



Effectiveness of Apologizing Effectively Intervention among Married Couples: Enhancing Communication Patterns, Tolerance for Disagreement and Marital Quality

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of apologising effectively which was a positive psychology intervention for enhancing the Tolerance for Disagreement (TfD), Positive Communication Patterns (PCP) and marital quality, along with reducing Negative Communication Patterns (NCP) in married couples. For this purpose, married couples who had been married for a minimum of three years and had at least one child were selected by using purposive and snowball sampling. A pre-test/post-test experimental design was employed. Random assignment of married couples to a control group (husbands and wives) and an experimental group (husbands and wives) was done. Fourteen sessions of the apologising effectively technique were conducted with married couples. The Couple Communication Patterns Questionnaire, the Comprehensive Marital Satisfaction Scale and Tolerance for Disagreement Scale were administered at pre-test and post-test. The findings of the study suggest that post-test levels of TfD, PCP and marital quality were higher, while post-test levels of NCP were lower in married couples in the experimental group. These results highlight the feasibility of the Apologising Effectively intervention in married couples, which fosters a healthy marital relationship and emphasises an intervention-based study that would be of great value to couples therapists and marriage counsellors.

Keywords

Communication patterns
Effective apologising
Marital quality
Married couples
Tolerance for disagreement

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan has patriarchal system where marriage is considered as a sacred institution. Women are taught to compromise in marriage and forgive for the best interest of their family and children (Habiba et al., 2016). Spouses apologize for their behaviour such as domestic violence upon which the victim shows acceptance of apology to save their marriage (Afdal et al., 2019; Ahmad, 2023). Apologizing is a desire of spouses who tolerate their partner's behaviour without which anger builds up which can have detrimental effects on marital relationship (Chapman & Thomas, 2008; Kaleta & Jaśkiewicz, 2024). More than just apologizing, apologizing effectively, sincerely and on time is crucial (Ebesu Hubbard et al., 2013). Apologizing has been suggested for forgiveness when the partner is unfaithful and case of infidelity. Couples have been found struggling to apologize effectively. Thus, an effective apology should include remorse and acceptance of unfaithful behaviour rather than giving excuses, manipulating and pleading (Couch et al., 1999; Gnaulati, 2022). Miller et al., (2013) proposes apologizing effectively enhances communication and reduces conflicts in intimate relationships such as marriage.

The aim of this study is to assess the efficacy of apologizing effectively intervention on married couples in Pakistan. This study is first of its kind to be conducted on married couples in Pakistan with unique cultural and social factors related to marital relationship as compared to other Western countries. Testing the feasibility of this intervention serves the function of enhancing MQ and fostering positive emotions among the married couples. This intervention focuses on improving communication, so applying and evaluating it will emphasize on tackling the marital conflicts and increasing divorce rate in Pakistan (Waseem et al., 2020).

Objectives

The present study was carried out to check the effectiveness of Apologizing Effectively on TfD, CPs and MQ among married individuals. The objectives of the study are:

- To assess the effectiveness of Apologizing Effectively in enhancing TfD and MQ among married individuals.
- To examine the effectiveness of Apologizing Effectively in improving CPs (PCP & NCP) among married individuals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) are frequently in use by couple therapists to increase the marital satisfaction and work on marital disputes, along with reducing the Negative Communication Patterns (NCP) and improving Positive Communication Patterns (PCP) (Genç, 2021). Apologizing Effectively is a positive psychology intervention (PPI) which emphasis on communication (Michel et al., 2020). Apologizing effectively has been applied in multiple contexts such as with young adults (Michel et al., 2020), and with children and their mothers (Lee et al., 2023). A study conducted on university students involved workshop on apologizing effectively, where participants had more positive emotional reactions to apology as compared to control group. However, at follow-up, the differences were not significant (Miller et al., 2013). Lee et al., (2023) indicated that apologizing effectively intervention reduced internalizing behaviours as well as enhanced positive behaviours in children when their mothers apologized effectively. Apologizing effectively also had a negative link with externalizing behaviours of children.

Apologizing is an important factor for a successful marital life. It has been used by couples to solve marital conflicts and to enhance Marital Quality (MQ). Apologizing can be perceived as an attempt to repair marital relationship and foster forgiveness (Khojasteh Mehr et al., 2018; Sidelinger et al., 2009). Fife et al., (2013) found apology to be a significant element in reconciliation after infidelity aids in forgiveness and MQ. Schumann (2012) revealed in the study that apologizing effectively i.e. with sincerity is positivity associated with MQ, which leads to forgiving the partner. Another study highlighted the direct link between apologizing and MQ (KavehFarsani, 2020). It has been explored that MQ of men enhances after their approval of specific apology. Moreover, apology and reconciliation lead to forgiveness and contributes to better marital life (Biyık Sarı & Cihan, 2024). Apologizing effectively in terms of apologizing sincerely and apologizing after the disagreement, not during disagreement has been found to be effective in enhancing positive communication and increasing communication satisfaction. Also, it lowers negative emotions and negative communication during disagreements (Ebesu Hubbard et al., 2013).

The Attribution Theory by Heider (2013) also sheds light on the significance of timing of apology and its function as spouses can form either positive or negative attributions based on the function and timing of apology which has an influence on communication and marital satisfaction. Therefore, perceived sincere apology is related to positive attribute which improve communication and reduces negative emotions in the married couples (Ebesu Hubbard et al., 2013; Rosiana et al., 2022). Estrada (2009) identified communication as a key factor for MQ. Communication Patterns (CPs) can be either positive or negative. A positive communication pattern encompasses validation, positive emotions and warmth which have a positive association with MQ. Ineffective or negative communication includes invalidation, dominance and hostility which has a negative association with MQ (Zhang & Kline, 2020). Lavner et al., (2016) found that for husbands and wives, there was positive relationship of MQ with positive communication and negative relationship with negative communication at each time interval.

Thus, the study highlighted that higher marital satisfaction is related to more PCP and to the use NCP with a lesser extent. Another study signifies that constructive i.e. positive communication pattern has a positive association with MQ while avoidance-withholding and demand/withdraw i.e. NCP have a negative association with MQ (Tan et al., 2017). Significant differences have been indicated in terms of communication for husbands and wives such that women are more accustomed to the pathway from marital commitment to MQ through communication. Hence, communication is a critical factor contributing wives' MQ levels (Hou et al., 2019). A study conducted by Rosiana et al., (2022) in Indonesia emphasizes on the significance of apologizing and communicating for conflict resolution. This case study found that mostly husbands apologize first to resolve conflicts. While another study found that wives used humour to apologize to maintain peace at home (Gyasi, 2023; Záharcová et al., 2023). This indicates various ways of apologizing to avoid conflicts. Zhang and Kline (2020) proposed that the strength of association between communication and MQ is greater in Western couples unlike the non-Western couples.

Disagreements in marriage is one of the determinants of reduction in MQ (Allendorf & Ghimire, 2013). Shahid and Shahid (2016) conducted a study in Pakistan on married couples and found a positive relationship between TfD and MQ among spouses. Li and Wickrama (2014) examined marital management skills which consisted of TfD in married couples. The study determined a positive association between TfD and MQ. Additionally, it was revealed that husbands reported greater tolerance levels than their wives. Eranli and Özcan (2017) suggest that there is no significant difference in levels of tolerance and marital quality in married couples.

Hypotheses

H₁: Husbands and wives receiving Apologizing Effectivity intervention have enhanced TfD and MQ as compared to those in control group.

H₂: Husbands and wives receiving Apologizing Effectivity intervention have improved CPs unlike the couples in the control group.

METHODOLOGY

Pre-test/post-test experimental design was employed in this study. Pre-test and post-test were carried out to assess the levels of TfD, CPs and MQ in experimental and control group. Purposive snowball sampling technique was used to recruit married couples to implement Apologizing Effectively intervention. The study included an experimental and a control group with 10 married couples (n=10 husbands, n=10 wives) i.e. a total of 20 married individuals. The married couples were randomly assigned to an experimental or a control group. The sample was matched based on the education level, duration of marriage, spouses who were residing together, age range between 25 to 45 years, and couples not seeking marital therapy or counselling. Initially to approach research participants, a flyer explaining the purpose of study and defined inclusion and exclusion criteria was devised and advertised on various forums, including display/notice boards in universities and social media Platforms (WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook). Out of the potential couples, those married couples who met the inclusion criteria were recruited and randomly assigned to each group.

Inclusion Criteria

Married couples, aged between 25 and 45 years, having minimum 14 years of education, having a minimum 3 years of marriage duration, and have at least one child, were included in the sample. Married couples undergoing marital counselling or living separately from each other were excluded.

Therapeutic Intervention

Apologizing Effectively

This positive psychology intervention technique was implemented on 10 married couples, assigned to experimental group. 14 consecutive online intervention sessions were conducted with married couples. Assessment on TfD, CPs and MQ was carried out in two phases including pre-test and post-test. The dropout rate of participants was 20% due to which follow-up could not be conducted. Intervention was performed in following manner. Individual sessions were conducted with each couple. Couples were instructed to begin an effective apology by taking responsibility and acknowledging their relevant mistake that hurt their spouse. Participants acknowledged that they recognize their responsibility by saying: "I messed up..." Or "I am at fault...". Both spouses (husband- wife) explained to each other that they never meant to hurt the partner and it will not happen in future. Spouses expressed their emotional feeling of that specific time to each other; it could be embarrassment, shame or humiliation etc. This act helped couples to understand that they recognize each other's mistake. Verbal acknowledgment was followed with an apology which took around 5 to 7 minutes per session. Partners were asked to tell each other what they might consider good reparation in their relationship. Further, participants filled the intervention specific work sheet for 14 consecutive days.

Instruments

Comprehensive Marital Satisfaction Scale

To measure MQ, the Urdu version of Comprehensive Marital Satisfaction Scale (CMSS) by Mehrabian (2005) was used which consists of 35 items. CMSS contains 18 positively and 17 negatively worded items rated on a response rate of 9-point rating from “*very strongly agreement*” (+4) to “*very strongly disagreement*” (-4). The total score on CMSS is attained by subtracting the aggregate of responses on negatively worded items from the aggregate of positively worded items with a total score range of -140 to + 140. High score on CMSS indicates higher levels of MQ. The pre-test and post-test alpha reliability for husbands in the current study was .80 and .90 respectively. While pre-test and post-test alpha reliability for wives was .70 and .76 respectively.

Couple Communication Patterns Questionnaire

Christensen and Sullaway (1984) developed Couple Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CCPQ) to assess CPs among married couples. This study used the Urdu translated version by Fatima et al., (2019). This scale comprises of 28 items rated on 9-point rating scale from “*unlikely*” to “*very likely*”. CCPQ comprises of two subscales i.e. PCP and NCP. The total score on CCPQ is obtained by adding the scores on each statement. The score range is from 28 to 252 with high score on each subscale indicating respective communication pattern. The Cronbach alpha reliability for pre-test and post-test scores of PCP subscale for husbands was .71 and .90 respectively, and for wives was .75 and .89 respectively. Whereas for NCP subscale, Cronbach alpha reliability for pre-test and post-test scores of husbands was .74 and .94 respectively, and of wives was .74 and .81 respectively.

Tolerance for Disagreement Scale

In the present study, Tolerance for Disagreement Scale (TfDS) (Teven et al., 1998) was assessed by the Urdu translated version (Fatima et al., 2019) which contains 15 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from “*Strongly Disagree*” (1) to “*Strongly Agree*” (5). Out of 15 items, 8 are reverse scored items (3, 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13). The cumulative score is equivalent to the sum of scores on each item ranging from 15 to 75. The high score on TfD implies greater TfD. In the present study, the pre-test and post-test reliability value for husbands was found to be .80 and .93 respectively, and for wives was .82 and .92 respectively.

Procedure

The present study was approved from Institutional Review Board and participants were informed about the purpose of the research study. Potential participants were approached individually and were informed about the criteria for eligibility in this study. Participants were informed that their personal information will not be shared and the collected data will be kept confidential. After taking written consent from participants, they were provided with item booklet for pre-testing. The booklet consisted of demographic information form, TfDS, CMSS and CCPQ. These instruments were used to measure post-test scores. However, follow-up could not be conducted due to high dropout ratio. Participants were informed about the three phases of this study i.e. pre-test, Apologizing Effectively intervention and post-test. Participants were given instructions for completing the questionnaire. They were informed that there are no right or wrong answers and there is no time restraint for completing the booklet. The intervention was given in-person and an incentive of 1000 PKR/- was given as a token of appreciation upon completion of intervention.

Ethical Considerations

The present study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Foundation University Islamabad and ethical clearance was given by the institution. Permission to use the scales for this research was sought from the authors. Written and verbal informed consent was taken from husbands and wives for participation in the research. Participants were explained the purpose of the study and were informed that they can withdraw participation at any time. Participants were warranted that their identity would

not be disclosed and the data would be kept confidential. Furthermore, participants in control group were kept on delayed intervention group list.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

This study examined the effectiveness of positive psychology intervention technique i.e. Apologizing Effectively in enhancing Tfd, CPs and MQ among married individuals. The paired sample t-test was used for Apologizing Effectively intervention technique (at two-point measurement levels i.e., pre-test and post-test) for measurement of Tfd, CPs and MQ among husbands and wives. The analyses were performed by using a statistical package known as SPSS.

Table 1

Paired Sample t-test for Tfd, CPs and MQ among Husbands

Variable	Groups	Pre-test		Post-test		N	t(9)	p	95% CL		Cohen's d
		M	SD	M	SD				LL	UL	
MQ	Experimental	24.70	18.89	56.40	9.95	10	-6.05	.00	-43.5	-19.8	-.72
PCP		44.10	5.08	82.50	3.56	10	-16.83	.00	-43.56	-33.2	-.97
NCP		73.70	7.94	49.90	8.14	10	8.14	.00	17.35	30.24	.82
Tfd		31.00	3.83	67.50	2.83	10	-18.76	.00	-40.90	-32.1	-.98
MQ	Control	-3.30	9.32	-3.00	9.52	10	-1.00	.34	-.97	.37	--
PCP		47.60	2.01	47.50	1.84	10	.318	.75	-.61	.81	--
NCP		92.70	3.77	93.40	3.43	10	-1.90	.08	-1.5	.12	--
Tfd		38.40	4.00	37.70	4.21	10	1.90	.89	-.12	1.50	--

Results from paired sample t-test on husbands' pre-test and post-test score imply significant differences between the mean scores of Tfd, CPs and MQ as represented in Table 1. Significant differences in pre-test and post-test scores for MQ indicated that husbands scored higher on post-test (M=56.40, SD=9.95) as compared to pretest scores (M=24.70, SD=18.89), $t(9) = -6.05$, $p = .00$. For, PCP, pre and post-test results reveal that husbands scored significantly higher on post-test (M=82.50, SD=3.56) as compared to pretest scores (M=44.10, SD=5.08), $t(9) = -16.83$, $p = .00$. However, pre-test and post-test scores for NCP indicated that husbands scored significantly lower on post-test (M=73.70, SD=7.94) as compared to pretest scores (M=49.90, SD=8.14), $t(9) = 8.14$, $p = .00$. Furthermore, pretest and post-test scores of Tfd indicated that husbands scored significantly higher on post-test (M=67.50, SD=2.83) as compared to pretest scores (M=31.00, SD=3.83), $t(9) = -18.76$, $p = .00$. For control group, the results depict that there are no significant differences in pretest scores of PCP (M=47.60, SD=2.01), NCP (M=92.70, SD=3.77), Tfd (M=38.40, SD=4.00) and MQ (M=-3.30, SD=9.32) of husbands as compared to post-test scores of PCP (M=47.50, SD=1.84), NCP (M=93.40, SD=3.43), Tfd (M=37.70, SD=4.21) and MQ (M=-3.00, SD=9.52).

Table 2

Paired Sample t-test for Tfd, CPs and MQ among Wives

Variable	Groups	Pre-test		Post-test		N	t(9)	p	95% CL		Cohen's d
		M	SD	M	SD				LL	UL	
MQ	Experimental	32.30	11.00	69.80	12.32	10	-9.18	.00	-46.7	-28.2	-.84
PCP		44.80	3.76	72.40	5.31	10	-11.1	.00	-33.2	-21.9	-.94
NCP		70.70	7.87	47.60	8.78	10	10.23	.00	17.9	28.20	.81
Tfd		35.10	4.06	62.00	2.49	10	-16.6	.00	-30.5	-23.2	-.97
MQ	Control	-4.00	5.77	-4.30	5.07	10	.53	.60	-.96	1.56	--
PCP		47.70	7.43	52.10	4.50	10	-1.4	.17	-11.2	2.43	--
NCP		71.20	9.22	75.80	6.12	10	-1.41	.19	-11.9	2.74	--
Tfd		33.60	5.71	33.20	5.90	10	1.17	.26	-.36	1.16	--

Table 2 represents the pre-test and post-test score of wives related to apologizing effectively intervention. There were statistically significant differences between Tfd, PCP, NCP and MQ scores.

Significant difference in pre-test ($M=32.30$, $SD=11.00$) and post-test scores ($M=69.30$, $SD=12.32$), $t(9)=-9.18$, $p=.00$ for MQ shows that wives scored significantly higher on study variable at post-test as compared pre-test. Furthermore, PCP pre-test ($M=44.80$, $SD=3.76$) and post-test scores ($M=72.40$, $SD=1.86$), $t(9)=-11.10$, $p=.00$ imply that wives scored significantly higher on post-test as compared pretest scores. In comparison to PCP, post-test scores ($M=47.60$, $SD=8.78$) for NCP were significantly lower than pre-test scores ($M=70.70$, $SD=7.87$), $t(9)=10.23$, $p=.00$ indicating decrease in NCP among wives. Similarly, pre-test and post-test scores of Tfd revealed that wives scored significantly higher on post-test ($M=62.00$, $SD=2.49$) as compared pretest ($M=35.10$, $SD=4.06$), $t(9)=-16.65$, $p=.00$.

For control group, no significant differences were found in pre-test scores of MQ ($M=-3.30$, $SD=9.32$), PCP ($M=47.60$, $SD=2.01$), NCP ($M=92.70$, $SD=3.77$) and Tfd ($M=38.40$, $SD=4.00$) as compared to post test scores of MQ ($M=-3.00$, $SD=9.52$), PCP ($M=47.50$, $SD=1.84$), NCP ($M=93.40$, $SD=3.43$) and Tfd ($M=37.70$, $SD=4.21$).

Discussion

The present experimental study with pre-test and post-test design was devised to investigate enhancing MQ among married adults through apologizing effectively which is a positive psychology. Assessments of Tfd, CPs and MQ were carried out in different phases for both experimental and control group. Forgiveness is the function of apology in marital relationships which enhances MQ (Fahimdanesh et al., 2020; Kaleta & Jaśkiewicz, 2024; McDonald et al., 2018). The results of this study are consistent with the findings from previous researches that apologizing leading to forgiveness is a positive predictor for increase in MQ of husbands and wives (Muneer, 2015; Kaleta & Jaśkiewicz, 2024).

For the experimental group, the results of paired sample t-test for husbands that MQ enhances after apologizing effectively are consistent with the previous studies that MQ of husbands increases after apology approval (Muneer, 2015). A qualitative study validates the current results that apology from wife for peace and harmony in marriage increases MQ (Gyasi, 2023). A study found husbands' Tfd was linked with their wives' enhancement in MQ (Gnaulati, 2022; Li & Wickrama, 2014) which is evident in the results of this study that post-test levels of Tfd were higher in men as compared to their pre-test levels of Tfd before the apologizing effectively intervention. Furthermore, the MQ of wives increased which validates the results of Li and Wickrama (2014) that Tfd in husbands is associated with wives' MQ. Furthermore, the findings of this study are in line with the assumption that positive psychology intervention such as apologizing effectively enhances PCP and diminishes NCP (Genç, 2021; Tan et al., 2017).

As hypothesized that the levels of wives' MQ, PCP and Tfd will increase while NCP will decrease, which is evident in the results of paired sample t-test analysis of wives. CPs is a significant predictor of improving MQ of wives (Muneer, 2015; Hou et al., 2019) which is apparent in the findings of this study that post-test higher levels of MQ than pre-test levels are related to the increase in the levels of PCP and decrease in NCP levels in wives. A longitudinal study by Lavner et al., (2016) suggested bidirectional marital satisfaction-to-communication and communication-to-satisfaction link which validates the result. Moreover, Záhórcová et al., (2023) identified that for women, apology is important for forgiveness during marital conflicts. This implies the significance of Apologizing Effectively technique during marital conflicts as evident by the post-test results of increased MQ and communication in wives. Along with it, high levels of tolerance were indicated in wives as compared to husbands in Pakistan (Shahid & Shahid, 2016) which is also represented in the current study.

The current study indicated that control group did not improve on Tfd, PCP, NCP, and MQ at post-test level. However, experimental group receiving apologizing effectively intervention scored significantly higher on Tfd, PCP, NCP, and MQ at post-test level. In addition, lower scores obtained for NCP at post-test enhances MQ. Previous studies highlight the crucial role of apology for forgiveness during marital disputes and to sustain marital harmony during stressful marital events (Biyik Sarı & Cihan, 2024; Fahimdanesh et al., 2020; Kaleta & Jaśkiewicz, 2024; Záhórcová et al., 2023). Hence, it is evident that

apologizing effectively intervention effectively improved CPs, enhanced marital satisfaction and Tfd in husbands and wives.

CONCLUSION

The current study signifies the feasibility and efficacy of Apologizing Effectively intervention. It highlights the use of apologizing effectively in daily life leading to increase in marital satisfaction, tolerance and PCP between the spouses. Apology is importance for marital harmony; however, this study indicates that not only apologizing, but apologizing effectively is essential by owning mistakes and not blaming each other for any event. Therefore, Apologizing Effectively is useful in Pakistani context and can be inculcated in daily life to avoid marital conflicts and to enhance MQ.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study is first of its kind which has been found to be effective for married couples. But there are several limitations of the present study. Firstly, the sample size for intervention is small. Future researchers should take larger sample to increase generalize the findings of their study. Moreover, Pakistan's culture differs significantly from Western culture, especially when it comes to apology, countries which honour values and are reluctant in apologizing. Thus, apologizing effectively intervention should be applied with caution to Western countries. Lastly, married couples who had major conflicts or issues in their marital life were not selected for this intervention. There is ample research on the power of apology and its role in forgiveness. Therefore, in future, married couples with specific issues such as infidelity could be selected as population of interest to make this intervention more useful for married couples with severe marital conflicts.

Implications

The present study examined the effect of apologizing effectively, a positive psychology intervention on MQ of married couples in Pakistan. The findings highlight the significance of communication and Tfd to improve MQ through apologizing for hurting the significant other and owning mistakes effectively by not blaming or manipulating the partner. The effectiveness of apologizing effectively intervention paves path towards the use of positive psychology interventions in daily life to enhance marital satisfaction. Therefore, the implication of this study is that couple therapists and counsellors can utilize the benefits of apologizing effectively during sessions while working with married couples with mild or moderate issues in marital relationship.

Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authors' Biography

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