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## **Efficacy of Existential Freedom Training on Marital Satisfaction of Iranian Women**

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**Abstract.** Existential freedom is acknowledged as one of the fundamental elements in existential marital counselling. Furthermore, one of the main principles of existential marital counselling is to give spouses awareness of this existential dimension. From this perspective, providing married people with some awareness of existential freedom in a way that they recognize its outcome on their matrimony is of great importance. However, based on literature this dimension has been somehow neglected and only some similar researches can be found. The present research is an attempt to fill the gap in knowledge on the counselling area to see whether there are any effective consequences of the awareness on marital satisfaction. In this regard, forty Iranian women were selected to the research. Twenty of them as experimental group received some information about the existential freedom dimension. These women participated in a three session training during which they were supposed to identify existential freedom information. The Findings of this research established that the program has a considerable impact on marital satisfaction.

**Key words:** Existential theory, existential counselling, freedom, training, matrimony, Iranian women.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Many research stated that satisfaction is a major factor that anchors spouses to be in marital life (Funk and Rogge, 2007; Walker, 2009). Therefore, there is a variety of theories and programs for increasing marital satisfaction. The 1970s, indeed, witnessed an outburst of marital counselling theories and programs; what emerged in chapels and synagogues were quickly transformed with various degrees of success across secular practices. Scholars and programs consisted of Gottman and his Love Lab, McManus' Marriage Education, Gordan's PAIRS, Guerny's IMAGO and the Relationship Enhancement program suggested by Sherod and Phyllis Miller (Kirby, 2005).

Besides, technology and urban living have brought difficulties of marriage and family into the social context; marital education courses and training classes nowadays are held weekly across the nations by means of numerous media sources. Stanley and Markman's PREP to David Olson's PREPARE/ENRICH established that marital counsellors have not met the market demand for services by providing annual seminars. Hence, much more research is required to facilitate growth and development in these areas (Hudson, 2008).

Additionally, a number of issues are recognized to have associated with marital satisfaction. Self-esteem is one of the factors has positive relation with marital satisfaction (Dethier, Counerotte and Blairy, 2011; Kang, Shaver, Sue, Min and Jing, 2003). Anxiety, stress, depression and meaning of life are another issues have relation with the quality of matrimony (Arrindell and Emmelkamp, 1986; Kalantarkousheh and Hassan, 2010c; Kulik, 2006; Whisman, Uebelacker and Weinstock, 2004) Bowen's (1978) differentiation of self is also one of the factors for marital satisfaction. Some research stated that Bowen's (1978) differentiation of self has an important role for level of satisfaction (Adams, 2003; Bartle-Haring and Lal; Glade, 2005). Spouses who have lower levels of differentiation have lower levels of satisfaction whereas those who have high levels of differentiation have higher levels of satisfaction. It seems that differentiation of self is similar with existential freedom so that existential freedom can be a predictor for marital satisfaction. In a research by Kalantarkousheh and his colleagues (2011d) indicated that existential I-Thou communication training, which results from the concept of existential freedom and has some similarities with the content of differentiation of self, has a positive impact on the quality of matrimony. Additionally, in a training reported by Lantz and Raiz (2004) using existential concepts improved marital relationship of couples participated in the training. In another research, Lantz also showed that the marital relationship of couples with chronic illness increased by existential training (1996). However, as far as the current findings are concern, there is no research to evaluate the impact of existential freedom on marital satisfaction.

Freedom is considered as one of the human principles and discussed in various fields of studies. The spiritual leaders believe in the great honor of freedom and they talked about it as an essential factor to meet God, Allah satisfactory. Moreover, freedom regarded as the final aim for a society. Existential philosophers regarded freedom as a major element in the quality of human life. Kierkegaard (2000) as the father of Existential thought views freedom as individual's power which leads to creativity in his / her life. In Existential thought, the belief is that people can receive whatever they want and whatever they choose; individuals are free to select what to make of their choice; they have freedom to choose their own course of action; and they can make meaning of

their life by themselves. Thus, it can be stated that, from Existential thought, the nature of human being is nothing but action based on free will (Sartre, 2003). Existentialists claim that free will is a force up on human beings; in other words, to have freedom and to choose are thrown on human beings.

Apart from having freedom, to have an awareness of this dimension of human being is a necessity. Existentialists have a great emphasize on awareness of human situation and one of their main concerns is that people become aware of the fact they have freedom during their life. Kierkegaard (2000) defines human's awareness of freedom as an individual's consciousness of real dimension. Indeed, human being by recognizing their potentialities in the world can live successfully. However, it seems that sometimes people don't hold such a belief; i.e., they don't accept in human freedom leading to the fact that most individuals living in the world are not aware of the capabilities arising from self-freedom.

From existential perspective human beings are constantly free within their situation to choose the meaning in their life, free to recreate his explanation of experience, free to reconsider and change them with his/her choice (Spinelli, 2007).

Individuals are responsible of how they want to use their freedom in realm of thinking, willing and possibilities and creating. As a result, individuals have power to take charge of their life. Sartre eloquently declares, "human being because he thrown in the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre, 2003).

Existential counsellors following the Existential thought pointed out that freedom is one of the human potentials needed to be acknowledged (Deurzen, 2002; Frankl, 1988; Kalantarkousheh, Hassan, Kadir and Talib, 2011a; Yalom, 1980). In this regard, awareness is acknowledged as significant critical concern for improving the quality of marriage (Kalantarkousheh and Aishah, 2011c; Kalantarkousheh, Hassan, Kadir and Talib, 2011b).

Existential counsellors explore the concept of freedom in two different worlds; the inner world of feelings and the outer world of the individuals. The inner world characterizes the values and perception of the individual. Ernesto Spinelli states: "our freedom does not consist of our ability to control or determine the stimuli that meet us every day. But the significance and the meaning we give to the stimuli and the interpretation of the event and how we experience it is a matter of choice" (2007, p. 105). Therefore a question arises: how we recognize our feeling of freedom to answer to our condition in life time? The outer world symbolizes all external conditions which explain the limitations of human freedom. Binswanger (1958) introduced three worlds; the natural world, which concerns the limitations of human, namely biophysical conditions; the social world, concerning the law and the society individuals are thrown into; the personal world, relating individuals' search for identity. Van Deurzen-Smith (2002) added a fourth dimension, the spiritual world, which concerning religion and spiritual beliefs. All of the aforementioned worlds are interrelated and therefore, human beings need to be aware of them. Furthermore, existential counselling is a process to develop understanding the outcomes that relate to individuals' actions. This process helps individuals to make a positive change in their life. However, the change cannot initiate until an individual recognizes responsibility. Indeed, people need to accept responsibility for their actions which have contributed to where they are now at life. If they have no responsibility, consequently people have little capability to change.

From the standpoint of existential counselling, satisfactory of life is depending on whether ones acknowledge and accept their freedom dimension as genuine. Thus, problem in life is sometimes a sign that important human dimension is not being sufficiently met (May, 1994). In the light of the above mentioned issues, if a client's awareness of existential freedom is not satisfied by counsellor, then it could be considered as a factor in decreasing the quality of life.

It seems that spouses within their life often lack knowledge about realms of freedom and corollaries of using freedom. This lack of understanding and awareness makes it difficult for them to have satisfaction in marital life. It should be noted that the degree of our awareness of how we are influenced by our drives, instincts, unconscious, environment and other people is controlling us. Therefore, it is the duty of existential counsellors to help spouses be aware of the dimensions of their freedom. The help leads spouses live more realistically out of their full awareness.

Even though, existential freedom is regarded as an important element in existential counselling process, to our knowledge, there is not any experimental research to evaluate the effect of existential freedom training on the quality of matrimony. As a matter of fact, being possibilities in existential counselling beside some similarities with some other theories which positively impact on marital satisfaction demands experimental research in realm of existential counselling to evaluate the effect of existential freedom on marital satisfaction as a token of quality of life. Therefore, it is the main goal of the present research to examine the effect of existential freedom training on marital satisfaction.

**Methodology:**

**Research Design:**

The aim of this experimental research was to illuminate effect of existential freedom training on marital satisfaction among Iranian women. The research is randomized control group, pretest-posttest design. Using same pretest and post test for both experimental and control group.

**Participants:**

Population for our research was Iranian women who informed by Ivanak health house center's advertizing. The center is located in second area of Tehran Municipality. The sampling procedure used in this research was randomly selected from those who earned middle mark (between 2.5 to 4 of 5) from the pre-test. Our sample is forty women and in each group of experimental and control are 20 participants which assigned randomly. Sample size calculations by Cohen (1988)'s rule using two-group comparison measures to determine a significant effect of existential freedom training with  $\alpha$  ( $p$ ) = .05, power = .70 and effect size = .80 indicated that at least sample size of 16 per group was needed as it calculated by G Power version3.

**Materials:**

Materials used in this study were two kinds of questionnaires. First one was demographics questionnaire including age, duration of their matrimony and number of children. Second one was marital satisfaction subscale of ENRICH. This scale was developed by Olson, Fournier and Druckman in 1985. The ENRICH scales have high levels of reliability and validity (Larsen and Olson, 1989; Larson and Olson, 2005; David H. Olson and Olson, 1999). ENRICH has been validated in various researches and confirmed solid reliability; Coefficient alpha reliabilities of the scales is .81 for Marital Satisfaction (Olson and Fowers, 1993). The translated version of ENRICH has been used in a study in Iran, in which the test-retest reliability with one week was .85 for marital satisfaction (Sanai, Alaghband and Hooman, 2000).

**Procedure:**

The study was conducted among Iranian women how informed by Ivanak health house center which located in second area of Tehran Municipality, Tehran, Iran.

The sampling procedure used in this research was randomly selected from those who earned middle mark (between 2.5 to 4 of 5) from the pre-test. Each group for experimental and control was 20 participants. The training held during three sessions (70 minutes per session). During the sessions experimental group received existential freedom training. Since main duty of existential marital counselling is helping spouses to be aware of their human dimensions, in our training, we intended to facilitate participants' awareness of the real dimension of human being, namely freedom. In particular, in our training, freedom is regarded as a chance for self-evolution. Past decision making is another subject in the training. The freedom-seekers notice that their experience in the past was the best because of their choosing of the experience to experience. They also received some info about two kinds of different worlds, namely the inner world of feelings and the outer world of the individuals, which are depend on existential freedom.

It is worthy to mention that, during the training the control group received some regular life skills rather than existential freedom training. Participants in both groups did not notice which of the two classes were regarded as the experimental or the control group. After the training, a post-test was conducted to the control group and the experimental group and the achieved data were analyzed to assess the effect of the training course.

**Null-Hypotheses:**

H01 There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean scores of marital satisfaction of the experimental group.

H02 There is no significant difference between the experimental and the control groups in their posttest mean scores of marital satisfaction.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The statistical computation used in this study was based on an equal number of 40 married women.

Descriptive findings of demographics questionnaire in two groups before the training

The average age of participants in experimental group was 38.11 years ( $SD = 6.91$ ) ranged from 28 to 46 years. In control group was 39.5 years ( $SD = 4.73$ ) ranged from 28 to 48 years. Furthermore, the number of children in the experimental group is 1 to 4 and in the control group is the same. Moreover, duration of marriage in experimental group is 4 to 26 ( $M = 16$ ) and in control group is 1 to 30 ( $M = 15.8$ ).

**Homogeneity Test of Marital Satisfaction in Experimental group and Control Group:**

Levene’s Test was performed to identify the homogeneity of outcome variable, namely marital satisfaction, between the two groups' pre-test score.

When we run Levene's Test of Equality of Variances, in SPSS, then we got a result similar to the table 1. Since the significance level in pre test of the marital satisfaction scale is greater than .05, then our group variances treated as equal and we have not violated the assumption of homogeneity of variance.

**Null- Hypothesis Tests:**

The results of null-hypothesis testing are presented in Tables 2. A paired-samples t-test indicated that scores were significantly higher for posttest of the experimental group ( $M = 3.53, SD = \pm.519$ ) than for the pretest of the experimental group ( $M = 3.10, SD = .670$ ),  $t (19) = 4.45, p < .05, d = 0.70$ . Therefore H01 is rejected. Additionally, an independent-samples t-test indicated that scores were significantly higher for post test of the experimental group ( $M = 3.53, SD = .519$ ) than for post test of the control group ( $M = 3.13, SD = .757$ ),  $t (19) = 1.94, p < .05, d = 0.59$ . Therefore, it can be concluded that our second null hypothesis rejected.

**Table 1:** Homogeneity Tests of Marital Satisfaction between experimental and control.

Variable	Groups		Levene's Test
	Experimental (n=20)	Control (n=20)	sig
Marital Satisfaction	$M \pm SD$ 3.10 ±.67	$M \pm SD$ 3.11 ±.65	.79

**Table 2:** Mean Comparisons on Outcome the Variable between the Experimental and Control groups.

Variable	Group	Pre test $M \pm SD$	Post test $M \pm SD$	t	p	Effect Size
Marital Satisfaction	Experimental group (n=20)	3.10±.670	3.53±.519	4.45	.000	.70
	Control group (n=20)	3.11 ±.655	3.13±.757	.56	.959	
	Experimental group (n=20) Control group (n=20)		3.53±.519 3.13±.757	1.94	.000	.60

**Discussion and Conclusion:**

The main goal of this research was to determine whether existential freedom training would help increase marital satisfaction of Iranian women. Primarily, the researcher conducted the pre-test for 60 women. The evaluation of its result showed that 40 women were in the middle score in marital satisfaction; among which twenty were randomly selected for the experimental group and twenty for the control group. This research revealed that existential freedom training had positive effect on improving marital satisfaction.

Our findings support previous literature. As was mentioned earlier, awareness of existential freedom improves marital satisfaction. Therefore, the present findings are in line with the research indicated that awareness of freedom has important role in the quality of life (Kalantarkousheh, *et al.*, 2011a, 2011b). Additionally, the findings sustain the research reported that I-Thou communication training and differentiation of self which are depend on existential freedom, improve matrimonial quality (Adams, 2003; Bartle-Haring and Lal; Glade, 2005; Kalantarkousheh and Hassan, 2011d).

Additionally, the results of the present research are in line with research by Lantz and Raiz (2004) and also by Lentz (1996) were indicating that using existential issues have a positive impact on the quality of spousal life.

The limitation of this study lies in the single gender of the participants, wherein studies on males would be necessary to establish the benefits of the training on existential freedom in improving marital satisfaction for both partners in a marriage. Additionally, an Iranian sample population implies that the results of this study may not be widely generalizable to populations in other countries and cultures.

Consequently, the scope of future work would require the application of existential freedom training to enhance matrimonial satisfaction in: a larger and broadly stratified sample, on couples, various socio-cultural settings, or in a longitudinal study.

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