



The Development and Effect Evaluation of the Newlyweds' Relationship Education Program in China

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the application and effect of intimate relationship education program. 9 newlywed Chinese couples participated in this educational workshop program. The workshop was designed to help couples enhance mutual understanding, explore gender differences, learn about conflicts and coping strategies, promote emotional management skills. The study also used interviews to explore the effect mechanism of the educational workshop, and this kind of educational program was proved to be applicable and effective in helping newlywed couples to improve communication and self-management skills, and it might be helpful to decrease the future risk of marital dissolution.

Keywords: couple relationship, group workshop, newlyweds

Most people in the world desire satisfied intimate relationship which is an important source of the essential psychological needs of love and belonging. However, falling in love is the easy part, maintaining a happy marriage is a challenge. When stresses such as conflicts, disagreements and economic pressure come into marriage, the initial passion gradually fades, and the relationship satisfaction of the couple will drop rapidly in the first ten years after marriage. According to previous studies (Hawkins, 2008), 10% to 15% of couples' marital satisfaction declined in the first 3-4 years, and 33% of them declined in the first 10 years. So far, some relationship education programs have been proven to effectively slow down the decline in satisfaction after marriage and reduce the risk of marriage breakdown (Hirschberger, 2009; Amini, 2016; Blanchard, 2009). The best time for couples to receive this kind of education is before marriage and shortly after marriage (Williamson, 2018). Therefore, the current study recruited newly-married couples to conduct the couple relationship education program. This educational program is carried out in the form of a two-day workshop, after which, semi-structured interviews with participating couples are conducted to verify the feasibility and effectiveness of the plan.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research consists of two steps. The first step is the development of an education plan for newlyweds. Based on literature review, preliminary interviews, expert consultation, etc., a two-day group workshop plan for newlyweds was initially formulated.

The second step is to carry out a two-day workshop to explore its applicability and effectiveness through interviews.

Research participants

Researchers distributed workshop advertisements through campus postings and online forums. A total of 9 newly married heterosexual couples were recruited. The average age of the couples was 31.2.

Research design

Couple relationship education program manual which was developed on the basis of following theories:

1) David Kolb Experience Learning Circle Theory

The famous American adult education expert David Kolb has summarized John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Piaget's experience learning model, proposed his experience learning model which is also called experience learning circle theory. In Kolb's theory, the impetus for the development of new concepts is provided by new experiences. "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984). Kolb identified learning follows a four-stage cycle. The first stage is concrete learning, where the learner encounters a new experience or reinterprets an existing experience. This is followed by the next stage, reflective observation, where the learner reflects on the experience on a personal basis. After this comes abstract conceptualization, where the learner forms new ideas, or modifies existing abstract ideas, based on the reflections arising from the reflective observation stage. Lastly, the active experimentation stage is where the learner applies the new ideas to his surroundings to see if there are any modifications in the next appearance of the experience. This second experience becomes the concrete experience for the beginning of the next cycle, beginning at the first stage. This process can happen over a short or long time (Kolb, 2014).

American educator Eduard C. Lindeman who is notable for his pioneering contributions in adult education, proposed that "Adult education is a co-operative venture in non-authoritarian, informal learning the chief purpose of which is to discover the meaning of experience; a quest of the mind which digs down to the roots of the preconceptions which formulate our conduct; a technique of learning for adults which makes education coterminous with life, and hence elevates living itself to the level of an experiment (Lindeman, 1925). Therefore, the relationship education program can design interactive games, quizzes, group discussions to inspire participants to think about their existing experience, in the interaction with partner and other participants, enhance the reflection of themselves.

2) Lewin's Change Management Model

Kurt Lewin (Cummings, et al., 2016) proposed a simple theory model which is also known as Unfreeze -Change -Refreeze model, starting by creating the motivation to change (unfreeze), then moving through the change process by promoting effective communications and empowering people to embrace new ways of working (change), and the process ends when returning the organization to a sense of stability (refreeze), which is so necessary for creating the confidence from which to embark on the next, inevitable change. Lewin believed that individuals' personal participation in group discussions and activities will more effectively

change their attitudes and views on issues. Participation gives people more room for development, allowing them to actively extract what they need according to their own needs, and also brings them the joy of communication during participation, enhance their empathy to others, and promotes their emotional attitudes and values development. Therefore, the small group education is also derived from the participants' personal experiences or opinions. It is based on the problems faced by the participants and activates their existing information to stimulate their active participation in learning. "As long as you participate, you will start to change!" (Hussain, et al., 2018).

3) Group counseling model

Small group counseling is a kind of "interpersonal communication laboratory" in nature. It helps to cultivate the individual's ability to listen to others attentively, increase the sensitivity of the individual to the emotions and thoughts of others, facilitate the individual to better understand their own feelings and motivations, improve the ability of personal expression and improve interpersonal relationships eventually.

The workshop in this study is composed of newly married couples participating in pairs, and the purpose is to improve the interactive relationship between husband and wife by observing and interacting with other married couples. The purpose is to encourage participants to interact and share with their spouses, while also being able to actively interact with other couples. In a warm and safe setting, they may have a chance to reflect self-experience and cognition, learn to accept new and meaningful insights, and practice constructive marital interaction skills, etc., so as to promote the marital stability and happiness, and avoid the emergence of marital discord.

THE OUTLINE OF THE WORKSHOP

The two-day workshop, from 9 am to 4 pm of weekend, consists of six sessions.

Session 1 After breaking the ice with husband and wife as a unit, they will understand the nature of love and marriage and the importance of marriage education through theoretical explanations and group discussions;

Session 2 Participants are divided into two groups according to gender. Some activities such as group discussions and games are carried out to promote group members to better understand the gender differences in cognition, emotion, and behavior.

Session 3 Participants will learn about theories of personal traits, mate choice theory, family of origin, attachment style, etc., to promote group members' self-exploration and reflection. Discussions and communications between couples will help them to better understand themselves and their partners, to learn about ways to understand and live with the differences between them.

Session 4 In this session, participants will get to know the stresses and conflicts in marriage, explore their interactive styles in marriage, including positive and negative interactions, and learn about constructive conflict management and coping strategies.

Session 5 Communication skills and emotional management skills will be taught by role playing and discussions to help enhancing interpersonal skills.

Session 6 Participants will learn about marital commitment theories, look for important factors that can strengthen the stability of marriage, and through game links such as drawing love maps and drawing lovers shirts, improve the level of marital commitment, and help the good wishes of “holding hands and growing old together” eventually come true.

Feedback form after the workshop

Participants were invited to fill in their suggestions for the workshop after the workshop, to score satisfaction with each session of the workshop, and to choose the three topics and three activities that are most helpful to them.

The couple interview form after the workshop

After the workshop, 9 couples were interviewed. The main questions were as follows:

What is your overall feeling of this workshop?

What impressed you most about this workshop? How did the workshop influence you?

Do you have any suggestions for the development of the workshop (content, format, time, participants, leaders, etc.)?

RESULTS

Evaluation whether the workshop meets their needs et al

Questions	Score (One to six grades, 1 means completely disagree; 6 means completely agree)
The contents of the workshop meets my needs	4.76
I learned a lot from this workshop	5.21
I like the group settings of the workshop	4.01
I am more confident to manage my marriage	5.79
I am happy to participate in this kind of workshop	4.90

The most helpful sessions

Sessions	Votes (18 participants)	rate (%)
Session 6	14	78
Session 2	13	72
Session 5	11	61
Session 4	7	39
Session 3	7	39
Session 1	2	11

The most helpful activities		
Activity	Votes (18 participants)	Rate (%)
Interactions inside couples	17	94
Interactions with other couples	12	67
Leader's theoretical explanations	10	56
Group discussions and sharing among same-sex participants	9	50
quizzes	4	22
Videos	1	5
Brainstorming discussions	1	5

Results of the couple's interviews after the workshop

Suggestions for the workshop

1) Time arrangement

Two participants reported that the current two-day workshop was a little bit challenging. They suggested that two-hour meeting once a week would be a better choice. They can come to exchange ideas every week and have time to digest and practice what they have learned. .

In the meanwhile, there are four participants who held different opinions. They thought that the weekend centralized workshops was good enough, they could have full time to learn and share, and they would not be affected by other chores, so they can devote themselves and immerse into it.

2) Content arrangement

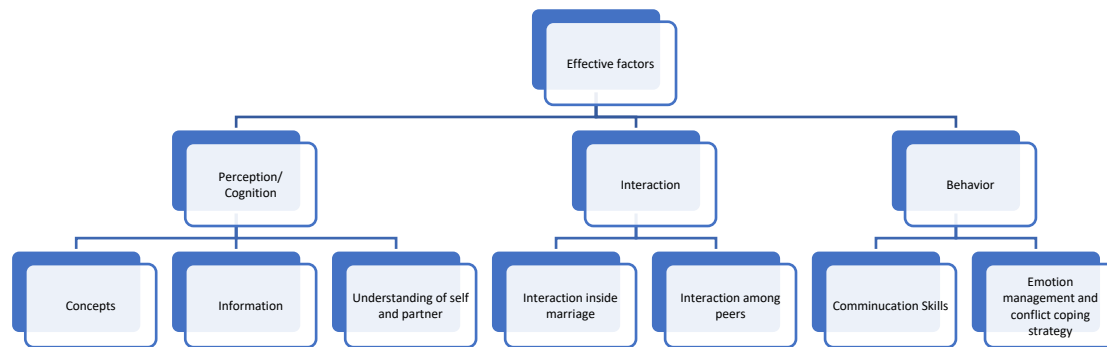
Most participants agreed that the topics of the current workshop were valuable, however, due to time limit, some of the sessions were not conducted deep and thorough enough.

More than half of the participants believed that interacting and sharing with others was the most beneficial part for them.

Some characteristic small topics can be added, such as how to prevent affair, how to achieve a career/family balance, "Are you going to have children? When?", lighting marriages, etc.

More fun, relaxing and meaningful games were also suggested.

Effect mechanism form



Perception/ Cognition factor

The participants learned constructive values and useful information from the workshop and deepened the self-awareness and understanding of each other.

Concepts

One participant talked to the researcher in the interview, She said, One of my favorite song is 'the most romantic thing in the world' husband and wife is each other's most intimate person, only if they rely on each other, cherish each other, they can eternal happiness.

One husband shared his reflection in the interview, "In Chinese culture, we used to value our parents and children more than our wives. Some guys also describe wife as clothes, which can be bought or changed. That is insane. In my opinion, one of the golden criteria of good guy is loving his wife, i believe in this. Especially after this workshop, i am very confident that i am right. There is no success without a successful marriage."

In the marital commitment session, we talked about devoting commitment. Many participants shared their thoughts. One of them told us, "I used to think commitment is never divorce, now i realized it is not only about non-divorce promise, it is about a promise to make your partner happy with you. Devotion is the necessary ingredient in marriage. But unfortunately it is rare in young couples, especially the only-child generation. As the only child of the family, we grew up in a self-centered environment, we get love from parents and grand parents, we did not learn how to love back. Some of my friends when they get married, they always fight about trivial things, because making compromise is very difficult for them. They act childishly emotional. I am very grateful i have a husband who is very tolerant and mature."

Information

In this workshop, the leader taught several classic theories and research findings about intimate relationship and gender differences. Many participants thought this kind of information was very useful and helpful. For example, one of them said, "I really like Dr. Gottman's research on couples, I will make sure to read more from his books."

"My husband used to make fun of me when I was driving, he thought I am a horrible horrible female driver. But when we watched the videos the leader shared in the workshop, he told me he changed his mind, he said I am good enough." Another wife shared this with big smile.

Understanding of self and each other

In session 3 the participants involved in a series of activities to enhance self exploration. Some of them revealed that this part has special meaning for them. "I think this part affects me most. I do have a tough past which influences my personality a lot. When I start to look at it, admit it, find connection between past and present, I find I can love myself. Then I find when I accept myself, I can also accept my partner. We as a whole, in this relationship, we all have our pains, but together we are stronger."

Another wife shared that she was very happy that her husband joined this workshop with her. Her husband was a man of few words. She used to nag about it a lot. She now understood the true love was not only sweet words but also silent sacrifice.

Interaction

Interaction between husband and wife

94% of the participants believed the interaction in the workshop was the most effective factor. One of them said the "love map" was his favorite part. He was amazed about how well his wife knew about him and he was deeply moved in this session.

One lady said, "I love the moments when we shared our opinions. The topics in the workshop we barely talked at home. It might be because we are too busy with our daily life, and choose to ignore these topics. I am so grateful we had such an opportunity to communicate with each other, it looked like our honeymoon was back. And I am also happy to meet other couples in the workshop."

Interactions among peers

One husband said, "I am glad to meet others, we are about the same age, and have a lot in common. For example, we all have similar stresses, paying a house, finding jobs, et al. I learned so much from them, especially the happy couples, the rapport and mutual understanding and care enlightened us."

Some wives shared their worries about the relationship between them and their mother-in-law. They found great support from each other and inspired by others' stories.

Behavioral change***Couple interaction skills***

Several participants thought the skills were very useful especially the conflict coping strategies and communication skills. They mentioned the listener/speaker skill and time-out skill was easy to get and practice.

One husband talked about love language when he was interviewed. He was very glad getting to know about his wife's love language was 'acts of service', he promised to do more chores and cooking for her.

Another husband admitted his habitual model during conflict was stone-walling. He realized how this kind of behavior harm their relationship.

DISCUSSION

How the relationship education workshop works? The current study showed several mechanisms of the effectiveness of the educational program.

Cognitive factors are the most important

The feedback results of this study showed that participants favorite, the most impressive session is the marital commitment theory, gender differences researches, emotion and conflict management part. In the interview, participants also believed that the idea and information transmitted by the workshop was very helpful. This proved that one of the important mechanisms of relationship education program is to convey the concept of maintaining long-term stable marriage to participants, as well as the essential information to build a happy marriage. According to Yalom's group therapeutic factors theory, the teaching and recommendations of leaders can help participants to recognize their own concepts and promote the reflection and changes(Overholser,2005).

Get growth in interactive sharing

The two-day weekend's couple education program is like a "Retreat" which can allow couples getting away from daily stresses and chaos to refresh in a quiet and relaxing environment and interact with peers.

Through feedback and interview results, this study suggested that the interaction in the workshop was the most effective factors, since many couples find it's hard to have time thinking and talking about how to strengthen their relationship. In this kind of workshop, they have a great opportunity to sit down and interact with each other and address the important factors in their marriage. The educational program also facilitate this process by games, quizzes to enhance couples' constructive interaction, what the couples learn and experience in the workshop might also keep and practice in their home.

Besides interaction between husband and wife, the communication among different couples is also effective factor of this program. By learning from other couples, observing other couples' interaction and discussed with each other, the participants could gain fresh views ,great suggestions and interesting ideas and support from their peers.

CONCLUSION

The small group workshop for newlywed is a feasible and effective form to do marital education. Most of the participants believed the workshop helped them to be more confident with their marriage and confirmed that the interactive activities were the most helpful factor. The workshop conveyed essential concepts and information to the couples, enhanced their self-awareness and understanding of each other, promote the positive and effective communication, teach the couples useful skills of emotion management and conflict coping strategies, and helped to reduce the risk of marital collapse.

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