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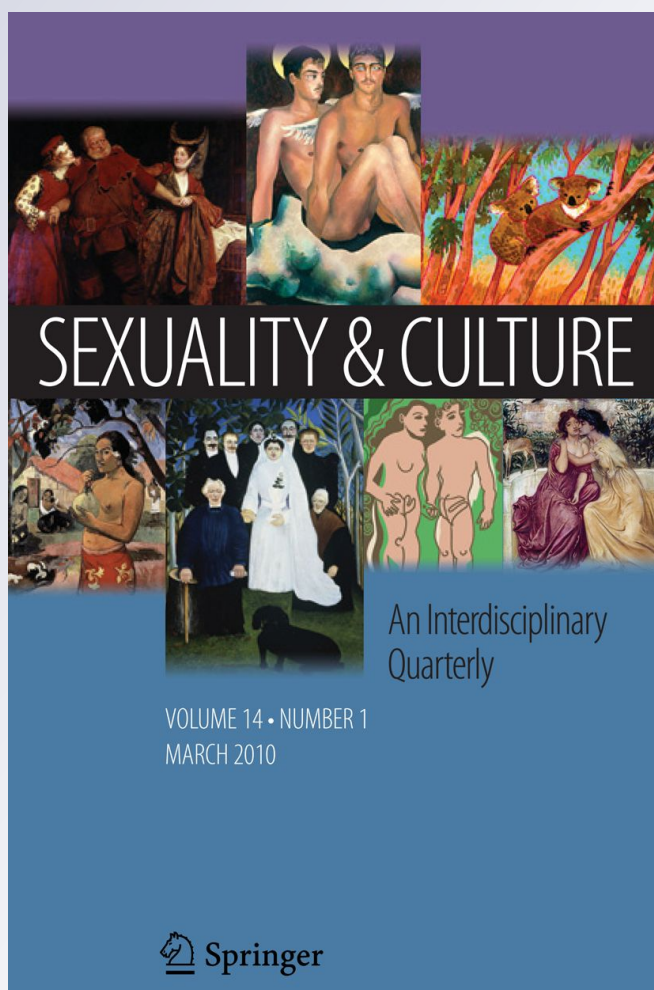
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Effect of Pre-Marriage Counseling on Marital Satisfaction of Iranian Newlywed Couples: A Randomized Controlled Trial

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Abstract This study examined the effect of selected sexual and nonsexual aspects of pre-marriage counseling on the marital satisfaction of Iranian newlywed couples. A sample of 200 couples was divided randomly into two groups, one group receiving ordinary education (the no intervention group, NIG), the other group receiving special education (the intervention group, IG). IG couples attended four lecture sessions given by the researchers consisting of family planning, personal health, different aspects of sexuality, communication and conflict resolution skills. NIG couples attended lectures presented in the normal preparation program, based on just family planning and personal health. All lectures were given a few months prior to marriage, and then marital satisfaction was assessed 4 months after marriage with 40 questions of the ENRICH questionnaire. Final analysis was based on 64 completed questionnaires. The results indicated that, 4 months after marriage, sexual, nonsexual and marital satisfaction in IG was significantly higher than in the control group.

Keywords Pre-marriage counseling · Couples · Marital satisfaction · Iran

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Introduction

High rates of marital dissatisfaction and divorce have increasingly led to the preparation of different programs for marriage. In Iran, the rate of divorce in 2006 showed a 10% increase in comparison with 2005 and reached a level of more than 12%. In Tehran, the rate was 21% with more than 23,000 cases of divorce annually, which was the highest rate in Iran (Statistical and Population Information Center 2006). There are clear physical and psychological effects of divorce on both individuals and the society. In addition, because more than 30 million of Iran's population of 70 million are aged between 15 and 35 years, each year we will encounter a great many divorce cases.

In the past two decades, a lot of research has established that high-quality and well-timed programs can reduce marital distress and enhance marital satisfaction (Silliman and Schumm 2000). Carroll and Doherty (2003) in a meta-analytic review of 23 well-designed pre-marital programs found that all but one of these studies showed that couples generally reported that the experience was helpful and that the mean effect size for a pre-marital program was .80. They emphasized that a number of important factors (e.g., sampling, educational length, format and content) can directly affect the results.

In Iran, a pre-marriage program is mandatory for acquiring a marriage license, but it only consists of a one-hour segregated class for men and women, covering family planning and personal health, which is certainly not adequate to prepare young people for marriage, which all small- and large-scale investigations have confirmed. For example, Hejazi et al. (2004) evaluated the pre-marriage counseling in three provinces in Iran. They randomly selected 20 couples who had married one year after the counseling and asked them about their satisfaction with it and their knowledge and attitude towards family planning, the prevention of STI and sexual health. They found that just 14–43% of couples' sexual knowledge had been gained from these classes, and that 93% of couples implied that they needed a comprehensive sexual education. They also reported that just 14% of the couples had got the necessary knowledge about sexuality from the pre-marriage programs and that the most important problems were a lack of the proper context, and no opportunities for the participants to express their problems or ask questions.

Because the programs do not cover other aspects of pre-marriage counseling such as communication, conflict resolution, and so on, we have no evaluation of these topics in pre-marriage counseling.

Recently, the Iranian government has recognized the importance of addressing the sexual and marital needs of adolescents and youth. In order to design an effective program, the actual needs and problems of couples need to be considered (Silliman and Schumm 1999). In Iran, studies have shown that sex education is one of the most important needs of couples, because this topic is not officially included in curriculums of schools or universities or of any official or private organizations. Also, in society, discussing sexuality often involves a feeling of fear, shame and taboo (Nejati 2003). Parsai et al. (2004) evaluated the sexual knowledge of 150 young couples in Tehran city. Just 12% of men and women had an acceptable knowledge of safe, responsible and enjoyable sexual relationships, while 12.7% of

women had a fear of sexual relationships, and the vast majority of the couples (81.6%) agreed that a sex education program was necessary. Sherfab et al. (2005) assessed the sexual knowledge of 100 engaged couples in Iran. They chose 100 couples at random in Mashhad (one of largest cities in Iran) before they received pre-marriage counseling. The aim of study was to assess the couples' knowledge about the sexual cycle, its physical and emotional differences in men and women, and the couples' view on the importance of pre-marriage counseling. They revealed that only 40% of men and 30% of women knew about the stages of the sexual response cycle, and just 15% of men and 11% of women knew about differences in orgasms in men and women. In both groups, 11% knew about differences in arousal in men and women, and 81% of women and 73% of men stated that their sexual knowledge was at a low level and that they needed special education. Furthermore, 18% of women never expressed their sexual needs or problems to their husband while 48% expressed their feelings seldom or hardly at all. For men, these rates were, respectively, 10 and 31%.

Communication plays a central role in marriage. Litzinger and Gordon's (2005) study of 387 married couples showed that communication and sexual satisfaction independently predict marital satisfaction. The importance of skills development in the marriage preparation program has been demonstrated in a number of studies. Carroll and Doherty (2003) in their meta analysis concluded that communication is one of the key factors in marital success and stability.

It seems that the lack of knowledge and skills are the most important reasons for misunderstandings, disappointments and, subsequently, sexual and marital dissatisfaction. To be informed of physical and psychological aspects of sexuality, its differences in men and women, and effective communication are all crucial for success in marriage (Rafai 1999).

Despite evidence that shows that the marriage preparation programs in Iran are generally unsuccessful, there has been little research on designing a proper program with regard to our needs, problems, and culture and religious characteristics. The purpose of the present study was to examine the effect of pre-marriage programs on marital satisfaction in early marriage. This program has concentrated on sexuality, communication and conflict resolution skills.

Methodology

Program

Modern pre-marriage counseling involves a reciprocal communication between counselor and couples in which the counselor tries to verbally teach communication and social skills and to clarify the physical and psychological aspects of marriage for the couples (Sauber 1993).

In our study, a control group attended a normal program of these centers offering pre-marriage counseling that consisted of a 45-minute segregated class for men and women dealing with family planning and personal health. A second group was given a four-hour lecture and discussion session. The first two hours was in segregated

classes for both men and women with a same sex counselor and consisted of a brief lecture and discussion on three general topics.

Sexual health included female and male genital anatomy and physiology, the menstrual cycle, reproductive health and safe sex.

Family planning included details of pills, condoms and emergency contraceptive pills.

Sex education covered the physical and emotional differences in men and women in the sexual response cycle, as well as sexual techniques and behavior.

The third hour included a lecture and home practice to learn *communication and conflict resolution skills* such as active listening, empathy, and self-expression and both giving and accepting criticism. It was a contemporary class for men and women. This section was just a reminder of life skills with emphasis on their importance. After a short explanation for each skill, we described three possible scenarios, which we discussed while noting correct and incorrect behavior in each. Everyone was asked to think of problematic situations that might occur with her/his reflections on them. The last hour to devoted to questions from the couples.

Marital satisfaction is the individual satisfactory rating of marriage that depends on intra-personal concepts (experienced reactions and relationships) and inter-personal concepts (the conformation between personal expectations and wishes and the current situation) (Sauber 1993). In this study to assess marital satisfaction, we have used questions from the ENRICH (Enriching and Nurturing Relationship Issues, Communication and Happiness) questionnaire, and we have divided them into sexual (10 questions) and nonsexual (30 questions) satisfaction.

This program was a part of the academic process for obtaining an MSc degree which was set up by the Tehran University of Medical Sciences. The project has been evaluated and confirmed by the scientific board at three different stages, once for the proposal (with emphasis on correct randomizing, follow-up and ethical considerations), a second time for the questioner, and lastly for the final degree defense session.

Sample

Participants in the study were all the couples who had attended the selected health-centers of the Tehran University of Medical Sciences to obtain their marriage license, from February to September 2004. These centers are three out of nine centers which deliver marriage licenses in Tehran. These three centers are all those belonging to the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, and people from all regions in Tehran with different incomes and different education levels attend them. Although the total number of couples in this period was more than 2,000, only those couples who were to be married in the next two months were included (because of the time constraints for the MSC dissertation) and who agreed to enter to study, which amounted to 200 couples. Among the 1,800 couples who exclude, 10 couples was because they did not agree to participate and the others were not eligible based on their proposed marriage dates.

Couples who agreed to participate in this research provided their addresses and telephone numbers (the wife's and husband's cell phone numbers and the wife's father's phone number) through which they could be contacted for follow-up. All lectures were free for both groups.

These couples were randomly assigned to two groups, one group receiving the ordinary education (the no intervention group, NIG), the other group receiving special education (the intervention group, IG). Normally, pre-marriage counseling class is limited to family planning and personal health, provided in one session that takes a maximum of one hour. Life skills or sexual behavior are not included. Our NIG groups attended this normal class that was conducted by the staff midwife of that center. For the IG couples, a special program was delivered by the researchers consisting of three hours of lectures and one hour for answering the personal questions of the couples. It was not possible to evaluate the couples' baseline sexual satisfaction, due to religious and cultural considerations (officially, couples do not have any sexual relationship before marriage).

Both groups were given pre-paid envelopes and two questionnaires (for the wife and husband, separately) that were to be filled in and returned 4 months after the marriage (i.e., 6 months after the education). In these 6 months, we called all the 200 couples at least three times. We received envelopes from 50 couples in the IG and 32 couples in the NIG. From the start, we have worked with a large sample of couples since we knew that we would receive a low rate of returned questionnaires because of the type of questions being asked (about sexuality and aspects of private livee), although just gathering the samples took six months. Finally, it was possible to compare 32 couples in each group. After the sampling, we organized a session and delivered our program for the NIG due to ethical considerations.

All of the respondents were Muslem (Shia) and in their first marriage. The average age for women was 23.9 years, and for men 27.4 years. Of the sample, 1.5% had primary school education, 10.9% secondary school, 40.6% high school, and 47.0% some college education. In terms of income, 3.1% of respondents reported earning a monthly income of less than \$100, 45.3% between \$100 and \$200, 35.9% between \$200 and \$300, and 15.7% more than \$300 (in 2004, less than \$100 monthly income was considered to be below the 'poverty line'). The time from when the spouses first got to know each other to the wedding was, in approximately two-thirds (64.0%) of the couples, less than 12 months, while in 20.3% it was 1–3 years, and in 15.6% more than 3 years.

Measures

To evaluate the value of this program, we used 40 questions from the ENRICH 115-item questionnaire, consisting of 10 questions each in the areas of marriage satisfaction (marital expectation), sexual satisfaction, communication and conflict resolution. Ten demographic items and one global satisfaction item on a 5-point likert-type scale were added. All 40 items were scored on a 5-point likert-type scale with scores ranging from 0 to 4. Higher scores reflected higher satisfaction. We have divided marital satisfaction to sexual satisfaction and nonsexual satisfaction.

Sexual satisfaction has been assessed with a 10-item scale with a possible score range of 0–40. Nonsexual satisfaction has been considered as the total score of communication, conflict resolution and marriage expectation, using a 30-item scale with a possible score range of 0–120.

Marital satisfaction consisted of both sexual and nonsexual scores, using a 40-item scale with a possible overall score range of 0–160. In each category, a score of under 50% of the total score was considered as low, between 50 and 75% moderate, and scores of more than 75% as high satisfaction.

In their report, Olson et al. (1989) stated that reliabilities for marriage satisfaction, communication, conflict resolution and sexual satisfaction were established through the demonstration of a high internal consistency by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81, 0.68, 0.75, and 0.48 with an average of 0.79. Their questionnaire has been translated into Persian by Sanai (professor of family and marriage counseling and psychotherapy). In different research, the range of Construct validity was 0.41–0.60, internal consistency was 0.94 and Cronbach's alpha was 0.92–0.95 (Sanai Zaker 2000). Asgari et al. (2006) tested the validity and reliability of the Persian translation of the ENRICH questionnaire: reliability with Spirman-Brown and Gatman was 0.89 and 0.88, respectively, and Cronbach's alpha was 0.91. In our study, in test–re-test, the average reliability over a duration of 4 weeks was 0.86.

Analysis

We first compared individual demographic characteristics in the two groups. Statistical tests (χ^2 and Fisher exact) showed that there was no significant difference between them and that the two groups were matched with regard to demographic variables. Therefore, if we can detect any differences in marital satisfaction between the two groups, this will be the effect of our education.

Concerning dependent variables (sexual, nonsexual and marital satisfaction), the Wilcoxon test did not show any significant differences between women's and men's answers in each group. In this article, we have considered the women's answers as the couples' results. Finally, dependent variables in the two groups have been assessed with the Mann–Whitney test. A *P* value less than 0.05 has been considered as significantly different.

Results

The results showed that our education had a significant effect on sexual, nonsexual and marital satisfaction in the IG.

Mean and standard deviation scores of sexual satisfaction in the IG were $M = 35.62$, $SD = 5.89$, and in the NIG were $M = 32.90$, $SD = 4.72$. The Mann–Whitney test showed a significant ($P < .002$; Table 1) difference in sexual satisfaction between the two groups.

Mean and standard deviation scores for nonsexual satisfaction in the IG were $M = 96.96$, $SD = 14.21$, and in the NIG were $M = 81.87$, $SD = 18.99$. Nonsexual satisfaction increased significantly ($P < .001$; Table 2) in the IG. Also, we found a

Table 1 Comparison of sexual satisfaction in the two groups

Sexual satisfaction	IG		NIG		Mann–Whitney
	<i>n</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>P</i>	
High	29	90.6	23	71.9	<i>u</i> = 287.00
Moderate	1	3.1	9	28.1	<i>P</i> = .002
Low	2	6.3	0	0	
Total	32	100	32	100	

IG Intervention group, NIG no intervention group

Table 2 Comparison of nonsexual satisfaction in two groups

Nonsexual satisfaction	IG		NIG		Mann–Whitney
	<i>n</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>P</i>	
High	22	68.8	10	31.2	<i>u</i> = 261.50
Moderate	9	28.1	18	56.3	<i>P</i> = .001
Low	1	3.1	4	12.5	
Total	32	100	32	100	

IG Intervention group, NIG no intervention group

significant difference in three area of nonsexual satisfaction, namely communication skills ($P < .001$), conflict resolution ($P < .001$), and marriage expectation ($P < .002$).

Mean and standard deviation scores of marital satisfaction in the IG were $M = 132.59$, $SD = 19.14$, and in the NIG were $M = 114.78$, $SD = 22.70$. In the IG, marital satisfaction was significantly ($P < .001$; Table 3) increased.

Global satisfaction of couples from these classes showed significant ($P < .000$; Table 4) differences in the IG and NIG groups.

When respondents were asked which subjects were the most useful, couples in the IG stated: sex education (34.4%), all subjects (28%) and communication (19%). But of couples in the NIG, 44% of participants did not answer this question, while 22% said none of the subjects was useful, and it is clear that they did not have a view on any subject other than family planning (Table 5). In addition, we found that the majority of the IG stated that the duration of the class was very short but the NIG reported that the time was sufficient.

Discussion

The findings in this study, as in most previous research, confirm the effect of pre-marriage counseling on marital satisfaction.

Table 3 Comparison of marital satisfaction in two groups

Marital satisfaction	IG		NIG		Mann–Whitney
	<i>n</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>P</i>	
High	25	78.1	14	43.8	<i>u</i> = 341.50
Moderate	6	18.8	17	53.1	<i>P</i> = .007
Low	1	3.1	1	3.1	
Total	32	100	32	100	

IG Intervention group, NIG no intervention group

Table 4 Satisfaction rating of the two groups' evaluation of the program

Satisfaction rating	IG		NIG		χ^2
	<i>n</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>P</i>	
Very high	18	56.3	1	3.1	$\chi^2 = 25.92$
High	10	31.3	11	34.4	<i>P</i> = .000
Moderate	3	9.4	15	46.9	
Low	1	3.1	5	15.6	
Total	32	100	32	100	

IG Intervention group, NIG no intervention group

Table 5 Couples' views about the most useful subject

Subject	IG <i>P</i>	NIG <i>P</i>
All subjects	28	18
Sexual health	9.3	–
Sexuality	34.4	–
Communication	19	–
Family planning	9.3	16
None subject	–	22
No answer	–	44

IG Intervention group, NIG no intervention group

Four months after marriage, 90.6% of the IG reported high sexual satisfaction, while in the NIG this rate was 71.9%. Because, in Iran, sexual activity officially starts after marriage, we guessed that this independent variable may not show any significant difference in early marriage, but our findings showed a meaningful difference between the two groups. Westheimer (2005) indicated that lack of sexual information about anatomy and the sexual response cycle caused sexual dysfunction and sexual dissatisfaction. Many Iranian studies have indicated the effect of education on sexual satisfaction. Hosseyni et al. (2003) in a study on 67 couples showed that although sexual satisfaction was similar to start with, 3 months after education sexual satisfaction was considerably higher in the IG.

It is also possible that education on communication and conflict resolution skills causes increasing sexual satisfaction in the IG. Through effective communication, partners are able to express to each other their sexual needs, desires, preferences and expectations (Larson et al. 1998).

Our finding also confirmed that social skills increase nonsexual satisfaction. High nonsexual satisfaction has been reported in 68.8% of the IG and in just 31.3% of the NIG. In our study, 68.8% of the IG had appropriate communication abilities, while this rate in the NIG was 37.4%. This is similar to the finding of Durana (1997), who found that six months after education on communication and conflict resolution skills, nonsexual satisfaction is significantly more than in the pretest period. Russell and Lyster (1992) found that, after a preparation program, increased understanding of communication and conflict resolution was high, with average ratings of 3.7 and 3.3, respectively. Carroll and Doherty (2003) with their meta-analysis of 23 studies showed a notable consistency of effectiveness in premarital programs that address communication and conflict skills in their curriculums. They reported that recent experimental studies all taught conflict-negotiation skills.

It seems that communication skills like active listening, empathy and self-expression caused a greater closeness and intimacy in couples which consequently leads to an effective and reciprocal relationship. In spite of the fact that this was the first time that we have applied social skills in pre-marriage programs and considering the limited time that we devoted to this subject, the results are considerable. Furthermore, couples reported this subject to be the second most useful topic.

Finally, marital satisfaction showed a significant increase in the IG which depended on enhancing sexual and nonsexual satisfaction. The relationship between sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction has been confirmed by Young et al. (1998). This relationship can also be seen in Iran. In Amirian Zade et al.'s (2005) research, 53% of women who demanded divorce were dissatisfied with their sexual relationships. Of these, 68% of women had no sexual desire for their husbands, 65% stated they did not enjoy foreplay, 64% had no orgasm, and 59% felt angry after sex, while overall sexual satisfaction was significantly lower in these women in comparison with a control group. Yousefi et al. (2006), in research on 51 couples in Tehran, found that sexual knowledge and attitude has a positive and meaningful correlation with marital satisfaction. The effect of nonsexual satisfaction, especially communication and conflict resolution, on marital satisfaction has been demonstrated in a great deal of research (Guerney 1977; Markman et al. 1988). Silliman and Schumm (1999) believed that the most important component of a pre-marriage program is communication and conflict resolution skills, because it directly affects marital satisfaction and also indirectly through resolving of financial, sexual or personality differences. Also, Schneewind and Gerhard (2002) showed that, over time, couples' conflict resolution style becomes more influential in predicting marital satisfaction. However, Burlson and Denton (1997) demonstrated that the relationship between communication skills and marital satisfaction is not always direct and simple. The most important studies in Iran have indicated a positive relationship between communication skills and marital satisfaction. Yousefi and Adhamiyan (2006) showed that effective communication is a crucial factor in a

couple's marital satisfaction. Among couples referred to a counseling center, 60 couples were selected by simple sampling. Their marital satisfaction was assessed with the ENRICH questionnaire. Twenty couples attended six sessions on communication skills and the other 40 couples were observed as a control group. Couples with more effective communication skills showed a higher satisfaction. Foroghfar's (2006) study, on 93 married students, showed that conflict resolution skills are strong predictable factors for marital satisfaction, and that these skills have direct and positive effects on the received score of the Dyadic Adjustment scale (Spanier 1976). Also Jalali and Jalavand (2006), in a case and control study on 28 couples, indicated that after 10 sessions each 90 minutes long about communication skills, the score of the Dyadic Adjustment scale was significantly increased in the case group.

Global satisfaction of the program was found to be strongly positive. In the IG, 56.3% of couples reported that this class was very useful, while in the NIG a large percentage of individual (46.9%) reported that attending their class had a moderate value. This finding is in accordance with the results of Williams et al. (1999) and Russell and Lyster (1992), who found that preparation program is a valuable experience.

About the length of these classes, the IG attended in a four-hour class and stated that the time was inadequate, whereas the NIG who were presented a class of less than one hour reported that timing was sufficient. It seems that given an appropriate context, with clear and unembarrassing clarification and opportunities to express problems, the actual needs of couples have been revealed.

Conclusion

The results showed that our education program had a significant effect on marital satisfaction. It also showed that, without attention to participants' needs, demands and problems, these classes are not so useful. Schumm et al. (1998) have indicated that low-quality premarital counseling was not much better for improving marital satisfaction than no counseling at all. Also, these needs can be totally different. For example, in some countries, studies have shown that couples did not find sexuality a useful topic in premarital counseling (Williams et al. 1999; Russell and Lyster 1992; Silliman and Schumm 1989). This is because in most countries individuals have learned about these issues and do not view this as new or required information (Williams et al. 1999). But our study, like other research in Iran, have shown that, in the opinion of couples, sex and related subjects are most helpful topics. This is because they have not received any official information about such topics and also have not had any sexual experience or relationships before marriage, when they encounter problems and questions. Obviously, such curriculums will not have the same positive effect on sexual satisfaction in many developed countries or in countries with different religions and cultures. Because any sexual relationship before or outside marriage is considered illegal in Iran, any education and evaluation of sexual behavior and sexual satisfaction must be started at this time.

There are several limitations to the present study. The results cannot be extrapolated to the general population. Future research should focus on using a

larger sample of couples. Also, our findings are based on people of moderate socioeconomic status. This program should continue with a more heterogeneous sample. It is possible that other factors have contributed to the greater satisfaction in the IG, such as discussions on the selected topics with peers and friends, specific advice/guidance from family elders or spiritual leaders just prior to marriage or even more education time allocated to the IG. Finally, an important limitation of the study was the timing of the education. The time devoted to discussions of the expanded subjects was very short. This was not because of the limitations of researchers, rather because of the couples' acceptance, especially at the time of registration and before attending the course.

Different organizations and counselors may use these findings for program design. It seems that the current pre-marriage program in Iran needs fundamental reform. We should consider couples' wishes and demands in designing pre-marriage programs. Based on many research findings, sex education is a first and most important need of couples. Also, communication and conflict resolution skills should be added to this program. It is also recommended that some classes should be established with men and women both attending. For example, in the social skills class, the hearing of different opinions and problems of the opposite sex helps the individuals to objectively learn about each other.

Furthermore, the results of this study suggest several additional areas for further research. The couples' needs after marriage, the effect of the classes over a longer period after their marriage, the effect of communication on marital and sexual satisfaction, and the best duration for the class could be systematically studied with the aim of improving program delivery.

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