

Development and Validation of an Integrated Couple Therapy Package for Conflicted Couples Based on Influential Factors of the Family of Origin

DOI: 10.22098/JPC.2025.17415.1322

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Abstract

Objective: Marital conflict can stem from the unique family, cultural, and social values of the family of origin. The aim of the present study was to develop and validate an integrated couples therapy package based on the influential indicators of the family of origin in 2024.

Method: To develop the package, through interviews with 18 conflict participants (12 women and 6 men) who referred to counseling centers in Marand city, using a qualitative approach and phenomenological method indicators of the impact of the family of origin on marital conflicts were extracted. After coding the interviews based on the Brown and Clark method, three main themes emerged: socio-cultural (with four subthemes), economic (with two subthemes), and family (with thirteen subthemes). Based on the themes obtained, intervention strategies, which were mainly within the framework of Bowen's emotional system, imago therapy, contextual, and cognitive-behavioral approaches, were selected and the package was developed and presented to a panel of 6 experts for validation. In the quantitative validation section, the content validity coefficient (CVR) and the content validity index (CVI) were used.

Findings: The results showed that the compilation package was valid with a content validity coefficient (CVR=1) higher than the required value (CVR $\geq$ 0.99 for 6 panel members) and a content validity index (CVI) of 0.83, and was considered valid.

Conclusion: Validation of the developed package with content adequacy showed that the present package can be used alongside other couples therapy approaches to reduce marital conflict.

Keywords: Validation, Phenomenology, Conflicted men and women, Family of origin, Approach.

Introduction

Marriage is a fundamental aspect of human relationships, providing a framework for the continuity of family and social life, fulfilling deep human needs for companionship, love, and intimacy, and leading to lasting emotional bonds (Vijayan, 2024). In many cultures, marriage is viewed as a primary source of support and affection, and spouses are expected to exhibit a special relationship characterized by honesty, affection, intimacy, and mutual support (Siegel et al., 2021). When the relationship between couples is tied, multiple factors such as the couple desires, aspirations, individuality, and expectations of each other influence their minds (Reddy & Arya, 2024). Unfortunately, ample evidence suggests that couples in today's society face widespread difficulties in maintaining intimate and friendly relationships (Dodaj & Simic, 2020). Marital conflict can be mentioned among the harms in couples' relationships (Hooshmandi et al., 2021). Marital conflict is the reduction of positive connection between couples resulting from communication errors, perception, and other external and internal factors that can manifest physically and mentally by the parties in their relationship and create an atmosphere of aversion and hatred (Getahun, 2021).

Chronic marital conflict can lead to increased psychological problems (such as depression and substance abuse) for couples and children, and poor conflict management can affect children's emotional health and future relationships (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2022). On the other hand, preventive measures such as marriage education programs, improving communication skills, and reducing negative behaviors lead to increased marital satisfaction (D'Souza, 2002).

Marital conflicts are not only influenced by individual issues, but may also stem from unique social values between couples and their original family culture (Frey et al., 2020); and family of origin refers to an individual's experiences with their parents or caregivers during childhood, which lay the foundation for their interpersonal relationships in adulthood (Monk et al., 2020). The family of origin includes siblings, parents, and childhood caregivers, and based on this, the function of the family of origin refers to the discovery of basic family interactions and patterns and their impact on individuals within the family of origin (Ennaco, 2018). In Iranian culture, each spouse, in addition to being a member of the family they have formed with their spouse, is still considered a member of their original family (Abbaspour et al., 2024). The family of origin directly and indirectly affects the relationship between husband and wife: one through the quality of the relationship with their child, and the other through the quality of the relationship with their child's spouse (Yuan, 2019).

Based on family systems theory, conflicts between parents set the stage for future levels of conflicts and problems (Zhong & Chung, 2023). The reciprocal relationship between parents' interaction with each other and the reflection of their relationship outcomes in their children can be explained by family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997), which assumes that the dynamics between the parental subsystem and the parent-child subsystem in the family are interdependent. Research has shown that the methods individuals use in adulthood to manage and resolve their conflicts with others, especially with their spouses, are very similar to their parents' conflict management styles throughout life, which members have learned and transferred to relationships and

communication systems outside the family (Chen, 2023). Consistent with this claim, research results have shown that exposure to negative experiences in the family of origin is associated with an increased risk of communication and marital problems in children in adulthood and when forming a family (Obeid et al., 2021) and low quality of marital life (Tunca & Durmus, 2024; Van de Weije et al., 2020; Abbaspour et al., 2024).

Many researchers have examined couple therapy interventions with different approaches for family health; on the other hand, the results of studies have shown that marital conflict originates from various individual, social, and cultural values (Frey et al., 2020). Meanwhile, approaches such as Intensive Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy: Emotions and Defenses (Nichols & Schwartz, 2010), Imago Therapy: Dysfunctional Communication and Dialogue (Hendrix, 2006), Bowen Family Systems Theory: Chronic Anxiety and Differentiation of Self (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2024), Contextual Therapy: Inability to Change Patterns Derived from Previous Relationships and Imbalance in Emotional Ledger (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 2013), Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy: Irrational Beliefs and Negative Behavioral Exchanges (Ellis, 2003) have been considered effective in the occurrence of marital conflict and employ their specific therapeutic strategies in dealing with marital conflict. However, in couple and family therapy, if treatment is approached with only one specific approach, sometimes a problem will not be solved in practice in response to some clients' needs. In these situations, professionals have turned to integrating approaches, either through theoretical integration or technical eclecticism (Prochasga and Norcross, translated by Seyyed Mohammadi, 2023). Therefore, the researcher decided to fill the gap resulting from the lack of a comprehensive protocol in reducing marital conflict in conflicting couples by developing a comprehensive educational-therapeutic program.

Generally, family therapy schools can be divided into three categories based on their theme, emphasis, and focus in therapy: a. Approaches that focus on behavioral patterns that perpetuate the problem; b. Approaches that focus on narratives and problematic belief systems; c. Approaches that focus on historical, contextual, and dispositional predisposing factors (Prochasga and Norcross, translated by Seyyed Mohammadi, 2023). In the objectives of this research, attention has also been paid to the classification to achieve a flexible, coherent, and coordinated approach in action and practice by compiling and developing a package including all three categories (perspectives).

Therefore, several points were considered in selecting four approaches among family therapy approaches: 1. These four approaches should include all three categories of the classification, so that the combination of techniques includes behavioral patterns, belief systems, and predisposing and historical factors; 2. They should have specific techniques for the couple and family domain; 3. They should be among the most well-known and widely used theories in Iran; 4. There should be sufficient and rich resources for extracting techniques. Therefore, in view of the issues raised and in order to fill the gap caused by the lack of a comprehensive protocol to cover the problems arising from the family of origin in marital conflict between couples, the researcher sought to answer these questions: What are the most important indicators and components necessary for developing a training package for marital conflict affected by the family of origin? And does the developed training package have the necessary content validity?

Methodology

This research was conducted using a qualitative method and an interpretive phenomenological approach. Interpretive phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on deeply understanding people's lived experiences. It seeks to understand how people make meaning of their experiences. In this approach, the researcher is not simply a neutral observer, but acts as an active interpreter. The researcher uses his or her own knowledge, background, and understanding to interpret and give meaning to the experiences of the participants. It is this interaction between the researcher's perspective and the participant's statements that leads to the production of new knowledge (Clark, 2010). The statistical population of the study included women and men with marital conflicts who referred to counseling and psychological services centers in Marand city (Hamraz, Sedaghat, and Pouyamehr) in 2024. The sample size included 12 female and 6 male participants, who were selected using non-probability and purposive sampling methods, and the sampling process continued until data saturation. In order to develop an educational package to prevent marital conflict affected by the family of origin of women and men, the coding method was used to achieve a network of open and central codes and the content of the educational package in line with the research objective. Based on Brown and Clark's (2006) approach in the coding process, first, through semi-structured interviews, the factors affecting the family of origin in marital conflicts between women and men were collected. In this regard, after applying interview questions such as: What are the most important indicators and components necessary for developing a training package for marital conflicts affected by the family of origin? And what is the validity of the developed training package? To examine the face validity of the semi-structured interview questions, the initial draft of the questions was developed by the researcher and presented to three professors and experts in the field under study. They were asked to evaluate each question for clarity of expression, simplicity of vocabulary, comprehensibility to participants, and relevance to the overall purpose of the study. Suggestions and corrections provided by these experts (including changing the order of questions, rewriting some sentences for greater clarity, and removing or merging repetitive questions) were implemented. This revision ensured that the questions were valid and understandable for the respondents in terms of their appearance and initial perception. To confirm content validity, the revised version of the questions was presented to five professors and researchers specializing in the research field. These experts were asked to evaluate the questions in terms of complete coverage of the conceptual dimensions of the phenomenon under study, direct relevance to the main research questions, and suitability with the theoretical framework of the research. Expert judgment was used as the basis for modifying and completing the questions to ensure that the data collection tool was able to collect the necessary data in a comprehensive, in-depth manner, and in line with the research objective. In the second stage, meaningful units were extracted. In the third stage, open and axial codes were extracted and then their relationship was drawn. In the next stage, the content of the training sessions, along with suggested assignments for 10 sessions (each session lasting one and a half hours), to prevent marital conflict between conflicting men and women affected by the family of

origin, was extracted from the texts in accordance with each of the open and central codes. After developing the package, in order to ensure the content validity of the package, the content validity ratio (CVR) was calculated and approved using the Lawshe method and the content validity index (CVI) was calculated using the Walts & Bausell method for all objectives in the training package,

Results

The present study was conducted with the participation of 12 women and 6 men. The age range of the participants was 26 to 52 years and their average age was 36.55 years. Eight participants had one child, six had two children, one had three children, and three had no children. Most women were housewives and most men were employees. In terms of education, one person had a high school education, three participants had failed diplomas, four had diplomas, five had bachelor's degrees, three had master's degrees, and two were doctoral students. The findings of this study are presented in two stages. In the first stage, after conducting interviews with the selected sample, the main and secondary themes resulting from the indicators of the family of origin's influence on marital conflict were obtained. In the second stage, based on the obtained themes, an intervention strategy for resolving marital conflict was developed based on family therapy approaches and an educational-therapeutic package was developed.

Table 1. Main and sub-themes related to the influential indicators of the family of origin on marital conflicts extracted from interview analysis

Main theme	Sub-theme	Intervention solution for marital conflict
Socio-cultural	Strictness in ceremonies and rituals	In the content of the interviews, strictness was placed within the framework of "expectations formed from the family of origin," and "expectations" are predictions about the likelihood of specific events occurring, which can be examined in the context of dysfunctional beliefs within the cognitive-behavioral approach (Ellis, 2003).
	Attitudes related to religion	One of the most important processes through which individuals learn spiritual values in the family is observational learning of spirituality. The term "observational learning" falls within the cognitive-behavioral theory framework, and behaviorists believe that normal behavior is target behavior (Nichols and Schwartz, translated by Dehghani et al., 2010).
	Taboos related to the family of origin	From the perspective of the contextual and Bowenian approach, the increase in marital conflicts is because young couples lack the skills to change behavioral patterns, rules, and expectations derived from previous relationships, especially the family of origin, and to form a new marital unit (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 2013).

	Gender discrimination in the family of origin	In the cognitive-behavioral approach, the most fundamental causes of marital relationship problems are considered to be learned responses, and the goal is to modify specific behavioral patterns (for example, gender discrimination behavior) to reduce the present problem (Nichols et al., translated by Dehghani et al., 1389).
Economic	Economic poverty of the family of origin	It can be explained under the title of horizontal stress. Horizontal stressors are anxiety-provoking events that the family faces during life cycle transitions, i.e., developmental pressures. (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, translated by Shahi Baravati et al., 2021). By using a genogram or family tree of the family of origin up to 3 generations, the necessary awareness about the effects and resolution of these stressors can be obtained.
	Extremes in Spending and Leisure Time	Extreme and idealistic beliefs are not based on reality and their roots point to dysfunctional thoughts. Extreme expectations lead to specific behaviors and shape particular ways of thinking about family life. Extreme thoughts can be examined within the framework of the cognitive-behavioral approach.
Family	Family Myths	Mythical beliefs can function similarly to irrational beliefs. While irrational beliefs are the result of individuals' different life experiences (Shockley & Allen, 2019), these myths may manifest in intergenerational transmissions. Cognitive restructuring is the core of cognitive-behavioral therapy.
	Intergenerational Dependence	According to Bowen, the underlying factor in the emergence of psychological problems is emotional fusion that is transmitted from one generation to the next (Nichols & Schwartz, translated by Dehghani et al., 2010). Therapeutic strategies involve detriangulation through discovering and resolving fusions, making the individual aware of emotional processes and family interactions, emotion management, and self-differentiation (Bowen, 1978).
	Crisis in the Family of Origin	Crises are referred to as horizontal and vertical stressors in the family. McGoldrick and Carter's (2016) intergenerational perspective believes that the flow of anxiety and conflict in the family is related to "vertical" and "horizontal" stressors. Vertical stressors refer to communication and functional patterns that are transmitted from one generation to the next, such as family attitudes, expectations, taboos, labels, etc. Horizontal stressors are anxiety-provoking events that the family experiences during life cycle transitions, meaning developmental pressures (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, translated by Shahi Baravati et al., 2019). Through education and the use of a genogram or family tree of the family of origin up to 3 generations, the necessary insight into the effects of these stressors can be gained and managed.
	Parenting Style and Child Rearing	Based on the interview content, parenting with high differentiation and equipped with various problem-solving methods was evident, which

	mainly falls within the framework of Bowen's family systems theory and cognitive-behavioral approaches.
Taunting and Character Assassination in the Family of Origin	Cognitive-behavioral couple therapy, using cognitive and behavioral strategies and teaching life skills, attempts to change the overt behavior and interaction style of couples by changing their thoughts, expectations, interpretations, and response styles, and provides an opportunity for couples to learn the necessary methods to identify and correct their self-destructive thoughts and behaviors and use them in the future when facing various issues.
Couple Boundary Setting	According to the interview content, couple boundary settings included decision-making outside the couple system. Entering the world of marriage requires a kind of maturity and emotional maturity for couples, and these concepts can be explained within the framework of undifferentiation in Bowen's family systems theory.
Pathological Perfectionism in the Family of Origin	The cognitive-behavioral approach views marital problems as a result of spouses' ineffective communication skills, inability to effectively solve problems and conflicts, irrational expectations and beliefs, and negative behavioral exchanges (Nichols et al., translated by Dehghani et al., 2010). Perfectionism is also a type of extreme thinking that can be modified using techniques from the cognitive-behavioral approach.
Increased Tension in the Family of Origin	The implicit meaning of context is the inevitability of intergenerational consequences. No one is immune to the consequences and results of good or bad family relationships, and the difficulties belonging to previous generations remain in the structure of the current family (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, translated by Shahi Baravati et al., 2019).
Prevalence of Defense Mechanisms in the Family of Origin	Individuals with low differentiation are more involved in emotional defense mechanisms such as emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, and fusion or triangulation with others. The central idea of Bowen's approach is: strengthening individual autonomy and responsibility by reducing blame and projection of weaknesses (Bowen, 1978).
Poverty in interpersonal relationships of the family of origin with others	Imago therapy (relationship therapy) is one of the suggested methods for preventing marital conflicts, and unconscious and unresolved early internalized experiences that adults may bring into their marital relationships can lead to the formation of dysfunctional patterns through which individuals cling to each other dependently and desperately.
Past emotional deprivations	Individuals with childhood trauma are affected by childhood trauma in terms of emotional-social development with the expansion of negative schemas about themselves and others. The basic goal of cognitive behavioral therapy is to correct dysfunctional beliefs and replace them with logical thoughts.

Prevalence of incorrect and destructive exchanges in the family of origin	Imago therapy addresses both intrapsychic analyses and interpersonal relationships and considers the root of all current relationship difficulties to be the ruptures of expected bonds in childhood that will appear in the intimate relationships of spouses (Agathagelou, 2013).
Presence of mental disorder in the family of origin	Chronic physical illnesses, emotional disorders, social problems such as addiction, acting out, aggression, and irresponsible behaviors that are becoming chronic can be manifestations of the severity of undifferentiation and emotional reactivity, and these emotional coping strategies for anxiety and communication patterns are unconsciously transmitted from one generation to another through multi-generational transmission.

Considering Table (1) and based on the content of the interviews and the influential indicators of the family of origin in marital conflicts, in order to develop and validate the integrated couple therapy package, among the family therapy approaches, finally four approaches including Bowen's multi-generational, Imago therapy, Contextual, and Cognitive-Behavioral, were selected and the training sessions were developed based on the concepts and techniques of the mentioned approaches in ten sessions, each lasting one and a half hours.

After compiling the package, in order to ensure the content validity of the package, the content validity ratio (CVR) was calculated and approved using the Lawshe method and the content validity index (CVI) was calculated using the Walts & Bausell method for all objectives in the training package.

As the results in Table 2 show, the training package for reducing marital conflict affected by the family of origin was designed for 8 sessions (each session 90 minutes). The results of the content validity ratio and content validity index of the training package are presented below.

$$CVI = \frac{\text{Number of experts selecting fully relevant options requiring minor revision}}{\text{Total number of experts}} = \frac{5}{6} = \frac{0}{83}$$

$$CVR = \frac{\frac{\text{Required option Number of experts} - \frac{\text{Total number of expert}}{2}}{\frac{\text{Total number of experts}}{2}}}{\frac{6 - \frac{6}{2}}{\frac{6}{2}}} = \frac{3}{3} = 1$$

As the results show, the content validity ratio using the Lavish method and the content validity index (CVI) using the Waltz and Bassel method, which were examined by 6

family counseling experts, were equal to 1 and 0.83, respectively, indicating appropriate content validity .

Table 2. Educational package for reducing marital conflict based on functional indicators of the family of origin

session	The title of the session	content of the sessions	Homework
First	Establishing relationship and therapeutic alliance	Getting to know the general rules of treatment, evaluating the nature of the problem, evaluating goals and expectations from treatment, checking the current status of each participant and their desired wishes, taking a pre-test.	Expressing the goals and expectations of participating in the meeting
Second	Explaining the concept of marital conflict based on four approaches	Defining the concept of marital conflict and its dimensions, general description of the four approaches (imago therapy, contextual, cognitive-behavioral, and Bowen's emotional system) and explaining marital conflict in their framework.	The couples were asked to list the most important issues that lead to conflict between them and bring them to the meeting for further investigation.
Third	Explaining the concept of family - the origin and history of important relationships of a person with others	Defining the concept of family and family of origin, familiarizing with the genogram and drawing it, examining the history, nature and quality of the relationship between family members, teaching the functioning of the emotional system of the family of origin and its effects on subsequent relationships, examining the cultural and moral effects of the family of origin on people's relationships.	The couples were asked to examine the nature and quality of the relationship during three generations by drawing a genogram and to examine their impact on the process of their current interactions.
Fourth	Investigating childhood unfinished business and conscious learning	Acquaintance with the deep needs of oneself and one's spouse, going back to the childhood and reviewing the memories of that time and discovering the structure of the imago (mental image of oneself) of the individual, examining the crises and emotional events of the family of origin and its effects in current relationships, examining the communication patterns and main interactions of the family of origin and how they are projected to the current	The couples were asked to write the most important needs of themselves and their spouses, along with the positive and negative characteristics of their parents, and to list the childhood events that affect

		relationships, dealing with issues related to the relationship ethics of couples such as trust, justice, loyalty, responsibility and sense of duty in the family of origin and in the marital relationship of each couple.	their current interactions. Also, the couples were obliged to write down a few obligations and rights in relation to their spouses, along with ways to balance them.
Fifth	Examining the myths and dysfunctional cognitions of couples	Identifying beliefs related to sexual role expectations for each person inherited from the original family, examining extreme and inflexible standards, examining behavioral responses learned inconsistently in previous relationships and replacing them with constructive behaviors, planning to implement bonding rituals.	The couples were asked to list the most significant beliefs and myths in their family of origin and their current family and examine their effects on their current relationships and behaviors.
Sixth	Making couples aware of the process of emotions	Investigating and becoming aware of the process of intensification and worsening of the couple's emotions by each other, teaching active listening and playing a fair game in relation to emotions (insulting, being defensive and exhuming the past is prohibited), practicing the motivation to return and reconstructing emotional responses.	The couples were asked to examine the process of the occurrence of emotions and record their emotional patterns in family arguments and bring them to the meeting. Also, note each other's feedback while receiving the emotions of the other party.
Seventh	Anatomy of emotional wounds	Examining and recognizing each other's emotional wounds, examining past emotional deprivations, examining couples' reactions when emotional wounds are activated by the other party, removing the cover of emotional wounds, helping to rebuild childhood emotional wounds with the guided mental imagery method, empty chair fan, writing letters and talking to parents, practicing empathetic responses to each other.	The couples were asked to identify their emotional wounds and examine and write down the patterns and vicious cycle of dealing with them.

Eighth	Teaching intergenerational patterns, expressing the patterns of relationships of the family of origin and existing triangles around problems	Recognizing and explaining triangulations and pathological triangles and their role in marital conflict, examining intergenerational patterns, teaching triangulation	Examining the most effective transfer patterns from the family of origin, triangulation of relationships and expressing its effects as a solution to the group members.
Ninth	Teaching conflict resolution skills	Teaching conflict resolution styles, learning problem-solving skills, strengthening communication and financial skills, developing independence and overcoming selfishness, strengthening the expression of love and loyalty to one's spouse.	The couples were asked to write examples of recent problems and ways to deal with them and bring them to the meeting.
Tenth	Strengthening communication skills, expanding empathy and reimagining the spouse	Practicing caressing, couples' awareness that they can see that their choice of spouse was unconsciously based on the positive and negative characteristics of their caregivers in childhood, and following these couples, they enter a process where they slowly realize that they are each other's friends and not enemies, adaptive interpersonal skills training, taking a post-test.	Couples were asked to practice empathic behaviors and skills in real life.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to develop and validate a marital conflict reduction training package based on influential factors of the family of origin. Based on the findings obtained from the thematic analysis, integrated couple therapy sessions were developed over ten sessions. Constructive conflicts are characterized by a warm environment where both parties focus on seeking common agreements, express their feelings, provide positive feedback, respect different perspectives, and can reach the most cost-effective and constructive solution (Maya et al., 2024). Regardless of any therapeutic approach, the primary goal is to establish a therapeutic relationship and alliance. In this stage, the rules and regulations related to the training sessions, the couple expectations, were reviewed, and then the client and therapist agreed on the goals. Much research indicates the importance of common factors in therapy; many therapists and researchers have attributed treatment outcomes more to common factors (such as the patient-therapist relationship,

therapist empathy, and positive regard) (Feinstein, et al., 2015). Previous findings show that those treatment-related factors that are related to treatment outcomes (Norcross, 2011; Bachelor, 2013; Holdsworth, Bowen, Brown et al., 2014; Higgins, Larson, and Schnall, 2017), and lead to motivational enhancement (Scott, King, McGinn et al., 2011) and the creation of a group atmosphere (Illing, Tasca, Balfour et al., 2011; Kirchmann et al., 2009).

Pioneers of family therapy approaches (such as Framo, Bowen, Imago Therapy, and psychodynamic perspectives) believe that developmental stages in childhood, especially a child's early relationships with parents, influence their marital relationships in adulthood. Spouse selection and marital relationships are not solely a conscious process; a significant part of it is unconscious and results from the need to complete unfinished childhood stages and heal emotional wounds from that period (Agathagelou, 2013).

Emotional wounds, which are the central dynamic of couples rooted in each person's childhood, prevent couples from moving forward and cause conversations to get stuck. Now, the most important steps for treating emotional wounds are recognizing emotional wounds, the ability to express them to the other person, and most importantly, moving away from childish behaviors and emotional knots in the relationship and moving towards the adult self (Tayebi & Amin, 2021, pp: 81-82).

The designed training package, which addresses the concept of family of origin, genogram, unfinished childhood work, intergenerational patterns, and triangulation in sessions three, four, and eight, is strongly rooted in Murray Bowen's family systems theory. Bowen believes that individual and marital problems often stem from unspoken and ignored emotional and communication patterns that are transmitted intergenerationally (Bowen, 1978). By employing effective mechanisms such as increasing intergenerational insight and reducing blame by drawing genograms and examining relationship histories across three generations, the trainings helped clients visually identify recurring patterns of conflict, attachment styles, stress management, and even psychological issues in their family of origin. This insight into the impact of family "heritage" has led to a reduction in mutual blame in the marital relationship and provides a space for empathy and mutual understanding.

Also, during the sixth and seventh sessions, clients are helped to process and heal attachment wounds by using techniques such as guided imagery, the empty chair technique, and correspondence with parents. This helps clients process attachment wounds and emotional deprivations from their childhood that affect their current relationships. Healing these wounds leads to reduced emotional reactivity, increased capacity for emotional vulnerability, and consequently, increased empathy and emotional companionship (Webb et al., 2017). Also, examining the "history of the individual's significant relationships with others" and "unfinished childhood work" (sessions three

and four) implicitly refers to the formation of attachment patterns (such as anxious or avoidant insecure attachment) that were formed in the family of origin. These patterns significantly influence how couples experience and manage conflict and emotional closeness in adult relationships. Understanding these roots helps couples better understand their own and their partner's attachment responses and move toward more secure attachment, which is the foundation of healthy emotional companionship.

Most importantly, sensitivity to the worsening process of creating and expressing emotions is a fundamental skill between couples that the therapist can help improve by using various strategies such as active listening, awareness of the formation process of destructive emotions, and providing feedback to couples to increase awareness of the conversation process, prohibiting the expression of destructive emotions, reconstructing misunderstandings, problem-solving ability, and creating positive feedback (Tayebi, translated by Amin, 2021, pp: 63-68).

Within the framework of Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Contextual Therapy, the therapist examines and displays past relationships and events and their impact on the patient's current emotional technique by drawing a genogram, which is a family tree. Research has shown that being emotionally empowered makes it easier for individuals to face life's challenges (Haskett et al., 2012). Research results have shown that Bowen Family Therapy, by using its specific techniques, is effective in increasing differentiation, reducing emotional divorce, and marital burnout in couples seeking divorce (Matt et al., 2024; Knapp et al., 2024).

In summary, to establish and maintain a stable and intimate interpersonal relationship, an individual must be able to recognize themselves in connection with others and be aware of their feelings, expectations, needs, fears, and desires so that they can express themselves in a mature relationship without merging with others while maintaining their individuality, and engage in a reciprocal relationship with their spouse, exchanging support and care. In line with drawing a genogram of co-parent relationships to understand the functioning of the emotional system of the original families and their effects on each individual, cultural and ethical influences on individuals' relationships are also revealed. Furthermore, potential emotional events and traumas during childhood and their impact on the current relationship are revealed (Gatfield, 2017). Bowenian therapy aims to reduce chronic anxiety by making the individual aware of the family's emotional system, increasing the level of differentiation, and focusing on changing oneself instead of trying to change others. This therapy is also successful in regulating unpleasant emotions and appropriate emotional reactivity (Walters et al., 2023). By raising awareness and providing insight into unknown emotions and sensation-seeking, this therapy helps the client identify sources of emotional intensification and better control them (Saeedpour et al., 2018).

An individual's experiences in their family of origin are influential in shaping their personality traits, attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral and emotional patterns, and constitute a significant part of their family legacy (Fathollahi Motlagh & Arefi, 2022), which, if dysfunctional, can lead to marital conflicts. The core of cognitive-behavioral therapy interventions is the assessment of dysfunctional cognitions and beliefs and cognitive distortions (Mayorga et al., 2016).

Mythological beliefs can function similarly to irrational beliefs. While irrational beliefs are the result of individuals' different experiences throughout life (Shackley et al., 2019). These myths may manifest themselves in intergenerational transmissions. In intergenerational transmission, parenting attitudes and behaviors of one generation are psychologically influenced by the previous generation, either intentionally or unintentionally (Van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1992).

Components of the protocol, particularly in sessions five and nine, address "examining myths and dysfunctional cognitions" and "teaching conflict resolution skills," which have strong roots in cognitive-behavioral therapy. Using techniques such as cognitive restructuring, clients learned to identify and challenge their cognitive distortions (e.g., mind-reading, catastrophizing, overgeneralization) by identifying "myths" and beliefs related to gender role expectations or extreme standards inherited from the family of origin (session five). This change in thought frameworks leads to a reduction in negative emotional reactions and maladaptive behaviors during conflict. Also, communication and problem-solving skills training (direct training in skills such as active listening, assertiveness, negotiation, and compromise (session nine)) gives couples tangible tools to manage their differences in a constructive manner. These skills allow them to move from destructive communication patterns (such as aggression, silence, or defensiveness) to more constructive interactions and find shared solutions (Kalaei et al., 2021).

It is clear that cognitive-behavioral couple therapy intervention seeks to form and increase interpersonal processing in such a way that couples gain a metacognitive awareness from both how they talk to each other and the experience they gain from each other. This awareness leads to fundamental changes in the way they communicate, solve problems, negotiate differences, empathize, comfort, and provide emotional and affective support to their spouses, which fills their emotional voids. Research has shown that cognitive-behavioral couple therapy can be effective on the psychological, emotional, affective, and communication components of couples (Dharsana et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020); anger control and marital conflict (Moradi & Sadeghi, 2020). Cognitive-behavioral couple therapy helps revive family functioning by increasing interpersonal skills and organizing couples' thoughts. Awareness of the emotions they have imposed on each other leads to initial repair of the relationship, and this helps the couples' dormant roles return to their previous state (Kalai & Eldridge, 2021).

Marital communication is the core of the family system, and its disruption is a serious threat to the survival and mental health of the family (Gehlert, Schmidt, Giegerich et al., 2017). Research on couples confirms that approximately 10 to 15 percent of married individuals regularly report significant communication problems (Van der Meiden, 2020). Communication therapy calls unmet needs "wounds" and believes that everyone is emotionally like children seeking to satisfy their unanswered childhood needs. These needs affect the committed relationship of marriage, and if these needs are not self-aware or met, they can lead couples towards conflict and the creation of deep rifts (Muro et al., 2016). In Imago Therapy, individuals are given a more accurate understanding of romantic relationships, and it does not view marriage as a static category between two unchanging individuals, but rather as a psychological and spiritual journey that begins in the shadow of attraction (Hendrix et al., 2015). During the sixth and seventh sessions, the focus was on "raising awareness of the process of emotion occurrence" and "dissecting emotional wounds." Emotion-focused therapy is based on the premise that marital problems often stem from negative interactional cycles and unmet attachment needs that are hidden beneath a layer of anger and conflict (Johnson & Greenberg, 1995). By using effective mechanisms such as: identifying and breaking negative interaction cycles (by teaching the process of escalating emotions and the role of each in this cycle (during the sixth session), clients were helped to identify their dysfunctional patterns. This identification is the first step to consciously intervene and break these cycles, which leads to reduced emotional reactivity and fewer conflicts.

This training program helps participants communicate their messages more clearly and achieve a greater understanding of each other. In this method, spouses can learn skills to heal childhood wounds and create healthy behaviors by understanding the unconscious processes in themselves and their spouses, and by transforming unconscious marriage and relationships into conscious marriage, they can obtain the love and intimacy they need (Hendrix et al., 2005). During Imago therapy sessions, couples are helped to accept their role in the events that occur, and as a result, see their contribution more clearly, and by accepting their role, thoughts of blame and resentment towards each other decrease, leading to the emotional release of negative emotions, which increases the level of psychological well-being of couples (Moro et al., 2016).

Based on developmental theories, it can be inferred that the increase in marital conflicts is due to young couples lacking the skills to change behavioral patterns, rules, and expectations derived from previous relationships, especially the family of origin, and to form a new marital unit (Vivian, 2024).

Components of sessions four and ten, particularly the "Discovering the Structure of the Imago" section and awareness of unconscious mate selection based on characteristics of childhood caregivers, draw on imago therapy principles. Imago therapy believes that we

unconsciously choose a partner who resembles our primary childhood caregivers so that we can heal unfinished wounds from the past within the context of the current relationship (Hendricks et al., 2005). By employing effective mechanisms such as changing the perception of the spouse and promoting empathy by understanding this "unconscious choice" and recognizing the deep needs of themselves and their spouse, clients learned to see each other not as "enemies" or pain-causing agents, but as "healers" and "fellow travelers" who can help in the process of growth and healing past wounds. If individuals experience their relationships as fair and balanced, they feel good about giving to others and being loyal, and they also ask others to meet their needs through open dialogue (Daneshpour, translated by Kiani Chalmardi et al., 2020, p. 207). And all these activities can dry up the roots of marital conflict between couples. The present study, despite having achievements, also had limitations. The limitations of this research included the limited scope of the study to conflicting men and women referring to counseling centers in Marand, the existence of some uncontrolled variables such as the family status of men and women, the financial status of families, the number of children and their social status, and the lack of use of random sampling methods (due to the nature of the research). Therefore, it is recommended that to increase the transferability of the results, at the level of research proposal, this research be conducted in other cities and regions and communities with different cultures, other groups (such as couples with emotional divorce, couples with early maladaptive schemas, etc.), with the control of the mentioned factors. On the other hand, given the content adequacy, the integrated educational-therapeutic package derived from the theoretical foundations of Bowen, Imago Therapy, Contextual, and Cognitive-Behavioral, it is suggested that couple therapists and family counselors use the mentioned package as an effective treatment in the therapeutic process of couples with marital conflict (especially those affected by the family of origin).

Compliance with ethical guidelines: This article is taken from the doctoral dissertation of the Second author in the field of counseling in the Faculty of Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili. In order to maintain the observance of ethical principles in this study, an attempt was made to collect information after obtaining the consent of the participants. Participants were also reassured about the confidentiality of the protection of personal information and the presentation of results without mentioning the names and details of the identity of individuals.

Role of each author: This article was extracted from the doctoral dissertation of the second author with the guidance of the first and third authors and the advice of the fourth author.

Funding: This study was conducted as a PhD thesis with no financial support.

Conflict of interest: the authors declare no conflict of interest for this study.

Acknowledgments: I would like to appreciate the supervisor, the advisors and the Participants in the study.

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