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Comparing the Effectiveness of Pre-Marriage Training Package and SYMBIS Training on Self-Differentiation in Marriage Applicants

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of the current investigation is to evaluate the relative efficacy of a premarital training program in comparison to the SYMBIS training on the self-differentiation among prospective marriage participants.

Methods: This research employed a quasi-experimental design incorporating pre-test and post-test assessments alongside a control group and a follow-up phase. The statistical population for this study comprised all individuals seeking marriage in Khomein County. The sample consisted of 48 participants (24 couples) who were allocated into three groups of 16 participants each (two experimental groups and one control group). The initial sampling was conducted through a process of availability and ensured complete satisfaction of all members involved. The allocation of participants to either the experimental or control groups was executed through a random process. The instrument utilized for data collection was the differentiation questionnaire developed by Skorn and Freelander (1998). Data analysis was conducted using the covariance test with repeated measures within the SPSS version 26 software environment.

Results: The results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the developed intervention and the SYMBIS approach; however, a significant difference was observed between both interventions and the control group.

Conclusions: The findings derived from this study are anticipated to assist numerous educational and therapeutic institutions in formulating essential programs related to premarital education, taking into consideration the identified factors.

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Introduction

Youth represent the most crucial and productive demographic within the human resource framework of any society, consistently attracting the attention of sociologists and policymakers alike. Among the youth, the institution of marriage emerges as the most significant and foundational decision in an individual's life trajectory (Bethmann & Kvasnicka, 2011). The selection of a marital partner constitutes a multifaceted issue, posing a choice that profoundly impacts one's future existence. Should individuals elect a spouse devoid of informed awareness, lacking appropriate criteria and a comprehensive understanding of their prospective life, and do so haphazardly without prior strategic planning, adequate assessment, or foresight concerning marriage, it is likely that future difficulties and conflicts may manifest between partners throughout their marital journey (Seaman et al., 2016). Consequently, the evaluation and measurement of premarital patterns, alongside the timely implementation of interventions, can facilitate the fortification and stabilization of marriage, diminish divorce rates, and enhance the overall quality of marital unions (Khosravi et al., 2022). Expectations surrounding marriage are inherently cognitive constructs, with empirical research indicating that numerous individuals harbor unrealistic anticipations regarding marriage and their life partner, often expecting their spouse to compensate for all inadequacies and deficiencies experienced prior to marriage (Pashib et al., 2017).

One of the phenomena significantly influenced by the dynamics and interactions among family members is the concept of differentiation (Naeimi et al., 2015). This notion was initially articulated by Bowen. According to Bowen, differentiation encompasses the attainment of a level of emotional autonomy that empowers an individual to make rational and independent choices in emotional contexts without succumbing to the emotional milieu of those situations (Yosefi et al., 2017). In the exploration of differentiation, two distinct levels can be conceptualized: the first being an internal process, which entails the elements of ego status and emotional reactivity, and the second manifesting within interpersonal relationships, comprising the aspects of integration with others and emotional disengagement (Naeimi et al., 2015). Individuals exhibiting low differentiation are characterized by a profound intertwining of intellect and emotion, rendering their lives susceptible to external influences and predisposing them to engage in detrimental behaviors. Conversely, individuals demonstrating high differentiation possess reduced emotional

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reactivity, the capacity to sustain an independent stance (I) in relational contexts, low emotional detachment, moderate integration, and experience fewer interpersonal conflicts throughout their daily interactions compared to those with lower differentiation (Skowron et al., 2009). Livne et al. (1993) assert that the construct of differentiation, as articulated by Bowen, serves as a conduit for comprehending the phenomenon of codependency (Rozhnova et al., 2020). Within the framework of differentiation, the intricate balance between independence and dependence is subject to fluctuation; this encompasses the individual's capacity to engage and self-regulate emotionally in relation to significant relationships with others, a capacity that is indispensable for fostering high levels of intimacy within marital relationships (Rodríguez-González et al., 2016). In the current investigation, a comparative analysis was conducted between the premarital education package and the standard Symbiosis education package, with the objective of optimizing the differentiation among individuals seeking marriage. A prominent technique employed in premarital enrichment counseling is the SYMBIS method, which underscores seven fundamental categories during the dating and engagement phases, thereby enabling couples to acquire essential skills and enhance their communication competencies (Ghezelseflo & Rostami, 2021; Parrott & Parrott, 2013). Within this framework, Parrott and Parrott (2015) address seven pivotal inquiries pertinent to couples in the dating and engagement phases. The initial inquiry pertains to misconceptions surrounding marriage; this section critically examines detrimental and erroneous beliefs that adversely impact marital relationships and future cohabitation. According to Parrott and Parrott, marital issues are, to a considerable extent, influenced by an array of misconceptions regarding the ideal marital construct and pervasive falsehoods, which this section seeks to rectify. The subsequent inquiry focuses on the couple's lovemaking style; this segment scrutinizes the various elements and dimensions of love and highlights the necessity for couples to prioritize these aspects to sustain their romantic connection. The third inquiry addresses the concept of happiness within marriage, concentrating on the individuals comprising the couple rather than the marital union itself, since it is the couple's individual perceptions that contribute to their happiness. The fourth inquiry pertains to the dynamics of understanding and being understood; this section endeavors to facilitate enhanced comprehension and mutual understanding among couples. This segment accentuates the importance of effective communication, thereby establishing a robust foundation for communication skills during the nascent stages of marriage. The fifth inquiry within this

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methodology explores the distinctions between genders; the dialogues encompassed in this section aid couples in gaining insight into their partners, noting the influence of gender on thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Should each couple duly acknowledge these differences, they will cultivate a potent reservoir of intimacy within their marriage. The sixth inquiry concerns conflict resolution; this segment elucidates methods for couples to navigate conflicts while concurrently minimizing aggression to the greatest extent feasible. The seventh and concluding inquiry pertains to profound understanding and the spiritual dimension, regarded as the quintessential element of a robust marriage. This section initiates the discussion by exploring the necessity for spiritual intimacy and subsequently investigates strategies to nurture the spiritual essence of marriage (Parrott & Parrott, 2015).

Shaafizadeh et al. (2020), in a scholarly article entitled The Effectiveness of Premarital Education Using the Symbiosis Method on Marital Differentiation, Attitudes, and Expectations Among Single Girls at Hormozgan University, asserted that premarital education utilizing the SYMBIS model possessed a statistically significant impact on differentiation. Odero (2018) demonstrated in his research that a premarital education initiative can serve a pivotal role in enhancing marital quality. Additionally, VanBergen et al. (2021) ascertained through their study that couples exhibiting lower levels of differentiation tend to display diminished emotional maturity and a reduced capacity for intimacy and independence, whereas couples characterized by higher differentiation typically exhibit enhanced flexibility and greater intimacy.

In the context of Iran, numerous investigations have been undertaken regarding premarital education; however, insufficient emphasis has been placed on the beliefs associated with spouse selection. Nevertheless, it appears that should there exist a malfunction in these beliefs, it would be prudent to identify such issues prior to marriage and during the spouse selection phase, thereby utilizing the insights gained to inform the design of educational programs at a macro level and within the realm of premarital education. While a variety of studies have been performed to assess the efficacy of premarital education, there exists a notable scarcity of domestic research aimed at formulating a premarital education package and juxtaposing its effectiveness with the SYMBIS approach concerning differentiation, intimacy, and self-efficacy in marriage, as a holistic and integrative methodology. Consequently, the current investigation aspires to address the inquiry of whether a distinction exists between the effectiveness of a developed premarital education package

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and the Symbiosis approach on differentiation among marriage candidates who seek counsel at counseling centers.

Material and Methods

In the current investigation, a quasi-experimental methodology characterized by a pretest-posttest framework, inclusive of a control group and a subsequent follow-up phase, was employed. The statistical population pertinent to this research encompassed all individuals applying for marriage within Khomein County, who had engaged in romantic relationships for a minimum duration of six months and a maximum of 24 months, and were aged between 18 and 40 years. The statistical sample was comprised of 48 participants (24 couples) who were allocated into three distinct groups of 16 individuals (two experimental groups and one control group). The initial sampling was conducted through accessible means, ensuring complete satisfaction among all members. The allocation of participants to experimental and control groups was executed through a process of randomization.

In the current investigation, the differentiation of self inventory devised by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) was utilized as the primary instrument for data collection. This questionnaire is a comprehensive tool consisting of 46 items designed to assess the differentiation levels of individuals. It emphasizes critical life connections and the present relationships individuals maintain with their families of origin. The instrument encompasses four subscales: emotional reactivity, personal position, emotional detachment, and integration with others. Items 1, 6, 10, 14, 18, 21, 26, 30, 34, 38, and 40 pertain to emotional reactivity, items 4, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31, 35, 41, and 43 pertain to personal position, items 2, 3, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, 32, 36, 39, and 42 pertain to emotional detachment, while items 5, 9, 13, 17, 22, 25, 29, 33, 37, 44, 45, and 46 pertain to integration with others. The questionnaire employs a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 6 (completely true of me). Each item receives a score within the range of 1 to 6, with option 1 assigned a score of 1 and option 6 assigned a score of 6. The maximum attainable score on the questionnaire is 276. Certain items are reverse-scored, as delineated in the question table. A lower score on this instrument signifies diminished levels of differentiation. Skowron and Friedlander (1998) reported the internal consistency of the questionnaire and its subtests, with Cronbach's alpha values as follows: total questionnaire 0.88, emotional reactivity 0.83, emotional

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detachment 0.80, integration with others 0.82, and personal position 0.80. The reliability coefficients for the questionnaire and its subtests within the Iranian sample, as indicated by Fakhari et al. (2014), were 0.75 for the overall questionnaire. In the present study, the reliability of this questionnaire was computed utilizing the Cronbach's alpha technique, yielding a value of 0.77.

The SYMBIS premarital education program is structured to include eight sessions, each conducted on a weekly basis, with session durations ranging from 90 to 120 minutes. A detailed description of the sessions is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of SYMBIS premarital education sessions

Session	Content
1	Title: Discussion of the problem; (Definition of love, and the importance and necessity of premarital education)
2	Agenda: Establishing a relationship, introducing members to each other, introducing the program and goal of premarital education with the SYMBIS model, and discussing the importance of premarital education.
3	Assignment: Each member should write down their opinion on the necessity of participating in premarital education sessions.
4	Title: Finding a solution to the problem (Creating an attitude in life)
5	Agenda: Receiving feedback from the previous session, reviewing homework assignments and summarizing the previous session, defining attitude, components of attitude, how it is formed, characteristics and factors affecting the formation of attitudes, feedback and discussion about the session.
6	Assignment: Each person should think about the issue of online marriage and try to self-talk about their attitude towards this issue using the cycle of awareness.
7	Title: Explaining Gender Differences
8	Agenda: Receive feedback from the previous session, review assignments and summarize the previous session, define gender differences (physical, cognitive, emotional), define different reactions of the two sexes in different moods, ways to motivate spouses.

The educational module formulated by the researcher comprises nine distinct sessions, with each session ranging in duration from 90 to 120 minutes. The credibility of this instrument has been substantiated through the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) methodology and the insights of subject matter experts. A comprehensive outline of the sessions is delineated in Table 2.

Table 2. Synopsis of sessions within the formulated premarital education module

Session	Content
1	Group members get to know each other and familiarize themselves with the concepts of life skills and marital life skills.
2	Conversation skills training; familiarization with various conversation styles, the most appropriate time to use conversation skills, components of conversation (verbal and non-verbal elements), rules related to the speaker and listener.
3	Continued conversation skills training; familiarization with destructive conversation patterns and ways to prevent them, examining factors that enhance conversation, discussing listening and its obstacles, examining factors affecting the quality of conversation.
4	Anger control skills training; explanation of anger and its function in relationships, presenting various anger management styles, examining how to deal with one's own anger and deal with an angry partner, presenting anger control strategies and responding to criticism such as leaving the situation and ...

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5	Sexual communication skills training; Examining human sexual responses, explaining points regarding sexual desire in women and men, examining the importance of candidates talking to each other regarding sexual issues, explaining factors and situations that can hide differences in sexual desire.
6	Conflict/problem resolution skills training; examining processes and issues that generate conflict, recognizing signs of hidden problems, presenting conflict resolution approaches, discussing the evaluation and change of annoying strategies, presenting eight annoying strategies, describing conflict resolution styles, examining the ultimate steps in conflict resolution.
7	Mutual reinforcement skills training/training the skill of identifying and changing cognitive distortions; Training in the skill of reciprocal reinforcement, presenting the method of implementing reciprocal reinforcement and the obstacles to its implementation, training in the skill of identifying and changing cognitive distortions, examining the types of cognitive distortions.
8	Training in the skill of understanding and changing wrong behaviors; discussing transfer distortion, making a distinction between the candidate and his parents, the conditions that provoke transfer distortion, transfer distortion versus using one's past experiences, trying to identify the nature of transfer distortion, identifying defenses against the candidate, confronting one's own defenses, and finally identifying expectations and rules about the fiancé.
9	Summarizing the discussions and concluding the course; presenting a summary of all the discussions with the participation of members during the course.

The ethical considerations pertinent to the research are as follows:

1- Securing informed consent from the participants engaged in the research while ensuring that they are aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any point.

2- Every individual participating in the research possesses the autonomy to select a pseudonym to preserve their anonymity.

3- Guaranteeing that the data acquired from the participants is treated with confidentiality and is not disseminated publicly.

4- The researcher ethically honored each individual engaged in the research process and refrained from any form of discrimination.

Descriptive statistical methods, including mean and standard deviation, alongside inferential statistical techniques such as repeated measures analysis of variance and the Bonferroni post hoc test, were employed for the analysis of data. It is important to note that the significance threshold for the hypotheses was established at $P<0.05$, and the data analysis was conducted utilizing the SPSS-26 software platform.

Results

The mean and standard deviation of the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up scores of the dependent variable of the study for the experimental and control groups are presented in Table 3.

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Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of differentiation in the three groups in the three stages of pre-test, post-test, and follow-up

Indices	Group	Phase		
		Pretest	Posttest	Follow-up
Mean	Developed package	42.40	47.30	40.80
	SYMBIS	42.70	44.30	47.40
	Control	43.60	43.50	43.40
SD	Developed package	1.64	9.83	9.54
	SYMBIS	1.88	2.003	2.67
	Control	1.35	1.43	1.43

As can be seen in this table, the mean scores of the variables in the experimental groups in the pre-test stage are different from the post-test stage. This difference still persists in the follow-up stage. However, in the control group, the differences in the scores in the variables in the three stages of evaluation (pre-test, post-test, and follow-up) are not significantly different.

In order to compare the effectiveness of the package developed with the SYMBIS approach on differentiation in marriage applicants, analysis of variance with repeated measures was used. This test has assumptions that must be observed before implementation. Including the assumption of homogeneity of variances between groups and the assumption of homogeneity of variances within groups (Sphericity).

Levene's test was used to examine the assumption of homogeneity of variances; considering the p-value for the dependent variable, which indicated non-significance, the condition of equality of variances between groups was observed and the amount of variance of the dependent variable error was equal in all groups.

The assumption of sphericity (equality of variance of the difference of all pairs of repeated measurements) was examined by performing the Mauchly's test. In this test, the Mauchly coefficient was equal to 0.536 and the chi-square was equal to 214.16. Also, the significance level of the test was estimated as desirable ($p < 0.05$).

In the following, Table 4 shows the results of repeated measures analysis of variance for the differentiation variable in the three groups during three stages.

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Table 4. Results of repeated measures analysis of variance for the differentiation variable in the three groups during three stages

Source	SS	DF	MS	F	P	Eta
Between subjects						
Group	6316.02	2	3158.01	65.36	0.001	0.829
Error	1304.46	27	48.31			
Within subjects						
Factor	5704.02	1.366	4175.30	258.60	0.001	0.905
Factor * Group	2864.44	2.73	1041.78	64.52	0.001	0.827
Error	595.53	36.88	16.14			

Table 4 shows that there is a significant difference between the differentiation variable in the experimental and control groups (F=65.36 and $p < 0.05$). Also, a significant difference was obtained between differentiation in the pre-test, post-test and follow-up stages (F=258.60 and $p < 0.05$). Finally, the trend of change in differentiation scores from pre-test to post-test and follow-up in the groups was significant (F=64.52 and $p < 0.05$). According to the observed averages, the trend of change in scores from pre-test to post-test and follow-up in the two experimental groups was increasing, and the slope of decrease was greater in the developed intervention group. As a result, it can be said that the developed intervention and the SYMBIS protocol are effective. In order to determine which intervention has a greater effect on differentiation, the Bonferroni post hoc test was used.

Table 5. Bonferroni test for pairwise comparison of groups in the differentiation variable

Groups	Mean difference	SD	P
Developed intervention- SYMBIS	2.03	1.79	0.802
Developed intervention-Control	-16.67	1.79	0.001
SYMBIS-Control	-18.70	1.79	0.001

A pairwise analysis through pairwise comparisons showed that there is no significant difference between the developed intervention and SYMBIS but there is a significant difference between these two treatments and the control group ($p < 0.001$).

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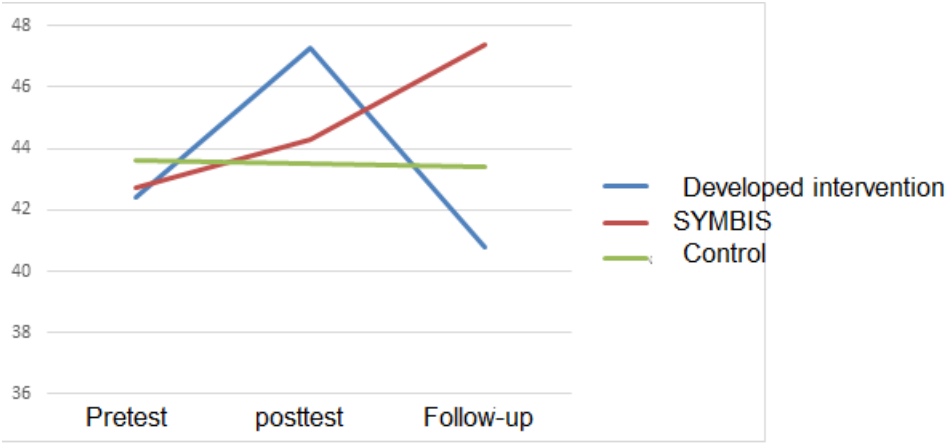


Figure 1. The average score of the post-test phase compared to the score of the pre-test and follow-up phases in the experimental groups

In figure 1, it can be seen that the average score of the post-test phase was lower than the score of the pre-test and follow-up phases in the experimental groups. This indicates the effect of both therapeutic interventions on the differentiation component, although the effect of these interventions decreased slightly in the follow-up phase compared to the post-test phase, but this effect was still significant compared to the pre-test phase and the overall treatment. It can also be seen in this graph that the developed intervention had a greater effect on increasing differentiation in the post-test and follow-up phases compared to the SYMBIS protocol, but this difference was minor and not statistically significant.

Discussion

Based on the empirical evidence gathered in this investigation, it has been ascertained that both the developed educational package and the SYMBIS intervention exert an influence on the differentiation of marriage applicants; however, the efficacy of these two modalities does not exhibit a statistically significant disparity. This observation corroborates the findings presented in the scholarly works of Shaafizadeh et al. (2020), Odero (2018), and Ghezelseflo and Rostami (2021). The aforementioned studies collectively affirm that the implementation of premarital education courses can mitigate tensions between couples while simultaneously enhancing their positive psychological attributes. The current results indicate that the educational package formulated by the organizers of this research possesses commendable efficacy, which is nearly

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equivalent to that of the established protocol (SYMBIS), thereby suggesting that this instructional package may be utilized to foster positive psychological attributes among marriage applicants.

In elucidating this finding, one might assert that the educational materials employed in this study are predicated upon mutual understanding and constructive communication between partners; furthermore, as posited by Licht and Chabot (2006), individuals with high differentiation exhibit the capacity to integrate cognitive and emotional processes. Such individuals demonstrate a profound ability to cultivate intimacy with others while simultaneously preserving their individual identity, allowing for an authentic self-representation. Conversely, individuals with low levels of differentiation exhibit diminished capacity to engage in cognitive processing during emotionally charged situations. Less differentiated persons may construct a façade of independence, struggling to reconcile cognitive and emotional aspects, thereby becoming susceptible to emotional fluctuations within interpersonal dynamics; thus, it is plausible that the current educational packages yield a favorable impact on the differentiation variable.

In general, four salient factors are associated with an individual's level of differentiation: firstly, undifferentiated individuals exhibit emotional reactivity, whereas highly differentiated individuals are not easily overwhelmed by their emotions. Secondly, individuals with high differentiation are capable of asserting their personal positions and articulating their feelings and thoughts without requiring affirmation from others. Thirdly, in instances of profound interpersonal experiences, undifferentiated individuals tend to withdraw from others and their emotions, while differentiated individuals do not necessitate emotional detachment. Lastly, individuals with elevated differentiation possess the ability to cultivate distinct relationships, whereas low differentiation results in emotional amalgamation with others (Peleg-Popko, 2002). All factors delineated in the two training protocols (particularly the developmental protocol) of this study were evident and are conspicuously observable in the training sessions. Within these training sessions, efforts are made to first regulate the emotions of the couples in a constructive manner to alleviate tension between them. Second, the couples are encouraged to articulate their perspectives on contemporary life issues within an environment characterized by logic and intimacy. Third, they are instructed to refrain from conflating their emotions with those of their spouse during moments of emotional intensity. Finally, they are guided to establish an effective and constructive relationship with their partner.

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The findings of this research will assist numerous educational and therapeutic institutions in formulating essential programs pertinent to premarital education, taking into account the identified determinants. In this context, it is recommended that the outcomes of the current investigation, particularly the premarital education protocol, be disseminated to marriage counselors and psychologists in a booklet format, thereby enabling them to enhance positive psychological attributes among couples pursuing marriage.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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