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The Effectiveness of Couples Therapy Based on the Gottman Method Among Iranian Couples With Conflicts: A Quasi-Experimental Study

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of couple therapy based on the Gottman method in decreasing emotional divorce and improving verbal-nonverbal communication skills among Iranian couples dealing with conflicts. The design of the study was quasi-experimental with pretest and posttest, and a wait list control group. The sample for the study consisted of 14 voluntary couples who sought therapy at a mental health clinic in Iran. Participants were assessed using the Emotional Divorce Scale and Primary Communication Inventory questionnaires. Analysis of covariance models were used. Results of the study showed that the Gottman method reduced emotional divorce and improved their verbal-nonverbal communication skills ($P < .05$).

KEYWORDS

Gottman method; Iranian couples; evidence-based couple therapy; emotional divorce; quasi-experimental study

Divorce rates in Iran have increased over the past 10 years with an estimate of 103,302 couples getting divorced in 2013 (National Organization of Health Center in Iran, 2013). In addition to these official statistics about the number of divorces, there is another largely nondiscussed type of divorce called emotional divorce, which is when couples continue to live together but are cold to each other, feel isolated, and live separate lives without necessarily considering divorce (Matthews, 1998). Mashregh NEWS (2016) reports that the rate of emotional divorce (2016) is two to three times higher than legal divorce; one reason for the high presence of emotional divorce can be attributed to the taboo nature of getting a legal divorce given the collectivistic cultural context of Iran. There is a famous Farsi/Persian proverb, which says that women enter the marital relationship dressed in a white gown and exit wrapped in a white shroud after they die, which means women leave marriage only after they die. Islam as a religion also promotes a negative view of divorce. There is a narration (*hadith*)

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from Prophet Mohammad saying: "Of all things permissible, divorce is the most reprehensible" (Haeri, 2014). It is no surprise then that the stigma attached to divorce in Islam has deeply permeated Iranian culture (Sheikhi, Khosravi, Gharibi, Gholizadeh, & Hassanzadeh, 2012). Other factors besides religious ideologies and cultural norms that are also responsible for the unfavorable cultural attitudes around divorce in the Iranian society, such as women's economic dependence on men and the importance of honoring family legacy by keeping the family together (Barzoki, Tavakoll, & Burrage, 2015). Although the severity of the taboo has decreased tremendously over time and individuals have begun to learn to reevaluate and end unsuitable relationships much earlier, divorce is still considered a stigma that provokes negative familial and societal judgments (Sheikhi et al., 2012).

Therefore, a likely solution can be an emotional divorce, which leads couples to a world of less expectations less emotional connections, and less positive affections. In these situations, couples often have many concerns about the future of their relationships given the fact that they are living a parallel life without much emotional connections. Research studies have shown that different factors affect emotional divorce; one of these factors is the lack of communication skills (Bastani, Golzari, & Roshani, 2010; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Imani, 2012). Verbal and nonverbal communication skills are the grounds for effective interpersonal communication (Suhaimi, Marzugki, & Mustaffa, 2014). These skills help individuals express their emotions, needs, concerns, and expectations properly and bring more intimacy into the relationship (Ozkan, Dalli, Bingol, Metin, & Yarali, 2014). Kayzer (2001) believes that couples lack of communication skills can bring emotional distance, which shows itself in sexual, emotional, verbal, nonverbal, and spiritual connections. Researchers have also shown that there is a significant correlation between communication and compatibility in marital relationships (Christensen & Shenk, 1990; Floyd & Zmich, 1991; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Stuart, 1998; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2000; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1992; Ponzetti & Cate, 1986; Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1998). Thus, helping couples improve their verbal and nonverbal communication skills is one effective way to increase marital satisfaction and decrease experiences of loneliness in marital relationship (Christensen & Shenk, 1990; Fowers, 2001; Halford, Kelly, & Markman, 1997; Sabatelli, 1988). It is important to consider that communication challenges can be different based on cultural norms; for example, Iranian couples may mostly find it difficult to talk about the sexual aspect of their relationship since sex is a taboo subject in many collectivistic cultures including Iran (Nekoolaltak, Keshavarz, Simbar, Nazari, & Baghestani, 2017). Further, although usually both men and women work, sometimes men still have the expectation that

chores and housework are women's job and because of this belief and the sexism biases, the communication patterns about these conflicts maybe impacted (Sadeghi, 2017).

Further, research shows an increasing trend in the prevalence of conflicts for couples living in Iran due to many global changes impacting marital satisfactions, personal choices, and cultural norms (Askari, Noah, Hassan, & Baba, 2012; Najafi, Soleimani, Ahmadi, Javidi, & Kamkar, 2015; Rahmani, Khoei, & Gholi, 2009). Despite these trends, research studies concerning marital conflicts and appropriate interventions are rare for Iranian couples. There have been few research studies about Iranian couples and even fewer on the use of the Gottman method in Iran (Ajeli Lahiji, Behzadi Pour, & Besharat, 2016; Bayat Mokhtari, 2013). There are several evidence-based studies on the effectiveness of the Gottman method (Cornelius & Alessi, 2007; Cornelius, Shorey, & Beebe, 2010; Denton, Burleson, Hobbs, Von Stein, & Rodriguez, 2001; Hawkins et al., 2012), but none have examined the relational issues for Iranian couples considering their collectivistic cultural context compared to individualistic cultural context for western couples.

Given the fact that there is a gap concerning emotional divorce and communication skills among Iranian couples (Zanialipour, Zarei, & Abdi, 2014), the present study was designed to examine the use of the Gottman method in decreasing Iranian couples' emotional divorce and improving verbal and nonverbal communication skills. To the best of our knowledge this will be the first study conducted with this aim in mind. The focus of the research was on whether Iranian couples with conflict in a significantly different cultural and contextual background would also benefit from the Gottman method, and whether their communication skills and emotional distance would improve.

Literature Review

Marriage is an important aspect of human relationship in almost every part of the world (Bodenmann, Meyer, Ledermann, Binz, & Brunner, 2005) and provides the primary structure for establishing family relationships to raise the next generation. Further, marriage occupies a special place in Iranian culture because of traditional and religious aspects of Iran's social history. It is apparent that couples do not intentionally starts a relationship so later on they can experience loneliness, emotional distance, distress, and dissatisfaction. However, for most couples, their happiness and satisfaction in the relationship decreases over time (Bradbury, 1998) since close relationships are always intertwined with conflicts (Kiecolt-Glaser, Bane, Glaser, & Malarkey, 2003; White & Klein, 2008). According to Gottman and Silver (1999), 69% of relational conflicts are perpetual, which means that these

conflicts will always be present. Thus, it is important for couples to learn how to keep their relationship healthy despite having these perpetual problems, as well as attempt to solve the remaining 31% of relational conflicts, which are often temporary and solvable. Perpetual problems are conflicts without any clear solutions. However, couples can have more constructive conversations, try to understand each other and the stories behind the conflicts, and eventually try to make more compromises.

While getting a divorce may increase loneliness (Van Tilburg, Aartsen, & van der Pas, 2015), experiencing a positive marital relationship decreases isolation and enhance the individual's wellbeing (Fokkema, De Jong Gierveld, & Dykstra, 2012; Pinquart, 2003). Even without a legal divorce, couples can experience loneliness and emotional distance while they are still officially married.

Gottman Method

Gottman (1999) formulated the concept of the distance isolation cascade, which indicates the transition to an emotional climate in the relationship that has additional negative affections and attributions. In this stage, couples think that it is better if they work out problems alone rather than together and live their parallel lives. As a result, they experience loneliness (Doohan, Carrère, & Riggs, 2010). This stage, which the first author calls the emotional divorce stage, shows how the process of couples drifting apart occurs (Gottman, 1994). Carrère and Gottman (1999) and Gottman (1999) believe that the final step of the distance isolation cascade before break-up and official divorce is loneliness. It is worth noting that not all couples experience loneliness after divorce and each individual experiences life an end to a marriage differently.

Verbal and nonverbal communication skills are other important aspects of a relationship, which usually need improvement among distressed and conflicted couples. Verbal and nonverbal communication skills have been known to be effective in helping conflicted and unhappy couples have healthier marriages (Fowers, 2001). Researchers have shown that there is significant correlation between communication, conflict resolution abilities, and compatibility in marriage and divorce (Christensen & Shenk, 1990; Floyd & Zmich, 1991; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Stuart, 1998; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2000; Markman et al., 1992; Ponzetti & Cate, 1986; Sanders et al., 1998). We can work on improving relationships and decreasing emotional divorce by teaching couples basic communication and conflict resolution skills. This can hopefully bring harmony to their relationship (Christensen & Shenk, 1990; Halford et al., 1997; Sabatelli, 1988).

In the United States, more than 46% of first marriages end in divorce (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). The good news is that research studies have shown that couples therapy can reduce relational distress (Shadish & Baldwin, 2005) and prevent divorce (Snyder, Wills, & Grady-Fletcher, 1991). Gottman discusses three systems in a relationship: the friendship system, the conflict management system, and the shared meaning system. In the concept of the “Sound Relationship House,” the friendship system comprises the love map, sharing fondness and admiration, and turning towards versus turning away. Gottman and Silver (2015) describe these levels as having an effect on the negative or positive atmosphere or perspective in marriages. Couples feel lonely when they realize that their partners do not know them and their relationship very well (love map), do not appreciate and see what they do in their relationship (sharing fondness and admiration) and do not feel that their partners are there for them to respond to their bids for connection and do not know how to compensate for their mistakes (turning towards versus turning away) (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Silver, 2015). According to Gottman (1999, 2000, 2015), helping couples become mindful of these three important aspects and using various strategies such as updating their love maps by asking open-ended questions, training their minds to see positive aspects of their relationships, expressing their appreciation when their partners do something right, making bids for connections, responding to their partners’ bids, and having ways to make it up to them will lead couples to decrease emotional divorce and distance and feelings of loneliness.

In addition, Gottman (1999) has presented different strategies, including, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, which help couples with conflict management and relationship improvements. Further, there are several specific behaviors that show relational distress such as criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling, which is called the “Four Horsemen” in the Gottman method (Gottman, 1999). We can expand them to other types of communications that contribute to marital distress and conflicts, such as sarcasm, hostility, withdrawal, as well as the combination of all, which are flooding, harsh start-up, gridlock, escalating physiological, and emotional arousal and rigid interactional patterns (Gottman, 1999). In response to these vicious cycles and patterns, Gottman (1999) found protective factors, including accepting influence, using softened start-ups, repair attempts, and stress-reducing conversations, help intimate relationships become more adaptive and allow couples to experience more relational improvements. These concepts have been studied and have been found to distinguish happy from unhappy couples (Cornelius & Alessi, 2007; Cornelius, Alessi, & Shorey, 2007; David, 2015; Davoodvandi, Navabi Nejad, & Farzad, 2018; Gottman & Gottman, 2015).

Method

The design of the study was quasi-experimental with both pretest and posttest and included a wait list control group. The sample for the study consisted of 14 voluntary couples who sought therapy with complaints about relationship conflicts at a mental health clinic of a major university in the eastern part of Iran. The mean age of the couples was 35 years old. The average length of time together was 8 years, and the average number of children was two. The couples' educational background ranged from a high school diploma to a master's degree. Couples were assigned randomly to an experimental and a control group (seven couples in each group). The experimental group received eight sessions of 1.5 hours of couples therapy based on the Gottman method. The posttest was administered at the end of week 8. In weeks 9 through 17, couples therapy based on the Gottman method was administered to the wait list control group. Participants were assessed using the Emotional Divorce Scale (EDS) and Primary Communication Inventory (PCI) questionnaires.

To be eligible for the study, participants had to (a) be 20 years or older, (b) be officially married for 1 year or longer, (c) have no intention of an official divorce or acting upon it, (d) not be involved in an ongoing affair, (e) not be diagnosed or have backgrounds in addiction or other psychological disorders, and (f) not use medication or other psychotherapy methods.

Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: Couples therapy based on the Gottman method would cause a significant difference in lowering the level of emotional divorce for the experimental group in comparison to the control group.

Hypothesis 2: Couples therapy based on the Gottman method would cause a significant difference in improving verbal and nonverbal communication skills for the experimental group in comparison to the control group.

Instruments

Emotional Divorce Scale: Gottman (1994) has developed The Opinions About Loneliness and Parallel Lives questionnaire, which includes 34 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," with higher scores indicating more loneliness. Examples of the questions are as follow: "Sometimes it seems like we are strangers in this house together" and "Something seems to be missing from our marriage." Scores can range from 34 to 170. Cronbach's alpha was .94 for husbands and .96 for wives. Bayat Mokhtari (2013) translated this questionnaire to Farsi/Persian and found its Cronbach's alpha to be .91.

Primary Communication Inventory (PCI): Locke, Sabagh, and Thomes (1956) developed PCI and it was modified by Navran (1967) into its current version. The PCI includes 25 items using a 5-point Likert scale, with scores on the PCI ranging from 25 to 125 and higher scores reflecting greater satisfaction with a couple's level of communication. The process of scoring the three items is reversed and that of nine items is transposed from the spouse's questionnaire. Therefore, the PCI can only be scored accurately if it is completed by a couple. It is important to mention that the PCI has two subscales: nonverbal communication (7 items) and verbal communication (18 items); and two perspectives: self-description (14 items) and spouse's description of communication behavior (7 items; O'Leary, 2013, pp. 336–337). Test-retest reliability for the PCI is 0.86 (Ely, Guernsey, & Stover, 1973). Kimiaei, Mansouri, and Mansouri (2013) translated the PCI to Farsi/Persian in Iran and they found its Cronbach's alpha to be .75 among distressed couples and .66 among nondistressed couples.

Procedure

The structure and content of couple therapy sessions based on the Gottman method were developed through the use of resources such as the Gottman Method Couple Therapy chapter in *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy* (Gurman, 2008), The seven principles for making marriage work (Gottman & Silver, 1999), and the marriage clinic casebook (Gottman, 2004). Due to the political situation between the United States and Iran, it was not possible to use a certified Gottman therapist for this study. Therefore, what was delivered was an approximation of it based on the researcher's understanding of that method.

During the eight sessions, couples were encouraged to work on their friendship system and verbal and nonverbal communication skills. At the first session, working on the joining process, chief complaints, goals, and exploring communication skills were addressed. At the second session, working on how to update their love map, share fondness and admiration in their relationship, and giving related tasks were addressed. At the third session, turning towards instead of turning away, bringing the positive perspective in their relationship, and giving related tasks were addressed. At the fourth session, recognizing the four horsemen (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling), becoming familiar with their antidotes (soften start-up, describing yourself and having a culture of appreciation, taking responsibilities, and doing self-soothing), and giving related tasks were addressed. At the fifth session, accepting influence, having stress reducing conversations, body language, and giving related tasks were addressed. At the seventh session, life dreams and shared meaning were discussed and at the eighth session, a summary of the process and a conversation about meeting goals were provided (Gottman, 1999, 2004; Gurman, 2008).

Results

Data Analysis

Demographic data were analyzed using χ^2 . The average age of participants was 31.07 and the average length of marriages was 7.14 years. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used, which proved to be normal for all variables ($p < .05$). There was no significant difference between groups in emotional divorce and verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Table 1 shows no significant difference between groups in emotional divorce and verbal and nonverbal communication skills ($p < .05$). Therefore, both groups were the same at the pretest stage.

Differences between groups at pretest were analyzed using one-way analysis of variance. Posttests were analyzed using univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for each dependent variable (emotional divorce and verbal and nonverbal communication skills) with the pretest scores as covariates. According to the covariance analysis test results, there was a significant difference between the pretests and posttests in terms of emotional divorce ($p < .05$).

In order to compare average verbal and nonverbal communication skills of the sample group with the wait list control group at the pretest stage, the two-independent means were statistically compared. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was also used to assess normal distribution of the variable of emotional divorce and verbal and nonverbal communication skills which, according to the results, were confirmed ($p < .05$). The distribution of emotional divorce scores among the control group in pretest ($z = 0.122$, $p < .05$), and posttest ($z = 0.125$, $p < .05$) was normal. The distribution of emotional divorce scores among the experiment group in pretest ($z = 0.152$, $p < .05$), and posttest ($z = 0.112$, $p < .05$) was normal. The distribution of verbal and nonverbal communication skills scores among the control group in pretest ($z = 0.137$, $p < .05$), and posttest ($z = 0.189$, $p < .05$) was normal. The distribution of verbal and nonverbal communication skills scores among the experiment group in pretest ($z = 0.185$, $p < .05$), and posttest ($z = 0.144$, $p < .05$) was normal.

Thus, the comparison of two population means was practicable. Table 2 shows the results of ANCOVA and F -test of emotional divorce and verbal and nonverbal communication skills in couples. Thus, couples therapy based on the Gottman method seemed to decrease the likelihood of

Table 1. Pretest comparison of the groups in the scales of emotional divorce and verbal and nonverbal communication.

Scales	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> *	<i>df</i> **	<i>p</i> value***
Emotional divorce (EDS)	Control Experiment	10.28 11.85	3.07 2.93	3.02	1	.05
Verbal and nonverbal communication (PCI)	Control Experiment	48.21 46.35	9.51 9.13	1.43	1	.05

*Paired t test.

**Degrees of freedom.

***Probability of rejecting the null hypothesis.

Table 2. ANCOVA of emotional divorce and verbal and nonverbal communication skills scales in couples with conflicts.

Scales	Freedom	Mean square		F value		P value		Effect size		Statistical power	
		Pretest	Group Membership	Pretest	Group Membership	Pretest	Group Membership	Pretest	Group Membership	Pretest	Group Membership
Emotional divorce (EDS)	1	72.99	555.87	24.97	190.18	.000	.000	0.151	0.88	0.5	0.88
Verbal and nonverbal communication skills (PCI)	1	1785.27	3354.4	50.55	94.99	.000	.000	0.002	0.82	0.66	0.88

emotional divorce (88%) and improve verbal and nonverbal communication skills (82%).

Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to examine the effectiveness of couple therapy based on the Gottman method of decreasing emotional divorce and improvement of verbal-nonverbal communication skills among couples with conflicts in Iran.

The first hypothesis speculated that couples therapy based on the Gottman method would cause a significant difference in emotional divorce for couple in the experimental group in comparison with the wait list control group. The second hypothesis stated that couples therapy based on the Gottman method would cause a significant difference in verbal and nonverbal communication skills in the experimental group in comparison with the wait list control group. The results from this study confirm both hypotheses.

Relevant to the first hypothesis, Wairire (2011) mentioned that emotional divorce is a type of divorce, which is not officially recorded anywhere but happens when couples no longer have any physical or emotional intimacy and feel lonely in the relationship. Conflicts are inevitable in a marriage, and therefore, how we face and control them are crucial in successful relationships. When emotional divorce happens, the positive perspective is damaged, and couples have a difficult time finding satisfactory aspects of their relationship. Thus, with the presence of emotional divorce, there is a much bigger chance for developing mental health symptoms and having relational issues (Kenneth & Prather, 2000).

There is a paucity of research studies on emotional divorce but there are studies that explored similar variables such as marital satisfaction and adaptability, and divorce. Markman and Holweg (1993) examined a longitudinal educational program by working on listener and speaker techniques based on the Gottman method to prevent marital dissatisfaction and divorce. After a 3- to 4-year follow-up, couples showed significant improvement in expressing positive affection, better communication and problem-solving skills. Therefore, the Gottman method had a longitudinal impact on marital dissatisfaction and divorce. Johanson (2000) conducted research on the behavioral differences between distressed and nondistressed couples. The study showed that couples who have more positive and less negative attributions are more content and have more satisfactory relationships. In addition, this research suggested that when a husband accepts influence from his wife and share power with her, their relationship is more stable. A large body of research provides evidence indicating that working on emotional divorce, loneliness, and communication skills will increase

marital satisfaction (Dudley & Kosinski, 2006; Hamamci, 2005; Kotrla, Dyer, & Stelzer, 2010; Perry, 2006; Robinson & Price, 1980).

The second hypothesis was largely supported in that couple therapy based on the Gottman method caused a significant difference in verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Research studies have shown that dysfunctional communication patterns will increase marital conflicts and improvement in verbal and nonverbal communication skills increases marital satisfaction, which is in alignment with the findings of this study (Christensen & Shenk, 1990; Gray, 1999; Markman et al., 1992; Wood & Davidson, 1993). Kahn (1970) examined the relationship between nonverbal communications and marital satisfaction and found that there is a significant difference between happy and unhappy couples in the subscale of nonverbal communication of the PCI. Ely, Guerney, and Stover (1973) demonstrated that the PCI is sensitive to therapeutic interventions and increased significantly between the experimental and control group. Another research study revealed that effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills increase positive interactions and conflict management and couples develop higher level of self-regulation and problem-solving skills after they improved their communication skills (Markman, 1982; Stanley, 2001). Hahlweg, Revenstorf, and Schindler (1984) have studied the effect of behavioral marital therapy on couples' communication and problem-solving skills and found that educational patterns for couples increase positive behaviors and marital satisfaction in relationships. Gottman, Markman, and Notarius (1977) conducted a study comparing distressed and nondistressed couples and mentioned that the difference between their verbal and nonverbal communication skills creates the difference between their agreements and disagreements and couples with better verbal and nonverbal communication skills have more collaborations in their relationship.

As stated, different factors can cause emotional divorce and conflicts among couples. The consequences of these challenges are important for the institute of family as well as society. Based on the findings of this research study with Iranian couples, it seems like couple therapy based on the Gottman method can lead couples to better understanding of each other's physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs regardless of their cultural context. These findings are interesting given the perception that both easterners and westerners have about the vast differences in marital satisfaction for couples who live in a more "traditional" versus "modern and advanced" societies. There seems to be many universal traits in human behavior that need to be considered as the world is becoming a global village connected by the advancement of technology and communication. The concept of emotional divorce is a cross-cultural phenomenon for those couples who are stuck in a loveless marriage for many different reasons

and Iranian couples are no exceptions. Furthermore, it is part of human nature to strive for love and connection and desire empathy and understanding regardless of cultural background. The Gottman model pays attention to concepts like intimacy, love, and passion in a relationship. It shows that sharing fondness and admiration, turning towards instead of turning away and practices in these areas increase marital satisfaction. On the same note, conflict management skills, having dialogues about perpetual problems, accepting influence from your spouse, and having more functional interactions decrease conflicts and loneliness in a relationship and these patterns proved to be true for the Iranian couples in this study.

Findings of the present study were consistent with other related studies that have been done in the United States. However, no previous studies have examined the effect of the Gottman method in decreasing emotional divorce within the cultural context of Iran. It seems like by virtue of evidence-based knowledge of marital process, dysfunctional patterns, vicious cycles, helpful behavioral patterns, understanding, and empathy, we can paint marriages with a different stroke, which can positively contribute to an intimate relationship no matter where we live across the globe.

Clinical Implications

It is intriguing that focusing on couple therapy based on the Gottman method can improve Iranian couples' relationships. While this may seem obvious on the surface, no study in Iranians' culture has been conducted to confirm this. Although this may have been long held and treasured knowledge to couples therapists, research that confirms this clinical insight is still lacking.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that couples therapists working with Iranian couples may wish to focus on the Gottman method and its specific concepts (friendship system, loneliness and emotional divorce, conflict management, and verbal-nonverbal communication skills) that can lead to satisfactory changes for couples. Mental health professionals should remind couples that marriage is not a box full of joy, passion, love, happiness, and smiles at all times. These wonderful and satisfying concepts are built in a relationship by marital partners. Marriage is an empty box that can be filled with unresolved conflicts, struggles, negative attributions, and violence, or couples can deposit love, intimacy, companionship, friendship, dialogs, and many other positive meanings into it. In this way, couples will not only survive but also thrive and flourish in their relationship.

As an important caveat, couple therapists need to be mindful of cultural diversity and differences when they work with Iranian couples. For example, when a therapist wants to explore sexual aspects of a marital relationship with an Iranian couple, she/he should know that like many other

cultures sex has been a taboo subject in Iran and the conversation could not be as direct as in some western cultures. Therefore, couple therapists need to modify questions and some of the interventions in Gottman method such as dreams within the conflicts. An example of modification could include: if sexual satisfaction is a perpetual problem for an Iranian couple and their therapist realizes the couple are not comfortable talking about it, the therapist could start dreams within conflict intervention about a physical sensation (and not sexual) and ask the couple to perform the practice about the main issue when they are at home and have privacy.

On another note, in Gottman's method, accepting influences from your spouse is one the ways couple can have healthier relational dynamics. However, even though patriarchy has global influence on all marital relationships regardless of the cultural context, in some cultures, it has more visible influence. In Iran like many other more traditional societies accepting influence from your spouse is a double-edged sword. On one hand, women supposed to accept influences and listen to their spouse, which will also contributes to their lower marital satisfaction. On another hand, men are not supposed to be overtly influenced by their spouses even though not being influenced by the spouse is not possible in any marital relationship. Thus, a therapist using the Gottman model in Iran should discuss the idea that being influenced by the partner is inevitable in any close relationship. They also need to share data that couples in egalitarian relationships enjoy many more benefits and have less emotional and physical health-related issues regardless of their cultural background.

In summary, cross-cultural studies help us gain better perspectives about what parts of human relationships are universal and what parts are unique and culturally based. It seems appropriate and relevant to tease out these issues and use models from different cultures like those that have been developed within the cultural contexts of eastern societies and utilize them in western cultures and vice versa. This seems to be the only way we can act as a global village and move forward with our relationships based on humanity and love and not hatred and disconnections.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study had a number of limitations. There were few evidence-based studies on the topic of emotional divorce and even fewer research studies on the Gottman method in Iran (Ajeli Lahiji et al., 2016; Bayat Mokhtari, 2013). Furthermore, the official government reports are released every 5 years so we did not have access to the latest report on the divorce rate in Iran after 2013. In order to measure the communication patterns of Iranian couple, the PCI was chosen even though the Cronbach's alpha was low. However, the researchers did not have any other choices due to the lack of

access to any other Farsi translated questionnaire; thus, the results should be interpreted cautiously.

Furthermore, the sample for this study included 14 couples who resided in Mashhad, Iran. Therefore, one must exercise caution in generalizing the results to the entire population of Iran due to different cultural and relational dynamics. Only heterosexual married couples were chosen for this study since other types of relationships are considered illegal in Iran. The couples sampled for this study were self-identified couples seeking treatment in a culture more or less discouraging attention to marital distress while openly discouraging divorce. One might imagine that couples both identifying their distress and openly seeking treatment represent groups different from the traditional dominant culture and more similar to those of the dominant American samples used in developing the Gottman approach. There was also no follow up with couples to examine the stability of their relationship post therapy. Further, a Gottman-certified therapist was not available in Iran to help with running the workshops; therefore, the first author had to act as the therapist and the researcher for this study. This obviously creates a potential conflict of interest and impacts the way results should be interpreted. Future studies should gather data from a larger sample from different regions of Iran and should include couples from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Nevertheless, this study can contribute a great deal to our understanding of how resolving marital conflicts may need the same or different tools depending on the cultural context.

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