In this study, Cronbach's alpha values for altruistic love were 0.96, playful love 0.77, erotic love 0.70, pragmatic love 0.67, friendly love 0.66, and romantic love 0.77.

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Imago Therapy

The intervention comprised ten structured sessions utilizing the Imago therapy approach, aimed at enhancing marital adjustment and love styles among married students with early marriages. The sessions began with establishing a connection and setting goals, followed by planning for the future, increasing self-awareness, and deepening understanding of the partner. Subsequent sessions focused on recognizing mutual needs and emotional wounds, creating mutual commitment, rekindling romantic memories, learning new behaviors, and effectively managing anger and emotions. The final session involved summarizing and integrating the learnings. Each session employed specific activities, such as personal reflections, conscious communication exercises, and collaborative goal-setting, to foster deeper intimacy, empathy, and mutual support within the marital relationship (Maazinezhad et al., 2021).

Session 1: Establishing Connection and Explaining the Method and Objectives

The primary goal of the first session is to establish a connection with the participants and explain the objectives and methods of the therapy sessions. This involves introducing the members, outlining the goals of the therapy, and setting the group rules. This initial stage helps create a safe and understanding environment where couples feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

Session 2: Planning for the Future

The second session focuses on planning for the future and assessing the potential for progress. Couples are encouraged to write down their personal beliefs about intimate relationships, including their aspirations and current relationship dynamics. They then share these with their partners to identify commonalities and compile a shared list of goals and expectations, fostering a sense of mutual understanding and cooperation.

Session 3: Increasing Self-Awareness

This session is dedicated to enhancing self-awareness by revisiting childhood memories and discovering the Imago structure, which is the mental image individuals have of themselves. Participants review their history of intimate relationships and communication patterns, identify major childhood disappointments, and examine their reactions to these experiences. The aim is to develop a suitable mental image and understand how past experiences influence current behavior.

Session 4: Understanding the Partner

The fourth session aims at deepening the understanding of one's partner by examining hidden agendas and their impact on current relationships. Couples are asked to discuss the positive and negative traits of their partner, compare these traits with their mental image, and explore the mutual influence of these perceptions on their relationship.

Session 5: Recognizing Each Other's Needs and Wounds

In this session, the focus is on recognizing each other's emotional wounds and needs. Couples learn to send effective and clear messages to one another, practice conscious communication, and share the insights gained from the third and fourth sessions. This helps in fostering empathy and understanding between partners.

Session 6: Closing the Exit Routes

The goal of the sixth session is to create a mutual commitment and ensure togetherness by increasing the level of intimacy and meeting each other's needs. Couples identify their own and their partner's exit strategies and plan to close these routes, reaching mutual agreements to strengthen their commitment.

Session 7: Rekindling Romantic Memories and Improving the Relationship

This session involves creating a safe zone to increase intimacy and heal emotional wounds by reviewing positive past behaviors and memories. Couples are acquainted with the differences in marital satisfaction between men and women, identify current methods to please their partner, unmet needs and desires, and are encouraged to offer unexpected gifts and engage in shared recreational activities.

Session 8: Learning New Behaviors

The eighth session focuses on increasing feelings of security and emotional connection by identifying distressing behaviors and disappointments, and outlining desires and requests. Couples learn how to satisfy each other's deep needs and adjust their behaviors accordingly. They revisit personal beliefs about intimate relationships, share these with their partner, and identify common goals.

Session 9: Releasing Anger and Emotions

In this session, couples are guided to express and release anger in a safe and constructive environment, reducing and resolving past resentments and healing emotional wounds. They identify and examine unexpressed negative feelings and unresolved situations, practice constructive anger release techniques, and work towards empathy and forgiveness.

Session 10: Summarizing and Integrating the Self

The final session involves a comprehensive review of what was covered in the therapy sessions, aiming for both individual and couple conclusions. Couples reflect on their journey, consolidate their learning and experiences, and integrate these insights into their relationship moving forward.

2.4. Data analysis

The collected data and parameters were calculated, and pre- and post-intervention comparisons were made using a multivariate parametric covariance analysis to test the research hypotheses. The assumptions of the analysis, including the normality of data, linearity of relationships between dependent variables, absence of multicollinearity between dependent variables, homogeneity of regression slope, and homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, were examined. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 26.

3. Findings and Results

Data analysis was conducted in two sections: descriptive and inferential. In the descriptive section, we used central and dispersion indices such as mean and standard deviation to summarize the available data. In the inferential section, we examined the research hypotheses.

Table 1

Descriptive Indices Related to Imago Therapy Results in the Experimental Group

Group	Variable	Time	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	
Experimental	Romantic Love	Pre-test	15	10.53	1.060	6	14	
		Post-test	15	13.93	1.980	9	16	
	Ludic Love	Pre-test	15	5.20	1.521	3	9	
		Post-test	15	6.27	1.163	4	8	
	Storgic Love	Pre-test	15	6.60	3.203	3	13	
		Post-test	15	8.60	1.957	6	12	
	Pragmatic Love	Pre-test	15	8.60	1.502	6	12	
		Post-test	15	13.73	1.534	10	16	
	Erotic Love	Pre-test	15	9.87	2.264	6	13	
		Post-test	15	9.00	2.360	6	14	
	Agape Love	Pre-test	15	8.93	1.438	6	11	
		Post-test	15	7.87	1.060	6	9	
	Control	Romantic Love	Pre-test	15	11.80	3.688	6	16
			Post-test	15	12.33	2.690	8	16
Ludic Love		Pre-test	15	6.47	1.302	4	8	
		Post-test	15	6.40	1.121	5	8	
Storgic Love		Pre-test	15	7.93	2.434	3	12	
		Post-test	15	8.00	2.591	3	12	
Pragmatic Love		Pre-test	15	11.73	2.604	8	16	
		Post-test	15	11.47	2.696	8	15	
Erotic Love		Pre-test	15	9.87	2.386	6	13	
		Post-test	15	10.37	1.624	7	14	

After obtaining findings from the statistical population, we will examine the proposed hypotheses using the statistical tests utilized in the research. To examine the hypotheses, we use the analysis of covariance test, which requires several assumptions: normality of the pre-test and post-test scores using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of regression slopes, and linearity of the correlation between the control and independent variables.

The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the significance level of the pre-test and post-test scores in the experimental groups was higher than the error level of

0.05. The sig values for all four variables are greater than 0.05, confirming the normality of the variables. Additionally, the results of the homogeneity of variances test showed that since the significance level of the pre-test and post-test scores of the Imago therapy method is higher than the error level of 0.05 ($F = 0.143, p > 0.05 = 0.708$), we can conclude that the distribution of the data is based on random sampling, and there is no significant difference in the variance among the samples. In other words, the variance of the pre-test and post-test scores of the Imago therapy method (variance-covariance matrix) in students is homogeneous.

Table 2

One-Way Analysis of Covariance Results in MANOVA on Post-Test Mean Scores of the Experimental Group Imago Therapy

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Effect Size
Model (Corrected)	1922.057	3	640.686	94.588	.001	.916
Intercept	204.897	1	204.897	30.250	.001	.538
Group	48.415	1	48.415	7.148	.013	.216
Pre-test	1004.704	1	1004.704	148.330	.001	.851
Group*Pre-test	13.579	1	13.579	2.005	.169	.072
Error	176.110	26	6.773			
Total	103599.000	30				
Corrected Total	2098.167	29				

As presented in Table 2, with the control of the pre-test, there is a significant difference in compatibility among the students in the experimental group (Imago method) ($p < 0.05, F = 7.148$). Therefore, the effectiveness of the Imago therapy method is confirmed, with an effect size of 0.21, meaning that 12% of the individual differences in the post-test scores of the Imago therapy method are attributed to the effect of the Imago therapy intervention and training. Given that the significance level is $0.00 < 0.05$, it is clear that the pre-test and post-test scores of the Imago therapy method differ significantly, indicating that the Imago therapy method has been effective.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Training and intervention with the Imago therapy approach are effective on marital adjustment in married students with early marriages. After participating in educational sessions with the Imago therapy approach, the Spencer marital adjustment scores in the experimental group increased significantly compared to the control group, indicating effectiveness. Therefore, training and intervention with Imago therapy affect marital adjustment in married students with early marriages, confirming the research hypothesis. These findings are consistent with the results of

prior studies (Alipour et al., 2018; Aslani, 2015; Beheshtinezhad et al., 2019; Fatemi et al., 2016; Honarparvaran, 2017; Maazinezhad et al., 2021; Mansourian et al., 2019; Movahedi et al., 2019; Nikkhah et al., 2019; Seidabadi et al., 2021; Sheydanfar et al., 2020; Sheydanfar, 2021), which indicate the positive effects of Imago therapy training and intervention on marital adjustment.

In explaining these findings, it can be said that relationship imagery is a process that provides couples with awareness and information, most importantly about the unconscious aspects of their marital relationships. It helps individuals to address issues more precisely rather than trying to solve them superficially. Success in this process leads to improvement, growth, and emotional security towards each other. Couples learn to view conflicts as opportunities for deeper intimacy and connection. These small changes significantly affect the happiness of couples, making them sources of joy rather than discomfort for each other. Two essential tools for improvement are conscious dialogue and using the process of conversation to help each partner make better changes in their behavior, thereby better addressing sexual relationship issues and enhancing the quality of marital relationships. Furthermore, Imago therapy training and intervention are effective on love styles in

married students with early marriages, as the pre-test and post-test scores significantly differ. After participating in educational sessions with the Imago therapy approach, the strong attitudes towards love scores in the experimental group increased significantly compared to the control group, indicating effectiveness (Beheshtinezhad et al., 2019; Fatemi et al., 2016). Therefore, training and intervention with Imago therapy affect strong attitudes towards love in married students with early marriages, confirming the research hypothesis. These findings align with prior studies (Fatemi et al., 2016; Mirza Hosseini & Movahedi, 2016; Sheydanfar et al., 2020), indicating the positive effects of Imago therapy training and intervention on love attitudes.

In explaining these results, it should be noted that in Imago therapy's relational model, revisiting childhood memories that involve withdrawal, disappointment, and negative mental images, and addressing unfinished and unresolved situations, the training focuses on increasing self-awareness, understanding the partner's needs more deeply, practicing conscious communication methods with the partner, and establishing a shared list of similar beliefs and emotions. Couples are encouraged to have reasonable expectations from each other, improving communication issues and increasing intimacy and empathy in the relationship (Maazinezhad et al., 2021).

In summary, love stems from an unconscious internal force and our childhood experiences. Our romantic choices are influenced by childhood patterns. This method, more than any other couple therapy, addresses love and its processes, helping individuals understand their way of loving, expectations, and rebuild the concept of love. Imago therapy addresses incomplete and denied aspects of one's personality, providing a realistic picture of love, and helping individuals rebuild their imaginary perceptions. It helps individuals adjust their expectations from their partners and address hidden aspects of their personalities. The main premise is that marital choices are unconsciously based on romantic attraction formed at the end of childhood. Therefore, choosing a spouse results from an unconscious competition between an image of parents or caregivers formed in childhood, called Imago, and absolute personality traits of spouse attraction. Imago is a significant factor in selection as it unconsciously aims to restore an individual's wholeness through re-establishing connections disrupted in childhood by failures. Thus, romantic love results from the anticipated need for satisfaction. Therefore, Imago therapy changes love styles, aligning them with the spouse's interests and needs. Marriage and family counselors are advised to

use Imago therapy to improve couples' love attitudes and alter marital relationships.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small, limited to 30 participants, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused solely on married students with early marriages within a specific geographical region, which may not reflect the experiences of similar populations in different cultural or social contexts. The reliance on self-reported measures could also introduce bias, as participants might respond in socially desirable ways. Lastly, the study did not include a long-term follow-up to assess the sustained impact of the Imago therapy intervention over time.

Future research should consider using larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. It would also be beneficial to conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term effects of Imago therapy on marital adjustment and love styles. Exploring the intervention's impact across different cultural, social, and economic backgrounds could provide a more comprehensive understanding of its effectiveness. Additionally, incorporating objective measures, such as observational data or physiological indicators, alongside self-reports could help mitigate response bias and provide a more robust assessment of the intervention's outcomes.

The positive results of this study suggest that Imago therapy can be a valuable tool for improving marital satisfaction and relationship quality among married students with early marriages. Practitioners, such as marriage counselors and therapists, should consider incorporating Imago therapy techniques into their practice to address issues related to marital adjustment and love styles. Educational institutions and policy makers might also explore implementing relationship education programs that include components of Imago therapy to support young couples in building strong, healthy relationships. These implications underscore the importance of early and effective intervention in fostering marital stability and satisfaction.

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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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