

Effectiveness of Premarital Counselling in Reducing Marital Discord among Seventh-Day Adventist Couples in Thiruvananthapuram

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Abstract: Marriage, while considered a sacred covenant within the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) faith, is increasingly susceptible to contemporary stressors that lead to marital discord. Despite the availability of pastoral premarital counselling, empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness in mitigating marital conflict within this specific community in Thiruvananthapuram remains limited. The present study aims to evaluate the impact of premarital counselling on marital satisfaction and discord among SDA couples. Utilizing a quasi-experimental static-group comparison research design, the study compared levels of marital discord between couples who completed a structured premarital counselling program and those who did not. Data were collected using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-32) from a sample of 80 couples (40 in each group), selected through purposive sampling based on their specific history of premarital counselling. Statistical analysis using an independent samples t-test demonstrated that couples who underwent structured premarital counselling achieved significantly lower levels of marital discord and higher adjustment scores ($M = 122.45$, $SD = 8.12$) compared to the control group ($M = 98.60$, $SD = 11.45$), $t(78) = 10.68$, $p < .001$. The findings highlight the critical importance of evidence-based premarital interventions and provide actionable insights for church leadership to refine counselling modules to better address the relational needs of modern couples.

Keywords: premarital counselling, marital discord, Seventh-day Adventist, Dyadic Adjustment Scale, relational satisfaction, Kerala.

1. Introduction

The institution of marriage serves as a foundational unit of social stability and human emotional attachment. However, in contemporary 21st-century society, marital relationships are subject to intense socio-economic, interpersonal, and psychological pressures. Marital discord- conceptualized as the range of negative perceptions, hostile interactions, chronic emotional tension, and unresolved conflicts between partners- has become an increasingly prominent issue across Indian urban centers, including Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

Historically, traditional joint family networks in South India provided built-in buffers and organic conflict-resolution mechanisms for newly married couples. As society transitions rapidly toward nuclear family arrangements, young couples often lack the immediate intergenerational support and mediation previously accessible. Consequently, relational conflicts can escalate rapidly into chronic discord or legal separation.

Premarital counselling functions as a primary psycho-educational intervention designed to equip prospective spouses with conflict-resolution strategies, realistic communication patterns, emotional regulation skills, and shared expectations prior to entering marriage. Within the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Christian faith, marriage is held not merely as a civil contract, but as a divine covenant. Consequently, church-led premarital guidance often weaves together theological tenets with practical interpersonal advice, seeking to construct a resilient, lifelong bond.

2. Theoretical Background

The conceptual foundation of this study is grounded in three major theoretical frameworks:

- **Family Systems Theory:** Systems theory views the romantic couple as an interdependent emotional unit. Premarital counselling enhances systemic homeostasis by helping both partners recognize system-wide patterns and preventing individual stressors from causing relational instability.
- **Social Learning Theory:** Bandura's perspective highlights that communication and conflict behaviors are learned through social modeling. Premarital intervention offers a structured platform to unlearn maladaptive patterns (such as criticism, stonewalling, or defensiveness) and adopt positive communication styles.
- **Covenantal Relationship Model:** Specific to faith-based contexts like the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, this model posits that a shared spiritual foundation and covenantal worldview provide an additional buffer against marital discord, enhancing commitment and shared purpose.

Need and Significance of the Study

In the contemporary social landscape of Kerala, changing gender dynamics, heightened economic demands, and evolving lifestyle expectations have led to a noticeable rise in marital distress across diverse demographic groups. Although the Seventh-day Adventist Church strongly advocates premarital guidance, there is a distinct lack of empirical, objective evaluation concerning whether these

pastoral or psychological premarital sessions effectively reduce post-marital conflict.

This study holds significant clinical, academic, and community value. From a clinical perspective, it provides empirical feedback regarding the efficacy of premarital preparation modules. In terms of preventive psychology, it demonstrates how proactive educational interventions can protect psychological well-being before severe distress occurs. Finally, for the SDA community in Thiruvananthapuram, the study yields actionable evidence to upgrade pastoral counselling frameworks into standardized, evidence-based psycho-educational programs.

3. Literature Survey

Conceptual Review

Premarital Counselling (PMC) is defined as a specialized psycho-educational program delivered prior to marriage to foster interpersonal competence, operationalized through communication training, financial alignment, role expectation clarification, and intimacy building. Marital Discord represents relational distress characterized by communication breakdown, persistent conflict, emotional distance, and cognitive dissatisfaction, frequently operationalized via Gottman's 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling). Within the SDA context, premarital preparation blends religious instruction on biblical marriage roles with practical relational advice.

Theoretical Review

Social Exchange Theory posits that relationship satisfaction is evaluated through a balance of perceived costs and rewards. Effective premarital counselling lowers interactional costs by reducing dysfunctional disagreements and elevates rewards through active listening and mutual emotional support. Additionally, Attachment Theory suggests that premarital education allows individuals with insecure attachment orientations to establish a secure base with their prospective spouse, fostering emotional accessibility and responsiveness.

Review of Previous Studies

Global research systematically supports the positive influence of premarital education. Carroll and Doherty (2003) as well as Fawcett et al. (2020) demonstrated in meta-analytic reviews that structured premarital programs yield approximately 30% higher marital satisfaction and significantly lower rates of marital separation compared to non-participating control groups. In the Indian context, studies by Thomas (2012) and Vasudevan et al. (2015) identified in-law interference, poor financial communication, and unaligned gender expectations as major catalysts for marital distress in Kerala, emphasizing the urgent need for structured premarital boundary setting.

Research Gap

Although general literature confirms the efficacy of premarital education in Western and secular settings, empirical research specifically investigating faith-based premarital counselling within South Indian Christian minorities—specifically the Seventh-day Adventist

community in Thiruvananthapuram—remains sparse. Most existing local programs operate informally without standardized psychological measurement. This study directly addresses this research gap by evaluating premarital counselling outcomes using the validated Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-32).

4. Problem Definition

"Effectiveness of Premarital Counselling in Reducing Marital Discord among Seventh-day Adventist Couples in Thiruvananthapuram."

5. Objectives of the Study

- 1) To measure the levels of marital adjustment and discord among Seventh-day Adventist couples in Thiruvananthapuram.
- 2) To compare the levels of marital discord between couples who underwent structured premarital counselling and those who did not.
- 3) To offer evidence-based recommendations for pastoral and psychological premarital interventions.

6. Methods / Approach

Research Problem: Evaluated under an empirical quantitative approach to establish precise relational outcomes.

- 1) **Research Design:** A Quasi-Experimental Static-Group Comparison Design was employed. Because participants could not be randomly assigned to marriage or counselling conditions retroactively, two pre-existing groups (Counselled vs. Non-Counselled) were compared on the dependent variable of marital adjustment.
- 2) **Variables of the Study:**
 - Independent Variable (IV): Premarital Counselling status (Categorical: Attended vs. Not Attended).
 - Dependent Variable (DV): Marital Discord / Dyadic Adjustment (Continuous: Measured via total scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale - DAS-32).
- 3) **Sample and Participants:** The target population comprised legally married Seventh-day Adventist couples residing in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. The total sample consisted of 80 participant couples (N = 80), categorized into Group 1 (Counselled, n = 40) and Group 2 (Non-Counselled, n = 40).
- 4) **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:**
 - Inclusion Criteria: (a) Married for at least 1 year and no more than 10 years; (b) Both spouses active members of the SDA Church in Thiruvananthapuram; (c) Willingness to give informed consent.
 - Exclusion Criteria: (a) Couples currently undergoing formal legal divorce proceedings; (b) Individuals with diagnosed active clinical psychopathology or cognitive impairments.
- 5) **Sampling Technique:** A non-probability Purposive Sampling technique was utilized to recruit participants meeting the strict inclusion criteria across designated local SDA churches in Thiruvananthapuram.
- 6) **Tools and Measures:**
 - Socio-Demographic Sheet: Captured participant age, gender, marriage duration, education level, family

structure (nuclear vs. joint), and premarital counselling background.

- Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-32; Spanier, 1976): A widely validated 32-item instrument assessing four dimensions of relational health: Dyadic Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction, Dyadic Cohesion, and Affectional Expression. Total scores range from 0 to 151, where higher scores signify higher adjustment and lower marital discord.
- 7) **Procedure:** Permissions were obtained from local church leadership across Thiruvananthapuram. Participants were contacted during community gatherings and online church networks. After briefing participants and securing signed informed consent, questionnaires were completed individually or via secure digital forms.
- 8) **Ethical Considerations:** Ethical guidelines prescribed by Jain (Deemed-to-be University) were strictly followed. Informed consent was secured, participation was entirely voluntary, data were anonymized using numeric codes, and contact information for professional counselling support was provided.
- 9) **Statistical Analysis:** Descriptive statistics (Mean, Standard Deviation) were computed for demographic and test data. An Independent Samples t-test was conducted to compare DAS-32 total scores between counselled and non-counselled groups.

7. Result

The final sample comprised 80 Seventh-day Adventist couples in Thiruvananthapuram. The mean duration of marriage across the sample was 4.20 years ($SD = 2.15$). Exactly 40 couples (50%) had completed formal premarital counselling, while 40 couples (50%) had not.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for DAS-32 Total Scores by Premarital Counselling Status

Group	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Score Range
Counselled Group	40	122.45	8.12	106 - 138
Non-Counselled Group	40	98.6	11.45	76 - 120

Hypothesis Testing

To test the primary hypothesis (H1) that couples receiving premarital counselling demonstrate significantly lower marital discord compared to non-counselled couples, an Independent Samples t-test was conducted.

Table 2: Independent Samples t-Test Comparing DAS-32 Scores Between Groups

Variable	Mean Diff.	t-value	df	p-value	Cohen's d	95% CI
DAS Total	23.85	10.68	78	< .001	2.38	[19.41, 28.29]

As shown in Table 2, the independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in Dyadic Adjustment Scale scores between counselled couples ($M = 122.45$, $SD = 8.12$) and non-counselled couples ($M = 98.60$, $SD = 11.45$), $t(78) = 10.68$, $p < .001$. The mean difference was 23.85 points (95% CI [19.41, 28.29]), representing an exceptionally large effect size (Cohen's $d = 2.38$).

Because $p < .05$, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) is accepted. The results provide strong statistical support that structured premarital counselling significantly reduces marital discord and promotes dyadic adjustment among Seventh-day Adventist couples.

8. Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The primary empirical objective of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of premarital counselling in mitigating marital discord among Seventh-day Adventist couples in Thiruvananthapuram. The statistical analysis unequivocally supports the hypothesis: couples who underwent structured premarital counselling exhibited substantially higher dyadic adjustment scores, reflecting markedly lower levels of marital discord.

These findings align seamlessly with global literature (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Fawcett et al., 2020) establishing premarital psycho-education as a critical protective factor against marital distress. From the standpoint of Social Learning Theory, premarital sessions equip partners with concrete behavioral competencies- such as active listening, emotional regulation, and structured problem-solving- that counteract maladaptive conflict habits.

In the specific context of the Seventh-day Adventist community in Kerala, premarital counselling provides a valuable venue for aligning spiritual and practical expectations. Couples who explore topics such as nuclear family boundaries, financial stewardship, in-law relationships, and covenantal commitment before marriage are significantly better prepared to maintain systemic homeostasis when facing post-marital stressors.

9. Implications of the Study

- 1) **Institutional Standardisation:** Church administrative bodies and pastoral leadership should transition from casual pre-wedding talks to standardized, evidence-based premarital modules that combine psychological skill-building with theological principles.
- 2) **Preventive Mental Health Advocacy:** Community mental health practitioners can leverage these results to advocate for premarital education as an essential primary preventive mental health intervention across Kerala.

10. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings: (a) Social Desirability Bias may cause participants within religious communities to overreport relational harmony; (b) The Quasi-Experimental design restricts causal inferences compared to randomized controlled trials; (c) The geographically and denominationally focused sample limits direct generalizability to non-SDA populations.

11. Conclusion

This dissertation investigated the impact of premarital counselling on marital discord among Seventh-day Adventist couples in Thiruvananthapuram. Utilizing the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-32) across a sample of 80 couples, the study demonstrated that structured premarital counselling leads to statistically significant improvements in dyadic adjustment and substantial reductions in marital discord.

The research highlights the indispensability of structured premarital education in safeguarding family stability. By systematically combining evidence-based psychological frameworks with spiritual covenantal principles, church leaders and mental health professionals can effectively equip couples to navigate modern marital challenges and build enduring, harmonious unions.

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