




Designing a Preliminary Framework for a Premarital Counseling Protocol

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Abstract

Background: The present study aims to identify key components and expert insights that can inform the future development of a comprehensive premarital counseling protocol tailored to the Iranian context, and to explore the professional perspectives of premarital counselors regarding essential elements of culturally grounded counseling protocols.

Methods: A qualitative approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 18 premarital counselors from diverse counseling centers across Tehran, Iran, selected through maximum variation sampling.

Results: Three dominant counseling approaches emerged – humanistic, psychoanalytic, and cognitive-behavioral – each influencing counselors' relational strategies. Key themes included empathy, emotional regulation, cultural sensitivity, and ethical challenges in virtual settings. Personal marital history and institutional gaps were also found to affect counseling practices. Based on the extracted themes, a three-part empowerment protocol was developed and validated by experts. This protocol encompasses general counseling skills, professional competencies, and self-care strategies tailored to the Iranian context.

Conclusions: Premarital counseling is a deeply human and context-sensitive practice. Empowering counselors through experiential insights and structured support can enhance service quality and relational outcomes. Future research should investigate the cross-cultural applicability and long-term impacts of counselor development.

Keywords: Premarital Counseling, Counselor Empowerment, Lived Experience, Protocol Development, Validation

1. Background

Marriage remains one of the most significant life decisions, forming the foundation of both family and society. Despite its centrality, contemporary research reveals alarming trends in marital instability. Meta-analyses indicate that nearly 50% of first marriages and 60% of second marriages in the United States end in divorce (1). These statistics prompt critical inquiry into the underlying causes of marital dissolution, with scholars emphasizing the multifactorial nature of divorce (2). Among the most detrimental factors is the prevalence of unrealistic and romanticized beliefs that individuals bring into marriage, often undermining marital satisfaction and stability (3).

In Iran, as in many other societies, the family is regarded as the cornerstone of psychological well-being and social cohesion (4). The formation of a family through marriage introduces individuals to a complex array of roles, responsibilities, and interpersonal dynamics for which many are unprepared. The high rate of early marital conflict and divorce (5) underscores the urgent need for effective premarital education and counseling (6). However, existing programs often lack cultural specificity and fail to address the nuanced realities faced by couples in diverse social contexts.

Premarital counseling has emerged as a preventive intervention aimed at enhancing marital quality, reducing divorce rates, and fostering self-awareness (7). These programs typically focus on skill-building and psychoeducation, offering short-term benefits in

communication, conflict resolution, and relational insight (8). Yet, most global models rely on standardized group formats or psychological frameworks such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, often overlooking the lived experiences and cultural insights of counselors themselves.

In Iran, the absence of a culturally grounded, theory-informed protocol tailored to the lived realities of premarital counselors remains a critical gap (9). Counselors and therapists frequently navigate diverse client narratives without a unified framework for assessing the effectiveness of their interventions. Moreover, qualitative research traditions – particularly phenomenological approaches – highlight the importance of understanding how counselors construct meaning through their professional and personal experiences (10).

2. Objectives

The present study aims to provide a foundational framework for developing a culturally grounded premarital counseling protocol, rather than presenting a finalized and fully operational protocol. While previous studies have focused on clients' lived experiences, this research emphasizes the professional insights of experienced counselors. Ultimately, the study asks: How do premarital counselors experience their work, and how can these experiences be translated into a competency-enhancing protocol tailored to the Iranian context?

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach, using semi-structured interviews with experienced counselors. The data were analyzed inductively to identify key themes relevant to protocol development. While this study outlines essential elements of a potential protocol, it does not include implementation procedures or standardized operational guidelines, which require further research and testing.

To achieve the first aim, semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposefully selected counselors who demonstrated maximum variation in their professional experiences. Participants were chosen to represent diverse demographic and professional profiles, including gender, educational level (master's and PhD), marital status (married and divorced), and parental status.

The researcher obtained a list of licensed counseling centers in Tehran from the Support and Executive Affairs Department of the Iranian Psychological Association. From each of the 22 municipal districts, two centers were identified based on socioeconomic status, with the second center serving as a backup in case the first declined participation. Initial contact was made with center managers to confirm the presence of eligible premarital counselors. Upon confirmation, an invitation message was sent to potential participants, including a link to a demographic form. Those who completed the form were considered willing to participate and were further screened for inclusion criteria.

Interviews were conducted individually at the counselors' workplaces. Before each interview, participants were informed about the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality, and reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. The first question – “How do you perceive your professional role as a premarital counselor?” – was designed to elicit open-ended narratives and facilitate rapport. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded, and observational notes were taken during the sessions.

Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, which occurred after the 18th interview. Saturation was determined based on the repetition of themes and the absence of new conceptual insights. Following each interview, transcripts were reviewed, coded, and analyzed to identify emerging patterns. The process included descriptive reading, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meaning units, theme development, and validation through member checking.

To support the second objective – protocol development – document analysis was conducted in parallel with the interview process. This allowed for triangulation between lived experiences and existing professional guidelines. The final protocol was informed by both empirical data and documentary evidence, ensuring contextual relevance and practical applicability.

3.1. Data Analysis

The primary goal of data analysis in this study was to identify and describe how premarital counselors perceive their professional experiences within the counseling setting. Following each interview, the audio

recordings were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a multi-step phenomenological analysis process.

The analysis began with a holistic reading of each transcript to grasp the overall narrative and emotional tone conveyed by the participants. Significant statements and phrases were then extracted, representing key conceptual insights into their lived experiences. These statements were reformulated into meaning units and organized into subthemes and overarching themes. Each theme was described in detail to reflect the depth and nuance of participants' perceptions.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were employed:

- Member checking: Participants were invited to review and confirm the interpretations of their narratives.

- Prolonged engagement: The researcher maintained extended contact with the research setting and participants to deepen contextual understanding.

- Peer debriefing: Interpretations were discussed with colleagues to refine thematic accuracy.

- External audit: Social work professionals reviewed the coding and thematic structure to confirm consistency and reliability.

The data were analyzed using MAXQDA (VERBI Software, Berlin, Germany), a qualitative content analysis software, which facilitated systematic coding and theme development. To enhance transferability, thematic codes were reviewed collaboratively with other researchers to ensure conceptual clarity and applicability across diverse counseling contexts.

This rigorous analytic process enabled the emergence of rich, layered insights into how premarital counselors construct meaning around their professional roles, challenges, and contributions — ultimately informing the development of a culturally grounded competency-enhancement protocol.

4. Results

The findings represent expert-informed themes and components that may serve as a basis for future protocol development, pending further empirical validation.

4.1. Conceptual Dimensions of Lived Experience

The counselors' narratives revealed two overarching dimensions of lived experience: (1) Reflection on

professional knowledge and practice; and (2) emotional and cognitive responses to counseling encounters. These dimensions were further elaborated through subthemes such as satisfaction, frustration, personal growth, and ethical dilemmas.

4.2. External Influences on Counselors' Perceptions

Participants consistently emphasized the impact of demographic and contextual variables — such as age, marital status, gender, academic background, and years of experience — on their counseling approach and perceived effectiveness. [Table 1](#) illustrates sample responses reflecting these influences.

Self-care strategies identified by counselors are presented in [Table 2](#), under the theme “Personal Readiness and Emotional Regulation”. These include techniques such as stress management, emotional awareness, and boundary setting.

4.3. Positive and Negative Lived Experiences

Counselors described a range of emotional responses to their work, from fulfillment and creativity to disappointment and ethical tension. These experiences were shaped by factors such as client resistance, personal identification with cases, and the perceived social value of their role.

4.4. Conceptual Categories by Counseling Approach

The study identified three dominant theoretical orientations among participants: (1) Humanistic; (2) psychoanalytic; and (3) cognitive-behavioral. Each orientation influenced the counselors' self-perception, client engagement, and counseling strategies. Thematic comparisons across these approaches revealed distinct patterns in how counselors construct meaning and navigate challenges.

4.5. Influence of Demographic Variables

The counselors' lived experiences varied significantly across age groups, gender, and educational background. Younger counselors reported challenges in gaining client trust, while senior counselors expressed concerns about generational gaps. Gender dynamics also shaped counselor-client rapport and perceived effectiveness.

4.6. Validation of the Empowerment Protocol

Based on the extracted themes, a competency-enhancement protocol was developed and validated

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Premarital Counselors

Participant ID	Gender	Age Range	Education Level	Years of Experience	Sector Affiliation	Workplace Type
1	Female	30 - 39	Master's degree	8	Public	Government counseling center
2	Male	40 - 49	PhD	15	Private	Private counseling clinic
3	Female	50 - 59	Master's degree	20	Community-based	Religious counseling center
4	Male	30 - 39	Bachelor's degree	7	Public	Government counseling center
5	Female	40 - 49	Master's degree	12	Private	Private counseling clinic
...
18	Female	30 - 39	Master's degree	10	Public	Government counseling center

Table 2. Expert Validation of General Skills in the Empowerment Protocol

General Skills	Definitions	Expert Agreement (%)	Comments from Experts
Active listening	Ability to attentively and empathetically listen to clients' concerns	95	"Essential for building trust and rapport."
Emotional regulation	Managing personal emotions during counseling sessions	90	"Helps maintain professional boundaries and reduces burnout."
Communication clarity	Expressing ideas and feedback in a clear, respectful manner	92	"Vital for conflict resolution and client understanding."
Cultural sensitivity	Awareness and respect for clients' cultural backgrounds	88	"Needs more emphasis in training modules."
Ethical awareness	Understanding and applying ethical principles in practice	94	"Should be reinforced through case-based learning."

through expert review. Tables 2 - 4 present expert feedback on general, professional, and self-care skills required for premarital counselors. The protocol achieved a Cohen's Kappa agreement score of 0.83, indicating strong content validity.

Table 3 presents the general skills identified, including emotional regulation, ethical awareness, and interpersonal communication. Table 4 details the professional competencies such as legal literacy, crisis management, and structured intervention techniques, all of which were validated through expert agreement.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that premarital counselors' lived experiences are deeply shaped by their professional identity, personal history, and the sociocultural context in which they operate. Employment in counseling is not merely a job; it becomes a core component of self-concept, influencing how counselors perceive themselves and others. As noted by a study, occupational roles can evoke a wide range of emotions, including shame, pride, guilt, and defensiveness — all of which were reflected in participants' narratives (11).

Counselors described their work as emotionally demanding, often requiring them to navigate complex

relational dynamics while maintaining professional boundaries. Their lived experiences included both fulfillment and frustration, shaped by factors such as client resistance, unrealistic expectations, and the emotional toll of repeated exposure to vulnerable populations. Many counselors reported that their marital history — whether positive or painful — played a role in how they empathized with clients and interpreted relational patterns (12).

Three dominant counseling approaches emerged: Humanistic, psychoanalytic, and cognitive-behavioral. Humanistic counselors emphasized authenticity, empathy, and personal growth, aligning closely with existential theories such as those of Frankl and Yalom. Psychoanalytic counselors focused on unconscious processes and early attachment patterns, drawing from Freudian and Bowlby's frameworks (13). Cognitive-behavioral counselors prioritized thought restructuring and behavioral interventions, often referencing Beck's cognitive therapy and Kohlberg's moral reasoning models (14).

Demographic factors such as age, gender, and educational background significantly influenced counselors' self-perception and client rapport. Younger counselors often felt dismissed due to their age, while older counselors expressed difficulty relating to modern

Table 3. Sample Responses on External Factors Influencing Counselors' Lived Experiences

Themes	Subthemes	Sample Quotes	Participant Codes
Societal expectations	Pressure to conform to cultural norms	"Families expect us to reinforce traditional roles, even when they harm couples."	P03
Institutional constraints	Lack of supportive policies	"There's no formal structure to protect counselors from burnout or legal risks."	P07
Economic challenges	Low compensation	"We're expected to do emotionally intense work for minimal pay."	P12
Gender dynamics	Gender-based bias	"Male clients often question my authority as a female counselor."	P05
Legal ambiguity	Unclear ethical boundaries	"Sometimes I'm unsure what's legally permissible when handling sensitive cases."	P09

Table 4. Expert Validation of Professional Skills in the Empowerment Protocol

Professional Skills	Definitions	Expert Agreement (%)	Comments from Experts
Case conceptualization	Ability to assess and organize client information into coherent intervention plans	93	"Crucial for tailoring counseling strategies to individual needs."
Documentation and reporting	Accurate and ethical recording of counseling sessions and outcomes	89	"Should align with legal and institutional standards."
Referral competence	Knowing when and how to refer clients to specialized services	91	"Important for managing complex or high-risk cases."
Session structuring	Planning and managing the flow of counseling sessions	87	"Improves time management and client engagement."
Outcome evaluation	Monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of counseling interventions	90	"Supports evidence-based practice and accountability."

relationship dynamics. Gender dynamics also played a role, with some participants reporting greater success when the counselor-client gender matched (15).

Although the current study presents a structured framework based on expert consensus, it does not constitute a complete protocol. Future research should focus on translating these components into actionable steps, testing their effectiveness in practice, and refining them through iterative feedback.

Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of developing a competency-enhancement protocol grounded in counselors' lived experiences. Participants emphasized the need for ongoing professional development, emotional self-care, and culturally responsive training (16). The protocol validated in this study includes general skills, professional competencies, and self-care strategies – each essential for effective premarital counseling.

5.1. Conclusions

This study provides an initial guide for developing a premarital counseling protocol. The findings underscore the importance of recognizing counseling as a deeply human and context-sensitive endeavor. Counselors' narratives reflected a spectrum of emotions—from empathy and fulfillment to frustration and ethical tension—highlighting the need for institutional

support, reflective practice, and ongoing professional development.

By identifying key counseling approaches and validating a competency-enhancement protocol, this study offers a practical framework for empowering counselors in diverse settings. The protocol integrates general skills, professional competencies, and self-care strategies, ensuring that counselors are equipped not only to guide others but also to sustain their own well-being.

In light of the challenges posed by digital counseling platforms, demographic disparities, and fragmented institutional structures, the study calls for a more cohesive and ethically grounded approach to counselor training. Future research should expand on these findings by exploring cross-cultural perspectives, longitudinal outcomes, and the impact of counselor-client dynamics on relationship success.

5.2. Limitations

This study was conducted using conventional content analysis with a relatively small sample of 18 premarital counselors from Tehran. As the data were collected from a single urban setting, the findings may not be generalizable to counselors in other regions or cultural contexts (17). Additionally, the study was part of a master's thesis project, and although ethical

principles were strictly followed, no formal ethical code number was issued (18). The qualitative nature of the study also limits the ability to quantify the prevalence of identified themes.

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Footnotes

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