

Investigating the Effect of Reality Therapy Based on Choice Theory on Marital Satisfaction and Relationship Quality of Couples on the Verge of Divorce in Kermanshah City

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of reality therapy based on Choice Theory on marital satisfaction and the quality of relationships among couples on the verge of divorce in Kermanshah. This semi-experimental research employed a pre-test and post-test design with a control group. The statistical population included all couples seeking divorce who visited the family court in Kermanshah during the second half of 2023. A total of 30 couples on the verge of divorce, who had applied for counseling services, were selected through purposive random sampling and were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups (15 couples in each group). The research tools included the Enrich Marital Satisfaction Scale (Olson, 1989) and the Quality of Marriage Index (Busby, 1995). The experimental group underwent eight 60-minute sessions of reality therapy based on Choice Theory, while the control group received no intervention. After the

educational program, a post-test was conducted for both groups. Data were analyzed using multivariate and univariate covariance analysis via SPSS22 software. The results indicated that the reality therapy program based on Choice Theory significantly improved marital satisfaction and the quality of relationships among couples on the verge of divorce. Based on the findings, it is recommended that family counselors utilize this therapeutic program to enhance marital satisfaction and relationship quality among couples.

Keywords: Choice Theory, marital satisfaction, relationship quality, reality therapy

Introduction

Marriage is among the most important milestones in the journey of personal and societal growth. It constitutes a relationship that is formalized through a structured ceremony, placing partners in a bond that is socially recognized. (Cag & Yildirim, 2020). Marriage appears to be a transitional stage toward creating one's own family, emphasized as a significant social event aimed at meeting individuals' emotional needs (Satisi & Deniz, 2020). The family is considered the most important social unit, with various factors contributing to its stability and strength (Anyamene, 2020). Throughout history, families have encountered many difficulties, with divorce being the most prominent issue. Divorce can be generally divided into two categories: formal divorce and emotional divorce (Koumeh & Yazdani, 2016). It is one of the

most disruptive factors in human life, with requests and decisions for divorce often stemming from intense pressures affecting at least one of the spouses (Schaan, Schulz, Schachinger, & Voge, 2019). Divorce rates in many industrialized countries fluctuate between 30% and 50% (French, Altgelt, & Meltzer, 2019). In Iran, statistical reports also indicate a growing trend in divorce, especially in the early years of marriage. For instance, in 2009, 14 out of every 100 marriages ended in divorce, whereas this figure rose to approximately 20 divorces per 100 marriages in 2013 (Haj-Adineh & Kalhorinia, 2019). As a result, in recent decades, researchers and clinical specialists have increasingly focused on the quality of marital relationships, marital satisfaction, and family health (Yahyayi-Rad, Salimi Bojestani, Asgari, & Farahbakhsh, 2019). One of the key factors in family growth and sustainability is the compatibility, understanding, and satisfaction between spouses. Marital satisfaction is a fundamental component of the marital system and significantly influences an individual's life. It is a comprehensive assessment of the current state of one's marital or romantic relationship, reflecting either a positive evaluation or a combination of specific factors within the relationship (Nooripoor, Bass, & Apsche, 2013). Stable and fulfilling marital relationships bring numerous benefits, such as psychological well-being, physical health, and personal growth for family members (Michalitsianos, 2014). Marital satisfaction acts as a standard for thriving marriages, reflecting the level of joy obtained from the marital bond or a

combination of contentment resulting from various marriage-specific elements. (Berna, Hasan-Abadi, & Ghanbari, 2016). Studies show that marital satisfaction is crucial for predicting marital longevity and reducing the tendency toward divorce (Olson, Defrain, & Skogrand, 2013). Another critical issue among couples seeking divorce is the quality of marital relationships (Mohammadi-Pour, Shojaei, & Bakhshipour, 2019). Marital relationships form the foundation of family connections. Mutual respect and cooperation within these relationships fulfill the needs of both partners (Bitzman, Nagelhout, & Cameron, 2011), leading to happier, healthier, and more vibrant lives. Such marriages provide opportunities for companionship, open interaction, and support (Abousaeidi-Moghaddam, Sanagoo Moharrer, & Shirazi, 2019). The quality of marital relationships encompasses the degree of agreement between spouses on significant matters, such as cooperation in shared tasks and expressions of affection (Nazarpoor, Heidarnia, Pouryahi, & Davarnia, 2019). Factors like emotional awareness, expression, regulation, and empathy significantly affect communication and marital quality, which are seen as indicators of marital satisfaction (Anyamene, 2020). Studies highlight that a decline in marital quality often drives couples toward divorce (Mohammadi-Pour, Shojaei, & Bakhshipour, 2019).

Intervention Approaches in Marital Conflicts

Numerous approaches have been employed to address marital conflicts, enhance marital satisfaction, and improve communication quality. One such approach is Reality Therapy based on Choice Theory. This theory posits that all human actions are behaviors comprising four components: action, thought, feeling, and physiology. While individuals have direct control over action and thought, they influence feeling and physiology indirectly (Glasser, 2000). A core concept in reality therapy is external control psychology, which refers to the tendency of spouses to control one another in their relationships. This behavior often leads to the destruction of the marriage. The optimal solution lies in guiding the couple during counseling sessions to steer their shared life toward problem-solving rather than control. In marriage counseling, the relationship's needs take precedence over the individual needs of each partner (Berna et al., 2016).

Choice Theory and Marital Conflicts

According to Choice Theory, marital discord and conflicts arise from irresponsible and incorrect behavioral choices within the relationship. The divergence of desires, unrealistic expectations, and poor judgment about one's behavior lead to conflicts and disagreements. This theory emphasizes key aspects of human needs, such as accepting reality, taking responsibility, and planning to achieve goals (Haj-Adineh & Kalhorinia, 2019).

Glasser (2007) argues that the best way to address marital issues is to change behavior through the selection of constructive and beneficial actions. This behavioral change is not rooted in behaviorism but in the conscious choice of behaviors that enhance the relationship between husband and wife. Behavior change through self-selection is often more effective than attempting to alter feelings or perceptions.

Effectiveness of Reality Therapy

Various studies have demonstrated the efficacy of reality therapy in counseling couples and families, both domestically and internationally (Duba, Jill, Graham, Britzman, & Minatrea, 2009). Research shows that this intervention significantly improves all aspects of family functioning, including problem-solving, communication, emotional involvement, emotional cohesion, behavior control, and family efficiency (Sudani & Karimi, 2016).

Objective of the Study

Given the above and the lack of prior research directly addressing the variables under investigation, the present study aims to explore the impact of Reality Therapy based on Choice Theory on marital satisfaction and the quality of relationships among couples on the verge of divorce.

Method

This research employed a quasi-experimental pretest-pretest design with a control group. The statistical population included all couples seeking divorce who visited the family court in Kermanshah during the second half of 2023 (Iranian year 1402). A total of 30 couples on the verge of divorce, who requested counseling services, were selected using purposive non-random sampling and were randomly assigned to two groups: an experimental group and a control group (15 couples in each group). The Inclusion criteria were as follows: the couples must have been married for at least one year and at most five years, both partners must have at least completed primary education, the couples must have visited the court and been referred to a counselor by the court or voluntarily sought counseling, and the reason for the divorce request should not include infidelity, addiction, delinquency, or criminal behavior by either partner. The exclusion criteria included a history of mental disorders such as bipolar disorder, substance abuse, prior psychological interventions, and unwillingness to participate in the study. After preparing the questionnaires and selecting the participants, the research questionnaires were administered as a pretest to the couples on the verge of divorce (both the experimental and control groups). The researcher provided the necessary instructions on how to complete the questionnaires. Participants were encouraged to seek clarification from the researcher if they encountered any difficulties during the process. Selected

participants, after giving consent to participate in the research and receiving assurances that their information would remain confidential, entered an eight-session intervention program. Each session lasted 60 minutes and involved reality therapy based on choice theory. The training and therapy sessions were conducted in person. Initially, the teaching method was interactive. During the sessions, each participant was given sufficient time to discuss their problems in the group setting, and other group members provided feedback. After completing the intervention sessions, the questionnaires were re-administered to both groups as a posttest.

1.ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire:

The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire was designed by Olson (1989) to assess potential problem areas and identify strengths and areas for enrichment in marital relationships. The original version includes two forms with 115 and 125 items, divided into 12 subscales. The questionnaire is based on a five-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 0 to 5. Its internal consistency reliability has been estimated between 0.73 and 0.90 (Olson & Olson, 2000).

Regarding the validity of the test, the correlation coefficient with family satisfaction scales ranges from 0.41 to 0.60, and with the life satisfaction scale from 0.32 to 0.41, indicating good construct validity. All subscales of the questionnaire can distinguish between satisfied and dissatisfied

couples, which also supports strong criterion validity (Sanai, Alagheband, & Hooman, 2019). In Iran, a shortened 47-item version of the questionnaire was developed by Soleimani (1994) due to the length of the original version. The reported psychometric properties for this version indicate a high internal consistency reliability of 0.95. Cronbach's alpha reliability for individual factors was calculated as follows: Conventional Response (0.86), Marital Satisfaction (0.82), Personality Issues (0.78), Marital Communication (0.80), Conflict Resolution (0.84), Financial Management (0.72), Leisure Activities (0.74), Sexual Relationship (0.80), Marriage and Children (0.70), Family and Friends (0.82), Gender Equality Roles (0.74), and Religious Orientation (0.86). These values reflect high reliability and internal consistency for the questionnaire items.

Overall, the total reliability of the questionnaire was reported as 0.84 (Fattorehchi, Shahmoradi, & Naghsh, 2018). In the present study, the reliability of the tool was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, resulting in a value of 0.87.

2. Busby Relationship Quality Questionnaire (RDAS):

The Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) was developed by Busby, Crane, Larson, and Christensen in 1995 to measure the quality of marital relationships. This questionnaire consists of 14 items across three subscales: Agreement (6 items), Satisfaction (5 items), and Cohesion (3 items), which together indicate overall marital quality. Higher scores reflect higher marital quality. The questionnaire uses a six-point Likert scale (0 = Always Disagree to 5 = Always Agree). The reliability of the RDAS was calculated by the authors at 0.85, and its content validity was also deemed appropriate. Additionally, its reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha, resulting in a score of 0.79.

Data Analysis:

For statistical data analysis and hypothesis testing, descriptive and inferential statistical methods were applied using SPSS software version 22. Descriptive statistics included frequency, mean, and standard deviation for data description. At the inferential level, multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) and univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were used, depending on the type of data and variables.

Table1: Summary of Sessions and Therapeutic Activities Based on Glasser's Choice Theory

Session	General Goal	Session Content
First Session	Familiarization and Stating Objectives	Introducing members, stating session rules, explaining goals of therapy based on choice theory and stating its 10 principles.
Second Session	Identifying Marital Problems	Explaining problems based on choice theory, presenting dysfunctional marital patterns and views, changing attitudes and unrealistic beliefs causing marital conflicts and dissatisfaction.
Third Session	Control	Explaining internal control, introducing Glasser's concepts of external control (criticizing, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, bribing, and rewarding for control) and internal control, discussing seven deadly habits of control.
Fourth Session	Destructive Habits	Reviewing destructive habits, explaining the impact of such habits in creating marital conflicts, the seven deadly habits, emphasizing the need for replacement with seven caring habits (support, encouragement, listening, acceptance, trust, respect, and negotiation).
Fifth Session	Love Needs	Explaining proper satisfaction of love needs and discussing the needs for love, affection, intimacy, and physical intimacy.
Sixth Session	Marital Needs	Exploring the need for companionship and discussing proper ways of meeting marital needs.
Seventh Session	Behavior and Implementation	Explaining the need for thoughtful marital behaviors, raising awareness, presenting

		behavioral topics, discussing thoughts, emotions, and behaviors related to marital satisfaction.
Eighth Session	Improving Quality of Marital Relationships	Teaching ways to improve the quality of marital relationships with an emphasis on reducing marital conflicts, unrealistic beliefs, and reducing emotional burnout and depression.

Findings

According to the demographic data, 9 men and 7 women in the experimental group, as well as 8 men and 8 women in the control group, had university education. In terms of employment, 2 women in the experimental group and 4 women in the control group were employed. 5 men in the experimental group and 7 men in the control

group held government jobs. 1 man in the experimental group and 2 men in the control group were unemployed. Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of the research variables.

Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation of the research variables for both groups.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Research Variables

Experiment		Control		Number	source of the variable	
standard deviation	Mean	standard deviation	Mean			
22/80	115/63	23/32	118/93	30	Pretest	marital satisfaction
26/12	170/03	23/00	117/43	30	Posttest	
5/47	22/73	5/89	24/10	30	Pretest	Quality of marital relationships
9/16	44/40	5/89	23/43	30	Posttest	

2/18	9/47	2/45	9/93	30	Pretest	agreement
3/99	17/40	2/63	9/17	30	Posttest	
2/25	7/63	2/07	8/17	30	Pretest	satisfaction
4/45	15/07	2/16	8/27	30	Posttest	
1/59	5/50	1/65	5/80	30	Pretest	cohesion
1/89	10/93	1/69	5/90	30	Posttest	

According to Table 2, the posttest scores in the experimental group increased in all components compared to the pretest, while no significant changes were observed in the control group. The use of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) as a parametric test requires adherence to several statistical assumptions. These assumptions include random sampling, normality of variances, linearity, homogeneity of variances, and homogeneity of regression slopes, all of which were examined. Based on the Shapiro-Wilk test, the null hypothesis for

the normality of the distribution of scores in all variables was confirmed, meaning that the variable scores in the pretest have a normal distribution. To test the assumption of homogeneity of variance/covariance matrices, Levene's test and M-Box test were applied. The results of these tests indicated that the significance level for all variables was greater than 0.05, suggesting that the assumption of homogeneity of variances holds, and parametric tests (ANCOVA) can be used.

Table 3: Results of the multivariate analysis of covariance examining marital satisfaction and relationship quality among couples.

η^2	P	Df error	d.f Hypothesis	F	Amount	test
0/813	0/001	55	2	119/281	0/813**	Pillais Trace
0/813	0/001	55	2	119/281	0/187**	Wilks' Lambda
0/813	0/001	55	2	119/281	4/337**	Hotelling's Trace
0/813	0/001	55	2	119/281	4/337**	Roy's Largest Root

According to the information in Table 3, the value of Wilks' Lambda is 0.187, and the F value obtained for this statistic is 5.806. The significance level of this value, with degrees of freedom 2 and 55, is less than 0.01 ($p <$

0.01). This indicates that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in at least one of the components of marital satisfaction and relationship quality. Considering the eta-

squared coefficient, reality therapy based on choice theory has an effect size of 0.81 on marital satisfaction and relationship quality

($\eta^2 = 0.81$, $p < 0.01$, $F = 5.806$, $\Lambda = 0.187$ with degrees of freedom 2 and 55).

Table 4: Univariate Analysis of Covariance for Marital Satisfaction

eta-squared	Sig	F	MS	Df	SS	source of the variable	
0/673	0/001	117/45	44766/968	1	44766/968	group	marital satisfaction
-	-	-	381/141	57	21725/031	error	
-	-	-	-	59	76619/733	Corrected total	

The analysis results in Table 4 indicate that the F value obtained for the difference in marital satisfaction means is 117.45 ($F = 117.45$, with degrees of freedom 1 and 29). The significance level for this variable is 0.001 ($\alpha = 0.001$), which is less than the

assumed level of 0.01. Therefore, the reality therapy program based on choice theory has a significant effect on the marital satisfaction of couples on the verge of divorce, with an effect size of 0.67 ($\eta^2 = 0.67$, $p < 0.01$, $F = 117.45$, with degrees of freedom 1 and 29).

Table 5: Univariate Analysis of Covariance for Marital Relationship Quality

eta-squared	Sig	F	MS	Df	SS	source of the variable	
0/689	0/000	121/58	1081/078	1	1081/078	agreement	group
0/586	0/000	77/90	746/247	1	746/247	satisfaction	
0/747	0/000	162/09	399/693	1	399/693	cohesion	
-	-	-	8/891	55	489/025	agreement	error
-	-	-	9/579	55	526/831	satisfaction	
-	-	-	2/466	55	135/620	cohesion	
-	-	-	-	59	1678/183	agreement	corrected total
-	-	-	-	59	1403/333	satisfaction	
-	-	-	-	59	566/583	cohesion	

The analysis results in Table 5 indicate the following:

- The F value obtained for the difference in the mean of **agreement** is 121.58 ($F = 121.58$, with degrees of

freedom 1 and 59). The significance level for this variable is 0.001 ($\alpha = 0.001$), which is less than the assumed level of 0.01. Therefore, the reality therapy program based on choice theory has an effect size of 0.68 on agreement ($\eta^2 = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$, $F = 121.58$, with degrees of freedom 1 and 59).

- The F value obtained for the difference in the mean of **satisfaction** is 77.90 ($F = 77.90$, with degrees of freedom 1 and 59). The significance level for this variable is 0.001 ($\alpha = 0.001$), which is less than the assumed level of 0.01. Therefore, the reality therapy program based on choice theory has an effect size of 0.75 on satisfaction ($\eta^2 = 0.75$, $p < 0.01$, $F = 77.90$, with degrees of freedom 1 and 59).
- The F value obtained for the difference in the mean of **cohesion** is 162.09 ($F = 162.09$, with degrees of freedom 1 and 59). The significance level for this variable is 0.001 ($\alpha = 0.001$), which is less than the assumed level of 0.01. Therefore, the reality therapy program based on choice theory has an effect size of 0.74 on cohesion ($\eta^2 = 0.74$, $p < 0.01$, $F = 162.09$, with degrees of freedom 1 and 59).

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of reality therapy based on choice theory in improving marital satisfaction and relationship quality among couples on the brink of divorce in Kermanshah. The results of the study revealed that, in the experimental group, marital satisfaction showed significant

improvement in the overall dimension and across all sub-dimensions in the post-test compared to the pre-test. In contrast, no significant changes were observed in the control group. Similarly, in the experimental group, relationship quality improved across all aspects in the post-test, while no change was observed in the control group. These findings suggest that the reality therapy program based on choice theory had a positive impact on marital satisfaction and relationship quality among couples facing divorce. These findings are consistent with studies by Meydanchi, Yaghoubi, Karimi, and Goudarzi (2020), Moridi, Kajbaf, and Mahmoodi (2020), Mortezaei, Rasouli, Hosseinian, and Zarei (2020), Farhadi et al. (2020), and others, as well as international studies (e.g., Traeen, Stulhofer, Janssen, Carvalheira, Hald, Lange & Graham Carr., 2019; Lee & McKinney, 2018; Elsayed & Elyas, 2016). The positive effects of the reality therapy program can be explained through the emphasis on responsibility in relationships. By teaching couples to take responsibility for their actions and choices, marital satisfaction and relationship quality improve. Increased responsibility in resolving marital conflicts leads to better relationship functioning. Additionally, by learning the principles of choice theory, couples become more aware of their own basic needs and, by extension, better

understand the needs of their partner. This understanding fosters mutual respect and deeper empathy, allowing for better management of differences. When conflicts arise, the couple is able to use the concepts of choice theory to negotiate and clarify their positions regarding the needs at the root of the conflict. As Glasser (1998) suggests, our need for love and belonging not only drives us to care for others but also motivates us to seek satisfying relationships with significant individuals throughout our lives. The intervention, therefore, helps couples navigate and enhance their relationships by promoting these fundamental human needs. In families that have been trained based on choice theory, there is an emphasis on getting along well with each other concerning positions of power. Bullying and imposition are rare in these families. There is no reason for spouses to judge each other, and they work together to resolve their differences and conflicts. The need for power and freedom are two enemies of marriage if not negotiated. Denying freedom stifles creativity. In marital life, when freedom is taken away and creativity is suppressed, marital satisfaction decreases. However, by understanding each other's need for freedom and defining the boundaries of that freedom, couples can reach satisfaction in their relationship. When discontent arises within a marriage, the initial casualty is the necessity for

recreation. Meeting the requirement for recreation is more attainable than satisfying other necessities. Couples have the opportunity to participate in numerous activities to experience enjoyment and recreation. Reality therapy based on choice theory, by teaching the concept of a quality world and how to enter it, helps couples become familiar with their partner's habits and preferences. By understanding their ideal world and how to enter it, marital satisfaction and relationship quality can improve. Additionally, the theory teaches couples about external and internal control psychology. According to this view, the only person one can control is oneself, and there is no control over the partner's behavior. When one partner attempts to control the other, marital satisfaction and relationship quality sharply decline. In relationships based on external control, both parties are always looking for faults in each other. However, couples living according to the teachings of choice theory do not exhibit this trait. According to reality therapy based on choice theory, spouses, because of their freedom, use their creative system when their lives become harmonious and predictable. Therefore, freedom in practice, lack of control, and creativity are significant factors that increase marital satisfaction and the quality of relationships. In general, these strategies, by providing specific frameworks to couples, enable

them to take control of their married life and plan for it. The consistent application of these strategies over an extended period will result in enhanced marital satisfaction and improved relationship quality. In this study, the number of sessions was restricted, and owing to time limitations, it was unfeasible to conduct a follow-up on the outcomes. The couples, motivated by their inclination toward divorce, possessed a significant bias against one another, which complicated the training process. The research was performed with couples residing in Kermanshah; therefore, caution should be taken when extrapolating the results to other cities. To achieve more consistent outcomes and alleviate the limitations of this study, it is recommended that similar studies be carried out using alternative methods for couples, employing different instruments to assess the research variables. Additionally, combining these variables with other associated variables would yield more trustworthy outcomes for subsequent research. This study exclusively centered on the efficacy of reality therapy grounded in choice theory concerning marital satisfaction and relationship quality. Future investigators are urged to examine other methods, such as imparting optimism, elements of positive thinking, and evaluate their influence on the aforementioned variables.

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