

Effects of Training Transactional Analysis on Increasing Family Functioning Among Distressed Couples: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: This research aimed at studying the effectiveness of transactional analysis on increasing family functioning in distressed couples referring to Boroujen City Family Welfare Center. Population of the study included all the distressed couples referring to this center. The 30 distressed couples were randomly selected from among the volunteers who responded to the researcher's call for increasing family functioning. The couples were randomly assigned into experimental and control groups (15 couples for each). The research plan included pre- and post-test with the control group. Transactional analysis and family functioning were the independent and the dependent variables, respectively. Both groups were pre-tested. The experimental group received eight sessions of training on Transactional Analysis. Then both groups were post-tested. This research used Family Assessment Device (FAD) as the instrument of data collection. Results from descriptive statistical methods and Multivariate Covariance Analysis (MANCOVA) showed the effectiveness of transactional analysis therapy on increasing family functioning (problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavioral control and general functioning) among the couples of the experimental group as compared to the control group.

Keywords: Distressed couples, family functioning, transactional analysis

INTRODUCTION

Minuchin (1974), the pioneer of structural family therapy, believes there is more to family organization than just the biological and psychological dynamics among its members. Family is more than a group of people living in a special physical and psychological environment. It is a natural, social system with its own distinguishing features. Family as a social system formulates a set of rules and principles and assumes different roles for its members. In addition, family has a systematic structure; it establishes complicated forms of explicit as well as implicit communication styles to convey messages. It has many complicated negotiation and problem solving strategies that help the accomplishment of different assignments. The reciprocal, strong and enduring emotional attachments among the system members connect them together. All families are characterized by affection, loyalty and continued membership, which distinguish family from other systems (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 2007).

Marital life begins with the couple's interest in beginning a happy dispute-free life; however, the question is why does the love between couples fade being replaced by disputes and incompatibility? (Boelens *et al.*, 1980)

Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2007) suggest therapists should study their clients' problems within the context of their families and societies, because family is where people are born and grown up and where they also experience problems; that is to say, personal problems begin within the family and therefore family is the place where such problems should be resolved in.

Family is usually formed with the union of a man and a woman, holding different values. This union will not last, unless both sides reach an agreement through mutual externalization. Interactional patterns which are established according to implicit contracts, govern the spouses' interpersonal relationship. Any violation from these patterns creates a sense of disloyalty in the partner. These patterns should both be clear and flexible in order to be adoptable to new conditions. The husband and wife dyadic sub-system is a source of support which protects the partner against the outside world. Unclear boundaries in this sub-system allow relatives and children to intervene in the sub-system leading to disturbed marital relationships. Under these circumstances, children are likely to get involved in their parents' disputes through triangulation, as a result of which they may show pathological symptoms.

There is a major difference between marriage, even cohabitation and other life relations. When spouses live together and become committed to a common life they form expectations from each other. Each partner expects unconditional love, intimacy, loyalty and support from the other. Growing expectations and emotions may lead to misunderstanding between spouses. In case any misunderstanding occurs, the spouses reproach one another, rather than looking into the problem, so in case any problem arises, hostility, reproach and dispute arise. The spouses neglect each other's positive characteristics and gradually reach a point where they might even look doubtfully to their common life (Beck, 1988). Thus, it seems that the objects of this theory regarding the promotion of mental health in a social context are in compatibility with the couples' need to acquire constructive positive communication skills for healthy interchange. Berne (1975) believes transactional analysis as a means of studying marital relationship, as well as a wide range of other social bonds. Corey (2009) considers transactional analysis as an interactive therapy intended to enhance the client's awareness of and ability in making a sound decision to change his/her course of life with an emphasis on his/her cognitive, behavioral and rational functions.

In case such needs are not satisfied, or speaking in a transactional analysis language, if strokes are not received, the couple may experience senses such as being lonely and meaningless, as a result of which the quality of married life might reduce. The logic behind this approach is that one can help spouses improve their communication through insight into their "ego states" and through making them aware of times when their interaction patterns cross each other. If they recognize the ego state involved in crossed transactions and return to the address state, they will be able to conduct an infinite complementary transaction (Prochaska and Norcross, 2009). According to this approach love is not only looking into each other's eyes, but also looking out at the same direction together. The Parent (exteropsyche) and the Child (archaeopsyche) ego-states of partners may lead them to different directions; and it is only the adult (neopsyche) ego-state that helps them join together again (Harris and Harris, 1995). Therefore this study considers demonstrating interpersonal relationships, so that it can strengthen the positive aspects of family functioning and remedy the controversial ones by transactional-analytical skills training.

As research demonstrates, spouses who have a close relationship show more commitment to their family and marital relationship, attach more importance to family health, have a more intimate relationship as compared to spouses who attach no importance to an efficient family relationship (Miller *et al.*, 2003; Caughlin *et al.*, 2000). Findings of Epstein and Jackson (1978) also shows the effectiveness of communication skills training courses in enhancing intimacy and family efficiency and in reducing marital disputes.

Since marital disputes are mostly caused by the absence of a healthy relationship or the lack of the basic skills to express affections to one's spouse in the marital relationship, the researcher studied the effects of transactional analysis on increasing family functioning of distressed couples referring to Boroujen City Family Welfare Center.

This study aimed at determining the efficacy of transactional-analytical group therapy on the functioning of the couples referring to Boroujen City Family Welfare Center. This research, on the one hand, can lead to the development of an efficient method for developing self-awareness and communication skills as the relevant factors in successful marriage; on the other hand, it can prevent or solve couples' communication problems during their marriage.

Research hypotheses:

- Transactional-Analytical (TA) skills training leads to the increase of distressed couples' functioning
- Transactional-Analytical (TA) skills training leads to the improvement of distressed couples' family functioning components (problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavioral control and general functioning)

Population, samples and sampling: The population of the study included all the distressed couples referring to Boroujen City Family Welfare Center in 2007-2008, i.e. all the couples referring to the aforementioned center in the period between the December 2007 and June 2008. The sample included 30 couples whose family functioning score were one score below the standard deviation, chosen from among 100 volunteer couples who responded to the researcher's call for increasing family functioning. The samples were randomly chosen and assigned into experimental and control groups. The couples of the experimental group attended 8 sessions of TA training while the control group was provided the same instruction after the completion of the research project; that is, the control group received no instruction at the time of the treatment.

Design of the study: The design of the research was a randomized controlled experiment with pre-test and post-test. This plan included an experimental and a control group, each of which took a pre-test under controlled conditions. The intervention was made; a week after finishing the training sessions, the post-test was given in order to determine the effectiveness of the independent variable on the experimental group.

Instruments: The present research used the Family Assessment Device (FAD) to study family functioning. FAD is a questionnaire with 60 questions designed to assess family functioning based on the McMaster Model.

At this time, The McMaster Model of Family Functioning is applied for the Family Assessment Device (Epstein *et al.*, 1983; Miller *et al.*, 1985) and a therapist-completed scale (Miller *et al.*, 1994). This model determines a family's structural, occupational and interactional characteristics, as well as the six dimensions of family functioning including problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavioral control and general functioning. Therefore the family assessment device for the above dimensions included six subscales, as well as a seventh subscale for general family functioning.

The present research used a five-degree Likert Scale ranging from very much to very little, to assess the examinees' tendency. Some questions are scored reversely.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Having given out and scored the couples' questionnaires, 30 couples were randomly chosen from among those who had gotten the lowest scores in the FAD as the sample of the study; subjects were randomly assigned into experimental and control groups (15 couples for each). Both groups were given the pre-test. The experimental group received the treatment, while the control group received no intervention at the time of the experiment (they were provided the instruction after the experiment). The intervention plan took place in 890 min weekly sessions. Each session was divided into two parts: 1 h for training, half an hour for practicing the instructions of the previous session. Here comes a summary of the content and the objective of each training sessions.

- Session 1:** Clarifying the objective of the training sessions, structural analysis objectives and the preliminary functional analysis
- Session 2:** Introducing personality disorders (both structural and functional) (rejection, pollution and agitation)
- Session 3:** Introducing the concept of interaction and interpersonal relationship
- Session 4:** Strengthening the adult-ego, controlling for the parent ego and satisfying the needs of the child ego-state
- Session 5:** Introducing stroke, it's significance and role through stroke diagram
- Session 6:** Introducing the concept of time management and its significance

Session 7: Introducing the life draft life and life states

Session 8: Introducing the concept of unified adult to the group and a conclusion of the sessions

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Transactional-analytical skills training leads to the increase of family functioning (the total scale score) in the experimental group as compared to the control group.

To test the first hypothesis covariance analysis was used. First, Pre-test scores, as the confounding or covariate variable, were entered into the model. The dependent variable was the participants' post-test scores. Results of the analysis are presented in Table 1.

As Table 1 shows there was a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the pre-test total scores of family functioning, with the adjusted mean being 194.882 and 165.618 for each respectively $F_{(1,57)} = 9.769$; $p < 0.01$; therefore, one can conclude communication skills training increases family functioning among experimental as compared to control group.

Hypothesis 2: Transactional-analytical skills training leads to the increase of each single family functioning scale (problem solving, communication, roles and emotional intercourse, associated with emotional and behavioral control).

Multivariate Covariance Analysis (MANCOVA) was used to study the second hypothesis of the study as well as to study the significance of each of the 7 factors of the questionnaire. After MANCOVA analysis, ANOVA analysis was used as a follow-up study to explore the partial significance of the relationships between the research variables. Table 2 demonstrates the results of MANCOVA analysis for the interaction effects of the five sub-tests of the family functioning scale.

As Table 2 shows, results of Pillai-Bartlett effect test ($F = 11.546$; $Sig = 0.000$), Wilks' lambda test ($F = 11.546$; $Sig = 0.000$), Hotelling-Lawley effect test ($F = 11.546$; $Sig = 0.000$) and Roy's largest root Test ($F = 11.546$; $Sig = 0.000$) were significant. Therefore, one can conclude the control and experimental groups were different at least in one sub-scale of family functioning. In other words, the two groups were significantly different at least in one dependent variable after controlling for the

Table 1: The results of covariance analysis test for total score in family functioning scale

	Sample size	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean	Adjusted mean	F-value	df	Significant level
Experimental group	30	122.30	182.17	194.882	9.769	1.57	0.003
Control group	30	182.73	178.13	165.618			

Table 2: The results of MANCOVA for the interaction effects of the five sub-tests of the family functioning scale

Test statistics	Test value	F-value	df (effect)	df (error)	p-value
Pillai-bartlet effect	0.653	11.546	7	43	0.000
Wilks' lambda	0.347	11.546	7	43	0.000
Hotelling-lawley effect	1.880	11.546	7	43	0.000
Roy's largest root	1.880	11.546	7	43	0.000

Table 3: The results of the one-way variance analysis test in the MANCOVA context to study the independent difference of FAD factors

Factor	SS	df	MS	F-value	Significant level
Problem solving	42.110	1	42.110	6.748	0.012
Communication	56.305	1	56.305	4.817	0.044
Roles	31.947	1	31.947	6.615	0.031
Affective involvement	67.724	1	67.724	3.827	0.002
Emotional responsiveness	52.186	1	52.186	6.062	0.017
Behavioral control	46.586	1	46.586	4.052	0.037
General functioning	56.256	1	56.256	5.572	0.020

effects of the effects of pre-tests. In order to determine which variable gives rise to the linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables, ANOVA test is warranted for each variable in any of the hypotheses. Results of ANOVA test for exploring the significance of problem-solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavioral control and general performance are presented in Table 3.

As Table 3 shows, the F for problem solving ($F = 6.746$) is significant at $p > 0.01$; thus transactional-analytical skills training increased the couples' capacity for problem solving. According to the contents of Table 3, the F values were calculated at 4.817 for, 6.615 for roles, 3.872 for affective involvement, 6.062 for emotional responsiveness, 4.052 for behavioral control and 5.752 for general functioning. Since all the F values were significant at ($p < 0.05$), it was concluded transactional-analytical skills training had led to the increase of the experimental group's test scores in all the factors of the family functioning scale as compared to the control group.

CONCLUSION

Hypothesis 1: Transactional-analytical skills training leads to the increase of distressed couples' family functioning.

As Table 1 shows, there was a significant difference in total pre-test scores of family functioning between the experimental group (adjusted mean score = 194.882) and the control group (adjusted mean score = 165.618). ($p < 0.01$, $F = 1.57$). The conclusion is that transactional-analytical skills training had a positive effect on enhancing family functioning in the experimental group as compared to the control group. The results of the first hypothesis were in line with findings from Christensen and Shenk (1991); they came to the conclusion that one of the main reasons of low family functioning and marital disputes is couples' disability in developing a constructive relationship. In fact, transactional-analytical training helps

spouses convey their messages more clearly and develop a deeper understanding of one another. Systematic practice with TA skills by couples would help them build more constructive interactional patterns, through adding constructive habits into their behavioral repertoire and therefore will help them resort to constructive communication patterns in conflict situations instead of engaging in stress-inducing behaviors such as criticism, blaming, taunting and tongue-lashing language.

Hypothesis 2: Transactional-analytical skills training leads to the improvement of distressed couples' family functioning components (problem solving, communication, roles, emotional intercourse and emotional and behavioral control)

As Table 3 showed, the ($F = 6.747$) calculated for one-way analysis of variance for the effects of transactional Analysis on "problem solving" was significant ($p < 0.05$). Therefore one can conclude transactional analysis skills training had a positive effect on improving couples' problem solving skills. These results are consistent with the results of Sanderson and Karetsky (2002). According to their study, the couples attending communication skills training courses developed a more efficient relationship, coped better and experienced less conflict, while the couples lacking these skills, experienced conflicts at a higher level.

TA skills training helps couples involve their adult ego-state in their problems, bring the child- and parent ego-states under the control of the adult ego, trace the origins of their problem and try to solve it. They also learn that even if they are not able to involve their adult ego-state at the moment of the discussion, later they can look into the problem logically to trace its origins and come to a logical result.

As Table 3 shows, the ($F = 4.817$) calculated for one-way analysis of variance for the effects of transaction on "communication" is significant ($p < 0.05$). Therefore one can conclude transactional analytical skill training has a positive effect on improving couples' communication skills. The importance of the level of communication

skills in partners and its effects on healthy marital functioning has been emphasized in many researches. Findings of the present research were in coordination with the results of Christensen and Shenk (1991), which indicated communication skills training had a positive effect on increasing and improving spouses' relationship. One explanation for this result is that TA skills training enables partners to recognize their ego-states, distinguish the three states involved in communications and choose the proper ego-state for any communication. They learn to pay less attention to their fault-finding parent ego, achieve a more mutual recognition of one another's child-ego and activate the adult ego-state. So, it can be concluded that TA skills training leads to communication improvement.

As Table 3 shows, the ($F = 6.615$) calculated for one-way analysis of variance for the effects of transaction on the "role" variable was significant ($p < 0.05$). In other words, transactional analytical skills training had a positive effect on increasing the spouses' role efficiency. In other words, as a result of TA skills training one can change his/her reactions or ego-state depending on the situation and show tendency to change his/her behavioral patterns. Family members use different ego-states depending on their spontaneous role; they can change their leanings into an ideal form. Following TA training sessions recognizes his/her roles in the marital life play, as well as the communication stands he/she can use. Having recognized the role of ego and its formation process he/she tries to activate his/her adult ego-state and conscious thought. They try to achieve the point of "I am good, you are good". This may lead to increased role efficacy.

As Table 3 shows, the $F = 6.062$ calculated for one-way analysis of variance for the effects of transaction on the communication variable is significant ($p < 0.05$). So it can be concluded that transactional analytical skills training has a positive effect on improving couples' emotional intercourse. The present research was in correlation with Garland (1981) study on the effectiveness of communication skills training on reciprocal understanding. The latter demonstrated the significant effect of training on increasing the spouses' understanding of the other side's outlook and feelings. The findings showed the effect of TA training on the spouses' significant accuracy in understanding the other side's outlook and feelings. TA helps each spouse to recognize his/her partner and him/herself; so they reinforce the positive aspects of family functioning and improve its alarming aspects, as well as the parent-child relationship under the control of the adult ego-state, all of which leads to the couple's emotional intercourse.

As Table 3 shows, the $F = 3.827$ calculated for one-way analysis of variance for the effect of transaction on the affective involvement variable is significant ($p < 0.05$). So it can be concluded that transactional analytical skills training has a positive effect on increasing the spouses' affective involvement. This finding was in correlation

with the findings of Wood and Davidson (1993) study. They demonstrated the effectiveness of communication skills training on increasing affection between spouses. It was also in correlation with Halford *et al.* (2003)'s findings. They also found that the spouses who received communication skills training showed more positive feelings, affective involvement, caring and attentional practice for one another. When the offended child of one spouse reveals, the supporting parent of the other spouse tranquilizes this offended inner child by his/her strokes. This fact results to the spouses' affective involvement.

As Table 3 shows, the $F = 4.052$ calculated for one-way analysis of variance for the effects of transaction on the behavioral control variable is significant ($p < 0.05$). So it can be concluded that transactional analytical skills training has a positive effect on increasing the spouses' behavioral control. This finding was in correlation with Markman *et al.* (1993)'s research titled "Preventing Marital Distress through Communication and Conflict Management Training". As the latter research showed, spouses who enjoyed higher levels of communication and lower levels of negative communication skills had more ability to control their behavior. They demonstrated the effectiveness of communication skills training on increasing behavioral control. The requirement for this theory is the use of all the ego-states. The adult ego-state attaches more importance to analysis, it is more provident and reasonable and keeps assessing facts and situations; so if people use their adult ego-state when they lose their behavioral control we can come to the conclusion that development of the adult ego-state, besides healthy use of the other two, helps people assess all the situations before any reaction and keep control of their behavior.

As Table 3 shows, the $F = 5.752$ calculated for one-way analysis of variance for the effect of transaction on the "general functioning" is significant ($p < 0.05$). So it can be concluded that transactional analytical skills training has a positive effect on increasing the spouses' general functioning. The results of the first hypothesis were in correlation with Christensen and Shenk (1991) study; their research findings demonstrated the positive effect of constructive communication problems on low family functioning and marital disputes. In fact, transactional-analytical training helps spouses convey their messages more clearly and develop a deeper understanding of one another. As the result of practicing the essential transactional-analytical skills, couples add these habits to their treasury, thus in case any problematic situation or conflict occurs, they resort to constructive methods rather than tensional behaviors such as fault finding, reproaching and taunting.

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