



Research Paper

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The Effect of Schema-based Couple Therapy on Marital Silence and Emotional Blackmail in Women with Marital Conflicts

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Article Info.	Abstract
Received: 24.01.2023	Abstract Family plays an important role in the mental health of its members. If it suffers from conflicts, it can lose its importance as an emotional and psychological base. Marital conflicts have been identified as one of the most common problems in families. The purpose of this research study was to examine the effect of schema-based couple therapy on marital silence and emotional blackmail in women with marital conflicts. The research method was semi-experimental with a pretest-posttest design with a control group. The statistical population included all women who referred to Golestan Zendegi counseling center, District 2, Tehran. Among them, 30 women were selected through the purposive sampling method; they were randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups (15 women in each group). Marital Silence (Rasouli & Rezaee, 2019), Emotional Blackmail (FOG; Karnani, 2018), and Marital Conflicts (MCQ; Sanai Zakir & Barati, 2008) questionnaires were used to collect data. Data was analyzed using SPSS software (version 24) and MANCOVA. The experimental group received schema-based couple therapy intervention during 10 sessions. However, the control group did not receive any intervention. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the control and experimental groups in terms of marital silence and emotional blackmail. In other words, the treatment model was effective in reducing the variables. Accordingly, the schema-based couple therapy approach could be used to reduce the problems and conflicts of couples, especially marital silence and emotional blackmail.
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<i>schema-based couple therapy,</i>	
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Introduction

Marital conflict might be the result of couples' disagreements in personal context, motivations, values or behavioral priorities (Dong et al., 2022). Studies have shown that marital conflict leads to the emergence of destructive emotional patterns in couples' lives (Cheung et al., 2022). Two of these patterns are marital silence and emotional blackmail (Rasouli & Rezaee, 2019). Marital silence leads to negative consequences such as loneliness, sexual dissatisfaction, marital conflict and emotional divorce (Ahmadzadeh Aghdam et al, 2019). According to Forward (1997), emotional blackmail is a form of intense manipulation of others; as it increases in marital life, the level of their support for each other decreases, the pressure on one of the victimized couples increases, and family disputes lead to marital dissatisfaction. Finally, it leads to divorce (Karnani, 2018). Considering the problematic nature of marital silence and emotional blackmail among couples, using psychological interventions is needed.

One of the most widely used approaches is schema-based couple therapy. This therapy, which takes a cognitive approach to marital problems, points out that distorted perceptions and irrational thoughts are the main causes of problems of couples. One of the most important reasons for choosing this treatment is to focus on solving the past and the present problems of couples and restoring the emotional patterns between them. According to this approach, couples' incompatible schemas play a role in the emergence of problems. Moreover, the effect of schema-based therapy on marital problems, the inconsistency of intimate relationships (Leahy, 2019), increased quality of life and marital satisfaction of couples is supported in the literature (Ahmadi et al, 2020).

Considering the negative effects of marital conflicts and its social and economic costs, identifying related factors and timely intervention can be effective in preventing negative consequences. Many research studies have been conducted on reducing marital conflicts of couples. However, no research study has been conducted on the use of therapeutic interventions to reduce marital silence and emotional blackmail. Therefore, the present study was conducted with the aim of investigating the effect of schema-based couple therapy on marital silence and emotional blackmail in women with marital conflicts.

Methodology

The current study was semi-experimental with pretest and posttest design with a control group. The statistical population included all women with marital conflicts in the second district of Tehran, 30 of whom were purposively selected and were randomly assigned to the experimental (15 individuals) and control (15 individuals) groups. Inclusion criteria were being consent to participate in the study, not using medication while participating in the meetings, having at least two years of marital life, being in the age range of 18 to 40 years, having no history of divorce, and getting a score of one standard deviation above the mean in Marital Conflict questionnaire. In addition, the exclusion criteria included the presence of mental disorders or the simultaneous use of medication to treat other disorders, absence of more than two treatment sessions, and failure to do tasks. After checking all the criteria and assigning individuals to the groups, training sessions were conducted in the experimental group based on the research therapy sessions of Ahmadi et al. (2020). Furthermore, the control group did not receive any intervention. After the treatment sessions of the experimental group, in order to comply with the ethical issues, these sessions were also conducted intensively for the control group. To collect data, Marital Silence questionnaire (Rasouli & Rezaee, 2019), Emotional Blackmail questionnaire (Karnani, 2018), and Marital Conflicts questionnaire (Sanai Zakir & Barati, 2008) were used. Data analysis was conducted through Multivariate Analysis of Variance using SPSS software (version 24).

Results

The mean and standard deviation of the experimental and control groups in terms of marital silence and emotional blackmail in the pretest and posttest phases are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of marital silence and emotional blackmail in two groups

Variables		Pretest		Posttest	
		Mean	Std. deviation	Mean	Std. deviation
Marital silence	Control group	30.94	2.85	31.65	3.05
	Experimental group	31.67	3.66	26.94	3.07
	Total	31.30	5.48	29.87	3.02
Emotional blackmail	Control group	31.06	1.95	31.22	1.95
	Experimental group	31.78	2.43	27.50	1.45
	Total	30.42	3.17	29.36	1.55

According to Table 1, the mean of marital silence in the experimental group was 31.67 in the pretest phase, which decreased to 26.94 in the posttest phase. In addition, the mean of emotional blackmail in the experimental group was 31.78 in the pretest phase, which decreased to 27.50 in the posttest phase.

After examining the descriptive statistics, before performing multivariate covariance analysis, the assumptions of covariance analysis were checked; the results indicated that the six assumptions were not violated. In fact, the normality of data distribution was confirmed by Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. In order to evaluate the equality of variances, Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances was used, and the level of error less than 0.05 was not significant. Therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was established for both variables. The linearity of the relationships between the variables was also measured and the scatter diagram was oval. Multi-collinearity between variables was also estimated. The homogeneity of regression slopes was also established between the auxiliary variable of the mean pretest score and posttest scores of the two variables. Finally, the homogeneity of variances-covariance matrix was established by M-box test; the non-significance of this test indicated the homogeneity of the variance-covariance matrices.

Considering the fact that the assumptions were met, covariance analysis was performed; the results are reported in Table 2. As it can be seen in the table, there was a significant difference between the schema-based couple therapy group and the control group in terms of marital silence ($p < 0.001$, $F = 33.712$). In addition, Eta squared shows that the effect of schema-based couple therapy on marital silence was 0.498. Therefore, schema-based couple therapy had an effect on marital silence and led to its reduction. Moreover, considering the variable of emotional blackmail, there was a significant difference between the schema-based couple therapy group and the control group ($p < 0.001$, $F = 20.653$). Eta square showed that the effect of schema-based couple therapy on emotional blackmail was 0.378. Therefore, schema-based couple therapy had an effect on emotional blackmail and led to its reduction.

Table 2. The results of ANCOVA considering the posttest scores of marital silence and emotional blackmail

Variables	Sources	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	η^2
Marital silence	Group	936.333	1	936.333	33.712	.001	.498
	Interaction	450.722	2	225.361	159.446	.001	.824
	Error	96.111	68	1.413			
Emotional blackmail	Group	234.083	1	234.083	20.653	.001	.378
	Interaction	130.722	2	65.361	84.154	.001	.712
	Error	82.815	68	.777			

Conclusion

The results showed that schema-based couple therapy significantly reduced marital silence and emotional blackmail of women with marital conflicts. In line with these findings, the research results of Chan et al (2020), Ahmadzadeh Aghdam et al. (2019) and Simpson et al. (2019) indicated that couples who experienced marital silence often had incompatible schemas considering rejection, specifically emotional deprivations in which the individuals' needs for emotional support were not sufficiently satisfied by others. In fact, if individuals receive less affection from their parents during childhood, in adulthood, when conflict with their spouse occurs, the schema of deprivation becomes active, couples become cold towards each other, and they do not express positive emotions such as affection. As a result, they use avoidance coping styles such as silence to reduce their anxiety, frustration and distress.

Furthermore, in line with the results of the studies of Bidari et al (2021) and Tadros et al. (2023) on the effect of schema-based couple therapy on emotional blackmail, couples tried to solve their problems through identifying and considering the roots of their behaviors in problematic situations. Using this therapeutic approach led to a better understanding of negative emotions. Therefore, during therapy sessions, couples' negative emotions, thoughts and behaviors were investigated.

From among the limitations of the present study were the use of self-report questionnaires, the lack of interviews, the absence of men, and the lack of follow-up. Comparing other couple therapy programs with schema-based couple therapy and conducting research with simultaneous presence of men and women are among the recommendations for further research studies. The use of this approach is suggested as an effective method in family counseling centers and educational workshops for couples.

Conflict of interest

This study is taken from a master's thesis on General Psychology. According to the corresponding author, there was no financial support for the research and no conflict of interest.

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