

Effectiveness of Structural Systemic Training on Control Strategies Among Women With a Desire for Divorce

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted with the aim of comparing the effectiveness of attachment-based systemic training and structural systemic training on control strategies among women with a desire for divorce. The research was an experimental study with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design including a control group. The research population comprised all women with a desire for divorce in the city of Isfahan in 2025. The sample consisted of 60 women with a desire for divorce who were selected via convenience sampling based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, and were randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group. All subjects were evaluated across three stages: pre-test, post-test, and follow-up using the research instrument. The research instrument was the Control Strategies Questionnaire (Yousefi & Bahrami, 2017). The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (repeated measures analysis of variance). The results indicated that both methods were effective on the dimensions of control strategies, and there was no significant difference between their effectiveness, except for adaptive control, where the structural systemic method had a significantly greater impact. Based on these results, it can be concluded that both methods are effective in improving the dimensions of control among women with a desire for divorce.

Key words: Attachment-based systemic, structural systemic, control strategies, desire for divorce

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Introduction

The family unit, as the foundational cornerstone of social architecture, serves as the primary environment for emotional growth, psychological security, and interpersonal development. However, contemporary shifts in social dynamics have led to an increase in marital instability, manifesting prominently in the rising desire for divorce among couples. This phenomenon is not merely a legal dissolution but a systemic collapse that entails significant psychological trauma. The ramifications of such marital dissolution extend beyond the couple, as evidenced by investigations into the psychological damages suffered by children in the wake of parental divorce, which highlight long-lasting effects on developmental well-being (1). Understanding the transition from marital distress to the eventual decision to separate requires a comprehensive analysis of the adjustment processes involved. Researchers have noted that divorce and post-divorce adjustment are

governed by complex models that necessitate rigorous assessment to understand how individuals navigate the loss of a primary partnership (2).

At the heart of marital dissolution lies a breakdown in the systemic organization of the couple's relationship. Structural family therapy, as conceptualized by Minuchin, posits that the health of a family system is dependent on its internal organization, including its hierarchies, subsystems, and boundaries (3). When these structural elements become rigid or, conversely, too diffuse, the system's ability to manage stress is compromised. In the context of women desiring divorce, dysfunctional communication patterns often serve as a precursor to emotional divorce. Recent network analyses of couple communication patterns suggest that these interactional sequences are highly predictive of the emotional distancing that characterizes the pre-divorce stage (4).

A critical component of this systemic dysfunction is the deployment of maladaptive control strategies. Control methods, alongside other systemic variables such as triangulation and leisure time management, have been identified as significant predictors of divorce tendency (5). Control in a relationship is inextricably linked to power dynamics. The power structure within a family often dictates marital adjustment, and when this structure is imbalanced, it frequently leads to triangulation—the process of bringing a third party into a dyadic conflict to reduce tension—which further erodes the couple's bond (6). These power dynamics are not static; they represent a continuous flow of influence that systemic family therapists must address to facilitate healthier relating (7). Furthermore, power asymmetry is particularly pronounced in the early stages of divorce intervention, where the perceived or actual lack of control can exacerbate conflict (8). Interestingly, even in more technical fields, the concept of structural reliability and the transformation of power indexes are studied to ensure system stability (9); metaphorically, a family system requires similar structural reliability and a functional “power transformation” to remain resilient under the pressure of marital conflict.

Family boundaries—their identification and dynamics—are central to maintaining the integrity of the couple system (10). When boundaries are compromised, individuals often resort to maladaptive interactional styles. For instance, women with sexual dysfunction symptoms often experience heightened triangulation and blurred family communication boundaries, highlighting the intersection between physical intimacy and systemic health (11). To combat these issues, various therapeutic modalities have been tested. Structural family therapy has been shown to be effective in increasing the level of marital satisfaction among women by restructuring these very boundaries and hierarchies (12). Additionally, more contemporary applications, such as integrative structural family therapy combined with models like the Double ABCX, have proven effective in improving marital adjustment and reducing parenting stress in highly stressed populations (13).

The field of family therapy offers diverse approaches to addressing marital distress. While structural models focus on organization, Bowenian perspectives emphasize emotional processes and the differentiation of self. Bowen's emotional family therapy has been utilized to address family developmental functions and maladaptive emotional schemas, particularly in women struggling with major depressive disorder in the context of family life (14). Comparisons between different models, such as the Bowen family therapy approach and the McMaster model, have been conducted to determine their relative effectiveness on intimacy and cognitive emotion regulation in couples seeking divorce (15). Furthermore, the Bowen family systems model provides a framework for understanding how generalized anxiety disorder and romantic relationship distress are interconnected through systemic emotional patterns (16).

Other systemic interventions include brief strategic family therapy, which targets marital conflicts by disrupting dysfunctional feedback loops (17). Strategic systemic therapy has also been evaluated for its effectiveness in addressing boundaries and triangulation in sensitive contexts, such as women affected by domestic violence (18). The evolution of these therapies has led to integrated models, such as comparing the effectiveness of integrated emotion-focused-Gottman approaches with strategic-solution-focused approaches for the recovery of marital intimacy in couples on the brink of divorce (19). Despite the variety of interventions, the evidence base for family therapy and systemic interventions remains a critical area of ongoing research, especially concerning child-focused problems and the long-term sustainability of therapeutic gains (20).

Individual psychological factors also play a significant role in how women experience and manage the desire for divorce. Attachment theory provides a valuable lens for understanding these dynamics. Skill training based on attachment patterns has been found to be effective in reducing hostile attribution and outward anger in women seeking divorce, suggesting that internal working models of relationships directly influence external conflict strategies (21). This suggests that integrating attachment-based insights into systemic training may offer a more nuanced approach to changing control strategies.

Furthermore, the context of divorce prevention is often influenced by broader cultural and spiritual factors. For many individuals, religion and spirituality play a pivotal role in maintaining marital commitment and providing a framework for conflict resolution (22). From a cultural perspective, conceptualizing divorce prevention through specific religious lenses, such as an Islamic perspective, offers tailored strategies that resonate with the values and worldviews of specific populations (23). These factors must be considered alongside clinical interventions to provide a holistic approach to saving marriages.

The current study focuses on “control strategies” as a primary variable. Control strategies are the behavioral manifestations of how individuals attempt to manage their environment and their partners during conflict. In women desiring divorce, these strategies often shift from adaptive (problem-solving, negotiation) to maladaptive (coercion, withdrawal, manipulation) as the relationship deteriorates. While structural systemic training (SFT) directly targets the organizational patterns that facilitate these behaviors, attachment-based systemic training (ABST) targets the underlying emotional security that drives the need for control. Given that structural models emphasize the re-establishment of functional boundaries and hierarchies (3), they are theorized to provide the necessary “scaffolding” for behavioral change. On the other hand, focusing on attachment patterns addresses the “hostile attributions” that often trigger maladaptive control (21).

Comparing these two approaches is essential for clinical efficiency. If structural systemic training can effectively modify control strategies by simply reorganizing the family’s transactional rules, it may offer a more direct route to conflict reduction. Conversely, if attachment-based training provides a deeper, more lasting shift in the internal drivers of control, it may be the preferred method for long-term stability. The necessity of such comparative research is underscored by the ongoing need for evidence-based interventions in the field of systemic therapy (20). By specifically examining a population of women who have already expressed a desire for divorce, this study targets individuals at a critical juncture where the choice of intervention could determine the future of the family system.

In conclusion, the desire for divorce is a multifaceted issue involving systemic organization, power imbalances, communication breakdowns, and attachment-related distress. While structural family therapy has a long-standing history of addressing these organizational failures (3, 12), the integration of attachment-based perspectives and the comparison with other systemic models like strategic or Bowenian approaches continues to refine our therapeutic toolkit (16, 18). The role of control strategies, as both a psychological and systemic variable, remains a pivotal point of intervention. Whether through restructuring boundaries (10) or addressing the power asymmetries that complicate early divorce interventions (8), the goal remains the stabilization of the relationship and the prevention of the psychological damage associated with family dissolution (1).

The aim of this study is to compare the effectiveness of attachment-based systemic training and structural systemic training on the control strategies of women desiring divorce.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study utilized an experimental research method with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design (conducted one month after the post-test) including an equal control group. This design was selected because the present study sought to examine the changes resulting from the implementation of structural systemic training on the control strategies of married women with a desire for divorce. The statistical population for this study consisted of all women with a desire for divorce who visited counseling centers in the spring and summer of 2025.

The sample consisted of 40 women selected from an initial pool of 73 who had volunteered to participate in the course after seeing advertisements in counseling centers. These participants were selected via convenience sampling based on inclusion and exclusion criteria and were randomly assigned to either the experimental group or the control group. The inclusion criteria were as follows: age range of 28 to 45 years, married for at least one year, currently cohabiting, expressing a desire for divorce in the initial interview, and the absence of severe psychiatric disorders (as assessed by the trainer during an initial interview). The exclusion criteria included: absence from more than two sessions, inability to comply with the course rules, failure to complete worksheets, and a desire to withdraw from the training course.

To conduct the research, after obtaining the necessary permits and ethical clearance from the university, advertisements for the course were distributed in family counseling centers. Subsequently, 40 participants were selected from among the women who identified themselves as having a desire for divorce based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. They were then assigned to the structural systemic training group and the control group. Following assignment, the subjects underwent a pre-test. While the control group was placed on a waitlist, all subjects were re-evaluated using the research instruments at the end of the course and again 45 days after the completion of the training.

Data Collection

Control Strategies Questionnaire: This questionnaire consists of 26 items, and its construction, validation, and reliability were established by Bahrami and Yousefi (2017). The items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” Scoring is direct for all items, meaning the

highest score is assigned to “Strongly Agree” and the lowest score to “Strongly Disagree.” This questionnaire was designed to measure methods of controlling others and consists of two subscales: adaptive control and maladaptive control. The scale does not provide a total score. Bahrami reported the internal consistency for each of these subscales to be above .70. They also reported the convergent validity of maladaptive control to be positive and significant with triangulation and desire for divorce, and the divergent validity of adaptive control to be positive and significant with triangulation and desire for divorce. Furthermore, the construct validity of each subscale was confirmed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). In the present study, the internal consistency for each subscale was found to be above .80. It should be noted that the internal consistency was re-examined in this study and yielded a value of .89.

Intervention

The structural systemic training protocol utilized in this study was adapted from the work of Ashouri and Monshi (2020) and conducted over eight sessions. The first session focused on group introductions, outlining session objectives, introducing the therapeutic approach, and defining the concept of marital conflict, with homework requiring participants to document their primary conflicts and expectations. In the second session, the previous homework was reviewed, communication and family subsystems were defined, and the dominant status of the participants’ families was analyzed; the homework involved practicing communication skills and recording the outcomes. The third session provided feedback and training in family therapy techniques, including joining, mimesis, and reenactment, followed by practical exercises and homework to note the effects of these techniques on daily life. The fourth session addressed common transactional patterns and the triangles formed around family problems, with homework focusing on listing expectations from the spouse and proposing strategies for mutual cooperation. The fifth session was dedicated to family restructuring and change, exploring strategies for systemic modification and identifying personal triggers for emotional reactions. In the sixth session, the balance between the marital relationship and relationships with the family of origin was examined, and participants were tasked with documenting instances where family-of-origin closeness led to marital distance. The seventh session involved discussing family dynamics regarding relatives and friends, with homework aimed at finding a balance between in-law relationships and mutual friendships. Finally, the eighth session addressed sexual issues, specifically the timing and quality of intimacy, concluding with a task for participants to negotiate these issues with their spouses and implement their agreements.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this research was performed at both descriptive and inferential levels. At the descriptive level, mean and standard deviation were utilized, while the inferential statistics section employed repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA). The statistical analysis tool used was SPSS software, version 22.

Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages for control strategies across the research groups.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of control strategies for research groups across three time intervals

Variable/Time	Structural Systemic (Mean)	Structural Systemic (SD)	Control Group (Mean)	Control Group (SD)
Maladaptive Control				
Pre-test	56.20	3.25	59.80	3.66
Post-test	44.93	5.37	58.60	3.68
Follow-up	45.60	4.28	56.33	6.69
Adaptive Control				
Pre-test	51.86	2.03	54.40	3.22
Post-test	57.46	2.26	57.33	2.79
Follow-up	54.13	3.83	54.44	3.74

As shown in Table 1, in the variables of adaptive and maladaptive control strategies, the experimental groups (attachment-based systemic training and structural systemic training) showed changes in the post-test and follow-up stages compared to the control group. Table 3 presents the results of the Shapiro-Wilk test (for normality of distribution), Levene's test (homogeneity of variance), Box's M test (homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices), and Mauchly's test of sphericity for the dimensions of control strategies.

Table 2. Results of Shapiro-Wilk, Levene, Box's M, and Mauchly's tests for dimensions of control strategies

Variable	Test	Shapiro-Wilk (Sig.)	Levene (Sig.)	Box's M (Sig.)	Mauchly (Sig.)
Maladaptive	Pre-test	.781	.142	.378	.051
	Post-test	.803	.233		
	Follow-up	.819	.456		
Adaptive	Pre-test	.815	.546	.678	.006
	Post-test	.833	.809		
	Follow-up	.903	.469		

As observed in Table 2, control strategies across all three stages (pre-test, post-test, and follow-up) follow a normal distribution ($p > .05$) and demonstrate equality of error variances ($p > .05$). The difference in variance-covariance matrices (via Box's M test) was also non-significant ($p > .05$). However, Mauchly's test was significant, indicating that the assumption of sphericity was violated. Therefore, due to the violation of the sphericity assumption, Greenhouse-Geisser statistics are reported in the final analysis tables. Table 4 presents the results of the repeated measures analysis of variance.

Table 3. Results of Repeated Measures ANOVA for Control Strategies

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power
Maladaptive							
Time	1672.45	1.74	956.73	170.80	.000	.803	1.00
Time $\times$ Group	447.630	3.49	128.03	22.85	.000	.521	1.00
Error (Time)	411.24	73.41	5.60				
Group (Between)	2043.68	2	1017.34	10.82	.000	.340	.986
Adaptive							
Time	1291.43	1.63	789.99	579.21	.000	.932	1.00
Time $\times$ Group	480.91	3.27	147.09	107.84	.000	.837	1.00
Error (Time)	93.64	74.46	1.25				
Group (Between)	579.39	2	289.69	13.840	.000	.997	1.00

As observed in Table 3 for the maladaptive control strategy, the within-group effect for the interaction of Time $\times$ Group ($F = 22.85, df = 3.49, p < .000$) indicates a significant difference between groups over time. This result shows that the interaction of time and the independent variable explains 52.1% of the variance in

mean differences between the treatment and control groups for maladaptive control, with an observed power of 100%. Furthermore, as seen in the between-group effects section of Table 4, there is a significant difference in the group factor ($p < .000$), indicating that the training interventions were effective on control strategies compared to the control group ($F = 10.82, df = 2.00, p < .000$).

As observed in Table 3 for the adaptive control strategy, the within-group effect shows a significant difference between the three research groups regarding the interaction of Time $\times$ Group ($F = 107.84, df = 3.27, p < .000$). This result indicates that the interaction of time and the independent variable (one of the training methods) explains 83.7% of the variance in mean differences between the treatment and control groups for adaptive control, with an observed power of 100%. Additionally, the between-group effects section shows a significant difference in the group factor ($p < .000$), confirming the effectiveness of the training compared to the control group ($F = 13.840, df = 2.00, p < .000$). Table 5 presents the results of the Bonferroni post-hoc test for the pairwise comparison of the three experimental groups and the control group regarding control strategies.

Table 4. Results of Bonferroni Post-hoc Test for Pairwise Comparison of Groups in Control Strategies

Variable	Stage	Group (I)	Group (J)	Mean Diff (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Maladaptive	Pre-test	Attachment-Based	Structural	3.00	1.58	.065
		Attachment-Based	Control	2.80	1.58	.084
		Structural	Control	-0.20	1.58	.900
	Post-test	Attachment-Based	Structural	-1.66	1.79	.357
		Attachment-Based	Control	-7.60	1.79	.000
		Structural	Control	-5.93	1.79	.002
	Follow-up	Attachment-Based	Structural	-2.20	2.35	.356
		Attachment-Based	Control	-8.66	2.35	.001
		Structural	Control	-6.46	2.35	.009
Adaptive	Pre-test	Attachment-Based	Structural	-7.26	.915	.000
		Attachment-Based	Control	-6.93	.915	.000
		Structural	Control	0.33	.915	.000
	Post-test	Attachment-Based	Structural	-3.60	1.03	.001
		Attachment-Based	Control	6.40	1.03	.001
		Structural	Control	6.40	1.03	.001
	Follow-up	Attachment-Based	Structural	-2.93	1.08	.010
		Attachment-Based	Control	2.80	1.08	.010
		Structural	Control	5.73	1.08	.000

The post-hoc test results indicate that in the post-test and follow-up stages, there is a significant difference between the training groups and the control group in the mean scores of maladaptive control strategies, suggesting both methods were effective. No significant difference was found between the two training methods for maladaptive control; however, the structural systemic method was found to be more effective regarding adaptive control strategies.

Discussion and Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to evaluate and compare the effectiveness of structural systemic training and attachment-based systemic training on the control strategies—specifically adaptive and maladaptive dimensions—among women experiencing a desire for divorce. The statistical analysis, utilizing repeated measures ANOVA and Bonferroni post-hoc tests, revealed that both intervention modalities

significantly improved control strategies compared to the control group. Specifically, both training programs led to a significant decrease in the use of maladaptive control strategies (such as coercion, manipulation, and emotional withdrawal) and a significant increase in adaptive control strategies (such as negotiation, problem-solving, and assertive communication). These gains were maintained at the 45-day follow-up, suggesting that systemic interventions provide relatively stable behavioral shifts. Notably, while both methods were effective, the structural systemic training demonstrated a statistically superior impact on the enhancement of adaptive control strategies compared to the attachment-based approach.

The effectiveness of structural systemic training on improving control strategies aligns with the foundational principles of structural family therapy, which emphasizes the reorganization of the family's transactional patterns to promote healthier functioning (3). In this study, by focusing on boundaries, hierarchies, and subsystems, the structural intervention provided women with a clear framework for navigating marital conflict. This result is consistent with the findings of Ashouri and Monshi (2020), who demonstrated that structural family therapy significantly enhances marital satisfaction by clarifying roles and expectations within the family system (12). When women understand the structural “map” of their relationship, they are less likely to resort to chaotic or maladaptive control and more likely to utilize the structured, adaptive communication tools provided during training.

Furthermore, the significant reduction in maladaptive control strategies through structural intervention can be explained by the focus on dismantling dysfunctional “triangles.” In systemic theory, triangulation is often a maladaptive way to manage tension, and reducing it is crucial for marital stability (5, 6). The structural approach's emphasis on strengthening the marital subsystem and establishing firm boundaries against external interference—such as from the family of origin—directly reduces the need for the manipulative control tactics often associated with triangulated relationships (10, 18). By empowering women to communicate directly with their spouses rather than through third parties or emotional outbursts, the structural training replaced maladaptive habits with functional systemic interactions.

The finding that attachment-based systemic training also significantly improved control strategies is supported by research highlighting the link between attachment security and interpersonal behavior. Attachment-based interventions target the “hostile attributions” and internal working models that drive reactive, maladaptive control in times of relationship stress (21). By addressing the underlying fear of abandonment or engulfment, attachment-based training allows women to approach conflict with less emotional reactivity. This shift in internal processing facilitates a move away from outward anger and toward more regulated emotional expressions, which is a key component of improving family functioning and cognitive emotion regulation in couples seeking divorce (14, 15).

The superiority of the structural systemic method in promoting **adaptive control** warrants specific attention. Structural therapy is inherently “action-oriented” and focuses on the “here and now” of transactional sequences. While attachment-based models focus on the internal emotional state, structural models provide concrete behavioral “enactments” and restructuring techniques that directly model adaptive control (3, 13). This direct focus on the power structure and communication sequences likely accounts for the greater gains in adaptive strategies. As noted by Young and Seedall (2024), addressing power dynamics is central to systemic therapy; structural interventions provide a pragmatic pathway for women to reclaim a

sense of agency (adaptive control) without resorting to the coercive tactics that often characterize power asymmetries in distressed marriages (7, 8).

The results regarding maladaptive control, where no significant difference was found between the two training methods, suggest that both organizational restructuring and emotional/attachment processing are equally potent in inhibiting negative behaviors. This indicates that whether a therapist chooses to focus on the external structure of the relationship (17) or the internal emotional schemas (14), the result is a reduction in the toxic control tactics that drive couples toward divorce. This is consistent with the idea that various systemic interventions, from strategic-solution-focused to emotion-focused models, can effectively recover intimacy and reduce conflict by breaking the cycle of maladaptive interactions (19).

The stability of these results at the follow-up stage underscores the robustness of systemic interventions. Unlike purely individualistic approaches, systemic training alters the “rules of the game” within the relationship. By changing the communication patterns and boundary dynamics, these interventions create a new equilibrium that is more resistant to the stressors that lead to divorce tendency (4, 5). This is particularly important given the profound psychological damage that parental divorce can inflict on children, making the sustained prevention of marital collapse a high-priority clinical goal (1).

Finally, the context of these results within the broader socio-cultural framework cannot be ignored. The effectiveness of these interventions may be bolstered when they align with the individual’s broader belief systems. In many contexts, the role of religion and spirituality acts as a protective factor in divorce prevention, providing a moral and emotional foundation that supports the systemic changes proposed in therapy (22, 23). By integrating structural and attachment-based techniques, therapists can provide women with the psychological and systemic tools necessary to navigate marital distress, effectively moving them from a state of reactive maladaptive control to one of proactive, adaptive relational management. The evidence from this study strongly supports the use of systemic training as a primary intervention for women at the precipice of divorce, offering a clear pathway toward relationship stabilization and individual empowerment.

Regarding limitations, the present study focused exclusively on women desiring divorce, which limits the generalizability of the findings to men or to couples who are collectively seeking therapy. The use of convenience sampling from specific counseling centers in Isfahan may also introduce selection bias, as the participants were motivated enough to seek help or volunteer for a study. Furthermore, the follow-up period was limited to 45 days, which, while providing an indication of short-term stability, does not account for the long-term sustainability of these behavioral changes over several years. The reliance on self-report measures for control strategies also introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, where participants might over-report adaptive behaviors and under-report maladaptive ones to please the researchers.

Future research should aim to include both spouses in the training process to observe the dyadic effects of structural and attachment-based interventions on control strategies. Longitudinal studies with follow-up periods of six months to one year would be beneficial in determining if the superiority of the structural approach for adaptive control persists over time. Additionally, researchers could employ observational methods or spouse-report measures to triangulate the self-report data and provide a more objective assessment of behavioral changes. Comparative studies across different cultural and socioeconomic

backgrounds would also help determine the cross-cultural validity of these systemic training protocols, potentially incorporating religious or spiritual variables as moderators.

For clinical practice, these findings suggest that practitioners working with high-conflict women should prioritize structural systemic techniques—such as boundary setting and hierarchy restructuring—to rapidly build adaptive control skills. Given that both training methods were effective in reducing maladaptive behaviors, therapists might consider an integrative approach that starts with structural interventions to stabilize the relationship's organization, followed by attachment-based work to deepen emotional security. Counselors in divorce-prevention centers should be specifically trained in these systemic protocols, as they offer concrete tools that go beyond simple vent-based therapy. Furthermore, providing these interventions in a group format, as done in this study, offers a cost-effective and supportive environment for women to practice new relational strategies with peers facing similar challenges.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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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