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Comparison of the Effectiveness of the Premarital Preparation Program Based on Olson's Model and Premarital Education Using the Awareness and Choice Method on Attitudes Toward Marriage

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of the present study was to compare the effectiveness of the premarital preparation program based on Olson's model with premarital education using the awareness and choice method on attitudes toward marriage among university students.

Methods: The research method was quasi-experimental, employing a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design with experimental and control groups. The statistical population included students on the verge of marriage at Dezful University of Medical Sciences. Using convenience sampling and considering inclusion and exclusion criteria, three groups of 15 individuals each were selected as the sample and responded to the study's questionnaires.

Findings: The results indicated that the impact of premarital education using the awareness and choice method on attitudes toward marriage in the post-test and follow-up phases was 46.5% and 22.2%, respectively, demonstrating the effectiveness of this intervention compared to the control group. Additionally, the impact of the premarital preparation program based on Olson's model on attitudes toward marriage in the post-test and follow-up phases was 69.7% and 57.3%, respectively, indicating the effectiveness of this intervention compared to the control group.

Conclusion: It can be concluded that premarital education and preparation programs can assist in reducing divorce rates and facilitate better partner selection among couples.

Keywords: Attitude toward marriage, premarital preparation program, Olson model, awareness and choice method.

1. Introduction

Marriage is the most significant social norm and custom in all societies and cultures, forming and shaping the closest interpersonal processes between two individuals, ultimately resulting in the establishment of a social unit known as the family (Dardashti et al., 2023). Inclination toward marriage is influenced by various factors. Beyond major factors such as economic, social, and personality factors, other influences include the couple's communication skills, family interaction patterns, and each partner's psychological and emotional maturity (Vafaeinezhad et al., 2023). It appears that individual characteristics, such as attitudes toward marriage, are also linked to the tendency or reluctance of young people to marry and may serve as predictors.

Attitude toward marriage reflects an individual's feelings, biases, preconceived notions, fears, and firm beliefs about marriage. Thus, an individual's attitude toward marriage encompasses their thoughts and feelings about it (Dardashti et al., 2023; Kalate Sadati & Jiriaei, 2022). Attitude is a crucial and influential factor in behavior, affecting all personal, group, and societal functions. The strength of attitudes impacts the quality of behavior and its outcomes. Attitudes essentially serve as a bridge between our values and actions. According to many researchers, changing actions necessitates a shift in attitudes (Harris & Park, 2022). Individuals with negative attitudes toward marriage are often influenced by distorted cognitive schemas shaped by incorrect judgments and expectations within the family or through other interpersonal relationship exposures, such as media portrayals of marital relationships. The attitude a person has toward the future and partner selection can determine how they navigate future relationships, with a lack of positive attitudes resulting from various individual and external factors explaining young people's reluctance to marry (Cheng & Yang, 2021; Park & Harris, 2023).

In a study on premarital attitudes through premarital education, Barton et al. (2014) demonstrated that premarital education could moderate negative attitudes toward marriage and make partner selection criteria more realistic. This study involved 63 couples, some of whom received premarital education while the others did not. To understand changes in marriage attitudes in adulthood, Willoughby and Dworkin (2009) conducted a study titled "Attitude Circuit toward Marriage in Adolescence, Youth, and Young Adults." The sample consisted of 1,000 high school students, with changes tracked over four years. The findings indicated

that participants viewed marriage as a transition into adulthood. Family structure, core goals, race, and gender also influenced attitudes toward marriage (Alivardi Nia et al., 2024).

Several strategies have been implemented and validated for premarital education, notably Olson's preparation approach and the awareness and choice method, both of which are examined in detail. Olson's approach addresses various topics, including career issues, finances, friendships and social support, parenting, core family matters, attitudes and beliefs about marriage, gender role expectations, personality traits, values, marital adaptation, commitment, time spent with a spouse, problem-solving, love, and sexual relations (Murray, 2006). It emphasizes four essential characteristics of an effective preventive approach: (a) identifying factors influencing marital success, (b) evaluating couples based on these factors, (c) providing feedback and practice in problem areas, and (d) teaching and practicing conflict resolution and communication skills (Razavi et al., 2018). Researchers in premarital enrichment have noted that individuals who participate in premarital education programs experience improved communication, reduced destructive exchanges, increased support, and lower divorce rates (Borowski & Tambling, 2015; Kepler, 2015). The effectiveness of this approach has been confirmed in numerous studies, such as Sepehari Shamlou (2010), who found that premarital education enhanced awareness of expectations, improved communication beliefs, and increased marital satisfaction among married women (Sepehari Shamlou, 2010).

Another premarital education program is the Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge (PICK) program. Based on Van Epp's (2006) attachment theory model, this program explores close relationships and introduces the relationship attachment model, which outlines five components: knowledge, trust, reliance, commitment, and touch. Together, these components provide an overall understanding of a relationship, offering meaningful insights into feelings of love, attachment, and intimacy (Van Epp, 2006; Van Epp et al., 2008). This comprehensive program reviews key areas of romantic relationships, providing a framework for understanding closeness and intimacy in premarital relationships. Supporting this, Rajabi et al. (2017) confirmed that this educational strategy effectively improved communication beliefs and reduced dysfunctional beliefs (Rajabi et al., 2017).

Given that students are a crucial demographic for a country's success, recent decades have seen increasing

research, policy, and programmatic focus on their empowerment (Crandall et al., 2016). Empowering young students is inherently valuable, benefiting families, communities, cultures, and social institutions (Gill et al., 2007). The significance of family and marriage is well-known, especially considering the unique socio-cultural context of Iranian society, where the family holds a special place. Therefore, understanding students' attitudes toward marriage and how they approach marriage-age decisions is vital. Employing premarital preparation and awareness strategies would be a significant service to society, preventing more severe issues. This study aims to compare the effectiveness of Olson's premarital preparation program and the awareness and choice method on students' attitudes toward marriage.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up, featuring experimental and control groups. The statistical population consisted of all students on the verge of marriage at Dezful University of Medical Sciences. Using convenience sampling and considering inclusion criteria (single males and females aged 19 to 35, students at Dezful University of Medical Sciences, not having participated in premarital education programs, full consent to participate in the study, and regular attendance at educational sessions) and exclusion criteria (receiving pharmacological or psychological treatment for physical or behavioral issues, participation in treatment programs that negatively impact other areas of social and personal life, and missing more than three educational sessions), three groups of 15 individuals were selected as the sample.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Attitudes and Expectations

The Marital Attitudes and Expectations Scale developed by Braaten and Rosén (2008) is a 36-item measure designed to assess three components: intention to marry (3 items), attitude toward marriage (10 items), and expectations from marriage (23 items). It was translated and used in Iran for the first time by the researcher. Participants respond on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with some items being reverse scored. In the current study, only the 10 items related to the attitude toward

marriage subscale were used. The score range is 10 to 70, with higher scores indicating a more positive attitude toward marriage (Braaten & Rosén, 2008). The reliability of this scale was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding values of 0.79 and 0.77 for male and female student samples, respectively.

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Awareness and Choice Premarital Education Protocol Based on the PICK Model

In this study, premarital education using the awareness and choice method was provided to the first experimental group, consisting of nine 90-minute premarital education sessions based on the principles and techniques developed by Van Epp (2006), the theorist of the relationship attachment model (Van Epp, 2006).

Session 1: Introduction to the Awareness and Choice Program

Participants are introduced to one another using icebreaker techniques and are informed about the objectives, norms, and importance of premarital education. The session concludes with a documentary film on divorce, followed by a discussion about the relationship attachment model and the ways of gaining both rational and emotional knowledge.

Session 2: Gaining Rational Knowledge through Understanding Family Background Patterns and Conscientiousness

Participants explore family background patterns and their influence on adult relationships, such as partner selection and spousal interaction, and gain insights into changing these patterns. They are also introduced to the concept of conscientiousness, self-monitoring, and adopting a conscientious perspective.

Session 3: Gaining Rational Knowledge through Understanding Compatibility

Participants learn about the dimensions of compatibility, including mutual chemistry (reciprocal attraction), complementarity (key differences), and comparability (similarity in lifestyle, values, and personality).

Session 4: Gaining Rational Knowledge through Recognizing Communication Skills

The session covers the significance of healthy communication skills, recognizing deception in self-presentation, incongruent communication, and expectations for partner openness. It concludes with understanding the partner's communication skills, such as assertiveness and self-disclosure.

Session 5: Gaining Emotional Knowledge through Awareness of the Trust Component

Participants discuss why trust can be challenging, learn about the traits of trustworthy individuals, and explore sources of information about people, such as ideals and associations.

Session 6: Gaining Emotional Knowledge through Further Exploration of Trust

Similar to the previous session, participants delve into information sources about a person, including stereotypical expectations and relational beliefs, with practical techniques for application.

Session 7: Gaining Emotional Knowledge through Support

The session begins with a discussion on recognizing whether a partner is willing to meet one's needs. Participants learn about the significance of needs in relationships and the process of polarization. The group discusses the yin-yang symbol as a metaphor for support and resolving differences.

Session 8: Gaining Emotional Knowledge through Commitment and Physical Contact

Participants learn about assessing a future partner's commitment, the risks of staying too long in a relationship, and the dangers of excessive pre-marital commitment. Discussions cover the emotional and physical effects of sexual attraction, providing insights into expectations and attitudes regarding sexual satisfaction.

Session 9: Review of Key Concepts and Post-Test

The session reviews the main concepts, including rational knowledge acquisition and emotional knowledge components, as well as the overall understanding of the relationship attachment model. A post-test is administered, and participants are thanked for their active involvement.

2.3.2. Premarital Preparation Program Protocol Based on the Olson Model

For the second experimental group, the premarital preparation program protocol based on the 2000 edition of the Olson enrichment model (Olson & Olson, 2014) was used, comprising seven 90-minute educational sessions conducted as premarital education webinars. All research interventions and ethical considerations, including confidentiality of information, voluntary participation in each session, and respect for participants' human rights, were observed.

Session 1: Introduction

Participants introduce themselves and get acquainted with the session objectives. The complete program is

explained, research questionnaires are administered, and an open discussion is held to engage the group.

Session 2: Identifying Relationship Strengths and Growth Areas

Participants individually complete questionnaires on relationship beliefs, fear of marriage, marital attitudes, and limiting beliefs. They then engage in discussions about their concerns and share their thoughts with each other.

Session 3: Enhancing Communication Skills

Participants practice creating a wish list of three desired behaviors they would like from their partner. Each person shares their wishes, and the counselor provides feedback on their assertiveness and active listening skills during the exercise.

Session 4: Conflict Resolution Using the Ten-Step Model

The ten-step conflict resolution exercise is practiced, with the counselor guiding participants through selected growth or problem areas. Couples choose a specific issue to work on as homework for the next session.

Session 5: Exploring Family of Origin Issues Using Couple and Family Mapping

Participants engage in a couple mapping exercise, learning about the influence of their family of origin on their worldviews and relationship expectations. Concepts of couple and family cohesion and flexibility are explained, and participants are encouraged to share their insights.

Session 6: Creating a Practical Budget and Financial Plan

Participants complete budget worksheets, create a list of short- and long-term financial goals, and learn how to develop a realistic budget. Financial issues are discussed and reviewed, emphasizing other areas of relationship strength and growth.

Session 7: Setting Personal, Couple, and Family Goals

Participants work individually to describe two or three personal, couple, and family goals. Using the CHANGE model, they develop a practical plan for one area of their life. Each participant shares their goals with their partner, focusing on similarities and differences. The counselor provides feedback on assertiveness and active listening throughout the exercise.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to summarize demographic information and the scores of variables at different stages. Inferential statistics, including repeated

measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), were conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions across the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up phases. The significance of differences between groups and interaction effects were assessed, and effect sizes were reported to determine the magnitude of the interventions' impact. Pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction were performed to identify significant differences between specific stages. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software, with a significance level set at $p < .05$.

Table 1

Descriptive Indices of Scores on Attitude Toward Marriage by Group and Stage

Variable	Phase	Premarital Preparation Program Based on Olson Model (M $\pm$ SD)	Premarital Education Using the Awareness and Choice Method (M $\pm$ SD)	Control (M $\pm$ SD)
Attitude Toward Marriage	Pre-test	40.46 $\pm$ 8.58	42.06 $\pm$ 4.65	39.46 $\pm$ 6.98
	Post-test	55.06 $\pm$ 7.23	45.73 $\pm$ 5.31	35.33 $\pm$ 6.20
	Follow-up	56.20 $\pm$ 8.22	45.46 $\pm$ 4.68	39.46 $\pm$ 6.63

The descriptive indices of attitude toward marriage scores by group and stage are detailed in [Table 1](#).

Table 2

Results of Variance Analysis with Repeated Measures: Awareness and Choice Method on Attitude Toward Marriage

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value	Effect Size	Observed Power
Stage	66.822	2	33.411	11.286	.001	0.28	0.99
Group	1596.011	1	1596.011	16.020	.001	0.36	0.97
Stage * Group	229.400	2	114.700	38.746	.001	0.58	1.00

Based on the findings in [Table 2](#), the difference in mean scores of attitudes toward marriage across the three research stages is significant ($p \leq .001$). The mean scores of this variable also differ significantly between the experimental and control groups ($p \leq .001$). The results indicate that about 36% of individual differences are related to differences

3. Findings and Results

Participants in the study had a mean age of 21 years. The sample consisted of 31 males (68%) and 14 females (32%). Additionally, 9 participants (20%) were first-year students, 16 (35%) were second-year students, 12 (27%) were third-year students, and 8 (18%) were fourth-year students.

among the three groups. Additionally, the interaction between research stages and group membership is significant ($p = .001$), with approximately 58% of variance or individual differences attributed to differences across the three test stages and group membership.

Table 3

Pairwise Comparison of Mean Scores on Attitude Toward Marriage: Awareness and Choice Method

Variable	Stage Comparison	Mean Difference	SE	p-value	95% CI Lower Limit	95% CI Upper Limit
Attitude Toward Marriage	Pre-test - Post-test	0.233	0.401	.100	-0.788	1.254
	Pre-test - Follow-up	-1.700*	0.492	.005	-2.954	-0.446
	Post-test - Follow-up	-1.933*	0.435	.001	-3.040	-0.827

The results of pairwise comparisons in [Table 3](#) indicate significant differences between the pre-test and follow-up, and the post-test and follow-up phases for attitudes toward

marriage ($p = .001$). However, the difference between the pre-test and post-test phases is not significant.

Table 4*Results of Variance Analysis with Repeated Measures: Olson's Method on Attitude Toward Marriage*

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value	Effect Size	Observed Power
Stage	962.067	2	481.033	49.105	.001	0.637	1.00
Group	3509.378	1	3509.378	24.558	.001	0.467	0.99
Stage * Group	1518.689	2	759.344	759.516	.001	0.735	1.00

According to Table 4, the difference in mean scores of attitudes toward marriage across the three research stages is significant ($p \leq .001$). The mean scores of this variable also differ significantly between the experimental and control groups ($p \leq .001$). About 46% of individual differences are related to differences among the three groups. Moreover, the

interaction between research stages and group membership is significant ($p = .001$), indicating that the difference in attitudes toward marriage across the three research stages is significant among the groups. Approximately 73% of the variance or individual differences are related to differences across the three test stages and group membership.

Table 5*Pairwise Comparison of Mean Scores on Attitude Toward Marriage: Olson's Method*

Variable	Stage Comparison	Mean Difference	SE	p-value	95% CI Lower Limit	95% CI Upper Limit
Attitude Toward Marriage	Pre-test - Post-test	-5.233*	0.759	.001	-7.259	-3.208
	Pre-test - Follow-up	-7.867*	0.879	.001	-10.105	-5.628
	Post-test - Follow-up	-2.633*	0.744	.001	-4.529	-0.738

The results of pairwise comparisons in Table 5 indicate significant differences between the pre-test and post-test ($p = .001$), the pre-test and follow-up ($p = .001$), and the post-

test and follow-up phases ($p = .001$) for attitudes toward marriage.

Table 6*Results of Variance Analysis with Repeated Measures: Combined Methods on Attitude Toward Marriage*

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value	Effect Size	Observed Power
Stage	984.726	2	492.363	65.732	.001	0.61	1.00
Group	3509.615	2	1754.807	14.961	.001	0.41	0.99
Stage * Group	1621.407	4	405.352	54.116	.001	0.72	1.00

According to Table 6, the difference in mean scores of attitudes toward marriage across the three research stages is significant ($p \leq .001$). The mean scores also differ significantly between the three groups ($p \leq .001$). Approximately 41% of individual differences are related to

differences among the three groups. The interaction between research stages and group membership is also significant ($p = .001$), with about 72% of variance or individual differences attributed to differences across the three test stages and group membership.

Table 7*Pairwise Comparison of Mean Scores on Attitude Toward Marriage: Combined Methods*

Variable	Stage Comparison	Mean Difference	SE	p-value	95% CI Lower Limit	95% CI Upper Limit
Attitude Toward Marriage	Pre-test - Post-test	-4.711*	0.567	.001	-6.124	-3.298
	Pre-test - Follow-up	-6.378*	0.623	.001	-7.932	-4.823
	Post-test - Follow-up	-1.667*	0.538	.001	-3.007	-0.326

The results in Table 7 indicate significant differences between the pre-test and post-test ($p = .001$), pre-test and

follow-up ($p = .001$), and post-test and follow-up phases ($p = .001$) for attitudes toward marriage.

Table 8

Parameter Estimates for Comparing Three Groups Based on Fear of Marriage

Variable	Stage	Comparison	Mean Difference	p-value	Effect Size
Attitude Toward Marriage	Pre-test	Selection Theory vs. Control	2.600	.310	0.025
		Olson vs. Control	1.00	.695	0.004
		Choice Theory vs. Olson	-1.26*	.310	0.025
	Post-test	Selection Theory vs. Control	10.40*	.001	0.327
		Olson vs. Control	19.73*	.001	0.637
		Choice Theory vs. Olson	9.33*	.001	0.282
	Follow-up	Selection Theory vs. Control	6.00*	.018	0.126
		Olson vs. Control	16.73*	.001	0.529
		Choice Theory vs. Olson	10.73*	.001	0.316

The findings in Table 8 indicate that there are no significant differences between the premarital education groups based on the selection theory and Olson's theory compared to the control group or with each other in the pre-test phase ($p > .05$). However, significant differences are found in the post-test and follow-up phases between the control group and the selection theory group ($p < .001$) and Olson group ($p < .001$), with premarital education based on the selection and Olson approaches resulting in effects of 32.7% and 63.7%, respectively. In the follow-up phase, the effects are 12.6% and 52.9%, respectively, indicating the long-term effectiveness of both methods on students' attitudes toward marriage ($p < .01$). Furthermore, the differences between the two strategies in both the post-test and follow-up phases are significant, with effect sizes of 0.282 and 0.316, suggesting greater stability of Olson's approach over time compared to the selection and awareness method.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to compare the effectiveness of the premarital preparation program based on Olson's model with premarital education using the awareness and choice method on students' attitudes toward marriage. The results showed that the impact of the awareness and choice method on attitudes toward marriage in the post-test and follow-up phases was 46.5% and 22.2%, respectively ($p < .01$), indicating the effectiveness of this therapeutic approach compared to the control group, consistent with the prior findings (Hoseyni & Khajooei Zadeh, 2015; Vafaeinezhad et al., 2023).

Choice theory teaches individuals how to set goals to satisfy their needs based on reality and responsibility. By designing and implementing a conscious plan to achieve short-term and long-term goals, individuals develop self-

regulation and responsibility. These changes ultimately improve dysfunctional attitudes rooted in the individual and their subconscious. When attitudes change, individuals experience self-worth and responsibility. This theory helps clients understand that they choose their behaviors and can only control their own actions. Once they choose a behavior, they discover whether the outcome is pleasant or unpleasant. They learn whether these behaviors meet their needs or not and realize that many aspects of the external world are either satisfying (fulfilled needs), painful (unfulfilled needs), or neutral. Thus, choice theory emphasizes strengthening internal control, helping individuals attribute successes to themselves and believe that their thoughts, behaviors, and feelings are under their control. If their behavior does not fulfill their needs, they choose another behavior and accept responsibility for the consequences. Enhancing responsibility, awareness of behavioral and attitudinal conflicts, and becoming self-monitoring encourages efforts to improve attitudes arising from conflicting internal and external dimensions (Vafaeinezhad et al., 2023).

The results also indicated that the impact of Olson's premarital preparation approach on attitudes toward marriage in the post-test and follow-up phases was 69.7% and 57.3%, respectively ($p < .01$), showing significant therapeutic effectiveness compared to the control group. However, no similar supporting research was found.

Olson's approach focuses on teaching skills such as empathy, problem recognition and resolution, conflict management, dialogue and negotiation, establishing honesty, intimacy, respect, listening skills, shame management, sexual communication skills, assertiveness, anger management, economic management, and learning and reinforcing spousal skills (Bowling et al., 2005). The Olson model emphasizes two fundamental dimensions: cohesion and flexibility within the family context. Cohesion

involves teaching clients to create emotional bonds among family members, while flexibility emphasizes balance and adaptation in managing roles and communication rules among couples. Thus, marital success depends on achieving balance between these dimensions both individually and together, making these elements central to premarital relationship enrichment. Clients' awareness of these dimensions leads to changes in their attitudes toward marriage (Mostofi Sarkari et al., 2019).

The results revealed no significant differences between the premarital education groups based on choice theory and Olson's theory compared to the control group or with each other in the pre-test phase ($p > .05$). However, in the post-test and follow-up phases, significant differences were found between the control group and both the choice theory ($p < .001$) and Olson ($p < .001$) groups, with effects of 32.7% and 63.7%, respectively. The follow-up phase showed effects of 12.6% and 52.9%, indicating that both approaches remained effective over time in changing students' attitudes toward marriage ($p < .01$). The differences between the two strategies in both the post-test and follow-up phases were significant, with effect sizes of 0.282 and 0.316, respectively, suggesting that Olson's approach demonstrated more therapeutic stability over time compared to the choice and awareness method.

Olson's educational approach helps individuals recognize and modify their thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors, especially destructive aspects. This method allows therapists to educate individuals to improve and grow their relationships. It also equips therapists with flexible approaches, tools, and techniques to facilitate systemic and psychological transformations and understand behavioral changes. Olson's therapy is effective for altering attitudes due to its comprehensive theoretical basis, influencing couples' thinking and behavior (EbadiRad & Kariminejad, 2017). Problem-solving skills focus on current, active issues, challenging individual attitudes, identifying negative beliefs, and selecting strategies suited to the situation (Ghasemi et al., 2017).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

This study was limited to students at Dezful University, so caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings to dissimilar populations. Another limitation was the absence of an extended follow-up period. Future research should include three- or six-month follow-up assessments of dependent variables. Additionally, both approaches to

relationship enrichment could be used to modify restrictive beliefs, partner selection beliefs, fear of marriage, and attitudes toward marriage. It is recommended that monthly premarital educational programs be held at universities to adjust students' beliefs and expectations about marriage.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript. In this study, the second author, as the supervising professor, provided oversight and guidance for the overall research and finalized the article revisions. The first author was responsible for designing the research plan, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and manuscript writing. The findings' interpretation and conclusions were jointly developed through discussions among all collaborators, with support from the third author, who served as the thesis advisor.

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.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

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

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