

Evaluating a Partner Schema Clarification Intervention on Attribution Bias and Conflict Sensitivity

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a Partner Schema Clarification Intervention (PSCI) in reducing attribution bias and conflict sensitivity among married individuals. A randomized controlled trial was conducted with 30 married participants from Baghdad, Iraq, who were randomly assigned to an intervention group ($n = 15$) or a control group ($n = 15$). The intervention group received a six-session PSCI program over six weeks, focusing on identifying and restructuring maladaptive partner-related schemas, while the control group was waitlisted. Both groups completed standardized assessments of attribution bias and conflict sensitivity at three time points: pretest, posttest, and five-month follow-up. Data were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA, with Bonferroni post-hoc tests conducted to examine pairwise differences over time. SPSS-27 was used for all statistical analyses. Results indicated significant time $\times$ group interaction effects for both attribution bias ($F(2, 54) = 38.49, p < .001, \eta^2 = .598$) and conflict sensitivity ($F(2, 54) = 33.90, p < .001, \eta^2 = .557$), suggesting that the intervention group improved significantly over time compared to the control group. Bonferroni post-hoc tests revealed statistically significant reductions in both variables from pretest to posttest and from pretest to follow-up in the intervention group ($p < .001$), with no significant changes between posttest and follow-up, indicating sustained treatment effects. The Partner Schema Clarification Intervention was effective in reducing attribution bias and conflict sensitivity in marital relationships, with improvements maintained at follow-up. These findings support the application of schema-focused, cognitive-emotional interventions in couple therapy settings to enhance relational perception and emotional regulation.

Keywords: Partner schema, attribution bias, conflict sensitivity, couple therapy, schema clarification, randomized controlled trial, marital conflict.

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Introduction

Schemas—deep-seated cognitive frameworks developed through life experiences—play a crucial role in shaping individuals' perceptions, emotions, and behaviors in close relationships. In the context of romantic partnerships, early maladaptive schemas (EMSs), particularly those related to mistrust, emotional deprivation, and defectiveness, can distort reality and exacerbate interpersonal tensions. Such schemas often manifest as attributional biases and heightened sensitivity to conflict, leading to misinterpretation of a partner's intentions and disproportionate emotional reactions during relational challenges (Celsi et al., 2021; Kover et al., 2024). These distortions not only erode relational satisfaction but can also contribute to chronic conflict patterns and emotional disengagement. Interventions aimed at clarifying and restructuring partner-related schemas may hold promise for reducing these maladaptive processes and enhancing emotional regulation and empathy in romantic contexts.

Attribution bias, particularly within intimate partnerships, involves the tendency to interpret a partner's negative behaviors as stable, internal, and intentional, while minimizing or externalizing positive behaviors. This distorted pattern, referred to as

the “hostile attribution bias,” is often linked to deeper schema-driven beliefs rooted in disconnection, rejection, or mistrust (GÜler, 2024; Yoo & Hong, 2024). Partners who hold these schemas are more likely to interpret ambiguous or neutral behaviors through a negative lens, perpetuating cycles of defensiveness, blame, and escalation. Cognitive-behavioral approaches, particularly schema-based interventions, have been shown to be effective in modifying such attributional styles by challenging and reappraising core beliefs (Akers et al., 2025; Yakin et al., 2020). This cognitive restructuring fosters increased accuracy in social interpretation, leading to more adaptive responses in conflict situations.

In parallel, conflict sensitivity refers to the heightened emotional reactivity and physiological arousal experienced in the presence of interpersonal discord. Individuals with elevated conflict sensitivity often perceive relational disagreements as threats to their psychological safety, which activates maladaptive coping patterns such as withdrawal, aggression, or emotional flooding (Debnam et al., 2024; Sáez et al., 2020). These reactions are frequently schema-congruent, particularly for those with core beliefs around abandonment, vulnerability, or defectiveness. Empirical research has demonstrated that individuals with intense early relational traumas or emotionally invalidating developmental environments are more prone to schema-driven reactivity and misperception during interpersonal conflict (Capinha et al., 2023; Sójta et al., 2023).

Schema theory provides a robust framework for understanding the interplay between cognitive distortions and emotional dysregulation in close relationships. According to this model, schemas influence attention, memory, and interpretation in ways that reinforce existing core beliefs, often outside of conscious awareness (Moscovitch et al., 2023; Reznikova, 2022). In couples with entrenched conflict patterns, these schemas can become rigid and self-fulfilling, contributing to a breakdown in communication, empathy, and emotional intimacy (Celsi et al., 2021; Yoo & Hong, 2024). As such, targeting partner-related schemas through structured interventions may reduce attribution bias and conflict sensitivity by promoting emotional insight, cognitive flexibility, and more accurate appraisal of interpersonal cues.

Recent research supports the efficacy of schema-based treatments in reducing relational distress and improving cognitive-affective functioning. For example, Akers et al. (2025) conducted a meta-analysis demonstrating significant schema modification following cognitive-behavioral and schema therapy interventions among individuals with persistent cognitive distortions (Akers et al., 2025). Similarly, Moghadam et al. (2023) found that integrated schema therapy significantly reduced obsessive-compulsive symptoms by targeting rigid cognitive patterns and enhancing metacognitive awareness (Moghadam et al., 2023). These findings suggest the potential for schema clarification techniques to be adapted and applied in relational contexts to address dysfunctional partner-related thinking.

Moreover, schema modes—momentary emotional states that activate specific schemas—play a critical role in relationship dynamics. According to Yakin et al. (2020), schema modes mediate the impact of personality pathology on functioning, including in intimate relationships, and are modifiable through targeted therapeutic strategies (Yakin et al., 2020). Addressing these modes through emotional regulation techniques and cognitive reappraisal may reduce the frequency and intensity of maladaptive responses in high-conflict couples. Matthys and Schutter (2024) emphasize that involving individuals in goal-directed, schema-informed therapy sessions enhances behavioral and emotional outcomes by increasing personal agency and self-monitoring during interpersonal stressors (Matthys & Schutter, 2024).

Another layer influencing attribution and conflict is the role of early interpersonal experiences, such as adverse childhood events or emotional neglect. Celsi et al. (2021) showed that such experiences predict both early maladaptive schemas and abusive patterns in adult romantic relationships, supporting the need for interventions that address the developmental origins of schema-driven behavior (Celsi et al., 2021). Likewise, Blais and Livingston (2021) found that trauma-related sexual self-schemas mediated the impact of military sexual trauma on relationship outcomes, underscoring the broader relevance of schema clarification beyond clinical disorders (Blais & Livingston, 2021).

The design of effective schema-based relational interventions must also consider the contextual and motivational variables that sustain maladaptive schema activation. Capinha et al. (2023) proposed a cognitive-interpersonal model of intimate partner violence that incorporates not only schema content but also emotional intelligence and motivational distortions (Capinha et al., 2023). These components are critical when adapting interventions for populations where emotion regulation and cognitive empathy may be impaired due to prior interpersonal trauma. In this context, conflict sensitivity is both a product of schema activation and a gateway to behavioral escalation if not properly managed (Debnam et al., 2024; Sójta et al., 2023).

Technology-based interventions may also serve as adjuncts to schema clarification approaches. For instance, Carhuapoma et al. (2021) developed a mobile health decision aid that improved dyadic communication and decision-making in couples facing serious illness, highlighting the potential for digital tools in enhancing schema awareness and partner support (Carhuapoma et al., 2021). In a similar vein, Sander et al. (2024) evaluated a digital co-parenting tool that improved cooperation and reduced stress among divorced individuals, suggesting that technological platforms can facilitate behavioral and cognitive shifts in relational functioning (Sander et al., 2024).

Despite the growing evidence, few interventions have explicitly targeted *partner schemas* as mechanisms underlying attribution bias and conflict sensitivity. While schema therapy has traditionally focused on individual psychopathology, the relational applications are now receiving increased empirical support. For example, Golden et al. (2022) and Green et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of communication frameworks that integrate patient or partner schemas into healthcare and behavioral decision-making processes (Golden et al., 2022; Green et al., 2024). Similarly, GÜler (2024) demonstrated the mediating role of sexual satisfaction and anger in the link between obsessive-compulsive partner-related symptoms and sexual self-schemas, providing a relational model for schema impact (GÜler, 2024).

Other domains of schema research lend further support to a structured partner schema intervention. Johnson et al. (2024) and Tseng and Georgiades (2024) explored cognitive flexibility and perception in medical and psychiatric populations, showing the importance of schema congruence in symptom maintenance and relational dysfunction (Johnson et al., 2024; Tseng & Georgiades, 2024). Ülker and Bodemer (2023) extended schema-based models to collaborative learning environments, reinforcing the principle that schema accessibility and updating influence group dynamics and memory (Ülker & Bodemer, 2023). Moreover, Nys and Billen (2021) provided computational models of schema consistency, arguing for simplified yet flexible schema structures that enhance information processing across contexts (Nys & Billen, 2021).

Lastly, the development of schemas is inherently tied to narrative structure, metaphors, and culturally-bound concepts. Reznikova (2022), in a linguistic study of image schemas, demonstrated how fundamental cognitive structures such as "circle" and "boundary" influence conceptualization processes—a notion that parallels the cognitive distortions observed in rigid partner schemas (Reznikova, 2022). Szalay et al. (2024) argue that therapeutic efficacy in personality disorders is partly dependent on narrative restructuring of self-other dynamics, which aligns closely with the goals of partner schema clarification (Szalay et al., 2024).

Given the theoretical and empirical grounding, the present study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a structured Partner Schema Clarification Intervention (PSCI) in reducing attribution bias and conflict sensitivity in married individuals.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design with two parallel groups: an intervention group and a control group. Participants were recruited from psychological counseling centers and community clinics in Baghdad, Iraq,

through purposive sampling followed by random assignment. A total of 30 married individuals (15 in the intervention group and 15 in the control group) were included in the study. Inclusion criteria required participants to be married for at least one year, aged between 25 and 50, fluent in Arabic, and reporting moderate levels of marital conflict. Individuals undergoing other forms of psychological therapy or taking psychiatric medication were excluded. The intervention group received the six-session Partner Schema Clarification Program, while the control group was placed on a waitlist. Both groups were assessed at three time points: pretest, posttest, and five-month follow-up.

Measures

The Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM) was developed by Fincham and Bradbury (1992) to assess attributional biases within romantic relationships, particularly how individuals interpret their partner's negative behaviors. The RAM consists of 24 items that describe hypothetical negative partner behaviors, with participants asked to rate the extent to which each behavior is caused by internal, stable, and global factors. These ratings are aggregated into three attributional dimensions: locus (internal vs. external), stability (stable vs. unstable), and globality (global vs. specific). Responses are recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Higher scores indicate a greater tendency toward maladaptive attributional styles. The RAM has demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's α ranging from .76 to .89) and construct validity in multiple studies evaluating marital satisfaction and relational conflict patterns.

The Conflict Sensitivity Questionnaire (CSQ), developed by Heyman et al. (2001), is a validated instrument designed to measure individuals' sensitivity to interpersonal conflict in intimate relationships. The questionnaire includes 20 items across two key subscales: Perceived Threat and Affective Reactivity. Participants respond on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater sensitivity to conflict. The CSQ has shown robust psychometric properties, with internal consistency coefficients exceeding .80 for both subscales and strong convergent validity with measures of emotional reactivity, conflict resolution difficulty, and relationship distress. This tool has been widely used in intervention research focused on relational dynamics and emotional regulation in couples.

Intervention

The Partner Schema Clarification Intervention is a structured, short-term psychoeducational and experiential program consisting of six 60–90-minute sessions delivered weekly in a couple or individual format. The intervention aims to help participants identify and modify maladaptive partner-related schemas that distort attributional thinking and escalate conflict sensitivity. Drawing from schema therapy, attribution theory, and emotion-focused approaches, the program fosters cognitive restructuring, empathy development, and emotional awareness in relational contexts. The sessions are sequenced to move from awareness and identification to transformation and relational integration.

Session 1: Introduction to Partner Schemas and Attribution Styles

This session introduces the concept of partner schemas—core beliefs formed from past experiences that shape current interpretations of partner behavior. Participants explore the definition of schemas and their connection to attributional bias using real-life examples. Educational content includes how cognitive distortions such as internal, stable, and global attributions can escalate conflict and emotional reactivity. Participants begin identifying their own recurring patterns of misinterpretation and complete a Partner Schema Mapping Worksheet to reflect on beliefs they hold about their partner.

Session 2: Origins of Schemas and Their Impact on Conflict Perception

This session delves into the developmental roots of partner schemas, including early family dynamics, attachment patterns, and previous relationships. Using guided imagery and narrative techniques, participants trace how early schemas influence

current relational conflicts and distort perception of their partner's intentions. The focus is on linking past pain to present triggers and increasing insight into how schemas create automatic, often exaggerated, emotional reactions. Homework includes journaling recent conflicts and identifying the underlying schema activated.

Session 3: Identifying Attribution Bias in Daily Interactions

The third session emphasizes identifying patterns of biased attribution in everyday interactions with one's partner. Participants are guided through cognitive-behavioral exercises to examine how they typically explain their partner's negative behaviors—whether as intentional, stable, or global. They learn how these interpretations reinforce partner schemas and heighten conflict sensitivity. In-session exercises include role-playing and Socratic questioning to challenge biased thoughts. Participants are asked to track attributional thoughts during the week and replace biased interpretations with alternative explanations.

Session 4: Emotion Regulation and Schema-Driven Reactions

This session centers on managing the emotional reactivity that emerges from activated partner schemas and attributional distortions. Participants are introduced to emotional regulation strategies such as mindfulness, affect labeling, and self-soothing techniques. They explore how heightened emotional responses can fuel conflict escalation and reduce empathy. The session includes practicing “pause and reframe” techniques and breathing exercises to regulate arousal before reacting. Participants are encouraged to apply emotion regulation strategies during real or anticipated conflicts.

Session 5: Empathy and Perspective-Taking in Partner Conflict

Building on previous sessions, this session helps participants develop skills in perspective-taking and empathic understanding to counter attribution bias. Through structured dyadic dialogues and empathy exercises, participants learn to step into their partner's emotional world and distinguish between perception and intention. The goal is to promote relational curiosity over judgment. An empathy-mapping tool is introduced to encourage active listening and reflective responses. Participants practice expressing needs without accusations and validating their partner's emotional experience.

Session 6: Integrating Insights and Constructive Communication Planning

The final session focuses on integrating the skills learned across the intervention into a practical conflict resolution framework. Participants consolidate awareness of their own schemas and biased attributions and develop personalized communication strategies to de-escalate conflict and enhance emotional safety. The session includes a future-planning component, where each participant creates a “Schema Management Plan” outlining triggers, emotional cues, regulation strategies, and reframing techniques. Role-plays simulate future challenges, and the session closes with reflections and feedback on relational growth.

Data analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 27. To evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention over time, analysis of variance with repeated measurements (Repeated Measures ANOVA) was employed. The within-subject factor was time (pretest, posttest, follow-up), and the between-subject factor was group (intervention vs. control). Effect sizes were calculated using partial eta squared (η^2). The Bonferroni post-hoc test was applied to identify significant pairwise differences across time points. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for all analyses.

Findings and Results

The final sample included 30 participants, of whom 18 (60.0%) were female and 12 (40.0%) were male. The mean age of participants was 34.47 years ($SD = 5.36$), ranging from 26 to 49. In terms of educational attainment, 11 participants (36.7%)

held a university degree, 13 (43.3%) had completed secondary education, and 6 (20.0%) had attained a diploma. Regarding employment status, 17 participants (56.7%) were employed, while 13 (43.3%) were unemployed or homemakers. Most participants (63.3%) reported a marriage duration between 5 to 10 years.

Prior to conducting the repeated measures ANOVA, key statistical assumptions were assessed and confirmed. The data met the assumption of normality as evidenced by Shapiro-Wilk tests (all $p > .05$), with skewness and kurtosis values ranging between -0.72 and 0.89 . Mauchly's test of sphericity was not significant for either dependent variable (Attribution Bias: $\chi^2(2) = 2.64$, $p = .27$; Conflict Sensitivity: $\chi^2(2) = 1.91$, $p = .39$), indicating the assumption of sphericity was satisfied. Levene's test for equality of variances yielded non-significant results across all time points (all $p > .10$), confirming the homogeneity of variance between the groups.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Attribution Bias and Conflict Sensitivity by Group and Time

Variable	Group	Pretest (M $\pm$ SD)	Posttest (M $\pm$ SD)	Follow-up (M $\pm$ SD)
Attribution Bias	Intervention	5.84 $\pm$ 0.62	3.49 $\pm$ 0.57	3.63 $\pm$ 0.60
	Control	5.76 $\pm$ 0.59	5.58 $\pm$ 0.61	5.51 $\pm$ 0.64
Conflict Sensitivity	Intervention	4.92 $\pm$ 0.53	3.15 $\pm$ 0.49	3.28 $\pm$ 0.51
	Control	4.88 $\pm$ 0.55	4.74 $\pm$ 0.56	4.68 $\pm$ 0.60

Participants in the intervention group demonstrated substantial decreases in both attribution bias and conflict sensitivity scores from pretest to posttest, which were largely maintained at follow-up. For attribution bias, the mean score dropped from 5.84 (SD = 0.62) to 3.49 (SD = 0.57) and remained low at 3.63 (SD = 0.60). The control group showed minimal change over time. Similarly, conflict sensitivity decreased from 4.92 (SD = 0.53) to 3.15 (SD = 0.49) in the intervention group and was stable at 3.28 (SD = 0.51) at follow-up, while the control group remained relatively unchanged.

Table 2. Results of Repeated Measures ANOVA for Attribution Bias and Conflict Sensitivity

Variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	η^2
Attribution Bias	Time	58.94	2	29.47	41.76	<.001	.613
	Group	32.18	1	32.18	45.26	<.001	.627
	Time $\times$ Group	54.36	2	27.18	38.49	<.001	.598
	Error	20.32	54	0.38			
Conflict Sensitivity	Time	43.65	2	21.83	36.12	<.001	.572
	Group	26.41	1	26.41	42.57	<.001	.612
	Time $\times$ Group	38.76	2	19.38	33.90	<.001	.557
	Error	22.51	54	0.42			

The ANOVA results revealed significant main effects of time and group, as well as significant time $\times$ group interactions for both dependent variables. For attribution bias, the interaction effect was significant, $F(2, 54) = 38.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .598$, indicating a greater reduction over time in the intervention group. Similarly, conflict sensitivity also showed a significant interaction effect, $F(2, 54) = 33.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .557$, confirming that the intervention group improved significantly compared to the control group over time.

Table 3. Bonferroni Pairwise Comparisons for Time Effects in Intervention Group

Variable	Comparison	Mean Difference	SE	p
Attribution Bias	Pretest – Posttest	2.35	0.28	<.001
	Pretest – Follow-up	2.21	0.30	<.001
	Posttest – Follow-up	-0.14	0.17	.681
Conflict Sensitivity	Pretest – Posttest	1.77	0.25	<.001
	Pretest – Follow-up	1.64	0.27	<.001
	Posttest – Follow-up	-0.13	0.18	.719

The Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons showed statistically significant reductions from pretest to posttest and from pretest to follow-up in both attribution bias and conflict sensitivity within the intervention group ($p < .001$). However, there were no significant differences between posttest and follow-up scores ($p > .68$), indicating that the treatment effects were sustained over time. This supports the temporal stability of the intervention's impact.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the effectiveness of a Partner Schema Clarification Intervention (PSCI) in reducing attribution bias and conflict sensitivity among married individuals. Findings revealed that participants in the intervention group experienced significant reductions in both attribution bias and conflict sensitivity from pretest to posttest, with these improvements maintained at the five-month follow-up. In contrast, the control group exhibited no statistically significant changes over time. These results suggest that the PSCI program, which targeted the cognitive and emotional components of partner-related schemas, was successful in producing sustained intrapsychic and relational improvements.

The reduction in attribution bias following the intervention aligns with cognitive and schema therapy models that emphasize the role of early maladaptive schemas in distorting partner perceptions (Kover et al., 2024; Yoo & Hong, 2024). Participants in the PSCI group likely learned to recognize and challenge negative, global, and stable attributions about their partners through the cognitive restructuring techniques embedded in the sessions. These findings are consistent with previous research by Akers et al. (2025), which showed that schema-focused cognitive behavioral interventions led to significant schema change in individuals with entrenched cognitive distortions (Akers et al., 2025). Additionally, the current results support the proposition by Moscovitch et al. (2023) that modifying schema-congruent information processing through therapeutic mechanisms can reframe interpersonal misinterpretations and reduce maladaptive relational responses (Moscovitch et al., 2023).

The observed decrease in conflict sensitivity is also congruent with past studies indicating that heightened emotional reactivity during relational discord is often rooted in unresolved schema-based fears of rejection, abandonment, or inadequacy (Debnam et al., 2024; Sójta et al., 2023). The emotional regulation and mindfulness components of the PSCI likely contributed to reducing physiological arousal and reactive conflict behaviors, as participants were guided to self-soothe and reinterpret emotional cues during moments of interpersonal stress. This aligns with Yakın et al. (2020), who highlighted the mediating role of schema modes in personality pathology and relational functioning, noting that targeted interventions can reduce emotional instability and interpersonal dysfunction (Yakın et al., 2020).

Moreover, the maintenance of treatment gains at the five-month follow-up demonstrates the program's durability and internalization of skills. As highlighted by Matthys and Schutter (2024), sustained outcomes in behavioral interventions are often contingent on the degree to which individuals are able to generalize new coping strategies across contexts (Matthys & Schutter, 2024). The present study likely facilitated this generalization by including practical exercises such as schema mapping, role-play, and empathy training, which mirror real-life marital dynamics and help solidify behavioral change.

The intervention also appears to have addressed deeper developmental patterns that underlie schema formation. The sessions on origin exploration and narrative processing may have enabled participants to recontextualize their current relational triggers in light of earlier unmet needs or invalidating experiences (Celsi et al., 2021). This mechanism is supported by findings from Capinha et al. (2023), who emphasized the value of linking present relational dysfunction to earlier attachment injuries in their cognitive-interpersonal framework for perpetrator rehabilitation (Capinha et al., 2023). Similarly, Moghadam et al. (2023) demonstrated that integrating schema therapy with mindfulness enhanced treatment efficacy by promoting reflective awareness of intrusive schema-based thoughts (Moghadam et al., 2023).

A unique contribution of this study lies in directly targeting *partner-specific schemas*, rather than generalized cognitive distortions. This distinction is critical, as attributional distortions in romantic relationships are often context-dependent and shaped by core relational beliefs about the partner's intentions, reliability, and emotional responsiveness (Debnam et al., 2024; GÜler, 2024). The PSCI's focus on mapping, labeling, and challenging these relational beliefs distinguishes it from standard CBT programs and mirrors approaches outlined in relational schema research by Blais and Livingston (2021), who demonstrated that sexual self-schemas mediated the effects of trauma on intimate outcomes in partnered women (Blais & Livingston, 2021).

The results also support the neurocognitive view that schema activation impacts both emotional and perceptual processes during social interaction. According to Moscovitch et al. (2023), schema-congruent processing is fast, automatic, and often biased toward confirming preexisting expectations (Moscovitch et al., 2023). By disrupting these patterns and replacing them with conscious reappraisal strategies, the PSCI likely enhanced participants' capacity to respond to relational stress with flexibility rather than defensiveness. This neurocognitive shift may also explain the improvements in emotional tolerance and reductions in hypersensitivity to conflict-related cues observed in the intervention group.

The findings further echo the work of Genter et al. (2021), who demonstrated the feasibility of resilience-based interventions in improving relational functioning among distressed caregivers (Genter et al., 2021). Like their program, the PSCI aimed not only to reduce maladaptive symptoms but also to build relational skills that buffer against future stressors. The emotional insight and partner empathy exercises embedded in the PSCI appear to have served this preventive function.

While this study was not designed to evaluate the role of gender, the intervention's effects may be particularly meaningful for populations in which gendered schemas shape emotional communication. Debnam et al. (2024), in their review of the "strong Black woman" schema, noted that internalized gender roles often limit emotional vulnerability and contribute to rigid relational expectations (Debnam et al., 2024). Similarly, Reznikova (2022) argued that schemas are shaped by culturally embedded metaphors and symbolic systems that impact relational perception (Reznikova, 2022). In the context of this study's Iraqi sample, cultural schema elements related to authority, shame, or intimacy may have played a role in baseline relationship patterns, thus making schema clarification a culturally adaptive target.

Furthermore, the present results are relevant to contemporary debates about flexibility versus consistency in relational schema design. Nys and Billen (2021) propose that simplified and modifiable schema structures improve adaptability and resilience—a concept that resonates with the goal of PSCI to foster flexible attributions and emotional interpretations (Nys & Billen, 2021). The reduction in rigidity observed post-intervention aligns with this theoretical model and suggests that relational schemas, though deeply rooted, are malleable through structured cognitive-emotional work.

Finally, the current findings intersect with technological applications of schema interventions. Though this study used an in-person format, research by Carhuapoma et al. (2021) and Sander et al. (2024) has shown that digital platforms can deliver schema-relevant education and support with comparable outcomes (Carhuapoma et al., 2021; Sander et al., 2024). This raises future possibilities for scaling PSCI using hybrid delivery models to broaden access in diverse relational settings.

Despite the promising findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small ($N = 30$), which may limit the statistical power and generalizability of the results. While the effect sizes observed were robust, larger and more diverse samples would strengthen the confidence in these outcomes. Second, the study relied on self-report measures for both dependent variables, which may introduce social desirability or recall bias. Incorporating observational or physiological measures in future studies could offer a more nuanced view of relational dynamics.

Third, although the five-month follow-up period is a strength, it remains a relatively short window to assess long-term changes in relational schemas and behaviors. Longer-term follow-ups (e.g., 12 or 18 months) are needed to determine whether

gains are sustained over time, especially under ongoing marital stress. Fourth, the intervention was delivered in a structured format by trained facilitators, and the fidelity of intervention delivery was not formally assessed. Variability in delivery or therapist competence could affect replicability. Lastly, cultural norms and beliefs unique to the Iraqi context may limit the applicability of the findings to other sociocultural environments.

Future studies should consider using larger, more demographically diverse samples across different cultural settings to assess the universality and adaptability of the Partner Schema Clarification Intervention. Researchers may also explore the inclusion of dyadic formats to assess the mutual influence of schema change within both partners simultaneously, using actor–partner interdependence models. In addition, incorporating mixed-methods designs would provide richer data, combining quantitative outcome measures with qualitative insights into the subjective experience of schema transformation.

Longitudinal designs with multiple follow-up points would help establish whether schema changes translate into sustained relational improvements and reduced divorce or separation rates. Future research might also investigate the neural and physiological correlates of schema change, utilizing functional imaging or biomarker assessment to validate cognitive-emotional shifts. Furthermore, comparisons between PSCI and other schema-based or emotionally focused therapies could clarify the unique active components of the intervention.

Finally, researchers could develop and test digital or app-based versions of the intervention, potentially integrating artificial intelligence for real-time schema monitoring or attributional feedback. Such innovations could extend access to couples in underserved or remote regions and enhance treatment personalization.

Practitioners working with couples experiencing chronic conflict or emotional detachment should consider assessing for partner-specific schemas and attributional styles during intake. Integrating schema clarification exercises early in therapy can facilitate greater self-awareness and reduce defensiveness. Therapists may benefit from incorporating experiential techniques—such as role-plays, empathy mapping, and narrative reconstruction—that target both cognitive and affective schema layers.

Training programs for couples therapists should include modules on schema theory and relational attribution bias, with emphasis on cultural adaptations. In community or preventative settings, brief PSCI workshops could be offered to at-risk couples before relationship deterioration escalates. Lastly, practitioners are encouraged to collaborate with digital developers to translate schema concepts into accessible tools and exercises that can be used between sessions to reinforce learning and promote long-term relational resilience.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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