

Comparing the Effectiveness of Schema-Focused Couple Therapy and Emotion-Focused Couple Therapy on Marital Offense Forgiveness in Couples with Marital Discrepancies

Masoume. Seidyousefi¹, Fathola. Mohamadian^{2*}, Arash. Nademi³

¹ Ph.D, Student of Psychology, Department of Psychology, Sanandaj Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sanandaj, Iran

² Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Ilam University of Medical Sciences, Ilam, Iran

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Statistics, Ilam Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ilam, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: fmohamadianmaghale@yahoo.com

Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Seidyousefi, M., Mohamadian, F., & Nademi, A. (2024). Comparing the Effectiveness of Schema-Focused Couple Therapy and Emotion-Focused Couple Therapy on Marital Offense Forgiveness in Couples with Marital Discrepancies. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 5(1), 155-166.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.5.1.17>



© 2024 the authors. Published by KMAN Publication Inc. (KMANPUB), Ontario, Canada. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to compare the effectiveness of schema-focused couple therapy and emotion-focused couple therapy on marital offense forgiveness in couples with marital discrepancies in Ilam city.

Method: This was a quasi-experimental study with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design with a control group. The study population comprised 105 couples who sought counseling in Ilam during the second half of the year 2021. From this population, 30 couples were selected using a convenience sampling method and randomly assigned to three groups: emotion-focused intervention (10 couples), schema-focused intervention (10 couples), and a control group (10 couples). The emotion-focused group received Johnson's training package (2012) over 9 sessions, and the schema-focused group received the Young, Klosko, & Weishaar package (2003) also over 9 sessions. The control group did not receive any intervention. The research instrument used was the Marital Offense Forgiveness Scale by Paleari, Regalia, and Fincham (2009). Data were analyzed using repeated measures analysis of variance.

Findings: Schema-focused couple therapy had a significant effect on marital offense forgiveness ($F = 5.85, p = .025$). Emotion-focused couple therapy also had a significant effect on marital offense forgiveness ($F = 5.81, p = .045$). These effects were reported to be stable at the follow-up stage. Additionally, there was no significant difference in the effectiveness of schema-focused couple therapy versus emotion-focused couple therapy on marital offense forgiveness.

Conclusion: Both schema-focused and emotion-focused couple therapies are effective methods for enhancing marital offense forgiveness in couples with marital discrepancies.

Keywords: Marital offense forgiveness, marital conflict, couple therapy, schema-focused, emotion-focused.

1. Introduction

The family system is among the most important social systems, forming based on the marriage between two sexes. Marriage is described as the most significant event in any human's life and as the most fundamental and basic human relationship (Dehghani, 2020). The behavior of family members, especially spouses, occurs within the framework of social norms and values, typically exhibiting a degree of unity and complementary roles (Parsakia et al., 2023). Since marriage is a long-term commitment between a man and a woman, it is essential for both parties to be satisfied and happy with their marital life (Hooshmandi, 2019). However, statistics indicate that maintaining this relationship is challenging. Throughout the growth of this relationship, couples may face conflicts that threaten the stability of their marriage. Due to the nature of the reciprocal relationships between spouses and the unique personalities each spouse has, an individual may not be able or willing to see issues exactly as the other does. Therefore, the possibility of conflicting perspectives and unmet needs exists, leading to feelings of anger, disappointment, and dissatisfaction between spouses, resulting in conflicts. Given the nature of spousal relationships, the occurrence of disagreements and conflicts in marital relationships is natural (Mbwirire, 2017). However, when conflicts become frequent, incompatibility within the family can disrupt family relationships, create disunity, jeopardize the unity among family members, and ultimately lead to dissolution (Yeganeh Mehr, 2013). According to findings, approximately one-third of marriages face failure within the first five years, indicating a significant portion of the population engages in marital conflict within their families. These distressing conflicts can destabilize marital relationships and significantly impact them (Kazemian, 2013).

Marital conflict is a type of marital interaction involving violent behaviors such as insults, blame, criticism, and physical attacks, where spouses feel hostility, resentment, anger, and hatred towards each other, each believing their spouse is an undesirable and incompatible person causing their suffering (Saadati & Parsakia, 2023). This distress affects the quality of the relationship, and since relationship quality is a strong predictor of marital satisfaction, resolving this distress can improve relationship quality and, if not addressed timely, can lead to psychological and physical problems or even separation. Forgiveness can serve as a powerful means to end a troubled or painful relationship and

facilitate reconciliation with the offending party, thereby enhancing marital satisfaction (Fincham, 2004, 2006). Interpersonal forgiveness between spouses arises when one spouse's actions or words cause dissatisfaction and harm to the other (Prendergast, 2019). Forgiveness in these instances is a strategy that quickly resolves distress and enhances the quality and level of marital satisfaction (Fincham, 2006).

There are differences of opinion in defining and conceptualizing forgiveness, with various definitions provided. Definitions include the process of reducing anger, dissatisfaction, or hatred towards others, freeing from past judgments and perceptions, releasing from learned and habitual responses to situations, and striving to heal past wounds. Therefore, forgiveness can significantly impact human relationships, especially among conflicting couples. Various approaches have been introduced to help couples in conflict, including couple therapy. Emotion-focused couple therapy is one approach that can be appropriate in this context. In emotion-focused couple therapy, couples engage in a process during treatment where each tries to express their fears and attachment needs and work towards fostering a safer attachment bond, which in turn leads to sustained changes in relationship satisfaction and achieving early adaptive emotional responses to situations (Johnson, 2012). Saemi, Besharat, and Asgharnejad (2018) in a study showed that both methods are effective on marital intimacy, but Gottman couple therapy is more effective (Saemi, 2020). Sheydanfar, Navabinejad, and Farzad (2017) in a study aimed at comparing the effectiveness of emotion-focused couple therapy and Imago therapy on marital satisfaction involving 24 couples divided into experimental and control groups, exposed one group to emotion-focused couple therapy and the other to Imago therapy over ten 90-minute sessions. The results showed that Imago therapy is more effective than emotion-focused couple therapy in enhancing couple satisfaction (Sheydanfar, 2021). Findings by Aslani et al. (2018) in a study demonstrated that emotion-focused couple therapy is more effective than systemic therapy, and both significantly enhance positive affect (Aslani, 2015). Ofok et al. (2015) in a study found that emotional intelligence and forgiveness have a positive and significant relationship with the level of marital satisfaction among employees with marital disputes (Ofoke S. Mbam, 2015).

Additionally, recent empirical and theoretical advancements in the field of couple therapy have led to a deeper understanding of various communicative cognitions that seem to be very important in the communicative functioning of couples. One type of cognition that plays a

significant role in communicative performance is schemas. Recent professional literature has offered a perspective that focuses on the role of individual schemas in couples' relationships, suggesting that vulnerable schemas can be treated and reconstructed during periods of couple therapy (Tilden, 2005). Schema therapy considers psychological themes that characterize patients with cognitive personality issues. These themes are called early maladaptive schemas. The core of schema therapy is the early maladaptive schemas, which are considered the deepest cognitive levels. Schemas are described as organized representations of early life experiences that significantly affect individuals' perceptions, behaviors, and thoughts (van Dijk et al., 2019). Schema therapy is a treatment that helps therapists more accurately define and organize the chronic and profound problems of clients (van Dijk et al., 2019). As the effects of emotion-focused and schema-focused couple therapy on marital relationships and marital satisfaction have only been examined separately or in comparison with other couple therapy methods, and no research has yet compared them together, and as there has been no research on comparing the effectiveness of schema-focused and emotion-focused couple therapy, the current research issue is to examine and compare the impact of these two approaches on satisfaction and adjustment in marital relationships of couples. In addition to determining the role of the mentioned therapies on marital offense forgiveness in couples, this also addresses the existing research gap to some extent so that they can be employed in couple therapies and marital counseling and determine the importance and impact of schemas and emotions in marital life. Therefore, the present research was conducted with the aim of testing the following hypotheses:

Schema-focused couple therapy has an effect on marital offense forgiveness in couples with marital discrepancies.

Emotion-focused couple therapy has an effect on marital offense forgiveness in couples with marital discrepancies.

There is no significant difference in the impact of schema-focused and emotion-focused couple therapy on marital offense forgiveness in couples with marital discrepancies.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

The research method of the current study is quasi-experimental, utilizing a pre-test, post-test design with a control group. The statistical population consisted of 105 couples who visited counseling and psychological services

centers in Ilam during the second half of the year 2021. Out of these, 30 couples were selected through convenience sampling and randomly assigned into three groups, each comprising 10 couples. The inclusion criteria were the presence of both members of the couple at therapy sessions, a marital duration between two to ten years, and the existence of marital disputes. The Marital Offense Forgiveness Questionnaire was administered to the participants for responses. The experimental interventions for the emotion-focused group and the schema-focused group were conducted over 9 sessions, each lasting 100 minutes. It should be noted that during this period, the control group did not receive any intervention. After the sessions ended, both groups were reassessed, and three months after the post-test, a follow-up test was conducted. Data from the administration of schema-focused couple therapy and emotion-focused couple therapy were analyzed through repeated measures analysis of variance.

After coordinating with the counseling center in Ilam, from among 105 couples who visited the center in the second half of 2021, after screening and selecting eligible participants, explanations about the nature, implementation method of the research, and adherence to ethical considerations were provided. Two experimental groups and a control group were randomly assigned. After the sessions, both groups were re-evaluated, and three months after the post-test, a follow-up test was conducted.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Forgiveness

This questionnaire was developed by Paleari, Regalia, and Fincham in 2009 to assess the forgiveness process in marital life situations. The Marital Offense Forgiveness Questionnaire consists of 10 statements and two subscales: benevolence and anger-avoidance. To obtain the scores of the subscales, the scores of all statements related to the desired subscale are summed. To obtain the average score, the total score is divided by the number of statements related to that subscale. The results indicate satisfactory reliability of this test. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the benevolence subscale is .35 for men and .10 for women, and for the anger-avoidance subscale, it is .33 for men and .19 for women. The discriminant validity of the test was examined through confirmatory factor analysis. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis also confirmed the presence of two separate but aligned factors, namely benevolence and anger-avoidance (Dehghani, 2020). In this study, Cronbach's alpha

for the benevolence subscale was .80 and for anger-avoidance, it was .72.

2.3. Interventions

2.3.1. Emotion-Focused Therapy

This intervention was conducted in nine 100-minute sessions (Nameni, 2017).

First session: Activities included familiarization and establishing a therapeutic relationship with the couples, introducing the general rules of therapy, presenting a definition of emotion and its application, assessing the nature of the problem and the relationship, and evaluating the goals and expectations of the spouses from the therapy.

Second session: Identifying the negative interaction cycle and creating conditions for the spouses to reveal their negative interaction cycle, assessing the relationship and attachment bond between the couples, assessing the problem and attachment barriers, familiarizing the couples with the principles of emotion-focused therapy and the role of emotions in interpersonal interactions, reconstructing interactions, and increasing the flexibility of the spouses.

Third session: Accessing unidentified emotions that underlie interactive situations, focusing more on emotions, attachment needs, and fears, creating a safe communication space for the couples, facilitating interactions between the spouses, and validating their experiences, needs, and attachment desires, focusing on secondary emotions that appear in the interaction cycle, and exploring them to access underlying and unknown emotions, discussing primary emotions, processing them, and enhancing the couples' awareness of primary emotions.

Fourth session: Reframing the problem in terms of underlying emotions and attachment needs, informing the couples about the impact of fear and their defensive mechanisms on cognitive and emotional processes, aligning the therapist's diagnosis with the couple, describing the cycle within the attachment context.

Fifth session: Encouraging the identification of rejected needs and aspects of the self that have been denied, drawing the couples' attention to their interaction style and reflecting their interaction patterns with respect and empathy, expressing attachment needs, identifying denied needs, and enhancing acceptance of corrective experiences.

Sixth session: Informing the couples about underlying emotions and revealing each spouse's role in the relationship, emphasizing the acceptance of spouse experiences and new ways of interaction, tracking recognized emotions,

highlighting and re-describing attachment needs, and noting the healthy and natural aspects of these needs.

Seventh session: Facilitating the expression of needs and desires and creating emotional engagement, developing initial emotional experiences in the context of attachment, recognizing internal needs and attachments, creating new attachments with a secure bond between the spouses.

Eighth session: Creating new interactive situations between the couples and ending old interaction patterns, clarifying interaction patterns, recalling attachment needs.

Ninth session: Reinforcing changes that occurred during therapy, highlighting the differences between current interactions and old interactions, forming a relationship based on a secure bond in a way that discussions about problems and searching for solutions do not harm them, discussing positive and negative viewpoints regarding the experimental design, evaluating changes, and conducting the post-test.

2.3.2. Schema Couple Therapy

This intervention was conducted in nine 100-minute sessions (Nikpour et al., 2021).

First Session: Goal: To establish a secure and empathetic therapeutic relationship with the couple. Session Description: In the first session, the therapist strives to create an environment in which the couple can express their problems with a sense of calm and security. The focus is primarily on the couple's current issues and what they wish to discuss. The more comfortable the couple feels in expressing their emotions and thoughts, and the more the therapist can foster hope for treatment, the more positive outcomes are likely. It is crucial that the therapist creates a sense of empathy and alliance with each spouse, preventing the formation of an alliance with only one spouse or creating such a perception. It should be noted that attention, empathy, and active listening by the therapist are important in all sessions.

Second Session: Goal: To identify the couple's dysfunctional life patterns. Session Description: This goal continues over several sessions. Initially, the therapist collects information and, based on this, examines the couple's life history and current problems. The session explores the strategies that the couple has used to date in dealing with their stated problems and how each of them thinks and feels about them. What is important for a schema therapist is to hypothesize about the couple and the root of their problems, identifying early maladaptive schemas based

on the information gathered. The therapist tests their hypothesis and its validity in subsequent sessions. At the end of the session, the therapist provides a general summary and conceptualization of the couple's problems and how these dysfunctional patterns have led to unmet fundamental needs, according to the schema therapy approach. Assignment: Each spouse is asked to try to identify the connection between their childhood behaviors and their current behaviors in response to a distressing event.

Third Session: Goal: To teach the schema therapy model. **Session Description:** Initially, the previous session's homework is reviewed. As the couple has gained more readiness and trust in the therapist, an explanation is given about the five basic human needs from the perspective of schema therapy. The session also discusses the consequences of these unmet needs and the strategies that an individual might choose in response, and their impact on life. The couple is asked to talk about their current life needs and how they meet them. The therapist helps the couple identify their schemas and coping styles. Lastly, it is explained to the couple that they should attend the next session individually for the assessment phase. **Assignment:** The couple is asked to think about the needs discussed in the session, which have been noted down for them, and to closely examine their life history to see which of their needs have not been well attended to.

Fourth Session: Goal: To explore basic needs and how they were met during childhood (this session was conducted separately once for women and once for men). **Session Description:** In this session, the previous session's homework is reviewed, and it is expected that by completing it, the client will have a more prepared mind for conceptualizing their problems from the perspective of schema therapy. The client is asked to discuss memories (focusing on distressing memories) and the quality of their relationship with their parents and significant others. The client tries to express their feelings and thoughts from their childhood perspective. As the sessions continue, the client gains deeper insight into their needs and why they have remained unmet. In the process, the therapist also gains information about the client's temperament. For this purpose, we ask the client to recall attitudes and behaviors of their parents and also use the technique of mental imagery. **Assignment:** The client is asked to think more deeply about their childhood experiences at home, noting down their feelings and thoughts. This process helps them realize that the strategies they currently use against problems with their

spouse are rooted in their past. This realization is a new experience for the couple.

Fifth Session: Goal: To review coping styles. **Session Description:** Given the training both spouses have received about different coping styles, in this session, the client discovers, with the help of the therapist, which coping style they predominantly use in their life. It is important for the client to realize that they used these strategies during their childhood as a way to meet their needs and that they have continued to use them despite their negative consequences over the years. Helping the client express their experiences and how they feel and think is very important. **Assignment:** The client is asked to examine situations in their past life (in relation to their parents or others) that triggered the same feelings, emotions, and thoughts in relation to their current issue (examining similar situations in life).

Sixth Session: Goal: Conceptualization of the client's problem based on the schema therapy approach. **Session Description:** In this session, the therapist, based on the information obtained from previous sessions, discusses their hypothesis about the schemas formed in the client and their relation to the relevant problems. The therapist, along with the client, evaluates this hypothesis. What is crucial is the therapist's special attention to the client's emotions. The client connects with the concept of their schema when an emotional change occurs in response to this insight. **Assignment:** The client is asked to observe the activation of their schemas in their current life and note it down for discussion in the next session. Self-observation helps the client see how their schemas are triggered and how they persist.

Seventh Session: Goal: To change maladaptive schemas through cognitive strategies. **Session Description:** After the therapist and client have passed the assessment stage and the client has become aware of their schemas and coping strategies, it is time for change. Initially, change occurs through cognitive strategies. First, the therapist makes an agreement with the client not to see their schemas as absolute truths but rather as hypotheses to be tested. At this stage, the client, with the help of the therapist, examines evidence that confirms or refutes their schemas in their life (by making a list). When the client presents evidence supporting their schema, this evidence is re-examined, and alternative interpretations of the same events are presented. The client is also asked about the advantages and disadvantages of their current coping strategies, so that when their schemas are activated in everyday life, they can fight against them. The goal is to create a healthy mindset and empower the client.

This session emphasizes the evidence from the client's early life and the neglect that occurred not by their fault but by their parents', as well as the incompatibility of coping strategies in adulthood. During this session, a discussion is held between the healthy aspect and the schema aspect regarding the problem the client is facing, with the therapist's help. Assignment: The client is asked to write a letter to their parents and a letter to their spouse during the week, discussing their feelings, expectations, and desires.

Eighth Session: Goal: To change maladaptive schemas through emotional strategies. **Session Description:** The client has rationally understood their schemas in previous sessions; now, with the use of emotional strategies, the most important of which is mental imagery, the client understands the schemas on an emotional level. This emotional belief can create the most change. Initially, the client, with the help of the therapist, starts with imaging a safe environment and then moves towards chaotic mental images from childhood that indicate relationships with parents. It is important that the therapist empathetically helps create a sense of security for the client to express their emotions. The client expressing anger towards their parents can have a profound effect on changing their schemas. The goal of this session is to create a direct connection between childhood memories and the client's current life. When the client successfully creates an image, they are asked to talk to people within the image (first parents and then spouse). The client is also asked to break patterns in their mental images that perpetuate their schemas and to act differently and correctly in difficult situations in their mind. Assignment: The client is asked to write letters addressed to their parents and their spouse, discussing their feelings, expectations, and desires.

Ninth Session: Goal: To change maladaptive schemas through behavioral strategies and to conclude the therapy session. **Session Description:** In this part of the treatment, it is time to change behavioral patterns and create healthier coping styles in the client. Throughout the session, the therapist, based on the client's characteristics and schemas, can use all behavioral techniques such as assertiveness, anger management, communication skills, etc. The most important part of this section is preparing a list of problematic behaviors. It is very important for the therapist to give the couple hope to continue the journey and not to be discouraged. One of the things the therapist does at this stage is to review the advantages and disadvantages of maladaptive behaviors in the couple, creating the necessary motivation to continue. The couple is asked to talk

comprehensively about what they have learned from this therapy period. The therapist, to maintain motivation and hope for continued effort in the couple, reminds them that their schemas have evolutionary roots in their childhood. This prevents the couple from feeling guilty and weak in the face of change. The session also reviews the advantages and disadvantages of the couple's alternative behaviors towards each other and in problematic situations. The therapist emphasizes their continued support for the couple when needed and announces the end of the session. Assignment: The couple is asked to set aside time to talk about their therapy experience and the changes that have occurred in their married life in various areas.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data from the implementation of schema-focused couple therapy and emotion-focused couple therapy were analyzed through repeated measures analysis of variance.

3. Findings and Results

The average age and standard deviation of participants in the schema-focused couple therapy group was 28.15 years, in the emotion-focused couple therapy group it was 29.36 years, and in the control group it was 29.05 years. The average duration of marriage and standard deviation for participants in the schema-focused couple therapy group was 6.4 years, in the emotion-focused couple therapy group it was 5.8 years, and in the control group it was 6.6 years. In the schema-focused couple therapy group, there were 10 women and 10 men, in the emotion-focused couple therapy group there were 10 women and 10 men, and in the control group there were 10 women and 10 men. Pearson's chi-square test results indicated that there was no significant difference between the groups in terms of gender. Educational levels in the schema-focused couple therapy group included 2 individuals with a diploma or less, 6 with an associate degree, 6 with a bachelor's degree, and 6 with a master's degree or higher. In the emotion-focused couple therapy group, there were 2 individuals with a diploma or less, 6 with an associate degree, 6 with a bachelor's degree, and 6 with a master's degree or higher. In the control group, education levels were 2 individuals below a diploma, 4 with a diploma, 8 with a bachelor's degree, and 6 with more than a bachelor's degree. Pearson's chi-square test results showed no significant differences between the groups in terms of education levels.

Table 1*Mean and Standard Deviation of Research Variable in Experimental and Control Groups*

Variable	Group	Pre-test Mean	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean	Post-test SD	Follow-up Mean	Follow-up SD
Marital Offense Forgiveness	Schema-Focused	37.18	8.11	43.22	8.03	43.08	7.58
	Emotion-Focused	37.78	7.56	42.66	7.51	43.32	7.53
	Control	37.49	8.93	37.10	7.65	-	-

As observed in Table 1, the mean score of marital offense forgiveness for the schema-focused, emotion-focused, and control groups in the pre-test was 37.18, 37.78, and 37.49, respectively. This value in the post-test was 43.22, 42.66, and 37.10, respectively. Therefore, it can be stated that the mean scores of marital offense forgiveness in the schema-focused and emotion-focused experimental groups showed a significant difference in the post-test compared to the pre-test, while this difference was not significant for the control group. Additionally, the follow-up stage showed that scores

did not significantly differ from the post-test stage. Given that the significance level obtained in the Shapiro-Wilk multivariate test is greater than .05 ($p = .12$, $W = .91$), it can be said that the assumption of normal distribution of data is appropriately established for the research data. Further, to check for the presence of a correlation structure between the scores of the dependent variables of the study, allowing for the possibility of conducting a multivariate analysis of variance, the Bartlett's test of sphericity was used, and the results are reported in Table 2.

Table 2*Results of the Tests for Normal Distribution of Scores and Homogeneity of Variances*

Variable	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	Levene's Test (All Groups)	Mauchly's Test (All Groups)
Marital Offense Forgiveness	Schema-focused	$D(20) = 0.21$, $p = 0.06$	$F(1, 57) = 0.51$, $p = 0.61$	$W = 0.85$, $p = 0.001$
	Emotion-focused	$D(20) = 0.20$, $p = 0.05$		
	Control	$D(20) = 0.21$, $p = 0.05$		

The results in Table 2 show that the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test confirms the condition of normal distribution of scores, and Levene's test results indicate the condition of homogeneity of variances in the variable of marital offense forgiveness. Furthermore, Mauchly's W statistic for the

research variables is not significant at the .05 level, thus indicating that variances of differences among the levels of the dependent variable are not significant, and the sphericity assumption is established. Therefore, this statistic was used for interpreting the results of the within-subjects effects test.

Table 3*Results of Mixed ANOVA with Repeated Measures across Three Groups at Three Stages*

Variable	Group	Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Squares	F-Ratio	Significance	Effect Size
Marital Offense Forgiveness	Schema-Focused	Intervention Stages	281.5	2	140.75	2.03	.15	.06
		Stages * Group	231.6	2	115.80	1.95	.17	.06
		Between Groups	491.2	1	491.20	5.85	.025	.19
	Emotion-Focused	Intervention Stages	455.5	2	227.75	2.50	.055	.11
		Stages * Group	409.9	2	204.95	2.15	.055	.10
		Between Groups	400.9	1	400.90	5.81	.045	.18

The results in Table 3 indicate that the schema-focused intervention was effective on marital offense forgiveness scores ($F = 5.85$, $p = .025$) with an effect size of .19, and the

emotion-focused intervention also significantly affected marital offense forgiveness scores ($F = 5.81$, $p = .045$) with an effect size of .18.

Table 4

Bonferroni Post-Hoc Test Results Comparing Mean Differences Between Groups Across Three Stages

Variable	Stage Comparison	Group	Mean Difference	Standard Error	Significance Level
Marital Offense Forgiveness	Post-test vs. Pre-test	Schema-focused	5.8	0.92	$p < 0.001$
		Emotion-focused	4.2	0.56	$p < 0.001$
		Control	1.2	0.75	$p > 0.05$
	Follow-up vs. Pre-test	Schema-focused	6.32	0.58	$p < 0.001$
		Emotion-focused	7.6	0.76	$p < 0.001$
		Control	1.49	0.35	$p > 0.05$
	Follow-up vs. Post-test	Schema-focused	1.90	0.18	$p < 0.001$
		Emotion-focused	3.5	0.65	$p < 0.001$
		Control	2.37	0.28	$p > 0.05$

Table 4 shows the comparison of the three stages in the schema-focused and emotion-focused experimental groups and the control group, indicating that the differences in marital offense forgiveness were significant ($p = .001$) in the

post-test and follow-up stages compared to the pre-test, and this effect remained stable through the follow-up stage. However, these differences were not significant in the control group.

Table 5

Tukey Post Hoc Test Results for Pairwise Comparisons between Experimental and Control Groups

Stage Group	Group	Mean Difference	Standard Error	Significance Level
Marital Offense Forgiveness	Schema-Focused vs. Control	5.85	2.01	.002
	Emotion-Focused vs. Control	7.68	2.01	.005
	Schema-Focused vs. Emotion-Focused	2.14	2.01	.75

Table 5 compares the effect of two intervention approaches, schema-focused and emotion-focused, on marital offense forgiveness among couples with marital discrepancies, indicating that there is no significant difference between the two groups in terms of marital offense forgiveness. Thus, there is no significant difference in the impact of schema-focused and emotion-focused couple therapy on marital offense forgiveness among couples with marital discrepancies, and both approaches are equally effective on the variable of marital offense forgiveness within the statistical population.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to compare the effectiveness of schema-focused couple therapy and emotion-focused couple therapy on marital offense forgiveness among couples with marital differences in Ilam city in 2021. The research findings indicated that the mean scores of marital offense forgiveness for the schema-focused group, emotion-focused group, and control group in the pre-test were 37.18, 37.78, and 37.49, respectively. These scores changed in the post-test to 43.22, 42.66, and 37.10, respectively. Accordingly, it can be said that the mean scores

of marital offense forgiveness in the schema-focused and emotion-focused experimental groups showed a notable difference in the post-test compared to the pre-test, while this difference was not significant in the control group. Furthermore, the follow-up phase also showed that scores did not significantly differ from the post-test phase. Mixed ANOVA results with repeated measures across three groups at three stages indicate that schema-focused intervention significantly affected the scores of marital offense forgiveness ($F = 5.85$, $p = .025$) with an effect size of .19. These findings are consistent with the results of prior research (Ammari et al., 2023; Barzegaran et al., 2021; Najari et al., 2023; Zolfaghari et al., 2021). These findings corroborate that forgiveness is a strategy that can quickly resolve offenses and prevent subsequent problems. Forgiveness improves the quality and satisfaction levels in marital relationships and can be a robust means to end a troubled or painful relationship and facilitate reconciliation with the offending party (Najari et al., 2023; Zolfaghari et al., 2021). Therefore, it can increase marital satisfaction and reduce conflicts through withdrawal from the relationship. Forgiveness is a variable that has recently attracted researchers' attention in the field of marital satisfaction.

Forgiveness involves reducing anger, dissatisfaction, or hatred towards others, freeing oneself from past judgments and perceptions, and striving to heal past wounds (Ammari et al., 2023). Thus, forgiveness can significantly impact human relationships. An important issue is the ability to forgive and the use of this construct, which heavily depends on individuals' mindsets and pre-existing cognitive patterns, where proper utilization of the schema therapy model can facilitate and conceptualize this structure. Schemas are maintained through three primary mechanisms: cognitive distortions, self-damaging life patterns, and coping styles. A significant advantage of the schema-focused approach is its integrated nature compared to most other approaches, blending elements from cognitive, behavioral, psychodynamic, object relations, attachment, and Gestalt models (Ammari et al., 2023). Proper use of this approach and effective intervention creates a psychological capacity to recognize inefficient early patterns and negative mindsets and allows for substituting these structures with rational and effective reactions based on considering the partner, which results in the acceptance of personal problems and the partner, substituting forgiveness and tolerance instead of increasing transactions and related conflicts.

Mixed ANOVA results with repeated measures across three groups at three stages show that emotion-focused intervention significantly impacts marital offense forgiveness ($F = 5.81$, $p = .045$) with an effect size of .18. Furthermore, the follow-up phase also demonstrated that scores did not significantly differ from the post-test phase. These findings align with prior findings (Dehghani et al., 2019; Ertezaee et al., 2023; Greenberg et al., 2008; Nameni, 2017; Rahimi & Mousavi, 2020; Zuccarini et al., 2013). In emotion-focused couple therapy, various training is used to enhance these skills. One such component is emotional awareness, which includes defining emotion, familiarity with primary emotions and the impact of situation assessment on them, recognizing the difference between perceiving emotions in couple relationships and reacting to them, and the ability to recognize the physical and physiological signs of different emotions. The mentioned training facilitates the understanding and expression of couples' emotions. To achieve this purpose, emotional detection techniques are used in the protocol to assist couples in achieving their desired goals and creating a two-way and multi-directional communication environment with an awareness of the emotions of the partner, resulting in concessions for each other and forgiveness of past grievances towards achieving higher goals based on

satisfaction and marital compatibility. In explaining these findings, the emotion-focused approach strives during the intervention to encourage couples to question their distressing thoughts and replace self-talk to deal with these emotions and mental ruminations causing turmoil and anxiety. Addressing these factors can lead to improvements in interpersonal forgiveness among couples (Ammari et al., 2023). Bonferroni test results in three phases by groups comparing the three stages in the schema-focused and emotion-focused experimental groups and the control group show that the difference in marital offense forgiveness ($p = .001$) in the post-test and follow-up stages compared to the pre-test is significant, and this effect remains stable through the follow-up stage, while in the control group, these differences are not significant. Therefore, it can be said that the results obtained are sufficiently stable and maintain their effect in the long term. Also, based on the findings, there is no significant difference between the impact of schema-focused and emotion-focused couple therapy on marital offense forgiveness among couples with marital differences in Ilam city. Tukey's post-hoc test results for pairwise comparisons between experimental and control groups comparing the effect of two intervention approaches, schema-focused and emotion-focused, on marital offense forgiveness among couples with marital discrepancies show that there is no significant difference between the two groups exposed to schema-focused and emotion-focused couple therapy in the variable of marital offense forgiveness. Thus, in the impact of schema-focused and emotion-focused couple therapy on marital offense forgiveness among couples with marital discrepancies, there is no significant difference, and both approaches are equally effective on the variable of marital offense forgiveness within the statistical population. These findings are consistent with Fincham, Hall, and Beach's (2006) research, which concluded that one of the effective factors in creating marital satisfaction is marital offense forgiveness, as discrepancies and grievances between husband and wife occur in every marital life, which, if not addressed timely, can lead to psychological, physical, and behavioral problems (Fincham, 2006). In explaining these findings, both approaches, though they may have different perspectives in some dimensions, address a common issue based on a cohesive reformative outlook. In the emotion-focused approach, therapy indicates that the experiential roots of emotion-focused couple therapy improve that therapeutic stance that deals with differences and freely learns from clients, which includes learning everything meaningful to clients and how they view intimate

relationships should learn about this unique culture and adopt interventions to shape (effective interventions). Emotion-focused couple therapy especially regards key emotional experiences, attachment needs, and behaviors as universal. Emotion-focused couple therapy helps clients to solve problems, emotional responses, and feelings by focusing on the aspects of reality that have been set aside, examining unspoken issues, and integrating elements of the couple's realities that have yet to be narrated, assisting them in responding more appropriately to each other's emotions and having a more effective relationship; therefore, one of the features of emotion-focused couple therapy is focusing on how spouses communicate and also on the general patterns that recur in various concepts, striving to correct and improve these factors (Ertezaee et al., 2023). Also, change is one of the very constructive and small steps toward engaging and sharing emotionally, so that spouses can provide each other with peace, comfort, and assurance, in schema therapy, too, the goal is to improve the behavioral pattern and remove existing problems from the formation of initial incompatibilities and cynical schemas, that proper use of the desired approach provides the basis for expansion and improvement of conditions in the target group and creates empathy and understanding, playing an effective role in the quality of relationships and forgiving problems.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Every research and study, although inherently seeking to link factors and the extent of their impact, will nevertheless have its limitations, which may appear along the way of the research and cause difficulties in the research and make generalizing the results challenging. The current research was not exempt from such matters and had limitations as follows:

The lack of entirely random sampling limits the generalizability of the research findings to other communities.

The lack of full cooperation from some participants and existing problems in this area were among the other limitations of this research.

The potential presence of socially desirable and evaluator-acceptable responses by participants.

It is recommended that the emotion-focused approach be used alongside the medical model to correct conditions and create mental balance and tranquility in marital life in the treatment of chronic physical problems such as various cancers, and given the existing effectiveness, it reduces

psychological problems and increases mental health, playing a role in physical improvement. Finally, it is worth mentioning that due to the convenience sampling method, the results of this research do not have the desired generalizability. It is suggested that this research be conducted in larger and random samples.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

References

- Ammari, S., Deyreh, E., Keykhosrovani, M., & Ganji, K. (2023). The Effectiveness of Couple Therapy on Depressive Symptoms and Sexual Function in Women Affected by Infidelity. *Razi Journal of Medical Sciences*, 29(7), 54-63. <https://www.magiran.com/paper/2520730>
- Aslani, K., Jamei, M, Rajabi, G. (2015). The effectiveness of imago therapy on marital quality among referred couples to the Behbahan counseling centers. *Applied Psychology*, 9(1), 37-53.

- https://apsy.sbu.ac.ir/article_96504_1cba63e3d242a37bf46793f7f5e274ad.pdf
- Barzegaran, S., Haroon Rashidi, H., & Kazemian Moghadam, K. (2021). The Effect of Emotional Schema Therapy on Forgiveness, Quality of Marital Relationships, and Self-Differentiation of Women Faced with Infidelity. *Journal of Applied Psychological Research*, 12(1), 315-332. <https://doi.org/10.22059/japr.2021.305998.643574>
- Dehghani, M., Aslani, K., AMANELAHI, A., & Rajabi, G. (2019). The effectiveness of emotionally focused couples therapy based on attachment injury resolution model on forgiveness among the injured women with marital infidelity. *Family Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 9(1), 143-160. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.34785/J015.2019.020>
- Dehghani, M., Aslani, Khaled. (2020). Comparison of the effectiveness of Attachment Injury Resolution Model with Integrative Couple Therapy on Forgiveness among the Injured Women with Marital Infidelity. *Applied Psychology*, 14(2), 171-147. <https://doi.org/10.52547/apsy.14.2.147>
- Ertezaee, B., Neissi, A., Hamid, N., & Davoudi, I. (2023). The effectiveness of emotion focused therapy on mental pain, experiential avoidance, and forgiveness in women with depression, who experienced a romantic relationship breakup [Research]. *Shenakht Journal of Psychology and Psychiatry*, 9(6), 64-77. <https://doi.org/10.32598/shenakht.9.6.64>
- Fincham, F. D., Beach, Steven RH, Davila, Joanne. (2004). Forgiveness and conflict resolution in marriage. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 18(1), 72. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.18.1.72>
- Fincham, F. D., Hall, Julie, Beach, Steven R.H. (2006). Forgiveness in Marriage: Current Status and Future Directions. *Family Relations*, 55(4), 415-427. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2005.callf.x-i1>
- Greenberg, L. J., Warwar, S. H., & Malcolm, W. M. (2008). Differential effects of emotion-focused therapy and psychoeducation in facilitating forgiveness and letting go of emotional injuries. *Journal of counseling psychology*, 55(2), 185-196. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.55.2.185>
- Hooshmandi, R., Ahmadi, Khodabakhsh, Kiamanesh, Alireza. (2019). Analysis of the causes of marital conflict in the last two decades (a systematic review). *Journal of Psychological Science*, 18(79), 819-828. <https://psychologicalscience.ir/article-1-365-fa.pdf>
- Johnson, S. M. (2012). *The practice of emotionally focused couple therapy: Creating connection*. Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203843871/practice-emotionally-focused-couple-therapy-susan-johnson>
- Kazemian, S., Shariati, Seyedasadrobin. (2013). Family conflict resolution training pattern design: based on anthropological perspective Ayatollah Javadi Amoli. *Counseling Culture and Psychotherapy*, 4(13), 11-34. <https://doi.org/10.22054/qccpc.2013.6083>
- Mbwirire, J. (2017). Causes of marital conflicts in Christian marriages in Domboshawa area, Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Humanities, Art and Social Studies (IJHAS)*, 1(9), 59-73. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/John-Mbwirire/publication/315712871_CAUSES_OF_MARITAL_CONFLICTS_IN_CHRISTIAN_MARRIAGES_IN_DOMBOSHAWA_AREA_MASHONALAND_EAST_PROVINCE_ZIMBABWE/links/58de05a7a6fdcc3c6abf9d08/CAUSES-OF-MARITAL-CONFLICTS-IN-CHRISTIAN-MARRIAGES-IN-DOMBOSHAWA-AREA-MASHONALAND-EAST-PROVINCE-ZIMBABWE.pdf
- Najari, F., Niknam, M., & Dokaneifard, F. (2023). Comparison of the efficacy of acceptance and commitment based therapy (ACT) and schema therapy on forgiveness in women after infidelity [Research]. *Journal of Psychological Science*, 22(124), 827-843. <https://doi.org/10.52547/jps.22.124.827>
- Nameni, E., Mohammadpoor, Mohammad, Noori, Gafar. (2017). The effectiveness of emotion-focused group therapy on interpersonal forgiveness and hope in divorced women. *Counseling Culture and Psychotherapy*, 8(29), 57-78. <https://doi.org/10.22054/qccpc.2017.19768.1463>
- Nikpour, F., Khalatbari, J., rezaei, o., & jomehri, f. (2021). Comparison of the effectiveness of schema therapy approach and acceptance and commitment based therapy Psychological well-being of divorced women [Applicable]. *Journal of Psychological Science*, 20(101), 741-751. <http://psychologicalscience.ir/article-1-1105-en.html>
- Ofoke S. Mbam, R. C. N., Oginyi, Ernest I. Onyishi. (2015). Emotional intelligence, religiosity and forgiveness as predictor of marital satisfaction among non-academic staff of Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki South Eastern Nigeria. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 6(5), 361-370. <https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC183952>
- Parsakia, K., Farzad, V., & Rostami, M. (2023). The mediating role of attachment styles in the relationship between marital intimacy and self-differentiation in couples. *Applied Family Therapy Journal (AFTJ)*, 4(1), 589-607. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.4.1.29>
- Prendergast, L. E., Toumbourou, John W, McMorris, Barbara J, Catalano, Richard F. (2019). Outcomes of Early Adolescent Sexual Behavior in Australia: Longitudinal Findings in Young Adulthood. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 64(4), 516-522. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.10.006>
- Rahimi, P., & Mousavi, A. S. (2020). The effectiveness of emotion focused education on sexual intimacy and interpersonal forgiveness of conflicting couples. *Journal of psychologicalscience*, 19(86), 229-236. http://psychologicalscience.ir/browse.php?a_id=373&sid=1&slc_lang=en
- Saadati, N., & Parsakia, K. (2023). The Predictive Role of Parents' Marital Relationship Quality on The Adolescents' Psychological Capital. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies (JAYPS)*, 4(8), 139-146. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.jayps.4.8.16>
- Saemi, H., Besharat, Mohammad Ali, Asgharnezhad farid, Aliasghar. (2020). Comparison of the Effectiveness of Gottman Couple Therapy and Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy on Emotion Regulation in Couples. *Research in Clinical Psychology and Counseling*, 10(1), 87-104. <https://doi.org/10.22067/tppcp.2020.39366>
- Sheydanfar, N., Navabinejad, Shokouh, Farzad, Valiollah. (2021). Comparing the effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT) and Imago Relation Therapy (IRT) in couple's marital satisfaction. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 4(2), 75-88. https://www.ijfpjournal.ir/article_245533
- Tilden, T., Dattilio, Frank M. (2005). Vulnerability schemas of individuals in couples relationships: a cognitive perspective. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 27(2), 139-162. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-005-4036-4>
- van Dijk, S. D. M., Veenstra, M. S., Bouman, R., Peekel, J., Veenstra, D. H., van Dalen, P. J., van Asselt, A. D. I., Boshuisen, M. L., van Alphen, S. P. J., van den Brink, R. H. S., & Oude Voshaar, R. C. (2019). Group schema-focused therapy enriched with psychomotor therapy versus treatment as usual for older adults with cluster B and/or C personality

- disorders: a randomized trial. *BMC psychiatry*, 19(1), 26.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-018-2004-4>
- Yeganeh Mehr, Z. (2013). The Study of Espousal Class Factors in Garmsar, 2011. *Semnan police knowledge quarterly*, 3(7), 55-72. http://semnan.jrl.police.ir/article_15775_
- Zolfaghari, D., Mohammadkhani, S., Mahdavian, A., & Akbari, M. (2021). Transdiagnostic model of healing from marital infidelity with emphasis on the role of metacognitions, schemas, intimacy, emotional efficiency and forgiveness. *Clinical Psychology and Personality*, 19(1), 27-39.
<https://doi.org/10.22070/cpap.2021.7279.0>
- Zuccarini, D., Johnson, S. M., Dalglish, T. L., & Makinen, J. A. (2013). Forgiveness and reconciliation in emotionally focused therapy for couples: The client change process and therapist interventions. *Journal of marital and family therapy*, 39(2), 148-162. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2012.00287.x>

