The Effect of Training Through Transactional Analysis Approach on Couples’ Communication Patterns

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Abstract: The Effect of Training through Transactional Analysis Approach on Couples' Communication Patterns. The point of interest to this study was to examine the effect of the group training on the communication patterns through transactional analysis (TA) approach. To pursue this purpose, a semi-experimental research was carried out with the population including couples who visit consulting centers in Khoram-Abad city during 2009-10. In this regard, thirty couples (sixty persons) were selected voluntarily as the research sample. The participants, then, were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. Predominantly couples completed the Communication Pattern Questionnaire (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984), and then the experimental group was asked to attend 8 training sessions based on TA approach. At the end, as the post-test the questionnaire was administered again. Covariance analysis showed significant differences between the two groups based on CP questionnaire (P ≤ .05). It means that training in the form of transactional analysis on mutual constructive, demand-withdraw and mutual avoidance communication patterns was meaningful. This approach will equip couples with effective communication skills so that they can recognize their and the partner’s ego states and make an appropriate complementary communication especially through noticing verbal and non-verbal clues.

Key words: Communication patterns • Mutual constructive pattern • Demand/withdraw pattern • Mutual avoidance pattern • Transactional analysis

INTRODUCTION

Communication plays an important role in determining satisfaction in marriage and close relationship [1]. How one communicates with one’s partner is important in setting the overall tone of the relationship and gives rise to predict patterns of behavior, especially when attempting to solve the everyday problems and challenges that confront most couples [2]. Each part of relationship’s ability in explaining and clarifying their needs, demands and wishes, besides their ability in caring for others, while inviting them to clarify the problems and situations result in a healthy and effective relationship. Appropriate care and direct verbal communication among members of a family is also the sign of healthy family. In other words, to have a successful communication one has to learn to care for others thoughts, and emotions, while a malfunctioned and unhealthy relationship reduces care and sympathy among the members of a family and causes a vague verbal communication [3]. People, through effective communication, learn to express their emotions, explain their problems and solve their unwanted differences resulting in oppositions, enjoy being with others and sympathize with all the important persons in their life [4].

The researchers’ result shows that the communication problems cause a lot of marital conflict, while a healthy communication presents the happening of problems and strengthens intimacy among the members of a family [5].

Marital relationship refers both to verbal and non-verbal exchange of information among the couples, which requires specific skills for effective exchange of these communication patterns [6]. Couples in their marital life communicate with each other through many different ways. Those communications ways, which are often taken in a family, are called communication patterns [7]. There is agreement that some conflict communication patterns reflect the active and constructive negotiation of differences, whereas others reflect a tendency to avoid conflict or use other strategies that are less helpful to the overall health of the relationship [8]. At least three patterns of communication have been identified as important: mutual constructive, demand-withdraw, and mutual avoidance.

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In mutually constructive communication, partners discuss the issues affecting them, express their feeling in a positive way and work towards a resolution of the problem. By contrast, in the demand-withdraw approach, one partner will attempt a discussion by criticizing, complaining, or suggesting change, while the other partner attempt to end the discussion or avoid the issue by remaining silent or simply walking away [9]. Christensen explains the demand-withdraw pattern in terms of desire for closeness and interdependence versus autonomy and independence noting that partners may differ in their preferences for closeness and autonomy [2]. Finally, both partners avoiding discussion of a problem characterizes the mutual avoidance patterns. The researchers argue that these kinds of partner are at some risk over time because they are not able to develop a sense of working through their problems together [10].

There are clear cross-sectional evidences that communication patterns are associated with some of marital and psychological variables [11, 12, 13, 14, 8, 15, 16, 10, and 17]. Researchers have suggested that unhappy couples appear to suffer from a deficiency of skills that inhibits their ability to communicate effectively. Results demonstrate that couples lacking the necessary skills to regulate their emotional expressiveness and successfully communicate tend to become defensive or to withdraw from a conflict situation [14]. One of those theories, which play an important role in improvement of human relationship skills, is the theory of Transactional Analysis (TA).

The transactional association of transactional analysis believes that the transactional analysis theory is an organized approach in the ease of mental treatments for helping person's pleasant growth and changes. This theory is comprised five crucial parts: I'm Ok; you're Ok, strokes, ego states (Child, Parent and Adult), transactions (complementary, crossed and ulcer transaction), and games and life scripts [18]. When people are aware of their personality structure, they would know and develop more aspects of their abilities [4]. Using of TA in marital counseling is one of the most helpful ways to examine similarities and differences to construct a personality diagram of the couple contemplating marriage. The aim of this examining is to predict what kind of relationship might be possible in the future [19]. Transactional analysis theory has particularly focused on the couples' intimate and sexual relationships in addition to their communicative skills. The roles of games and life scripts as the main factor in forming the methods of establishing the couples' communication with each other and increase of the couples' satisfaction with their interaction have been taken into account [20, 21, 22, and 23]. Researchers assumed that at least three areas of communication are important to the development and maintenance of satisfying marital relationship and TA training imply these areas. These areas are: response to conflict, non-verbal accuracy, and conversational patterns [24]. TA training, using different ways of sympathizing and stroking (both taking and receiving) and a great emphasis on a positive unconditioned stroking to create secure sense in couples, attempts at being them finally to constructive communication patterns to say "I'm Ok, You're Ok". This training improves "adult" state and helps couples to solve their problems through a negotiation without negative stroking economy [19]. The stroke economy creates a scarcity of love and affection by imposing a set of rules that govern the exchange of strokes [25]. Gottman's findings show that negative cycles in deconstructive communication such as critical complaints (negative strokes) and defensive responses (crossed transaction) predict a dissonant relationship. He also noticed that couples who have a 5 to 1 positive to negative interaction ratio which translates quite easily to the concept of positive to negative Strokes (both verbal and non-verbal) stayed together, whereas couples with fewer positive interactions (positive stroking) had a much smaller chance of staying together - no matter how often they argue, or how many stresses they faced [26]. In addition, the results of researches about the State of the Ego [27], the effectiveness of transactional analysis over the student's communicative skills [28], relational schemas theory and transactional analysis [29], positive psychology and transactional analysis [30], autonomy with integrity [31], and prevention of increasing conflict and violence [32] confirms that transactional analysis, using concepts of complementary, crossed and ulcer transaction, helps couples in having a pleasant and healthy communication.

Since deficiency in transactional skills are usually accompanied with marital problems such as misunderstanding, not enough caring and sympathy, dissatisfaction, problems in listening and inability in solving complicated situations, all measures such as method of training and couples' mental health can be important step in enriching and strengthening marital relationships. On the other side, TA gives the couples possibility of reviewing their relationships and enjoying the sense of more security by analyzing couples' interaction and suggesting practical ways of having pleasant behavior. Achieving this aim, this project had studied the effectiveness of training on couples' communication patterns by transactional analysis method.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample and Procedure: To pursue the purpose of this study a semi-experimental research was carried out with
the population including couples who visited Khoram Abad's counseling center during 2009-2010. In this regard, after distributing announcement in Khoram Abad counseling centers, applicant couples were registered. Then, qualified couples were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups (15 couples in each). The conditions to be qualified were being married for, at least, two years, having not less than diploma and aged from 20 to 45. Husbands and wives with serious mental problems are excluded.

The experimental group received a comprehensive transactional analysis program during 8 sessions that included the following components: primary concepts of transactional analysis theory were given in the first session, understanding different ego states through role playing was continued in the second session, different kinds of interactional relationship were presented in the third session, pathology of interactional relationship and the ways of improve the relationship was done in the fourth session, the ways of structuring the time in the fifth session, explaining stroking and different kinds of it through role playing in the sixth session, life situations in the seventh session and familiar with marital intimacy with respect to concepts of TA in the eight session. The control group received one session about marital relationship totally. Assessments were carried out at the beginning of the training sessions (pre-test), at the end of the training sessions (post-test) and one month later after the last training sessions (follow-up).

**Measures:** Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ) [33].

The CPQ is a 35-item self-report instrument designed to assess the extent to which couples employ various types of interactional strategies when dealing with a relationship problem. CPQ designed to assess couples' behavior during three stages of conflict: (1) when a problem in the relationship arises; (2) during their discussion of the relationship problem; and (3) after the discussion of the relationship problem. Each partner indicates what typically occurs in their relationship on a nine-point Likert scale ranging from very unlike us (1) to very like us (9). In this study normality form of CPQ in Iran is used. It is comprised of four subscales: (a) the constructive communication subscale, (b) the female demand and male withdraw subscale, (c) the female withdraw and male demand subscale and (d) the mutual avoidance subscale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient in this study for every subscale was respectively .58, .35, .35 and .85. The internal consistencies of these subscales for the present sample are as follows: mutual constructive communication, .50, man demand/woman withdraw, .53, woman demand/man withdraw, .55 and mutual avoidance communication .51 [34].

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of the present study seem to throw some light into the area that training through transactional analysis approach (TA) can be effective on couples' communication patterns including: mutual constructive, demand-withdraw (demanding/warning woman and demanding woman/withdrawn man) and mutual avoidance.

As regards covariation equivalence, the Box Test of the four sub-scales carried out and the following results were obtained: mutual constructive (F= 3.1, P=.1), Demand man/withdraw woman (F= .62, P=.38), Demand woman/withdraw man (F= 2.96, P=.41), and Mutual avoidance (F= 1.82, P=.55). Furthermore, Wilks' Lambda findings in this research indicated that, with respect to the four dependant variables, the two groups were different. The amount of this difference was .68 percent (F= 52.05, P=.001), meaning that .68 percent of the individual differences in those four sub-scales was related to the difference of the experimental and control groups.

Table 1 presents the Mean and Standard Deviation of the scores related to the pre-post test of all kinds of communication patterns. The results of the covariance analysis, regarding the effect of the TA training on couples' communication patterns indicate meaningful differences (Table 2). The most important feature of the mutual constructive couples (F= 89.99) is that they are able to talk about their problems and conflicts easily and attempt to solve them. In the same vein, they avoid violence and irrational reactions and both of them gain access to personal growth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Follow-up</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mutual constructive</td>
<td>29.57</td>
<td>7.81</td>
<td>34.67</td>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>35.47</td>
<td>5.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demand m/withdraw w</td>
<td>16.13</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>13.67</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>11.37</td>
<td>4.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demand w/withdraw m</td>
<td>15.07</td>
<td>6.34</td>
<td>10.53</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>10.53</td>
<td>4.38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mutual avoidance</td>
<td>17.33</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>10.33</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>4.59</td>
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<td>Control</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual constructive</td>
<td>32.03</td>
<td>7.59</td>
<td>30.67</td>
<td>6.68</td>
<td>30.77</td>
<td>7.77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demand m/withdraw w</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>15.07</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>14.30</td>
<td>4.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demand w/withdraw m</td>
<td>12.57</td>
<td>5.79</td>
<td>13.70</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>12.80</td>
<td>5.50</td>
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<td>Mutual avoidance</td>
<td>15.07</td>
<td>5.70</td>
<td>14.53</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>14.67</td>
<td>5.09</td>
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</table>
Table 2: Results of Covariance analysis in post and follow-up stages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test power</th>
<th>sum of squared</th>
<th>mean square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>( \square ) observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mutual constructive</td>
<td>2424.34</td>
<td>2424.34</td>
<td>364.61</td>
<td>.86 .99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand m/w withdraw m</td>
<td>1209.74</td>
<td>1209.74</td>
<td>307.75</td>
<td>.86 .99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand w withdraw m</td>
<td>1272.70</td>
<td>1272.70</td>
<td>486.66</td>
<td>.89 .99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual avoidance</td>
<td>1256.53</td>
<td>1256.53</td>
<td>251.78</td>
<td>.86 .99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual constructive</td>
<td>538.50</td>
<td>538.50</td>
<td>80.99*</td>
<td>.58 .99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand m/w withdraw m</td>
<td>204.41</td>
<td>204.41</td>
<td>62.65*</td>
<td>.52 .99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand w withdraw m</td>
<td>373.03</td>
<td>373.03</td>
<td>142*</td>
<td>.71 .99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual avoidance</td>
<td>502.39</td>
<td>502.39</td>
<td>140.65*</td>
<td>.71 .99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual constructive</td>
<td>645.44</td>
<td>645.44</td>
<td>79.74*</td>
<td>.58 .99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand m/w withdraw m</td>
<td>314.65</td>
<td>314.65</td>
<td>150.03*</td>
<td>.72 .99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand w withdraw m</td>
<td>255.89</td>
<td>255.89</td>
<td>111.78*</td>
<td>.65 .99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual avoidance</td>
<td>488.60</td>
<td>488.60</td>
<td>158.04*</td>
<td>.74 .99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* P<.001

Problematic couples, demand man/withdraw woman (F=62.65) and demand woman/withdraw man (F=142), come to solutions in which one of them is victor and the other is loser (not constructive communication pattern). According to TA this means "I am OK, you are not OK." The pointed couples have learned from TA, thus, can make a communication with the striking feature- both part as victor- (constructive communication pattern). Such points include caring for others; active listening, avoidance of withdrawing, intimacy facilitation by means of expressing one's emotions and with the help of "adult" and taking the healthy stance of "I am OK, you are OK".

Mutual avoidance communication patterns (F=140.65) usually lead to destructive and permanent struggle. According to this pattern, couples escape from making relationship. Thus, their relation remains as the minimum level as possible. It is worthy to mentioning that the mutual avoidance pattern is the only adaptive mechanism of this kind of communication pattern which is very close to the concept of "Games" in TA. TA training, then, assists couples not to enter the "Games" consciously and if so, interrupt the progress of games. Furthermore, TA learning with regard to strokes and providing positive strokes, intimacy and free expression of feelings, confession in an atmosphere with emotional safety and interactive empathy can reduce mutual negative avoidance among the couples. Couples, by learning the subjects of TA, can recognize their feelings, follow successful behavior patterns and effectively decide in problematic situations.

As evidenced in the literature [20, 21, 22, 23, 26, 32], the efficacy of this training on couples' communication patterns can be perceived in the light that TA aims to set the couples' ego "adult" state free from destructive and unpleasant impacts of ego "parent" and ego "child" states and develop agreeable changes in couples' behavior as well. Consequently, they can recognize their feelings and notice their inner similarities and contrasts. In this manner, they make an endeavor to get genuine relationship resulting in solving problems jointly. Of course, this will be possible through not to blocking different ego states.

This study faces some limitations. Firstly, the sample in this research was from among the couples willing calling on the counseling centers. As such, their tendency might make them motivated and influenced the results gained through TA training. Thus, any claims of extrapolating the effects to all couples are not warranted, and indeed of further confirmation. Secondly, the participants enjoyed at least the diploma degree, two years of marital experience and the ages ranging from 20-45. All put the researcher into a state of hesitation to generalize the findings to the couples beyond these limitations. The last point to be mentioned here is that all participants were Iranian. Hence, to generalize the results, cultural Similarities have to be considered.

This study brings to light a number of issues that have significance, therefore in need of further investigation, exploiting other methods of the relationship improvement, and conducting the research on the participants with properties other than what mentioned above is suggested. In addition, to enrich the couple's interaction and train them the necessary skills, it seems helpful to deploy the TA findings in pre-marriage counseling centers, and to improve the situation of problematic couples TA findings can be used along with some others marital therapies such cognitive-behavior therapy.

**CONCLUSION**

TA theory paves the ground for increasing the couples' awareness of their transactional relationship and as such, enables them to lead their lives toward. The TA training course, thus, provides an opportunity to make changes in facing with couple's social and psychological pressures and prepare the necessary condition to maintain such changes as well. The main focus of these training is centered on amending the couple's communicative skills and it is expected that, along with other marital therapies, this method can be fruitful in solving the couple's deeper problem.

**REFERENCES**