

Effectiveness of Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge Program on Hesitation and Hesitancy in Decision Making and Attitudes toward Marriage

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Quantitative Study

Abstract

Background: Youth marriage has become one of the main challenges in Iranian society; young people avoid marriage for various reasons, and the phenomenon of delay in the age of marriage has become an issue. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of the Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge (PICK) program on hesitation in decision-making and attitudes toward marriage.

Methods: This was a quasi-experimental study with a pre-test and post-test design with a control group. The statistical population of this study was all medical students of the Islamic Azad University, Sari Branch, Sari, Iran, in 2019. Among them, 36 single students were selected using the purposive sampling method. They were divided into two experimental ($n = 18$) and control ($n = 18$) groups. Participants completed the demographic information questionnaire, Elaydi decision doubt scale, and the Kinnaird and Gerrard Attitude towards Marriage Scale. The experimental group participated in 9 PICK sessions for 90 minutes twice a week. Data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) by SPSS software.

Results: The PICK program was effective on hesitation in decision-making ($P < 0.01$) and attitudes toward marriage ($P < 0.01$).

Conclusion: Considering the positive effect of the PICK program on reducing hesitation and hesitancy in decision-making and improving attitude toward marriage, it is recommended that this program be used in pre-marriage education and counseling.

Keywords: Marriage; Decision making; Premarital examinations

Citation: Dehghan S, Abbasi G, Ahmadi R, Eslami S. **Effectiveness of Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge Program on Hesitation and Hesitancy in Decision Making and Attitudes toward Marriage.** *Int J Body Mind Culture* 2024; 11(5).

Received: 09 Jan. 2024

Accepted: 05 Sep. 2024

Introduction

Marriage as a social affair provides the basis for the formation of the family institution, which is the most basic social institution, and to a large extent, the health of a society is strongly correlated with its health (Azimi Khoei, Zaharakar, & Ahmady, 2021; Sutton, 2019). But nowadays, youth marriage has become one of the main challenges in Iranian society; young people avoid marriage for various reasons, and the phenomenon of delay in the age of marriage has become an issue (Hashemi, Behboodi, & Fard, 2022). Often, young people cannot make the right choice among several different things or become confused about the nature of marriage. There has been a shift in the global marriage trend over the past four decades, reflecting an increase in the proportion of single people relative to married people. This trend first appeared in Western countries (Himawan, 2019). However, in many East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, particularly Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, this trend is growing (Jones & Yeung, 2014). In Iran, which is in the transition from tradition and entering into modernity and is facing a broad sociocultural change in all phenomena, including marriage and mating, it is evident that men and women have a new approach to marriage and mating (Khojasteh Mehr, Mohammadi, & Abbas Pour, 2016). According to the country's population registration figures for 2022, more than 2.5 million people are approaching the age of marriage, and more than 9.7 million people are at the age of marriage and have not yet taken any action to start a family. This reflects the fact that the age of marriage in Iran has increased. There are several reasons for this, including economic conditions, conditions of justice and educational equality (Mehrabani, 2014), the end of the university term, and the acquisition of financial independence (Willoughby, 2010).

Among these factors, hesitation and hesitancy are essential in deciding on romantic relationships. In the research literature, uncertainty in decision-making is a topic that is less commonly mentioned (Muraco & Curran, 2012). Making decisions in romantic relationships, such as starting a dating period, proposing a marriage, or ending a relationship, can have long-term and significant consequences (Morrison & Roese, 2011). Most people know that there is often a significant level of doubt in decisions, but they often choose an option before reaching a decision and then doubt whether they have made the right decision (van de Calseyde, Zeelenberg, & Evers, 2018). Experiencing doubts in romantic relationships can come from three separate but interrelated sources (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b): 1) the person involved in the relationship who is skeptical about their level of involvement, 2) a partner who doubts the level of their partnership in the relationship and life, and 3) a relationship where the parties doubt the nature of the relationship. Doubts in romantic relationships are not inherently harmful (Knobloch, 2007), but research shows many negative consequences. For example, high levels of doubt are associated with poor quality of communication, a lower understanding of the partner, and involvement in a romantic relationship (Boucher, 2014). More skeptical people report negative feelings about their relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Nagy, 2010).

False beliefs and inappropriate attitudes toward marriage are some of the causes of the decreasing tendency toward marriage in youth (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a). Attitude toward marriage as an aspect of marriage is one of the main predictors of behavioral and emotional patterns in close and personal relationships. In particular, strong positive and negative attitudes are more likely to affect people's perceptions and behaviors about relationships (Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001) and related behaviors, such as deciding to marry (Park, 2012). Attitudes to marriage can be

defined as the meaning and expectation of a person's future marriage and marital relationship and may change over a lifetime (Willoughby, 2014). In the past few years, youth attitudes toward marriage and family formation have been negatively oriented, and moral, social, and economic depravity has been prevalent in youth (Jonsson, Njardvik, Olafsdottir, & Gretarsson, 2000). Positive attitudes toward marriage may change behavior, but negative attitudes may affect relationship beliefs (Riggio & Weiser, 2008). People with a positive attitude toward marriage see marriage and the future as happy and prosperous, while those with negative attitudes toward marriage have higher negative expectations of marriage (Riggio & Weiser, 2008). In this regard, the results of Park (2012) research have shown a significant correlation between negative attitudes toward marriage and doubt.

Teaching how to make healthy decisions and develop healthy attitudes toward marriage will have positive consequences in dating (Abbasi, 2019; Van Epp, Futris, Van Epp, & Campbell, 2008). Historically, little attention was paid to marriage preparation two decades ago, but prevention support is growing today as individuals increasingly become aware of the significance and implicit meaning of marital problems in society (Bradford, Stewart, Pfister, & Higginbotham, 2016). Nowadays, premarital education is the focus of public, national, and international politics. Professional family researchers support premarital education to better prepare for marriage (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Research literature in the field of premarital counseling shows that premarital programs have a significant effect on individuals. One of these programs is the Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge (PICK) program. The program was developed by Van Epp (2007) for single people and is based on research-based knowledge. This program was designed based on the model of relational attachment as an alternative model for the study of close relationships. This theoretical model is a visual representation of communication links in a relation. The relationship attachment model comprises five dynamic links: cognition, trust, encouragement, commitment, and contact. Combining these five links provides a picture of the overall feeling in a relationship and meaningful information about feelings of love, attachment, and closeness. The relational attachment model is a dynamic model that allows for different combinations of links at any time. This composite image is helpful because different combinations of active links inform about the existence of vulnerabilities in a relationship and, subsequently, how to resolve these vulnerabilities. In addition, the communication attachment model has been used since 1997 as a framework for the training program for interpersonal awareness and selection (Brower, MacArthur, Bradford, Albrecht, Bunnell, & Lyons, 2012). Although access to this program has been expanded, further evaluation of the PICK program seems necessary (Stewart, 2015).

The results of the studies showed that the interpersonal awareness and selection PICK program led to the development of rational attitudes toward the relationship, better understanding of the family context, adaptability, greater confidence in decision-making in the relationship (Boehme, 2017), increased knowledge about communication skills, knowledge about mate selection, knowledge about communication patterns with the marriage partner (Stewart, 2015), decreased risky behaviors (Doherty & Harris, 2017), and increased understanding of healthy communication (Boehme, 2017). Studies in Iran showed that this training program reduced communicative beliefs, decreased students' idealistic expectations, reduced fear of marriage, increased motivation for marriage (Rajabi, Abbasi, Sodani, & Aslani, 2017), and improved romantic decision-making for marriage (Abbasi, 2019).

Considering that a healthy and successful marriage is one of the evaluations of mental health in different societies, proper and principled education to single people on the subject of marriage as a preventive approach is a fundamental issue and guarantees the mental health of the community. Moreover, given that the period of youth is when many people decide to have an intimate relationship and marriage, educating single students about the growth of healthy and loving relationships can be beneficial for their marriage and future marital life. Therefore, this research seeks to answer whether interpersonal knowledge and selection programs affect the uncertainty in single students' decision-making and attitude toward marriage.

Methods

Study design and participants: The design of this study was semi-experimental with a pre-test, post-test, and control group. The statistical population of this study was all single students of the School of Medical Sciences, Islamic Azad University, Sari Branch, Sari, Iran. Thirty-six subjects whose scores were lower than the mean in the questionnaire of decision doubt and attitude toward marriage were selected based on the initial interview and inclusion and exclusion criteria and were randomly assigned to an experimental group and a control group. Then, the experimental group was separately trained in the PICK program, and the control group did not receive any intervention.

Inclusion criteria were: single students less than 30 years old, lack of engagement or marriage history, lack of experience in marriage training workshop or class, and ability to attend nine educational sessions; and exclusion criteria were: single students over 30 years old, students with a history of engagement or a marriage contract, receiving other psychological treatments and training, and not being able to attend nine sessions. After obtaining the necessary permissions to select the statistical sample, the announcement of the marriage workshop was distributed and installed in the medical school. After a general interview based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, 36 students were selected; 18 were randomly assigned to the experimental group, and 18 were in the control group. Then, the experimental group participated in 9 sessions of 90 minutes of premarital education through the awareness and interpersonal selection PICK program method in the faculty amphitheater, and the control group did not receive any training. After the intervention, the post-test was performed again on all study participants, the experimental and control groups. Finally, descriptive statistics [mean, standard deviation (SD)] and inferential statistics [multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA)] were used to analyze the data.

Sample size: Using the random table method, the participants were placed into two groups (control and experimental). The sample size was determined using G*Power software at a significance level of 0.05, test power of 0.90, and effect size of 1.42.

Instruments and variable

In this study, the following questionnaire was used to obtain the required information:

Demographic information questionnaire: A questionnaire was designed to collect demographic information of the participants that determined age, gender, education, and occupation.

Decision uncertainty scale: The decision doubt scale (Elaydi, 2006) was used to measure decision doubt. This scale was designed to assess the degree of uncertainty in decision-making. The scale has 13 questions with a range of 6 options from completely disagree = 1 to agree = 6. The high score in this questionnaire indicates more hesitancy in decision-making. The validity of this method was confirmed by the

content validity method, and the test-retest reliability coefficient or the two-run coefficient of this questionnaire was reported to be 0.95 (Alamneshan & Naji, 2015). In this study, the reliability of this tool was calculated by Cronbach's alpha of 0.64.

Attitude to marriage: Attitude to marriage was measured using the Attitudes towards Marriage Scale (Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986). This scale was designed to assess the attitudes of individuals towards marriage. Specifically, this scale assesses attitudes toward marital responsibility, happiness, freedom, and compatibility with marriage. The scale consists of 14 questions and is scored based on a 5-point Likert scale from completely disagree = 1 to completely agree = 5. A high score on this scale indicates a positive attitude toward marriage. The reliability of this scale using Cronbach's alpha was 0.77, and its test-retest reliability coefficient was 0.86 (Branch-Harris & Cox, 2015). In this study, the reliability of this tool was calculated by Cronbach's alpha of 0.77.

Intervention: The content of the interpersonal selection and awareness program sessions was presented based on the principles and techniques of the PICK (Van Epp et al., 2008). The treatment plan was formulated in 9 sessions and administered once a week. The duration of each session was 2 hours as a group.

Analysis: This study analyzed the obtained data in two descriptive and inferential levels. In the descriptive section, indices such as mean, SD, percentage, and frequency, and in the inferential section, MANCOVA was used. Statistical calculations were performed using SPSS software (version 20, IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA).

Ethics: It should be noted that to observe the ethics of research, interviews, and completing questionnaires individually at the university counseling center, individuals were reminded to be free to participate in the workshop and continue it (informed consent), and information about them would remain confidential.

Results

The mean and SD of age in the experimental group was 22.22 ± 2.94 , and in the control group was 22.88 ± 2.76 . Besides, the minimum and maximum ages were 19 and 30. The mean and SD of variables in decision-making and attitude toward marriage in both experimental and control groups in the pre-test and post-test stages are presented in table 1. According to the findings, the mean of decision doubt and attitude towards marriage variables from the pre-test to post-test in the experimental group showed a significant change. This difference was not significant for the control group.

Before analyzing the data, the assumptions underlying the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were investigated. The results of the skewness and strain test showed that the distribution of scores of variables was normal. The homogeneity assumption of regression slope and Levene's test were confirmed to investigate the homogeneity of variances. Moreover, the results of MANCOVA showed that the experimental and control groups differed in at least one dependent variable, and MANCOVA could be used to compare the groups.

Table 1. Descriptive indicators of research variables

Group	Variable	Pre-test (mean \pm SD)	Post-test (mean \pm SD)
Intervention	Doubt in decision	39.77 \pm 3.99	23.77 \pm 4.00
	Attitude to marriage	36.05 \pm 2.36	49.77 \pm 7.54
Control	Doubt in decision	39.33 \pm 4.64	38.50 \pm 4.68
	Attitude to marriage	36.33 \pm 2.58	36.05 \pm 2.31

SD: Standard deviation

Table 2. Summary of multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOA) on research variables

Source	Dependent variable	SS	Df	MS	F	P-value	Eta
Doubt in decision	Group	1961.44	1	1961.44	99.69	0.001	0.75
	Error	629.57	32	19.67			
Attitude to marriage	Group	1651.61	1	1651.61	53.12	0.001	0.62
	Error	994.77	32	31.08			

SS: Sum of squares; Df: Degree of freedom; MS: Mean squares

According to table 2, the results showed that the F ratio of ANCOVA of the education group and the control group in dependent variables showed a significant difference between the two groups in the above variables, which showed the effectiveness of PICK program on uncertainty in decision making and attitude toward marriage of single students. Additionally, the effect size index shows that 75% of the variance in decision-making and 62% of changes in attitude toward marriage scores are due to implementing an educational program (intervention).

Discussion

The present study investigated the effectiveness of interpersonal knowledge and selection programs on uncertainty in decision-making and attitude toward marriage in single students. The results of this study showed that the PICK program led to a reduction of decision-making uncertainty in the group under training. This finding is consistent with the results of Van Epp et al. (2008), Rajabi et al. (2017), and Abbasi (2019).

The PICK program provides a basis for reducing uncertainty in decision-making by training the knowledge and cognition that is essential to the program and reduces decision uncertainty by introducing predictors of a successful marriage, i.e., family background, attitudes, and practices of conscientiousness, adaptability, examples of other relationships, and communication skills. In this program, people learn that the process of recognizing a person is conceptualized by a formula $I = T + T + T$, intimacy (I) equals speaking (T) (mutual self-disclosure) + being together (T) (having different shared experiences) + time (T) which seems to be the fabric of another cognition, and neglecting any of these factors leads to less hesitation in deciding whether to choose a spouse (Abbasi, 2019; Van Epp, 2007). Therefore, cognition training can prevent self-confidence, relationships, and irreparable consequences of doubt (Boehme, 2017). Moreover, this program teaches the relationship attachment model to individuals to be safe in romantic decision-making, experience less hesitancy, and communicate healthily and stably while choosing a spouse. This model states that before the development of a link, communication dynamics such as cognition should not be addressed to the growth of other links such as trust, encouragement, commitment, and contact. Slipping out of the safe zone is the most common mistake people make in a relationship. When the levels of the five dynamic factors are out of balance, the emotional bond becomes unhealthy (Van Epp et al., 2008), and individuals face more significant challenges in decision-making.

Another finding of this study showed that the PICK program led to an increase in positive attitudes toward marriage in the trained group. This finding is consistent with the findings of Van Epp et al. (2008), Rajabi et al. (2017), and Rajabi et al. (2017). In explaining this finding, it can be said that offering this intervention itself can be considered a kind of service and support for couples; therefore, it can increase their perceived support and cause a more positive outlook on marriage. Interventions based on communication skills training, spouse cognition, and modification of

stereotypical and idealistic beliefs can lead to positive attitudes toward marriage. Lack of understanding of right and wrong beliefs is one of the fundamental aspects of negative attitudes toward marriage (Azimi Khoei et al., 2021).

The vital principle of this curriculum is that no one enters a new relationship without a mental background. Everyone brings to their marriage or future spouse profiles of previous candidates and detailed information about other candidates and relationships. These pre-existing profiles can be considered as databases. These databases are a collection of prior experiences, images, feelings, and fantasies towards marriage, including 1) stereotypical beliefs, 2) associations, and 3) ideals. These mental databases provide a starting point for first impressions and can play a vital role in people's attitudes by putting people in the position of a judge (Van Epp, 2007). That is, it either makes people in the position of an expert too trustworthy or too pessimistic. Therefore, reconstructing these databases in this program can be essential in increasing positive attitudes and decreasing negative attitudes toward marriage and choosing a spouse.

The most important limitation of this research is its statistical population, i.e., students, which makes it possible to generalize the results to other populations with caution; therefore, it is suggested that this study be implemented on other people in the community. Additionally, considering the critical role of premarital education programs in preventing problems in marriage and marital life, it is suggested that the organization of systems and psychology, welfare, national youth organization, and other custodians related to marriage and family counseling services provide the grounds for teaching this training program to counselors and psychologists under their membership and use the findings of this research.

Conclusion

The PICK has significantly reduced decision-making doubts and increased positive attitudes towards marriage. Hence, this program helps prevent delayed marriages and the problems and challenges of choosing a spouse in the future, and can be the foundation of intervention centers for family and marriage counseling therapists.

Conflict of Interests

Authors have no conflict of interests.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the participants of this study, whose cooperation made this research possible.

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