

The Effectiveness of a Communication Skills Program on a Marital Conflict among Disabled Women of the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

When we mention the term " non – verbal communication skills ", this term indicates or refers to the skills of communicating information without the employment of language. Such skills may include face expressions, body movements, as well as pitch and vocal tone. In the present research, the researchers aim at determining and detecting the effectiveness of training for women in non-verbal communication skills with regard to marital conflict in deaf–hearing and deaf–deaf partnerships. Women from the Masarat Center for Development and Empowerment were chosen to be the control and experimental groups established for this research.

The researchers selected fifteen deaf married women and then distributed them in two groups, six women were in the experimental group and nine women represented the control group. Both groups were given an initial test. The experimental group then got a training course in non-verbal communication skills, the course included ten sessions, each lasts for one hour. At the end of these training sessions, members of both groups were required to complete a specialized questionnaire. The results showed, indeed, that training in non-verbal communication skills can significantly reduce or decrease marital conflict in the experimental group. In addition, evidence shows that due research should be undertaken on the differences between deaf–hearing as well as deaf–deaf marital conflicts. The researcher highlighted the theoretical implications of the research, along with other recommendations that concern the role of family and marriage therapists associated to deaf couples.

Keywords: Communication skills, Marital Conflict, Disabled Women, Deafness

1. Introduction

The current statistics of World Health Organization revealed that one in five females in the world suffer from disability. Both of Disability and gender aspects are related to each other. Furthermore, discrimination in terms of disability, gender, age and other similar social categories is commonly experienced or faced by those disabled women. Recent evidence indicated that disabled women suffered from increased isolation, stigmatization, in addition to discrimination and they experienced a lack of schooling and lack of similar opportunities that would probably let them participate in a proper communal life. In this sense, one of the most common and widespread types of disability is hearing

loss or hearing impairment. Evidence shows that 5.3 percent of the world's population (i.e. more than 360 million people) were subjected to have a rather particular degree of hearing loss (Reports from WHO, 2014; UNESCO, 2014).

In comparison with disabled men and normal or able-bodied women, disabled women seem more likely to remain without marriage, or they marry rather late in life, they are also subject for divorce if they do get married. It is stated that sixty percent of normal women and disabled men are married, whereas only forty nine percent of disabled women are married. Another comparison of the rates of divorce for people having disability comes to suggest that disabled women appear more likely to remain unmarried, when compared with men (Mbanjwa, Neeson 2002).

As far as the deaf community is concerned, it is shown that marital status is greatly influenced by the social environment. Furthermore, evidence shows that hearing loss is also associated with decreased household income, improper occupational status or rank in addition to decreased academic achievement. It is also observed that deafness was also correlated with various deteriorated health conditions and psychological distresses. Aspects of health and wellbeing of disabled individuals, including those suffering from hearing loss, represent the major priorities in public as well as health policies (Kobayashi, et al., 2015).

Govender, et al., (2014) stated that a deaf woman finds difficulty getting married, with little change. Both of families and society still consider disabled women as inferior who cannot be responsible about family life and consequently object to her marrying, and when they get married it would be contrary to the will of families! With the existence of such attitudes, sometimes disabled women get married either to disabled men or (with less opportunity) to normal men. It is thus indicated that people with special needs face, indeed, various sorts of obstacles and difficulties in their struggle for obtaining justice and equality. In spite of discrimination faced by men and women due to their disabilities, disabled women suffer a further disadvantage owing to discrimination based on gender (Govender, et al., 2014).

Marital conflict with someone who is deaf-mute can be explained in terms of various sociological theoretical parameters. Conflict conveys struggles over status as well as power sources. Social exchange specialists who focus on the aspects of quality and stability of marriages have argued that individuals tend to balance between the costs and benefits of mate selection on the one hand, and of remaining in a marriage on the other. The researchers refer to this theory here to explain why individuals may choose to remain in a marriage that they probably find unsatisfying. Resistance to change in addition to the attractiveness of alternatives are among the basic elements of the theory of social exchange when used to guide the investigation of divorce. In addition, symbolic interactionism claims that society is composed of continual intercommunication between couples who share the same experiences. This is a very useful theory for understanding couples and for enhancing communication. Once you realize that partnerships are, by their social nature, highly symbolic to each party, then you begin to realize how to be persuasive with your partner and other family members, and how to interpret misunderstandings. This theory is interested in terms of meanings. Consider these three words: love, lust and meat. Each letter is considered as a symbol. When these are combined in a particular order, each word can be defined. Because we tend to memorize words and their meanings, we find that there is a considerable difference between love and lust (Govender, Maistry , Soomar, &Paken, 2014).

Facial expressions, gestures and eye contact are considered non-verbal communications. When someone is talking, the listener can observe changes in facial expressions and, consequently, he will respond accordingly. Such facial expressions may include raising one's eyebrows, sneering, eye-rolling, yawning as well as nodding. The meanings of these movements are pretty much the same in all cultures (Cherry, 2014).

Training in communication skills has its considerable importance to most of treatment protocols used in both the primary as well as secondary prevention of marital distresses and divorce. When referring to the literature available on marital therapies, Bray and Jouriles (1995) stated that most marital programs encourage and support active listening and validation of each spouse's position,

which is seen to encourage less defensive discussions. However, in spite of its wide employment and general acceptance as a technique, studies have rarely focused on such communication training in isolation and some, notably Gottman et al, (1998), argue that this technique, in particular may contribute to the limited effectiveness of marital interventions. Recent researchers have also suggested an urgent need for dismantling research that examines the individual treatment components of marital programs, rather than evaluations of treatment protocols in their entirety (Christensen, & Baucom, 2005).

As major requirement for interaction among people, communication is definitely present in all aspects of life. The process of communication is a basic means in the social experience. Thus, as comprehension naturally allows ideas, images as well as experiences to be moved to a particular area, it is essential for communication to take place. In this process, social relations can be established and are understood by means of interpersonal communication, thus individuals' experiences, feelings, emotions and discoveries are then exchanged. In this sense, communication can be basically classified as either verbal or non-verbal. Verbal communication is completely voluntary, whereas non-verbal communication can be viewed as an involuntary reaction, or an intentional or deliberate communicative act (Rebouças et al. 2007).

The present study evaluates non-verbal communication skills in women who are deaf. How do these women communicate with each other? How do they use verbal and non-verbal communication? How do they cope with their everyday life? Are there any aids that can help them to communicate with others?

When reviewing the literature of communication skills training (CST), it is found that training is effective in increasing marital gratification and a better quality life. Yalchin and Karahan (2007) focused on training 14 couples in communication skills. In response to a newspaper article, these couples had registered for CST. By the end of their training sessions, the experimental group obtained an increased a marital adjustment. Results showed that CST lead to increased satisfaction, improved communication with a spouse and consequently improved problem-solving skills (Yalcin, & Karahan, 2007).

Khojastemehret al. (2007) focused on the relationship between human concepts and verbal communications. Effective communication skills provide one of the most important predictors for interpersonal relationships. Consequently, CST is one of the most crucial and necessary elements of life skills training. The significance of communication with respect to the strength of the family unit has been revealed in various models of family interactions. McMaster's model focused on family functioning over 6 dimensions, 2 of which are communication and affective responsiveness (Khojastemehr, et al., 2007).

In addition, Tavakolizadeha, et al, (2015) mentioned that *“most of the couples who experienced marital conflict have problems in terms of communicating with each other and they are mostly engaged in ineffective communication pattern”* Based on this, it seems that, in addition to the therapeutic approaches available, CST can play a considerable role in reducing marital conflicts. *Learning communication skills as enriching the relationship, self-assertiveness, empathy as well as active listening were investigated in these training programs. Supporting such skills is necessary for couples because communication challenges are definitely common in married couples. Evidence shows that more than 90% of dysfunctional couples consider this challenge as a basic problem in their marital relationship. Communication problems represent the most significant factors in familial communication approaches. These approaches regard or view marital conflict as dysfunctional communication. These struggles consequently lead to a vicious cycle in which any attempt to find a starting point is fruitless and futile”* (Tavakolizadeha, et al., 2015, p. 215).

Scholars have investigated non-verbal communication, also named as the theory of non-verbal signs. In this study, the researchers have chosen Hall's Theory of Proxemics; this assesses body posture and spatial relations as an elaboration of the culture in which individuals live. This theory recommends the following analytic factors, which represent its primary categories (Rebouças,

Pagliuca, Almeida, 2007): Posture–gender, sociofugal–sociopetal axis, Kinesthetic: contact behavior: visual code, thermal code: olfactory code, and voice volume

In addition to the study of various types of signs and distinctive traits that are related to the use of space in human relations, proxemics considers four interpersonal distances which are: intimate distance, personal distance, social distance and public distance.

Intimate distance (from 0 to 50 cm). It refers to physical contact, human warmth, the transmission of odors and the most intimate personal gatherings.

Personal distance (from 50cm to 1.20 m). Although close, this may not involve physical contact, and odors and body warmth may no longer be detected.

Social distance (1.20m to 3.60 m) . This refers to eye contact with the interlocutor but no physical contact.

Public distance (more than 3.60 m) . It occurs in public speaking such as conferences, with collective visual contact (Rebouças, Pagliuca, & Almeida, 2007).

2. Previous Research

Previous research reported only one group of women with special needs that are more likely to be married than men of the same disability group. This group is women suffering from deafness. Barnett and Franks (2002) found that deafness was related to low marriage rates. Furthermore, 99% of the persons were married to other deaf persons; only 10% were married to people with unimpaired hearing. The divorce rate among deaf persons was relatively about the same as that of the reference population, deaf persons having a relatively low divorce rate (Barnett and Franks 2002). In the US, 49.8% of prelingually deaf adults are married, compared with 66.1% of hearing adults (Barnett and Franks 2002).

Much evidence shows that couples that experience marital conflict face difficulties in terms of communication skills. Skaldeman (2006) showed 70 divorced and married men and women, at least one of the spouses expressed less love and affection towards their spouse, that they face communication problems and that divorced couples were significantly different from married couples in terms of active listening skills (Skaldeman, 2006).

David and Jack (2007) stated that (52%) of divorced women suffered from aggressive interactions and intense marital conflict (David, & Jack 2007). Kettrey and Emery (2006) argued that couples with irrational and aggressive communication patterns and, they confronted more conflicts in marry and they faced divorced (Kettrey, & Emery, 2006). Parlina (2006) argued that the quality of interactions between these couples is a predictor of the potential distress in their marital relationship and any subsequent divorce (Aghdam, Ahadi, Jamehri, 2012). Faulkner et al. (2005) showed that Marital satisfaction can be predicted through the communicative performance of couples and interpersonal relationships which is one of the strongest predictors, also disorder communication is an indicator of the marital conflict between couples (Oprisan, & Cristae, 2012).

3. Hypotheses

To study communication skills as a means of conveying information to each other effectively and efficiently, the study ideally requires couples with good verbal and non-verbal communication skills.

- **H1:** No statistically significant differences exist in total marital conflict scores between the control and experimental groups prior to the Communication Skills Program.
- **H2:** No statistically significant differences exist in total marital conflict scores for the experimental group before or after employing the Communication Skills Program.
- **H3:** No statistically significant differences exist in total marital conflict between the control and experimental groups after employing the Communication Skills Program.

4. Research Method

4.1 The Design of the Study

This quasi-experimental study examined the effect of the Communication Skills Program on marital conflict in women with special needs. The study utilized a pre-training and post-training design, and involved a control group, as used by Johnson and Johnson (2010). A 42-question marital conflict questionnaire was given to the couples in the study to complete. This instrument was developed by Sanayi-Zaker and Barati in 2007 to investigate the seven dimensions of marital conflict: reduced cooperation; sexual intercourse; and familial relationships with spouse's relatives and friends; keeping financial issues separate from each other, while increased affective reaction; child support; and personal relationships with relatives (Sanayi-Zaker, Barati, 2007).

There are five options for each question. These options indicate the degree of agreement as ranging from one to five. The minimum possible score for the questionnaire is 42 and the maximum is 210. Those who score between 70 and 114 are considered to have a normal marital relationship, while those who score between 115 and 134 are considered to have abnormal levels of marital conflict. Couples who score more than 135 are considered to have severe levels of conflict. The reliability and validity of this questionnaire have been shown to be acceptable. Dehghan investigated the reliability of this questionnaire independently and found a Cronbach's alpha of 0.71. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha is determined as 0.76 (Sanayi-Zaker, 2007) and was administered to the participants in the experimental and control groups both prior to training and after training. The experimental group underwent 10 CST sessions. The control group did not receive any program training.

4.2 Participants

The current study was conducted at the Masarat Center for Development & Empowerment. The participants comprised 15 females from the Masarat Center. The sample study participants were chosen randomly. The marital conflict questionnaire was administered to all participants. The cut-off score for the selection of the level assigned to the control and experimental groups was >115. The 15 women were randomly assigned to 2 groups: 6 to the experimental group and 9 to the control group.

4.3 Instrument

The instrument used in the current study was a self-report questionnaire, which was used to collect the range of individual differences.

The instrument was translated from English into Arabic sign language and administered to 17 deaf-deaf and 9 deaf-hearing couples. Professional Emirate psychologists and sociologists were asked to assess the efficacy of the questionnaire for testing marital conflict among the participants. As a result, 85% of the psychologists and sociologists consulted agreed on items that would be suitable for the Emirate culture. A reliability test was also performed to obtain the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The result of the Cronbach's alpha was high, at 0.92 for the entire sample.

4.4 Data Collection

During the academic year 2016, the questionnaire was administered to 15 participants: 9 females were randomly assigned to the control group and were kept on the waiting list; 6 females were randomly assigned to the experimental group.

4.5 Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to investigate marital conflict among the deaf women who participated in this study. The 15 study participants chosen were selected from candidates diagnosed as experiencing marital conflict. It was ensured that these 15 deaf women could use sign language, and

that they received no other support in relation to marital conflict. The 6 participants in the experimental group received CST; the 9 participants in the control group were kept on the waiting list. The control group received no CST. The study began in February 2016 and finished in April. The experimental group received a total of 10 weekly training sessions in communications skills, each session lasting for 60 minutes. The training package was based on Hall's Theory of Proxemics. Non-verbal CST was conducted in group sessions by a clinical psychologist. A translator helped the researcher by translating from Arabic into sign language.

Session 1: Introducing group rules, presenting explanations concerning non-verbal communication with dependents and family, introducing group rules, and presenting explanations regarding how non-verbal CST reduces marital conflict for married deaf women.

Session 2: Non-verbal CST to improve cooperation between married deaf women and their family members.

Session 3: Non-verbal CST to improve listening skills and sexual relationships for married deaf women.

Session 4: Non-verbal CST to improve the emotional reactions in married women and familiarity with requesting (ask family to get help).

Session 5: Non-verbal CST to increase the support from children and to afford familiarity in expressing positive emotions.

Session 6: CST to improve married deaf women's personal relationships with their spouse's relatives.

Session 7: CST to improve the familial relationship between married deaf women with their spouse's relatives and friends, and becoming familiar with the skills required to control anger and annoyance levels.

Session 8: Non-verbal CST to enable deaf married women to enjoy leisure time in common and mutually pleasurable activities.

Session 9: Becoming familiar with skills in negotiation and dispute settlement.

Session 10: CST to improve financial issues for married deaf women, a review of all the sessions and receiving feedback from the participants.

5. Results

The basic demographic and outcome data are introduced in Table 1. Participants aged from 20 to 40, with a mean of 29.60 (SD = 12.73). In this study, most of the participants stated that this was their first marriage, although some participants had been married more than once. Table 1 also shows that the level of education achieved by the majority of them was relatively low.

The results of data analysis are reported with the research hypotheses of this study in mind.

Table 1: Personal data of the married women in the experimental and control groups

<i>Personal information</i>			<i>Experimental group</i>	<i>N%</i>	<i>Control group</i>	<i>N%</i>
<i>Age</i>	20-25	1	1	6.66	0	
	26-30	7	2	30.00	5	33.33
	31-35	5	3	20.00	2	13.33
	36-40	2	0	—	2	13.33
<i>Education</i>	Primary	11	5	33.33	6	40.00
	Secondary	4	1	6.66	3	20.00
<i>Relative</i>	Relative	2	1	6.66	1	6.66
	Non-relative	13	5	33.33	8	53.33
<i>Occupation</i>	Employed	9	5	33.33	4	26.66
	Housewife	6	1	6.66	5	33.33

5.1 Hypothesis 1

There are no statistically significant differences in marital conflict scores between the control and experimental groups prior to the Communication Skills Program.

Hypothesis 1 was supported by the data. Table 2 outlines the statistics for the marital conflict mean scores of the experimental and control groups. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests indicated that the differences between the experimental and control group tests for the marital conflict questionnaire scores ($z = -0.94$, $p = 0.34$.) were not statistically significant. There was no significant mean difference in marital conflict for either group.

Table 2: Marital conflict scores for the experimental and control groups prior to the Communication Skills Program

<i>Group</i>	<i>Experimental M (SD)</i>	<i>Control M (SD)</i>
<i>Pre-training</i>	148.00 (10.72)	144.55 (12.36)

5.2 Hypothesis 2

There are no statistically significant differences in marital conflict for the experimental group before and after the Communication Skills Program.

Hypothesis 2 was rejected by the data. Table 3 outlines the descriptive statistics for marital conflict mean scores prior to training and following training. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests indicated that differences between the scores of the marital conflict questionnaire ($z = -2.20$ -, $p = 0.02$.) for the experimental group were statistically significant. There is a significant mean difference in marital conflict for the experimental group prior to and following the Communication Skills Program. The improvement in the performance of the experimental group indicated that the Communication Skills Program had generally been effective.

Table 3: Marital conflict scores for the experimental group before and after the Communication Skills Program

<i>Group</i>	<i>Pre-training M (SD)</i>	<i>Post-training M (SD)</i>
<i>Experimental</i>	148.00 (10.72)	122.50 (9.35)

5.3 Hypothesis 3

There are no statistically significant differences in marital conflict between the control and experimental groups following the Communication Skills Program.

Hypothesis 3 was rejected by the data. Table 4 outlines the descriptive statistics of the marital conflict mean scores for the experimental and control groups following the Communication Skills Program. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests indicated that the differences for the marital conflict questionnaire scores ($z = -2.44$ -, $p = 0.01$) for the experimental and control groups following the Communication Skills Program were statistically significant. There is a significant mean difference in marital conflict for the experimental group. The improvement in the experimental group indicated the general effectiveness of the Communication Skills Program.

Table 4: Marital conflict scores for the experimental and control groups after the Communication Skills Program

<i>Group</i>	<i>Experimental M (SD)</i>	<i>Control M (SD)</i>
<i>Post-training</i>	122.50 (9.35)	143.88 (12.45)

Discussion

The present study showed that Emirati deaf women suffering from marital conflicts do not have a special strategy to resolve this conflict. The non-verbal CST assisted deaf women take appropriate steps to deal with such conflict. There are many negative traits, expectations and beliefs that hinder effective communication. The training of non-verbal communication skills helped deaf women to identify the underlying causes of marital conflict and helped them use more constructive ways to deal with the problem.

In fact, non-verbal communication skills helped Emirati deaf women convey their messages more clearly and effectively. The systematic practicing of such skills makes individuals incorporate this behavior into their behavioral repository and use it in conflictive situations. Learning non-verbal communication skills leads to the exchange of positive, amusing behaviors, hence reducing negative behavior. The increased exchange of positive behaviors fulfills the emotional needs of the couple, leading to positive feelings toward one another and change their attitude.

The effect of non-verbal CST on convergence regarding financial issues was accepted in the present research. The findings showed that divergence regarding spending is one of the main reasons for marital conflict. On the other hand, marital conflict leads to couple's feelings of insecurity with each of the spouses tries to reduce their insecurity by maintaining their financial power and personal savings. Teaching communication and problem-solving skills can help them converge on financial issues.

Communication is an important human characteristic. To achieve and maintain effective relationships between wife and husband, deaf wives must communicate with their husbands. Everyday life aspects require a variety of communications with family members.

Conclusion

Non-verbal communication training is effective in reducing marital conflict in deaf couples and in increasing marital satisfaction, and is therefore recommended. The application of related interventional programs before and in the initial years of marriage could also help reduce marital conflict.

Recommendation

Further studies with larger sample sizes and a longer follow-up period are required to further confirm these results.

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