

The Effectiveness of a Counseling Program Based on Experiential Therapy in Enhancing Marital Life Skills and Self-Differentiation among a Sample of University Students

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The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of a counseling program designed to improve marital life skills and self-differentiation among a sample of male and female university students. To achieve the study objectives, the researcher developed a counseling program consisting of 11 sessions, delivered at a rate of two sessions per week. Two instruments were utilized: a self-differentiation scale and a marital life skills scale, both of which were validated for reliability and validity. The study population consisted of university students, with a sample of 32 participants randomly assigned to two groups: an experimental group (16 students) and a control group (16 students). The counseling program was administered to the experimental group. Subsequently, post-test measurements were conducted for both groups, along with a follow-up measurement for the experimental group. The results indicated statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on both the self-differentiation and marital life skills scales, favoring the experimental group, attributable to the counseling program. The findings also revealed no statistically significant differences between the post-test and follow-up measurements for the experimental group on both scales, indicating the sustained effectiveness of the counseling program.

Keywords: marital life skills, self-differentiation, marital counseling, experiential therapy, Virginia Satir.

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North American Journal of Psychology, 2026, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1257-1280
© NAJP <https://doi.org/10.65696/001c.164165>

INTRODUCTION

The Satir Model is considered a positive, growth-oriented approach. Virginia Satir emphasized that individuals need to establish meaningful and positive goals in their lives. According to McLendon (2000), these goals include enhancing an individual's level of independence, making more constructive choices rather than reacting negatively to people or situations, and assuming greater personal responsibility, including responsibility for one's emotions, thoughts, expectations, and the fulfillment of needs related to belonging, acceptance, and love in a healthy manner. Additionally, individuals are encouraged to achieve greater harmony and congruence in their lives and to experience inner peace. In Satir's framework, the counseling or therapeutic process begins with raising awareness among individuals and families, followed by fostering a sense of safety, support, and acceptance, and enhancing motivation for change. Carlock (2015) presented the Satir Model as an educational tool applicable to adults in educational, clinical, developmental, and training settings. He further noted that this approach is effective in improving self-differentiation and internal integration, as well as in helping individuals manage internal conflicts more effectively. Moreover, it can be utilized as a self-exploration tool in developmental contexts. Accordingly, the researchers were inspired to employ Satir's experiential therapy techniques with individuals rather than families, with the aim of enhancing the functioning of internal processes. This, in turn, is expected to be reflected in improved levels of self-differentiation among individuals.

Marital life skills are among the essential competencies that enable couples to function effectively and sustain marital stability. In Jordan, divorce rates have consistently ranked among the highest in the Arab world over many years, particularly in cases of pre-consummation divorce. According to the Jordanian Women's Solidarity Institute, approximately (21.2%) of divorced males and (51.8%) of divorced females are under the age of 25. This indicates a substantial deficiency among young individuals in terms of readiness for marriage and the ability to maintain marital relationships. Consequently, the phenomenon of marital separation necessitates comprehensive and integrated national-level preparation aimed at reducing divorce rates and enhancing family adjustment, given its positive implications for society as a whole (Tadamon, 2017). In this context, the World Health Organization has developed practical and applicable models of life skills, identifying ten core categories: decision-making, problem-solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, self-awareness, and coping with stress (WHO, 1994). From these general life skills, a range of competencies essential for marital and family life can be derived. Burns and Fields (2014) indicated that acquiring six key life skills contributes to future marital adjustment and success. These include commitment, expectations, awareness of the influence of the family of origin, communication, conflict resolution, and marital intimacy. With regard to self-differentiation, Virginia Satir introduced the concept of the "self-container," emphasizing that every individual possesses inherent self-worth, whether positive or negative. She maintained that the fundamental

factor underlying what occurs both within individuals and between them lies in the value of the self and its level of differentiation. Self-differentiation refers to an individual's capacity to perceive and define oneself independently of one's family of origin. It also reflects the ability to distinguish between thoughts and emotions, as noted by Kerr and Bowen (1988).

The function of self-differentiation becomes particularly evident during the emergence of family conflicts. Individuals who are able to distinguish between their thoughts and emotions tend to be more capable of confrontation, resilience, and self-assertion. They are less vulnerable to external influence, emotional control, or distortion of their self-image. In contrast, individuals with lower levels of self-differentiation are more susceptible to psychological difficulties. From a theoretical perspective, Herman Witkin's theory explains self-differentiation as the degree to which domains of psychological functioning—such as cognition, behavior, and emotion—are able to operate according to their distinct characteristics while remaining relatively independent from one another (Nisbett & Temoshok, 1976). Herman Witkin further proposed that personality consists of multiple dimensions, and that differentiation reflects the ability to separate these domains and allow each to function autonomously. This includes distinguishing between emotion, perception, cognition, and behavior, and selecting the most appropriate response (Witkin, Goodenough, & Oltman, 1979).

Similarly, Murray Bowen (1978) posited that higher levels of self-differentiation are associated with better overall psychological and physiological functioning. Conversely, low levels of differentiation lead to phenomena such as triangulation, instability in the family emotional system, increased likelihood of marital conflict, and the family projection process. This process occurs when spouses with low differentiation project their unresolved tensions onto one of their children or others (Abu Aita, 2019). Moreover, Jarkawi et al. highlighted the growing need to acquire marital skills, manage family relationship challenges, and develop effective communication skills. Such programs provide an important platform for couples to learn new competencies, address relationship problems, and prepare for marriage. The study by Boustani, Eksir, and Borazjani (2025) revealed a significant effect of life skills training on distress tolerance, quality of life, and marital conflict among married students in Shiraz, Iran. Similarly, Kamankesh et al. (2024) reported a substantial impact of life skills and communication training on marital conflicts, conflict resolution strategies, and psychological well-being among maladjusted couples. Ngunjiri and Muiro (2021) also found that communication skills significantly contribute to marital stability among married couples. Furthermore, Khodakarami et al. (2018) indicated that life skills training has a positive effect on marital satisfaction. In contrast, Delatorre and Wagner (2018) identified gender differences in conflict management strategies, noting that men tend to use compromise strategies more frequently, whereas women are more likely to adopt confrontational approaches. Based on the foregoing review, there is a relative scarcity of studies addressing the topic of the present research, which underscores the need for further scholarly attention. The current study benefits from previous research in constructing its theoretical framework, designing the

counseling program, developing the measurement instruments, and determining the methodological approach to be employed.

Problem Statement and Hypotheses:

The present study was motivated by the noticeable delay in the age of marriage among both males and females, along with a significant increase in divorce rates. Statistics reported by the Supreme Judge Department indicate a marked rise in divorce cases, reaching (4,690) cases in 2018. Multiple factors contribute to the occurrence of divorce, including excessive attachment to the family of origin and the inability to make independent decisions without parental reliance. Other factors are associated with a lack of essential marital life skills among engaged individuals, particularly communication skills. Accordingly, the idea of the present study emerged to involve participants in a counseling program aimed at enhancing self-differentiation and equipping them with effective marital life skills. Such competencies are expected to contribute to reducing potential challenges that may arise in their future marital and family lives. The current study seeks to answer the following main research question:

“What is the effectiveness of a group counseling program based on experiential therapy theory in improving marital life skills and self-differentiation among the participants in the study?”

Research Questions:

1. Are there statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$) between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the self-differentiation scale attributable to the counseling program?
2. Are there statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$) between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the marital life skills scale attributable to the counseling program?
3. Are there statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$) between the mean scores of the experimental group in the post-test and follow-up measurements on both the marital life skills scale and the self-differentiation scale attributable to the (sustained effect) of the counseling program?

METHODS

Participants

The study population consisted of married and unmarried male and female university students, totaling (3,500) individuals. The study sample included (32) students who were selected and randomly assigned using a computer-based randomization procedure. Participants who obtained the lowest scores on both measurement scales were selected for inclusion in the study. They were then randomly distributed into two groups: an experimental group and a control group, with (16) participants in each group. The study employed a quasi-experimental design, as it was deemed most appropriate for achieving the study objectives. This design involved the random assignment of participants to experimental and control groups,

along with the administration of pre- and post-test measurements of the study's dependent variables.

Study Tools

Self-Differentiation Scale:

The researchers used the short form of the Self-Differentiation Scale (DSI-SF) developed by Drake (2011). The scale consists of 20 items divided into four dimensions: Emotional reactivity, represented by items 1–6; My position, represented by items 7–12; Emotional detachment, represented by items 13–15; and Integration with others, represented by items 16–20. The Likert scale was adopted as in the original scale, as follows: strongly agree, somewhat agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree. The scale was scored by assigning the above response values to the positive items (6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1) and reversing the scale for the negative items. The construct validity indices for the scale items were extracted with the total score in a pilot sample of 12 participants outside the study sample. The correlation coefficients of the items with the instrument as a whole ranged from 0.38 to 0.79, and with the domain from 0.53 to 0.88. All correlation coefficients were acceptable and statistically significant, so none of these items were deleted, which is consistent with the correlation coefficients of the original scale. To ensure the stability of the scale, the stability coefficient was calculated using Cronbach's alpha internal consistency method, ranging between 0.71 and 0.85, and using the Gutman half-split method, ranging between 0.77 and 0.88. These values were considered appropriate for the purposes of this study.

Marital Life Skills Scale

The scale was developed by Khalil (2018) and Mohammadzadeh et al. (2017). The scale consists of 48 items distributed across six dimensions: compatibility skills (items 1–8), commitment skills (items 9–16), awareness of the influence of the original family, represented by items 17–24; conflict resolution, represented by items 25–32; communication, represented by items 33–40; and intimacy, represented by items 41–48. The scale was designed using a five-point Likert scale, where responses to the paragraphs were given a score of (1) I have very little of this skill, (2) I possess the skill to a small degree, (3) I possess the skill to a moderate degree, (4) I possess the skill to a large degree, and (5) I possess the skill to a very large degree. The validity of the scale was verified through: construct validity indicators, and the correlation coefficients of the items with the instrument as a whole ranged between (0.36-0.89), and with the domain (0.37-0.91). The stability coefficient was also calculated using Cronbach's alpha internal consistency equation, which reached (0.78).

Counseling Program

The counseling program aimed to enhance participants' understanding of marital life skills through a structured series of (11) counseling sessions. Preparatory sessions were first conducted to introduce participants to the program, its tools, and its requirements, as well as to prepare them for the subsequent enrichment sessions.

A total of (11) sessions were implemented progressively over the course of the academic semester. Each session was designed to introduce key principles and practices of marital life and to develop strategies for their application. The targeted skills included commitment, expectations,

awareness of the influence of the family of origin, communication, conflict resolution, and marital intimacy. The sessions were structured in a sequential manner, with each session building upon the previous one, in order to progressively deepen participants' understanding of marital life skills and enhance their ability to apply them effectively. The program appendix (Appendix 1) provides further details.

Study Procedures

Participant Selection

A self-report questionnaire was administered over a two-week period during the first semester of 2026. Based on initial screening sessions and individual assessments, 40 students who demonstrated lower levels of marital life skills were identified. From this pool, the final sample consisted of (32) participants, with (16) assigned to the experimental group and (16) to the control group. Participants were randomly assigned to ensure the fairness and internal validity of group composition.

Data Collection

Marital Life Skills Scale

This scale was administered before and after the intervention using a standardized instrument adapted to the context of the study. It assessed changes in the level of acquired marital life skills as a result of the counseling program.

Self-Differentiation Scale

This scale was also administered pre- and post-intervention using a standardized instrument adapted to the study context. It was used to measure changes in self-differentiation and to examine the effect of marital life skills on self-differentiation among participants.

Statistical Analyses

Quantitative data from the pre-test and post-test measurements were subjected to statistical analysis using methods such as the t-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA). These analyses were conducted to examine differences in self-differentiation between the experimental and control groups. Accordingly, insights were obtained regarding the extent to which marital life skills training contributes to enhancing self-differentiation among participants. To ensure the equivalence of the experimental and control groups, means and standard deviations were calculated for the sub-dimensions and the total score according to the group variable (experimental, control). An independent samples t-test was then applied. The results indicated that the groups were equivalent on the pre-test self-differentiation scale, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and t-Test Results According to Group on the Dimensions and Total Score of the Pre-Test Self-Differentiation Scale

Dimension	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	df	Sig.
Emotional Reactivity (Pre-test)	Experimental	16	2.48	0.811	0.032	30	0.973
	Control	16	2.45	1.011			
I-Position (Pre-test)	Experimental	16	3.83	0.828	0.035	30	0.971
	Control	16	3.86	0.866			
Emotional Cutoff (Pre-test)	Experimental	16	2.95	1.004	0.112	30	0.913
	Control	16	3.01	1.103			
Fusion with Others (Pre-test)	Experimental	16	3.16	0.885	0.462	30	0.646
	Control	16	3.32	1.092			
Self-Differentiation (Total, Pre-test)	Experimental	16	3.14	0.605	0.192	30	0.848
	Control	16	3.16	0.765			

Table 1 shows that there are no statistically significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) attributable to the group in all dimensions and in the total score of the pre-marital self-differentiation scale. This result indicates that the groups are equivalent. As for the equivalence of the groups in the pre-marital life skills scale, the results indicate that:

Table 2. Arithmetic Means, Standard Deviations, and t-Test Results According to Group Variables on Dimensions and Total Scores on the Pre-Marital Life Skills Scale

Dimension	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	df	Sig.
Self-adjustment skill (pre-test)	Experimental	16	3.29	0.402	0.145	30	0.887
	Control	16	3.31	0.505			
Awareness of the impact of the family of origin (pre-test)	Experimental	16	2.95	0.460	0.369	30	0.714
	Control	16	3.04	0.608			
Commitment skill (pre-test)	Experimental	16	2.80	0.566	0.696	30	0.492
	Control	16	2.94	0.636			
Conflict resolution skill (pre-test)	Experimental	16	2.86	0.440	0.571	30	0.571
	Control	16	2.94	0.488			
Communication skill (pre-test)	Experimental	16	3.06	0.412	0.416	30	0.681
	Control	16	2.98	0.438			
Intimacy skill (pre-test)	Experimental	16	3.31	0.455	0.145	30	0.884
	Control	16	3.30	0.458			
Marital life skills (overall, pre-test)	Experimental	16	3.05	0.331	0.318	30	0.751
	Control	16	3.09	0.405			

Table 2 shows that there are no statistically significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) attributable to the group in all dimensions and in the overall score

of the pre-test marital life skills scale. This result indicates that the groups are equivalent.

RESULTS

First question: Are there statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$) between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the post-test self-differentiation scale attributable to the counseling program?

The arithmetic means and standard deviations of the sample individuals' scores on the self-differentiation scale in the pre- and post-tests were calculated according to the group (experimental, control), as shown in Table 3:

Table 3. Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations of Group Members' Scores on the Self-Differentiation Scale as a Whole for the Pre-Test and Post-Test According to Group

Group	N	Pre-test Mean	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean	Post-test SD
Experimental	16	3.11	0.605	5.05	0.225
Control	16	3.16	0.766	3.31	1.017
Total	32	3.14	0.680	4.19	1.138

Table 3 shows apparent differences between the means of the scores on the self-differentiation scale as a whole in the pre- and post-tests, according to the group (experimental, control). To determine whether these apparent differences are statistically significant, a one-way ANCOVA was used, as shown in Table 4:

Table 4. Results of One-Way ANCOVA Analysis for Post-Test Scores on the Self-Differentiation Scale as a Whole According to Group After Controlling for the Effect of Pre-Test Scores

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F value	Significance (p)	Eta Squared η^2
Pre-test	8.067	1	8.067	28.582	.000	.495
Group	24.856	1	24.756	87.725	.000	.751
Error	8.183	29	.281			
Total	40.045	31				

Table 4 shows statistically significant differences at a significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the self-differentiation scale scores according to the group (experimental, control). The value ($F = 87.725$) reached statistical significance ($p < .001$), indicating an effect of the group. As shown in Table 4, the effect size was large; the eta-squared value (η^2) explained 75.1% of the variance in the dependent variable, which is the self-differentiation scale. To determine to whom the differences were attributable, the adjusted means and standard errors were extracted according to the group. The results indicate that the differences were in favor of the experimental group (5.056) who were exposed to the counseling program compared to the control group (3.296). The arithmetic means and standard deviations of the self-differentiation scale dimensions

were also calculated according to the group (experimental, control), as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations of Pre- and Post-Tests for Dimensions of the Self-Differentiation Scale According to Group

Dimension	Group	N	Pre-test Mean	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean	Post-test SD
Emotional Reactivity	Experimental	16	2.47	0.810	4.85	0.370
	Control	16	2.46	1.001	2.53	1.037
	Total	32	2.46	0.896	3.69	1.407
My Position (I-Position)	Experimental	16	3.84	0.827	5.61	0.199
	Control	16	3.85	0.865	4.21	1.230
	Total	32	3.85	0.832	4.91	1.123
Emotional Cutoff	Experimental	16	2.96	1.003	4.44	0.805
	Control	16	3.00	1.102	3.19	1.355
	Total	32	2.98	1.037	3.81	1.267
Fusion with Others	Experimental	16	3.15	0.884	4.94	0.605
	Control	16	3.31	1.093	3.26	1.208
Others	Total	32	3.23	0.981	4.10	1.268

Table 5 shows apparent differences between the arithmetic means in the pre- and post-tests of the self-differentiation scale dimensions resulting from the difference between the groups (experimental and control). To verify the significance of the apparent differences, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANCOVA) was applied, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) of the Group Effect on the Post-Test Measurement of Each Dimension of the Self-Differentiation Scale After Controlling for the Effect of Pre-Test Scores

Source of Variation	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2
Emotional Reaction (Pretest, Covariate)	Emotional Reactivity	1.708	1	1.708	3.718	.068	.128
Self-Position (Pretest, Covariate)	I-Position	1.005	1	1.006	2.004	.168	.073
Emotional Detachment (Pretest, Covariate)	Emotional Cutoff	5.470	1	5.480	6.396	.019	.196
Integration with Others (Pretest, Covariate)	Fusion with Others	.665	1	.664	1.383	.249	.050
Group (Posttest) Hotelling's Trace value=3.949 Sig.=0.00	Emotional Reactivity	43.006	1	43.007	93.582	.000	.784
	I-Position	16.213	1	16.212	32.291	.000	.554
	Emotional Cutoff	13.599	1	13.599	15.872	.000	.378
	Fusion with Others	23.223	1	23.223	48.319	.000	.650

Error	Emotional Reactivity	11.949	26	.460	–	–	–
	I-Position	13.054	26	.502	–	–	–
	Emotional Cutoff	22.276	26	.857	–	–	–
	Fusion with Others	12.496	26	.481	–	–	–
Corrected Total	Emotional Reactivity	61.339	31	–	–	–	–
	I-Position	39.110	31	–	–	–	–
	Emotional Cutoff	49.764	31	–	–	–	–
	Fusion with Others	49.840	31	–	–	–	–

Table 6 shows statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$) according to the effect of the group (experimental, control) in all dimensions. To determine which of the two study groups had the most significant differences, the adjusted arithmetic means and standard errors of the dimensions were calculated according to the group, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Adjusted Arithmetic Means for the Post-Test Measurement of the Self-Differentiation Scale According to Group

Dependent Variable	Group	Adjusted Mean
Emotional Reaction (Posttest)	Experimental	4.866
"My Position / I-Position" (Posttest)	Control	2.518
"My Position / I-Position" (Posttest)	Experimental	5.633
"My Position / I-Position" (Posttest)	Control	4.192
Emotional Cutoff (Posttest)	Experimental	4.472
Emotional Cutoff (Posttest)	Control	3.153
Fusion with Others (Posttest)	Experimental	4.964
Fusion with Others (Posttest)	Control	3.236

Table 7 shows that the significant differences between the adjusted arithmetic means of the post-test in all dimensions of the self-differentiation scale were in favor of the experimental group members who were exposed to the counseling program compared to the control group members. It should be noted that the effect size for the dimensions was high, ranging from (37.9% to 78.3%).

Second question: Are there statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$) between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the post-program marital life skills scale attributable to the counseling program?

To answer this question, the arithmetic means and standard deviations of the marital life skills scale scores in the pre- and post-tests were

calculated according to the group (experimental, control), as shown in Table 8:

Table 8. Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations in the Marital Life Skills Scale as a Whole for the Pre- and Post-Tests According to Group

Group	N	Pretest		Posttest	
		Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)
Experimental	16	3.04	.332	4.28	.293
Control	16	3.08	.404	3.35	.509
Total	32	3.06	.366	3.80	.613

Table 8 shows apparent differences between the means of the marital life skills scale scores as a whole in the pre- and post-tests according to the group (experimental, control). To determine whether these apparent differences are statistically significant, one-way ANCOVA was used for the post-test measurement of marital life skills as a whole according to the group (experimental, control) after neutralizing the effect of their pre-test. The results are presented in Table 9:

Table 9. Results of One-Way ANCOVA Analysis of Post-Test Scores on the Marital Life Skills Scale as a Whole According to Group After Controlling for the Effect of Pre-Test Scores

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2
Pre-test	0.162	1	0.163	0.937	.342	.032
Group	6.630	1	6.629	38.400	.000	.570
Error	5.007	29	0.174			
Total	11.701	31				

Table 9 shows statistically significant differences at a significance level of ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the marital life skills scale scores according to the group (experimental, control), reaching a value of ($F = 38.400$) with statistical significance ($p < .001$), indicating an effect of the group. As shown in Table 10, the effect size was large; the eta-squared value (η^2) explained 57% of the variance in the dependent variable, which is the marital life skills scale. To determine to whom the differences were attributable, the adjusted means and their standard errors were extracted according to the group, as shown in Table 10.

Table 10. Adjusted Arithmetic Means for the Total Score on the Marital Life Skills Scale According to Group

Group	Adjusted Post-test Mean
Experimental	4.271
Control	3.359

The results in Table 10 indicate that the differences were in favor of the experimental group who were exposed to the counseling program compared to the control group. The arithmetic means and standard deviations of the dimensions of the marital life skills scale were also calculated according to the group (experimental, control), as shown in Table 11.

Table 11. Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations of Pre- and Post-Tests for Dimensions of the Marital Life Skills Scale According to Group

Skill Dimension	Group	N	Pretest		Posttest	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Self-Adjustment Skill	Experimental	16	3.31	0.402	4.55	0.296
	Control	16	3.34	0.506	3.50	0.380
	Total	32	3.33	0.451	4.03	0.639
Awareness of Original Family Influence Skill	Experimental	16	2.96	0.461	4.23	0.282
	Control	16	3.05	0.609	3.37	0.744
	Total	32	3.01	0.531	3.79	0.708
Commitment Skill	Experimental	16	2.81	0.566	3.98	0.551
	Control	16	2.95	0.637	3.26	0.702
	Total	32	2.87	0.598	3.62	0.715
Conflict Resolution Skill	Experimental	16	2.87	0.441	4.12	0.734
	Control	16	2.94	0.486	3.35	0.626
	Total	32	2.91	0.459	3.73	0.776
Communication Skill	Experimental	16	3.05	0.411	4.55	0.275
	Control	16	2.99	0.439	3.26	0.561
	Total	32	3.02	0.420	3.91	0.784
Intimacy Skill	Experimental	16	3.32	0.455	4.15	0.606
	Control	16	3.30	0.459	3.43	0.705
	Total	32	3.31	0.449	3.79	0.744

Table 11 shows apparent differences between the arithmetic means in the pre- and post-tests of the marital life skills scale dimensions resulting from the difference between the groups (experimental and control). To verify the significance of the apparent differences, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was applied, as shown in Table 12.

Table 12. Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) of the Group Effect on the Post-Test Measurement of Each Dimension of the Marital Life Skills Scale After Controlling for the Effect of Pre-Test Scores

Source of Variation	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2
Pretest Self-Adjustment Skill (Covariate)	Self-Agreement Skill	.132	1	.132	1.036	.319	.041

Pretest							
Awareness of Family-of-Origin Influences Skill (Covariate)	Awareness of Family Influence Skill	.242	1	.243	.885	.356	.036
Pretest Commitment Skill (Covariate)	Commitment Skill	1.352	1	1.352	3.454	.074	.127
Pretest Conflict Resolution Skill (Covariate)	Conflict Resolution Skill	.331	1	.329	.653	.425	.026
Pretest Communication Skill (Covariate)	Communication Skill	.943	1	.943	5.240	.032	.179
Pretest Intimacy Skill (Covariate)	Intimacy Skill	.456	1	.457	1.028	.321	.042
	Self-Agreement Skill	8.741	1	8.741	68.677	.000	.741
	Awareness of Family Influence Skill	5.360	1	5.360	19.543	.000	.450
Group Hotelling's Trace value=6.396 Sig.=0.000	Commitment Skill	4.453	1	4.453	11.367	.003	.321
	Conflict Resolution Skill	3.617	1	3.617	7.189	.013	.231
	Communication Skill	11.021	1	11.020	61.158	.000	.718
	Intimacy Skill	3.631	1	3.631	8.161	.009	.254
	Self-Agreement Skill	3.054	24	.127	—	—	—
	Awareness of Family Influence Skill	6.581	24	.274	—	—	—
Error	Commitment Skill	9.402	24	.392	—	—	—
	Conflict Resolution Skill	12.077	24	.503	—	—	—
	Communication Skill	4.324	24	.181	—	—	—
	Intimacy Skill	10.676	24	.444	—	—	—
	Self-Agreement Skill	12.647	31	—	—	—	—
	Awareness of Family Influence Skill	15.550	31	—	—	—	—
Corrected Total	Commitment Skill	15.901	31	—	—	—	—
	Conflict Resolution Skill	18.617	31	—	—	—	—
	Communication Skill	19.116	31	—	—	—	—
	Intimacy Skill	17.182	31	—	—	—	—

Table 12 shows statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) according to the effect of the group (experimental, control) in all dimensions. To determine which of the two study groups had the most significant differences, the adjusted arithmetic means and standard errors of the dimensions were calculated according to the group, as shown in Table 13.

Table 13. Adjusted Arithmetic Means for the Post-Test Measurement of Marital Life Skills According to Group

Dependent Variable	Group	Adjusted Mean
Self-Adjustment Skill (Posttest)	Experimental	4.574
	Control	3.481
Awareness of Original Family Influence Skill (Posttest)	Experimental	4.221
	Control	3.365
Commitment Skill (Posttest)	Experimental	4.015
	Control	3.235
Conflict Resolution Skill (Posttest)	Experimental	4.086
	Control	3.383
Communication Skill (Posttest)	Experimental	4.516
	Control	3.289
Intimacy Skill (Posttest)	Experimental	4.153
	Control	3.449

Table 13 shows that the significant differences between the adjusted arithmetic means of the post-test in all dimensions of the marital life skills scale were in favor of the experimental group members who were exposed to the counseling program compared to the control group members. It should be noted that the effect size for the dimensions was high, ranging from (23.1% to 74.1%).

Question 3: Are there statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the mean scores of the experimental group in the post-test and follow-up test on the marital life skills scale and the self-differentiation scale attributable to the continuing effect of the counseling program?

To answer this question, the arithmetic means and standard deviations of the experimental group's scores in the post-test and follow-up test on the dimensions and total score of the marital life skills and self-differentiation scales were extracted. To show the statistical differences between the arithmetic means, the paired-samples t-test was used. Table 14 illustrates these results.

Table 14. Arithmetic Means, Standard Deviations, and t-Test Results for the Experimental Group's Scores on the Post-Test and Follow-Up Test on the Dimensions and Total Scores of the Marital Life Skills and Self-Differentiation Scales

Dimension	Measure	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Emotional Reaction	Posttest	16	4.85	0.37	1.192	15	.252
	Follow-up	16	4.82	0.41	—	—	—
Self-Attitude	Posttest	16	5.61	0.20	1.522	15	.149
	Follow-up	16	5.48	0.38	—	—	—
Emotional Detachment	Posttest	16	4.44	0.81	0.637	15	.534
	Follow-up	16	4.35	0.70	—	—	—
Integration with Others	Posttest	16	4.94	0.61	0.565	15	.580
	Follow-up	16	4.93	0.59	—	—	—
Self-Differentiation	Posttest	16	5.04	0.23	1.463	15	.164
	Follow-up	16	4.97	0.25	—	—	—
Self-Adjustment Skill	Posttest	16	4.56	0.30	1.000	15	.333
	Follow-up	16	4.53	0.29	—	—	—
Awareness of Family-of-Origin Influence	Posttest	16	4.23	0.28	1.781	15	.095
	Follow-up	16	4.16	0.37	—	—	—
Commitment Skill	Posttest	16	3.98	0.55	0.752	15	.464
	Follow-up	16	3.94	0.50	—	—	—
Conflict Resolution Skill	Posttest	16	4.12	0.73	0.643	15	.530
	Follow-up	16	4.09	0.66	—	—	—
Communication Skill	Posttest	16	4.55	0.27	1.291	15	.216
	Follow-up	16	4.48	0.33	—	—	—
Intimacy Skill	Posttest	16	4.16	0.61	0.716	15	.485
	Follow-up	16	4.14	.605	—	—	—
Marital Life Skills	Posttest	16	4.27	0.29	1.51	15	.151
	Follow-up	16	4.22	0.28	—	—	—

The results presented in Table 14 indicate that there are no statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the posttest and the follow-up test in all dimensions and in the total scores of both the Marital Life Skills Scale and the Differentiation of Self Scale.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrated the effectiveness of a program based on marital life skills in improving self-differentiation among participants in the experimental group. This effectiveness can be attributed to the program's inclusion of numerous impactful activities that enrich the concept of self in all its dimensions, teach individuals communication skills, and help participants understand the structure of their original and future families, while fostering a positive dyad with their life partner. The program also emphasized cultivating positivity in life at the individual,

community, and global levels, allowing participants to freely express their emotions, thoughts, habits, traditions, and beliefs, which positively reflected on the experimental group members' behaviors and attitudes. These findings are consistent with previous research, notably Bani Salameh and Jaradat (2016), which demonstrated the effectiveness of group counseling programs in improving marital communication patterns.

The strategies and methods supporting the activities also contributed to explaining the program's impact on improving self-differentiation. These included discussion, dialogue, presentation methods, individual exercises, and workshops focused on reasoning, report writing and discussion, self-assessment, and clarification of terms. Brainstorming, cooperative learning, and visualization strategies also contributed to improving the program's impact, as did basic counseling skills such as questioning, summarizing, empathy, reflecting feelings, and reflecting content, which helped increase participants' motivation and learning impact.

The results related to the second question showed the effectiveness of the group counseling program based on marital life skills in improving these skills. These differences favored the experimental group. The counseling program used in this study included clear strategies and activities to help participants improve their life skills in six areas: compatibility, commitment, awareness of the influence of the family of origin, communication skills, intimacy skills, and conflict resolution skills. This helped participants acquire a good level of these important skills to achieve a good level of marital compatibility.

Participants were taught how to apply marital life skills in their practical lives, especially in their families and outside the scope of counseling sessions, given their significant positive impact on marital satisfaction. The strategies and methods supporting the activities contributed to explaining the program's impact on improving marital life skills, such as discussion and dialogue techniques, presentation techniques, individual exercise strategies, and workshops that included reasoning, report writing, discussion, self-assessment, and clarification of terms. Brainstorming, cooperative learning, and visualization strategies also contributed to improving the impact of the program, as did basic counseling skills such as asking questions, summarizing, empathizing, reflecting feelings, and reflecting content, which contributed to increasing participants' motivation.

The results related to the third question showed that the differences in the arithmetic means between the experimental group in the post-test and follow-up test were not statistically significant at the significance level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) on the dimensions of self-differentiation and marital life skills. This indicates the continued effectiveness of the group counseling program in improving marital life skills. The counseling program continued to have an impact on participants after a period of time, indicating the continuity of the learning effect among participants and their clear interest in the information and experiences gained from the counseling program.

This impact is due to the focus during the counseling sessions on having participants apply the information, skills, and activities outside the counseling group, either directly within their original family or with their partner. These activities included writing a letter to themselves, drawing

family maps, reading the family system, observing body language and communication, avoiding participation in family triangles, reading the rules of the original family, and trying to establish new family rules that suit the participants and their partners. These activities and tasks had a strong impact on the continuity of the counseling program's effect through the follow-up stage.

We conclude that the counseling program used in this study included clear strategies and activities to help participants gain a deeper understanding of self-concept, and its basic components, as well as to distinguish between and recognize their inner parts. Among the most important parts that were focused on were the mental and emotional parts, which are the core of differentiation and its foundation, helping participants to form a differentiated and strong self. The participants identified the strengths and weaknesses of these parts. The counseling program included a wide range of activities that helped improve the level of differentiation. These activities included: Your Magical Garden, Find Your Missing Parts (Your Handkerchiefs), Draw the Iceberg, Candles Activity, and Talking About the Bowl. The counseling program included a wide range of activities that helped improve marital life skills, such as focusing on communication skills, positive communication patterns, body shapes, the influence of the original family, and resolving marital conflict. The program included a wide range of motivational activities, including: touch activity, body language activity, it is wrong to talk about these things activity, dismantling the parts of the device activity, drawing a map of the house activity, and drawing a family map activity. Participants were taught how to apply marital life skills in their practical lives, especially conflict resolution and how to learn a set of constructive strategies for resolving conflicts. Awareness of the influence of the family of origin helps with self-regulation of the relationship and reduces the level of attachment, as in the study by Darin, Aaron, and Jonathan (Darin, Aaron & Jonathan, 2015), and understanding the role of the family of origin in tolerance, as in the study by Naiemi, Mohsenzadeh, Pirsaghi, and Maleki (Naiemi, Mohsenzadeh, Pirsaghi, Maleki, 2016). These programs also have a clear and lasting impact on individuals' lives, transferring learned experiences and integrating them into the self, leading to a change in lifestyle. This demonstrates the importance of these programs in the field of family wellness and prevention. Organizing intensive courses for those about to get married (engaged couples) aims to equip them with life skills, high self-esteem, and other topics that increase the rate of marital compatibility and reduce divorce rates as a whole. Understanding the factors that contribute to the success and preparation of those about to marry for a successful and lasting marriage, as well as helping married couples understand the rules and life skills necessary for a successful marriage.

Theoretical and Societal Contributions

Theoretical contributions: The importance of the study lies in the subject matter researched, as self-differentiation and a lack of essential marital skills among girls approaching marriage are among the most important issues that may disrupt married life, delay the decision to marry, make this decision difficult, or lead to family incompatibility and marital dissatisfaction in the case of engagement and marriage for many of them. The study aims to add new scientific knowledge on the subject of self-

differentiation on the one hand and marital life skills on the other. The importance for individuals and society: Understanding the factors that contribute to the success and continuity of marriage, especially the subjective factors related to those about to marry, may help counselors interested in family and marriage counseling to understand the rules and life skills necessary for a successful marriage.

Contributions of the Study to Society:

This importance is reflected in the development of a counseling program based on marital life skills and the use of its many strategies, which also provides an opportunity to test the theory in the Jordanian environment, as it is one of the theories that has proven its effectiveness in the fields of marital and family counseling. The study also provides an opportunity to test the variable of self-differentiation and the impact of the strategies of this variable, not from the perspective of Bowen's multigenerational therapy, as is customary. It also provides two important tools for measuring the level of self-differentiation and the level of possession of a set of necessary marital life skills, so that they can be used later in further studies on the same topic or similar family topics.

Recommendations and Future Proposals

In light of the study's findings and the challenges it revealed, the researchers recommend the following:

1- The need to teach and intensify subjects, if they exist, that aim to educate students in the field of family and marriage in educational institutions, especially universities, as this is the stage that precedes the stage of choosing a spouse and building a family.

2- Training national professionals working in the field of family and marriage counseling, especially those working in the offices of reform, rehabilitation, and family reconciliation affiliated with the Department of Judges, which are spread throughout the Kingdom, on family counseling strategies and theories, especially those related to marital life skills.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of a counseling program based on marital life skills in improving the level of self-differentiation among a sample of university students. The study sample consisted of 32 male and female students, who were randomly divided into two groups: experimental and control, with 16 participants in each group. The researcher used a quasi-experimental approach with a pre-post measurement design with a control group. The self-differentiation scale, which includes the dimensions of emotional reactivity, ego stance, emotional detachment, and integration with others, was applied, along with a counseling program that included a set of marital life skills, including self-congruence, awareness of the influence of the family of origin, commitment, conflict resolution, communication, and intimacy. The results showed statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in the post-test on the total score for self-differentiation and its various dimensions. It also revealed the continuity of the program's effect in the follow-up measurement, indicating the effectiveness of the counseling program in improving self-differentiation among participating students. The study recommended the inclusion of such counseling programs in university institutions, given

their role in promoting psychological and emotional growth and developing future marital relationship skills among young people.

The results of this study yielded a set of important practical implications, as the counseling program based on marital life skills proved effective in improving the level of self-differentiation among university students. This was also reflected positively on the dimensions of emotional reaction, ego position, emotional detachment, and integration with others. These results indicate the importance of employing counseling programs based on the development of marital life skills in the university environment, given their role in promoting emotional maturity, developing the ability to make independent decisions, improving the quality of social relationships, and preparing for future married life. The results also emphasize the need to integrate such programs into university counseling plans, train educational counselors and psychologists to implement them, and design preventive programs targeting students in the early stages of their university life, thereby contributing to the prevention of future psychological and family problems. The study highlights the importance of educating students about the influence of their families of origin in shaping emotional interaction patterns and developing communication and conflict resolution skills, thereby promoting more stable and differentiated marital relationships.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Funding

There is no funding figure. Researchers receive a financial allowance in the form of publication fees after publication as an encouragement for scientific publication.

Transparency

The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Data Availability Statement

The data is available only to the researchers and no one else has access to it. It will be destroyed after the research is published.

Authors' Contributions

All researchers acknowledge their contributions to the preparation of the research paper.

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Appendix (1):**The Counseling Program for Marital Life Skills**

Session Number	Session Title	Objectives	Tools and Activities
1	Building the Counseling Relationship	Introduce group members to each other Build trust among participants Emphasize the rules of group counseling Sign the program participation agreement	Distribute a sheet containing the counseling rules Agreement between the counselor and participants Divide the group into pairs
2	Self-Esteem and Its Differentiation	Participants will learn the meaning of "self" and related terms. Participants will become familiar with the concept of the self. Participants will understand the concept of self-esteem (the "invisible container"). Participants will learn how low self-esteem affects emotions and behaviors.	Dialogue and discussion Clarification of terms Individual and group work Brainstorming The story of the container
3	Essence of the Self	Participants will define the concept of the essence of the self and the influencing factors. Participants will understand the relationship between the inner essence and the life force. Participants will identify the factors that affect the essence of the self. Participants will view their own self-essence from a new perspective. Participants will learn to identify their personal strengths.	Dialogue and discussion Candle activity Clarification of terms
4	Discover Your Strengths (Your Magical Garden)	Participants will develop greater self-awareness. Participants will recognize the extent of their personal resources. Each participant will discover her own "magical garden" and	Lecture Discussion and dialogue Clarification of terms Cooperative learning "Your Magical Garden" activity

learn how to nurture it in the future.

5	Your Personal Mandala	Participants will learn how the human parts function. Participants will recognize that they have eight important parts. Participants will identify their strong and weak parts.	Lecture, discussion, and dialogue PowerPoint presentation "Find Your Missing Parts" activity
6	Owning Your "Strange" Parts	Participants will identify their internal parts. Participants will recognize their personal "iceberg." Participants will learn how their parts interact and influence each other.	Lecture and discussion Clarification of terms Cooperative learning Individual work Drawing the iceberg and its components on the board
7	Communication Skills (1)	Participants will understand that communication is a learned process. Participants will learn that communication is the main factor determining the type of relationship between oneself and others. Each participant will review her personal communication elements.	Presentation of communication styles according to Satir Training on effective communication patterns Cooperative learning "Camera" activity
8	Communication Skills	Participants will enhance their skills in observing, listening, paying attention, understanding, and finding meaning. Participants will learn that touch is the most expressive means of conveying emotional information between two people.	Lecture and discussion Clarification of terms PowerPoint presentation Touch activity Body forms activity

		Participants will understand how body forms influence communication.	
9	Closed and Open Systems	Participants will understand the concept of the family as a system. Participants will learn the characteristics of open and closed systems. Participants will understand how balance is maintained within the family.	Dialogue and discussion Visual presentation (PowerPoint) Brainstorming Clarification of terms “Disassembling the System Parts” activity
10	Your Family Map	Participants will draw their personal family map. Participants will identify the roles played by each family member. Participants will understand the concept of triangles and their impact on relationships among family members. Review and summarize the previous sessions and assess the progress achieved by participants.	Lecture Discussion and dialogue Clarification of terms Family map drawing activity
11	Closing Session	Allow participants to provide feedback on the group sessions. Discuss how to apply the learned skills in daily life. Complete remaining tasks and say farewell to participants.	Dialogue and discussion Group evaluation form (scored out of 10)
