

## **Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Training Based on Gottman's Theory on Marital Conflicts and Marital Instability**

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### **Abstract**

**Aim:** The goal of this study was to investigate the effect of Gottman's theory-based training on the reduction of couples' marital conflict and marital instability.

**Methods:** The research method was quasi-experimental with the pretest-posttest control-group design, and the population of this study was comprised of all the married couples in Shiraz, Iran in 2015-16. They were selected by the convenience sampling method, and after the interview, and were randomly assigned into two (28) groups. To collect the data, descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, frequency and frequency percentage, as well as inferential statistics including analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) and (ANCOVA) were used to test the hypotheses. Subsequently, the experimental group was given the considered training during 7 sessions, and the questionnaires were, finally, completed again by both groups.

**Findings:** Based on the findings of this study, Gottman's theory-based training has had a significant effect ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) on the reduction of marital conflict and marital instability of married couples.

**Conclusion:** It was concluded that Gottman's theory-based intervention is able to reduce the level of marital conflict and its components and marital instability significantly in the experimental group.

**Keywords:** Resilience, Children, Youth, Psychometrics

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## **Introduction**

Most of adults all over the world have the desire to marry, and most of them marry. This means that marriage or at least cohabitation is composed of a stable evolutionary strategy, which maximizes adjustment at large [1]. Marital satisfaction is the individual's overall assessment of the marital relationship [2]. Marital adjustment is a changing process that contains four dimensions of the couples' performance, including marital satisfaction, commitment to marriage, agreement and mutual understanding in marriage, and the couples' expression of their feelings and emotions in the family [3]. Divorce in Iran is soaring. Since 2006, the rate of divorce has increased more than one half time to the point where around 20 percent of marriages now end in divorce. According to the official statistics, in the first two months of this Iranian calendar year (late March to late May) alone, more than 21,000 divorce cases were logged [4]. Marital relationship requires that the couples learn how they are both related and also distinct from each other. Conflict arises when individual differences are not understood [5]. The concept of marital instability refers to the couple's tendency for divorce [6]. According to Gottman (1999), the couples should learn how to lighten the atmosphere, regain their calm, and focus their attention again. They should realize how "different intense emotions" can

be adjusted and modified [7]. One of the efficient methods to solve the marital problems and conflicts and prevent marital distress and divorce is skills training, which is considered as one of the marriage enrichment programs [8]. Behavioral-systematic couple therapy is basically a problem-solving approach [9]. This theory is, in fact, an approach, which the therapists use to change the couple's interaction process [10]. Goudarzi and Boustani pour realized that systematic-behavioral couple therapy is effective in the level of marital maladjustment [11]. Kazemi and colleagues used the training method of Gottman, who has carried out detailed longitudinal research on the factors affecting the maintenance and enhancement of marital relationships [7]. Review of the results indicated that the training program used increased marital satisfaction and mental health in the experimental group; these changes were preserved during one month of follow-up. Moreover, the study by Westerop [2002] on the participants in the marriage communication skills training program in Gottman's [1999] method showed considerable improvement in communication skills as well as in its stability over time [7]. Gottman and Porterfield discovered that there is a relationship between marital satisfaction (for both sides) and the husband's ability for accurate understanding of the spouse's

nonverbal messages [12]. In a study that was conducted on the participants in the marriage communication skills training program in Gottman's [1999] method for stabilization of marital relationships, both the participants themselves and their spouses showed improvement in communication skills, which remained for a long period. The hope for relationship improvement also increased, and the women gained better communication skills [7]. Based on what was stated above, it can be said that the everyday and often fleeting moments a couple experience together can lead to the health or destruction of a relationship [13]. Furthermore, one of the important problems of marital life is the phenomenon of divorce. The increasing prevalence of this phenomenon has made the researchers and theorists in the field of family and marriage investigate and explore its causes and the factors affecting it [14]. This study was done with the goal of evaluating the effect of Gottman's theory-based training on the reduction of couples' marital conflict and marital instability.

### **Methodology**

The research method was quasi-experimental with the pretest-posttest control-group design, and the population (28) of this study was comprised of all the married couples in Shiraz, Iran in 2015-16, who were selected by the convenience sampling method, and after the

interview, and were randomly assigned into two groups. In this study, by means of the convenience sampling method, an interview was done with a number of volunteering married couples, who were willing to participate in the training classes through a newspaper ad. From among the qualified married couples (interval of maximum 13 years after marriage, having the minimum age of 26 years, and the maximum age of 46 years, and having the minimum degree of diploma), and then reassuring them about the anonymity of questionnaires and confidentiality of their information, 28 couples were selected, and 14 couples were randomly assigned in each of the two experimental and control groups. It is to be noted that the sample group was homologized in terms of demographic characteristics. The experimental group was given the considered training during seven 2-hour sessions. After training, the questionnaires were presented, and about one week later, they were completed again. Subsequently, the results were analyzed. In this study, descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, frequency and frequency percentage and also inferential statistics including analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) and (ANCOVA) were used to test the hypotheses. The number and content of the training program sessions based Gottman's approach given in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Research training program based on Guttman’s approach

Sessions	Content of training program
1	Examining ways of improving the relationship of love between the couples by increasing their knowledge of themselves and spouses in personal, emotional, cognitive, philosophical, intellectual, interest and taste areas. Understanding the emotional world of spouses and understanding the concerns and improving the cognitive space of each of the spouses about each other.
2	Teaching effective ways to increase love, respect and positive interaction between the couples, revival of positive emotions, increasing gratitude, enhancing the ability to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the spouses, addressing the privileges of marriage history and philosophy of life, and substituting a more positive attitude toward the spouse.
3	Focusing on being close to each other and increasing the scale of intimacy, effective ways of listening and speaking (in other words, effective communication skills, as well as ways of attracting the attention and affection of the other partner), and finally, investigating factors causing coldness in the relationship and fixing them.
4	Teaching the importance of accepting the spouse and involving partners in decision-making and respecting his/her opinions and feelings, exercising to investigate the forms of men’s resistance to be involved in decision-making with their wives, measures to enhance the emotional feelings, and acceptance of surrender.
5	Learning ways to solve problems, identifying arguments, teaching the use of compensatory measures, paying attention to their physiology during debates, and different methods of relaxation, as well as ways to solve particular problems
6	Ways to overcome permanent and indissoluble difficulties, paying attention to dreams and deep inner causes of these problems, exercises to explore dreams, working on cases reached a dead end, calming each other, and agreeing on insoluble problems.
7	Empowering partners to create a common concept in their married life through the creation of inner life by both spouses, and exercises to reach common ground and values by exploring the symbols, rituals, roles, goals and family rituals.

Two questionnaires were used in this study:

**A) Revised Marital Conflict Questionnaire (R-MCQ)**

This questionnaire is a 54-question tool, which has been developed to assess couple conflicts based on the clinical experiences of Sanayi, Barati and Boustanipor [15]. This questionnaire assesses eight dimensions of marital conflict as follows: reduction of cooperation, reduction of sex, increase of emotional reactions, increase of gaining children’s support, increase of personal relationship with the relatives, reduction of family relationship with the relatives of the spouse and friends, separating finances from each other, and reduction of effective communication. Grading of the items is as

follows: *never* [1], *rarely* [2], *sometimes* [3], *often* [4], and *always* [5]. Questions 3, 11, 14, 26, 30, 33, 45, 47, and 54 are graded in reverse. In the study by Ahmadi and colleagues, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of the 42-item questionnaire for the entire questionnaire was reported as 0.94 [5], and in the study by Afkhami and colleagues, it was 0.94 [16]. In this study, Cronbach’s alpha was obtained as 0.88, and for the subscales of reduction of cooperation, reduction of sex, emotional reactions, gaining children’s support, personal relationship with the relatives, with the relatives of the spouse, finance, and effective communication, the obtained coefficients were 0.68, 0.69, 0.73, 0.67, 0.75, 0.82, 0.88 and 0.79, respectively.

**B) Marital Instability Index (MII)**

Marital instability index (MII) is a 14-question tool, which was developed by Edwards and colleagues to measure marital instability and specifically divorce proneness [17]. The responses to divorce proneness were collected. Marital instability index (MII), with the Cronbach's alpha of 0.93, had an excellent internal consistency [15]. In the study by Yari pour to calculate the validity coefficient of this tool, the method of the correlation between the two halves was used to assess the test's validity, and the validity coefficient was reported as 0.70 [18, 19]. In the study by

Ahmadi et al. [5], the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire questionnaire was reported as 0.92. The Cronbach's alpha in this study was obtained as 0.75.

**Findings**

According to Table 2, the frequency and percentage of demographic variables included: gender, (female (14), male (14), number of children, (without children, one or two children), degree, (diploma, postgraduate, bachelor's and master's degrees, PhD (age, (20-40 up), financial status, occupation and duration of marriage).

**Table 2:** Frequency and frequency percentage of the demographic variables

Variable	Group	Experiment		Control	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	14	50	14	50
	Male	14	50	14	50
Number of children	No child	14	50	4	14
	1 child	8	23	20	72
	2 children	6	27	4	14
Educational level	Diploma	4	14	5	18
	AD	4	14	3	11
	BA	11	40	13	46
	MA	8	29	5	18
	PhD	1	4	2	7
Age	20 to 30	9	32	9	32
	30 to 40	15	54	15	54
	40 and higher	4	14	4	14
Financial status	Average	10	36	6	21
	Good	8	28	10	36
	Very good	10	36	12	43
Job	Household	8	29	11	40
	Freelance	13	46	10	36
	Employed	7	25	7	24
Marriage duration	1 to 5 years	14	50	18	64
	5 to 10 years	8	29	4	14
	10 to 15 years	6	21	6	22

Based on Table 3 and the obtained levels of significance ( $\alpha=0.05$ ), there is a significant

difference between the total score of marital conflict in the posttest control-group and

pretest control-group scores, but there is no significant difference in instability between the two groups. In other words, Gottman's

theory-based training has a significant effect only on the reduction of marital conflict.

**Table 3:** Gottman's theory-based training effect on the reduction of marital conflict and marital instability

Variance	Variance	SS	Df	MS	F	P
Intergroup	Conflict	9162.08	1	9162.08	92.87	0.001
	Instability	39.954	1	39.954	3.33	0.136
Intragroup	Conflict	3354.053	34	98.64		
	Instability	582.108	34	17.12		
Total	Conflict	469195.00	38	9162.08		
	Instability	16495.00	38	39.954		

According to the data given in Table 4 and the obtained level of significance ( $\alpha=0.05$ ), there is a significant difference between the dimensions of reduction of cooperation, reduction of sex, increase of emotions, increase of children's support, increase of relationship with the relatives of the spouse,

finance and reduction of effective communication in the posttest control-group and pretest control-group scores, and Gottman's theory-based training has a significant effect on most of the dimensions of marital conflict, except for communication with the relatives.

**Table 4:** Effect of Gottman's theory-based training on the reduction of dimensions of marital conflict

Variance	Variance	SS	Df	MS	F	P
Intergroup	Cooperation	20.19	1	20.19	4.70	0.039
	Sex	39.81	1	39.81	8.81	0.006
	Emotional	39.66	1	39.66	4.44	0.044
	Children's support	25.51	1	25.51	4.15	0.051
	The relatives	2.28	1	2.28	0.141	0.710
	The relatives of the spouse	50.22	1	50.22	29.88	0.000
	Finance	33.69	1	33.69	5.49	0.026
	Effective communication	165.86	1	165.86	10.20	0.136
Intragroup	Cooperation	120.26	28			
	Sex	126.50	28			
	Emotional	250.05	28			
	Children's support	172.25	28			
	The relatives	454.81	28			
	The relatives of the spouse	47.06	28			
	Finance	171.75	28			
	Effective communication	454.058	28			
Total	Cooperation	2974.00	36			
	Sex	4684.00	36			
	Emotional	9047.00	36			
	Children's support	3974.00	36			
	The relatives	5140.00	36			
	The relatives of the spouse	2547.00	36			
	Finance	8862.00	36			
	Effective communication	42324.00	36			

As shown in Table 5, F-value has become significant in the pretest score of marital instability [F (1 and 53) =47.528,  $p < 0.0001$ ] and in the group [F (1 and 53) = 5.421,

$p < 0.0023$ ]. It can be, therefore, said that Gottman's theory-based training has a significant effect ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) on the reduction of marital instability.

**Table 5:** Effect of Gottman's theory-based training on the reduction of marital instability

Variable	Sum of squares	DF	Mean of squares	F-value	Sig. level
Pretest score	721.43	1	721.43	47.528	0.001
Group	82.74	1	82.74	5.421	0.023
Error	804.49	53	15.179		

As can be observed in Table 6, the level of significance of multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) ( $p \leq 0.117$ ) is larger than the level of significance ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ); thus,

the effect of Gottman's theory-based training on reduction of the dimensions of marital conflict and marital instability is influenced by demographic characteristics.

**Table 6:** Effect of Gottman's theory-based training on the reduction of the dimensions of marital conflict and marital instability

Test	P	Df	F	Value
Pillai's Trace	.117	54	.234	0.034
Wilks' Lambda	.117	54	.234	0.054
Hotelling's Trace	.117	54	.234	.765
Roy's Root	.117	54	.234	.765

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to evaluate the effect of Gottman's theory-based training on the reduction of couples' marital conflict and marital instability. The results of the first hypothesis showed that Gottman's theory-based training had a positive and significant effect on the reduction of couples' marital conflict and marital instability. The findings of this study are in line with the studies, which proved that Gottman's approach has a positive and significant effect on the reduction of

marital conflict and marital instability and increase of marital satisfaction, adjustment, physical and mental health and life satisfaction among the couples [7, 12, 20].

In explaining the confirmation of this hypothesis, it can be said that this training can create positive changes in the emotional relationships, positive interactions, intimacy and effective communication and increase physical and mental health. In another explanation, it can be stated that Gottman's principles, unlike other methods of dealing

with couples' problems, instead of paying attention to the factors that lead to marital dissolution, consider the factors, which lead to marital success. Gottman has carried out many studies on the difference between stable marriages and marriages that have ended in marriage. He believes that successful marriages are based on profound friendship. In other words, here, the couples respect each other greatly, understand each other intimately, and are very well aware of their spouse's interests, dreams and ambitions.

The results of the second hypothesis showed that dimensions of marital conflict have reached the level of significance; this indicates the effect of Gottman's theory-based training on the dimensions of couples' marital conflict. The findings of this study are aligned with the studies by Gottman and Porterfield and Kazemi et al. [7, 12]. Also these findings are in line with the results of the study by Westerop based on considerable improvement in communication skills and also their stability over time as a result of communication skills training in Gottman's [1999] method [7]. Thus, in explaining the above finding, it can be argued that proper and accurate communication increases the couples' emotional intimacy. More precisely, if a couple can communicate in the proper method, they will not only have effective communications, but the intimacy between

them will increase as well.

Also the results of this study showed that Gottman's theory-based training affects the couples' marital instability. The findings of this hypothesis are in line with the studies by Gottman [1999] and Gottman et al. [7, 20]. The couples participating in this program significantly showed more positive emotions, better communication and more proper problem-solving skills.

In explaining the findings, it can be argued that couples' communication skills and their method of communication with each other, without increase of conflict, are among the factors that strengthen and stabilize the marital life. This issue is in line with the study that stated lack of positive messages and daily conversations as the factor affecting divorce and as one of the strong predictors of divorce in the first 7 years of marriage [21]. Therefore, learning techniques for effective communication with the spouse causes the couples to experience fewer conflicts; this adds more stability and strength to their marital life. The results showed that none of the demographic characteristics of the subjects reached the level of significance; this indicates that the effect of Gottman's theory-based training on the variables under study was not influenced by the subjects' demographic characteristics. In explaining the confirmation of this hypothesis, it can be stated that the

training content has been developed in a way that its effectiveness is not dependent on the individuals' situations and conditions (level of education, etc.). In another explanation, it can be stated that the couples who do not want to lose their family and are willing to maintain their life, try to protect it under any circumstances and with any age and level of education. Therefore, the given training affects them and is effective in their life. The researchers in the process of the current research have faced limitations that may affect the quality of the research. One of the limitations was the need to attend therapy sessions together, which led to less samples and limited access. Existence of limited resources on training based on Gottman's theory, especially experimental studies inside and outside the country, was one of the most important limitations so that it was not possible to accurately compare the obtained results with those of other studies.

Based on the achievements of this study, it can be concluded that due to the importance of the balanced function of the family and prevention from its dissolution, knowledge of the factors related to marital satisfaction, which is the strengthening foundation of family life, seems necessary [22]. Organizations, consultancy centers, and institutions dealing with conflicting couples as well as couples' mental health may hold training workshops based on

Gottman's theory in order to increase couples' intimacy and reduce their conflicts. According to the present research results, it is suggested to use this therapy method to improve the quality of marital life among the divorced applicants. In addition, the use of this method by marriage and family consultants is recommended [23].

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors had not any financial or personal relationships with other people or organizations during the study. So there was no conflict of interests in this article.

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