



Romantic Relationship Education: A Literature Review with Recommendations for Türkiye

Romantik İlişki Eğitimi: Bir Gözden Geçirme Çalışması ve Türkiye için Öneriler

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ABSTRACT

Intimate relationships are the focal aspiration for human beings. Romantic relationship education is described as a road map for helping people to find strategies and solutions that fit their context, values and relationship goals. By using evidence-based skills training, people can learn techniques to navigate typical relationship challenges and safely express emotions. Being in a mutually satisfying committed relationship has proven to be associated with many positive outcomes including life satisfaction, physical well-being, better coping with major illness, as well as longer life expectancy and career achievement. Relationship education programs are developed by psychologists in Western countries as a preventive intervention for couples, adolescents and emerging adults before relationships reach crisis stage. There is, however, a lack of empirical studies to examine the effectiveness of relationship education within the Turkish cultural context. The overarching aim of this study is to review the relationship education programs within Turkish and international literature. This study provides an overview of the relationship education, and its scope, and theoretical foundations and also effectiveness of relationship education programs for couples, adolescents and emerging adults. The study further provides cultural, theoretical and practical recommendations for future directions in Turkish relationship education programs.

Key words: Relationship education, romantic relations, emerging adulthood, adolescence

ÖZ

Yakın ilişkiler her zaman insanlar için evrensel bir özlem olmuştur. Romantik ilişki eğitimi, insanların bağlamlarına, değerlerine ve ilişki hedeflerine uygun stratejiler ve çözümler bulmalarına yardımcı olan bir yol haritası olarak tanımlanabilir. Kanıta dayalı beceri eğitimi kullanarak, insanlar tipik ilişki zorluklarını aşmak ve duyguları güvenli bir şekilde ifade etmek için teknikleri öğrenebilirler. Karşılıklı olarak tatmin edici bir bağlılık ilişkisi içinde olmanın, yaşam doyumu, fiziksel iyi oluş, ciddi hastalıklarla daha iyi başa çıkma, daha uzun yaşam beklentisi ve kariyer başarısı gibi birçok olumlu sonuçla ilişkili olduğu kanıtlanmıştır. İlişki eğitimi programları, batı ülkelerindeki psikologlar tarafından, ilişkiler kriz aşamasına gelmeden önce çiftler, ergenler ve gelişmekte olan yetişkinler için önleyici bir müdahale olarak geliştirilmiştir. Ancak, Türkiye'nin kültürel bağlamında ilişki eğitiminin etkililiğini inceleyen ampirik çalışmalar yetersizdir. Bu alanyazın inceleme çalışmasında, yurt içi ve yurt dışında çiftler, ergen ve beliren yetişkinler için geliştirilmiş ilişki eğitimi programlarının gözden geçirilmesi amaçlanmıştır. Çalışmada ilk olarak ilişki eğitimi kavramı, kapsamı ve kuramsal temelleri tartışılmış, çiftler, ergen ve beliren yetişkinlerde ilişki eğitimi programlarının yapısı ve etkililik çalışmaları ele alınmıştır. Son olarak da Türkiye'de geliştirilecek ilişki eğitimi programları için kültürel, kuramsal ve uygulamaya yönelik öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar sözcükler: İlişki eğitimi, romantik ilişkiler, beliren yetişkinlik, ergenlik

Introduction

Studies revealing the importance of being in healthy social relationships for the physical and psychological health of the individuals, are quite common. Healthy social relationships have been associated with numerous positive outcomes, including increased life satisfaction, subjective well-being, longevity and

a reduced risk of depression and anxiety (Barden et al. 2021). Understanding the importance of healthy social relationships has led to the emergence of some efforts (short-term couple therapies, sexual education, psychoeducational programs focused on relationship education, etc.) to increase the quality of relationships of individuals and couples, and to develop safe, stable and healthy relationships. Relationship education refers to

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psycho-educational interventions that aim to provide individuals or couples necessary knowledge and skills to establish and maintain healthy and stable romantic relationships and marriages (Braithwaite et al. 2010, Halford et al. 2011). The target groups of relationship training in the past years are mostly married couples or couples preparing for marriage who are already in a romantic relationship (Hawkins and Ooms 2012, Williamson et al. 2016). In recent years, the focus of relationship education has shifted to individuals in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Crooks et al. 2008, Kerpelman et al. 2009, Wolfe et al. 2009, Antle et al. 2011, Ball et al. 2012, Simpson et al. 2018).

In Turkey, relationship education is mostly offered to couples (Ersanlı 2007, Yalçın and Karahan 2007, Yılmaz and Kalkan 2010, Haskan Avcı 2014, Vural Batık 2017, Arıcı Şahin 2017). These relationship education programs have several common topics. Communication skills, problem solving and conflict resolution skills (Sardoğan and Karahan 2005, Canel 2007, Yalçın and Karahan 2007, Ekşi and Kahraman 2012, Akça Koca 2013, Vural Batık 2017), irrational beliefs in relationships (Canel 2007, Kalkan and Ersanlı 2008), roles in marriage and kinship relations (Ekşi and Kahraman 2012, Devenci Şirin 2013), self-awareness (Kalkan 2002) and couple burnout levels (Şirin and Deniz 2016) are frequently mentioned topics in these programs. Relationship training programs are proven to be effective in terms of many variables such as; marital satisfaction, adjustment, marital relations, dysfunctional attitudes, interpersonal mindfulness forgiveness, happiness, and dyadic burnout levels (Kalkan 2002, Ersanlı ve Kalkan 2003, Sardoğan and Karahan 2005, Canel 2007, Kalkan and Ersanlı 2009, Şirin and Deniz 2016, Akbulut 2018, Atan and Buluş 2019, Vural Batık and Kalkan 2019, Uzun 2021).

Although there are relatively few studies on couples in Turkey, there are also several programs to support the romantic relationships of university students (Duran and Hamamcı 2010, Yalçın and Ersever 2015, Yalçıntaş Sezgin 2015, Togay et al. 2019, Şirin and Bayrakçı 2020, Ulaş 2020). These programs, which are carried out with students who are in a relationship has been found to be effective on the participants communication styles, relationship satisfaction, relationship stability, conflict resolution and reduction of abuse (Duran and Hamamcı 2010, Yılmaz and Kalkan 2010, Yalçın and Ersever 2010, Haskan Avcı 2014, Yalçıntaş Sezgin 2015, Şirin and Bayrakçı 2020, Ulaşan 2020). These programs are presented in different ways, generally they consist of 8-12 sessions, they are carried out face-to-face format in small groups, each session lasts one and a half hours on average and is usually given in a university setting. Studies (Türküm et al. 2004, Ondaş 2007, Küçükarslan 2011) reveal that university students need to gain certain knowledge and develop their skills to guide them in their romantic relationships. Students wanted to be educated mostly on communication, conflict resolution, accepting differences, romance-sexuality and social support, respectively (Haskan Avcı 2014). These

researches reveal that university students should be supported with education programs concerning, skills and attitudes to develop healthy romantic relationships. Although relationship education programs for couples or individuals who are already in a romantic relationship are considered extremely important for strengthening the relationships of couples, these programs do not include the knowledge and skills that may be needed before and during the partner selection process, before unhealthy attitudes and behavior patterns occur (Hawkins and Ooms 2012, Cottle et al. 2014). Thus, it's assumed that there is a need for preventive relationship education programs, with a curriculum regarding the needs of the target group, for adolescents and emerging adults in Turkey. Based on this need, the aim of this study is to review the theoretical basis and intervention approaches of romantic relationship education programs for young people within international research, and to develop suggestions for future relationship education programs in Turkey.

Romantic Relationship Education

In the most general sense, romantic relationship education can be defined as efforts that focus on providing knowledge and enhancing skills in order to promote individuals and couples developing safe, stable and healthy relationships (Markman and Rhoades 2012, Markman et al. 2013, Russell 2021). Relationship education is a general term that expresses marriage (Hawkins et al. 2004) and romantic relationship education (Lucier-Greer and Adler-Baeder 2012, Hawkins 2012). Generally, relationship education programs are offered in the form of workshops as well as psychoeducational services. The psychoeducation method used in these programs means early intervention to relationship problems before they progress and become established. Relationship education programs are less intimidating, evidence-based, and more accessible preventative services for individuals at risk than traditional therapeutic practices (Russell 2021). Relationship education differs from couple therapy in terms of form and couple needs. While the relationship education curriculum is prepared in a structured way and taught to couples in the form of workshops or psychoeducation sessions, couple therapy is offered to couples with relationship problems in an office setting by a therapist (Markman and Rhoades 2012). Workshops are short and educational interventions that have the potential to be applied to relatively large groups (Davila et al. 2021). Romantic relationship workshops target married individuals (Duffey et al. 2004, Stanley et al. 2005), couples (Shapiro and Gottman 2005, Schmidt et al. 2016), and emerging adults (Holt et al. 2016, Davila et al. 2021). The duration of these trainings varies from a few hours to a few days (Duffey et al. 2004, Stanley et al. 2005). While the workshops are more educational, group works are more in the form of experiential activities. Relationship education programs are mostly group-based and are given face-to-face to fewer individuals than workshops. However,

internet-based programs have recently been adopted as they are more economical, easily accessible and suitable for dissemination (Braithwaite and Fincham 2014). Relationship education programs are designed to prevent problems before they occur, and to teach relationship skills that can correct relationship problems before they become more severe (Hawkins et al. 2004, Goodey et al. 2019).

Generally, there are three types of programs; first, programs that focus on couples who are experiencing difficulties in their relationships or at risk of divorce, second, programs targeting couples in the early stages of relationship problems, and universal prevention programs for young individuals and couples who do not show any sign of problems (Russell 2021). Most relationship education programs undertake the two components together and place emphasis on improving communication skills (Halford and Snyder 2012). For example, relationship education programs for young people have two main components: educating young people about healthy relationships and preventing dating violence (McElwain et al. 2017). One of the issues that needs to be addressed is who will provide the education, as well as the content of the relationship training programs. While those who provide relationship education in studies carried out for scientific purposes are generally professionals at the doctoral level (Russell 2021), most of the programs are provided by semi-professionals. Semi-professionals commonly complete the trainer's training in community centers or in various training institutions. Bradford et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of having two leaders, one of whom is a family therapist, because when clinical issues come to the fore in a relationship education program, a leader without therapy experience may have difficulty in carrying out the process. Markman and Ritchie (2015) underlines that, the presence of the therapist will shift the focus of the relationship education closer to couple therapy or group therapy. That would leave out most of the relationship education curriculum, and also it is difficult and expensive to recruit enough therapists to increase the prevalence of programs. Therefore, it is more appropriate for relationship education programs to be lead by trained semi-professionals, both for adherence to the program curriculum and for practical reasons. Relationship education trainers should have the ability to schedule the program, recognize the participants who need to be directed to therapy, perform an effective referral, increase the energy of the group, and encourage the participants. Additionally, the skills of establishing and maintaining positive relationships and instilling hope are important characteristics that leaders should have (Markman and Ritchie 2015).

Studies provide evidence that relationship education programs provide significant effects in targeted areas (Gardner et al. 2004, Adler-Baeder et al. 2007, Kerpelman et al. 2009, Futris et al. 2013). Studies on relationship education programs for couples reveal that relationship education programs improve the quality of close relationships and prevent marriage problems

and separations, at least in the short term (Hawkins and Ooms 2012). These programs improve communication skills (Blanchard et al. 2009), relationship quality and satisfaction (Williamson et al. 2016), parenting skills (Adler-Baeder et al. 2007), and reduce physical aggression (Antle et al. 2011, Carlson et al. et al. 2018). On the other hand, relationship education research for young people, shows that these programs achieve the targeted effects in terms of both developing healthy relationships and preventing dating violence. When these effects are examined, the increase in knowledge about unhealthy and healthy relationships (Gardner et al. 2004, Adler-Baeder et al. 2007, Rice et al. 2017), and a decrease in the use of verbal (Adler-Baeder et al. 2007, Kerpelman et al. 2009) and physical aggression (Gardner et al. 2004, Rice et al. 2017), a decrease in acceptance of violence in relationships and stereotypical gender role beliefs (McElwain et al. 2017). The effectiveness of relationship education programs in preventing negative situations in relationships and promoting healthy relationship development has made evidence-based relationship education programs that aim to develop relational competences and healthier attitudes towards romantic relationships become more common. One of the most important features of evidence-based programs is their theory-based structure.

Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations of Relationship Education Programs

Although diverse in design and specific content, relationship education programs are generally based on cognitive behavioral, social learning and behavioral exchange theories. Relationship education programs involve the provision of structured learning experiences to help individuals and couples develop knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to healthy relationship functioning (Halford et al. 2008, Halford and Snyder 2012, Markman and Rhoades 2012). According to the social cognitive approach, individuals are not merely passive recipients of environmental influences. Rather, they are active agents of their experiences. Therefore, in order to understand how change occurs in relationships, individuals' underlying attitudes and motivations regarding relationships and relational behaviors should be considered together (Ponzetti 2016). Relationship education curricula usually deal with various relationship skills or dynamics. Behavioral exchange theory assumes that social behavior is the result of an exchange process. The purpose of this exchange is to maximize benefits and minimize costs. According to behavioral Exchange theory, Costs are the factors that inhibit or deter a performance of a sequence of behaviors within a relationship, whereas rewards are the pleasures, satisfactions, and gratifications that a person enjoys within a relationship (Nakonezny and Denton 2008). From this point of view, relationship education programs aim to reduce people's relational costs and increase their rewards.

Although relationship education programs are generally based on

cognitive behavioral and social cognitive theories, according to Rice et al (2017) life-course theory (Bengtson and Allen 1993) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979) can also provide a framework for relationship education intervention and its potential effects. Life course theory suggests that events do not occur in isolation from one another, rather experiences at one time point and in one context are likely to influence later experiences in several contexts (Bengtson and Allen 1993). In other words, developing skills in romantic relationships through a program may influence different areas of healthy relationships with others. The principles of ecological systems perspective complement life course theory assumptions. An individual learns and functions within systems from proximal (micro-level) to more distal (macro-level) (Tudge et al. 2009, Rice et al. 2017). According to Rice et al (2017) life course theory and ecological systems approach not only provide a strong basis for the implementation of the intervention, but also serve as a theoretical baseline for expected change across domains.

Relationship Education for Couples

Healthy relationship programs for couples contribute to the relationship dynamics and psychological well-being of couples and individuals by improving communication, conflict management and emotion regulation skills. While some of these programs target couples, who want to improve their relationship quality, relationship satisfaction and relationship skills, some are for couples who experience problems in their relationships (Niolon et al. 2017). Relationship education programs increase couples' relationship quality and satisfaction levels (Carroll and Doherty 2003, Hawkins et al. 2008, Hawkins and Erickson 2015, Williamson et al. 2016, Carlson et al. 2017). Research has revealed that relationship education contributes to developing healthier relationships (Barden et al. 2021) by improving communication skills (Blanchard et al. 2009), parenting skills (Adler-Baeder et al. 2007), and reducing physical aggression (Antle et al. 2011, Carlson et al. 2018) and individual distress (Carlson et al. 2014). Skill-Based Relationship Education Programs focus on improving the communication skills, conflict resolution and decision-making skills of couples. The Relationship Enhancement Program, which was developed by Guerney (1977), is one of the first examples of skill-focused programs, aims to develop communication and problem-solving skills in order to enhance couples' marriages and relationships. The program was organized in small groups with the participation of three couples and two facilitators. Various versions have been developed. The original program was designed for ten weeks and is also available in a one-day marathon format. Research revealed that the program is effective in improving communication skills, marital adjustment, acceptance, trust and problem-solving skills (Guerney, 1977).

The relationship education programs aimed to strengthen the relationship skills of couples, are effective in preventing dating

violence. Among these programs the most common one is the Pre-Marital Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). It is a five-session intervention program designed for couples on the eve of marriage. It has been developed to increase the functionality of the relationship and to prevent relationship problems. This program has been presented to groups with different characteristics in various ways (face-to-face or online) and has been empirically tested. In the five-year follow-up study, couples who completed all or most of the PREP intervention reported lower levels of physical dating violence than couples in the control group. The experimental group also exhibited higher levels of positive communication skills and lower levels of negative communication skills compared to the control group (Markman et al. 1993). Similarly, the findings of the online e-PREP revealed that married couples in the experimental group reported lower levels of physical and psychological aggression compared to the couples in the control group even in follow-up studies (Braithwaite and Fincham 2014). Another example of programs for couples is Behavioral Couples Therapy, which is targeted to substance addicted individuals and their partners. The program was conducted with couples, as part of substance abuse treatment with conflict management and other relationship skills education. Results show significant decreases in partner violence among couples participating in the behavioral couple therapy treatment groups (Ruff et al. 2010). Couple Commitment and Relationship Enhancement (Couple CARE; Halford et al. 2006), and Couples Coping Enhancement Training (CCET; Bodenmann and Shantinath, 2004) are programs that aim at developing positive communication and conflict resolution skills. These programs are usually offered in the form of face-to-face small group training, but there are also online training materials that are flexible and can be self-educated. Skill-oriented relationship education programs for couples are carried out for couples who are at different stages of their relationships. These programs are offered to couples who are unmarried or on the eve of marriage (Laurenceau et al. 2004, Wood et al. 2012), expecting a baby (Halford et al. 2010, Petch et al. 2012), or to couples with children (Ladermann et al. 2007).

Relationship education programs are generally targeted to married or dating adult couples, and adolescents or emerging adults who have no romantic relationship can also attend individually (Russell 2021). However, there is increasing interest in relationship education programs developed for adolescents and emerging adults. The increased attention to the importance of having a relationship education before committing to a partner has led researchers to focus on individual-oriented relationship training (Fincham et al. 2011, Rhoades and Stanley 2011). This individual-oriented educational approach is offered to individuals from different demographic backgrounds and emerging adults (Rhoades and Stanley 2011) in or outside the classroom settlement in order to enable them to acquire

knowledge and skills about relationship quality (Cottle et al. 2014, Holt et al. 2016). The preventive programs for individuals who have no relationship experience or who are at the beginning of their relationship experience, may prevent the development of problematic behavior patterns. Teaching individuals how to recognize and avoid unhealthy relationship patterns in conflicts can prevent the formation of potentially abusive relationships (Polanchek 2014). In Western cultures, relationship training, designed to provide information to many people at the same time (Markman and Rhoades 2012), appears to have become the most widely used form of professional relationship intervention (Stewart et al. 2014).

Romantic Relationship Education in Adolescence

Most teenagers start dating and forming new relationships at adolescence. The positive attachments during the transition from adolescence to adulthood support relationship development (Rice et al. 1995). The quality of adolescent romantic relationships is one of the strongest predictors of adolescent well-being indicators, including self-esteem, depression and suicide attempts (Brent et al. 1993, Joyner and Udry 2000). Adolescents' romantic relationship experiences have individual and relational consequences such as self-esteem, quality of future relationships, and mental health (Madsen and Collins 2008, Collins et al. 2009). In recent years, efforts to understand the importance and effects of romantic relationships in adolescence have increased (Furman and Hand 2006, Giordano et al. 2006, Laursen and Mooney 2007). Studies have shown that adolescent dating relationships contribute to positive developmental outcomes such as resilience in youth at risk (Furman et al. 2007), as well as academic performance (Giordano et al. 2008), interpersonal skills (Haugen et al. 2008), and identity development (Bouchey and Furman 2003, Furman and Shaffer 2003). However, relationships during adolescence can also lead to depression, dating abuse, and compelling lifestyle changes resulting from sexual intercourse. Often, risks and benefits occur simultaneously (Furman et al. 2007).

Adolescents reach limited support services that will facilitate their preparation and experience for healthy romantic relationships (Collins and Laursen 1999, Collin and Sroufe 1999), and due to this lack of experience, their self-control in close relationships may be insufficient (Shulman 2003, Montgomery 2005). Adolescent relationship education programs, which emerged in the last 30 years, aim to teach the characteristics of healthy relationships and effective communication skills. Interventions to support healthy relationship development for adolescents are offered in three different but interrelated policy and program areas; prevention of dating violence among young people, youth relationship education and comprehensive sexuality education (Genereux 2020). Generally adolescent relationships are at risk

for both verbal and physical forms of aggression, and studies show that exposure to dating violence during adolescence increases the probability of experiencing relationship violence in the future (Close 2005, Wolfe 2006). One of the the first examples of the interventions to support the healthy relationship development in adolescents is youth dating violence prevention program, that aims to develop healthy relationship skills by focusing on increasing the awareness of young people about dating violence, reducing the attitudes that blames the victims and reducing interpersonal violence (Weisz and Black 2009). Adolescents often do not realize that conflict is inevitable in romantic relationships, and they view conflict as a negative issue (Shulman 2003). In fact, conflict and negotiation help to maintain the balance between emotional intimacy and individuality in adolescent romantic relationships. Being in a safe dating relationship during adolescence builds self-efficacy and self-worth, provides opportunities to practice and negotiate conflict management, and allows adolescents to gain awareness of how to create, maintain, and end relationships (Collins 2003). To develop these skills, and to increase the knowledge make important contributions to stable and high-quality relationships in future. The second intervention form to support healthy relationship development in adolescents is relationship education for youth, focuses on teaching adolescents more realistic relationship expectations as well as build up communication and problem-solving skills (Simpson et al. 2018). The relatively new, last form of the intervention is incorporating healthy relationship education into comprehensive sexual education programs. Sex education programs generally focus on providing comprehensive and accurate sexual health information (Genereux 2020).

One of the widely used programs developed to support healthy relationship enhancement for adolescents is Safe Dates. Its effectiveness has been proven in promoting healthy relationships and reducing dating violence. Safe Dates is a school-based program targeted both boys and girls (Foshee et al. 1996). This program was developed as 10 sessions for eighth and ninth grade students, the program focuses on providing students with skills related to conflict resolution, positive communication and anger management. Studies that have tested the effectiveness of the Safe Dates program have revealed that the program reduces physical and sexual dating violence and the risk of exposure to it (Foshee et al. 1998) and found out that this effect persists in four-year monitoring studies (Foshee et al. 2004). Safe Dates program participants were also found to be advantageous in terms of all types of violence, related to dating violence and involvement in crime compared to those in the control group (Foshee et al. 2014).

Another widely used program that has proven the effectiveness in teaching young people about healthy relationships is The Fourth R: Strategies for Healthy Teen Relationships. Its core philosophy is that teaching young people healthy relationships is as important as teaching reading, writing and arithmetic. This

program is based on the Youth Relationship Project developed by Wolfe et al. (1996, Wolfe et al. 2003). Youth Relationship Project is school-based and community-based 18-session program that was initiated on a large scale due to the increase in violence against women and children, especially targeting young people, explaining what abuse and violence is, and aiming to provide alternative prosocial behaviors to violence (Wolfe et al. 1996). It was presented to young people aged 14-16 by trained teachers, in small groups of 8 to 15 participants, once a week in community centers for two hours, for a total of 18 sessions. In the fourth R program, the scope of the Youth Relationship Project was expanded. Developing healthy relationships and reducing conflict have been addressed within a wider spectrum of violence (bullying, harassment, group-based peer violence and dating violence), and role-playing and skill-building practices have been increased. In the fourth R program, the scope of the Youth Relationship Project was expanded. Developing healthy relationships and reducing conflict have been addressed within a wider spectrum of violence (bullying, harassment, group-based peer violence and dating violence), and role-playing and skill-building practices have been increased. In addition, including materials on substance use and healthy sexual behavior, the program presented to 9th and 10th grade students in 21 sessions by teachers trained on relationship education in the physical education and health curriculum (Crooks et al. 2008), ensuring individual safety and prevention of physical harm, healthy growth, sexuality and substance abuse (Wolfe et al. 2009). I Love U2: Communication Smarts (Pearson 2004) is a seven-session program for young people focused on healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns, communication, conflict resolution and problem-solving skills. Its effectiveness has also been tested by adding additional sessions in different studies. Adler-Baeder et al. (2007) adapted this program as 12 modules, and Antle et al. (2011), as eight modules compressed into two days, and found that the short version was also effective. Expect Respect Support Groups is another program of proven effectiveness, based on a socio-emotional learning approach that focuses on fostering safe and healthy relationships. Respect Support Groups have been developed for youth who are exposed to violence and abuse. It is a 24-session program for, 11-17 age group, which includes recognizing abuse, developing an egalitarian and respectful attitude in relationships, and learning the skills necessary for healthy relationships (Ball et al. 2012). Young people who completed Respect Support Groups reported an increase in their relationship skills and a decrease in victimization of dating violence and crime (Reidy et al. 2017).

Meta-analyses of the relationship education literature (McElwain et al. 2017, Simpson et al. 2018) confirm the effectiveness of such education on adolescents. However, a recent study found out that a widely used program did not have a significant effect on healthy relationship skills, attitudes, and behaviors in the

third and ninth months following the intervention, even though adolescents expressed a high level of satisfaction with the program (Huntington et al. 2021). Relationship education studies with adolescents generally focused on three types of outcomes: relationship knowledge, attitudes, and skills (McElwain et al. 2017, Simpson et al. 2018). Although limited, empirical studies show that school-based relationships education is effective in reducing negative beliefs and attitudes and increasing adolescents' positive beliefs, skills and behaviors related to romantic relationships (Gardner et al. 2004, Adler-Baeder et al. 2007, Kerpelman et al. 2008). These studies show that relationship education has the potential to reduce the acceptance of dating violence and change traditional gender role beliefs among young people, which may reduce the experience of dating violence in adolescence (Savasuk-Luxton et al. 2018). Preventive intervention for relationships can provide positive models for healthy relationships, address maladaptive assumptions about relationships, and teach relationship skills that can help them avoid or minimize risky behaviors and negative consequences (Cui et al. 2011, Sutton et al. 2014, Huntington et al. 2021). In summary, providing education that develops knowledge and skills regarding healthy relationships, helps to prevent unhealthy dating relationships now and in the future among middle school (Hammond and Yung 1991, Ball et al. 2012, Reidy et al. 2017) and high school students (Foshee et al. 1996, Pearson 2004, Adler-Baeder et al. 2007, Antle et al. 2011, Reidy et al. 2017). These programs range from seven sessions (Pearson, 2004) to thirty-seven sessions (Hammond and Yung 1991), given either in the classroom setting (Antle et al. 2011, Ball et al. 2012, Reidy et al. 2017) or in both classroom and community centers. (Wolfe et al. 1996), for large (Ball et al. 2012, Reidy et al. 2017) or small groups (Wolfe et al. 1996) versions are available. Studies show that preventive intervention programs for adolescents in middle school and high school have an effect on healthy relationships. Furthermore, emerging adulthood is developmentally a critical period in preventing the development of unhealthy and unstable relationships.

Romantic Relationship Education in Emerging Adulthood

The postponement of life transitions such as completing education, living in a house of one's own, being married and being a parent from earlier to late twenties has affected the development of individuals between the ages of 18-29. Emerging adulthood is characterised by instability, exploration, being focused on self, and opportunities, and mainly includes urban university students between the ages of 19-25 in Turkey (Atak and Çok 2010). Emerging adulthood is a critical developmental stage for making many important decisions about relationships that can have the potential for a considerable life-long impact. Emerging adults strive to develop autonomy from their families

of origin, a continuation of a process that typically initiates in adolescence friendships and romantic relationships become more critical (Collins et al. 2009). Processes of emotional self-regulation development, navigating self-reliance, and further differentiating from nuclear families creates difficulty for many emerging adults (Russell 2021). The significant life changes, such as leaving home to go to university or into one's own home, disrupt earlier relationship security thereby pushing the individual to establish new romantic relationships (Asher and Weeks 2014). Generally, romantic relationships take precedence over familial relationships and friendships during this life stage (Arnett 2014). While gaining independence, emerging adults are expected to form intimate and meaningful relationships with romantic partners (Grotevant and Cooper 1998).

Throughout the university years, dating relationships are common and decisions that have potential for significant long-term impact are made (Arnett 2000, Scott et al. 2009, Chandra et al. 2011, Kuperberg and Padgett 2016). Recent trends, such as pervasive internet and social media use and changes in marriage choices, have contributed to an increased difficulty for emerging adults in successfully developing close relationships (Reed et al. 2002). However, research findings indicate that emerging adults are generally lacking in knowledge about healthy relationships (Willoughby and James 2017). Emerging adults experience many problems in their relationships, including dating violence, and need assistance to learn how to have healthy relationships (Berger et al. 2012). Thus, providing relationship education during this period is crucial.

There are several reasons to target emerging adults for providing relationship education. First, because the emerging adults are focused on themselves, making it a viable time to deliver relationship education programs to them. Second, emerging adults may have problematic long-term relationships because of a lack of knowledge about healthy relationships (Willoughby and James 2017). Third, large percentages of college students report the occurrence of violence within their relationship. In a study including university students in Turkey, the prevalence of dating violence was reported as 28.6 %. In another study 77.4% of the participants reported emotional violence, 37% reported physical violence and 29.1% reported that they were exposed to sexual violence at least once (Toplu and Hatipoğlu-Sümer 2011). Intervening during emerging adulthood could help individuals learn better communication and conflict resolution skills as they are forming their relationships (Fincham et al. 2011). Many emerging adults attending universities talk about their lives as being overwhelming, busy and stressful. By running relationship education programs on campus it allows the emerging adults to use the resources in a location that is convenient. Therefore, research on relationship education programs has shifted to an interest in emerging adults and specifically university students (Fincham et al., 2011).

All relationship education programs for emerging adult university students used the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP/ePrep, Braithwaite and Fincham 2007, 2009, Holt et al. 2016) or a version of it (Within My Reach, Cottle et al. 2014, RU, Braithwaite et al. 2010, Project RELATE, Fincham et al. 2011). The programs all include a core focus on communication and problem solving/conflict resolution, conscious decision making, realistic expectations in relationships and self or emotional regulation (Simpson et al. 2018). These programs often target knowledge, skills, and attitudes about healthy relationships (Kerpelman et al. 2009). These programs range in length from 1 hour to 13 hours, may consist of daily or weekly sessions lasting several months, usually include some techniques for reinforcement of learning (eg quizzes, role-playing, self-assessment) and are delivered by trained facilitators (Halford et al. 2003, Halford et al. 2008, Halford 2011). Research supports that corruptive attitudes about relationships severely reduce the odds of forming a successful and long-term partnership with another; for example, the unrealistic standard of finding a soulmate can create challenges in forming healthy unions as the standard for success is too high (Wilcox and Dew 2010). Most relationship education programs focus on gaining awareness of these unhealthy expectations and providing information about the qualities of a healthy relationship (Cottle et al. 2014).

Relationship programs are often targeted toward emerging adult university students in relationships (Braithwaite and Fincham 2007, 2009), although there is growing recognition of the significance of providing relationship education to individuals not in a relationship (Markman et al. 2019). Some programs focused on individuals not in a relationship (Cottle et al. 2014, Holt et al. 2016). With the increased awareness regarding the positive outcomes of relationship education programs, more university students have begun to look for programs that are easily accessible, thus creating an increase in the utilization of online programs (Doss et al. 2016). The studies have revealed that emerging adults display lower levels of verbal and physical aggression after engaging in a relationship education program (Adler-Baeder et al. 2007), and that individuals who actively attended relationship education programs were more willing to attend enrichment programs or seek assistance later in life (Gardner et al. 2004).

Discussion

In this literature review, relationship education programs developed for couples, adolescents, and emerging adults in a national and international context were reviewed. When international studies on romantic relationship education were examined chronologically, it was seen that the target groups of the first studies on this subject were mostly married or preparing for marriage, or couples who were in a romantic relationship (Hawkins and Ooms 2012, Williamson et al. 2016).

In the following years, relationship education mainly focused on individuals in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Crooks et al. 2008, Kerpelman et al. 2009, Wolfe et al. 2009, Antle et al. 2011, Ball et al. 2012, Simpson et al. 2018). Consistent with the international literature, the romantic relationship trainings in Turkey (Kalkan 2002, Ersanlı and Kalkan 2003, Sardoğan and Karahan 2005, Canel 2007, Kalkan and Ersanlı 2009, Şirin and Deniz 2016, Akbulut 2018, Atan and Buluş 2019, Vural Batık and Kalkan 2019, Uzun 2021) were primarily aimed at couples. However, it was noted that there is a very limited number of studies on the subject. Besides, there are relatively few programs to support the existing romantic relationships of university students in Turkey compared to studies for couples (Duran and Hamamcı 2010, Yalçın and Ersever 2015, Yalçıntaş Sezgin 2015, Togay et al. 2019, Şirin and Bayrakçı 2020, Ulaşan 2020). As a result, there are no interventions targeting university students who do not have a romantic relationship. This result shows that it is important to give priority to individual-oriented relationship education programs that will include young people who do not have romantic relationship experience in Turkey. While developing such programs, it is possible to provide some opinions that policy makers and researchers may need about the theoretical and cultural background, the content, and the way of implementation of the programs.

First of all, from an ecological point of view, we may suggest developing program contents in which cultural elements such as family-school-individual and relationship values are taken into account together. Furthermore, giving relationship education programs based on social-cognitive, behavioral and cognitive-behavioral approaches may be useful. Since programs to develop romantic relationship skills in today's youth are developed in countries with more individualistic cultural characteristics, they do not take into account that romantic relationships may differ culturally (Van de Bongart et al. 2015). Social-ecological theory can provide an important framework for considering the complex nature of romantic relationships in emerging adulthood. According to the ecological model, romantic relationships do not develop independently of social and cultural context. This model considers the social environment as an aggregation of multi-layered systems interacting with each other (Darling 2007). Therefore, in relationship education programs for emerging adults, at the microsystem level, skills, self-efficacy, or close relationship characteristics are considered, while the interaction of various relational and individual characteristics at the mesosystem level is taken into account. In addition, how environments such as family relations and school environments can interact with these individual skills and characteristics can also be included in the programs at this level (Roberson et al. 2016, Shulman et al. 2019). At the macro-system level, it may be suggested to consider factors such as beliefs about romantic relationships, social norms, expectations of the culture and

family system regarding the relationships of young people, and gender roles surrounding the culture in which young people live (Gala and Kapadia 2014, Mayselless and Keren 2014, Kuperberg and Padgett 2016). Thus, it will be possible to represent the autonomous-relational cultural elements that shape the meaning of close relationships in romantic relationship education.

In terms of content, training programs to be developed for Turkey would be more useful if they include skills such as communication, problem and conflict resolution (Haskan Avcı 2014), unrealistic relationship beliefs towards close relationships (Sarı and Korkut Owen 2015), dysfunctional attitudes towards violence (Sakarya 2013, İftar 2016). In addition, in parallel with the emphasis of the ecological model on the social and cultural context, it would be appropriate to include themes such as culture-specific gender roles, romantic jealousy, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, and violence in close relationships. Compared to western countries, Turkey is considered to be more sexist and traditional (Glick et al. 2000, İkizer et al. 2018, Fischer et al. 2021). Studies examining traditional gender roles and attitudes towards dating violence in Turkey show that, as the level of sexism increases, acceptance of dating violence increases (Yumuşak 2013, Demirtaş 2015, Yıldırım 2016). In Turkey, romantic jealousy is considered as an indicator of love (Demirtaş et al. 2017), whereas jealousy is seen as one of the main causes of dating violence (Tagay et al. 2018). In parallel, one of the most common forms of relationship violence in Turkey is violence against women (Tarhan et al. 2017, Bahadır Yılmaz and Öz 2018).

How romantic jealousy is experienced is significantly affected by the normative understanding of love in certain cultures and the behavior patterns expected from partners (Canto et al. 2017). Especially in cultures where the sexist sense of honor is common, violence by the partner on the grounds of jealousy can be justified (Puente and Cohen 2003, Canto et al. 2012). Such an understanding places particular emphasis on man's honor and normalizes the regulation of woman's behavior by others. In this respect, attitudes and behaviors that are thought to endanger the honor of men are controlled with violence (Cihangir 2013). Low education (Altınay and Arat 2009, Akar et al. 2010, Bener et al. 2010) and income level (Altınay and Arat 2009, Şahin et al. 2010) increase the risk of violence against women. Therefore, from a cultural point of view, it is important to include in the curriculum which cultural and sexist assumptions nurture and legitimize such behaviors, as well as how the types of psychological, physical, and economic violence aimed at regulating and controlling the behavior of the partner, especially in the context of jealousy. Another suggestion regarding the curriculum can be made under the title of partner support. In cultures where collectivist tendencies are relatively high, individuals give more importance to harmony and harmony in relationships, and couples develop more negative reactions to the decrease in perceived social support from each other, which negatively affects relationship harmony

(Paradis and Maffini 2021). Therefore, providing social support and receiving social support can be added as a separate title in relationship education programs. Similarly, it can be suggested to include non-verbal communication styles as well as verbal communication skills such as self-talk within the communication title, which is offered as an important part of the curriculum in almost all relationship education programs. Because, studies show that verbal and non-verbal communication are used equally in close relationships in individualistic cultures, whereas non-verbal communication is used more heavily in cultures where collectivism tendency is stronger (Bello et al. 2010). Another suggestion is to address the expectation of devotion and self-sacrifice, such as ignoring the various problems that they notice or experience in the relationship, especially for the sake of the continuity of the relationship, in cultures where collectivist tendencies and gender stereotypes are common (Natal 2022). While the issues such as mutual devotion, self-sacrifice, and forgiveness are emphasized in the conflict resolution in relationships programs, it is thought that the negative consequences of issues such as sacrifice and forgiveness, which are culturally internalized especially in unsafe or harmful relationships, need to be addressed. On the other hand, in non-Western cultures, there are significant differences in understanding between generations over the years, especially on issues such as the nature of romantic relationships and gender roles. In cultures where family ties and collectivist norms are emphasized, this situation may cause young people to experience more confusion about the normative relationship styles prevailing in their families or environments, and what their expectations are from romantic relationships (Terrazas-Carrillo et al. 2021). For this reason, it is considered important to include topics that will help young people build the meaning of a healthy and secure relationship for themselves by discussing the relationship characteristics they observe in their families and social contexts in the relationship education.

Another factor that can be taken into account in this context is what kind of elements relationship education programs can include in terms of developmental periods. The main purpose of relationship education programs for young people is to teach individuals in both adolescence and emerging adulthood the meaning and characteristics of healthy close relationships, to teach the characteristics of unhealthy or insecure relationships, and to gain the attitudes, awareness, and skills necessary for them to establish safe relationships. These aims can be achieved with different contents while structuring the programs (Simpson et al. 2018). For example, considering the emotional maturity level of adolescents, focusing on unrealistic beliefs about love and romance is important for them to form realistic expectations about relationships. On the other hand, since peer influence is more common during early adolescence and middle adolescence than in emerging adulthood, topics such as romantic relationships with peers and peer norms can be added

to the adolescent curriculum (Furman 2018, Allen et al. 2020). In addition, considering the distinction between infatuation and love during adolescence, the popularity of the partner in the peer group, and the salience of physical characteristics of the partner, it may be suggested to consider the characteristics of an ideal romantic partner in this context. In addition, it can be suggested that these programs include skills that will strengthen adolescents in negative relationship situations, such as saying no and assertiveness, as well as communication skills, emotion regulation, and conflict resolution skills. Finally, as part of the identity development processes of adolescents, integrating experiences that provide a safe discussion and navigation where adolescents can explore their understanding of gender roles, the meaning of a romantic relationship, and ideal partner would be developmentally supportive (Simpson et al. 2018, Stanley et al. 2020). Since emerging adulthood is now characterized by the process of developing commitment in close relationships, it is considered important to include elements such as evaluating and making decisions about healthy and unhealthy relationships, relationship phases and characteristics, problem-solving and self-regulation in relationships (Beckmeyer and Jamison 2021, Davila 2021).

When the content of the programs in Turkey is evaluated, it should not be overlooked that Turkey is a family-oriented Mediterranean welfare regime (Bugra and Keyder 2006, Eder 2010), which has inadequate social care services. For this reason, it would be appropriate to provide relationship training programs both for children and young people within the framework of compulsory education and during compulsory military service in emerging adulthood (Van Epp et al. 2008). On the other hand, these services should be provided free of charge in centers such as public education centers, youth centers, family counseling centers, or community mental health centers. Besides, these services should be provided free of charge in centers such as public education centers, youth centers, family counseling centers, or community mental health centers. It is widely established that, since the high school years, relationship education programs offered within classrooms embedded in the curriculum have the most widespread effect. As a matter of fact, relationship education is generally given within the secondary and high school curricula to cover all students (Kerpelman et al. 2008). In addition, it is offered in schools as psychoeducational programs ranging from 7 sessions to 24 sessions (Foshee et al. 1996, Wolfe et al. 2003, Pearson 2004, Adler-Baeder et al. 2007, Crooks et al. 2008, Antle et al. 2011, Ball et al. 2012), on the other hand, it is supported by community centers in risky groups (Foshee et al. 1996). In terms of universities, trainings are offered as a part of university counseling centers, elective courses for close relations, and common courses (Northwestern University) (Fincham et al. 2011). Each of these methods has its own advantages and disadvantages. However, schools need to plan how they will

present their relationship education programs according to their conditions and needs and make arrangements to ensure that more students can access these programs. In prevalence studies, it may be suggested to organize trainer training programs to present parallel-group training or relationship training integrated with the curriculum. Relationship training programs vary in terms of the way they are delivered, the number of sessions, the duration of the sessions, the content, and the methods used, depending on the target audience and the risk situation of this audience, and are shaped according to the needs (Wolfe et al. 2003, Pearson, 2004, Adler-Baeder et al. 2007, Crooks et al. 2008, Antle et al. 2011, Ball et al. 2012). From this point of view, it can be suggested that the relationship training programs to be prepared in Turkey should be designed in a way that can show flexibility by taking into account the target audience, duration, content, and place. Finally, in terms of the way they are presented, it was seen that online interventions that are easily accessible and have a high potential for dissemination are also used (Braithwaite and Fincham 2007, Braithwaite and Fincham 2009). Thus, online training programs will be beneficial in terms of access, cost, and dissemination, especially in environments where there are not enough experts, enough time and space.

Conclusion

In summary, there are not enough relationship education programs for young people in Turkey. Furthermore, existing programs focus on special relationship problems or skills rather than supporting healthy relationship development, they reach a limited number of individuals, and are organized as face-to-face small group sessions that do not allow flexible application in terms of place, duration, scope and application conditions. In addition, existing programs do not provide continuity, since they are mostly organized as effectiveness research, rather than institutional service. Overall, in Turkey, arranging the theoretical and cultural background, scope, and implementation processes by considering the dynamics of the Turkish context, will contribute to the benefits provided to the target groups of the programs.

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