

## The Effect of Divorce Counseling based on Gottman's Approach on the Self-Efficacy in Divorce Management of Couples Applying for Divorce

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Today, couples applying for divorce need more self-efficacy in their divorce management.

Self-efficacy in divorce management helps divorcing couples make the right decision to continue their married life or leave. The present study aimed to determine the effect of divorce counseling based on Gottman's approach on self-efficacy in divorce management within couples who applied for divorce in Yazd.

**Methods:** This quasi-experimental study was based on pre-test, post-test, and follow-up method in which the case-control group design was applied. The study population included all couples who applied for divorce in Yazd in 2017. We selected 32 participants using purposive sampling, who were then divided into experimental and control groups. In order to collect the study data, we used Zareei's self-efficacy questionnaire in divorce management. To analyze the data, we run multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), two-way analysis of variance, and repeated measurement tests.

**Results:** The results of MANOVA analysis indicated that the experimental group used self-efficacy more frequently than the control group in divorce management and its subscales. Moreover, analysis of two-way variance showed that gender did not have a significant correlation with the training results. In other words, the effect of education was the same for both genders. Moreover, the results of repeated measurement analysis indicated significant differences between the levels (pre test with post test and follow up).

**Conclusion:** Gottman-based divorce counseling affected self-efficacy in divorce management of couples applying for divorce in Yazd. The effectiveness of this training was the same for both males and females. As a result, for those couples who want to divorce, such training seems to be extremely necessary.

**Keywords:** Divorce Counseling, Tendency to Divorce, Divorce Management, Gottman, Self-Efficacy

## Introduction

Divorce is a long-term process, which begins with dissatisfaction, turmoil, desire for separation, and ends with separation.<sup>1</sup> The decision to divorce has three cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. The cognitive dimension encompasses the person's perception of divorce. Emotional dimension includes positive and negative emotions of the individual towards divorce and behavioral dimension entails an individuals' behavioral readiness for divorce.<sup>2</sup> The decision to divorce is the result of a severe internal pressure on at least one of the spouses, which may be caused by the failure to meet the needs and goals, poor coping strategies, as well as disability in the management of life events and transfer of feelings.<sup>3</sup> Social, legal, personal, and psychological factors as well as irrational beliefs were considered as the couples' causes of indecisiveness in applying for a divorce.<sup>4</sup> The divorce endangers the structure of family as the most fundamental part of society. Undoubtedly, divorce has different causes and affects couples, or even those who are in contact with them. According to the statistical data related to the center of Iran, the divorce rate has increased to more than 20 percent from 2006 to 2016. The highest prevalence of divorce was in the age range of 25 - 31 years, whereas, the lowest prevalence was observed in the age group of 52 -58 years.<sup>5</sup>

Gottman is considered as one of the contemporary theorists in the field of divorce. Gottman believes that before divorce, couples should come to this conclusion that there is no benefit in their staying together.<sup>6</sup> in couples who really intend to divorce, counseling based on self-efficacy with respect to divorce management can help couples to decide better.<sup>5</sup> The set of trainings available in the field of divorce management is based on the basic aspects of self-efficacy, including: a) indecisiveness in making decision, b) the issue of children (custody, visit, coordination in parenting), c) economic issues (dowry, alimony, housing, division of property), d) effects of the main family, friends, relatives.<sup>5</sup> These trainings can be considered as a kind of awareness that can help

couples in the process of divorce to make the best decision; whether to stay or leave. It should be noted that the training based on the family consolidation is used when couples intend to live together and this training can revitalize marital relationships and strengthen the family center.<sup>6-8</sup>

Self-efficacy in divorce management is a strong predictor, which shows how individuals act in a task. Low self-efficacy can lead to poor analytical thinking and reduces the problem-solving quality. When people find themselves ineffective in managing the divorce, they become depressed and anxious. Low self-efficacy can lead to depression and prevent couples from making the right decisions.<sup>9-11</sup>

Several studies were conducted on the predictors of divorce in Iran, whereas the effect of divorce counseling based on the Gottman approach has received scant attention. Several studies<sup>3, 5, 6</sup> addressed the role of divorce counseling in couples' decision making. Gottman<sup>6</sup> showed that three minutes of counseling with couples can predict the divorce occurrence in the future of couples. Moreover, he found that couples needed to manage their self-efficacy in divorce more than ever.<sup>5</sup> Thus; consultants need to work in this field more

Research investigating the desire to divorce in couples with traditional and non-traditional marriage showed that the desire to divorce was higher among non-traditionally married couples, which requires management in divorce.<sup>10</sup> Consulted divorce can affect couples, children, and even friends and families of both parties.<sup>12-15</sup> Researchers also found that managing the divorce process could put couples in the best decision for their life.<sup>16</sup> The latest statistics show that the divorce rate in Yazd is about one out of seven marriages.<sup>9</sup> Due to the increase of divorce, the need for self-efficacy in divorce management should be necessarily taken into consideration. As a matter of fact, few studies have been carried out on the self-efficacy in divorce management. As it was mentioned earlier, couples occasionally doubt to decide on divorce and may make a false decision in this regard. Self-efficacy of



divorce management can help couples to make the right decisions. In other words, if they are going to divorce or return to their lives, they must do so with complete awareness. This study may increase the self-efficacy of divorce management among the couples.

### Methods

The quasi-experimental study adopted a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up method. In this study, the participants were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. The intervention was performed on the experimental group, whereas the control group did not receive any training. The training included eight sessions of 90 minutes conducted for eight weeks. The structure of the meetings was designed based on the Gottman's approach.<sup>6</sup>

The statistical population of this study involved all the applicants for divorce (husband or wife), who referred to Yazd family court and applied for divorce.

In order to enter the study, the participants should have the following criteria: 1. Reading and writing literacy (elementary) 2- Divorce application recorded by the court. 3. Willingness to attend the training sessions. 4. No history of drug or alcohol addiction. 5- No acute psychological disorders such as personality disorders, depression, and no severe or acute axis I disorders (according to the implementation of MMPI- 2 test).

Other researchers<sup>17, 18</sup> used the sample size of 15 for each group in experimental and quasi-experimental studies. However, we determined the number of each group using alpha, test power, and Morgan's table. Among couples applying for divorce, 16 couples (32 participants) were selected and randomly assigned to experimental ( $n = 16$ ) and control ( $n = 16$ ) groups. All ethical considerations, such as the confidentiality of participants' identities and problems, lack of satisfaction to continue the research, not recording the counseling sessions, implementing the Gottman's interventions on the control group after the treatment sessions were followed for the current study.

The questionnaire has 20 items designed to increase the self-efficacy and awareness of couples on the decision to continue living together or divorce. This questionnaire has four subscales: a) inability to make decision, b) the issue of children (custody, visit, and coordination in parenting), c) economic problems (dowry, alimony, housing, division of property), (d) effects of the main family, friends and relatives.

Each question was answered on a 5-point grading scale (5 = I fully agree, 4 = I agree, 3 = I agree to some extent, 2 = I disagree, 1 = I totally disagree). Questions 1, 3, 5, 7, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17 are scored in a reversed order. Each person's score was obtained using the sum of scores of options. The minimum and maximum attainable scores in this test were 20 and 100, respectively. The higher scores in this questionnaire show lower doubts regarding the decision making about divorce. In other words, individuals with lower scores in this questionnaire need more help and consultation to make decision about continuing their married life or divorcing.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the whole sample, Cronbach's alpha was 0.91 (0.92 for women and 0.90 for men). Considering the sub-scales, Cronbach's alpha rates were 0.96, 0.82, 0.84, and 0.88 for valid decision making, issue of children, economic dimension, as well as the effect of main family, friends and relatives, respectively. Furthermore, SPSS<sub>21</sub> was used to analyze the study data. Some of the topics discussed in the training sessions were: communication and primary assessment, guidelines for useful relationships and effective communication, training for improving sexual relations, expressing and controlling the excitement, controlling behavior, analyzing the couples' views about the problem, how a problem is made in life, an effective process for solving a disagreement, formulating old and permanent loops, paying attention to the strengths of couples in dealing with the problems and getting feedback.<sup>6</sup>

### Results

The mean age of participants in the experimental and control groups was 25 and 26 years, respectively, which was not significantly different. The groups were also homogenized in terms of the number of children, education, and duration of married life, etc.

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the total score and self-efficacy subscales regarding divorce management in the experimental and control groups in the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up. As can be seen, the scores of participants regarding the self-efficacy subscales in the experimental group demonstrated a significant change compared to the control group. In the experimental group, the mean and standard deviation of the total score of self-efficacy in divorce management were 51.50 and 4.94 in the pre-test, 77.43 and 4.97 in the post test, and 73.56 and 5.83 in the control. In fact, the difference among pre-test, post-test, and control scores increased, which demonstrates an increase in the overall score of self-efficacy in the experimental group. However, in the control group, the mean and standard deviation of the self-efficacy total score were 50.81, 6.13 and 44.37 in the pre-test, 44.37 and 6.31 in the post-test, as well as 42.50 and 7.63 in the follow-up. No significant difference was observed between the three stages in the control group. High scores of self-efficacy indicated that training was effective and couples were able to achieve self-efficacy in this field. To test the hypotheses, we initially investigated the presumptions of normal distribution of scores as well as equality of variance and covariance for the variables of the research. Since the number of dependent variables was more than one (self-efficacy dimensions), multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used. Moreover, we used Box test and found that the difference between covariance was not significant ( $P$ -value = 0.353,  $F = 1.13$ ,  $BOX'SM = 20.79$ ).

The results of Table 2 showed a significant difference between the self-efficacy and its subscales between the experimental and control

groups ( $P$ -value < 0.01). Therefore, Gottman-based counseling was effective on the divorce management. The effect size was 0.74. That is, 0.74 of variance in the post-test and follow up scores are related to the group membership.

The results of Univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that the two groups had a significant difference in terms of each subscale and the total score ( $P$ -value = 0.001) (Table 3).

The results of Table 3 indicate a significant difference between the two groups regarding the self-efficacy subscales between the post-test and follow-up scores. In other words, the training affected the experimental group. As a matter of fact, 0.89 of the total score variance in the post-test and 84 percent of the variance in the follow-up scores can be related to group membership. In order to assess the effect of training on males and females, two-way ANOVA was used. In other words, we investigated the two factors of gender and group and their interaction using the two-way ANOVA.

As it can be inferred from Table 4, group had a significant effect on the dependent variable in all the tests. This means is the two groups had a significant difference with respect to the dependent variables. However, no significant difference was found between men and women regarding the dependent variable. Moreover, no significant interaction was observed between the group and gender. In other words, the effect of training was the same on males and females.

Table 5 shows that group had a significant effect on dependent variables in post-test and follow-up scores. In other words, a significant difference was observed between the experimental and control groups regarding the dependent variables.

Regarding the main effect of gender on dependent variables in post-test and follow-up, Table 5 shows that gender did not have any significant effect on dependent variables. In other words, the effect of training does not depend on gender.

**Table 1.** Comparison of mean and standard deviation of total score and sub-scales of self-efficacy scores in the experimental and control groups in pre-test, post-test, and follow up

Factors	Group	Number	Pretest		Post Test		Follow-Up	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Lack of Decision Making	Experimental	16	8.68	3.19	15.87	1.89	14.56	2.12
	Control	16	9.112	4.30	11.06	3.75	10.3	2.96
Management of Family And Others	Experimental	16	12.87	2.52	22.56	3.01	21.93	3.47
	Control	16	11.37	2.68	12.37	3.4	11.32	3.11
Economic Issues	Experimental	16	15.56	3.82	22.75	2.14	20.56	2.87
	Control	16	15.25	4.34	11.68	2.82	10.81	2.42
Children	Experimental	16	13.00	3.28	16.25	2.29	16.50	1.78
	Control	16	14.01	3.00	9.25	2.71	10.42	2.82
General Self-efficacy	Experimental	16	50.11	12.81	77.25	9.33	73.55	10.24
	Control	16	49.75	14.32	44.36	12.68	42.85	11.31

**Table 2.** MANOVA analysis results for comparison of self-efficacy scores and its subscales in the experimental and control groups

Variables	Test	Value	Hypothesis df	df Error	F	Significance Level	Eta-Squared	Statistical Power
Group	Pillais Trace	0.947	8	23		0.0001	0.74	1.00
	Wilks Lambda	0.053	8	23	51.001	0.0001	0.74	1.00
	Hotelling's Trace	17.74	8	23	51.001	0.0001	0.74	1.00
	Roy's Largest Root	17.74	8	23		0.0001	0.74	1.00

**Table 3.** One-way ANOVA results on post-test and self-efficacy mean scores in both experimental and control groups

Source of Changes	Stages	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean of Squares	F	Significance Level	Difference Level	Statistical power
Group	Post-test	Lack of decision making	185.28	1	185.28	21.00	0.001	0.412	1.00
		Family management	830.28	1	320.28	122.8	0.001	0.803	1.00
		Financial issue	979.03	1	979.03	155.86	0.001	0.839	1.00
		Child	392.00	1	392.00	60.62	0.001	0.669	1.00
		Total	8745.03	1	8745.03	267.79	0.001	0.899	1.00
	Follow up	Lack of decision making	195.03	1	195.03	33.68	0.001	0.529	1.00
		Family management	850.78	1	850.78	73.62	0.001	0.710	1.00
		Financial issue	760.50	1	760.50	107.42	0.001	0.782	1.00
		Child	294.03	1	294.03	35.86	0.001	0.545	1.00
		Total	7719.03		7719.03	167.32	0.001	0.848	1.00

One-way ANOVA results regarding the self-efficacy subscales in the post-test and follow-up scores between experimental and control groups



**Table 4.** Results of two-way ANOVA (group and gender) on self-efficacy variables

Effects	Test	Value	df	df Hypothesis	df Error	Significance Level	Difference Level	Statistical Power
Group	Pillais Trace	0.950	50	8	21	0.001	0.95	1.00
	Wilks Lambda	0.050	50	8	21	0.001	0.95	1.00
	Hotelling's Trace	19.11	50	8	21	0.001	0.95	1.00
	Roy's Largest Root	19.11	50	8	21	0.001	0.95	1.00
	Pillais Trace	0.455	2	8	21	0.071	0.455	0.70
Gender	Wilks Lambda	0.545	2	8	21	0.071	0.455	0.70
	Hotelling's Trace	0.836	2	8	21	0.071	0.455	0.70
	Roy's Largest Root	0.836	2	8	21	0.071	0.455	0.70
	Pillais Trace	0.267	0.958	8	21	0.493	0.267	0.32
	Wilks Lambda	0.733	0.958	8	21	0.493	0.267	0.32
Interaction between Gender and Group	Hotelling's Trace	0.365	0.958	8	21	0.493	0.267	0.32
	Roy's Largest Root	0.365	0.958	8	21	0.493	0.267	0.32

**Table 5.** The results of the main effects test and the interactive effect in two-way analysis of variance on each individual dependent variable of self-efficacy

Resource of Changes	Stages	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean of Squares	F	Significance Level	Difference	Statistical Power
Group	Post-test	Lack of Decision Making	185.28	1	185.28	25.38	0.001	0.47	0.99
		Family Management	830.28	1	830.28	118.38	0.001	0.80	1.00
		Financial Issues	979.03	1	979.03	147.67	0.001	0.84	1.00
		Child	392.00	1	392.00	58.46	0.001	0.67	1.00
		Total	8745.03	1	8745.03	259.28	0.001	0.90	1.00
	Follow up	Lack of Decision Making	195.03	1	195.03	37.24	0.001	0.57	1.00
		Family Management	850.78	1	850.78	82.67	0.001	0.74	1.00
		Financial Issues	760.50	1	760.50	110.18	0.001	0.79	1.00
		Child	294.03	1	294.03	33.62	0.001	0.54	1.00
		Total	77719.03	1	77719.03	180.92	0.001	0.86	1.00
Gender	Post test	Lack of Decision Making	34.03	1	34.03	4.63	0.17	0.143	0.59
		Family Management	7.03	1	7.03	1.00	0.325	0.13	0.10
		Financial Issues	2.053	1	2.53	0.382	0.54	0.13	0.09
		Child	6.12	1	6.12	0.913	0.34	0.301	0.09
		Total	55.28	1	55.28	0.157	0.69	0.16	0.58
	Follow up	Lack of Decision Making	26.28	1	26.28	5.09	0.13	0.15	0.62
		Family Management	57.78	1	57.78	5.61	0.12	0.16	0.08
		Financial Issues	1.12	1	1.12	0.163	0.68	0.07	0.07
		Child	0.78	1	0.78	0.089	0.76	0.02	0.42
		Total	166.53	1	16.53	3.90	0.058	0.122	0.48
Group and Gender Interaction	Post test	Lack of Decision Making	26.28	1	26.28	3.60	0.16	0.114	0.08
		Family Management	0.281	1	0.281	0.040	0.84	0.01	0.08
		Financial Issues	0.281	1	0.281	0.042	0.83	0.02	0.09
		Child	0.125	1	0.125	0.019	0.89	0.01	0.14
		Total	30.03	1	30.03	0.890	0.35	0.01	0.01
	Follow up	Lack of Decision Making	0.78	1	0.78	0.149	0.70	0.05	0.09
		Family Management	0.78	1	0.78	0.076	0.78	0.03	0.08
		Financial Issues	18.00	1	18.00	2.60	0.118	0.08	0.34
		Child	0.281	1	0.281	0.032	0.899	0.01	0.09
		Total	22.78	1	22.78	0.534	0.471	0.019	0.11



## Discussion

Haseley (2016) believes that high self-efficacy will make people work harder in facing the barriers.<sup>19</sup> Couples who have a higher self-efficacy are more likely to overcome the problems and make decisions more easily.<sup>20</sup> Self-efficacy leads them to experience more stress and tension in their lives. Basically, low self-efficacy can lead to despair and frustration in the marital affairs.<sup>21</sup>

Self-efficacy in divorce management can help couples to make the right decision and to be aware of its consequences. People who apply for a divorce ask themselves if it is possible to return and continue the marital life. Self-efficacy management can help couples to make informed decision.<sup>5</sup> Today, couples who apply for a divorce require more divorce management more than ever. The therapists or counselors have to decisively assist the couple to consider the consequences of divorce for themselves and their children. Parents may sometimes postpone the divorce after the children are well grown. Few therapists can dissuade couples who decide to divorce from their decision. The therapists can offer a temporary and experimental separation in order to give couples the opportunity to make a wiser decision and reconciliation. These results are consistent with findings of others.<sup>3, 5</sup>

The role of family and friends is of great importance in decision making. Our findings are consistent with other studies<sup>22, 23</sup> regarding the supportive or hindering role of families and friends. In the case that the taken decision is in line with that of the family members, no problem will arise, but if the decisions are inconsistent, the problem will be highlighted.

Concerning the interference of others, our results are in line with other findings.<sup>24-26</sup> The financial or material issues are the most important factors in making decision to divorce. A wife may do not apply for a divorce because of her unemployment and financial reasons. For example, a financially distressed woman attempts to stay in life or endures the life because she is afraid of worse financial problems. However, we should

note that happiness in a marital life can be achieved by having the least facilities provided that the couples love each other and think logically.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, living a simple life with the contentment, acceptance of the situation and the status of both parties can neutralize financial and economic factors,<sup>27</sup> though unfortunately, because most young people, without looking at themselves and their spouse, imagine ideal aspirations for marital life that are impossible to be materialized, that can lead their life to end in divorce after some time in common life.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

As the findings of this study show, the child is another problem so as the couples applying for divorce may encounter such problems as the problems of the children, the way of their taking care, the right of custody. These findings were consistent with those of the studies.<sup>28, 29</sup> Moreover, Research shows that couples with children are less likely to divorce than couples who do not have any children.<sup>30, 31</sup> The training provided in this area could increase the self-efficacy in divorce management within couples and help them either return to life with a wide view or divorce. The self-efficacy in divorce management does not always lead to a return to life, but can sometimes help couples to divorce calmly and do not regret their decision. Couples, nowadays, need more divorce training than any other time, requiring more cooperation from family authorities and family judges. The present study suffers from some limitation: the couples applying for divorce were used in this study and thus, the findings cannot be generalized for the divorced individuals or couples who have a normal life. As a result, the newly-married couples are suggested to attend family reunification classes in order to prevent their families from being collapsed.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors also have no conflicts of interest and have no involvement that might raise the question of bias in the results reported here.

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### Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization, F.Z.; Methodology, H.Z.M.; Investigation, F.Z. and H.Z.M.; Review & Editing, H.Z.M.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript and are responsible about any question related to article.

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