



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Investigating Views on Increasing Premarital Relationship Development Programs

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the perspectives of students enrolled in the Premarital Counseling course regarding the expansion of premarital relationship development programs. Employing a focus group interview as a qualitative research method, data collection utilized a semi-structured interview form with two questions. The study comprised 25 undergraduate students in the Guidance and Psychological Counseling Program. Analyzing the data through content analysis revealed two primary themes: alternative strategies to increase the number of premarital relationship development programs and participant incentives, aligning with the study's objectives. Sub-themes under these themes were also identified. The research findings are anticipated to guide future developmental studies aimed at enhancing both the quantity and quality of premarital relationship development programs in Türkiye, encouraging broader participation in these initiatives. Participants mentioned acquiring knowledge and awareness about existing programs through the Premarital Counseling course. To expand this impact, advocating for the widespread inclusion of Premarital Psychological Counseling courses in Psychological Counseling and Guidance undergraduate programs is recommended. Furthermore, as suggested by participants, informing university students in other programs and departments about premarital relationship training could be achieved through diverse elective courses.

In young adulthood, it is developmentally and socially important for individuals to establish romantic relationships, maintain these relationships in a healthy way, and marry. In collectivist cultures, marriage is the most accepted social way of living together and forming a family. In 2022, the crude marriage rate in Türkiye was 6.76 per thousand, and 574 thousand 358 couples married (Turkish Statistical Institute [TURKSTAT], 2023). Expectations regarding marriage and family life change depending on cultural and social norms, technological developments, and the development of gender equality. In particular, it is important to consider the impact of increased use of the internet and instant communication over social networks through smart devices on romantic relationships and marriages. While the expectations from marriage a century ago were to ensure the continuation of the generation on the basis of commitment, today it has turned into a structure based on the equality of men and women, where attention and love are desired to be felt constantly.

Marriage brings about significant changes in the lives of individuals (new life roles, duties and responsibilities, etc.). These changes are felt most intensely in the first years of marriage and couples are expected to adapt to

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these changes quickly. However, couples may face difficulties, disappointments, and conflicts in this adaptation process (Terzi İlhan & Işık, 2019). In the literature, it is possible to find research results that divorces are intense in the first years of marriage (e.g. Dennison, Koerner, & Segrin, 2014; Dişsever & Dişçi, 2000; Neff & Geers, 2013; Uçan, 2007). According to the marriage and divorce statistics of TURKSTAT (2023), the crude divorce rate in Türkiye was 2.13 per thousand in 2022, with 180,954 couples divorced. 32.7% of these divorces took place within the first 5 years of marriage, 21.6% of them within the 6–10 years of marriage, and the number of children affected by divorces was recorded as 180,592.

Since the family is the smallest social unit, a problem in the family system has a direct impact not only on the family but also on the family's immediate social environment and public health. While family breakdown and divorce cause psychological, social, and economic difficulties, troubled marriages also involve similar difficulties. Therefore, it is important to support individuals to gain some knowledge and skills to review both themselves and their relationships and to strengthen their relationships before marriage takes place. Premarital counseling is one of the most important services that can prevent marital failures, divorce, and sexual and psychological disorders of couples. Relationship development programs within the scope of premarital counseling are one of the main preventive services aiming to improve marital relationships, healthy reproduction, and healthy parenting. In addition to strengthening individuals' ability to make informed choices, premarital relationship development programs provide individuals with the opportunity to acquire the necessary skills to solve problems that may arise in marriage. As a matter of fact, research supporting the effectiveness of premarital education programs can be found in the literature (e.g., Halford, 2004; Larson, 2004). When premarital education programs are examined, it is seen that they are classified into three types: theory-based (e.g. Gottman's strong relationship home model, emotion-focused therapy, and Imago relationship therapy), skill-based (e.g. Protect Your Marriage Before It Starts program–SYMBIS, Prevention and Relationship Development Program–PREP) and inventory-based (e.g. Premarital Individual and Relationship Assessment–PREPARE, Understanding and Facilitating Couple Communication–FOCCUS) (Ökten, 2022).

A happy and satisfied marriage requires the presence of two happy spouses. Seeking psychological counseling before marriage or participating in relationship development programs is emerging as an effective means for engaged and newly married couples to maintain relationship satisfaction (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Silliman & Schumm, 2000). Despite researchers' growing interest in preventive approaches to marital distress, many couples do not yet realize the potential benefits of the programs and services that mental health professionals can provide. Even in the midst of severe marital distress, couples do not seek professional help and some studies show that more than 80% of couples who divorce do so without consulting a mental health professional (Blair and Córdova, 2009; Johnson et al., 2002). According to the Türkiye Family Structure Survey (2022), 43% of married couples reported that they consulted family elders when they had problems instead of seeking help from a specialist, while the rate of those who consulted a specialist was 5.2% for women and 4.3% for men. However, most of the research on premarital relationship development programs focuses on short-term effects in the early stages of a relationship. There is little research on the medium and long-term effects of relationship education on improving relationships or reducing separation. It is difficult to find education that supports couples during life transitions such as becoming parents, starting a family again, relocating, and retiring. Individuals may have few skills to cope with a crisis or challenges such as job loss and illness (Halford, 2000).

A study (Doss et al., 2009) examined the likelihood of receiving premarital education for 398 individuals currently in their second marriage and 1,342 individuals currently in their first marriage. Compared to those in first marriages, individuals in second marriages were significantly less likely to receive premarital education for their current marriage. This difference between first and second marriages was mediated by variables such as cohabitation before marriage, educational level, having children from previous relationships, and being married in a religious marriage. It is striking that in both first and second marriages, couples with the highest risk of subsequent marital problems and divorce were less likely to have received premarital education. This

gap has important research and policy implications, especially given that second marriages are more likely to end in divorce (e.g., Bramlett & Mosher, 2001; Kreider, 2005) and that children are involved during marriage.

Blair and Córdova (2009) investigated whether marital commitment predicts the intention to participate in premarital education programs in a study with 46 engaged couples. The results showed that marital commitment, spirituality, and health beliefs predicted women's interest in premarital education and intention to participate in premarital education programs, while men's intention to participate in premarital education programs was predicted only by women's interest in premarital education. However, 93% of the men and 100% of the women surveyed indicated that they already had the skills to deal with any conflict that might arise in their relationship. In particular, women were less likely to report an interest or intention to participate in premarital education if they perceived barriers to participation (Blair and Córdova, 2009). Thus, the more convenient and accessible these programs are, the more likely women are to participate, possibly with their husbands. In a similar study (Sullivan et al., 2004), perceived susceptibility to marital problems, perceived susceptibility to divorce, and perceived barriers were found to be significant predictors of women's intention to participate in a premarital education program. However, for men, after controlling for demographic variables, perceived barriers and expenditure were the only significant predictors of intention to participate. This research suggests that to the extent that policymakers, researchers, and educators can influence women's awareness of marital problems or their susceptibility to divorce, they can influence participation in premarital education programs.

While premarital education programs are frequently used in Europe and the USA, and even courses on romantic relationships are offered in high schools and universities, Türkiye has not taken consistent steps in this regard (Yıldız, 2016). When premarital relationship development programs in Türkiye are examined, it is only possible to find a limited number of studies conducted by ministries, universities, municipalities, private counseling centers, and non-governmental organizations (Ökten, 2022). It is very important to increase the number of premarital relationship development programs and to prepare them by taking cultural characteristics into consideration in order to reach wider target groups. On the other hand, reducing the cost, reducing the duration of the program, and making counseling as convenient as possible to increase participation in premarital relationship development programs are strategies that should be used to encourage more couples to benefit from premarital education programs. Many relationship development programs consist of committed couples. While the goal is to provide an opportunity for less committed couples to strengthen their relationship, premarital education also provides an opportunity for more committed couples to demonstrate their commitment. In order to increase engagement, along with the removal of barriers, educators should draw more attention to the importance of a commitment to the ongoing maintenance and development of the relationship (Sullivan et al., 2004; Blair & Córdova, 2009). In light of all this information, the aim of this study is to examine the views of the students who took the Premarital Counseling course at a foundation university in the fall semester of 2022–2023 on increasing the number of premarital relationship development programs. In line with this purpose, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What can be done to increase the number of premarital education programs? What are your alternative ideas on this issue?
2. Assuming that the number of training programs is increased, how can participation in these programs be encouraged?

Method

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative research approach was utilized. The focus of qualitative research is on the process and the search for meaning; it views the world as people, situations, events and the processes that connect them (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research is conducted to understand the context in which participants address a problem or issue (Creswell, 2013). In qualitative research, interviews can be conducted in different ways. The researcher can interview the participants face-to-face, by phone, by e-mail, or online (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this study, focus group interview, one of the qualitative research methods, was used. A focus group interview is a technique that aims to collect data by

creating a polyphonic environment where participants do not feel the need to hide their true thoughts, usually with 4–12 participants with some common characteristics and similar experiences and a moderator. Focus group studies are frequently used because they are low-cost, data can be obtained quickly, they provide reliable information if the appropriate environment is provided, and they are the most suitable technique, especially for community research. Within this framework, in this study, focus group interviews were used instead of individual interviews in order to obtain more in-depth data, as it offers the opportunity to work with a large sample. Participants in a focus group interview listen to each other and respond to the views and opinions they hear. Therefore, participation in a group environment provides valuable information. In focus group interviews, the answers to the questions are enriched by the interaction of the participants with each other and allow for deep and detailed analysis. Thus, the possibility of collecting data cost-effectively, revealing different perspectives, improving the data quality of the interaction between the participants, and the fact that the subject under study is not personal and sensitive are among the factors that influence the choice of the focus group interview method in this study (Patton, 2015). The data of this study were collected through a semi-structured interview form consisting of two questions. Semi-structured interviews provide more systematic and comparable information from the participants (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021).

Study Group

The study group of the research consists of 25 undergraduate students, 20 female, and 5 male, studying in the Guidance and Psychological Counseling Program of the Faculty of Education of a foundation university in Ankara. In qualitative research, purposive sampling methods are used to study situations that are thought to have rich information in depth (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). The Criterion sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used in the study. In line with the criteria established by the researchers, students who took the Premarital Counseling course as an elective course in the fall semester of the 2022–2023 academic year constituted the study group.

Data Collection

The data were collected in December 2022 with a semi-structured interview form created by the researchers. An announcement was made to the students who were taking the course by the instructor who taught the course. Students who volunteered to participate in the study were asked to sign an informed consent form. After the dates and times of the interviews were determined, three separate focus group interviews were conducted by planning the location and technology. At the beginning of the interviews, the information in the consent form was summarized, and verbal approvals were obtained. After the first researcher explained the purpose and scope of the research to the participants as the group manager, the interview questions were asked from general to specific. Probing questions were used to obtain in-depth information where necessary. Examples of these questions include *"What topics should these programs cover?"*, *"By whom and where should these programs be conducted?"*, *"To whom should these programs be directed?"*, *"When (at what stage of the relationship) should these programs be conducted?"*. The second researcher was assigned the task of controlling the recording device, noting important points, and fulfilling any needs that may arise. The first group consisted of 8, the second group of 10, and the third group of 7 participants. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes on average and were conducted in the group counseling room. The interviews were recorded with a tape recorder with the permission of the participants.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis refers to the process of creating meaning from data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The content analysis method was used to analyze the data. Conceptualizing the data and explaining the meaningful patterns between concepts through themes constitute the basis of this analysis. Content analysis focuses on an in-depth analysis of the collected data and the emergence of previously unclear dimensions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). Opinions on how to increase the number of premarital education programs and how to encourage participation in these programs if the number of education programs is increased include the steps of coding the data, finding themes, organizing the codes and themes, and defining and interpreting the findings. Each recorded interview was transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Research Credibility and Ethics

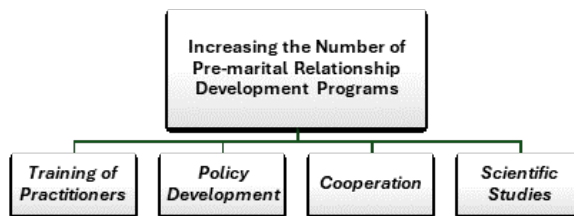
In qualitative research, the role of the researchers and their interest in the subject matter are important in ensuring the credibility of the researcher (Patton, 2015). The integrity of qualitative research is related to the position of the researcher and how it affects the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this study, the researchers' past experiences, education, and research topics of interest are within the scope of the research. The first researcher's doctoral study involved the implementation of a premarital psychoeducation program with university students. At the present time, the researcher conducts research in the field of couple and family counseling and teaches courses at undergraduate and graduate level. The second researcher took master's level courses on the same subject. The interview form prepared by the researchers was sent to two experts in the field of Guidance and Psychological Counseling. The interview form was finalized in line with the expert opinions. Furthermore, purposeful sampling and direct quotations containing raw data while remaining faithful to the nature of the data contribute to the reliability of the research (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). It can be said that the use of in-depth description in the transfer of findings contributes to validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In studies where more than one researcher analyzes the data, a study on coding reliability is required (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). Both researchers carried out coding in the analysis of the transcribed data. The agreement on codes and themes was determined as 84% according to the formula of Miles and Huberman (1994), which means there is an agreement between the coders (Creswell, 2013) and stability in the answers of more than one coder of the data set. Miles and Huberman (1994) state that the reliability of coding should be at least 80% agreement level for qualitative reliability. Accordingly, it can be said that the inter-coder consensus is at an acceptable level.

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical rules by adhering to the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive of Higher Education Institutions. At the same time, this research was conducted with the approval of the Social and Human Sciences and Arts Research Committee of the higher education institution where the researchers work, dated January 23, 2023, and numbered 17162298.600-23. The participants were informed about the purpose and content of the research and their consent was obtained. The participants were informed that the data to be obtained would be used for scientific purposes and that no information that would reveal their identities would be presented. The participants were coded as P1, P2..., PN in the data analysis, and their personal information was concealed. The researchers avoided leading questions and reflecting personal impressions during the data collection process.

Findings

As a result of the data analysis, two main themes, alternative ideas for increasing the number of premarital relationship development programs and participant incentives were identified in line with the purpose of the study and the research questions. The first of these two main themes, alternative ideas for increasing the number of premarital relationship development programs, was grouped under four sub-themes. The first theme and its sub-themes are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Alternative ideas.



Alternative ideas for increasing the number of premarital relationship development programs were collected under the sub-themes of training practitioners, policy development, cooperation, and scientific studies. Examples of verbal data in these themes are presented below.

In the sub-theme of training practitioners, participants emphasized various field specializations. In this context, field experts such as academics, psychological counselors, psychologists, lawyers, etc. are seen as having the competence to inform and train practitioners through education. For example P1 said “If ministries, etc. are interested in these pre-marriage programs, they should also be informed, because I think they don't give the necessary importance. If people who are experts in their field, such as university professors, inform them about the importance of this and how it should be done, they can prepare a program accordingly and then carry out a stage.”. Another participant (P10) said “Actually, psychological counseling and guidance and psychology students could at least carry out studies to raise awareness. For example, there could be informational activities. Even we could enter a class at the faculty of engineering and make such a presentation, at least about the importance of the relationship. Those who study psychological counseling have a little bit of awareness because of our department, but maybe an engineering student does not even have an awareness of this.” Statements in this theme often emphasize interdisciplinary collaboration in the development of programs and the training of practitioners.

In the sub-theme of policy development, participants were of the opinion that national and local policies should be developed to increase the number of premarital relationship development programs. For example P7 said, “Actually, when they go to get a wedding date, they have to fill out a lot of documents and they have to go through a lot of health stages. At least the informative part, I think we could make an informative session compulsory.”. Another participant (P13) said “We need to go to the countryside. The programs need to reach the people who really need it, because people who have a certain status or have exceeded a certain level of culture can somehow access it. I think they have more opportunities and possibilities in this sense.”. In addition to these statements, there are also statements that courses on romantic relationships and marriage can be added to schools, especially high schools and universities, and that politicians should also legally recognize premarital relationships.

In the sub-theme of cooperation, participants believe that increasing the number of premarital relationship development programs can be achieved through cooperation between various individuals, institutions, and organizations. Participants state that experts, national and local official institutions can come together and carry out studies. If the participant statements are given as examples, P13 stated that “I think stakeholders should work together, interdisciplinary work is needed. I think that the municipality and the health sector could come together and work could be carried out both to raise awareness of couples and to increase the accessibility of these studies.” while P20 stated that “Academics could work together with national education and raise awareness of teachers. Starting with teachers, because it also includes the students in the Ministry of National Education, because this starts in high school, I thought such joint studies could be organized, projects could be done. I think non-governmental organizations could also work.”.

In the sub-theme of scientific studies, participants think that various scientific studies should be conducted to increase the number of premarital relationship development programs. Participant statements regarding the sub-theme of scientific studies are presented below. For example P3 said “I think informative booklets could be prepared for the public, just like a newspaper is sold in grocery stores, magazines are sold in markets, I think informative booklets on certain topics could be prepared weekly or monthly, like the brochures we prepared within the scope of our course, or as young people, we live in the digital world more and more and this age is developing, we need to keep up with it, there could be informative posts on social media, podcasts, informative posts from regular accounts, these could also be important.” and P11 (“Can we adapt content again, for example, in this case? Instead of completely importing it from abroad, we can really adapt it to our own culture”) and P24 (“There were such programs abroad, they could actually be adapted here”) emphasized that programs abroad can be adapted to the culture.

The second research question, how to encourage participation in premarital relationship development programs, was grouped into four sub-theme under the theme of participant incentives. The second theme and its subcategories are presented in Figure 2.

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Figure 2. Participant incentive.

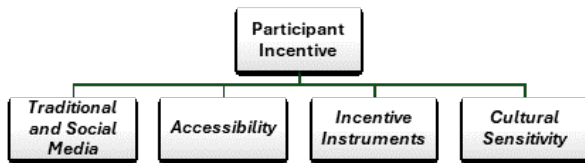


Figure 2 shows that the themes of traditional and social media, accessibility, incentive tools, and cultural sensitivity are included in participant incentives. Examples of verbal data on these sub- themes are presented below.

In the sub-theme of traditional and social media, participants stated that traditional and social media can be used to encourage participation in premarital relationship development programs. They state that content such as TV series, movies, advertisements, news, etc. featuring premarital relationship development programs can be used in traditional media. Similarly, participants believe that chat programs on various social media platforms, content producers, and influencers mentioning premarital relationship development programs in their content will increase the incentive. P15 stated that “The first thing that came to my mind was actually television because there is a segment that is difficult to reach. Here, famous names could advertise this, and people could pay attention to such things. Such a very popular book could be written and become very popular, or it could be a television series or a movie.” while P22 stated that “I’ve noticed something recently, if someone wants to make something famous, they get a brand to give an advertisement to an influencer without telling them it’s a collaboration, and then everyone is after them.”. P25 looked at it from a different perspective and stated that interviews could be conducted with those who had previously participated in similar premarital programs (“I also thought that if someone from the public said that they interviewed the people who received it in the news or something like that, it was short, but it was very useful for me, it would attract the attention of others and participation would increase.”).

In the sub-theme of accessibility, participants emphasized that accessibility is important to encourage participation in premarital relationship development programs. Accessibility includes awareness, information, and guidance about the need for premarital relationship development programs. If we look at the participant opinions, P2 said “Apart from the platforms, for example, there could be all the places they go. For example, a 60-year-old man could go to the coffeehouse, such things could be placed there, someone working there could be informed and we are doing something like this... Or, I don’t know, mosque exits, these could be the most hypothetical, I’m saying these places because they are the most unthinkable examples.”. P6 stated “I think these guides should be minimized and sold, they should be open to the public, and they should be in easily accessible grocery stores and markets. I think free training about this should be given in all municipalities in all eighty-one provinces, including districts.” and P19 added “Subways are the most used places by the public. In the subways, something like an informative public service announcement could be rotated on the screens or placed on the boards.”.

In the sub-theme of incentive instruments, participants indicated that various incentive tools such as certificates, financial support, and employment would encourage participation in premarital relationship development programs. If we give some examples of participant statements for the incentive instruments sub-theme: “In order for communities to be formed on the basis of volunteerism, I think the state has a treasury, or even if there is no treasury, I think it should provide an incentive. I mean, as an incentive, as I said, a certain segment thinks about the money part, they say, I have an interest in this, let me go and learn, I will get something as a result. For example, in this program for university students, they could be given a direct

certificate that could be used in their future lives.”(P5), and P15 stated “I think state support is important here again. Because I think one of the biggest reasons why men don't want it is the financial aspect. I think it would be easier to convince them if they at least knew that they would not spend a lot of money on it.” In addition to these incentive instruments, there are also participants who emphasize that symbolic incentives (such as certificates) can also be important (for example P17 and P25).

In the sub-theme of cultural sensitivity, participants mentioned various cultural changes, such as changing prejudices and gender role stereotypes, to encourage participation in premarital relationship development programs. Some participant statements in this regard are: “Culturally, such issues are a bit behind in our society. Whether it is pre-marriage... some families may not accept pre-marriage, there were arranged marriages before that. Therefore, first of all, the administrators need to create this culture in the country, in the society, and make the society adopt it... Yes, prejudices need to be broken first. They need to explain that there can be a relationship before marriage, that the things that happened before marriage are also included in the relationship, and they need to make the society adopt this.” (P6), P10 added “Things could be planned to break these myths. I mean, what is he thinking that he doesn't participate in these programs? Something could be done to turn these false beliefs into truth. Maybe in terms of gender, for example, when a woman tells a man to get such counseling, the man may feel guilty.”, another participant points out the importance of differences of opinion between generations “I think the issue that should definitely be taken into consideration is that unfortunately, family, or in some cases relative, intervention in pre-marriage couples is very common in our country. We see that this is especially high in rural areas and I think that they are the ones who need this program the most, because I think that crisis moments or neglect and abuse situations may be more common in them.” (P13).

Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

During young adulthood, developing romantic relationships before marriage, choosing a spouse, getting married, and starting a family are among the important developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1972; Levinson 1986). Considering that the first marriages take place during young adulthood in Türkiye and the average age of first marriage is 25.6 for women and 28.2 for men (TURKSTAT, 2023), the necessity of premarital services to be provided during this period becomes evident. Considering the effect of premarital relationship development programs on the realization of developmental tasks related to marriage and family building, this study examines the opinions of students taking the Premarital Counseling course on increasing the number of premarital relationship development programs. The data obtained as a result of the interviews with the students were collected under two main themes: increasing the number of premarital relationship development programs and participant incentives.

Under the theme of increasing the number of premarital relationship development programs, there are sub-themes of training practitioners, policy development, cooperation, and scientific studies. The findings in these themes show that the participants perceive premarital relationship development programs as professional support services and think that it is important for experts to take part in the preparation and delivery of pieces of training. In addition, national and local actors such as policymakers, ministries, and municipalities should take responsibility for increasing the number of premarital relationship development programs. It is known that there are not enough relationship development programs in Türkiye and most of the existing relationship development programs are limited to postgraduate studies (Kızıl Aslan & Nazlı, 2021). While the participants stated that there should be cooperation between stakeholders, different institutions, and experts who are thought to be related to the subject, they also emphasized scientific studies and stated that various publications should be prepared, and adaptation and development studies should be carried out. In light of these findings, when the premarital education programs carried out by the central government in Türkiye are examined, it is seen that the Ministry of Family and Social Services has been implementing the "Premarital Education Program" in cooperation with municipalities since 2012. This program consists of four modules: trainer's handbook, communication and life skills in marriage, family law guide, and marriage and health, and can be accessed free of charge on the official website of the Ministry within the scope of the Family Education

Program (<https://aep.aile.gov.tr/#egitimicerik>). The Ministry of Family and Social Services announced that more than 1 million 200 thousand people benefited from these trainings until 2021 and that the "Pre Marriage-Education Dissemination Project" was established by the General Directorate of Family and Community Services in 2020 in order to increase the recognition, public awareness, and preferability of the Pre-Marriage Education Program and to contribute to the formation of positive ideas about marriage and family institution (<https://www.aile.gov.tr/athgm/haberler/evlilik-oncesi-egitim-programi-kapsaminda-1-milyon-200-bini-askin-kisiye-egitim-verildi/>). Since 2014, the Ministry of Health has been preparing a Pre- Marriage Counseling Guide to inform couples applying for a health report to get married (<https://ekutuphane.saglik.gov.tr/Yayin/473>). In addition to these ministries, the Ministry of National Education also organizes various pre-marriage preparation courses (Ökten, 2022). When the programs conducted through higher education institutions are examined, the first noteworthy study is the "Marriage School" project conducted by Istanbul University in 1998. Afterward, various theses and articles on premarital relationship development programs were published (see Kızıl Aslan & Nazlı, 2021; Kızıl Aslan, 2023).

While all these efforts show the importance given to premarital relationship development programs, on the other hand, considering the number of people who have benefited from these services to date, it also reveals that there is a need for collaborations and policies that aim to systematically reach all the couples who are getting married. In the literature, there are studies showing that couples participating in premarital education programs have happier and more satisfied marriages (e.g. Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Hahlweg & Richter, 2010; Fawcett et al., 2010; Stanley et al., 2006). In a study conducted before marriage, it was concluded that the Romantic Relationship Development Program developed based on the systemic approach increased the relationship satisfaction of young people in romantic relationships and this effect continued two months after the program ended (Deveci Şirin & Bayrakçı, 2020). These and similar research results provide important evidence about the effectiveness of premarital relationship development programs. Therefore, increasing the number of training programs and reaching wider audiences is a need rather than a desire. For example, in Terzi İlhan and Işık's (2019) study examining the premarital education needs of 10 married individuals between 1-5 years, the participants stated that they would like to have information about sexuality, spousal relationships, family relationships, married life, and splitting tasks and to participate in a premarital education program with their spouses if they had the opportunity before marriage.

In the theme of participant incentives, there are sub-themes of traditional and social media, accessibility, incentive tools and cultural sensitivity. In this theme, it is seen that most of the participants emphasized awareness and information activities related to premarital relationship development programs. In other words, according to the participants, participation in the programs is related to being aware of the need for the program. Participants stated that premarital relationship development programs should be accessible and encouraged by using various incentive tools and this should be done in a culturally sensitive manner. According to the participants, accessibility problems are an obstacle to participation in the programs. In parallel with these findings, Şen (2009) mentions some methods on how to encourage young people to participate in premarital programs. One of these methods, the bad scenario tactic, in which the high divorce rates are brought to the forefront, was found to be least effective in increasing participation; instead, methods such as reducing misperceptions, making training and counseling fees accessible, ensuring that the trainers are experts and reliable, explaining the benefits well, praising the trainings by people who have previously participated in these trainings, statements by well-known people in the society, and recommending these trainings to everyone with whom couples communicate during the marriage process were found to be more effective. In a study conducted by Hamamcı, Buğa, and Duran (2011), when the sources used by university students about marriage were examined, the top three were talking to friends, observing married individuals, and television programs. In another study, the resources that can be used for premarital education were expressed as the internet, books, elders or relatives and physicians, and it was stated that education can be provided in the form of seminars, practically or through a booklet or brochure (Terzi İlhan & Işık, 2019). On the other hand, considering that couples and families go through a process of change before marriage (Kalkan & Yalçın, 2021), the participants' views on changing cultural judgments and informing the families of the couples to be married are significant. It is known that cultural and demographic changes in Türkiye affect the premarital period and the time when the family will be established (Türkiye Family Structure Advanced Statistical Analysis, 2018).

The Eleventh Development Plan aims to formulate family policies with the participation of all stakeholders and to increase the quality and prevalence of services for the family. In this direction, among the measures to strengthen the family, there are targets to expand education and counseling services that encourage the continuity of marriages and to expand educational programs on marriage, family, communication within the family, etc. using visual and audio media (Presidency of Strategy and Budget, 2019). When premarital relationship development programs are considered as programs aimed at building a strong social structure and strengthening the family, it can be said that the participants' views on policy development, cooperation, and traditional-social media sub-themes are consistent with national goals.

As a result, it is thought that the findings of the study can be guiding in developmental and preventive studies to be carried out in order to increase the number and quality of premarital relationship development programs in Türkiye and to encourage more participants to benefit from these programs. In their opinions on awareness and information about the programs, the participants stated that they reached knowledge and awareness about the existing programs through the Premarital Counseling course. In this direction, it can be ensured that the Premarital Psychological Counseling course is made widespread in Guidance and Psychological Counseling undergraduate programs, and beyond that, as stated by the participants, university students studying in other programs and departments can be informed about premarital relationship education through various elective courses. In addition, all relevant ministries, institutions, organizations, universities, non-governmental organizations, and private counseling centers can work in cooperation on this issue and conduct needs analyses with broad participation. Support can be obtained from professionals specialized in the field of mental health in developing effective programs and resources in terms of duration and content, and in training trainers. In order to encourage participants, large-scale advertising activities can be carried out by taking cultural characteristics into account, and certificates, financial support or various gift packages can be created. This study consists only of students who have taken the Premarital Counseling course and volunteered to participate in the study. In similar studies, the study group can be expanded, participants of various ages and educational levels can be reached, and mixed methods using both quantitative and qualitative data can be preferred.

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