

Comparing the Effectiveness of Schema Therapy and Emotion-Focused Therapy on Attitudes Towards Infidelity Among Individuals Experiencing Marital Conflict

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Ghale Khandabi, E., Peymani, J., Tizdast, T., & Khalatbari, J. (2024). Comparing the Effectiveness of Schema Therapy and Emotion-Focused Therapy on Attitudes Towards Infidelity Among Individuals Experiencing Marital Conflict. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 5(2), 87-94.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.5.2.10>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Marital conflict is one of the serious problems in couples' interactions, which is considered as the cause of marital infidelity or divorce in many cases. This research was conducted with the aim of comparing the effectiveness of schema therapy and emotion focused therapy on the attitude towards marital infidelity of people with marital conflict.

Methods: The research method was quasi-experimental with a pre-test-post-test design with two experimental groups and a control group along with a follow-up test period. From the statistical population of women referring to the clinics of the 1st district of Tehran, 45 people were selected using the available method and replaced in three groups using a random method. Whatley's marital infidelity questionnaire (2006) was used. First, the pre-test of the attitude towards extrapolation was implemented for all three groups, then schema therapy (Yang, 2003) and emotion focused therapy (Greenberg, 2004) were implemented for the experimental groups, but no intervention was applied for the control group; Finally, the post-test and the follow-up test were performed for all three groups.

Findings: The results of the repeated measurement test showed that both schema therapy and emotion focused groups are effective in reducing attitudes towards marital infidelity ($f=8.447$ and $p=0.001$). Bonferroni's post hoc test showed that there is no significant difference in the effectiveness of the two schema therapy and emotion focused approaches.

Conclusion: To improve the attitude towards marital infidelity of people with marital conflict, it is suggested to use both schema therapy and emotion focused interventions.

Keywords: marital conflict, attitude towards marital infidelity, schema therapy, emotion focused therapy.

1. Introduction

Family is the first manifestation of emotional relationships for individuals. The actions and challenges that occur in the family environment form the educational foundations for children, and the family culture determines the personality of the child (Hasanzadeh, 2015; Parsakia, Rostami, Darbani, et al., 2023; Parsakia, Rostami, Saadati, & Navabinejad, 2023). The relationships of those around them have a profound impact on establishing children's connections with people in society, and all behaviors and the culture of a family revolve around the main axis, namely the husband and wife, because they, in addition to determining the type of relationship and life they lead, also have the responsibility of educating and creating motivation for a better life for their children (Sutton, 2019). Marital conflict is considered a difference in the type of needs and values of the spouses in the family, which is expressed with negative emotions and provides a basis for clarifying and interpreting expectations about personal relationships for the couples (Chung, 2023). One of the effects that marital conflict can have is infidelity. Studies in the field of factors related to infidelity show that generally, these factors are included in three areas: individual differences (such as personality traits and attitudes), the nature of the relationship (level of commitment and satisfaction with the relationship), and environmental conditions (such as the opportunity for infidelity or the attractiveness of a third person) (Sharifi, 2013). Attitudes, according to these definitions, play a serious role in shaping behaviors, creating motivation, satisfying needs, and directing tendencies (Alitabar, 2014; Whatley, 2008). Indeed, from an evolutionary perspective, men and women have two different attitudes and behaviors towards infidelity (Shackelford, 2002). Therefore, based on Byers' statement (1996), it can be concluded that all actions of individuals in life depend on their own attitudes. The attitude towards infidelity is the feelings and thoughts of individuals regarding issues related to infidelity (Whatley, 2008). Research has shown that attitudes towards infidelity are significantly related to family disturbances, emotional problems, and feelings of loneliness (Ahramiyan, 2021; Whisman, 2000).

Numerous programs exist to enhance marital quality, each employing unique therapeutic and educational methods based on their philosophy and view of humans and the family (Fincham, 1987; Saadati & Parsakia, 2023). In other words, currently, various theoretical perspectives with

different approaches are attempting to explain and resolve marital conflicts. Among the approaches whose effectiveness has been confirmed in many areas are schema therapy and emotion-focused therapy.

Schema therapy is an approach that examines past attitudes and beliefs in relation to current personal relationships (Bernstein, 2023). This approach focuses on self-destructive patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior that have rooted in an individual's childhood and are repeated throughout their life. In the terminology of schema therapy, these patterns are called early maladaptive schemas (Bach, 2018). Early maladaptive schemas always manifest themselves in a relationship and influence relational interactions. Usually, the maladaptive nature of schemas appears when individuals, in the course of their life and in interaction with others, especially in marital relationships, act in such a way that their schemas are confirmed, even if their initial perceptions are incorrect (Dattilio, 2005; Fadaei moghadam, 2022). The schemas related to marital relationships involve fundamental beliefs about the nature of humans and the way relationships are supposed to function and are presumed to be relatively stable, and these maladaptive schemas can have destructive effects on marital and family life (Flink, 2019; Koppers, 2021).

In addition to schema therapy, another approach that can be effective for marital problems is emotion-focused therapy (Metzl, 2020). Emotion-focused therapy (EFT) is a holistic approach aimed at addressing various anxiety disorders, a wide range of traumas, and distress caused by life events (Ivanova, 2013). Since 1980s, the term emotion-focused therapy has been used for both individual and couple therapies. In this therapeutic approach, it is posited that emotions inherently have adaptive potential that, if activated, can help clients alter their problematic emotional states or unwanted experiences. This view of emotion considers it a natural adaptive system that aids our survival and advancement. Emotions express the most essential human needs and quickly alert individuals to their well-being. They also prepare individuals and guide them in these critical situations for action towards meeting their needs (Greenberg, 2010; Greenberg, 2007; Johnson, 1985).

A review of research shows that schema therapy affects variables such as marital happiness (Flink, 2019), violence and marital intimacy (Paim, 2018), intimacy, compatibility, and resilience in women with marital conflicts (Alizadeh Asli, 2018), and the emotion-focused approach also affects marital satisfaction (Beasley, 2019), marital boredom in couples seeking divorce (Goudarzi, 2020). As stated,

attitudes towards infidelity are related to marital conflict, and individuals experiencing marital conflict have problems in this area. Attention to all the mentioned factors highlights the importance of addressing this topic, especially since the research conducted in this area in the country has been limited, and the research gap in comparing the effectiveness of schema therapy and emotion-focused approaches on attitudes towards infidelity with marital conflict becomes increasingly apparent, leading the researcher to address this issue. Therefore, the current research sought to answer the following questions:

What effect does schema therapy have on the attitudes towards infidelity of individuals experiencing marital conflict?

What effect does emotion-focused therapy have on the attitudes towards infidelity of individuals experiencing marital conflict?

What is the difference between schema therapy and emotion-focused therapy on the attitudes towards infidelity of individuals experiencing marital conflict?

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

This study is an applied, quasi-experimental research with a pre-test, post-test design involving two experimental groups and one control group, along with a follow-up testing period. The research population consisted of women visiting clinics in District 1 of Tehran (due to marital problems) during the second half of the year 2021. From this population, 45 individuals were selected as the research sample through convenience sampling and were randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group. Inclusion criteria for the research were scoring above the cutoff point on the Attitudes Towards Infidelity according to research instruments, being married, and not concurrently participating in another therapy program. Exclusion criteria included missing more than two therapy sessions, starting any psychotropic medication, and withdrawing from the therapy program.

The implementation method was as follows: initially, through a call for participants, individuals experiencing marital conflict were screened using a marital conflict questionnaire, and those scoring high were selected as the research sample. Then, both groups (experimental and control) underwent a pre-test on attitudes towards infidelity, followed by schema therapy and emotion-focused therapy for the experimental groups, while the control group

received no intervention. Immediately after completing the interventions for the experimental groups, a post-test of the research questionnaire was conducted for all three groups. To assess the stability of the results, a follow-up test was conducted three months later, thus gathering the necessary data for research objectives. Participants first read the consent form and participated in the study if they wished. Participants were assured that there would be no personal misuse of the study and some expressed a desire to know the results of their questionnaire responses; a simplified report of their questionnaire interpretations was provided to them. Additionally, explanations were given regarding the confidentiality of the questionnaires and their results. Finally, to adhere to research ethics, after completing the research phase, interventions focused on emotion and schema therapy were also offered to the control group.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Attitudes Towards Infidelity

The Attitudes Towards Infidelity Questionnaire was designed by Whatley in 2006. This scale consists of 12 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Watley reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranging from .87 to .90 for this questionnaire, indicating high consistency. In Iran, Alitabar and colleagues (2014) reported the reliability of this tool to be .87 (Alitabar, 2014; Whatley, 2008).

2.3. Interventions

2.3.1. Schema Therapy

Schema therapy, as developed by Young (2003), is an integrative approach aimed at identifying and modifying deeply ingrained patterns of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors originating from unmet childhood needs. The protocol is structured around recognizing and altering these maladaptive schemas through cognitive, behavioral, and emotional techniques, fostering significant personal change.

Session 1: Introduction and Pre-test

The first session is an introductory meeting where participants are welcomed and the pre-test is administered. The therapist motivates participation and provides an overview of integrative therapeutic approaches for change, emphasizing the improvement and healing of schemas.

Session 2: Understanding Early Maladaptive Schemas

Participants are introduced to the concepts and definitions of early maladaptive schemas. This session covers the

formation and persistence of schemas, related domains, and needs, alongside an introduction to coping styles.

Session 3: Experiential Techniques Begin

The focus shifts to experiential techniques, examining how parenting styles contribute to schema formation. Participants are encouraged to freely express events related to schema development.

Session 4: Emotional Memory Modification

This session encourages participants to initiate changes in distressing emotional memories, examining how a child's temperament or mood may influence schema development.

Session 5: Triggering Schema-related Emotions

Participants explore emotions related to their early maladaptive schemas and review how coping styles may reinforce and sustain these schemas.

Session 6: Emotional Expression and Discharge

Focuses on the expression and healthy release of emotions, examining how avoidance coping strategies reinforce and sustain schemas.

Session 7: Modifying Unpleasant Emotional Memories

Encourages changes in the process of unpleasant emotional memories, reviewing how compensatory coping styles affect schemas.

Session 8: Role of Surrender Coping Styles

Analyzes the function and operation of surrender coping styles in the persistence of schemas.

Session 9: Barriers to Schema Formation and Persistence

Concentrates on factors that hinder the formation and persistence of schemas, such as the role of a supportive person (environmental factors), and biological or inherited traits.

Session 10: Post-test and Conclusion

The final session involves administering a post-test, discussing results, and emphasizing the role of personal agency in improving and healing unhealthy behavioral styles, concluding the sessions.

2.3.2. *Emotion-Focused Therapy*

Developed by Greenberg (2004), EFT is a process-experiential approach that emphasizes the identification, experience, expression, and regulation of emotions. EFT aims to transform emotional experiences by activating and processing underlying emotional states to promote emotional healing and develop healthier relationships.

Session 1: Introduction and Pre-test

This session introduces the structure and goals of the therapy, administers the pre-test, and provides an overview

of experience-focused approaches for change, along with the basics of EFT.

Session 2: Understanding Emotions

Participants learn about different emotions and their identification, focusing on core emotions and the expression of attachment needs, exploring the role of emotions in facilitating emotional regulation within relationships.

Session 3: Emotional Coaching Techniques

Introduces emotional coaching techniques, starting with phase one of coaching—reaching and accessing emotions.

Session 4: Continuing Emotional Coaching

Continues with emotional coaching or mentoring, covering phase two of coaching—leaving the emotional situation.

Session 5: Discovering Key Emotions

Participants explore key emotions, tracing the most painful and unpleasant emotions, highlighting the importance of recognizing process-focused content.

Session 6: Core Emotional Themes

Examines markers related to core emotional themes, bringing new meanings from emotional experiences to the forefront.

Session 7: Clarifying Secondary Emotions

Helps in revealing and validating secondary emotions, intensifying emotional experiences, and labeling secondary emotions.

Session 8: Identifying Primary Emotions

Assists in identifying and revealing primary emotions, validating and intensifying the foundational emotional experience, and owning the underlying experience.

Session 9: Communication Patterns and Cycles

Details the structure and process of communication patterns and interactive cycles, expressing attachment-based needs and desires with a focus on primary emotions.

Session 10: Post-test and Closure

Conducts a post-test, reviews the entire course and techniques used in the emotion-focused approach, collects feedback from participants, and concludes the sessions.

2.4. *Data Analysis*

Due to having pre-test, post-test, and follow-up assessments (three measurements), mixed or repeated measures ANOVA within and between groups, as well as the Bonferroni follow-up test, were used. To address ethical concerns, a consent form was prepared, outlining the research objectives.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, 45 individuals were divided among a control group, a schema therapy group, and an emotion-focused therapy group. The average age of the control group was 43.65 (SD = 7.98), the schema therapy group (Experiment 1) was 44.14 (SD = 6.67), and the emotion-focused therapy group (Experiment 2) was 42.87 (SD = 6.43). The results of the comparison of the mean ages indicated that this

difference was not statistically significant. The comparison of employment status among the groups revealed that in the control group, 9 individuals were employed and 6 were homemakers; in the schema therapy group, 8 were employed and 7 were homemakers; and in the emotion-focused therapy group, 9 were employed and 6 were homemakers.

Table 1

Pre-test, Post-test, and Follow-up Means and Standard Deviations for Attitudes Towards Infidelity by Group

Stage	Schema Therapy		Emotion-Focused Therapy		Control Group	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Pre-test	58.60	5.98	58.93	6.43	59.00	7.09
Post-test	51.60	6.54	50.53	6.56	58.86	7.12
Follow-up	51.40	6.18	50.60	5.32	58.80	7.34

As shown in Table 1, the mean attitudes towards infidelity in both experimental groups (schema therapy and emotion-focused therapy) decreased from pre-test to post-test and follow-up stages, with no significant differences

between the post-test and follow-up. However, in the control group, the differences between the three test scores were very minor.

Table 2

Results of Repeated Measures ANOVA for Comparing the Effectiveness of Schema Therapy and Emotion-Focused Therapy on Attitudes Towards Infidelity in Individuals Experiencing Marital Conflict

Source of Effect	F Value	df1	df2	p-value	Partial Eta Squared
Time	42.364	2	41	.000	.674
Time * Group	8.447	4	82	.000	.292

Table 2 indicates that the ANOVA for the within-group factor (Time) and the between-group factor (Group) is significant. This result means that considering the group effect, the effect of time alone is significant. The interaction

between group and time is also significant. To further examine this difference among the three groups, a Bonferroni post hoc test was used.

Table 3

Results of Bonferroni Post Hoc Test for Comparing Mean Scores of Attitudes Towards Infidelity Among Three Groups

Group A	Group B	Mean Difference	SD	Significance Level
Control	Schema Therapy	5.022	1.870	.031
	Emotion-Focused	5.533	1.870	.015
Emotion-Focused	Control	-5.533	1.870	.015
	Schema Therapy	-0.511	1.870	1.000

The Bonferroni test results showed that there are significant differences between the effectiveness of the schema therapy and emotion-focused interventions compared to the control group on attitudes towards infidelity, indicating the impact of both approaches on improving attitudes towards infidelity in individuals experiencing marital conflict ($p < .005$). The comparison

between the schema therapy and emotion-focused groups also showed that there was no significant difference in the impact of the interventions ($p > .005$).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to determine and compare the effectiveness of schema therapy and emotion-focused therapy on attitudes towards infidelity among individuals experiencing marital conflict. The first finding of the study indicated that schema therapy significantly reduces attitudes towards infidelity among individuals experiencing marital conflict. This result aligns with previous findings (Ahramiyan, 2021; Alizadeh Asli, 2018; Ammari, 2022; Beasley, 2019; Bernstein, 2023; Fadaei moghadam, 2022; Flink, 2019; Goudarzi, 2020; Rek, 2023; Roediger, 2020; Sareshdaranpour, 2022; Shokri, 2022; Titov, 2015). For instance, the study by Fadaei Moghaddam et al. (2022) showed that schema therapy was effective in reducing impulsivity and improving relational functioning among couples with marital conflicts in Qom (Fadaei moghadam, 2022). Rek et al. (2022) demonstrated that schema therapy reduces depression and enhances emotional regulation among individuals with marital conflicts, and Flink et al. (2019) found that schema therapy significantly reduces depression and increases marital happiness (Flink, 2019; Rek, 2023).

The findings suggest that in schema therapy, coping mechanisms for problems are directly addressed, usually leading to psychological satisfaction through finding suitable solutions for issues. This treatment is effective by challenging maladaptive schemas and ineffective responses, replacing them with healthier thoughts and responses. Schema therapy seems to improve psychological well-being and reduce attitudes towards infidelity in individuals with marital conflicts by improving certain fundamental and destructive components such as negative emotions and thoughts (Koppers, 2021).

According to participant reports in this study, recognizing old schemas and their role in damaging relationships, clarifying particularly shared values in marital relationships, and moving towards these values played a significant role in reducing attitudes towards infidelity and their marital conflicts. Schema therapy directly examines coping mechanisms for problems, usually resulting in psychological satisfaction from finding suitable solutions for issues and contributing to better mental health and more peaceful problem-solving (Roediger, 2020). Moreover, schema therapy induces cognitive, experiential, emotional, and behavioral changes. This approach is effective in replacing maladaptive schemas with healthier cognitive and behavioral responses, which may generally improve psychological and mental health. Schema therapy techniques help individuals reorganize their emotional structure, review

and learn new things, regulate interpersonal emotions, and promote self-soothing, thereby preparing the ground for schema improvement. These schemas operate at the deepest cognitive levels, often outside of conscious awareness (Titov, 2015), contributing to the reduction of attitudes towards infidelity among individuals experiencing marital conflicts in the schema therapy group.

The subsequent result of the research showed that emotion-focused therapy significantly reduces attitudes towards infidelity among individuals experiencing marital conflict. This result is consistent with previous findings (Ammari, 2022; Beasley, 2019; Goudarzi, 2020; Shokri, 2022). For example, Shokri et al. (2022) found that emotion-focused therapy effectively addresses forgiveness and marital boredom among couples seeking divorce (Shokri, 2022). Ammari et al. (2022) indicated that emotion-focused therapy is effective for sexual self-efficacy and marital conflict in women affected by spousal infidelity (Ammari, 2022). Beasley & Agar (2019) conducted a study on the effectiveness of couples therapy over the past 19 years, which included nine studies showing that emotion-focused therapy not only improves marital satisfaction but also significantly increases satisfaction at follow-up (Beasley, 2019).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

The comparison between schema therapy and emotion-focused therapy showed no significant difference in their effectiveness on attitudes towards infidelity among individuals with marital conflicts. This finding suggests that the solid theoretical foundations, significant benefits, and underlying mechanisms of each psychological intervention enable both methods to be equally effective in influencing attitudes towards infidelity.

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.

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