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## Research Paper

# The Effectiveness of Bowen's style Family Therapy on Increasing the Happiness and Empathy marital of Couples Referring to Isfahan Counseling Center



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective** The purpose of this study was to investigate The Effectiveness of Bowen,s style Family Therapy on Increasing the Happiness and Empathy of Couples Referring to Isfahan Counseling Centers.

**Methods** The research method was semi-experimental pre-test and post-test with a control group. The statistical population consisted of all couples in Isfahan who were referred to the psychological clinics of Isfahan in 2018. Using a suitable sampling method, couples who were referred to psychiatric clinics were selected 30 couples and randomly assigned to two Control groups (n = 15) and an experimental group (n = 15). Data gathering tools were Azrein, Nester & Jones's Couples Happiness Questionnaire(1973), Jolliffe & Farrington's Marital Empathy Questionnaire (2006), and Bowen,s Family Therapy Sessions during the 8 sessions of 60 minutes on the experimental group. Data were analyzed using SPSS-19 software using single-variable covariance analysis.

**Results** The results showed that Bowen,s style of Family Therapy increased the couples' happiness and empathy among couples referring to Isfahan counseling centers.

**Conclusion** As a result, Bowen family therapy can be used in couples counseling to promote empathy and happiness.

## 1. Introduction

Marriage is the prelude to starting a family. The family is formed by a marital bond, and its continuity and survival also depend on the continuity and survival of the marital bond. Marriage has always been affirmed as the most important and supreme social tradition to achieve the emotional and security needs of individuals and one of the components of the quality of marital relationships is marital happiness (Khurana

& Joshi, 2017) which increases the overall level of happiness in various aspects of the relationship. Marital Shows (Kamp Dush, Taylor & Kroeger, 2008) and includes an assessment of a person's sense of well-being or satisfaction in a marital relationship (Fincham, Stanley & Beaches, 2007).

Among the manifestations of human social life, the existence of healthy and constructive interaction between human beings and the establishment of love for each other, and the expression of intimacy and

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empathy for each other, the family is a place to satisfy various physical, intellectual, and emotional needs (Zehtabnajafi et.al, 2011). The family is the core provider of community health and marital relationships. The increasing problems, marital dissatisfaction and conflicts, the increase in divorce rates and their adverse consequences in recent years have highlighted the importance of marital relationships. One of the variables that can be effective in increasing marital conflicts among women is the lack of proper communication (Ghasemi & Arefi, 2017).

Marital relationships can be a source of happiness or a great source of suffering (Young & long, 1998). Happiness and cheerfulness as one of the most important human needs have major effects on the human life complex (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2011). One of the topics that have been considered in the positive psychology approach in recent years is the topic of happiness. Happiness is the degree of satisfaction and contentment of life; In other words, how much one loves one's life as it goes (Veenhoven, 1994). Psychologists such as Argyle also consider happiness to be a combination of positive emotions, lack of negative emotions, and life satisfaction. The server is one of the three components of happiness or happiness. As argued in Argyle's definition, the other two dimensions are happiness, life satisfaction, and lack of negative emotion. The server is the emotional aspect of happiness and life satisfaction (Argyle, 2001). Happy people have high self-esteem, strong friendships, and religious beliefs (Myers, 1996). Research shows that happiness, regardless of how it is acquired, can improve physical health. People who are happy feel more secure, make decisions easier, have a more participatory spirit, and are more satisfied than those who live with it. Unhappiness in marriage is also closely related to destructive conflict resolution and remorse strategies (Sandhya, 2009). Accordingly, more accurate identification of marital happiness factors can play a very effective role in leading people to higher-quality marriages, stable and more empathetic families, as well as reducing marital incompatibility, reducing divorce rates, and, consequently, increasing the mental health of society.

Empathy is one of the most important structures in interpersonal relationships that have long been considered by psychologists and counselors (Chryssikou & Thompson, 2016). Empathy is defined as knowing and sharing the other partner's emotional conditions or context (Bagheri fard, 2014). An empathetic person

tends to focus on the experiences of others unselfishly rather than relying on his or her own experiences in a selfish way (Toussaint & Webb, 2005). One of the theories that have made extensive use of the empathy construct is Rogers's central client theory. Counselors and therapists have used this important construct in Rogers' theory to explain couples' relationships with each other. The concept of empathy has different forms. One of them is marital empathy. Studies show that among the factors that help couples to be able to properly cope with these dysfunctional communication patterns and have more satisfaction with their married life, empathy and mutual understanding through conscious conversation and conversation and consequently Creating a safe environment to satisfy emotional needs and expand intimate relationships between each other (Karimi Vardanjani, 2016). Review by Gaur & Bhardwaj (2015, quoted by Jamei, 2013) indicates that the high level of empathy in couples is positively related to their marital satisfaction and adjustment. Long (2013) states that empathy helps maintain and promote intimate and satisfying relationships between couples over time; On the other hand, lack of empathy makes the spouse feel misunderstood, insignificant, and neglected by their partner, which affects how their relationship and marital satisfaction level.

One of the most effective approaches in investigating and recognizing the roots and causes of family therapy problems is based on Bowen's emotional system. Bowen-based therapy considers the family as an emotional unit and a network of intertwined relationships, and can only be better understood when analyzed from a multigenerational or historical perspective (Ghasemi & Arefi, 2017). Bowen's therapy serves as a bridge between psychoanalytic theory and systems theory. Bowen extended his emotional conceptions of the mother-child relationship to the whole family. He believes that the whole family is considered an emotional unit that can't be separated from each other or successfully. In this treatment, attention should be paid to the trend and flow of several generations. Because, according to Bowen's hypothesis, a kind of predictable regular communication process connects the functions of members of different generations of the family (Jahanbakhshian et. al, 2020). In Bowen's emotional therapy, differentiation of self is the balance between feeling and cognition, and differentiation is more of a process than an achievable goal or a way of life rather

than an existential being. Because Bowen's emotional system has a multi-generational meaning and states that each spouse has learned a style in the parent family and wants to repeat it in other relationships, Therefore, the only solution to the current problem is to change the individual's relationship with the family of origin, and only then will individuals achieve differentiation and react less to the current emotional force. In Bowen's method, the emotional system is first assessed through interviews and assessment techniques, and then intervention is made. In Bowen's method, family therapy is done in several stages (Freedman, 1998).

The Bowen method uses the ethnographer to illustrate the origins of the current problem by plotting family diagrams over at least three generations. This is done during the first sessions. Genealogy is a visual description of the nuclear family that shows emotional relationships such as age, name, sister status, rooms, religious, economic, and social beliefs. In Bowen treatment, it does not matter what the nature of the current clinical problem is, but in Boeving treatment, two main goals are pursued: 1-Reducing anxiety and getting rid of symptoms 2- Increasing the levels of separation in the present members to improve his adaptation. Before reaching the second goal, one must reach the first goal, and by changing the emotional relationships of the extended family in the nuclear family, separation is achieved (Kerr & Bowen, 1998). Thus, in Bowen's view, treatment includes educating all family members about how the system works and reducing family anxiety, and improving the differentiation of all family members. Therefore, the whole family system must be involved in the treatment to achieve a better result and the path of recovery to be followed properly, and the function of each member of the family to be better than before; Therefore, this study aimed to determine the effectiveness of Bowen's family therapy on couple happiness and empathy marital of the couple.

## 2. Materials and Methods:

The method of the present study is semi-experimental (pre-test and post-test with a control group). The statistical population of this study included all couples in Isfahan who were referred to psychological clinics in Isfahan in 2018. Using the available sampling method from couples who were referred to psychological clinics, 30 couples were selected and were randomly assigned to the control

group (n = 15) and the experimental group (n = 15). criteria for entering the study included: consent to participate in meetings, no severe psychological problems, participation of both couples, and Exclude criteria the study included unwillingness to continue cooperation of one couple, more than two sessions of the absence of one couple.

**Azrin Marital Happiness Scale (MHS):** This 10-item scale was developed by Azrin, Naster, and Jones (1973). Its scoring based on the Likert scale is ten options from completely happy = 10 to completely unhappy = 1. Based on this method, the subject's opinion can be received in 9 separate areas, or the scores that the subject gives to each item can be added together and his overall marital happiness can be judged. The minimum total score will be 10 and the maximum will be 100. The total score between 10 and 20 indicates low marital happiness, between 20 to 55 indicates moderate marital happiness and a score above 55 indicates high marital happiness (Issa Nejad, Ahmadi, Bahrami, Baghban and Shoja Heydari, 2011). The reliability of this questionnaire by internal consistency in Issa Nejad's research in 2008 was equal to 0.94. The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire in the present study was 0.87.

**Marital empathy scale (MES):** This scale contains 20 items by Jolliffe & Farrington (2006) Compiled and participants must respond to its items in a Likert 5-choice range (strongly disagree 1 to strongly agree 5). Also, 7 items of this scale are scored in reverse. It's the minimum and maximum score. The scale is 20 to 100, and a low score indicates a lack of empathy and a high score indicates a high level of empathy. This tool includes two cognitive empathy factors that include 9 questions (Articles 20-19-16-14-12-10-9-6-3) And emotional empathy, which includes 11 questions (Articles 1-2-4-5-7-8-11-13-15-17-18). Articles of this scale use the word spouse instead of the word friends. Stephaniak-Bisch-Richard, Ambrosio, and Ben Saleh (2013) obtained the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the two-factor model of cognitive empathy 0.71 and emotional empathy 0.84. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.90 and the convergent validity coefficient of this instrument was 0.65 with an 8-item questionnaire of empathy of Baston et al. In the study of Alieber et al. (2008), 0.87 was reported for the whole Cronbach's alpha coefficient scale, 0.86 for the emotional-emotional subscale and 0.74 for the cognitive subscale.

Also, in Nowruz's (2010) research, the reliability of the whole scale by Cronbach's alpha method has been reported as 0.84 and 0.78 for the emotional scale and 0.74 for the cognitive scale. Aliber et al. (2008) used construct validity to determine the validity of the questionnaire. They converged the basic empathy test with the Mehrabian Emotional Emotion Questionnaire (1996) with the Davis Interpersonal Interaction Index (1980) and the Capra et al. Population Scale (2005) and obtained a high correlation indicating construct validity (Jafari, Norouzi and Foolad Chang, 2017.) Also, the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha in the present study was 0.86 for cognitive empathy and 0.89 for emotional empathy.

#### Execution method:

At first, after coordination with some counseling and psychological centers in Isfahan and informing and advertising in these centers, registrations were made among couples who were willing to cooperate and participate in this research. Then, from the registered couples, 30 people were randomly selected and Randomly assigned in two groups of 15 people. First, marital empathy and couple happiness questionnaires were administered to both groups as a pre-test, and then the experimental group underwent Bowen family therapy training for 8 one-hour sessions per week, during which time the control group received no intervention. They did not. At the end of the sessions, questionnaires were administered to both groups again as a post-test. Bowen family therapy training package based on Ghasemi and Arefi research (2017) was performed on the experimental group in 8 one-hour sessions per week

<b>First session</b>	Communication and initial evaluation: 1- Establishing an objective relationship, not an emotional state, with the authorities 2- Explain the rules, goals, and number of treatment sessions 3- Concluding a medical contract and committing the authorities to continue the meetings 4 - Evaluation interview 5. Evaluation interviews with clients, if necessary, with the nuclear family and the wider family 6 - Perform pre-test
<b>Second session</b>	Education about differentiation of self and its effects and treatment methods: 1-Discussion about self-separation, its aspects and consequences 2- Explaining and understanding the separation of self 3-Establishing a connection between the problems of the current life and the separation of the self
<b>Third session</b>	Triangles and triangulation: 1- Presenting the logic of triangulation in the family 2- Investigating the effects of triangulation on marital relationships 3 - Understanding the use of retaliation in times of anxiety and stress in life 4 - Teaching coping methods Triangulation in the family
<b>Fourth Session</b>	Family emotional system: 1-Evaluating the emotional system of the family and its effect on the couple's relationship 2-The relationship between the family emotional system and marital conflict 3- The emotional system of the family and its effect on the level of separation and mixing 4-Strategies to improve the emotional system of the family of origin and destination
<b>Fifth session</b>	The process of projecting family or transferring parental separation to the child: 1- Presenting the logic of the projection process. The family or the transfer of parental separation to the child and its purposes 2- Discuss the process of transferring parental separation to the child and current problems 3- Relating the position of sisters, order of birth, personality, and its effect on the current problem
<b>Sixth session</b>	Emotional fault: 1- Presenting the logic of emotional failure 2- The effect of emotional failure on marital relationships 3- Determining a comprehensive list of specific behaviors of couples, as emotional breakdown behaviors 4- Provide ways to deal with emotional failure 5- Investigating the relationship between emotional failure and anxiety and attachment with the family of origin
<b>Seventh Session</b>	Multi-generation transmission process and genealogy: 1-Discussion about the multi-generational transmission process 2-Investigating the relationship between the multi-generational transmission process and the current problem of clients 3-Training in ethnography to clarify the problem of references and give it objectivity 4- How to transfer self-segregation in several generations to the present family 5- Practical ways to prevent related problems
<b>Eighth session</b>	Conclusion: 1-Summary of previous sessions 2-Check the homework done and troubleshoot 3-Conclusion and conclusion with the help of references and if possible couples 4- Execution of relevant post-tests 5-Thanks, goodbye, and end of meetings

### 3. Results

Descriptive indicators related to pre-test and post-test scores of couples' happiness and empathy of

couples in two experimental and control groups are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of research variables**

Variable	Group	N	Pre-test		Post-test	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
happiness of couples	experimental group	30	45.42	4.95	66.24	10.53
	control group	30	43.54	5.74	45.97	7.04
cognitive empathy	experimental group	30	18.53	1.12	30.53	1.43
	control group	30	20.43	1.72	21.89	1.24
emotional empathy	experimental group	30	20.68	1.89	39.63	2.38
	control group	30	21.48	1.22	23.07	1.14

The results of Table 1 show that the mean scores of couples' happiness, cognitive empathy, and emotional empathy of the experimental group in the post-test increased more than the control group. In this study, analysis of covariance has been used for inferential analysis. Therefore, first, its assumptions, ie normal distribution of scores, homogeneity of variance in groups were examined. Thus, the normality of the distribution of pre-test and post-test scores was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results showed that there was no significant difference

between the distribution of pre-test and post-test scores with the normal distribution. Therefore, the assumption of the normal distribution of scores was not rejected. Levin test was performed to examine the Homogeneity of variances, but due to the insignificance of the results, the Homogeneity of variance of the scores of the experimental and control groups was not rejected. By confirming the above assumptions, it is possible to Analysis of Covariance. The results of the analysis of covariance on the effectiveness of communication imagery on couples' happiness are given in Table 2.

**Table 2. Analysis of covariance of univariate family therapy by Bowen method on research variables**

Variables	df	Mean Square	F	Sig	Eta Squared	Observed Power	
Happiness	Pre-test	1	1584.86	29.32	0.076	0.041	0.12
	Group	1	832.32	14.30	0.012	0.68	0.92
Cognitive empathy	Pre-test	1	643.96	0.69	0.38	0.031	0.046
	Group	1	321.87	0.23	0.018	0.68	0.57
Emotional empathy	Pre-test	1	832.65	0.12	0.18	0.034	0.13
	Group	1	418.03	0.38	0.016	0.78	0.96

As the results of analysis of covariance in Table 2 show, by adjusting the pre-test scores, there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the post-test stage, in the couples' happiness, cognitive empathy, and emotional empathy scores, at the level of 0.05; In other words, Bowen-style family therapy has been able to improve couples' happiness. According to the ETA square, 68% of the

difference in the happiness scores, 57% of the changes in Cognitive empathy, and 78% of the emotional empathy changes of the couples in the experimental and control groups in the post-test stage were due to the intervention. The amount of statistical power indicates the selection of a sufficient and appropriate statistical sample

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion:

Increasing problems, marital dissatisfaction and conflicts, increasing divorce rates, and their adverse consequences in recent years have highlighted the importance of couples' relationships, so the purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of Bowen-style family therapy. Increasing the happiness and empathy of couples referring to counseling centers in Isfahan. The results showed that Bowen-style family therapy has been able to improve couples' happiness. Findings obtained indirectly with the results of Ghasemi and Arefi researches (2017) based on the effectiveness of family therapy based on Bowen emotional system in marital conflicts of women referring to counseling centers, Karkhaneh, Jazayeri, Soleimani, Bahrami and Fatehizadeh (2016) on the effectiveness of Bowen differentiation on marital conflict in married women, Asa (2016) on the effectiveness of systemic family therapy based on Bowen's approach to reducing harms from extramarital affairs, Asadi (2014) Comparison of the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral and Boenian family therapy in increasing the quality of life and psychological well-being and resilience according to the controlling role of differentiation, Fotovat (2010) Couples, Saeedpoor et al. (2019) comparing the therapeutic effect of McMaster and Bowen family on intimacy, cognitive emotion regulation and family functioning in divorced couples, Mojarrad et al. (2019) based on the effectiveness of systemic counseling Bowen on forgiveness and marital burnout in incompatible women, Jakimowicz et al. Makaran (2021) Based on the theory of Bowen family systems: Drawing a framework to support the well-being and quality of care for others in nurses, Priest & et al (2015) based on the application of the Bowen family systems model in generalized anxiety disorder and romantic relationship anxiety is consistent. These studies have also shown that Bowen family therapy has been effective. To explain the effectiveness of Bowen family therapy in increasing Happiness in the emotional system of the family can be reduced to the reaction of individuals and their awareness of the emotional processes of the family, as well as the reduction of triangulation in the family, which was assigned to each session, and according to Bowen (1975), reactions Emotions and triangulation are two basic elements of anxiety in the family emotional system. Other reasons for increased happiness as a result of the intervention can improve couples'

relationships as a result of reducing guilt and increasing responsibility. Cyclic causation in the formation and persistence of conflict is based on systemic concepts. Bowen (1978) introduces two main goals for his systemic treatment: 2 Increasing the differentiation of the family emotional system. Bowen emphasizes that achieving these two goals can lead to improved relationships between couples and ultimately their happiness.

Also, the difference between the experimental and control groups in the score of the cognitive empathy component is statistically significant. Couples referring to counseling centers in Isfahan are effective, it is confirmed. Based on the research researcher's research that examined the Bowen-style empathy-based family therapy intervention, no evidence was found to cite its alignment or non-alignment, which reflects the innovative aspect of the research; However, it can be said that the results of this part of the study are indirectly based on the findings of Hashemipoor and Toozandeh Jani (2016), based on the effectiveness of Bowen family therapy on forgiving spouses with extramarital relationships, Navabihezar, Arefi and Yousefi (2014). Bartle-Haring (2010), which examines the application of Bowen's theory in the treatment of couples.

In explaining this hypothesis, it can be stated that it has often been observed that problematic couples, when their problem becomes acute, make an emotional cut intimacy (from their spouse, or in the extreme of intercourse and close relationship with others) often move towards "Intimacy with the main family (in life's stressful times, coupled with low levels of self-differentiation become emotionally dependent on others, especially their family, and see no need to cut themselves off from their family, and have emotionally and intellectually". Their status is "unbalanced in lovemaking and intimacy and they desperately need to confirm or reject their family opinions, as a result of dysfunction of their balanced level of self-differentiation. They intensify, and according to Bowen, these issues can only be addressed through segregation, because segregation is a process that reflects the individual's emotional and intellectual independence, during which the individual learns to make independent decisions. Love rationally (Qarabaghi et al, 2015) and this causes cognitive empathy because in therapy based on Bowen's emotional system, separation of self, that is, the balance between feeling and cognition, and separation

is more a process than a goal. It is attainable or as a way of life, until it is existential, it increases.

The results also showed that Bowen-style family therapy has improved the emotional empathy of couples referring to counseling centers in Isfahan. Also, according to the value of the ETA coefficient, it can be said that 78% of the emotional empathy changes are related to family therapy in the Bowen method. The results obtained are consistent with the results of the research mentioned in the previous hypothesis. Given that Bowen's theory plays an important role in clinical work concerning the family, and according to Bowen's model, a person who has achieved a balanced differentiation from the family has the lowest level of anxiety and neurological diseases, and people with problems, especially couples often They suffer from anxiety and psychological symptoms caused by a lack of self-differentiation from the family of origin. (2009) that these factors facilitate marital conflicts, marital dissatisfaction, disputes and finally seek counseling and divorce, treatment of the emotional system by increasing self-differentiation has reduced the level of anxiety and creates intimacy and true love in couples, and As a result, in times of crisis, anxiety, and coldness of relationships and failure to express the right love can be effective if properly implemented because of independence in structures such as self-differentiation with optimistic views, intimacy and true love of couples and ultimately emotional empathy. Also, in these sessions, with the awareness of the couple about creating a triangle between themselves and their children or family members in the family, they realized that when they do not empathize with each other, the emotional system is out of balance and one or both couples or a third person They enter the fray to reduce the anxiety caused by this imbalance. Therefore, in these meetings, the couple was asked to remove the third person from their relationship and to resolve the issue with each other when there is a conflict, and achieve more empathy.

One of the limitations of this study is that this study was performed on couples referring to counseling centers in Isfahan, so care should be taken in generalizing the results to other communities. Given that the findings of this study showed the effectiveness of Bowen family therapy, the results of this study can provide a clear and practical perspective for counselors and psychotherapists, especially family therapists, effective guidance for holding workshops

to create happiness and Couples empathize with each other.

## 5. Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

All ethical principles are considered in this article. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and its implementation stages. They were also assured about the confidentiality of their information and were free to leave the study whenever they wished, and if desired, the research results would be available to them.

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### Authors' contributions

All authors have participated in the design, implementation and writing of all sections of the present study.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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