


# Comparing the Effectiveness of Pre-Marriage Training Based on Halford's Couple Relationship Education and Adlerian Premarital Approach on the Schema Modes of Girls and Boys Applying for Marriage

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The present study aimed to compare the effectiveness of pre-marriage training based on Halford's Couple Relationship Education and the Adlerian premarital approach on the schema modes of girls and boys applying for marriage.

**Materials and Methods:** This quasi-experimental research used a multi-group pretest-posttest design with a control group and a three-month follow-up phase. The statistical population consisted of girls and boys applying for marriage who had referred to counseling centers in the city of Darreh Shahr, Ilam. A total of 45 individuals were selected through convenience sampling and randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group (15 individuals per group). The data collection tool was the Schema Mode Questionnaire (Young, 2007). Pre-marriage training was provided to the experimental groups weekly, based on Halford's Couple Relationship Education approach and the Adlerian premarital approach. Data analysis was performed using repeated measures ANOVA and Bonferroni post hoc test at a significance level of 0.05.

**Findings:** The findings indicated that pre-marriage training based on the Adlerian approach had a significant effect on reducing schema modes ( $p = 0.010$ ). However, the effectiveness of Halford's Couple Relationship Education on schema modes was not significant ( $p = 0.356$ ). Additionally, no significant statistical difference was found between the scores of schema modes in the Halford's Couple Relationship Education group and the Adlerian pre-marriage training group, indicating that both approaches had a similar effect on the schema modes of girls and boys applying for marriage in the posttest and follow-up stages.

**Conclusion:** Based on these results, there is no significant difference in the effectiveness of pre-marriage training based on Halford's Couple Relationship Education and the Adlerian premarital approach on schema modes.

**Keywords:** Adler, Pre-Marriage Training, Schema Modes, Halford.

## 1. Introduction

One of the issues that preoccupies the mind of every individual is marriage, and most people desire to get married; however, many marriages eventually end in failure. The continuity of marital bonds depends on the perspective and interactions between spouses. As such, effective communication with one another and maintaining the bond are the foundation of marital life and the family (Qazi Askar, 2023). Dominant theories regarding the etiology of dysfunctional relationships among couples have identified significant social and cultural risk factors within the exosystem and microsystem (Chesworth, 2018). However, less theoretical and research attention has been given to ontogenetic factors such as cognitions (Senkans et al., 2020). Cognitive factors may influence how couples interact and their communication styles, and since they are modifiable, they serve as ideal targets for intervention (Spencer et al., 2019).

Schema modes are among the cognitive risk factors examined in this study (Pilkington et al., 2021). Unlike schemas, which are relatively stable traits, schema modes refer to a person's temporary emotional-behavioral state, shaped by a combination of early maladaptive schemas, coping responses, and/or healthy functioning (Kashani Kia, 2024). It is believed that schema modes result from the activation of early maladaptive schemas or the threat of activation, combined with coping responses to that activation (potentially) (Young, 1990). Schema modes are linked to psychopathological symptoms, as many of these symptoms can be directly observed as an active schema mode (Stavropoulos et al., 2020; Thimm & Chang, 2022). In the realm of marital relationships, schema modes have been confirmed to play a role in tendencies towards divorce (Soleiman Zade Halvae, 2021), marital conflicts (Qazi Askar, 2023), and both pessimistic and idealistic attitudes towards marriage (Kashani Kia, 2024). With the identification of the harmful consequences of schema modes, there is a need for treatment programs with maximum efficacy aimed at improving schema modes in couples and, more preventively, in girls and boys applying for marriage. It has been shown that participation in premarital training empowers couples to maintain their relationships and guides them towards resources that enable them to do so (Williamson et al., 2018). Given this importance, this study focuses on premarital training based on Halford's Couple Relationship Education approach and the Adlerian premarital approach.

Halford's Couple Relationship Education is a structured training program that provides couples with sufficient information about their relationship, with the goal of enhancing attitudes and skills for the long-term health of the relationship (Halford et al., 2008). According to Halford and Casey, communication skills training for couples has the potential not only to reduce relational conflict, aggression, and separation but also to improve personal and occupational functioning (Halford & Casey, 2010). Adlerian couples therapy is one of the most important and fundamental approaches in couples therapy (Carlson et al., 2006). In this approach, couples are helped to recognize that their goals and the subsequent conflicts are their own choices. As a result, they learn how their choices of behavior, belief, and attitude create conflict and, at the same time, how they can make new choices (Sweeney, 2019). Significant developments in Halford's Couple Relationship Education and Adlerian couples therapy have been reviewed in several valuable studies (Amani et al., 2022; Amani, 2018; Kim et al., 2020; Kim Halford et al., 2004; Shirafkan Kopkan, 2019; Stanley et al., 2020), as well as in meta-analyses (Pepping et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the researcher could not find any study that examined the effectiveness of these two educational approaches on schema modes. Considering that both Adlerian couples therapy and Halford's Couple Relationship Education are short-term therapies (i.e., around 20 sessions or less) that, unlike long-term therapies aimed at making fundamental changes in clients' overall functioning, seek to bring about small and practical changes to effectively address problems, they emphasize the strengths and assets of the clients (Ziaee, 2016). Therefore, a reduction in schema modes is not unexpected. Moreover, given the overlaps and differences between Halford's Couple Relationship Education and Adlerian couples therapy, it is conceivable to hypothesize which approach has greater efficacy. In light of the importance of this topic, this study examines the effectiveness of premarital training based on Halford's Couple Relationship Education and the Adlerian premarital approach, with significant clinical and theoretical commonalities and notable differences in skills, specific principles, and implementation techniques, to evaluate their efficacy on schema modes and identify the more effective treatment. As such, the findings of this research are applicable to psychologists, planners, and practitioners in public and social health in the country, as well as to couples therapists.

## 2. Methods and Materials

## 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was semi-experimental, employing a multi-group pretest-posttest design with a control group and a three-month follow-up phase. The statistical population consisted of girls and boys applying for marriage who had referred to counseling centers in the city of Darreh Shahr, Ilam Province, during the second half of 2023. The sample group included 45 eligible and willing girls and boys who were selected through convenience sampling based on the study criteria. They were randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group (15 individuals per group). Five individuals were placed on a waiting list to replace any participants who withdrew. The inclusion criteria were: a minimum age of 18; informed consent to participate in the study; at least middle school education; no chronic psychological illnesses; and no use of any narcotics. Exclusion criteria included lack of willingness to continue participation, incomplete questionnaires (failure to answer at least 5% of the questions in any given questionnaire), absence from more than two sessions of the training course, and concurrent participation in other counseling or psychotherapy programs. Ethical considerations, including the research ethics code IR.IAU.ARAK.REC.1403.154, were approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University, Arak Branch, and all ethical guidelines for conducting the research were followed. For data collection, the following tools and training sessions were used:

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Schema Mode

The Schema Mode Questionnaire is a 124-item tool developed by Young and colleagues (2007). This questionnaire assesses fourteen schema modes, including the Vulnerable Child, Angry Child, Impulsive Child, Undisciplined Child, Happy Child, Compliant Surrender, Detached Protector, Self-Soother, Self-Aggrandizer, Bully and Attack, Punitive Parent, Demanding Parent, and Healthy Adult modes. These fourteen modes are categorized into three overarching schema modes: Vulnerable Mode, Maladaptive Coping Mode, and Maladaptive Parent Mode. The questionnaire is scored on a six-point Likert scale (from 1 = never to 6 = always), with higher scores indicating a more rigid schema mode that dominates the information processing system. The internal consistency of this questionnaire, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, ranges from 0.76 to 0.96. The reliability of the Persian version, as

measured by Cronbach's alpha, ranges from 0.56 to 0.97. Concurrent validity was reported as satisfactory through its correlation with the Job Stress Questionnaire ( $r = 0.14-0.24$ ) (Javid, 2017).

## 2.3. Intervention

### 2.3.1. Pre-Marriage Training Based on Halford's Couple Relationship Education

In the present study, the premarital training package based on Halford's Couple Relationship Education was designed using the information, techniques, and tasks presented in the book *Brief Couple Therapy: Helping Couples Help Themselves* (Halford, 2005), and the *Couple Care Program* manual (Kim Halford et al., 2004). The training was implemented in six 90-minute group sessions (once a week). Additionally, to assess the content validity and time allocation for educational topics, seven premarital counseling experts were asked to evaluate the content and time allocation on a five-point scale based on content assessment questions. The content validity score was 0.91.

#### Session 1: Self-Change

In the first session, participants are introduced to relationship expectations and goals, focusing on the concept of self-change to achieve those goals. The session includes an overview of how personal changes can impact relationship dynamics. As homework, participants are asked to reflect on and document four recent interactions or conflicts they've had within the past month to help them recognize patterns and triggers in their relationships.

#### Session 2: Communication

This session introduces communication models, including techniques for speaking and listening effectively. Participants are guided through self-assessment of their communication, particularly in emotional and conflictual situations. The aim is to encourage self-change in how they communicate during conflicts. As homework, participants are asked to describe their communication styles with their partner and others.

#### Session 3: Intimacy and Attention

This session focuses on showing affection and balancing couple activities with individual interests. Participants explore ways to support one another and deepen emotional intimacy. Self-change in intimacy behaviors is discussed, and participants are assigned the task of applying conversation skills in their relationships and documenting their reactions and experiences.

#### Session 4: Managing Differences

The importance of recognizing individual differences in relationships is the theme of this session. Effective communication during conflict and strategies for conflict management are emphasized. Participants are encouraged to change how they manage conflicts, and they are tasked with continuing the communication exercises from the previous session to improve their conflict management.

#### Session 5: Sexual Desires

In this session, participants discuss myths surrounding sexuality, explore their sexual priorities, and consider ways to enhance sexual intimacy. Self-change strategies to increase sexual desires are discussed. For homework, participants are asked to further explore relationship myths and discuss them with their partner during the next session.

#### Session 6: Looking to the Future

The final session is about forecasting changes in the relationship and planning for them. Participants are guided through identifying potential future challenges and strategies for maintaining the relationship. The focus is on sustaining self-change in managing future relationship dynamics. The session concludes with participants formulating a plan to manage their relationship in the future.

### 2.3.2. *Adlerian Premarital Approach*

The premarital training package based on the Adlerian approach was developed based on the research of Amani (2018) and using the information, techniques, and tasks presented in the book *Marriage and Family* (Amani, 2018): *Adlerian Counseling and Therapy* (Khan Abadi, 2014). It was implemented in eight 90-minute group sessions (once a week). Additionally, to assess the content validity and time allocation for educational topics, seven premarital counseling experts were asked to evaluate the content and time allocation on a five-point scale based on content assessment questions. The content validity score was 0.89.

#### Session 1: Introduction and Life Styles

In the first session, the group members are introduced, and trust-building activities are initiated. The session covers an overview of the intervention, group rules, and participant responsibilities. A pretest is conducted, and the concept of life style, including Adler's four life styles, is introduced. The homework for this session asks participants to reflect on how their relationship would look if they were happy and content.

#### Session 2: Democratic Relationships

This session begins with a review of the previous meeting and a follow-up on homework. The focus is on Adler's

perspective of democratic relationships, where freedom and equality are emphasized. Participants are tasked with engaging in daily conversations with their partners and providing feedback in the next session.

#### Session 3: Goal Orientation and Behavior

The third session reviews the concept of teleology (goal-oriented behavior) and differentiates between values and goals in life. Participants are encouraged to reflect on how their goals shape their relationships. Daily conversation practice continues as part of the homework, with feedback to be discussed in the next session.

#### Session 4: Creativity and Social Interest

In this session, participants learn about creativity and choice in relationships, alongside Adler's concept of social interest as a key component of a healthy marriage. They are assigned the task of assessing their satisfaction with the life tasks and providing feedback during the next session.

#### Session 5: Social Interest and Feelings of Inferiority

The fifth session explores social interest further and discusses how feelings of inferiority impact individuals' personal growth and relationships. Participants are guided in finding their strengths and those of their partner. They are assigned the task of identifying and reflecting on positive traits in themselves and their partner, to be discussed in the next session.

#### Session 6: Protective Mechanisms

In this session, participants are introduced to protective mechanisms and how they can be used in marriage to foster a healthy relationship. The "button-press" technique is explained, which helps individuals recognize triggers. For homework, participants are asked to provide three encouragements to their partner and make two personal changes to discuss in the following session.

#### Session 7: Private Logic and Basic Mistakes

This session focuses on private logic and how fundamental mistakes in thinking can impact relationships. Participants learn techniques to correct these cognitive errors. The homework for this session involves organizing a "marital meeting" with their partner to discuss relationship dynamics, and feedback is collected in the next session.

#### Session 8: Life Tasks and Commitment

The final session reviews Adler's concept of life tasks and reinforces participants' understanding of marital commitment. The group summarizes the previous sessions, and participants complete a posttest. The session ends with feedback, a collective summary from the group, and a closing appreciation ceremony.



#### 2.4. Data analysis

After collecting data, and in accordance with the measurement level and statistical assumptions (normality, homogeneity of variances, covariance matrix, and sphericity assumption), repeated measures ANOVA and Bonferroni post hoc test were used for data analysis at a significance level of 0.05 using SPSS version 23.

### 3. Findings and Results

A total of 45 participants (30 in the experimental groups and 15 in the control group) took part in the study. The mean age and standard deviation for the Halford Couple Relationship Education group was  $28.7 \pm 6.5$  years, for the Adlerian premarital education group, it was  $27.9 \pm 5.9$  years, and for the control group, it was  $27.7 \pm 6.4$  years. The results of the ANOVA test showed no statistically significant

difference in age between the three groups ( $p = 0.176$ ). The distribution of respondents based on educational levels indicated that 73% (11 individuals) in the Halford Couple Relationship Education group held a bachelor's degree, 13% (2 individuals) had a master's degree, and 14% (2 individuals) had a high school diploma or associate degree. In the Adlerian premarital education group, 53% (8 individuals) had a bachelor's degree, 20% (3 individuals) had a master's degree, and 27% (4 individuals) reported holding a high school diploma. In the control group, 60% (9 individuals) had a bachelor's degree, 13% (4 individuals) had a master's degree, and 14% (2 individuals) held a high school diploma or associate degree. According to the results of the chi-square test, no statistically significant difference was found between the three groups in terms of educational levels ( $p = 0.749$ ).

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of Schema Modes in Pre-Test, Post-Test, and Follow-Up Phases by Group*

Variable	Stage	Group	M $\pm$ SD
Schema Modes	Pre-Test	Control	278.47 $\pm$ 51.42
		Halford Approach	291.60 $\pm$ 45.47
		Adlerian Approach	305.53 $\pm$ 43.53
	Post-Test	Control	268.47 $\pm$ 51.81
		Halford Approach	241.20 $\pm$ 44.88
		Adlerian Approach	215.07 $\pm$ 43.53
	Follow-Up	Control	268.20 $\pm$ 51.95
		Halford Approach	241.07 $\pm$ 44.79
		Adlerian Approach	214.93 $\pm$ 43.33

Table 1 presents the descriptive indices for schema modes during the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up phases in the experimental and control groups. The results indicate that the mean scores of participants in the experimental groups for the schema modes variable decreased, while no significant changes were observed in the control group. The assumptions for repeated measures ANOVA were then examined. The results of the normality assumption test, conducted using the Shapiro-Wilk test, indicated that the schema modes variable had a normal distribution in all three groups and at all three stages (pre-test, post-test, and follow-up) ( $p > 0.05$ ). The M-Box and Levene's tests for homogeneity of variance were also non-significant ( $p > 0.05$ ), confirming the homogeneity of covariance matrices

and the assumption of variance homogeneity. The results of Mauchly's test of sphericity showed that the assumption of equality of variances within subjects for the schema modes variable was violated ( $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, since the Greenhouse-Geisser epsilon value was less than 0.75, the Huynh-Feldt correction was used. Table 2 presents the results of the repeated measures ANOVA for examining within-subject effects. According to the F-test results, both the group effect and the time effect were significant for the schema modes variable ( $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, significant differences were observed between the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages for the research variable in the experimental and control groups.

**Table 2**

*Results of Repeated Measures ANOVA for Within-Subject and Between-Subject Effects*

Effects	Source of Effect	F-statistic	P-value	Eta-Squared
Within-Subjects	Time Effect	33310.518	$p < 0.001$	0.99
	Time $\times$ Group Interaction	7070.220	$p < 0.001$	0.99
Between-Subjects	Group Effect	1.202	$p = 0.030$	0.20

In Table 3, Bonferroni post-hoc tests were used to compare the schema modes between the groups (Halford

Couple Relationship Education and Adlerian Premarital Education) at each stage.

**Table 3**

*Results of Bonferroni Post-Hoc Tests for Comparing Schema Modes at Different Stages Between Experimental and Control Groups*

Variable	Stage	Group A	Group B	Mean Difference	Standard Error	P-value
Schema Modes	Pre-test	Control	Halford	-0.110	2.70	0.430
		Control	Adlerian	0.420	1.55	0.617
		Halford	Adlerian	0.759	1.145	0.346
	Post-test	Control	Halford	27.267	17.119	0.356
		Control	Adlerian	53.400	17.119	0.010
		Halford	Adlerian	26.133	17.119	0.403
	Follow-up	Control	Halford	0.156	0.084	0.209
		Control	Adlerian	55.300	0.765	$p < 0.001$
		Halford	Adlerian	0.178	0.099	0.236

According to the results in Table 3, the Adlerian premarital education approach had a significant effect on schema modes ( $p = 0.010$ ) compared to the control group. The effect of Halford's Couple Relationship Education on schema modes was not significant compared to the control group ( $p = 0.356$ ). Another finding of the study showed no statistically significant difference between the schema mode scores in the Halford Couple Relationship Education group and the Adlerian premarital education group ( $p = 0.403$ ), indicating that both educational approaches had a similar effect on schema modes in the post-test phase. This finding was maintained during the three-month follow-up period ( $p = 0.236$ ).

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to compare the effectiveness of pre-marriage training based on Halford's Couple Relationship Education approach and the Adlerian premarital approach on the schema modes of girls and boys applying for marriage. The results showed that premarital training using the Adlerian approach had a significant impact on reducing schema modes. Another finding of the study indicated that Halford's Couple Relationship Education was not significantly effective in reducing schema modes. Additionally, no significant difference was observed

between the effectiveness of Halford's Couple Relationship Education and the Adlerian premarital approach on the schema modes of girls and boys applying for marriage. These results persisted during the three-month follow-up period.

Given that schema modes reflect the immediate emotional, cognitive, and behavioral states of individuals (Young, 1990), these results align with previous studies that have examined the effectiveness of Adlerian couples therapy on emotion regulation strategies and emotional states. In line with this finding, Kim et al. confirmed the effectiveness of the Adlerian approach in reducing anger, depression, and anxiety in women (Kim et al., 2020).

To explain the effectiveness of Adlerian premarital training on the schema modes of girls and boys applying for marriage, it can be stated that schema modes are activated by early maladaptive schemas, which are dysfunctional emotional and cognitive patterns that develop in childhood and reappear throughout life. Unfavorable early experiences and frustration of basic childhood needs lead to the formation of maladaptive schemas regarding oneself, relationships with others, and the world (Young, 1990). In therapy sessions, after establishing a solid relationship based on mutual respect, the therapist explores each participant's lifestyle, including an examination of family dynamics and early memories. Information about childhood, such as

family background, self-descriptions, siblings, parents, other family members, family values, birth information, favorite childhood stories, and early memories, is collected during the evaluation of the couple's lifestyle. The rationale for collecting lifestyle information in the presence of both spouses is to provide each partner the opportunity to hear and understand the building blocks of the other's growth for the first time. The final step in collecting lifestyle information involves sharing five to seven childhood memories, including the first incident one can recall (Khan Abadi, 2014). Recalling early events provides unique and specific information about how individuals perceive themselves, others, and life. These memories reflect decisions made during formative years that define the individual's basic conceptual framework. Sharing early memories allows access to the individual's subjective reality for analysis. Memories represent the "life story" that a person uses to interpret, organize, and control experiences (Kim et al., 2020). Among the information gathered during lifestyle analysis, mistaken belief systems and approaches were identified and listed. By helping individuals change their faulty beliefs, the goal shifts towards creating opportunities for more constructive interactions. Gaining insight into the faulty logic behind behavior and understanding that current behavior is often based on a mistaken decision from childhood often leads to the decision to change attitudes and behaviors (Khan Abadi, 2014). Introducing new options by the therapist helped foster optimism in the spouses, allowing them to practice making changes. The therapist and the couple then worked together to review mistaken beliefs that led them to engage in dysfunctional behaviors, while communication and problem-solving skills were taught by reinforcing lifestyle strengths (Kim et al., 2020; Pepping et al., 2020). At the end of the sessions, couples reported using their skills to solve issues and becoming closer. This approach provided girls and boys applying for marriage with insight into their schema modes, helping them to reform these modes.

Another finding of the study showed that no significant changes were observed in the group receiving Halford's Couple Relationship Education compared to the control group during the post-test phase. In Halford's communication approach, dynamic factors such as communication quality and relationship expectations are emphasized, whereas factors such as family background (e.g., parental divorce), which are unchangeable and lack practical steps for improving present relationships, receive less attention (Stanley et al., 2020). Accordingly, while

relationship training can modify communication (Halford, 2005; Halford & Casey, 2010; Halford et al., 2008), there is no reliable evidence that these changes are associated with other outcomes—specifically schema modes.

To explain the equal effectiveness of Halford's Couple Relationship Education and the Adlerian premarital approach on schema modes, it can be argued that despite appearing to involve two distinct educational approaches—one focusing directly on reducing negative communication and maintaining couple relationships (Halford's communication approach) and the other indirectly focusing on creating an equal, mutually respectful relationship through various cognitive, behavioral, and emotional techniques (Adlerian approach) (Sweeney, 2019)—they share common ground. Specifically, both approaches heavily rely on schemas (or lifestyle) to help individuals organize their perspectives of themselves and the world around them. These schemas develop through strategies that enable individuals to meet their belonging needs, which stem from family relationships. In Adlerian couples therapy and Halford's Couple Relationship Education, lifestyle arises from an individual's perception of the environment, the behaviors they use, and the quality and quantity of the relationship. Both Halford's and Adlerian therapists share the idea that individuals act with specific goals or sets of goals in mind, which drives their behavioral efforts (Halford & Casey, 2010; Sweeney, 2019). Since schema modes stem from a "recognizable pattern of cognition and emotion developed from the past" (Young, 1990), the equal effectiveness of both premarital training approaches on schema modes is understandable.

## 5. Limitations & Suggestions

The limitations of the present study include the sample size and the sampling method. Since all participants were selected using convenience sampling from girls and boys applying for marriage who visited counseling centers in Darreh Shahr, Ilam Province, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results to other populations. For more conclusive results, case studies or experimental replications with larger samples and longer follow-up periods are recommended. The findings of this study highlight the potential of Adlerian premarital training in reducing schema modes. Therefore, psychologists and practitioners working in this area can use Adlerian premarital training as an effective model for prevention and treatment. Supporting this, Adler stated, "If every marriage were preceded by

couples therapy conducted by trained professionals, it would be a true blessing for marriage, humanity, and future generations" (Ellenberger, 1980).

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. The respondents provided written statements including ethical consent, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their information. This study holds an ethical code (IR.IAU.ARAK.REC.1403.154) from the ethics committee at Islamic Azad University, Arak Branch.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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