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The effectiveness of integrated systemic couple therapy on marital differentiation and marital burnout of couples affected by extramarital affairs

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Abstract

Aim: This research aimed to determine the effectiveness of integrated systemic couple therapy on differentiation and marital disillusionment in couples affected by extramarital relationships.

Method: The study employed a quasi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages, along with a control group. The statistical population consisted of women affected by extramarital relationships who sought counseling in Babol city centers during the first nine months of 2019. Thirty individuals were selected through convenience sampling and randomly assigned into two groups of fifteen for the experimental and control groups, respectively. The experimental group underwent Feldman's (1990) integrated systemic couple therapy protocol in twelve 90-minute group sessions, while the control group did not receive any training. Data were collected using the Pines' (1996) Marital Boredom Scale and the Skowron and Friedlander (1989) Differentiation of Self Inventory. Data were analyzed using repeated measures tests. **Results:** Results indicated that integrated systemic couple therapy had a significant effect on differentiation ($F = 30.01$, $p < 0.001$) and marital disillusionment ($F = 78.86$, $p < 0.001$) in women affected by extramarital relationships at the post-test stage. Additionally, the effectiveness of integrated systemic couple therapy on differentiation and marital disillusionment was sustained at the follow-up stage ($p < 0.05$). **Conclusion:** Given the findings, this research suggests that group-based integrated systemic couple therapy can aid in improving differentiation and marital disillusionment in women affected by extramarital relationships.

Keywords: Integrated systemic couple therapy, differentiation, marital dissatisfaction, extramarital relations.

Introduction

Extramarital relationships or marital infidelity are among the most destructive problems in a relationship, often leading to divorce, and are defined as a violation of the sexual agreement between a couple (Fincham & May, 2017). Essentially, an extramarital relationship is an emotional or sexual connection with someone other than one's legal spouse (Van Zyl, 2020). Marital infidelity refers to the breach of an explicitly stated or assumed commitment to sexual and emotional exclusivity, typically for personal gain (Ghasedi, Bagheri & Kiamanesh, 2017). Although infidelity is widely reported in various studies, there is a considerable discrepancy in the reported prevalence rates, and the exact frequency remains unclear. However, it is determined that 21% of men and 11% of women commit marital infidelity during their lifetimes (Yuan & Weiser, 2019). Unfortunately, precise statistics on this subject are not available in Iran. Nevertheless, marital infidelity has been reported as a primary cause of divorce in the years 2016 and 2019, indicating its high prevalence in Iran (Chopani, Sohrabifard, Mohammadi, Esmaeili & Samadifard, 2019).

Research shows that infidelity in a damaged relationship can lead to various psychological harms. Both the injured spouse and the unfaithful one may withdraw from the relationship, plagued by intrusive thoughts about the betrayal, leading to a decrease in emotional interactions and emotional turmoil post-disclosure (Fazel Hamdani & Ghorban Jahromi, 2017). Sanderberg, Busby, Johnson, and Yoshida (2012) suggest that the detrimental consequences of infidelity can be long-lasting, causing a rift between the real and ideal self, eroding interpersonal trust and intimacy. Marital boredom, defined as the gradual loss of emotional attachment, includes diminished attention to the spouse, emotional estrangement, and increasing feelings of disillusionment and indifference, often manifesting in stages of frustration, anger, and apathy (Kapri & Jikan, 2013). This phenomenon starts with the breakdown of the relationship, growing awareness of less pleasurable aspects, and, if unaddressed, worsens over time, potentially leading to the breakup of the marital relationship and decreased sexual satisfaction (Mahmoudi, Moradi, Goudarzi & Seyedalshohadaei, 2020).

Given the apparent and hidden prevalence of extramarital relationships, the complex nature of infidelity, and its disastrous impact on couples' relationships, it is crucial to develop effective interventions to assist couples facing this challenge. Most research on marital infidelity has been descriptive, mainly focusing on people's attitudes toward infidelity or its consequences and definitions. Additionally, the number of such studies in Iran is quite limited. Therefore, considering that there are spouses in our country who wish to continue their lives with a cheating partner and need counseling services to adapt to this situation and start anew with greater awareness, the existence of effective therapeutic models is of special importance. Considering the stated issues and the contradictory results regarding more effective treatments in domestic research on marital infidelity, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. Was systemic-integrative couple therapy effective on differentiation and burnout in couples affected by extramarital relationships in the post-test phase?
2. Was systemic-integrative couple therapy effective on differentiation and burnout in couples affected by extramarital relationships in the follow-up phase?

Method

The study employed a quasi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages, along with a control group. The statistical population consisted of women affected by extramarital relationships who sought counseling in Babol city centers during the first nine months of 2019. Thirty individuals were selected through convenience sampling and randomly assigned into two groups of fifteen for the experimental and control groups, respectively. The experimental group underwent Feldman's (1990) integrated systemic couple therapy protocol in twelve 90-minute group sessions, while the control group did not receive any training. Data were collected using the Pines' (1996) Marital Boredom Scale and the Skowron and Friedlander (1989) Differentiation of Self Inventory. Data were analyzed using repeated measures tests.

Results

Results indicated that integrated systemic couple therapy had a significant effect on differentiation ($F = 30.01, p < 0.001$) and marital disillusionment ($F = 78.86, p < 0.001$) in women affected by extramarital relationships at the post-test stage. Additionally, the effectiveness of integrated systemic couple therapy on differentiation and marital disillusionment was sustained at the follow-up stage ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of systemic-integrative couple therapy on differentiation and marital burnout in women with a history of marital damage. The findings of the study indicate that systemic-integrative couple therapy has led to an increase in differentiation in women with a history of marital damage. The research by Pourhosein Ali and Amirkakhraei (2019) on couples suffering from problems caused by infidelity showed that systemic-integrative couple therapy plays a significant role in differentiation and a meaningful increase in life. According to the research results, it can be said that couples with high marital burnout have poor communication skills, less intimacy, and are dissatisfied with their marital relationships and experiences. Additionally, emotional and psychological support from a spouse is one of the strongest internal needs and has a close relationship with enduring and profound feelings in couples' relationships. This includes satisfaction from sharing, participating, and expressing thoughts and feelings with the spouse, which manifests and is enhanced in the form of satisfaction and happiness, progressively deepening the closeness between couples and leading to an increase in marital satisfaction and a corresponding decrease in marital burnout (Panahi et al., 2017). Therefore, Feldman's integrated couple therapy approach allows couples to first change their relationships with their internal experiences, reduce experiential avoidance, increase flexibility, and act more in line with valued directions. Changing relationships with internal experiences includes expanding and clarifying internal awareness. Moreover, strengthening a non-judgmental and compassionate relationship with experiences is emphasized. Reforming and enhancing self-compassion is considered a crucial aspect of this therapy, reducing reactivity, fear, and inappropriate judgments. Ultimately, the experience of thoughts, feelings, and sensations occurs naturally. In summary, interventions based on this approach have helped couples to resolve

conflicts with their spouses, start new and positive communication, strive to create intimacy in the new relationship, thereby reducing their marital problems and ultimately reducing marital burnout in emotional, psychological, and physical dimensions (Choupani Souri et al., 2020).

Generally, regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of systemic-integrative therapy in this study, it can be said that since Feldman's approach is one of the integrated approaches, the researcher in this study, using psycho-dynamic, cognitive-behavioral, structural, and systemic theories, sought to create changes in couples at intrapersonal levels (for changing couples through cognitive reconstruction and insight) and interpersonal levels (autonomy of couples and the feeling of independence and ability to stand against pressures, resulting in stress reduction).

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