

The Effectiveness of Transactional Analysis Group-counseling on the Improvement of Couples' Family Functioning

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Background & Aims of the Study: Family functioning is among the most important factors ensuring the mental health of family members. Disorder or disturbance in family functioning would cause many psychological problems for family members. Current study intended to examine the effectiveness of transactional analysis group counseling on the improvement of couple's family functioning.

Materials & Methods: The design of the study is as semi experimental research with pretest and posttest with follow up and control group. Statistical population consists of all couples referring to the psychological and counseling centers of Rasht city in 2012. Samples were selected at first by available sampling method and after completing family assessment device, and obtaining score for enter to research, were placement using random sampling method in two experimental and control groups (N = 8 couples per group). The experimental group participated in 12 sessions of group counseling based on transactional analysis and control group received no intervention. The gathered data were analyzed using covariance analysis.

Results: The results show that there are significant differences between the pre-test and post test scores of the experimental group. This difference is significant at the level of 0.05. Therefore it seems that transactional group therapy improved the dimensions of family functioning in couples.

Conclusions: The results indicated that transactional analysis group counseling can improve the family functioning and use this approach to working with couples is recommended.

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Background

Many of social problems such as addiction, divorce, and severe marital conflicts not only threaten family members' health, but also the mental health of the whole society. In the process of any kind of counseling, many of the problems often acknowledged by the clients can be traced backed to their family relationships. Those who seek help for mental health, often complain about their problems with their partner or marital relationships and family functioning. Family is one of the most important institutions of any society (1,2).

Family functioning is among the most important factors ensuring the mental health of family members. Disorder or disturbance in family functioning would cause many psychological problems for family members (3-7).

Each of various family therapy theories has certain arguments and strategies. Each observe family from a different point of view, and define its functioning with a different explanation. Transactional Analysis (TA) developed by Eric Berne employs a tripartite model as 'ego states'. This very personality model helps understand how humans act and

behave. TA also provides a theory of 'communications' that can be applied to analyze the relationships within family (8). TA purpose is to release 'adult ego state' from the adverse demands and impacts of 'parent ego state' and 'child ego state', and thereby bring about favorable behavioral changes (9). TA is a method of healthy and coordinated interacting with the environment by creating communicative perspectives and skills. Using this method, therapists can take effective steps to identify, treat and help individuals, especially couples, development (8).

Family functioning based on McMaster model totally can be explained on seven dimensions including problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavior control and general functioning (10). TA is one of the therapy methods that can be effective on the improvement of family functioning (11-17).

Different studies have shown that constructive communication pattern paves the path for marital conflicts resolution and marital stability. Couples who have participated communication skills training sessions enjoy more effective and efficient relationships, deal better with each other and experience less conflict (11,12). Couples who have constructive communication pattern, suffer from less marital conflict. In fact, mutual constructive communication underlies marital satisfaction and conflict, thus enhancing family functioning (18).

Besides treating family as a system, TA benefits from a set of 'autognosis'-related concepts and techniques. Thus, enables the therapist not only to effectively address clinicians and their intrapersonal dynamics, but also create regular effects through planning treatment interventions for discordant couples and improve family functioning (19). Individual awareness and self-knowledge is closely associated with improvements in family functioning (20). In fact, TA not only informs couples of their three personality estates and

increase their self-knowledge, but is also able to produce necessary dynamics for couples and improve family functioning through developing a skill of looking at the family as a system (19).

Aims of the study: Transactional Analysis is among those theories resulted from the thoughts and studies of Western scientists and experts developed in social and cultural conditions different from Iran. Therefore, it is necessary for such theories to be tested by Iranian counselors and therapists in order to prevent any harm to the clients and clarify the extent of their competence before supplying them to the public. Considering that the healthy functioning of family is associated with increased health and well-being of family members (1-5), this study intended to examine the effectiveness of transactional analysis group counseling on the improvement of couple's family functioning.

Materials & Methods

This study is a semi-experimental research with pretest-posttest and follow-up design with control group.

Available sampling method was used, and for the implementation of sampling an advertisement to take part in counseling group sessions was published by the researcher and distributed to psychological and counseling centers and school parents and teachers' communities. After diagnostic interviews, couples were chosen for the selection process to attend the sessions and meet the inclusion criteria (having the cut scores at pre-test questionnaire, age range of 45-20 years, awareness of the problem, and lack of acute physical and mental disorders). Selected couples were randomly assigned in an experimental and a control group. For the experimental group-counseling sessions with a TA approach were held separately. Before the implementation of the independent variable (group counseling practices) pre-test (Family Assessment Device) was performed. After the

implementation of the independent variable, Family Assessment Device was performed again. The results of each experimental group were compared with the control group. Furthermore, after two months in the follow-up phase Family Assessment Device was performed one more time. The measurement instrument used for the dependent variable in this study was the Family Assessment Device (FAD).

Family Assessment Device (FAD): FAD is a self-report measure based on the McMaster Model of Family Functioning (MMFF) and describes the structural and organizational properties of the family group and the patterns of transactions among family members. The measure consists of seven scales including a General Functioning scale which incorporates items from each of the other scales. The remaining six scales assess the six dimensions of the MMFF which include: Problem Solving, Communication, Roles, Affective Responsiveness, Affective Involvement, Behavior Control and general functioning. FAD is comprised of 60 statements about a family; respondents are asked to rate each item on a four-point Likert-type rating scale ranging from (1) "Strongly agree" to (5) "Strongly disagree" to indicate how well each statement describes their own family. The FAD is scored by adding the responses (1-4) for each scale and dividing by the number of items in each scale (6-12). Higher scores indicate worse levels of family functioning. It should be noted that some statements are reversely scored in order of 4-1 (21). The measure prepared by Epstein, et al. (1983) was conducted on a sample of 503 subjects. The alpha coefficients for FAD subscales are 72% to 92%, which indicate a relatively favorable internal consistency (22). Through Iranian investigations, the validity and reliability of the measure were reported favorable (23).

Collected data were analyzed by analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

The structure of group counseling sessions

The regularly scheduled meetings held each week for two hours had been arranged as following: in the beginning of each session, participants' questions were answered in relation to the weekly duties and their obligations of each week were checked. Then, the current session subjects were discussed with the participants, and at the end of each session adequate explanation were given regarding assignment for the next week.

Session I: introduction, statement of principles, setting goals for the participants attending the sessions, signing therapeutic contract.

Session II: structural analysis based on different 'ego states', analysis of 'child ego' and its variants, drawing ego-grams training.

Session III: analysis of 'parent ego' and its variants, explanation of its formation in the past and its active presence in the present.

Session IV: analysis of 'adult ego', analysis of parent and child messages to contaminate adult ego, analysis of reciprocal contamination, 'child ego', 'adult ego' and 'parent ego' 'exclusion' analysis.

Session V: Transactional Analysis (TA), determination of variant types of transaction (complementary, crossed, and ulterior).

Session VI: introducing the need of 'thirsting for others' presence' by the concept of stroke and its variant forms (physical versus verbal, positive versus negative, conditional versus unconditional, written stroke, etc.), and training stroke charting.

Session VII: explaining the role of impellent and psychological stamp collection in life scripts.

Session VIII: analysis of life script and how to carry it out, analysis of life position and its role in transactions.

Session IX: 'time organizing' and introducing six methods of organization (withdrawal, procedures, rituals, past times, activities, playing, closeness).

Session X: explaining common 'games' in family.

Session XI: analysis of common family games.

Session XII: overall analysis of the sessions from participants' perspectives, implementation of posttest.

Results

The mean age of subjects was 34.19 with a standard deviation of 5.17. The mean age of participants was 32.08–35.51. The mean marriage duration in the sample was 7.08 with a standard deviation of 1.37, with a range of 6.67-7.31 in different groups. Average number of children in the sample was 1.97, with a standard deviation of 0.67 with a range of 1.92-1.97. In this study, levels of education were rated from 0-6 for each educational level. So that 0 points illiteracy, 1 points primary school education, 2 points secondary school education... and 7 points MA. Total education mean was 2.56, with a standard deviation of 0.81, with a range of 2.31-2.74. In the following, descriptive statistics about the variables is reported.

Table 1) Descriptive statistics on the pre-test, post-test and follow-up phases

Components	Groups	Pretest		Posttest		Follow up	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Problem solving	Experimental	20.11	7.4	11.7	7.56	12.4	6.32
	Control	19.78	7.2	20.1	8.48	20.3	8.28
Communication	Experimental	20.34	2.2	11.1	1.91	12.4	2.21
	Control	19.97	2.3	20.7	2.99	20.7	2.12
Role	Experimental	29.12	2.3	21.6	1.68	22.3	2.23
	Control	28.34	3.4	29.8	3.23	30.3	3.12
Affective responsiveness	Experimental	26.75	2.6	20.1	1.89	21.3	2.24
	Control	27.34	2.9	27.6	4.07	28.4	4.61
Affective involvement	Experimental	20.78	3.6	17.5	1.19	18.2	2.41
	Control	21.09	2.4	21.0	1.07	21.2	2.34
Behavior control	Experimental	28.45	2.4	22.1	2.03	23.5	2.45
	Control	28.71	3.0	29.1	3.48	30.4	3.09
General Functioning	Experimental	38.43	3.5	27.1	4.7	28.4	3.32
	Control	38.75	4.4	39.	4.2	40.5	3.34

Variables descriptive statistics on the pre-test post-test and follow-up phases are shown in Table 1. Considering the structure of the present study which is a pretest-posttest and follow-up research with a control group, the best method to analyze the data is covariance analysis. So, before conducting the analysis, test assumptions were examined.

Box test results showed that with considering the insignificance of the related amount, the homogeneity of variance covariance matrix is confirmed. The significance level of F (except for emotional involvement, behavior control, general functioning) was more than $P \geq 0.05$. Therefore, variances difference is not statistically significant and assumption of equal variances is confirmed. The results of covariance analysis are shown in Table 2.

Table 2) Test results of TA effectiveness on the improvement family functioning dimensions at posttest

Components	Group	M	S	Sig	Eta
Problem solving	Experimental	11.75	7.56	0.01	0.65
	Control	20.13	8.48		
Communication	Experimental	11.13	1.91	0.01	0.80
	Control	20.75	2.99		
Roles	Experimental	21.63	1.68	0.01	0.64
	Control	29.88	3.23		
Affective responsiveness	Experimental	20.13	1.89	0.01	0.55
	Control	27.63	4.07		
Affective involvement	Experimental	17.5	1.19	0.01	0.63
	Control	21.01	1.07		
Behavior Control	Experimental	22.13	2.03	0.01	0.62
	Control	29.13	3.48		
General functioning	Experimental	27.12	4.7	0.03	0.46
	Control	39.63	4.22		

As shown in the above table, TA group-counseling was effective on the improvement of family functioning dimensions, and the experimental group had a better performance than the control group ($P < 0.05$). In the following, the results of follow-up phase covariance analysis is reported.

Table 3) Test results of TA effectiveness on the improvement family functioning dimensions at follow-up

Components	Group	M	S	Sig	Eta
Problem solving	Experiment	21.43	6.32	0.01	0.63
	Control	20.39	8.28		
Communication	Experiment	12.41	2.21	0.01	0.78
	Control	20.77	2.12		
Roles	Experiment	22.33	2.23	0.01	0.63
	Control	30.34	3.12		
Affective responsiveness	Experiment	21.34	2.24	0.01	0.53
	Control	28.45	4.61		
Affective involvement	Experiment	18.22	2.41	0.01	0.61
	Control	21.33	2.34		
Behavior Control	Experiment	23.55	2.45	0.01	0.60
	Control	30.45	3.09		
General functioning	Experiment	28.44	3.32	0.03	0.43
	Control	40.56	3.34		

As shown in Table 3, TA group-counseling was also effective on the improvement of family functioning dimensions at follow-up ($P < 0.05$).

Discussion

This study intended to examine the effectiveness of transactional analysis group-counseling on the improvement of couples' family functioning. The results showed that TA group counseling improved various aspects of family functioning. In line with present research, the results of other studies suggest that TA can lead to a significant improvement in 'problem-solving' (11,12), 'communication' (13,14), 'roles' (15), 'affective responsiveness' (15,16), 'affective involvement' (17,24), 'behavior control' (16), and 'general functioning' (16).

To explain the above findings, it can be argued that individuals treating in accordance with TA method reach a degree of personal development that enables them to come to their own solutions to their problems. According to Berne's theory, when one learns to use his/her proper ego state in different situations, he/she

would be more capable of solving conflicts and problems. They learn how to involve their 'adult ego' when problems are arisen, and monitor their child and parent egos and investigate the cause of the problem in order to find a solution (25).

To improve communications, TA suggests that both sides of transaction communicate with the adult part of each other's personalities to have a relaxing and complementary relationship. And if they want to use their child or parent parts in their communication, they should use the positive ones. Therefore, it can be said that by making complementary communications and timely use of different ego states, proper relationships would be established between family members and many conflicts and disputes would be prevented, and members can possibly enough use their abilities for growth and prosperity (26).

According to Berne, a person who is stable regarding his/her adult ego, is realistic, logical, responsible, and avoid the games usually used to throw the responsibility onto others. Individuals whose adult ego is severely broken down cannot perform their duties and have aggressive behaviors. Through TA group counseling, in this study we tried to train individuals how to apply and enhance the adult part of their personality.

This study showed that communication skills training will result in better understanding of one's partner. During group counseling sessions, couples begin to understand each other better and reinforce positive aspects of family and repair its vulnerable ones. Besides, parent-child relationship increases under adult's supervision which brings about couple's emotional responses (15,16). In fact, couples trained in communication skills by attending group counseling sessions grow a more positive feeling towards each other; and show more emotional and empathetic behaviors (17).

Partners, who enjoy proper communication skills, are better able to control their behaviors (17). According to TA theory, it is necessary to

use all ego states. But, if individuals apply their adult ego at the time of losing control over behavior, it would yield in a better result. Considering the fact that adult ego often tends to analyze, assess, and predict various situations and the related realities, if individuals grow their adult ego and use other egos in a proper or healthy way, as a result it makes them able to assess and analyze different situations and then perform behaviors while having better control over their them.

In addition, TA group counseling helps couples convey their messages more explicitly to achieve a better understanding of each other. Couples learn to use constructive methods rather than criticizing or blaming in marital problematic situations and conflicts (15).

To justify the continuous effect of TA group counseling on the improvement of family functioning in the follow-up phase, the active presence and participation of participants with practical examples and exercises, and assignments at each session with an emphasis on the same session's content on the components of family functioning can be pointed out.

Additionally, the nature of TA group counseling is such that makes it applicable in most communication situations, so it would cause its further extension and stabilization. On the other hand, it seems that the theory's over-emphasis on adult reinforcement as personality chief executive, in addition to its effective cognitive-behavioral and emotional impacts, will lead to an increase in responsibility. Couples achieving a common language for dialogue and reaching agreements was also among the reasons for the continuation of this method in the follow-up period after treatment.

Study limitations included the counselor's faithful emphasis on the application of the theory's techniques, trying to conduct counseling sessions by proper structures in the process of group training, due to specific requirement to conduct counseling sessions with a certain structure in terms of experimental

qualifications. In some sessions, it was necessary to use other methods or techniques for certain participants. But to achieve the research objectives, the counselor was required to observe the principles and techniques of experimental method. This study was conducted on individuals referring to counseling centers in Rasht, Iran which limited the generalizability of the study. It is recommended that similar studies be carried out in other parts of Iran, so a better judgment of the effectiveness of this method can be achieved. It is also suggested to examine the effectiveness of this approach on other various types of couples in terms of educational, cultural and employment matters.

Conclusion

Generally, this method with analyzing personality structure, transactions, games, and life script provides self-knowledge increase, solving of personality pathological problems, emotional skillfulness, correction of cognitive performance, and an increase in self-disclosure and intimacy. Furthermore, helping people achieve independence, getting rid of inefficient and destructive patterns of communication, leaving irresponsibility and frustration caused by inefficient script, and choosing a healthy life state in an intrapersonal-interpersonal reform process can lead to the improvement of couple's family functioning

Footnotes

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Conflict of Interest:

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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