

# What Happens in Pre-Marriage Counseling Rooms? Examining the Process of Pre-Marriage Counseling from the Perspective of Its Recipients

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### ABSTRACT

The rising divorce rates and declining marriage rates have increasingly highlighted the necessity of pre-marriage counseling. The aim of the present study was to conduct a qualitative examination of the pre-marriage counseling process from the perspective of individuals who received such counseling in the city of Isfahan. This qualitative research was carried out using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study population consisted of individuals who had received pre-marriage counseling at counseling centers in Isfahan. The participants were purposively selected from those who had received pre-marriage counseling and had subsequently married based on that counseling. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews containing questions related to the pre-marriage counseling experience. Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method. The results revealed that pre-marriage counseling comprises four main categories: assessment, education, advice, and conclusion, each containing subcategories, and these categories occur in a systematic process during counseling. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that although counselors may use different materials, tools, and methods in the pre-marriage counseling process, a specific pattern dominates the counseling process.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Pre-Marriage Counseling, Qualitative Analysis, Thematic Analysis.

## 1. Introduction

Premarital counseling represents an essential preparatory step for couples on the threshold of marriage, aiming to address and enrich various dimensions of their relationship. Studies have underscored the positive influence of pre-marriage counseling on couples, enhancing their knowledge, attitudes, and communication skills, which are pivotal for a harmonious and satisfying marital life (Farnam et al., 2011; Moodi et al., 2013). This counseling process not only educates couples about the physical, psychological, and social facets of marriage but also facilitates an exploration of individual strengths, potential issues, and the alignment of expectations (Ali, 2020). Educational interventions during these counseling sessions cover crucial aspects such as sexual health, self-efficacy, and expectations from marriage (Moharrami et al., 2017; Sheikhi et al., 2019), thereby laying a solid foundation for a couple's future together.

The role of peer counseling, particularly among university students, highlights the significance of social support in enhancing marriage readiness (Hunainah, 2019). In different cultural contexts like Iran and Indonesia, pre-marriage counseling serves as a platform to promote reproductive health, family well-being, and adherence to therapeutic regimens, offering couples the opportunity to discuss critical topics such as childbearing and disease prevention (Al-Saaid et al., 2019; Nugraheni et al., 2023). The acceptance of counseling services among pre-marital couples in Iran reflects a positive orientation towards seeking pre-marital guidance (Ayatollahi et al., 2014).

Research suggests that premarital counseling can effectively change or mitigate idealistic expectations and beliefs about marriage (Rajabi & Abbasi, 2020), highlighting its importance in preventing dissatisfaction and failure in marriage. This counseling not only has preventive, educational, and therapeutic aspects (Moharrami et al., 2017) but also emphasizes the importance of life skills, spouse selection criteria, and the acceptance of gender roles in marriage, thereby strengthening the marriage (Torkian et al., 2020).

Given the significant impact of premarital counseling on improving the social relationships and health of both couples and their future children, it becomes a crucial element in health sector strategies (Said & Gomaa, 2022). This article aims to review the literature on premarital counseling, exploring its effectiveness in fostering marital harmony and family resilience, and to examine the role of educational

interventions in preparing couples for a successful and fulfilling marriage life.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

Given that the subject of this research was to examine how the process of pre-marriage counseling is perceived by its recipients, this study was qualitative in nature and employed thematic analysis. The current study acknowledges that knowledge is to some extent constructed within the social context of the interview and is not merely a mirror reflection of reality. Meaning is produced in the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee, with both sender and receiver collaborating to generate meaning. The research setting included all individuals (both men and women) in the city of Isfahan who had received marriage counseling. Therefore, participants were purposively selected from those who had received marriage counseling. This was done by accessing the files of three marriage counseling centers where individuals were selected. Participant selection continued until data saturation was observed, which was apparent from the beginning. However, the number of participants increased to eight. The criteria for inclusion in this study were the willingness to participate in marriage counseling and the ability to recall the content of the counseling sessions. It is noteworthy that these individuals had sought counseling for making their final marriage decision.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

As this was a qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Interview questions were prepared based on existing experiences related to marriage counseling and were reviewed by three experts and an initial evaluation in a preliminary interview. The topics discussed were consistent, encompassing questions about the start and end of the marriage counseling, their satisfaction with the counseling, their experiences, how they were evaluated, among other similar questions. At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they had anything else they wished to add to ensure no significant detail was missed. However, answering questions was not mandatory, and participants could choose which questions they wanted to answer. All interviews were recorded. Since body language sometimes plays a significant role in understanding

the participants' spoken meaning, it was decided that if a meaningful body movement occurred, it would be noted. Besides audio recording, note-taking was also conducted. Another practice to ensure accurate understanding of the participants' statements was to often summarize their statements and ask them to confirm the accuracy of the understanding. Interviews were conducted in the counseling center environment, lasting between 45 to 60 minutes.

### 2.3. Data analysis

The materials analyzed consisted of transcripts from the interviews and notes taken during or after the interviews. To ensure that the transcripts accurately reflected the written text, interviews were word-for-word checked. After the first reading, the transcribed content was matched with the recorded material. Additionally, transcription was carried out as soon as possible after the interview sessions ended to better recall the discussions and the participants' body language. These precautions were taken due to debates and controversies surrounding the transcription of spoken content. Many experts believe that converting speech to written text involves a (re)construction rather than a direct transcription. Word-for-word transcription, immediately after the interviews, was aimed at ensuring as close a match as possible between the oral speech and the written text.

### 3. Findings and Results

For the data analysis, given that the research method was thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method was utilized as follows: 1) Familiarizing oneself with the data, 2) Generating initial codes, 3) Searching for themes, 4) Reviewing themes, 5) Defining and naming themes, and 6) Preparing the report. This study employed a method known as thematic or category-centered analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) have described a specific form of thematic analysis, which can be deductive or inductive, or purely inductive. The present analysis proceeds by the nature of the data, thus, this research reports a form of inductive analysis. It focuses on the respondents' experiences and is based on principles related to inductive research. Furthermore, the analysis adopted a semantic approach, meaning themes were identified from the "explicit or surface meanings of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For the analysis, work began by reading all interviews to get an overall review, followed by referring to each interview's transcript and carefully studying each one. In the second reading, line-by-line coding was performed, where

each sentence in the interview received a code describing its essence. In this study, the initial codes were inductive, meaning they stemmed from the understanding of the researcher, the supervisor, and the respondents themselves. Therefore, it is not claimed that the codes strictly emerged from the data. After initial coding, codes were merged into larger units with similar semantic content. This merging of codes into larger units continued until only a few remained. However, the next step in the analysis was integrating codes into themes, as in this study, a theme was defined as the smallest unit meaningfully representing codes included within it. For example, a theme could represent an underlying concept, considering the included codes as manifestations of it, or it could give meaning to "similar" codes with divergent content. In the end, four themes were formed that describe how the process of marriage counseling unfolds. These 4 main categories of marriage counseling are assessment, education, advice, and conclusion. Following each main category, its organizing category and first-order categories are considered.

### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This research sought to answer the question: What is the process of marriage counseling from the perspective of pre-marriage counseling recipients in Isfahan city? This question was answered using Braun and Clarke's (2006) qualitative content analysis method, and the results showed that the pre-marriage counseling process is divided into 4 main categories: assessment, education, advice, and conclusion, each of which is further divided into several subcategories.

The synthesis of findings from previous studies alongside the results obtained from the current research presents a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted benefits of pre-marital counseling. The alignment of these findings underscores the critical role of pre-marital counseling in enhancing communication skills, knowledge about marital life, and positive attitudes towards marriage among couples (Ali, 2020; Farnam et al., 2011; Moodi et al., 2013). Specifically, the emphasis on educational interventions within the counseling sessions, as highlighted by Sheikhi et al. (2019) and Moharrami et al. (2017), resonates with our findings that addressing aspects such as sexual health, self-efficacy, and marriage expectations significantly contributes to building a strong foundation for the future of the couples (Moharrami et al., 2017; Sheikhi et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the importance of social support, as evidenced by the effectiveness of peer counseling

(Hunainah, 2019), aligns with the outcomes of our study, emphasizing the role of community and social networks in preparing couples for marriage. This communal approach is particularly relevant in diverse cultural contexts, where pre-marriage counseling not only addresses individual couple needs but also focuses on broader societal and health objectives, including promoting reproductive health and family well-being (Nugraheni et al., 2023).

The positive reception of counseling services among pre-marital couples, as noted in Iran (Ayatollahi et al., 2014), further validates our study's findings regarding the acceptance and perceived value of pre-marital counseling. This acceptance is crucial for the effectiveness of counseling sessions and for ensuring that couples are open and receptive to the guidance provided.

Moreover, the research underscores the potential of pre-marital counseling to modify or reduce idealistic expectations and beliefs about marriage (Rajabi & Abbasi, 2020), a theme that emerges strongly in our study as well. This adjustment of expectations is key to preventing dissatisfaction and ensuring a successful marital relationship.

Our study extends the existing literature by providing deeper insights into the effectiveness of pre-marital counseling in fostering marital harmony and preparing couples for the challenges and responsibilities of married life. It reaffirms the need for well-structured training programs (Horváth-Szabó et al., 2015) and highlights the preventative, educational, and therapeutic aspects of counseling (Moharrami et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the alignment of our findings with previous studies reinforces the significance of pre-marital counseling as a vital component of marriage preparation. It underscores the need for a holistic approach that incorporates educational interventions, social support, and cultural sensitivity to address the diverse needs of couples. This alignment not only validates the existing body of research but also adds valuable perspectives on the critical role of counseling in promoting successful and fulfilling marriages.

In explaining the results, it should be said that four main categories were extracted (assessment, education, advice, and conclusion). Each of these categories has several organizing categories (i.e., they are examined at several levels), which are then presented and explained.

The main category of assessment involves questions suitable for a counselor's initial acquaintance with couples. Clients are assessed according to the organizing category at 5 levels:

Assessment of demographic characteristics, which in this study was divided into two parts: a) Assessment of educational level, b) Assessment of the employment status of the couple. This indicates that, according to marriage counselors, the educational level and employment status of the couple are two important criteria for compatibility in choosing a spouse. On the other hand, these two questions may be among the closed-ended questions that counselors ask at the beginning of counseling; 2) Assessment of potential knowledge for married life, which includes two aspects: a) Assessment of the basic knowledge of married life, reflecting the couple's amount of information and awareness, expectations, and realistic and idealistic beliefs about the philosophy of life; b) Assessment of the level of acquaintance with each other, showing what aspects the couple has paid attention to in each other, their concerns, and how much information they have been able to obtain about each other. The examination of these two aspects by the counselor is a more specialized assessment, as it shows the couple's awareness, maturity, and perspective on marriage. It also indicates the knowledge and understanding individuals have gained about each other, showing their stage of intellectual maturity, whether they have focused on more fundamental issues or on less important ones. The results of this section can clarify the path of marriage counseling for the counselor and highlight areas overlooked by the couple.

Another organizing category revealed in the assessment category relates to the demographic characteristics of the relationship: a) Duration of acquaintance, b) Manner of acquaintance; examining the duration of acquaintance provides the counselor with insight into which stage of the relationship the couple is in. The longer the period of acquaintance, the deeper the stages of the relationship the couple has entered (such as the level of knowledge, interest, emotional relations, and the emergence of disputes). This information helps the counselor understand what information and assistance the couple needs. Assessing the manner of acquaintance provides good information about the couple's families, whether the couple acted independently in their choice or were supervised by their families. The more influence and control the family has in the marriage, the more diverse, conscious, and sometimes obsessive criteria are considered. And if they acted independently, the criteria based on excitement and enthusiasm are more prominent; 4) Personality assessment was one of the organizing categories in the assessment category, performed both subjectively and objectively by the counselor. In the subjective assessment of

personality, the counselor tries to gather information about the couple's personality traits based on questions related to individual differences and by paying attention to gestures, moods, and behaviors. In the objective assessment, the counselor asks the couple to complete objective and valid tests to obtain more standardized results. Additionally, the counselor asks the couple's families to provide information about their personalities, allowing the counselor to understand the more private and unseen aspects of the couple's personalities; 5) Assessment of family demographic characteristics was the fifth organizing category in the assessment category. Considering that the success of a marriage requires compatibility and equivalence between the families as well as the couple, it seems that family assessment by counselors occurs at three levels: economic, cultural, and the number of family members. Economic assessment of families can indicate the level of expectations and aspirations families have for their child's future life and spouse, as well as the couple's expectations based on the environment in which they were raised. It also shows the life experiences related to the financial and cultural level of the family and indicates the compatibility of the couple in their life experiences. It seems counselors believe that the more this compatibility exists, the easier the marriage process and the fewer disputes will occur. Assessment in terms of the number of family members provides the counselor insight into each of the couple's views on issues such as the desire to have children, the role of parenthood, the level of well-being and peace of mind in their original families, and also provides information about the couple's personality traits based on their position in the family, such as being an only child, having siblings, or coming from a large family.

Core category, Education; indicates that counselors provide training to clients at three levels based on the negative information obtained: a) Self-control training, which mostly relates to individuals who have reported anger and rage in themselves or their partner, and therefore need awareness and techniques to limit and control these impulses in the context of married life; b) Training on the effect of negative traits, which mostly relates to individuals who have reported doubt, skepticism, and even suspicion in themselves or their spouse, and the counselor educates them about the adverse effects of such behaviors; c) Training on adapting traits to married life, which is derived from the differences between the couple and the disputes that arise as a result of these differences, as well as changing the way of life from singleness to married life.

The next core category is Advice given by the counselor to the clients. It seems these recommendations are derived from the assessments made and the experiences of marriage counselors. The main category of advice includes 6 organizing categories: 1) Advice to achieve certainty for couples who are doubtful about marrying their partner. Therefore, the counselor advises them to have reached the necessary assurance before making the final choice and not to enter the relationship with doubt and hesitation; 2) Advice on reducing sensitivity, either because of sensitivities reported by the clients about themselves or their partner or the clinical experience of the counselor regarding the adverse effects of sensitivity in the couple's relationship, advising them to reduce their sensitivities; 3) Communication advice; considering the differences that might exist in introversion and extroversion between the couple or the type of interaction each spouse has with their family. The counselor advises considering each other's personality traits in establishing communication with others. This part could also be derived from the results of objective assessment; 4) Advice for greater understanding; it seems the counselor advises couples who have identified a problem in their partner or one of the parents has objected to the marriage, or the duration of acquaintance has been short, to gain a greater understanding of each other; 5) Advice on forgiveness and silence; which could be related to two issues. First, the counselor has realized that the clients have reported anger, rage, and resentment in themselves or their partner; therefore, the counselor advises the opposite couple to choose silence and forgiveness. Second, the clinical experience of the counselor has shown that silence and forgiveness are two important pillars of communication and should be considered at the beginning of the relationship; 6) Advice for wise marriage, advising clients not to marry on the recommendations of others or due to excitement and enthusiasm. In fact, the counselor aims to establish a balance between reason and family experience on one hand, and individual emotions on the other.

The core category, Conclusion, refers to the end of the marriage counseling process from the perspective of the clients to the marriage counselors; meaning that the counselor ultimately summarizes all the information obtained in the counseling sessions. This category includes 3 organizing categories: 1) Summary of objective assessment based on personality tests conducted during the sessions. It seems in this section, the counselor explains the personality traits of the couple and summarizes their level of understanding and differences with each other; 2)



Conclusion about the success of the marriage; ultimately, the counselor concludes the success of their relationship based on the information obtained from the counseling sessions and the couple; and 3) Acceptance of marriage responsibility, where the counselor summarizes the information the couple has obtained about each other with the information he has obtained and ultimately convinces the couple that based on this summary, the responsibility of choice rests on them, thereby absolving himself of the final responsibility of marriage and placing it on the clients.

Based on the results of this research, it can be said that: 1) Counselors have a framework for pre-marriage counseling that includes assessment, education, advice, and summary; 2) These results show that the framework for pre-marriage counseling among marriage counselors follows a relatively uniform model with some differences.

This research, like others, had limitations, including not addressing the different perspectives of couples on the marriage counseling process; the data collection source was individuals receiving marriage counseling, and the counselors themselves were not considered.

It is suggested that future research should study the couple's perspective on the marriage counseling process; it is suggested that the difference in perspectives of women and men on the marriage counseling process be considered; it is suggested that future research study the opinions of marriage counselors themselves about the marriage counseling process.

It is suggested that using the model extracted from this research, marriage counselors should work to complete this model and set comprehensive training courses for pre-marriage counselors based on a native pre-marriage counseling framework. Also, educational packages in the form of assignments for couples should be prepared and

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provided by counselors, and finally, using the model extracted from this research, educational packages for counseling students should be prepared.

## Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

## 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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## Ethics 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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