THE EFFECTS OF THE COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT PROGRAM ON THE DYSFUNCTIONAL ATTITUDES OF COUPLES

BİLİŞSEL-DAVRANIŞÇI EVİLİLİK İLİŞKİSİNİN GELİŞTİRME PROGRAMININ ÇİFTLERİN FONKSİYONEL OLMAYAN TUTUMLARINA ETKİSİ

Melek KALKAN*, Ercümen ERSANLI**

ABSTRACT: The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral marriage enrichment program to decrease the level of the dysfunctional attitudes of the couples. Forty participants with dysfunctional attitudes determined by The Dysfunctional Attitude Scale were randomly chosen as experimental and control groups. The results of the covariance analysis indicate that there are significant differences between the dysfunctional attitudes levels of the subjects on the experimental and control groups. The cognitive-behavioral marriage enrichment program can be said to decrease the levels of dysfunctional attitude in couples significantly.

Keywords: marriage enrichment program, cognitive-behavioral approach, dysfunctional attitudes.


Anahtar sözcükler: evililik ilişkisini geliştirme programı, biliselsel-davranışçı yaklaşım, fonksiyonel olmayan tutumlar.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marital problems are serious public health problems. A number of studies have documented the negative psychological, social, and health consequences of marital problems (Waite & Gallegher 2000). Several researches indicate that individuals with high levels of disharmony in their marriages have a worse psychological and physical health in comparison with those sustaining a harmonious marriage, and they also claim that disharmony in marriage is significantly correlated with neurotic depression and tendency towards suicide (Birchnell & Kennard, 1983a; Birchnell & Kennard, 1983b; Coyne & DeLongis, 1986; Johnson & Jacob, 2000; Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Yıldırım, 2004; Fidanoglu, 2007). The researches conducted on the children of disharmonious couples reveal the fact that these children both have psychopathological problems of adjustment with respect to the other children (Bond & McMahon, 1984; Frick, 1993; Kim, 2001).

The researchers of marriage and family studying the causes of unsuccessful marriages emphasize that the beliefs and dysfunctional thoughts of the individuals on marriage are indicators of disharmony in marriage (Markman et al. 1988; Larsen & Olson, 1989; Bradbury, Finchman & Beach 2000; Sharp & Ganong, 2000). The emphasis put by Ellis on the role of irrational expectations in problematic marriages has urged the cognitive approach to direct its attention on marriage therapy. Cognitive approach focuses on how the individuals interpret the relationship (Ellis, 1986). According to this approach, the individuals have common irrational thoughts on themselves, their partners and marriages. The studies indicate that there is a significant correlation between the correlation of irrational and dysfunctional thoughts and low levels of marriage satisfaction and adjustment (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981; Huber & Milstein, 1985; Bradbury & Fincham, 1988; Möller & Zy, 1991; Haferkamp, 1994; Cann et al. 2001; Flett et al. 2001; Stackert & Bursik, 2003). The similar studies in Turkey support the results of these studies. Results of a study conducted by Güven and Sevim (2007) on married individuals’ perceptions toward interpersonal cognitive distortions and marital satisfaction showed that unrealistic relationship expectation, one of the cognitive distortions, predicts marriage satisfaction. Hamamci (2005) investigated the association between

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dysfunctional relationship beliefs and marital adjustment and satisfaction of Turkish nonclinical married individuals. The results showed that dysfunctional relationship beliefs have negative correlation with the marital adjustment of males. The mind reading beliefs were positively associated with the marital satisfaction of females. A study by Akfirat (1995) showed that wives have causal attribution in low marital satisfaction in couples. Tutarel-Koşlak (1997) investigated the relation between marital satisfaction and attributions. The results indicated that negative attributions have positive correlation with the marital satisfaction. The improvement of the adjustment in a relationship or marriage requires transformation of the dysfunctional cognitions of the partners and cognitive restructuring (Baucom et al. 1990).

Problem solving contains the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills (Korkut, 2002). An effective way of changing the dysfunctional attitudes on marriage is “the family life education”. Presenting only seminars is not adequate in changing beliefs and attitudes on marriage. A content including activities and homework seems more appropriate and effective in changing the dysfunctional thoughts and irrational beliefs of the individuals (Sharp & Ganong, 2000). The preventive programs which are based on various psychological counseling or psychotherapy approaches occupy an important place in many public health practices, family practices, and counseling practices. In a study conducted on the effectiveness of marriage enrichment programs, it has been revealed that the individuals participating in these programs have shown an improvement in their marriages, and their problems have significantly decreased in comparison with those who have not participated in these programs (Jacobson & Addis, 1993). Furthermore, it is clear that the development of successful preventive interventions which address the common risk factors of marital distress and divorce have the potential to save personal, social, and economic costs implicitly (Duncan & Markman, 1988).

In this study, we have examined the effect of marriage enrichment program based on cognitive-behavioral approach on the dysfunctional attitudes of the couples. We have carried out the study in the light of the opinion that marriage therapies focused on cognitive restructuring may improve the relationships by changing the beliefs and expectations of the individuals about their partners and relationships significantly (Baucom et al. 1989; Haferkamp, 1994). Thus, the aim of this study is to examine the effectiveness of marriage enrichment program based on cognitive-behavioral approach to level of the dysfunctional attitudes of the couples.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

It was announced in various institutions in Samsun that a series of marriage enrichment program sessions to develop marital relationships of couples would be given at Ondokuz Mayis University. The Dysfunctional Attitudes Scale was administered to each couple. Taking into account the results of the Dysfunctional Attitudes Scale, a study group of 40 people was formed. A control group consisting of 20 people and an experimental group consisting of 20 people were formed taking the scores of the couples from the scale into consideration.

For those in the experimental group the mean of the marriage duration was 12.60 years and the age range was between 27 and 45 years. The mean of those who were in the control group was 11.40 years and their ages ranged from 28 to 41 years. It was also noted that the individuals in both of the groups were either the graduates of high school or university.

2.2. Design of the study

In this empirical study which has been conducted in order to see the effects of a marriage enrichment program based on the cognitive behavioral approach on the dysfunctional attitudes of the couples, “pre-test and post-test control group design” has been used. The independent variable of the study is the marriage enrichment program and the dependent variable of the study is dysfunctional attitudes.

2.3. Procedures

The marriage enrichment program consisted of 2-hour sessions in 9 weeks. In the first session the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale was given as a pre-test and the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale was given to the control group at the same time as the experimental group. The experimental group attended to nine marriage
enrichment sessions; whereas the control group was not interfered during the same period. After nine weeks, the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale was given to the control and the experimental groups again as a post test.

The activities used in the sessions which are based on the cognitive-behavioral approach are given in Table 1.

### Table 1: The Activities Included in The Marriage Enrichment Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>Group members meet each other; announcement of group rules; review of expectations from the group and marriage; emphasizing positive and negative sides of marriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>Informing about automatic opinions; exemplifying and sharing automatic opinions about marriage; homework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>Informing about cognitive mistakes; exemplifying and sharing cognitive mistakes about marriage; homework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>Informing about A-B-C models; exemplifying A-B-C models about marriage; homework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>Informing about irrational beliefs; handing out the list including the 12 irrational opinions of Ellis to the group members; reading the list together; discussing the opinions on unhappiness in marriage and on irrational relationship opinions; homework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI.</td>
<td>Informing about the D and E models while presenting the A-B-C models in order to transform the irrational beliefs about relationships; informing about the self-help form prepared with regard to the A-B-C model; exemplifying the discussion started by adding the D and E models to the A-B-C models; homework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII.</td>
<td>Informing about I-Language and You-Language; exemplifying I-Language and You-Language within the context of marriage; homework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII.</td>
<td>Informing about anger management; doing relaxation exercises; discussing, exemplifying and sharing irrational opinions leading to anger within the context of marriage; discussing irrational opinions leading to anger within the framework of A-B-C models; homework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX.</td>
<td>Evaluation of the process and group members by themselves; sharing emotions and opinions of the couples about the outcome of the program; conclusion of the session and the process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 2.4. Measures

The data have been gathered by the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (DAS). The original form of Dysfunctional Attitude Scale has been developed by Weissman and Beck in 1978. The scale has been translated into Turkish and its reliability and validity study were examined by Şahin and Şahin in 1992. It contains 40 items. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the scale is .79. Computed split half reliability coefficient is .72. The scale correlates .19 with the Beck Depression Inventory, and .29 with the Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire (Şahin & Şahin, 1992).

#### 2.5. Data Analysis

Pre- and post-test scores of control and experimental groups in the Dysfunctional Attitudes Scale have been designed so as to test the hypothesis of the research and, additionally, the covariance analysis has been conducted. The statistical analyses have been done by SPSS.

#### 3. RESULTS

The mean and the standard deviation of dysfunctional attitudes scores of the participants in the control and experimental groups are given in Table 2.
Table 2: Dysfunctional Attitude Levels of the Experimental and Control Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experimental group (N=20)</th>
<th>Control group (N=20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>210.05</td>
<td>120.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>32.03</td>
<td>56.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale applied to the experimental and control groups reveal no significant differences in dysfunctional attitude levels (pre-test experimental group=210.05±32.03, pre-test control group=200.05±28.77, p>.05).

The covariance analysis has been applied to the dysfunctional attitude scores of the subjects and the results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: The Results of Covariance Analysis of Dysfunctional Attitudes of the Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Sum of squares</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Mean square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>75549.042</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>75549.042</td>
<td>81.686</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>32433.611</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32433.611</td>
<td>35.068</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>34220.139</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>924.869</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1148199.000</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the covariance analysis in Table 3 indicate that the difference between the mean scores of the participants of the experimental and control groups in pre- and post-tests in terms of level of dysfunctional attitudes is significant at the level of .001. According to this, the marriage enrichment program based on the cognitive behavioral approach on dysfunctional attitudes of couples enhances marital adjustment level of couples significantly. This result verifies the hypothesis of the study.

4. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to evaluate marriage enrichment program based on cognitive-behavioral approach for couples with dysfunctional attitudes. In this study, the pre- and post-tests have been given to the experimental and control groups. The sessions lasted for 9 weeks with the experimental group. The results of the covariance analysis indicate the significant differences between the dysfunctional attitudes of the couples in the experimental and control groups. This finding reveals that the marriage enrichment program based on cognitive-behavioral approach decreases the dysfunctional attitudes level of couples significantly. This study supports the opinion that marriage enrichment programs are effective for the treatment of couples with dysfunctional attitudes.

Several studies provide promising results through cognitive-behavioral techniques in marriage enrichment program for couples. Seventeen couples with irrational beliefs were treated in six group sessions using cognitive-behavioral techniques. Results suggested that the program was an effective intervention for couples with irrational beliefs (Huber & Milstein, 1985). In a research conducted by Baucom, Sayers & Sher (1990), Behavioral Marriage therapy was united with Cognitive Reconstruction Training and Expression of Feelings Training and was applied to couples whose marital adjustment was low. The results show that the marriage enrichment program is an effective intervention. A study by Dandeneau and Johnson (1994) showed that couples’ levels of closeness and adjustment increased as a result of cognitive-behavioral interventions. More recently, Ersanli (2007) has investigated the effectiveness of the marriage enrichment program based on the cognitive-behavioral approach on decreasing the level of the irrational beliefs of couples. These studies indicate that the cognitive-behavioral marriage enrichment program has decreased the level of irrational relationship beliefs of couples significantly.

It is seen that the activities developed in the Marriage Enrichment Program based on cognitive-behavioral approach aim at cognitive and behavioral restructuring through changes in individuals’ thoughts and behavior. It is believed that gaining new behavior, correcting faulty learning and also changing the
irrational beliefs with rational ones may contribute to the decrease in the level of dysfunctional attitudes of couples.

This study has several limitations. Firstly, in this study, a pre-test, post-test design has been applied without follow-up. Future studies involving such a follow-up would be more informative about the effectiveness of the marriage enrichment program based on cognitive-behavioral approach for couples with dysfunctional attitudes. Secondly, the data have been collected from relatively well-educated participants. Therefore, the results may not be applicable to couples with no higher education. The properties of the program may be investigated in further studies by collecting data from couples with lower educational backgrounds. Finally, the results of this study need to be replicated with much larger samples in order to test these initial outcomes. If studies produce similar findings, then implications could be pursued to provide guides for family physicians, therapists and counselors.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The marriage enrichment program based on the cognitive behavioral approach on dysfunctional attitudes of couples enhances marital adjustment level of couples significantly. The implications for public health workers, family practitioners, clinicians, counselors, educators and researchers can be derived from the findings of this study. This study may help family practitioners and counselors in order to provide training program and to plan appropriate intervention programs at public health centers and psychological counseling centers.

REFERENCES


**GENİŞLETILMİŞ ÖZET**


Araştırma bulguları deney ve kontrol grubundaki çiftlerin on-test puanlarını arasında anlamlı bir fark olmadığını gösterirken, kovaryans analizi sonuçları deney grubundaki çiftlerin fonksiyonel olmayan tutumlarının son-testte anlamlı ölçüde azaldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Buna göre, bilişsel-davranışçı evlilik ilişkisi geliştirme programının evli çiftlerin fonksiyonel olmayan tutumlarını anlamlı düzeyde azalttığı sonucuna varılmıştır.
