




Understanding and Managing Falling in Love Syndrome for Marriage Among Marriage-Seeking Youth: A Grounded Theory

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the components of falling in love syndrome for marriage among young individuals seeking to marry. This qualitative research was conducted using Charmaz's (2014) grounded theory approach. The research setting consisted of expert marriage counselors, from among whom nine were selected. The research instrument was a semi-structured interview focusing on this syndrome. Data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using Charmaz's (2014) method. The findings revealed that the resulting grounded theory included three main dimensions: (1) The nature of falling in love syndrome, which was categorized into emotional symptoms (with axial codes: hopefulness, anxiety, fear, ambivalence), behavioral symptoms (with axial codes: inability to continue relationships and inability to initiate marriage), and cognitive symptoms (with axial codes: beliefs in individual and familial incompatibility); (2) Etiology, including causes before the age of five (with axial codes: perception of parental conflict, insecure attachment style, and the schema of rigid standards), and causes during adolescence and early adulthood (with axial codes: premarital relationships with the opposite sex and social comparisons); (3) Treatment, comprising emotional regulation strategies (emotional modulation, acceptance, and relational resilience), cognitive interventions (with axial codes: schema therapy and allowing space for maladaptive cognitions), and behavioral strategies (with axial codes: vicarious learning, goal-setting, and planning). Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that falling in love syndrome is a condition that may delay or obstruct marriage, but there is hope for recovery through corrective interventions.

Keywords: falling in love syndrome, marriage, youth, expert counselors, grounded theory.

1. Introduction

Marriage is perhaps the most significant decision that Iranian youth face, as it not only initiates a new phase in life but also influences the present and future of the individual, their chosen spouse, children, and extended family. Given that interpersonal relationships play a major role in one's quality of life, a healthy relationship with a spouse is considered one of the core components of psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Hazan & Shaver, 2017; Songur, 2023). On the other hand, increased pre-marital interactions between young men and women have complicated the decision-making process. The growing prevalence of pre-marital relationships under various labels has diminished young people's interest and motivation toward marriage. Additionally, marriage customs and traditions have become increasingly elaborate and extravagant, making the initiation of family life more difficult for many young individuals. This trend has transformed the beginning of marriage—typically associated with joy—into an experience marked by regret, longing, and sadness due to social comparisons. Moreover, the rising divorce rates and family breakdowns indicate that some young individuals struggle to adapt to the demands of married life. This has led to growing fear and anxiety about marriage. Among the psychological challenges affecting youth today is a phenomenon known as falling in love syndrome (Ahangar et al., 2024; Majdic & Majdic, 2021).

Falling in love syndrome refers to a psychological condition in which a young person is unable to develop romantic or affectionate feelings toward any potential partner as a basis for starting and maintaining a relationship. Essentially, the individual believes that no boy or girl evokes a spark or even a basic feeling of love that would motivate them toward marriage. Encounters with potential partners do not awaken in them the desire to marry, even though they await a moment when such a feeling might arise—one that would generate motivation, enable emotional investment, and foster resilience against pre-marital challenges (Hazan & Shaver, 2017; Majdic & Majdic, 2021). The presence of positive emotions is generally considered necessary for undertaking such a significant life decision. Without these emotions, the psychological and physical effort involved becomes burdensome. Still, many youth wonder how long they must wait until they feel emotionally drawn to someone enough to marry them. Evidence shows that due to this very issue, they are unable to make a choice and may miss valuable opportunities for marriage. It appears that falling in

love acts as a precursor to romantic attachment and requires at least a minimal level of initial attraction. When this experience occurs, individuals often feel an energy boost, increased awareness, and activation of the brain's reward system—all of which heighten their desire to continue the relationship (Songur, 2023; Wonderly, 2017).

Various factors may influence the experience of falling in love, including individual traits such as personal preferences, past experiences, and emotional readiness (Mokhtari et al., 2021). However, neurochemical processes—specifically, the release of dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin—also play a key role (Majdic & Majdic, 2021), enhancing the individual's motivation to pursue the relationship. Research has also indicated that previous relationships with the opposite sex (Ghanbari Barzian et al., 2018), fear of intimacy (Hazan & Shaver, 2017), low self-worth (Mokhtari et al., 2021), emotional dependency, attachment issues (Wonderly, 2017), childhood trauma (Riggs & Kaminski, 2019), and perceived parental conflict (Jokar et al., 2020) can contribute to the development of falling in love syndrome. The cultural importance of marriage in Iran has led to a growing body of research on this subject. Rezazadeh et al. (2019) examined the effect of pre-marital training on marriage expectations (Rezazadeh et al., 2019). Ahangar et al. (2024) highlighted the role of personality in partner selection (Ahangar et al., 2024). Azimi Hashemi et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of values and attitudes in marriage (Azimi Hashemi et al., 2015). Rezaei et al. (2022) explored the role of individual needs in marital relationships (Rezaei et al., 2022), and Kavehei Sedeh et al. (2022) investigated the significance of family in the partner selection process (Kavehei Sedeh et al., 2022). Qualitative observations suggest that some young men and women are unable to marry due to emotional unpreparedness manifesting as falling in love syndrome. Since emotional readiness is considered essential before marriage, counselors interpret the absence of positive emotions as a sign that the marriage is likely to be unsatisfactory. As a result, they may discourage such unions, labeling them as marriages devoid of genuine desire (Kavehei Sedeh et al., 2022). These young individuals, however, do want to marry and do not have any logical or rational objection to their potential partners. Their barrier is purely emotional, and they actively seek help in overcoming it, often asking how they can resolve the issue.

To date, based on a review of available databases at the time of writing this article, this group of youth has received little attention, and no intervention plans have been introduced to address their problem. Therefore, it is crucial

to recognize and understand this syndrome thoroughly. In clinical literature, a syndrome refers to a set of symptoms whose causes are not fully known but together define an abnormal psychological state. While marriage counselors are aware of these symptoms, no scientific text has systematized this clinical experience, clearly identified its signs, or introduced any treatment model. Accordingly, this study aimed to use grounded theory to explore the lived experiences of marriage counselors in addressing this phenomenon. Overall, the purpose of this study was to answer the following research question: What is the structural nature of falling in love syndrome?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The aim of the present study was to explore falling in love syndrome through the perspectives of expert premarital counselors. This study focused on the experiences of these counselors in understanding the syndrome within the framework of social constructivism. The exploratory nature of the research emphasized the participants' (i.e., expert counselors') perceptions and the experiences they had in the counseling room when managing falling in love syndrome. It was assumed that the premarital counseling experiences of these expert counselors regarding this syndrome could contribute to the development of effective educational and therapeutic strategies. The study aimed to uncover the underlying mechanisms for managing this syndrome through a detailed analysis of these experiences.

To achieve this aim, the social constructivist grounded theory method developed by Charmaz (2014) was used. The core of this model involves embracing subjectivity and recognizing the active involvement of the researcher in constructing and interpreting data through a rigorous process of interaction with both participants and data. In other words, the researcher is not an objective and independent observer but a part of the reality being co-constructed during the research process. It is worth noting that the expert premarital counselors selected for this study were key participants who permitted their experiences related to this syndrome to be elicited through interviews.

The researcher employed a purposive homogeneous sampling strategy. Accordingly, based on inclusion criteria, the researcher sought counselors who were widely recognized for their competence in premarital counseling. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were as follows: a minimum of five years of experience in premarital

counseling, being recommended by at least two other marriage counselors, having worked with at least one client diagnosed with falling in love syndrome, willingness to be interviewed, and ability to respond thoroughly to the questions. The exclusion criteria included inability to recall details in response to the questions and having incomplete counseling sessions with clients experiencing the syndrome.

2.2. Measure

To collect data, a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions and follow-up prompts was used to encourage participants to share in-depth experiences. To formulate the interview questions, preliminary interviews were conducted with several young individuals diagnosed with falling in love syndrome—as confirmed by their premarital counselors. In consultation with academic experts, the final set of interview questions was developed based on these initial interviews. The interviews began with general, open-ended questions about the characteristics of individuals with this syndrome and proceeded to address the occurrence of the syndrome and participants' suggestions for addressing it. Exploratory questions such as "Could you elaborate on that?" or "Can you clarify what you mean?" were used to obtain richer information. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and the time and location were arranged in advance by the researcher and the participant. After obtaining informed consent and explaining the study's purpose, participants were assured of the confidentiality of their identities and responses. They were also informed that all audio recordings would be deleted after the completion of data analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in several stages:

Initial coding: Following Charmaz's guidelines, the interviews were read line by line, and codes were assigned to each line. At this stage, the goal was to create short, data-proximal, and abstract codes.

Axial coding: In this second phase, the initial codes from each interview were categorized, and those with higher analytical value were identified. Codes that recurred more frequently and were more closely related to the research questions were prioritized. The aim was to develop theoretical categories by combining and analyzing larger conceptual units. The inductive nature of constructivist grounded theory emerged here, and through constant comparative analysis across multiple interviews,

opportunities for data triangulation and validation were established. As multiple layers of meaning and practice were integrated, those codes that appeared to have a high conceptual value were elevated to the level of categories.

With the formation of these categories, the analysis moved toward conceptual abstraction. According to Charmaz (2014), this stage involves working with recurrent themes and patterns. By the end of this process, the categories had been fully extracted. After data analysis and the finalization of conceptual categories, the researcher conducted a second literature review to refine and further develop the emerging theory in light of existing theoretical frameworks.

To verify the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was performed. The final interpretations were reviewed and confirmed by several participants. Additionally, a psychologist with expertise in qualitative research, independent from the research team, oversaw the entire process—from data collection to interpretation—and confirmed the integrity of the research and analysis procedures. Another criterion for assessing the rigor of the study was transferability, which was evaluated by determining whether the extracted concepts could be externally judged and applied. This was achieved through the construction of final conceptual diagrams, which were reviewed and confirmed by three family therapy specialists from a university, as well as by the expert counselors and three young individuals diagnosed with the syndrome.

Finally, the theoretical model was transformed into an educational intervention, which was tested in a pilot study.

The results supported the model's effectiveness in improving the constructs targeted by this research; however, these findings are beyond the scope of this paper. Overall, three types of triangulation were implemented in the study, and the research's value was thereby substantiated.

3. Findings and Results

The results of the grounded theory analysis using Charmaz's (2014) approach revealed that the theory explains three core dimensions of this phenomenon.

The three dimensions of this grounded theory are:

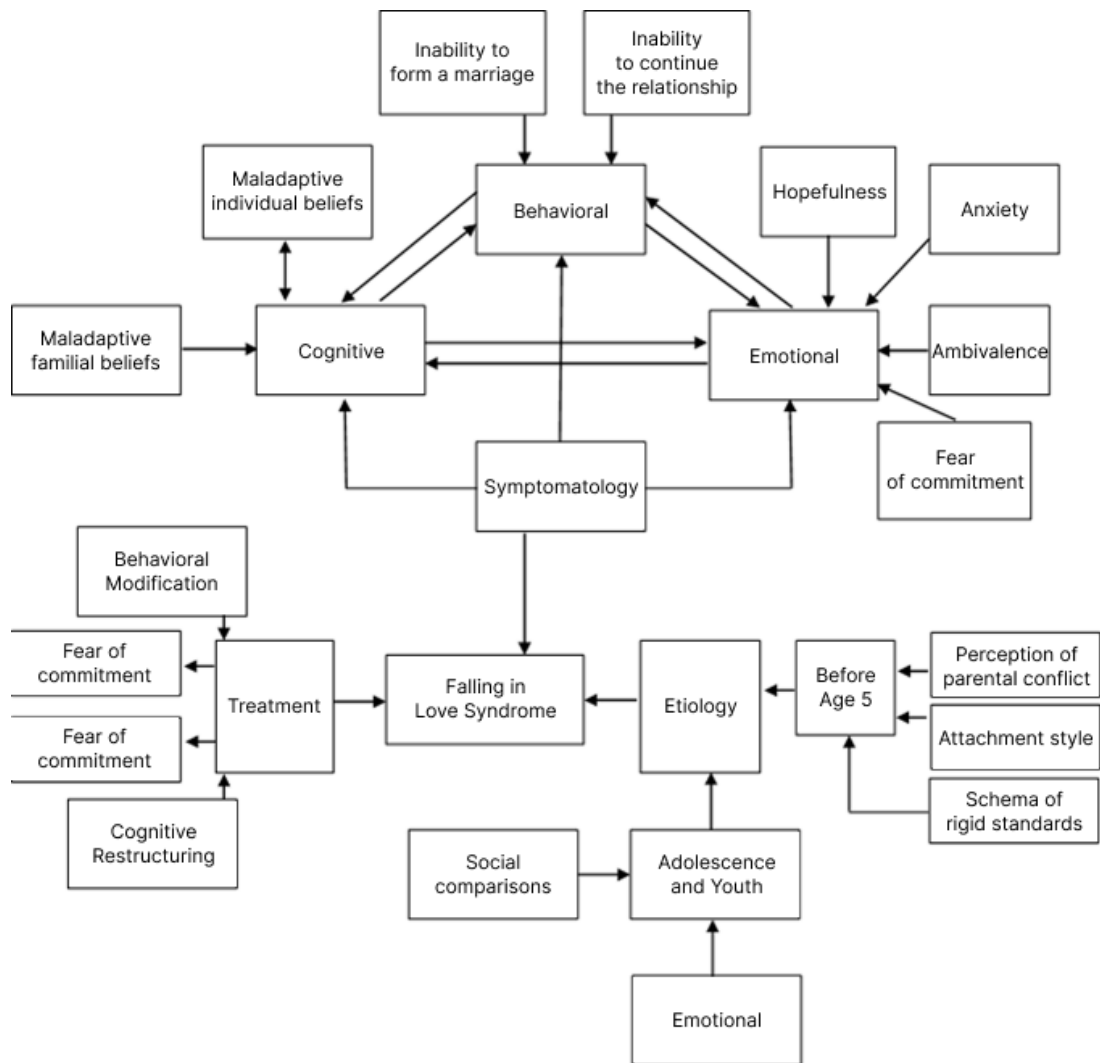
(1) The nature of falling in love syndrome, comprising emotional symptoms (with axial codes: hopefulness, anxiety, fear, ambivalence), behavioral symptoms (with axial codes: inability to continue a relationship and inability to initiate marriage), and cognitive symptoms (with axial codes: beliefs in individual and familial incompatibility);

(2) Etiology, consisting of causes before the age of five (with axial codes: perception of parental conflict, insecure attachment style, and the schema of rigid standards) and causes during adolescence and youth (with axial codes: premarital friendships with the opposite sex and social comparisons); and

(3) Treatment, with emotional regulation strategies (emotional modulation, acceptance, and relational resilience), cognitive strategies (with axial codes: schema therapy and allowing space for maladaptive cognitions), and behavioral strategies (with axial codes: vicarious learning, goal-setting, and planning).

Figure 1

Dimensions and Categories of the Grounded Theory on Managing Falling in Love Syndrome



4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore the components of managing falling in love syndrome before marriage among young people. To accomplish this, grounded theory methodology was employed. The theory addressed three essential questions: what the syndrome is, why it occurs, and how it can be treated.

To date, no study has been conducted under this specific title that allows for a comparison of its consistency or inconsistency with other research. However, various studies have addressed the phenomenon of falling in love. For instance, Hazen and Shaver (2017) investigated the role of attachment in the process of romantic feelings and attraction (Hazan & Shaver, 2017); Nevertheless, a review of relevant

databases at the time of writing confirmed that no prior research has addressed the topic of the present study.

In explaining the findings related to the nature of falling in love syndrome, which includes emotional symptoms (hopefulness, anxiety, fear, ambivalence), behavioral symptoms (inability to continue a relationship or initiate marriage), and cognitive symptoms (beliefs about individual or familial incompatibility), it can be concluded that this syndrome reflects a young person’s expectation of falling in love with a potential spouse in a way that activates emotional motivation—but this expectation remains unfulfilled. According to counselors, emotional factors are among the most critical, reflected in anxiety about finding the right partner, fear of starting and sustaining a marriage, and ambivalence in decision-making. Hopefulness, however, plays a major role, reinforcing the expectations and desires of the individual. While negative emotions are more

prevalent in these individuals, counselors noted that they remain hopeful they will eventually find a spouse who emotionally resonates with them.

From the viewpoint of expert counselors, affected individuals also exhibit behavioral symptoms, such as an inability to continue relationships that might otherwise lead to marriage. One counselor stated: “When a young person has falling in love syndrome, the criterion for starting or continuing a relationship is an immediate emotional attraction during the first meeting. This perspective prevents them from initiating or sustaining a relationship, ultimately hindering marriage.” Emotions and behaviors are shaped and reinforced by cognitions (Hoffman, 2025; Dobson & Dudgeon, 2021). According to counselors, such individuals often suffer from maladaptive beliefs, both individual and familial. For example, one participant said, “My mother always told me her future son- or daughter-in-law must come from our own street—she wouldn’t accept anyone from another street.” Another counselor noted, “Beliefs like ‘my spouse must match my mental image of physical attractiveness exactly’ lead individuals to keep waiting until they find the perfect partner.”

The second dimension of the theory relates to the etiology of falling in love syndrome, starting with causes originating before the age of five. Expert counselors believed that individuals who witnessed frequent parental conflict in early childhood tend to develop stricter standards for selecting a spouse. Insecure attachment styles are another key cause rooted in early life, leading to chronic relational anxiety and the formation of rigid schemas around marital expectations (Jiao & Segrin, 2022; Park & Harris, 2023).

Another etiological category relates to adolescence and youth, where easy access to premarital friendships with the opposite sex may reduce the motivational power of such relationships to inspire marital commitment. Social comparison was also cited as a key factor in this category. Media-driven social comparisons pose a direct or indirect risk (Ahangar et al., 2024), causing young people to develop unrealistic criteria and metrics for selecting a partner, thus complicating the marriage decision. One counselor noted: “Today’s youth are heavily influenced by media. Media subtly and pervasively shapes their choices, including in marriage, which is not exempt from this influence.”

The third dimension of the theory pertains to treatment. Counselors proposed integrative strategies for improving the condition. In the emotional domain, they emphasized emotion regulation, particularly emotional modulation, acceptance, and non-avoidance of both negative and overly

positive emotions (e.g., unrealistic hopefulness about finding the perfect partner) as means to reduce symptoms of the syndrome. One counselor stated: “Excessive surrender to emotions causes significant issues. A young person with unrealistic hope that they will definitely find the perfect partner—or someone who avoids anxiety and fear of marriage—places too much importance on emotional resonance. However, if they tolerate a bit of ambiguity and gradually continue a relationship with someone who meets at least some of their criteria, they’re more likely to eventually feel emotionally connected.”

The next category of treatment was cognitive restructuring (Galloway et al., 2022). According to theoretical and empirical perspectives, some of the symptoms and aversions toward marriage trace back to early childhood experiences. Thus, schema therapy (Wegerer, 2024) was considered promising. Cognitive therapists can also use schema therapy techniques to challenge maladaptive beliefs and regulate emotions (Leahy, 2019). Some counselors also endorsed third-wave approaches, such as acceptance and cognitive defusion, as beneficial in helping these individuals cope with rigid thoughts.

Finally, behavioral interventions were also emphasized as vital tools to help young people overcome the syndrome (Kang, 2021). Vicarious learning, for instance, enables individuals to observe successful marriages and develop self-efficacy. Counselors also recommended goal-setting and planning for marriage rather than relying on chance-based outcomes.

This study, while providing valuable insights into the conceptualization and management of falling in love syndrome among marriage-seeking youth, has several limitations. The findings are based on a qualitative approach and are therefore not generalizable to all populations. The sample was limited to expert premarital counselors in Iran, which may reflect culturally specific perspectives and exclude other relevant viewpoints, such as those of affected individuals or counselors from different sociocultural backgrounds. Additionally, the study relied on retrospective self-reports, which are subject to memory biases and personal interpretations.

Future research should consider expanding the sample to include individuals directly experiencing falling in love syndrome, as well as counselors from diverse cultural and geographical contexts. Comparative studies using mixed-method or quantitative designs could further validate the categories identified in this study and examine their prevalence and predictive power. Longitudinal research

would also be beneficial in understanding how the syndrome evolves over time and whether specific interventions lead to sustainable outcomes in emotional readiness for marriage.

The findings have important implications for counseling practices and the design of premarital education programs. Counselors can benefit from training on the recognition and management of falling in love syndrome, with specific attention to emotional regulation, cognitive restructuring, and behavioral techniques. Educational institutions and family therapists may also incorporate components of the identified treatment model into preventive interventions to foster realistic expectations and emotional preparedness in young adults contemplating marriage.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article. This article is derived from first authors' doctoral dissertation.

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.

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