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Effectiveness of Premarital Education Program Based on Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge Program in Reducing Fear of Marriage and Increasing the Marriage Motivation of Single Students

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Abstract

Introduction: The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of premarital education based on interpersonal choice and knowledge program in reducing fear of marriage and increase motivation of marriage.

Methods: This research was designed as an experimental study with pretest-posttest and follow-up with a control group. Thirty-nine volunteer single students were selected from universities of Ahvaz city if they obtained a standard deviation higher than the mean score of fear subscale and were assigned randomly to experimental group (n=20) and control group (n=19). The experiment group was given a premarital interpersonal choice and knowledge program of nine 90-minute sessions twice a week.

Results: The results of repeated measures analysis of variance showed that the premarital interpersonal choice and knowledge program reduced fear of marriage and increased motivation for marriage in the experimental group as compared with the control group at posttest and follow-up.

Conclusion: Our results showed that the premarital interpersonal choice and knowledge program is a suitable method for reducing fear of marriage and increasing motivation for marriage in single students.

Introduction

Throughout human history, marriage has always been among the most complex human relations and the basis for the family. It is a public phenomenon, analyzed in the social life of all societies. Despite numerous changes, it has survived along with other institutions and remains one of the most important decisions in life (1). Marriage, as a very important part of individual and social life, means entering a new phase of life. Moreover, marriage establishes a family and secures the human survival. If done in favorable conditions and with sufficient knowledge, marriage has significant effects on individual and social health, including the reduction of diseases and violence and, consequently, enhancement of mental and physical health (2)

The trend of marriage is a concern in Iran. Statistics suggest a reduction in marriage rate and increase in the age at marriage. According to the Statistical Center of Iran, the rate of marriage has decreased from 11.3 per 1000 in 2006 to 9.6 per 1000 in 2017 in Iran. Also, the increase in the age at marriage is unprecedented. Over the past 50 years, the mean age at first marriage has increased by 1.7 years for men and by 5 years for women (3). These statistics show that we face various crises regarding marriage despite our long spiritual history of marriage and starting a family. To the youth,

marriage is a ghost which is not a priority anymore because of the false idea of losing personal freedom, economic problems, and cultural and psychological reasons such as fear of marriage, lack of trust in one's spouse, escaping responsibilities, superficial understanding of marriage, and seeking luxury. Marriage has become a subculture, losing its priority among the youth because it has lost its significance and the age at marriage has increased. It is currently the seventh priority, preceded by finding a job and education. This indicates that the youth lack the motivation to marry and delay it because of problems and crises (4).

At the age of marriage, the youth have a fear of marriage. They are reluctant to marry and start a family because of the limitations on the activities of their single life, commitment to their spouse, parenting, and economic issues. This has caused numerous cultural and social problems for the society, leading to the phenomenon of the "single life" among different groups of women and men who prefer to have an independent single life to a formal and legal marriage. In the past, "bachelor pads" belonged to men alone. Today, however, women have turned to this lifestyle, and experience the single life in their apartment alone or cohabiting with friends (3, 4).

Most studies in the domain of family therapy focus on divorce and its prevention as the rate of divorce is increasing (3). There are, however, many who do not intend to marry in the first place and are skeptical of marriage. The reluctance and skepticism of marriage result from a fear of failure in marriage, limitations on the activities of the single life, and exorbitant costs of living, marriage, and housing, and result in delayed marriages (4). Researchers have observed that depression, unhappiness, obsession in choosing a spouse, uncertainty, hopelessness, and a lack of purpose are related to the lack of motivation and skepticism toward marriage (5).

Motivation is a major topic in the analysis of social cognition and process of intimate relationships. Various goals and motivations among different societies, or in one society but at different times, have affected marriage. Proper motivations for marriage requires the growth of cognitive dimensions, that is, understanding why to marry, having rational beliefs and attitudes, setting priorities, and having realistic expectations of marriage and selecting a spouse (6). Differences in motivations and reasons affect the selection of a good spouse, successful marriage, and optimal continuation of married life. The first step toward the realization of expectations is the agreement between husband and wife on reasons and expectations. Otherwise, it may lead to future disagreements, conflicts, and dissatisfaction (7).

A review of the literature suggests that the fear of marriage and motivation for marriage are significant research topics. These variables seem to predict the tendency toward marriage and a successful married life (8). A high level of fear of marriage and skepticism toward it is related to a low level of marital satisfaction. The fear of and skepticism toward marriage may increase the age at marriage and decrease the motivation for marriage (9, 10).

The appropriate time for changing the attitude toward marriage is before marriage since individuals rarely succeed in rationally evaluating their attitudes and expectations after marriage (11). Parents and educators must help adolescents and young adults to develop good attitudes toward marriage. Premarital education helps the youth develop a positive attitude toward marriage (12). Therefore, the evaluation of the fears and concerns of single people before marriage can help as it is a good source of data for predicting the attitudes and formation of intimate relationships (10). The literature on premarital counseling shows the significant effect of premarital programs (13). Further effort is required toward providing premarital education and teaching communication skills to the youth because of the high level of marital maladjustment and evidence suggesting a relationship between marital dissatisfaction and a wide range of social issues (14).

Few premarital programs are currently available. One such program is the Premarital Interpersonal Choice and Knowledge (PICK) program. Researchers on family and marriage have realized the significance of teaching interpersonal choice and knowledge for the youth and employed the noted program in order to create beliefs regarding intimate relationships and marriage (14, 17).

PICK was developed as a model for examining close relationships based on the relationship attachment model. This theoretical model introduces relationship bonds. It comprises the components of knowledge, trust, reliance, commitment, and touch, providing a combination of these five relationship attachments, an image of the general feeling in a relationship, and meaningful information regarding love, attachment, and closeness in a relationship (18).

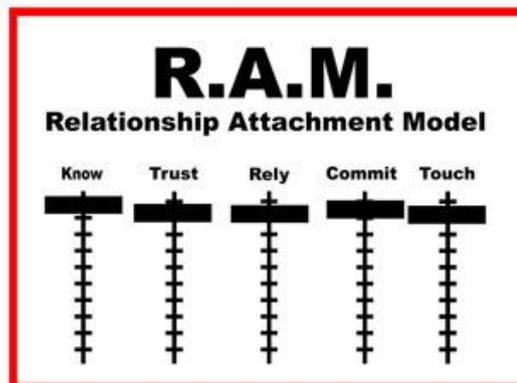


Figure 1. Visual model of relationship attachment

PICK organizes these five relationship components in two portions: the “head” and the “heart” knowledge. The “head” knowledge points to the knowledge and understanding of a dating partner. In this part which comprises the first component, i.e. knowledge, there are five areas one must learn about a person and are predictors of a successful marriage. These five areas are family background, attitudes and actions of the conscience, compatibility potential, examples of other relationships, and relationship skills. The “heart” knowledge, that is, the components of trust, reliance, commitment, and touch, emphasizes the cultivation of an emotional bond or feeling of love with a partner at any stage of the relationship. In this portion, participants learn how to cultivate, commit to, and expand attachment in a relationship and receive instruction on creating a balance between these factors and strengthening the boundaries in a relationship (19). In general, this program provides a comprehensive review of important grounds for romantic relationships and a comprehensive structure for understanding closeness and intimacy in premarital relationships.

Numerous studies have shown that PICK is an effective method for creating a positive attitude and motivation for marriage. Researchers have realized that PICK can positively affect the attitude, stress, and behavior of individuals (20). Moreover, they concluded that participants in PICK program have acquired a more rational and realistic belief and attitude toward marriage and relationships (21). This program significantly changes the attitude and motivation of the youth. The participants in the experimental group acquired a more positive attitude toward marriage, making a choice, or being chosen compared to the control group (22).

Premarital education is an important preventive tool for families in order to avoid the costs of divorce. Thus, many preventive programs try to change the process of maladjustment and divorce rate by focusing on the society and those at risk, especially married couples or

those about to be married, and few studies have focused on single youth in order to change their attitudes and motivation before marriage. As the motivations and attitudes of this group can be an important source of information for predicting marital problems (21, 23), the main focus of the present study was on premarital education as an effective preventive tool for reducing the stress and increasing the motivation for marriage in single university students.

Material and Methods

This research was a controlled quasi-experimental study with pretest-posttest and follow-up. The study population comprised all single students in universities of Ahvaz, Iran, during 2016-2017. To select the sample, first an invitation to classes on smart marriage was extended to universities and faculties of Ahvaz, including Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Payame Nour University of Ahvaz, Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz, University of Science and Research of Ahvaz, Farhangian University, University of Medical Sciences, Technical and Vocational University, Karoon University of Applied Science and Technology, and Rahnama Nonprofit University. Then, from among all single individuals accepting the invitation (n=185), 39 students who met the following criteria were selected: scoring above 100 on the Motivation for Marriage Questionnaire; age below 35 years; no history of permanent marriage; no history of participation in workshops or classes on marriage; and willingness to participate in the present study. Written informed consent forms were obtained and ethical considerations were taken into account. Then, participants were assigned to experimental (n=20) and control (n=19) groups via simple randomization. The following instruments were used to evaluate fear of marriage and motivation for marriage.

The Motivation for Marriage Questionnaire was designed by Amani and Behzad (2012) in order to examine motivations for marriage. It consists of 20 items, each standing for a reason or motivation for marriage. The items are scored on a Likert scale ranging from the least (0) to the most (10) intensity, with total

scores ranging from 0 to 200 and the cut-off point of 100. Higher scores indicate the intensity of one's motivation. The face and content validity of this questionnaire were examined and confirmed by experts. Moreover, it was tested in a pilot study on 30 participants and the Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 was obtained. In another study, the Cronbach's alpha equaled 0.87 (24). In the present study, the reliability and validity of the questionnaire were checked in the literature and examined in a pilot study on 70 participants. Through interviews with them, minor corrections on some words with cultural and value load were made and the final form was developed. The Cronbach's alpha for this instrument was 0.81 in a pilot study on 70 participants. Furthermore, the convergent validity of 0.75 between this and the Tendency for Marriage Scale was obtained (25).

The Fear of Intimacy Questionnaire was designed by Descutner and Thelen (1991) in order to measure the anxiety related to close relationships and marriage and shows fear in a wide range of situations and interpersonal relationships. It has 35 items scored on a five-point Likert scale from 1 ("Not at all characteristic of me") to 5 ("Extremely characteristic of me"). Those with high scores on this scale have numerous problems in terms of fear of marriage and intimacy. Researchers report the Cronbach's alpha of 0.93 and 0.89 for this questionnaire (26). Studies in Iran report the Cronbach's alpha and test-retest reliability of this questionnaire to be 0.83 and 0.92, respectively, and its divergent validity with Walker and Thompson's Intimacy Scale to be -0.58 (27). Moreover, this questionnaire was administered to 70 participants in a pilot study in order to examine its reliability and validity, and Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 was obtained. Also, the convergent validity between this and the Fear of Marriage Questionnaire was 0.90.

After determining the sample, all students were invited to be present in Ravanasa Counseling Center of Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz. PICK program was administered by an instructor (Ph.D. of Marriage and Family Counseling) in nine 90-minute sessions

Table 1. The educational protocol and content of PICK program sessions

First session	Introduction to PICK program Getting to know one another; introducing the objectives and norms of the group and importance and necessity of premarital education
Second session	Teaching the "head" knowledge through family background patterns and actions of the conscience
Third session	Teaching the "head" knowledge through understanding compatibility and adjustment and its dimensions, including mutual chemistry/attraction, complementing one another (examining important differences), and comparability (examining the similarities in lifestyle, values, and personality)
Fourth session	Teaching the "head" knowledge through understanding the partner's relationship skills; importance of healthy relationship skills; deception in self-expression; incompatible relationships; expectations of the partner regarding openness; and knowing the relationship skills of the partner, e.g. self-expression and self-disclosure
Fifth session	Teaching the "heart" knowledge through understanding the component of trust and characteristics of trustworthy people
Sixth session	Teaching the "heart" knowledge through understanding the component of trust, stereotypical relationship expectations and beliefs, and practical trust-building
Seventh session	Teaching the "heart" knowledge through reliance; importance of needs, process of bipolarity in a relationship; and the yin and yang as the symbol of reliance for conflict resolution
Eights session	Teaching the "heart" knowledge through commitment and touch; testing the commitment of a partner; dangers of staying in a relationship for too long; too much commitment before marriage; and emotional and physical effects of sexual attraction and touch in premarital relationships
Ninth session	Reviewing the basic concepts and administering the posttest Expressing gratitude to the participants

twice a week for the experimental group in line with the principles and skills of the noted educational program and supervised by the supervisor. The control group participated in a two-hour session on making a choice and knowing the spouse. In the final day of the program, the experimental group took the posttest. The posttest was administered to the control group the next day in the counseling center of the Faculty of Education and Psychology. Then, 45 days after the course, the two groups took the test (follow-up).

Results

The demographic characteristics of participants were as follows:

There were 7 (36.8%) men and 12 (63.2%) women in the control group and 7 (35%) men and 13 (65%) women in the experimental group. Moreover, 2 participants (10.5%) had an A.D., 11 (57.9%) had a B.S./B.A., and 6 (36.6%) had an M.S./M.A. in the control group. In addition, 12 (60%) had a B.S./B.A. and 8 (40%) had an M.S./M.A. In the experimental group. Nine (47.4%) aged 18-24 years, 7 (36.8%) aged 25-29 years, and 3 (15.8%) aged 30-35 years in the control group. Six (30%) aged 18-24, 3 (15%) aged 25-29 years, and 11 (55%) aged 30-35 years in the experimental group.

Based on Table 3, mean score of motivation for marriage was increased in the experimental group from pretest (77.60) to posttest (146.10) and follow-up (149.60). The range of skewness of the dependent variable of motivation for marriage was -0.77 to -1.04

for the control group and from 0.21 to -0.37 for the experimental group from pretest to follow-up. Moreover, the range of kurtosis of this variable was from 0.33 to 1.24 in the control group and from -0.43 to -1.52 for the experimental group, indicating that the range of scores falls within the normal range (not above +2 and not below -2). The assumption of repeated measures ANOVA, including Levene's test of homogeneity and equality of variances, showed that this assumption was met in control and experimental groups in pretest (F=3.60, p=0.065), posttest (F=0.98, p=0.327), and follow-up (F=1.76, p=0.192).

The second assumption, i.e. equality of covariance matrix between groups or Mauchly's test, showed the inhomogeneity of covariance matrix between groups ($\chi^2 = 58.63, p < 0.001$). Since this assumption was significant, the more conservative test of Greenhouse-Geisser was used for the second research question (Winer, 1962).

Based on Table 4, the F-ratio for groups equals 1.78 (p=0.190). This shows that PICK program did not increase the motivation for marriage in single students of the experimental group compared to the control group (mean of the experimental group was 124.43 and mean of the control group was 131.59). The F-ratio of the effect of the stages of the educational intervention on the motivation for marriage equaled 125.30, significant at the level of 0.001. This indicates that a significant difference exists among the three stages of pretest, posttest, and follow-up.

Table 2. Mean and SD of scores of motivation for marriage on pretest, posttest, and follow-up

Group	Variable								
	Sex	Frequency	Percentage	Level of education	Frequency	Percentage	Age group	Frequency	Percentage
Control group	Male	7	36.8%	A.D.	2	10.5%	18-24	9	47.4%
	Female	12	63.2%	B.S./B.A.	11	57.9%	25-29	7	36.8
				M.S./M.A.	6	36.6%	30-35	3	15.8%
Experimental group	Male	7	35%	A.D.	0	00%	18-24	6	30%
	Female	13	65%	B.S./B.A.	12	60%	25-29	3	15%
				M.S./M.A.	8	40%	30-35	11	55%
	Total	39	100%	Total	39	100%	Total	39	100%

Table 3. Mean and SD of scores of motivation for marriage on pretest, posttest, and follow-up

Indicators Group	Stage		
	Pretest	Posttest	Follow-up
Experimental	77.60±13.07	146.10±16.22	149.60±14.75
Control	131.42±23.10	131.95±22.89	131.42±22.67

Table 4. Results of 2 x 3 repeated-measures ANOVA on the effect of the three stages of educational intervention on motivation for marriage based on groups

Source of variation	Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean sum of squares	F-ratio	P level
Between-subject: group	1499.85	1	1499.85	1.78	0.190
Subjects within groups	31132.45	37	841.41		
Educational intervention	32340.50	1.10	29168.42	125.30	<0.001
Groups x stages of educational intervention	31896.07	1.10	28767.57	123.58	<0.001
Subjects within groups x stages of educational intervention					

Based on Table 5, mean score of fear of marriage was decreased in the experimental group from pretest (111.95) to posttest (97.80) and follow-up (100.20) compared to the control group. The range of skewness of the dependent variable of fear of marriage was -0.63 to -0.70 for the control group and from 0.29 to 0.78 for the experimental group from pretest to follow-up. Moreover, the range of kurtosis of this variable was from -0.07 to -0.30 in the control group and from 0.57 to 0.65 in the experimental group, indicating that the range of scores falls within the normal range (not above +2 and not below -2).

The assumption of repeated measures ANOVA, including Levene's test of homogeneity of variances,

showed that this assumption was not met in control and experimental groups in pretest ($F=20.25, P<0.001$), posttest ($F=12.54, P<0.001$), and follow-up ($F=13.62, P=0.001$).

However, because of the equal sample size in the two groups, the violation of assumption does not pose any problem. The second assumption, i.e. equality of covariance matrix between groups or Mauchly's test, showed the inhomogeneity of covariance matrix between groups ($\chi^2=41.68, P<0.001$). Since this assumption was significant, the more conservative test of Greenhouse-Geisser was used for the second research question (Winer, 1962).

Table 5. Mean and SD of scores of fear of marriage on pretest, posttest, and follow-up

Indicators Group	Stage		
	Pretest	Posttest	Follow-up
Experimental	111.95±4.17	97.80±5.44	100.20±4.81
Control	84.95±15.57	85.53±13.47	88.21±13.95

Table 6. Results of 2 x 3 repeated-measures ANOVA on the effect of the three stages of educational intervention on fear of marriage based on groups

Source of variation	Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean sum of squares	F-ratio	P level
Between-subjects: group	8535.21	1	8535.21	27.78	<0.001
Subjects within groups	11369.01	37	307.27		
Within-subjects: stages of educational intervention	916.05	1.18	772.15	30.89	<0.001
Groups x stages of educational intervention	1436.91	1.18	1211.19	48.45	<0.001
Subjects within groups x stages of educational intervention	1097.17	43.89	24.99		

Based on Table 6, the F-ratio for groups equals 27.078, significant at the level of 0.001. This shows that PICK program reduced the fear of marriage in single students of the experimental group compared to the control group (mean of the experimental group was 162.06 and mean of the control group was 156.56). The F-ratio of the effect of the stages of the educational intervention on the understanding of marriage equaled 122.16, significant at the level of 0.001. This indicates that a significant difference exists among the three stages of pretest, posttest, and follow-up.

Discussion

Results revealed the effectiveness of PICK program in increasing the motivation for marriage as the first variable, in line with previous studies (28-30). This program attempted to identify the reasons and motivations of single participants and help them evaluate their own behaviors and see whether they would lead to choosing a good spouse. This approach is a combination of cognitive and emotional beliefs which highlights rational and emotional processes, both personality variables with a positive correlation with motivation (31). Individuals become aware of themselves and their conscious and unconscious needs and value these needs in the "head" portion of PICK program, thereby raising their motivation for marriage. Knowledge is the first domain of the "head" portion. It helped participants know their needs better and, therefore, make a correct and rational decision about marriage and achieve a better self-knowledge. Those

with a higher level of self-knowledge have a higher self-confidence and motivation (32). Moreover, knowledge enhanced the ability to solve relationship problems and thus improved social relationships and enhanced the feeling of competence. As a result, the motivation for creating social relationships and marriage was increased (33, 34). In addition, a deep knowledge leads to the formation of the second dynamics, i.e. trust, in the relationship attachment model. Trust leads to a clear analysis of actions and motivations for marriage and promotes one's rationality in the face of signs of danger which threaten the individual, his/her partner, and the security of the relationship (35-37).

According to results, PICK program reduced the intensity of fear of marriage in the experimental group, consistent with previous studies (38, 39). This program proved effective in terms of fear of marriage similar to other variables. Attachment relationships and transferring relationship patterns to marriage explain the reduction in fear of marriage in the experimental group. According to studies, those who have received the unconditional love and attention of parents and optimal reactions during childhood and especially in the first two years of life can accept the feelings of others and express their own during adult life (40, 41). In the session of PICK program, individuals became aware of the attachment patterns in their childhood and their effects on the process of choosing a spouse became clear to them. This highly reduced their fear of marriage (42). On the other hand, the rational knowledge of

relationship skills may have reduced the fear of marriage. Fear of marriage depends on relationship skills. The youth and students at the age of marriage have received little instruction on relationship skills and establishing relationships with the opposite sex. Therefore, their relationship does not receive positive responses and, thus, they may avoid the establishment of intimate relationships or choosing a spouse. Over time, they doubt their abilities and choose not to establish any relationship, because they estimate their abilities as less than those of others (38-43, 44).

The "heart" knowledge can explain the reduction in the fear of marriage. Trust is the first component of the "heart" knowledge which protects one's "head" against signs of danger which threaten the individual and his/her partner. It helps individuals view their spouse in a more positive way and thus reduces their fear of marriage and establishment of intimate relationships (26). As a result of PICK program, one judges the level of trust below his/her own knowledge. That is, educations keep individuals in the safe zone. They learn not to trust their spouse more than they know him/her. As knowledge of one's spouse increases, the ability of risk-taking increases. The increase in knowledge in the visual profile increases the individuals' trust in their spouse and decreases their fear. Reliance is another component of the "heart" knowledge and depends on trust. When individuals completely know the satisfaction of their needs by their spouse, they can trust this satisfaction by them, creating a feeling of security and reducing fear (45). In PICK program, the participants learned to take steps toward enhancing the level of reliance on their partner and meeting physical and emotional needs with caution. This prevents an imbalance among the levels of attachment, reliance, and trust, thereby reducing the fear of marriage. When one learns not to trust his/her partner more than the level of needs he or she meets, one is assured that he/she would not have a premature emotional attachment to his/her partner and, therefore, the fear of marriage is reduced (46). Based on the "heart" portion, PICK program helps individuals move in the safe zone of premarital relationships and choosing a spouse. This is because their "heart" knowledge guided them toward passing a specific and reliable

process of closeness and attachment to their partners and clearly describe them. If one knows these stages clearly and tries to pass them in making a choice, he/she experiences less fear (16-47, 48).

Conclusion

Considering the importance of premarital education and the effectiveness of PICK program in decreasing the fear of marriage and increasing the motivation for marriage among single students, we suggest that this educational method be regularly provided to all single students by university counseling centers. We also recommend that family and marriage counselors and psychologists use the results of this study in their centers. Based on the effectiveness of the noted program in reducing the fear of marriage and increasing the motivation for marriage, we suggest that this program be taught to family and marriage counselors and psychologists and employed in health centers for premarital education.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies

The statistical population in this study was composed of university students. Therefore, researchers must be cautious in generalizing the results to other populations. Moreover, participants were selected from different educational levels (A.D., B.S./B.A., and M.S./M.A.) which may have affected the results. Also, participants willingly took part in the study. Thus, results may have been affected by the social desirability bias.

As this study was conducted on the student population, we recommend its replication on another population. Moreover, we suggest that other studies focus on students in higher education. The present study was a quantitative research. We suggest that other studies use qualitative methods based on the perspectives of single individuals and experts of premarital counseling.

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