


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Building marital foundations: A qualitative evaluation of reality therapy-based premarital counseling for young couples in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the effectiveness of a Reality Therapy-based premarital counseling program for young couples, implemented through a local Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) in Indonesia. Premarital counseling is recognized as a strategic intervention to mitigate challenges associated with early marriage, such as emotional immaturity and inadequate conflict-resolution skills. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive design, this research investigated the counseling process and its perceived impact on marital harmony. Data were collected via in-depth interviews with religious counselors and young couples, participatory observations of counseling sessions, and document analysis. The findings indicate that the structured, stage-based Reality Therapy approach, focusing on building rapport, exploring present behavior, evaluating effectiveness, planning change, and committing to action, effectively enhanced couples' sense of personal responsibility, improved communication, and fostered joint future planning. The study concludes that integrating Reality Therapy principles into community-based premarital programs provides a practical and culturally resonant framework for empowering young couples. It recommends the broader adoption of this model within religious and community institutions as a strategic initiative to promote marital stability and build resilient families. This research contributes to the literature on applied counseling interventions in non-clinical, community settings, particularly within the context of early marriage prevention and support.

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage at a young age persists as a significant social and public health challenge, particularly within rural communities and areas where access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education is limited. In Indonesia, this is evidenced by Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2021) data indicating one of the highest rates of child marriage in Southeast Asia, with over 1.2 million individuals married

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before the age of 18. While the legal marriage age has been raised, social, economic, and cultural factors continue to drive the practice (BPS, 2021; UNICEF, 2020). The implications extend beyond the wedding day, profoundly impacting health trajectories, educational attainment, economic potential, and the long-term stability of families. Early marriage is consistently associated with adverse outcomes, including truncated education for girls, higher maternal and infant mortality risks, and increased vulnerability to intimate partner violence (John et al., 2019; UNICEF, 2020). Furthermore, couples who marry young frequently lack the emotional maturity, financial independence, and conflict-resolution skills necessary for a stable partnership, which elevates the risk of marital distress and dissolution (Najman et al., 2023).

A common lack of preparedness for the roles and responsibilities of marriage compounds these challenges. Young couples often enter matrimony with idealized expectations and insufficient practical knowledge about managing household finances, communicating effectively, or navigating familial pressures (Panabulu et al., 2023). Recognizing this systemic issue, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs has initiated interventions through its local Offices of Religious Affairs (*Kantor Urusan Agama, KUA*). Beyond its administrative function, the KUA is increasingly positioned as a front-line institution for providing premarital guidance. A key innovative program is structured premarital counselling, designed to equip couples, particularly those marrying young, with essential knowledge and skills before and during the initial transition into married life (Kemenag, 2023).

The potential of such counselling interventions is supported by international literature. Evidence-based premarital education programs have been shown to improve communication, increase relationship satisfaction, and reduce the risk of divorce by helping couples develop realistic expectations and practical skills (Larson et al., 2022). One counseling framework with particular relevance for this context is Reality Therapy, developed by William Glasser and based on Choice Theory. This approach emphasizes personal responsibility, present-focused problem-solving, and evaluating the effectiveness of one's choices in meeting basic psychological needs (e.g., love, power, freedom, fun, survival) (Corey, 2017; Wubbolding, 2017). Its application in premarital settings can empower couples to move beyond blame, assess their relationship realistically, and make committed, responsible plans for their future together (Azwar, 2023).

Despite this potential, a significant gap exists between the program's intent and public perception. In many communities, premarital counselling at the KUA is viewed not as a vital educational intervention but as a bureaucratic formality, a box to be checked before the wedding ceremony (Maesaroh et al., 2025). This perception undermines its effectiveness and limits its reach, especially among vulnerable groups who could benefit most. There is a pressing need to critically examine and articulate the actual implementation and impact of these programs. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the implementation of the premarital counselling program at the KUA, focusing on its application for young couples. It seeks to evaluate how the principles of counselling, particularly those aligned with a reality-based approach, are operationalized to enhance couples' understanding of marital responsibilities, socio-emotional readiness, and mutual psychological needs, with the ultimate goal of fostering healthier, more stable family foundations.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to explore the implementation of premarital counseling using a reality therapy approach by religious counselors for young couples and to describe its perceived effectiveness on marital harmony two months after their marriage. The qualitative approach was selected as it allows the researcher to deeply investigate the subjective experiences and perceptions of both religious counselors and young couples regarding the

application and impact of reality therapy-based premarital counseling in their marital lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A descriptive design was utilized to provide a detailed account of the process, experiences, and perceived changes during and after the counseling sessions (Moleong, 2017).

The research was conducted at the Office of Religious Affairs (*Kantor Urusan Agama, KUA*) in Summersari, Jember Regency. Participants included two religious counselors who apply reality therapy in premarital counseling and young couples who married under the age of 19, residing in the sub-districts of Tegalgede, Wirolegi, and Kranjingan. The couples were selected based on their active participation in the counseling program, willingness to engage in in-depth interviews, and ability to provide relevant data on the counseling process and perceived outcomes.

Data were collected through three primary techniques to ensure depth and comprehensiveness: 1) In-depth interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with religious counselors and the young couples. This technique was used to explore participants' understanding of the implementation, perceived benefits, challenges, and personal changes associated with reality therapy counseling. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility to probe deeper based on participant responses (Sugiyono, 2022); 2) Participant observation: The researcher conducted direct observations of counseling sessions at KUA Summersari to understand the dynamics and interactions between counselors and couples. Observations were also extended to the couples' homes to gather non-verbal data, such as facial expressions, body language, communication patterns, and home environment, that could not be captured through interviews alone (Sugiyono, 2022); and 3) Documentation study: Relevant documents, including counseling session notes and progress records of the couples, were collected and analyzed. These documents provided a historical perspective and documented progression throughout the counseling process (Sugiyono, 2022).

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (as cited in Sugiyono, 2022), which involves three concurrent activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In data reduction, the researcher selected and summarized data relevant to the research focus, the implementation of reality therapy counseling for young couples. Irrelevant or redundant information was filtered out at this stage. In the data display stage, the reduced data were organized and presented in descriptive narratives and thematic matrices to illustrate participants' experiences and perceptions. Data were grouped into emerging themes, including challenges, perceived benefits, and observed changes in couples. In conclusion, based on the displayed data, preliminary findings were drawn regarding the effectiveness of reality therapy counseling in supporting young couples. These conclusions were continually verified against the raw data to ensure they were grounded in the evidence collected.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed method and source triangulation. Method triangulation involved cross-verifying findings from interviews, observations, and documents. Source triangulation was achieved by comparing data from multiple participants (counselors and couples). Furthermore, member checking was conducted by asking participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the data and preliminary interpretations derived from their contributions. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and conducting the research with sensitivity to participants' personal and cultural contexts.

RESULT

Reality therapy-based premarital counseling, which focuses on the individual's capacity to confront reality and take responsibility, serves as a strategic intervention in guiding young couples toward

establishing a *sakinah* (tranquil, harmonious) family. Conducted at the Summersari Religious Affairs Office (KUA) in Jember Regency, this counseling uses reality therapy, as developed by William Glasser, which prioritizes present behavior in problem-solving without dwelling on the past. Consequently, this counseling approach enables young couples to fulfill their psychological, physiological, and social needs, all of which are essential for building a strong self-identity and a sense of responsibility within marriage.

This research further underscores that reality therapy-based premarital counseling plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of responsibility in young couples. As outlined by Corey (2017) and Glasser (1999), this counseling not only helps young couples fulfill basic needs but also assists them in managing their behavior to achieve more realistic and positive marital goals. Needs for love, self-esteem, happiness, and freedom are explored in counseling sessions, enabling couples to learn to make wise, effective choices while maintaining relational and household balance.

The counseling cases examined in this study reveal a range of conditions experienced by young couples. Some couples viewed marriage merely as a pursuit of pleasure or a means to avoid responsibility. Others lacked financial planning or a long-term vision for building their household. The counseling approach seeks to build mutual understanding and awareness of shared responsibility, motivating couples to evaluate and plan their domestic life.

In other cases, the couples' parents played a role in arranging their children's domestic life. The religious counselors facilitated dynamics that supported the couple's independence while also reinforcing extended family support for the young couple's development.

Furthermore, this counseling systematically assists couples in accepting reality and developing collaborative problem-solving skills. In several instances, counseling aimed to build trust and emotional maturity, better preparing couples to face marital challenges. It also encourages couples to view marriage as a long-term commitment full of responsibility, rather than merely a source of transient pleasure. Ultimately, this study concludes that reality therapy-based premarital counseling helps young couples discover their self-identity, develop a successful self-concept, and enter marriage with full awareness of their responsibilities, aiming to form a family that is *sakinah*, *mawaddah* (affectionate), and *rahmah* (merciful). The following are the stages of reality therapy-based premarital counseling:

Building a Positive Relationship. The initial stage focuses on creating a supportive, empathetic relationship between the counselor and clients. The counselor builds rapport through home visits and interactions at KUA Summersari. This personal approach proved effective in fostering trust. Couples like Devi and her husband, who were initially reserved, became more open and demonstrated a commitment to participate in counseling actively. Hendi and Lusi also felt supported, which increased their motivation to build a better family. The counselor helped couples like Halimatus and Muhammad Sholeh understand that building a household is not a momentary activity but requires mature planning and communication. Even couples who previously lacked family support, such as Agus and Santi, gained more confidence in addressing communication challenges within their marriage due to the counselor's presence. This strong relationship serves as the primary foundation, allowing clients to feel secure enough to disclose real issues in their households.

The reality therapy approach demonstrates that a good counselor-client relationship provides a space for clients to express their thoughts and feelings without discomfort. An approach that brings the counselor emotionally closer to clients also creates a safer counseling atmosphere, enabling clients to be more assertive in disclosing the actual conditions in their households. Thus, reality

counseling not only assists in providing short-term solutions but also fosters long-term awareness for couples to pursue a more harmonious and higher-quality marriage.

Exploring Current Behavior. After rapport is established, the counselor explores behaviors that are sources of problems. Emphasis is placed on actions taken in the present, without judging the past. This exploration revealed various problematic behaviors: 1) First couple: Behavior neglecting the spiritual aspect of marriage triggered boredom; 2) Second couple: The husband's preference for being outside the home triggered the wife's jealous and overly anxious behavior; 3) Third couple: The husband's decreased attention after the wife's pregnancy was met with the wife's resigned behavior due to trauma from her parents' divorce; 4) Fourth couple: Resigned and "go-with-the-flow" behavior indicated a lack of awareness of responsibility; 5) Fifth couple: The husband's attention remained adequate due to his previous experience with divorce; and 6) Sixth couple: Dependent behavior on parents resulted in a lack of independence.

In general, the explored behaviors indicated mental unpreparedness, lack of commitment, and an inability to resolve conflicts independently. Most couples focused on momentary happiness without considering long-term responsibilities such as building strong commitment, future planning, and preparedness for difficulties. This often leads to conflict due to a lack of maturity in problem-solving, especially when the marriage motivation was liberation from parental rules or mere personal pleasure.

Table 1. Aims of counseling for couples

Subject	Aims
Couple 1	Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of one's spouse Cultivating the consistent practice of religious obligations
Couple 2	Learning to accept the strengths and weaknesses of one's spouse Communicating openly about all matters Fulfilling religious commandments
Couple 3	Enhancing the quality of shared life Accepting the strengths and weaknesses of one's spouse Fulfilling religious commandments
Couple 4	Striving to accept the strengths and weaknesses of one's spouse Enhancing the quality of shared family life Fulfilling religious commandments, at minimum by performing daily prayers
Couple 5	Understanding the strengths and limitations of one's partner Cultivating the consistent practice of religious obligations
Couple 6	Striving to accept the strengths and weaknesses of one's partner Enhancing the quality of shared family life Fulfilling religious obligations, at a minimum by performing the five daily prayers and reading the Qur'an

The counseling revealed that parental involvement also played a significant role, either as support or as a challenge, particularly for couples who were not financially independent. Parental distrust in the young couple's abilities added pressure to the household. There were also cases in which couples relied too heavily on parental decisions, making it challenging to establish household autonomy. The counselor worked to increase the couple's awareness of the realities of married life by reinforcing commitment, building a long-term vision, and emphasizing the importance of planning and responsibility. This counseling was also designed to help young couples view marriage as a long-term process that requires cooperation and maturity in facing life's various challenges.

Overall, emotional readiness, planning ability, and support from family and counselors are crucial factors in helping young married couples lead a more stable, *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* domestic life.

Evaluating Behavior. At this stage, the counselor facilitates the couple in assessing whether their current behavior is effective in achieving their desired marital goals. The counselor poses reflective

questions such as: "Does your resigned attitude help increase your husband's attention?" or "Does your jealous behavior make your husband more inclined to stay at home?" The evaluation results showed that most couples realized their behavior was actually distancing them from the goal of forming a *sakinah* family. They began to understand that momentary happiness is not a strong foundation, and that long-term commitment and maturity are the primary keys.

Planning for Change. Based on the evaluation, each couple establishes concrete and measurable goals for change. These goals focus on behaviors that each individual can control, not on changing their partner.

Implementation and Commitment. The formulated plan is implemented through several activities. One effective method is to create a "letter of intent" that outlines commitments to change. This letter functions as a reminder and self-evaluation tool for the couple. Counselor mentoring is also facilitated through online counseling to ensure the continuity of the process. However, this stage also faces challenges, such as low commitment from some couples and concerns about confidentiality. To address this, counselors assure couples that the professional code of ethics guarantees confidentiality. The counselor's ongoing supportive presence is a key factor in maintaining the couple's commitment.

Throughout the process, the counselor consistently emphasizes the importance of taking full responsibility for one's choices and actions. The counselor rejects excuses that hinder change and redirects focus to factors within the individual's control. Guided by this principle, couples are encouraged to be more assertive and proactive in solving problems, rather than merely blaming circumstances or their partner.

Table 2. Activities and evaluation outcomes for couples

Activity	Evaluation
Counseling sessions are conducted either at the Religious Affairs Office (KUA) or directly at the client's home. Counseling activities at the KUA are carried out in a relaxed manner, accompanied by training in crafting skills.	The willingness to attend sessions at the KUA remains limited, making it difficult to reach a full cohort of six couples per counseling session at the KUA. Therefore, counselors are striving to maximize attendance by conducting sessions directly at clients' homes.
To draft a letter of intent, written on the paper provided by the counselor. The content of the letter shall include a commitment to change from both partners, encompassing: accepting each other's strengths and weaknesses, engaging in assertive communication, enhancing the quality of shared life, and fulfilling religious obligations.	All couples have completed their letters of intent and have been requested to reread them after three months. This is done in order to jointly evaluate whether the commitments outlined in the letters have been implemented. Together with the counselor, they also assess the facilitating and hindering factors. On average, the primary hindering factor is the low level of commitment from each partner, while the key supporting factor is the consistent presence and accompaniment of the counselor.
The counselor established an online counseling facility for clients (via social media platforms).	Clients have begun utilizing social media platforms for counseling sessions. However, this medium has not yet been fully optimized, primarily due to concerns about the confidentiality of their information. In this regard, the counselor has reassured clients that they are bound by a professional code of ethics and the principle of confidentiality, thereby ensuring that details regarding their family matters will not be disclosed.

DISCUSSION

This study illustrates the application and perceived impact of a reality therapy-based premarital counseling program for young couples in a community setting. The findings are discussed in relation to the core tenets of Choice Theory/Reality Therapy, its efficacy in addressing the unique challenges of early marriage, and contextual factors that mediate its effectiveness.

The cornerstone of the intervention's perceived success was the initial establishment of a strong therapeutic rapport through empathetic engagement and home visits. This finding is fundamental and aligns with the global counseling literature, which emphasizes that a safe, trusting, and collaborative alliance is the most robust predictor of positive therapeutic outcomes across diverse modalities (Flückiger et al., 2018). In the context of reality therapy, this supportive relationship is the essential vehicle through which counselors can then challenge clients to evaluate their behaviors without coercion (Wubbolding, 2017). The counselors' culturally attuned approach of conducting home visits likely enhanced this alliance by demonstrating commitment and understanding of the couples' lived environment, thereby increasing engagement, a critical factor often cited as a challenge in youth-focused interventions (John et al., 2019).

The core process of exploring and evaluating current behavior directly operationalizes the principles of Choice Theory. By maintaining a disciplined focus on present, controllable action, eschewing the excavation of past trauma or mutual blame, the counselors guided couples to recognize the direct consequences of their chosen behaviors. This present-focused, responsibility-oriented approach is a defining feature of reality therapy, empowering individuals to move from a passive, external locus of control ("My partner makes me feel...") to an internal locus of control ("I choose to act in a way that...") (Corey, 2017). The use of Socratic, reflective questioning to facilitate self-evaluation is a key technique for helping clients assess whether their actions are effectively meeting their basic psychological needs for love, power, freedom, and fun (Glasser, 1999; Wubbolding, 2017). This process is particularly salient for young couples who may lack the cognitive-emotional frameworks to link their daily interactions to broader relational health.

The transition from evaluation to planning for change and commitment marks the intervention's constructive pivot. The creation of a "letter of intent" is an excellent practical application of the "Planning" (P) component in the WDEP (Wants, Doing, Evaluation, Planning) system of reality therapy (Wubbolding, 2017). This tool serves to externalize and concretize abstract commitments, functioning as both a behavioral guide and a tangible instrument for self-monitoring and accountability. Research in behavior change indicates that such concrete planning and self-regulation strategies significantly increase the likelihood of translating intention into sustained action (Hagger et al., 2020). The encountered challenges of wavering commitment and privacy concerns are not unique but reflect common implementation barriers in community health and counseling programs. The counselors' responses, which provide continuous support and reaffirm ethical confidentiality, are recognized as best practices for enhancing treatment adherence and trust (Hill & Knox, 2021).

Importantly, this study illuminates the critical ecological context of early marriage. The significant influence of parental attitudes and financial dynamics on a couple's autonomy underscores that individual behavioral choices are embedded within a powerful family system. While the counseling effectively targeted the couple's internal dynamics using reality therapy principles, external systemic factors inevitably mediated its ultimate impact. This finding resonates with socio-ecological models of health behavior, which posit that individual change is most sustainable when supported by interpersonal and community-level environments (McLeroy et al., 1988). It suggests that the effectiveness of the KUA program could be amplified by integrating a parallel, systemic component, such as brief family education sessions, to align the couple's immediate social environment with their new goals, a strategy supported by family systems theory (Carr, 2019).

In conclusion, this study provides a rich, contextualized account suggesting that reality therapy offers a coherent and adaptable framework for premarital counseling with young couples. It effectively targets deficits in responsibility, future orientation, and conflict management standards in early marriages. Future research should employ longitudinal, mixed-methods, or randomized

controlled designs to quantitatively measure the intervention's impact on marital quality, stability, and mental health outcomes over time. Furthermore, an investigation into how to effectively structure family-inclusive modules within this reality-based model would be a valuable contribution to developing more holistic, ecologically valid interventions for vulnerable young couples.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that premarital counseling utilizing the Reality Therapy approach is a highly effective intervention for supporting young married couples. The counseling process, which emphasizes personal responsibility, present-focused behavior, and future planning, aids couples in addressing various problems stemming from their initial unpreparedness for marriage. This intervention extends beyond providing short-term solutions by fostering emotional maturity and cultivating a successful relational identity for the partners. Consequently, Reality Therapy-based premarital counseling can serve as an effective and strategic capacity-building program at the Office of Religious Affairs or similar community institutions, contributing to the formation of families that are independent, harmonious, and responsible. The findings affirm the applicability of Reality Therapy principles, centered on choice, responsibility, and present-focused action, in a culturally and demographically specific context. By translating theory into practical, stage-based counseling (building rapport, exploring/evaluating behavior, planning, and committing to change), the program equips young couples with actionable frameworks for conflict resolution and mutual growth. The observed outcomes, including improved communication and a stronger sense of shared responsibility, align with the core objectives of fostering family resilience. Therefore, the systematic integration of evidence-informed counseling practices within community-based institutions is a vital strategy for enhancing marital stability and well-being among vulnerable youth.

DECLARATION

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Author contribution statement

Muhammad Muhib Alwi conceptualized the research, formulated the research design and methodology, collected the data, performed the data processing and analysis, and wrote, edited, and revised the final manuscript. Anisah Prafitralia conceptualized the research, formulated the research design and methodology, collected the data, performed the data processing and analysis, and wrote, edited, and revised the final manuscript.

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The data described in this article can be accessed by contacting the first author.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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