

## The effectiveness of Martin Seligman's flourishing theory training on the quality components of couples' relationships in couples with conflict in counseling centers in Ahvaz, Iran

### Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the effectiveness of Martin Seligman's flourishing theory training on the quality components of couples' relationships in couples with conflict in counseling centers in Ahvaz. The working method of this research was semi-experimental with a pre-test, and post-test design with control and experimental groups. The sampling group of this research included all couples referred to Ahvaz counseling centers in 2018. The number of subjects included 30 couples of those who had moderate to high conflict rates after filling out the Kansas Marital Conflict Questionnaire by Eggman et al. and were selected as available 15 couples were considered as the experimental group and 15 couples (30 women and 30 men) as the control group. Before conducting the independent variable, both groups underwent a pre-test then the experimental group underwent Martin Seligman's flourishing theory training interventions during 8 sessions (60 minutes every session) for 1 month while the control group did not receive this educational intervention. The tools used in this research included the couple relationship quality questionnaire (based on the theoretical framework of Mobler- Nanali, and Ekman) and the Kansas Eggman et al. Marital Conflict Questionnaire (KMCS). SPSS software was also used for the statistical analysis of data. The findings demonstrated that the average scores of the quality components of couples' relationships (attention to self, attention to a spouse, planning to solve problems, communication styles) were increased in the experimental group compared to the control group ( $P < 0.001$ ).

**Keywords:** marital conflict of couples, couple relationship quality, Martin Seligman's flourishing theory, couples counseling

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### Introduction

Marriage is one of the most important human relationships and the foundation of every family, which has been studied as a completely general phenomenon in the social life of all societies. Marriage means entering a new phase of life, which is a very important part of a human's personal and social life. Also, marriage is the cause of the formation of the family and the survival of the generation. How the relationship between couples begins and develops can affect their relationships and their children positively or negatively. Therefore, it seems necessary for everyone to gain more knowledge to have a successful marriage because a successful life requires knowledge, skills, and abilities in addition to facilities.

Conflict can happen in general in all stages of life and at the individual and collective levels. Family relationships are the most sensitive situation for creating interpersonal conflicts. In interpersonal communication, conflict occurs when a person sees a difference and inconsistency between his goals and needs and the goals and needs of the other party. The existence of differences in families is very common, but sometimes these differences lead to severe and unpleasant conflicts. The important thing is that instead of running away from these conditions or suppressing problems, you should try to find a solution; In this regard, conflicts and their causes must first be recognized correctly and then resolved. The key point in

conflict management is choosing the right solution and the right style (Rezghi Rostami and Aghayar, 2010).

Marital conflicts have negative effects on the quality of marital relationships and generally on family relationships. Differences in the family often lead to stress and anxiety and even many mental and emotional problems, it can also predict the onset of depression and many physical diseases. Albeit the lack of agreement between couples is not only unusual, participation in its structured solution also strengthens relationships. The quality of a couple's relationship improves when both parties seek to resolve differences and strengthen their relationship. In flourishing theory, Martin Seligman stated that it is not possible to obtain and sustainably increase pleasures and overall life satisfaction without expanding personal capabilities and virtues.

The important primary theory concepts in authentic happiness from Seligman's point of view can be summarized in 3 principles: i) positive emotions (enjoyable life), ii) fascination (active life), iii) meaning (purposeful and meaningful life). A pleasurable life includes having positive emotions about the past and present, as well as a sense of satisfaction, contentment, and a sense of peace. Optimism, hope, trust, faith, and positive emotions are future-oriented (quoted by Rashid, 2008). In general, it can be said that a satisfying life includes: enjoyment, fascination, and meaning through doing separate activities or doing a single activity. On the contrary, a life devoid of

meaning is a life that lacks these three dimensions, especially the dimensions of attraction and meaning, and this often causes numerous psychological problems (Seligman, 2011).

It can be concluded that the secret of people's lasting inner satisfaction is a composite effect; it means having a purpose in life and moving slowly but continuously towards it with proper planning and of course with stability and stability and never stopping trying and never getting disappointed.

Considering that harmony in life and the satisfaction obtained from it do not occur without the efforts of the couple, especially in the early years of marriage when marital harmony is very unstable and relationships are subject to the most instability. Therefore investigation seems necessary in this regard. So far, various methods have been used to increase the components of married life. Enrichment of marital relations takes place in different styles and methods, and each of these methods has a different level of influence. Considering the importance of preserving the family and its impact on society, this research aims to investigate the effectiveness of Martin Seligman's flourishing theory training on the quality of couples' relationships in couples with conflicts.

#### **Methods**

This research is applied in terms of the purpose of the study; also, in terms of the method of collecting data and information and the method of analysis, it is considered a semi-experimental research (pre-test, post-test design with a control group). The statistical population of the present study includes all conflicted couples who were referred to counseling centers in Ahvaz in 2018. According to the type of research, 30 couples (30 men and 30 women) among those who referred to counseling centers in Ahvaz with available sampling method, were selected equally and randomly divided into two experimental and control groups. The experimental group underwent training interventions based on Martin Seligman's flourishing theory.

#### **Materials**

Couple relationship quality questionnaire (based on Mobler-Natali and Ekman's theoretical model)

This questionnaire was created by Khushkam (2006) and includes 33 items and 4 factors of self-attention (items 1-5), attention to spouse (items 6-12), planning to solve problems (items 13-18), and communication styles. The answers to this questionnaire were based on a 6-point Likert scale (0 = not at all, 1 = very little, 2 = little, 3 = to some extent, 4 = much, and 5 = very much) and 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28 and 29 items were scored in a reverse way. The range of scores in the questionnaire was between 0 and 165, where a higher score indicates higher quality. The cutting point in this questionnaire was lower than 82, which was obtained from the total number of questions in the questionnaire and indicates the

low quality of the couple's relationship. Khushkam (2006) evaluated the validity of the questionnaire by receiving the opinions of university professors and the reliability coefficient of this questionnaire was reported as 0.9 using Cronbach's alpha method. Dai Jafari et al. (2017) reported the reliability coefficient of this questionnaire as 0.87 using Cronbach's alpha method.

Kansas Marital Conflict Questionnaire of Eggman et al. (KMCS)

This scale was introduced by Eggeman, Moxley, and Schumm (1985, cited by Zal, Arab, and Thanagoui Moher, 2020) (KMCS; Kansas Marital Conflict Scale) and contains 27 questions. The answers to this scale are based on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, and 4 = almost always) and questions 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, 21, 22 and 23 are scored in reverse. The range of scores on this scale is between 27 and 108, and a lower score on this scale indicates more marital conflict. The cutting point in this research was lower than 67 (Ansari et al. 2021), which was obtained from the total scores of the questionnaire questions and indicates the presence of high marital conflicts in people.

The flourishing training sessions included 8 group training sessions, each session lasting 60 minutes. In each session, happiness strategies and techniques were presented, and the logic of happiness exercises and their positive effects on life were discussed. The participants should implement at least one of the techniques presented under each flourishing strategy in each session, and in the next session, they should also report to the group about the method of conducting it, the emotional and cognitive impact of implementing these techniques, and they received emotional support from the group.

Data analysis was conducted using version 26 of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (SPSS 26).

#### **Results**

The results showed that 5 (33%) of the female subjects in the experimental group were between 20 and 30, 6 (39%) of the male subjects in the experimental group were between 20 and 30 and 9 of them (61%) were between 31 and 40. Among the female subjects in the control group, 6 (40%) were between 41 and 50. Among the male subjects in the control group, 7 (49%) were between 41 and 50. Among the female subjects in the experimental group, 7 (49%) had an associate's degree. Among the male subjects in the experimental group, 6 (40%) had a bachelor's degree. Among the female subjects in the control group, 9 (61%) had an associate's degree. Among the male subjects in the control group, 5 people (33%) had a diploma or lower education. In the experimental group, according to the marriage history, 9 couples (61%) were between 6 and 10 years old. In the control group, 5 couples (33%) had a marriage history of fewer than 5 years. (Table 1)

Table 1: The mean and standard deviation of the components of conflict resolution styles in the experimental and control groups separately in the pre-test and post-test stages

Variables		Test group (n=30)				Control group (n=30)			
		Women (n=15)		Men (n=15)		Women (n=15)		Men (n=15)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
The quality of couples' relationships	Pre-test	49.07	9.475	53.71	8.375	48.07	9.407	52.42	7.717
	Post-test	78.13	6.243	86.03	4.961	49	10.481	51.91	8.165

For women, the average (standard deviation) score of the quality of couples' relationships in the experimental and control groups in the pre-test was 49.07 (9.475) and 48.07 (9.407) respectively, and in the post-test was 78.13 (6.243) and 49 (10.481) respectively. For men, the mean (standard

deviation) score of the quality of couples' relationships in the experimental and control groups was 53.71 (8.375) and 52.42 (7.717) respectively in the pre-test and the post-test was 86.03 (4.961) and 51.91 (8.165).

Table 2. The results of the homogeneity of variances (Levin) test between the dependent variables in the experimental and control groups of women and men in the pre-test stage 1

Effectiveness	Dependent variable	Degree of freedom 1	Degree of freedom 2	F	Significance level
Women's group	The quality of couples' relationships	1	28	0.028	0.874
Men's Group	The quality of couples' relationships	1	28	0.152	0.699

As can be seen in the table (2), the quality of relationships in the experimental and control groups of women ( $F = 0.025$ ,  $p = 0.874$ ) and the quality of relationships in the experimental and

control groups of men ( $F = 0.152$ ,  $p = 0.699$ ) is not statistically significant.

Table 3: The results of the analysis of covariance in the MANCOVA text on the average scores of the post-test of the quality of relationships in the sample of women in the experimental and control groups

Variable statistical indicators	sum of squares	Degree of freedom	mean squares	F	Significance level	Effect size	Statistical power
The quality of couples' relationships	2293.728	1	2293.728	185.856	0.001	0.823	1

In the sample of women, the value of F for the quality of relationships was 185.856, which was significant at the level of  $p < 0.05$ . Therefore, it can be said that the teaching of Martin

Seligman's flourishing theory is effective on the components of the quality of women's relationships in couples with conflicts (Table 3).

Table 4: The results of the analysis of covariance in the MANCOVA text on the average scores of the post-test of the quality of relationships in the sample of men in the experimental and control groups

Variable statistical indicators	sum of squares	Degree of freedom	mean squares	F	Significance level	Effect size	Statistical power
The quality of couples' relationships	6012.447	1	6012.447	281.83	0.01	0.913	1

In the sample of men, the value of F for the quality of relationships was 85.856, which was significant at the level of  $p < 0.05$ . Therefore, it can be said that the teaching of Martin Seligman's flourishing theory is effective in the quality components of men's relationships in couples with conflict (Table 4).

### **Discussion**

Regarding the effect of Martin Seligman's flourishing theory training on the quality components of couples' relationships in couples with conflict, the F value for the quality of relationships was 85.856, which was significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. Therefore, it can be said that the teaching of Martin Seligman's flourishing theory is effective in the quality components of couples' relationships (self-attention, attention to the spouse, planning to solve problems, communication styles) in couples with conflict.

Also, the results of this research are consistent with the research conducted by Mahmoudpour et al., (2020) regarding the prediction of women's marital intimacy based on happiness and self-flourish, conflict resolution patterns, perceived social support and social well-being, the intimacy of a relationship in which has care, mutual trust, and acceptance. The findings of the current research indicate the importance of the variables of conflict resolution patterns, mindfulness, perceived social support, and social well-being in explaining women's marital intimacy. Therefore, it is recommended to teach the correct methods of conflict resolution and happiness exercises, sufficient support from the family and important individuals in life, and strengthening the motivation for the development of the social dimensions of women's personalities. Zoheiri et al. (2021) reported that couple therapy based on improving the quality of life and self-flourish on conflict resolution styles, marital satisfaction, and quality of couples life with a history of marital infidelity- a romantic relationship or emotional conflict, which led to the lack of commitment in the marital relationship and the formation of emotional and physical intimacy with someone outside of their relationship- can be effective. Since this approach has been effective based on therapeutic goals, treatment based on improving life was used to increase the quality of life and resolve conflicts in couples with a history of betrayal in counseling centers. Salayani et al. (2020) discussed the mediating role of lovemaking style in the relationship between personality traits and marital satisfaction and couple therapy in married people in Mashhad. Also, poetic, logical, and acting lovemaking styles had a mediating role in the path of neuroticism and extroversion to marital satisfaction ( $P < 0.05$ ) which demonstrated marital life satisfaction is influenced by lovemaking styles and personal characteristics. Also, this research was aligned with the research conducted abroad; Torres (2018) investigated the effectiveness of positive psychology on the improvement of couples' relationships. This

research was an applied and semi-experimental research (with a pre-test group and a post-test with a control group). The statistical population was all university students, from whom 30 individuals were selected according to the type of research and randomly divided into two experimental and control groups. The experimental group was trained in positive psychology and Seligman. The results showed that positive psychology with Seligman's approach can have a significant positive effect on improving marital relations and the quality of couples' communication. Algae and Zhaoyang (2016) investigated the effect of positive psychology influenced by Seligman's theory on solving marital conflicts and the results showed that positive psychology influenced by Seligman's theory has a significant positive effect on solving marital conflicts. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) also investigated the role of positive psychology in interpersonal relationships. These researches were in line with the present research in terms of the investigated variables, the assumptions and objectives, and the presented results.

Finally, it can be said that the most important result of this research is to attention to the positive points and even small positive daily events, and writing them down can in turn gradually change our view and become us from pessimism to optimism. A positive view of the future motivates us to work harder, and we learn how to make our outlook on life more positive, reduce rumination and negative associations, and increase our self-confidence so that we can better manage our thoughts and behavior. Everything starts from our mind. The smallest mental disturbance can confuse our thoughts, behavior, speech, and even life. We must learn how to properly manage our minds. Man's destiny is in his own hands and the source of all failures, victories, and reactions of others towards us is only ourselves. Our mental image determines how much we love ourselves, the world around us, our loved ones, and even other people. Flourishing means reaching the results that are important in the life of every person. Achieving these results brings lasting inner satisfaction. Every person is interested in being able to use his maximum capabilities and talents, but this depends on identifying his capabilities and how to use them correctly.

We must learn to be more flexible and not give up easily in front of life's challenges. Let's learn to let go of the things we can't change and instead spend our energy focusing on the things we can change. Enjoying the present is the most important lesson, a habit that requires repetition and practice. Contrary to the ideas of most people, happiness is not in being rich, but the real rich is the one who has people by his side who love him deeply, happiness means we can be happy with the smallest and cheapest things and use every moment of ours properly and finally we should learn that happiness is only in our way of looking. Happiness is seeing what we have. The

purpose of providing this training is to increase happiness and inner satisfaction and to achieve personal flourishing. The secret of lasting satisfaction is the composite effect: effort along with awareness and planning and persistence until reaching the goal.

### Conclusion

In general, based on the current findings, it can be said that Martin Seligman's flourishing theory training in the couple relationship quality variable increases the scores of the couple relationship quality components (self-attention, attention to the spouse, planning to solve problems, communication styles) in couples with conflicts. Having quality relationships, which requires self-attention first and then paying attention to your spouse, and then having effective communication styles to create better marital relationships, and having correct and principled and logical planning to solve problems and conflicts between husband and wife are other main and important factors in the quality of marital relations.

Since the statistical sample of this research was limited to Ahvaz city, therefore, the research results cannot be generalized to other geographical regions. According to the results, it is suggested that how to behave with spouses based on affectionate marital bonds should be taught to spouses based on Seligman's theory so that they can create the necessary attachment.

Conflict of interest

None

Financial support

None

Ethics statement

None

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