



Designing a Process Model for Premarital Counseling

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to design a culturally grounded and scientifically validated process model for premarital counseling tailored to the sociocultural context of Iran.

Methods and Materials: The research employed a qualitative methodology using the Delphi technique combined with thematic analysis and SWOT analysis to collect and analyze expert opinions. Twelve professionals—including psychologists, counselors, and executives in family-related institutions—were selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews, then coded and categorized into organizing and overarching themes. The resulting model was structured across five stages (education and awareness, psychological assessment, counseling interventions, post-marital follow-up, and final evaluation) and three functional levels (individual, interpersonal, and institutional).

Findings: The data analysis yielded four overarching themes: (1) coherence and systematization of the counseling process, (2) the role of culture, family, and social factors, (3) quality, tools, and scientific standards, and (4) training of communication, cognitive, and emotional skills. Participants emphasized the lack of standardized national frameworks, the influence of cultural and familial values on counseling receptivity, and the need for technological innovation in service delivery. The proposed model integrated these insights by offering a staged, interdisciplinary, and culturally responsive counseling structure that bridges psychological rigor with institutional coordination.

Conclusion: The developed model provides a comprehensive framework for premarital counseling that addresses both micro-level relational dynamics and macro-level systemic gaps. Its emphasis on cultural adaptability, psychological assessment, counselor training, and digital integration makes it a viable blueprint for enhancing counseling practices in Iran and similar contexts.

Keywords: premarital counseling, preventive interventions, process model, referral system, Delphi method, SWOT.

1. Introduction

Premarital counseling has become an essential preventive strategy in contemporary psychology, designed to enhance marital readiness, promote emotional resilience, and reduce the risk of early marital discord and divorce. Given the evolving social dynamics, increasing divorce rates, and shifting value systems across generations, the design of effective, culturally responsive, and scientifically grounded premarital counseling models has garnered widespread scholarly attention. The growing body of research highlights the need for structured interventions that go beyond superficial compatibility checks and instead engage couples in developing critical cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills required for sustainable intimate relationships (Roberts, 2023; Yavuzer & Doğanülkü, 2023; Zettel, 2023).

In recent years, a paradigm shift has occurred from traditional, advice-giving models toward integrative and multidimensional counseling approaches that incorporate empirical assessments, psychological theories, religious frameworks, and culturally sensitive components. Such models seek to address both individual and relational factors that contribute to long-term marital success (Muchupe, 2022; Salley, 2022). This interdisciplinary development is particularly important in societies where family structures, cultural values, and community norms deeply influence partner selection, marital roles, and conflict resolution patterns (Akhtiari Amiri et al., 2018; Irby, 2024). As such, premarital counseling must be reimaged not merely as an intervention for individuals, but as a process embedded within larger social and institutional systems (Razavi et al., 2018; Somari Safa et al., 2022).

The need for premarital counseling in the Iranian cultural context is both urgent and unique. Marriage continues to be a pivotal institution, but it is increasingly challenged by generational value shifts, urbanization, economic pressures, and psychosocial transformations. Consequently, researchers have emphasized the necessity of culturally adapted models that reflect indigenous norms while also meeting global standards of psychological validity and reliability (Akbari Torkestani et al., 2017; Kakabaraei & Amiri, 2022; Zahra Kar & Forough, 2020). The inclusion of religious values in some counseling models has further enhanced their acceptability and relevance within Iranian and other religious communities (Irby, 2024; Salley, 2022). Nonetheless, integration of religious, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions remains a complex challenge

requiring deliberate design and professional oversight (Akhtiari Amiri et al., 2018; Kakabaraei & Amiri, 2021).

The literature indicates that effective premarital counseling must incorporate psychological assessments to evaluate traits such as communication styles, problem-solving abilities, emotional regulation, attachment tendencies, and conflict resolution strategies. These traits have been consistently linked to marital satisfaction and stability (American Psychiatric, 2022; Zhian et al., 2022). For instance, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR) highlights that unresolved psychological vulnerabilities—such as personality disorders, mood instability, or maladaptive coping mechanisms—can impair relationship functioning if not addressed prior to marriage (American Psychiatric, 2022).

A critical element of the premarital process involves enhancing couples' awareness of their expectations, assumptions, and emotional needs. Structured educational interventions that build skills in empathy, active listening, emotional intelligence, and mutual respect have demonstrated efficacy in reducing maladaptive interaction patterns and promoting healthier couple dynamics (Roberts, 2023; Yavuzer & Doğanülkü, 2023). In this regard, premarital education is increasingly framed as a developmental pathway rather than a one-time consultation. Couples benefit most from counseling when they are guided through an evolving process of self-discovery, values clarification, and interpersonal growth (BahadorMotlagh et al., 2024; Kavei Sadeh et al., 2022).

Furthermore, digital innovations have opened new avenues for premarital interventions. From online self-assessment platforms to AI-powered compatibility analyses, technological tools are being used to increase access, personalization, and precision in counseling services. While digital tools are not substitutes for therapeutic relationships, they offer supplemental benefits such as convenience, real-time feedback, and data collection that inform individualized treatment plans (Muchupe, 2022; Zettel, 2023). However, as noted by scholars, the over-commercialization of premarital testing tools can undermine their credibility unless regulated within a professionally supervised framework (Kakabaraei & Amiri, 2022; Somari Safa et al., 2022).

Equally important is the consideration of institutional structures. A persistent gap in many countries, including Iran, is the absence of standardized national policies for premarital counseling and insufficient integration between healthcare, education, and religious systems (Akhtiari Amiri et al., 2018; Razavi et al., 2018). Research shows that

systemic collaboration among psychologists, clergy, legal professionals, and social workers is essential for constructing a holistic counseling infrastructure that supports young couples at different life stages (Irby, 2024; Kavei Sadeh et al., 2022). Without such coordination, the counseling experience remains fragmented, inconsistent, and often dependent on the practitioner's individual philosophy rather than evidence-based practice (Roberts, 2023; Salley, 2022).

Despite these structural limitations, several innovative premarital counseling models have emerged that reflect diverse perspectives. For example, the "Aware" model, developed with a culturally localized and multifaceted lens, demonstrated positive outcomes in improving couples' awareness, acceptance, responsibility, and adjustment (Kakabaraci & Amiri, 2021, 2022). Likewise, intervention models based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and cognitive-behavioral principles have shown significant improvements in sexual satisfaction, emotional intimacy, and marital preparedness (Akbari Torkestani et al., 2017; BahadorMotlagh et al., 2024).

It is also critical to underscore the dynamic nature of premarital counseling across genders and age groups. Gender expectations, roles, and socialization significantly affect how men and women approach counseling and marriage in general (Zahra Kar & Forough, 2020; Zhian et al., 2022). Counselors must be equipped to navigate these dynamics and avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes while promoting mutual understanding and equity in relationships (Muchupe, 2022; Zettel, 2023).

From a public health perspective, premarital counseling can play a preventive role in reducing the incidence of psychological distress, domestic violence, and divorce-related trauma (American Psychiatric, 2022; BahadorMotlagh et al., 2024). It serves as an early intervention mechanism to address risk factors and foster protective behaviors that contribute to long-term mental well-being and relational satisfaction. Counseling also promotes social stability by empowering individuals to make informed, emotionally intelligent, and responsible decisions about marital life (Irby, 2024; Roberts, 2023).

In sum, premarital counseling represents a fertile intersection of clinical psychology, cultural studies, education, and policy-making. As the literature confirms, no single model can universally serve all populations; rather, context-specific adaptations rooted in scientific evidence and cultural understanding are imperative. The integration of standardized psychological assessment, skill-building

education, spiritual guidance, and policy frameworks will likely define the next generation of premarital counseling systems. Accordingly, this study seeks to contribute to this evolving discourse by designing a process model of premarital counseling grounded in empirical research and sociocultural responsiveness, addressing both micro-level relationship dynamics and macro-level institutional challenges.

2. Methods and Materials

The present study, by nature, falls under the category of applied research. Moreover, this research integrates both theoretical and empirical aspects. In the theoretical part, it explores fundamental concepts, existing theories, and similar models, which help to strengthen the theoretical foundations of the study and clarify its connection with the scientific literature. In the empirical part, data gathered from practical counseling sessions and the administration of tests and structured interviews are analyzed to evaluate the effectiveness and practical applicability of the proposed model.

The statistical population of this study consists of an expert group comprising executive specialists, counselors, and psychologists in the field of premarital counseling. This group consists of individuals with expertise and specialized knowledge in premarital counseling and assessment, who, due to their subject-matter proficiency, can offer precise and scientific insights into premarital counseling processes. This group was selected using purposive sampling in order to ensure that the information and data were collected from individuals with sufficient expertise and experience in the area, thereby facilitating scientific and practical analysis of the proposed model.

Sampling in this study, as in other qualitative research, was purposive and homogeneous (Mohammadpour, 2019). Participants were selected based on their expertise and experience in premarital counseling. Homogeneous sampling, in contrast to maximum variation sampling, which seeks diversity in characteristics, quality, and contexts, focuses on in-depth examination of similar individuals (with one shared critical characteristic). Therefore, individuals were selected from a subculture with many common characteristics, and this specific group was studied. Since the goal was to interview professionals within a single discipline (psychology and counseling), the named sampling method was used. This qualitative sampling method is characterized by features such as transferability of findings, enabling

generalization to similar populations. It follows a naturalistic generalization approach and aims for deep understanding of the studied phenomenon without using statistical calculations (Ranjbar et al., 2012).

In qualitative research, unlike quantitative research where the goal is to generalize results from a sample to the whole population, the aim is to reach the most comprehensive explanation and description of a phenomenon. Therefore, sampling continues until the researcher reaches theoretical saturation—meaning that the obtained data become repetitive and no new information emerges. At this point, new participants no longer contribute to the findings, and all data sources provide similar content to the researcher. This principle was followed in the present study.

There is no strong and explicit rule regarding the number and selection of experts in Delphi studies. The number depends on several factors such as the objective of the Delphi method, the scope of the issue, decision quality, the

research team's capacity, internal and external validity, data collection timeline, available resources, the scope of the issue, and the response rate. The number of participants is typically fewer than 50, and most often between 15 to 20. In Delphi studies, homogeneous samples are usually used to obtain a broad range of opinions, high-quality responses, and acceptable solutions. However, larger samples may increase data collection complexity and make consensus, analysis, and revision more difficult. Nevertheless, with larger samples, the number of judgments increases, which enhances reliability, particularly in heterogeneous groups. Some researchers suggest that usually 30 participants provide sufficient data, and increasing the number results in repetitive responses with no new input. Others note that there is limited empirical evidence on the effect of participant numbers on the validity and reliability of consensus processes. Typically, homogeneous Delphi panels include between 10 and 15 participants.

Table 1

Characteristics of Study Participants

No.	Gender	Executive Background in Psychology and Counseling	Area of Expertise	Work Experience	Education Level
1	Female	Clinical Counseling, Welfare Org., Islamic Propagation Office	Family Counseling	30 years	PhD
2	Male	Clinical Counseling, Judiciary, Psychology Association	Health Psychology	15 years	PhD
3	Female	Clinical Counseling, Police Force	General Psychology	5 years	MA
4	Female	Clinical Counseling, Police Force	General Psychology	5 years	MA
5	Female	Clinical Counseling, Prison, Judiciary, Welfare Org.	Family Counseling	10 years	PhD
6	Female	Clinical Counseling, Judiciary, Police, Municipality, Welfare Org.	Family Counseling	20 years	PhD
7	Male	Clinical Counseling, Technical University, Broadcasting, Judiciary, Army, Municipality	Family Counseling	28 years	PhD
8	Female	Clinical Counseling, Judiciary, Welfare Org.	Family Counseling	6 years	PhD
9	Male	Clinical Counseling, Ministry	General Psychology	9 years	MA
10	Male	Clinical Counseling, Municipality, Welfare Org.	Clinical Psychology	15 years	PhD
11	Female	Clinical Counseling, Welfare Org., Relief Committee, Police	Clinical Psychology	6 years	PhD
12	Female	Clinical Counseling, Welfare Org.	Psychology	22 years	PhD

Data collection in this study was conducted through both library-based and field-based methods. In the library phase, credible academic sources such as books, research articles, theses, and other documents relevant to the topic were reviewed. These sources provided the necessary information for building a strong and comprehensive theoretical framework and enabled the researcher to conduct a precise analysis of the theoretical and scholarly background. This method allowed the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the research topic and ground the study in previous literature and existing theories.

In the field phase, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with experts in premarital counseling (including specialists, counselors, and psychologists) who held executive positions in institutions. These interviews were designed to gather detailed and qualitative insights from participants' experiences and perspectives, enabling the researcher to explore the intricacies of premarital counseling processes.

This combination of library and field data collection enabled the researcher to benefit from both theoretical sources and practical data, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of the subject's applied dimensions. This holistic approach contributed to the precision and depth of the research, enhancing the credibility and applicability of the findings.

The data collection instruments in this study were divided into two broad categories: library instruments and field instruments. Library instruments included resources such as online databases, printed books, scientific articles, both Persian and non-Persian sources, and translated works. These instruments were used for collecting theoretical data, reviewing the literature, and constructing the theoretical framework of the study. By reviewing credible sources, the researcher was able to establish a stronger theoretical foundation for the research.

Field instruments included communication tools such as audio recorders, telephone, mail, and email used to communicate directly with participants and collect field data. However, the primary data collection tool in this study was in-depth interviews. These interviews, as one of the most important qualitative methods, provided access to rich and detailed data through structured and semi-structured conversations with participants. Utilizing these interviews enabled the researcher to deeply and accurately analyze the participants' views, experiences, and relevant information.

In the present study, the questions were designed in a semi-structured format to allow greater flexibility for both

interviewer and respondent. The purpose of these questions was to gather comprehensive information from the experts' viewpoints, with follow-up questions used to probe deeper into participants' answers.

Moreover, the interview questions in the first phase, based on the first sub-question, were developed using the SWOT framework, focusing on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of premarital counseling from the experts' perspectives. In the second phase, aligned with the Delphi methodology, the questions addressed proposals for the premarital counseling process while considering other sub-questions. In both phases, the researcher maintained theoretical sensitivity and considered issues such as relevant institutions, implementation pathways, and research objectives.

The Delphi method is a systematic and predictable approach that facilitates interaction among experts and scholars. It is a consensus-building method used for addressing complex issues where sufficient information is lacking. Alongside brainstorming, Delphi is one of the most recognized group decision-making techniques. Its name originates from the ancient Greek Temple of Apollo in Delphi, symbolizing divine inspiration from Apollo, the god of music and the sun. Initially based on speculation, intuition, and inspiration, the technique evolved into a structured educational method. Delphi was first developed by RAND Corporation for a military-defense project aimed at predicting the impact of technology on warfare, though the results were not published until 12 years later due to security concerns. Subsequently, it gained popularity in scientific studies and became a widely used technique in the 1990s.

In this method, participants express their opinions on a particular issue through questionnaires administered by a facilitator. The goal is to narrow the range of responses and reach a consensus among experts, which continues to be a widely used practice. The Delphi method involves a panel of experts who respond anonymously to questionnaires and then receive statistical feedback on the group's responses, repeating the process iteratively. The method typically uses open-ended questionnaires and is primarily qualitative, although some researchers apply it to quantitative data and hypothesis testing. In that context, it functions as a descriptive survey technique.

The Delphi method is a multi-method research strategy that utilizes expert opinion for collecting and analyzing group knowledge. It is particularly suitable for topics requiring multiple perspectives from professionals. Its

advantage lies in enabling expert interaction and collective knowledge use. According to Strong, Lawrence, and Fowler (1978), the steps of conducting research using the Delphi method include: forming a supervisory team, selecting a roundtable of experts in the targeted area, preparing the first-round questionnaire, testing for clarity and ambiguity, distributing the questionnaires, analyzing the first round, preparing and possibly revising the second-round questionnaire, redistributing it, and analyzing the second round. Steps 7 to 9 are repeated as needed to achieve result stability. Finally, the researcher compiles a report to present, refine, and finalize the premarital counseling process model.

The implementation details include selecting experts with adequate experience and knowledge in marriage counseling and family relations, collecting data through interviews, surveys, or expert panels, analyzing and interpreting data using appropriate methods and software, and revising the process model based on expert feedback.

There are two forms of the Delphi method: formative Delphi and reactive Delphi. These are similar to content validity index (CVI) and content validity ratio (CVR) techniques. In the formative type, expert opinions are gathered first, and the model is then designed, revised, and refined—this is the approach used in this study. In the reactive type, the researcher first designs a model and then collects expert feedback.

The Delphi method is widely recognized and commonly used in futures studies and scenario planning. Given its predictive nature, it can be highly effective in psychology and counseling research. Accordingly, the current study employs the Delphi method to design a premarital counseling process model. The researcher intends to develop a model that helps couples undergo an effective and efficient process, become familiar with marriage-related challenges, and prepare more thoroughly for shared life.

Inclusion criteria are the conditions participants or data must meet to be included in the study. In this study, they include:

1. A minimum of 5 years of experience providing counseling services to ensure participants have practical experience dealing with counseling processes and challenges.
2. Experience integrating counseling with executive or managerial roles to enable participants to analyze counseling processes from a managerial perspective.

3. Practical familiarity with executive and managerial structures to ensure full understanding of the operational aspects of counseling processes.

Exclusion criteria are characteristics that disqualify individuals from participating in the study. These criteria ensure participants have sufficient practical and managerial experience. They include:

1. Fewer than 5 years of experience in counseling services.
2. Sole involvement in counseling without any executive or managerial experience.
3. No work experience in executive or managerial roles, limiting their ability to oversee or direct counseling processes.
4. Employment limited to administrative or academic roles without direct counseling experience.

In scientific research, adherence to ethical principles is essential to protect participants' rights and ensure the integrity and credibility of the results. In this study, all ethical considerations were strictly observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. This consent was documented in writing after clearly explaining the study's objectives, interview procedures, and data usage.

Participants were assured that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. All personal data were kept confidential and anonymized. Identifying information was removed, and data were only accessible to the researcher and team members. Interviews were conducted in a psychologically safe environment to ensure participant comfort and eliminate any pressure.

The researcher maintained full neutrality throughout data collection and analysis. All participant perspectives were respected, and no judgments or biases influenced the interpretation. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and how the results would be used and disseminated. They were allowed to withdraw at any point without any impact on their professional or academic standing.

All collected data were used solely for academic purposes. No data were used beyond the scope of the study, and personal data were deleted after analysis. Upon conclusion, participants were given the option to view the results, promoting transparency and offering them beneficial feedback.

3. Findings and Results

In line with the goal of designing a comprehensive and indigenous process model for premarital counseling, the data obtained from the second round of the Delphi analysis were revisited and classified in the third stage using an integrative and analytical approach. The aim of this stage was to synthesize and merge the dispersed organizing themes into higher-order concepts and overarching themes that could lead to the formation of the main dimensions of the model. Accordingly, each overarching theme reflects a cluster of aligned and problem-oriented subthemes that, at both the theoretical and practical levels, provide the necessary foundations for the systematic design of the counseling process.

Coherence and Systematic Structure of the Premarital Counseling Process

Given the overarching aim of this research—to design a comprehensive, indigenous, and staged process model for premarital counseling—the overarching theme titled "Overlooked Institutional Capacities and the Need for Synergy among Institutions: Coherence and Systematization of the Premarital Counseling Process" must be articulated in a way that coherently and analytically incorporates the concepts and subthemes embedded in the organizing themes. What follows is an integrative, comprehensive, and analytical description of this overarching theme based on its organizing subthemes:

One of the fundamental challenges in achieving an effective model for premarital counseling is the lack of structural coherence and systematic organization in the current process of delivering these services in the country. Despite the diversity of relevant institutions—including governmental, non-governmental, religious, and specialized centers—there is often poor coordination among them and an absence of an integrated interdisciplinary framework. This issue is particularly evident in the lack of shared standards, the absence of unified assessment protocols, and the fragmented performance of counseling institutions. Under such circumstances, each institution operates based on its own perspective and resources, resulting in counseling services that, at the macro level, lack consistency, evaluability, and optimal effectiveness.

This functional and structural fragmentation not only causes confusion for clients in choosing the appropriate pathway to receive services but also jeopardizes quality and equity in access. Therefore, it is imperative that the structure of premarital counseling be redesigned in a way that, in addition to clearly delineating the duties, responsibilities, and levels of intervention of each institution, facilitates

effective synergy and interaction among institutions involved in psychology, education, health, religion, and culture. Such a redesign must be grounded in comprehensive, staged, and culturally adapted models that can account for the country's cultural and regional diversity and meet the evolving needs of new generations in the realm of intimate relationships.

Within this framework, the design and implementation of an intelligent evaluation and monitoring system for the counseling process—from early adolescence through the decision-making stage for marriage—is indispensable. Only through such a system can the ongoing performance of counseling centers and the effectiveness of interventions be continuously assessed, enabling policy-making to be based on real-time and evidence-based data. In this context, the effective and supervisory intervention of governmental bodies—particularly the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Sport and Youth, the Psychology and Counseling Organization, and sovereign institutions—plays a crucial role in ensuring quality, supervising implementation processes, and enhancing the professional competence of counselors.

Overall, achieving a coherent, goal-oriented, and stable premarital counseling process requires the activation of neglected institutional capacities and the establishment of an interdisciplinary, standards-driven, and coordinated approach among institutions. This necessitates a serious revision of the current counseling system, the development of novel structures, the implementation of data-monitoring mechanisms, and the reinforcement of a network-based governance model in this domain. Through such initiatives, a sustainable, effective, and culturally grounded model can be derived to enhance informed decision-making in marriage and promote the psychosocial well-being of couples.

The Role of Culture, Family, and Social Factors in the Marriage Counseling Process

In the analysis of the codes and in the direction of constructing a comprehensive process model for premarital counseling, a code titled "The Impact of Family, Culture, and Lifestyle on Premarital Counseling: The Role of Culture, Family, and Social Factors in the Marriage Counseling Process" was identified as essential to encompass the cultural, generational, value-based, and social dimensions influencing this process through a structural and process-oriented lens. What emerges prominently at this level of analysis is the role that cultural and familial components play as foundational and mediating

factors shaping clients' attitudes and behaviors in the counseling process.

Culture and family not only serve as background forces in the formation of attitudes, values, and communication styles, but also act as active agents in the stages of partner selection, relationship initiation, marriage decision-making, and even engagement with the counseling process. In many cases, attitudes and expectations shaped within familial and cultural contexts significantly influence couples' understanding of relationships, conflict, responsibilities, and selection criteria. Particularly in a society such as Iran, where the family continues to exert considerable influence over children's decision-making, premarital counseling that neglects these layers will inevitably function incompletely.

Cultural, familial, and generational differences between partners are among the most prominent issues encountered during counseling sessions, often complicating mutual understanding, interaction, and adaptation. If a counselor lacks the necessary insight into the roots of these differences—or if the counseling structure is not designed to address and manage such disparities—the interventions will fail to facilitate informed and satisfying decisions. In this context, aligning the counseling process with clients' cultural, ethnic, gender-based, and lifestyle characteristics is of vital importance, as disregarding these factors may result in resistance, distrust, or misinterpretation of the counseling content.

Additionally, profound changes in lifestyle, communication patterns, gender roles, and family structures in recent decades have posed new challenges for the counseling system. Generational gaps between parents and children, value conflicts between older and younger generations, and new perspectives on marriage, family, and relationships necessitate a serious revision of counseling content, educational approaches, and applied techniques. Clearly, a traditional and uniform counseling structure cannot adequately meet the diverse needs of clients who bring conflicting values and varied life experiences into the sessions.

Therefore, in the proposed process model, the place and influence of culture, family, and social factors must be regarded as a fundamental mediating layer throughout all stages of counseling. This stage demands the design of culturally sensitive tools and approaches, the training of counselors in cultural competence, the understanding of family power dynamics, and the empowerment of couples to confront external pressures. Only through the understanding and integration of these dimensions into the counseling

structure can marriage decision-making be envisioned not merely as an individual choice, but as a conscious, sustainable action aligned with the individuals' cultural–social backgrounds.

Quality, Tools, and Scientific Standards in Premarital Counseling

Within the framework of designing a process model for premarital counseling, the overarching theme titled "Quality, Tools, and Scientific Standards in Premarital Counseling" reflects one of the most fundamental needs in Iran's counseling system—namely, the shift from traditional, generalized, and experience-based counseling toward a data-driven, standardized, technology-enhanced, and scientifically grounded approach that improves service quality and prevents superficial and high-risk decision-making.

A major weakness in the existing system is the inadequacy of counselor training content and the uniformity in counseling execution. Many counselors, due to limited educational opportunities, lack proficiency in using scientific tools, modern theoretical frameworks, and emerging technologies. As a result, counseling processes often devolve into stereotypical, non-analytical, and repetitive conversations that are ineffective in accurately identifying issues, predicting conflict zones, or offering impactful interventions. To overcome this issue, it is essential to enhance counselors' scientific and professional competencies in applying effective theoretical models, administering validated psychological tests, and analyzing couples' data.

Standard psychological assessments and behavioral measurement tools, when properly administered and interpreted, can play a critical role in revealing personality differences, core values, attachment styles, communication skills, and couples' problem-solving abilities. These tools not only increase the accuracy of the counseling process but also create opportunities for preventive interventions that mitigate the emergence of fundamental conflicts in future marital life. However, excessive reliance on tests—especially in the absence of counselors' scientific competence or in commercialized settings—can be detrimental. This challenge highlights the urgent need for professional oversight, specialized training, and the establishment of standardized frameworks for test utilization.

Among the most promising capacities in this field are digital innovations and technological tools, which can significantly enhance the speed, accuracy, and accessibility

of counseling services. Online counseling platforms, self-assessment apps, tools for analyzing couple interaction, and data-driven databases are examples of innovations that, when embedded within an integrated system, can not only improve the quality of counseling but also produce high-value informational outputs. These technologies, if integrated with scientific content and education, can transform a surface-level perspective into an analytical, process-oriented approach that focuses not merely on apparent compatibility but on deep cognitive, emotional, and behavioral alignment.

Ultimately, achieving this level of quality requires a comprehensive system for content development, tool management, continuous counselor training, and supervision of implementation methods. The design of the premarital counseling process model must adopt a holistic view of these components and, rather than proposing merely an operational pathway, must focus on scientific competence, standardization, and the integration of technology with psychology. Such a model will not only enhance the effectiveness of counseling but also transform it into a practical tool for empowering couples and enabling informed decision-making.

Training Communication, Cognitive, and Emotional Skills for Marital Relationship Improvement

In constructing the process model for premarital counseling, the overarching theme titled "The Importance of a Comprehensive and Dynamic Approach in Premarital Counseling for Enhancing Marital Life Skills: Training Communication, Cognitive, and Emotional Skills for Marital Relationship Improvement" addresses one of the most critical transformative layers in the counseling system—a layer that emphasizes proactive prevention and gradual empowerment for informed, mature, and sustainable entry into marital relationships.

One of the key shortcomings of the current premarital counseling system is the neglect of foundational, phased, and skill-based education. Such training should begin not only at the threshold of marriage but from adolescence and early adulthood, progressing in a structured, coherent manner grounded in individuals' personal and social development. Core skills such as self-awareness, emotional intelligence, responsibility, decision-making, conflict resolution, emotion

regulation, and communication styles play an undeniable role in the future quality of marital relationships.

If premarital counseling is limited to identifying superficial compatibilities or recognizing outward traits, it cannot fulfill its function of improving marital quality and preventing divorce. By contrast, an effective process model must be based on sustained and deep training in marital life skills. This approach views the client not as someone merely ready for marriage, but as a growing human being who needs to strengthen their psychological and social foundations to enter a healthy, responsible, and committed relationship.

Analyzing communication styles, personal values, core beliefs, relationship expectations, and psychological readiness for marital life should be central to this training. In this context, the counselor, as a life skills coach, must go beyond information transfer to reconstruct attitudes, enhance personal insight, and correct dysfunctional behavioral patterns. This level of intervention can only be achieved if premarital counseling evolves from a static, prescriptive format into a dynamic, educational, and participatory process.

Furthermore, research clearly demonstrates that beginning marital life education at earlier ages and integrating it into the educational system can have more lasting, deeper, and more effective impacts on partner selection quality and relationship sustainability. Training in emotional intelligence, self-regulation, responsibility, conflict resolution, and effective communication not only prepares individuals psychologically for marriage but also reduces post-marriage difficulties, increases marital satisfaction, and decreases divorce rates.

Therefore, the code "The Importance of a Comprehensive and Dynamic Approach to Enhancing Life Skills" must be reflected in the final model as conveying the notion that premarital counseling is not merely a brief stop on the path to decision-making—it is a stage in a broader educational-developmental journey where individuals learn foundational relationship skills, reconstruct their attitudes, and attain a level of psychological and social readiness such that the decision to marry is made with awareness, maturity, and responsible intent. Accordingly, [Table 2](#) presents a systematic classification of the organizing themes under overarching themes.

Table 2

Coding of Research Interviews

Organizing Themes	Overarching Themes
Development and standardization of premarital counseling services – Integration of the counseling process and improvement of couple assessment methods – Lack of coordination among counseling institutions and the necessity of interdisciplinary teamwork – The need for oversight and intervention by governmental institutions in the premarital counseling process – Systematization of the premarital counseling process and its implementation challenges – The necessity of redesigning the structure and process of premarital counseling – Redesigning structures and linking institutions in the premarital counseling pathway – Institutional incoherence and structural challenges in premarital counseling – Absence of institutional coherence and an integrated approach in the marriage counseling system – The need for standardization of the premarital counseling process – The necessity of designing comprehensive, indigenous, and staged structures and models – The necessity of establishing an evaluation and data-monitoring system from early ages – Overlooked institutional capacities and the need for synergy among institutions – Referral structure and final decision-making – Integrated and monitorable information system	Coherence and Systematic Structure of the Premarital Counseling Process
The role of culture, family, and clients' attitudes in premarital counseling – The influence of cultural and familial differences on couples' understanding – Challenges related to family interaction in the premarital counseling process – The impact of cultural and social changes on counseling and marriage decision-making – The role of family and generational differences in the premarital counseling process – Cultural, value-based, and religious gaps in the marriage counseling system – Adaptation of the counseling process to the cultural and social characteristics of clients – Influence of family, culture, and lifestyle on premarital counseling	The Role of Culture, Family, and Social Factors in the Marriage Counseling Process
Digital innovation: a bridge between speed and quality in premarital counseling – Management of tools and psychological interventions in premarital counseling – The role of psychological tests in the counseling process – The importance of counseling models and psychological assessment tools in enhancing diagnostic accuracy and preventive interventions – Challenges arising from commercialization and excessive use of psychological testing – Improving the quality and standards of marriage counseling through modern technologies – Enhancing counseling quality by reducing superficial approaches and increasing informational value – Developing a data-driven system and informational tools in counseling – Weaknesses in educational content and uniformity in implementation	Quality, Tools, and Scientific Standards in Premarital Counseling
The role of education and skills training in reducing divorce and improving couple relationship quality – Development of emotional intelligence and self-awareness in the premarital counseling process – The impact of gradual life skills training on marriage decision-making – The necessity of starting marriage education at younger ages and its effect on informed partner selection – The importance of communication and educational skills from early ages – The significance of analyzing communication style, responsibility, and personal values in marriage readiness – Training in emotional and communication skills – The importance of a comprehensive and dynamic approach in premarital counseling for enhancing marital life skills	Training Communication, Cognitive, and Emotional Skills for Marital Relationship Improvement

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to design a culturally grounded, scientifically rigorous process model for premarital counseling by integrating psychological, sociological, and institutional components. The analysis of qualitative data, particularly through Delphi rounds and thematic coding, yielded four overarching themes: (1) coherence and systematization of the premarital counseling process, (2) the role of culture, family, and social factors, (3) scientific quality, tools, and standards, and (4) training of communication, cognitive, and emotional skills. Together, these dimensions form a comprehensive framework that not only addresses individual-level relational dynamics but also emphasizes structural, cultural, and policy considerations.

One of the central findings of this study was the lack of institutional coherence and standardization in the delivery of premarital counseling services, as revealed through participants' perspectives. This aligns with prior research that highlighted structural fragmentation and inconsistent counseling protocols across different agencies (Kavei Sadeh et al., 2022; Razavi et al., 2018). Despite the presence of

counseling centers under various governmental, non-governmental, and religious bodies, participants emphasized the absence of unified models, coordinated referral systems, and consistent monitoring mechanisms. This echoes findings from studies advocating for integrated frameworks supported by standardized educational content, interdisciplinary collaboration, and government oversight (Akhtiari Amiri et al., 2018; Kakabaraei & Amiri, 2022). Our model addresses this challenge by proposing a multi-level system with clearly defined stages—from education to post-marriage follow-up—backed by institutional synergy and data-informed decision-making.

Another significant result pertains to the strong influence of familial, cultural, and social structures in shaping couples' engagement with premarital counseling. Participants consistently reported that generational value gaps, family interference, and cultural norms influence not only marital decisions but also receptivity to counseling. This finding resonates with studies that emphasize the cultural embeddedness of marital decisions and the need for culturally responsive counseling approaches (Irby, 2024; Muchupe, 2022; Somari Safa et al., 2022). Research conducted in Iranian and Islamic contexts further confirms

that without acknowledging the deeply rooted role of family and religious expectations, premarital counseling models may lack credibility and effectiveness (Akhtiari Amiri et al., 2018; Zahra Kar & Forough, 2020). Our model responds to this by incorporating a culturally sensitive layer across all phases, emphasizing cultural training for counselors, and promoting alignment with local norms without compromising on psychological integrity.

The third dimension revealed in our findings highlights the urgent need to elevate the scientific quality of premarital counseling services by incorporating standardized tools, valid psychological tests, and digital innovations. Several participants reported that existing counseling practices suffer from redundancy, lack of analytical depth, and over-reliance on counselor intuition. These insights align with studies underscoring the importance of evidence-based assessments in identifying communication patterns, attachment styles, conflict areas, and cognitive distortions that are predictive of marital dissatisfaction (American Psychiatric, 2022; Yavuzer & Doğanülkü, 2023; Zhian et al., 2022). Similarly, the caution against the over-commercialization of psychological tests without adequate counselor training reflects concerns raised in prior studies about ethical use and data misinterpretation (Kakabaraei & Amiri, 2022; Salley, 2022).

A further insight involves the role of digital and technological innovations in modernizing the counseling experience. Participants strongly favored digital tools—such as self-assessment platforms, interaction analysis software, and centralized databases—for their potential to increase access, personalization, and accuracy. This finding supports recent trends in telepsychology and technology-assisted assessment as promising supplements to face-to-face counseling (BahadorMotlagh et al., 2024; Zettel, 2023). Our model integrates such technologies into both the assessment and monitoring phases, offering a hybrid structure that balances technological efficiency with human connection.

Another noteworthy finding was the consensus among participants regarding the need for skill-based training, especially in the domains of communication, emotional regulation, decision-making, and conflict resolution. These findings support prior research emphasizing the developmental function of premarital counseling—not merely as an informational session but as a psychoeducational journey that prepares couples for real-life challenges (Roberts, 2023; Yavuzer & Doğanülkü, 2023). Multiple studies advocate for life skills training beginning from adolescence, continuing through courtship, and

extending post-marriage to ensure psychological readiness and relational competence (Akbari Torkestani et al., 2017; BahadorMotlagh et al., 2024). Our proposed model embeds structured skill modules across stages, viewing the counseling process as a long-term capacity-building experience rather than a one-time consultation.

It is also significant that the model addresses differences in client readiness, motivation, and relational dynamics by offering a tiered system of services—from general psychoeducation to intensive, problem-focused interventions. The need for such differentiation was echoed in participant narratives and is supported by previous findings that couples approach counseling with varying expectations and levels of commitment (Roberts, 2023; Salley, 2022). The processual nature of our model allows for flexible pacing, tailored content, and targeted interventions based on assessed needs.

In comparison with previously established models such as Olson's PREPARE/ENRICH or ACT-based frameworks, the current study's model offers the added value of being explicitly embedded within the Iranian socio-cultural matrix. While Western models have shown success in increasing marital satisfaction (Muchupe, 2022; Zettel, 2023), their direct application in Eastern or Islamic contexts has often led to limited outcomes due to cultural dissonance. By drawing from indigenous models such as the "Aware" model (Kakabaraei & Amiri, 2021), and integrating religious, familial, and psychological domains, our model offers contextual fit alongside conceptual rigor.

The model also emphasizes the need for a referral system and final evaluation mechanism, which are often missing in conventional counseling frameworks. Participants stressed the importance of continued support even after the wedding—a view supported by emerging research suggesting that post-marital follow-up enhances long-term relationship adjustment (Kavei Sadeh et al., 2022; Razavi et al., 2018). Therefore, the final phase in our model is not closure but continuation, linking premarital interventions with broader family mental health systems.

In summary, the findings of this study affirm that effective premarital counseling is multi-dimensional, requiring alignment between personal development, cultural adaptation, scientific rigor, and institutional coordination. The proposed model synthesizes these dimensions into a flexible but structured framework that can inform counseling practices, policymaking, and public health planning in Iran and similar cultural contexts.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

This study, despite its contributions, is not without limitations. First, it relied solely on qualitative methods and expert interviews, which, while rich in insight, may be constrained by subjectivity and the bounded perspectives of selected professionals. The absence of input from couples themselves—particularly those who have undergone premarital counseling—limits the ecological validity of the findings. Second, the model, though rooted in the Iranian context, may face challenges in generalizability to diverse subcultures or rural areas within Iran where norms, expectations, and institutional access differ significantly. Finally, although technological tools were conceptually integrated, actual user-testing of digital components was beyond the scope of this phase and remains an empirical gap.

Future studies should consider mixed-methods approaches that integrate the voices of both practitioners and service users, including couples from diverse backgrounds, to validate the model's usability, relevance, and impact. Quantitative validation studies using structured psychometric tools would further strengthen the model's generalizability and allow for comparative analyses with existing international frameworks. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore the effectiveness of the proposed model in enhancing marital satisfaction, reducing divorce rates, and improving psychological well-being over time. Researchers may also investigate the integration of artificial intelligence into the counseling process to enhance assessment precision, predict relational risks, and personalize intervention plans.

Professionals engaged in premarital counseling are encouraged to adopt a layered, culturally attuned approach that recognizes both individual differences and contextual realities. Institutions should collaborate to develop unified training programs for counselors that integrate psychological theory, ethical assessment tools, and cultural competence. Policymakers are advised to institutionalize premarital counseling within national health and education systems and fund its technological expansion. Counselors should view premarital work as a developmental process rather than a diagnostic session, empowering couples to build enduring relational skills. Finally, public awareness campaigns should be launched to normalize premarital counseling as a proactive, rather than remedial, step in relationship formation.

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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.

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 to this article.

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