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Important Factors in Marital Success and Satisfaction: Marriage Counselors' Perspectives

Bradley Vanover

St. Catherine University, bradley.vanover@hotmail.com

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Important Factors in Marital Success and Satisfaction: Marriage Counselors'
Perspectives

by

Bradley R. Vanover B.A.; M.B.A.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

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Committee Members:

Michael G. Chovanec, Ph.D., (Chair)

Sarah D. Berge, MA

Gretchen Scheffel, LISW

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation

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Abstract

This report presents the findings from a study which was conducted to examine what professional marriage counselors believe to be the key factors that affect marital success and satisfaction. A review of the literature provided the researcher with knowledge about the existing beliefs in the field of study. From there, questions were formulated and submitted to a committee for approval and a sample of seven professional marriage counselors were interviewed. The three main factors found from the study were the presence of external support, effective communication, and quality time spent together by the individuals in the marriage. Limitations of the study and implications for the field of Social Work are discussed.

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Perspectives

Over the past 50 years the rate of divorce in America has reached historical heights. According to Divorce Source (2015), people marrying for the first time have a lifetime divorce rate of 40 percent. Divorce is even more prevalent for second and third marriages – reported at 60 and 70 percent respectively. But why is this problematic? Research suggests the impact of divorce has serious implications for both individuals and society. Therefore, this issue is particularly relevant for social workers – whose mission is to enhance the wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2015).

Background

Divorce impacts society. There are costs to society as a result of divorce. A divorce can cause an individual to lose someone who had been one of their biggest supports and possibly create mental difficulties in the adjustment period. Derichs (2014) talks about the emotional costs of divorce on the individuals. Derichs (2014) writes “most people have periods of depression, sadness, anger, and fatigue around the loss of their relationship”. Divorces are also financially costly to the individuals and could lead to an inability to support themselves. According to Meyer (2015), “the average cost of divorce in the United States is \$15,000”. The resulting cost to society could be an increased number of individuals relying on welfare, which tends to create either higher taxes, or a larger budget deficit. This in turn could lead to cuts that would affect the quality of other programs. In fact, according to Fagan and Rector (2000), “almost 50 percent of the parents with children that are going through a divorce move into poverty after the divorce.” The Alexander House (2014) notes that each divorce costs taxpayers approximately \$25,000-

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\$30,000, and divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing costs taxpayers at least \$112 billion annually.

Furthermore, divorce impacts children. Children of divorce are more likely to engage in substance use and suffer from emotional and behavioral related disorders (Fagan & Rector, 2000). Similarly, research suggests these children are also at greater risk for lower academic achievement and higher involvement in conduct related matters. According to Bloem (2013), there are a variety of negative effects of divorce on children. These effects include: emotional pain and suffering, feeling insecure, anxiety, lower self-esteem, aggressiveness, higher levels of anger, depression, poorer social skills, higher future divorce rates, and learning problems.

Above all else, divorce affects the very individuals who are involved. Individuals who are divorced are at greater risk for poverty (especially women and children), psychological, economic and social stressors (Civitas, 2004). People who are divorced suffer higher rates of mortality, unhappiness and financial burden compared to their married counterparts. In fact, according to Alexander House (2014), 40 percent of married individuals reported being very happy with their lives, in contrast to only 18 percent of divorced individuals. Corroborating this finding, Waite, Luo, and Levin (2009) found that the dissolution of a happy marriage had a negative effect on an individual's psychological well-being. Dush, Taylor, and Kroeger (2008) also found that individuals with medium and high levels of marital satisfaction report higher levels of life satisfaction and less depressive symptoms. Finally, Choi and Marks (2013), using a study with the sample size of 1,849, found that increased marital satisfaction led to increases in self-reported health and lower levels of functional impairment.

Statement of problem

With rising divorce rates and lower levels of marital satisfaction, effects are noticed throughout the society as a whole and on individuals, in particular, who receive lower levels of support. This reduced level of support could affect the quality of life as well as the individual's ability to support themselves and the rest of their family. Also, with the lack of support, there could be damages to the individual's psychological well-being. This psychological damage, in turn, leads to an increase in the importance for social workers, since part of a social worker's goal is to assist their clients in developing and maintaining a higher quality of life and the maintenance of a healthy state of mind (NASW, 2015).

Significance of Studying Topic

This study has significance for many populations. One of the main implications for social work is what characteristics or factors lead to a higher chance of marital success. This allows social workers who are providing couples counseling and especially pre-marital counseling the ability to narrow down their focus to these factors which will have the greatest impact. This study will also have significance for the couples who are going through a divorce, the children of the divorcing couple, and the entire community in that the findings of this study will allow therapists to employ more effective interventions.

Purpose of study

This study will examine what factors might contribute to marital success and satisfaction in order to get a better understanding of the issues that might be leading these marriages to end in divorce. The question this study will look to answer is: what are the key factors affecting marital success and satisfaction, specifically as seen by marriage counselors, who are the professionals

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who work most intimately with this population. This study will attempt to answer this question by interviewing professional marriage counselors.

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to determine the importance of marital success and the factors that play a role in marital success. This literature review will examine research projects that have been conducted on this subject in the past. The review will cover general factors that could impact marital success and satisfaction, and then move on to examine more specific factors whose effects on marital success and satisfaction have been researched independently. This section will be organized under the following headers: general factors, interactional styles, age at marriage, use of mindfulness techniques, sexuality, premarital cohabitation, time spent together, and partner support.

The existing research has several holes that need to be noted in order to fully keep it in perspective. First, the research that was looked at was limited in the fact that it only accounts for married couples, and doesn't consider couples that are committed to each other but not legally married. Another area that was missed and could lead to bias in the results is that same-sex couples were not included in the research, as they have just recently been granted the right to marry and therefore were not legally married at the time of the research. This study will attempt to include the same-sex couples by asking the marriage counselors to consider the domestic partnerships they have worked with in the past in their responses. The researcher in this study chose to interview marriage therapists as they have the most direct in-person experience working with married couples and the most applicable education on the subject area.

Overview of General Factors on Marital Success and Satisfaction

With the understanding that dissolutions of happy marriages may have negative effects on the individual's psychological well-being, it is important to look at what different factors

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might potentially impact marital success and satisfaction. One study that looked into the key factors for marital success and satisfaction was performed by Billingsley, Lim, Caron, Harris, and Canada (2005). In order to look into what factors helped build strong relationships, Billingsley et al. researched and performed a literature review on over 15 previous studies that had been conducted on long-term marriages between the years 1953 and 2004. Through their analyses, they found nine themes that were common throughout. These themes were: “permanence of relationship, love, sex, compatibility in personality, common interests, communication, decision-making, intimacy, and religion” (Billingsley et al., 2005, p.7). This finding allows us to see what factors have been found in past studies that have been said to impact marital success. One limitation with this study is that most of the research examined was at least twenty years old so there is limited information on whether these factors are still currently impacting marriages or if any new factors have arisen recently.

There are several factors that were found to be risk factors for divorce. Hawkins, Willoughby, and Doherty (2012) asked 886 divorcing individuals the reasons for divorcing and examined whether the reasons had any association with their opinions on the possibility of reconciliation. The top six reasons for divorce in their survey were each listed by at least 30 percent of the respondents. These six reasons were growing apart (55%), not able to talk to each other (53%), how my spouse handles money (40%), infidelity (37%), personal problems of my spouse (37%), and not getting enough attention (34%). They found that not getting enough attention was the only reason for divorce that had a positive correlation to the desire for reconciliation. Growing apart and differences in tastes were found to have a negative relationship with the desire for reconciliation. Lu (2006) conducted a study designed to look into factors that increased the risk that individuals in stable, happy marriages would end up divorcing. Lu (2006)

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found that education, personal income, self-esteem, health problems, the cohabitation history, and perceived consequences of separation are found to be significantly associated with marital stability. Lu (2006) also found that compared to the other factors, perceptions of the consequences of divorcing had a significant impact on marital stability. In order to come to this conclusion, Lu (2006) examined data from 4,588 individuals who participated in the National Survey of Family Households.

As second marriages divorce at a higher rate than first marriages, it could be useful to see whether there are different factors affecting marital success and satisfaction within first and second marriages. Mirecki, Chou, Elliot, and Schneider (2013) ran a study to examine whether there were differences surrounding the factors that affect marital satisfaction between first and second marriages. This study provides information that implies that those who are in their first marriages are more likely to report higher levels of marital satisfaction than those in their second marriages but also that education levels are influential to the level of marital satisfaction in second marriages. Their sample size was 1,067, with 352 individuals in their first marriage and 715 individuals in their second marriages. They found that participants in first marriages reported significantly higher levels of marital satisfaction than those who were in their second marriages. Increased levels of education increased marital satisfaction in the second marriages but had no significant impact on the first marriages. Finally, those couples in counseling, whether in their first or second marriages, reported lower marital satisfaction than those who were not in counseling. This implies that people were more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction in their first marriages than in second marriages. Also, while an individual's level of education was not shown to impact those in their first marriage, it was seen that, in second marriages, an individual with a higher level of education would have higher levels of marital satisfaction than

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an individual with lower levels of education. Those in counseling, for either their first or second marriage, would understandably report lower levels of marital satisfaction as couples don't normally go to counseling unless there are issues in their relationship.

Interactional Styles

Conflict is going to be present in every relationship. Therefore, it is important to know whether the way a couple interacts during conflict has an impact on marital success and satisfaction. Gottman (1999) has found that, along with specific interactional styles, the way a couple manages conflict is important for marital success and satisfaction. According to Gottman, there are four behaviors that are most corrosive to a happy and successful marriage. Gottman calls these four behaviors the "four horsemen". These four horsemen are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Gottman writes that "criticism is any statement that implies that there is something globally wrong with one's partner" (1999, p.41). Defensiveness is defined as "any attempt to defend oneself from a perceived attack" (Gottman, 1999, p.44). Gottman (1999, p.45) says that "contempt is any statement or nonverbal behavior that puts oneself on a higher plane than one's partner". Lastly, "stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the conversation" (Gottman, 1999, p.46). According to Gottman, contempt is not seen in the more successful and satisfied marriages, but the other three horsemen are present, though at a much lower rate than one would find in less successful or satisfied marriages.

With conflict a part of every relationship, the impact of the use of humor during conflict on marital success and satisfaction was evaluated. Driver and Gottman (2004) looked into the effects that the use of humor and affection can have in a conflict. They found that the ability to use humor and affection might be able to lead to higher marital satisfaction scores than if there

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was no humor or affection during conflict. Driver and Gottman used observational methods to observe 49 couples in a ten minute dinnertime conversation and a fifteen minute conflict discussion. They found that a husband's playfulness was significantly related to the couple's humor and found evidence supporting the hypothesis that positive everyday moments could contribute to the couple's ability to use humor and affection in conflict discussions.

Knowing how interaction styles can impact marital success and satisfaction, would it be possible to predict marital happiness and stability based on the newlywed's interactions with each other? Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson (1998) researched whether one could predict marital happiness and stability based on newlywed's interactions with each other. They found that they were able to predict divorce and stability 83 percent of the time and satisfaction 80 percent of the time. Gottman et. al. ran this study with 130 newlywed couples. They found support for five factors able to predict divorce. The first factor they found was if the husband would reject his wife's influence. The second factor was if the wife would negatively start up arguments. The third factor discussed was if husbands failed to de-escalate the situation when wives showed negative affect at low-level intensity. The fourth factor was if the wives failed to de-escalate situations where there was high-level intensity of negative affect by the husbands. The fifth, and final, factor discussed was a lack of physiological soothing of the husbands. They wrote that they "found evidence that replicated the Gottman findings that contempt, belligerence, and defensiveness were the destructive patterns during conflict resolution" (Gottman et. al., 1998, p.17). The Gottman findings that were able to be replicated are discussed in Gottman's books *What Predicts Divorce?* and *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. These findings show that the ability to interact and respond appropriately during conflict plays a large part in the overall stability and satisfaction of marriages.

Age at Marriage and Marital Success

When looking at four studies that examined the types of effects age at marriage has on marital success, a common theme that was found was that there was a relationship between the age at marriage and the success rates of those marriages up to a certain point. These studies consistently found that positive effects from waiting to get married were observed up until the mid-to-late twenties at which point the effects seemed to level off. One of the first studies that was looked at was a study performed by Glenn, Uecker, and Love Jr. (2010). This study looked at five different American data sets, with a combined sample size of 20,535, and compared marital success based on marital survival and marital quality between couples who married later compared to couples who married earlier. This study found that later marriage led to increased marital survival but only statistically significant until the mid-twenties. According to Glenn, Uecker, and Love Jr. (2010) the data sets that were examined were the American General Social Surveys, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative Baseline Survey, the Texas Healthy Marriage Initiative Baseline Survey, the National Fatherhood Initiative National Marriage Survey, and the National Fatherhood Initiative 25-State Marriage Survey. Lampard (2013) examined the relationship between the age at marriage and the risk of divorce for couples in England and Wales. Lampard used data gathered from 5,422,453 marriages. Lampard found that the age at marriage has an effect on the divorce rate, but most of the effect comes from relative age at marriage. Lampard used direct standardization and logistic regression analyses and applied them to published marriage and divorce data for 1974-1994 in England and Wales. Relative age at marriage, in Lampard's research, was seen as "being defined with reference to the proportion of ages at marriage that are lower than a specified age" (2013). Lampard also found that the effects that increased age at marriage has on later marriages, meaning those marriages that occur after

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the individuals are over age thirty, are outweighed by the negative effects that absolute age at marriage at later times has on the marriage. Lehrer (2008) looked at whether the effects that age at marriage has on the success of the marriage diminish as one gets older. Lehrer analyzed the data from cycles five and six from the National Surveys of Family Growth to obtain the information for her study. The overall sample size for this study was 6,850. Lehrer found that increased age at marriage has a strong effect on the success of the marriage until the late twenties and then the effects tend to level off as they are counterbalanced by the increased likelihood of settling for bad matches. Lehrer and Chen (2013) performed another study to further examine the likelihood of settling for bad matches and the effects that had on the marriage. Lehrer and Chen found that women who marry in their late twenties or after disproportionately make matches that would normally be unexpected but the marriages were successful and stable. In order to perform their study, they analyzed the data from non-Hispanic White women from the 2006-2010 National Surveys of Family Growth. Lehrer and Chen then tested competing hypotheses to explain this and found that the destabilizing effects of unconventional matches were still present but were dwarfed by stabilizing forces seen from higher levels of education and older ages.

Mindfulness and Marital Satisfaction

The use of mindfulness techniques has been shown to potentially impact marital success and satisfaction. Burpee and Langer (2005) designed a study to look into the relationships between mindfulness, marital satisfaction, and perceived partner similarity. They found evidence supporting the idea that the use of mindfulness techniques has a positive impact on overall marital success and satisfaction. In order to evaluate this, they had 95 individuals fill out a questionnaire. This questionnaire, in addition to collecting demographic information, asked the subjects 14 questions regarding overall life satisfaction, of which five pertained to marital

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satisfaction, and one question on the perceived similarity between the subject and their spouse. The subjects were then instructed to fill out a mindfulness scale, which covered the four main areas of mindfulness: “novelty seeking, novelty producing, flexibility, and engagement” (Burpee & Langer, 2005). After collecting the information, Burpee and Langer ran regression analyses and correlations to determine whether there exists a relationship between the factors. Burpee and Langer found that there was a significant, positive relationship between mindfulness and marital satisfaction, while there was no relationship between marital satisfaction and the perceived similarity of one’s partner. Burpee and Langer said that they found that mindfulness accounted for “roughly 8% of overall marital satisfaction” (2005). While not explicitly stated in the research, it might be safe to assume that an increased use of mindfulness, to a certain degree, would lead to a higher level of marital satisfaction.

Sexuality and Marital Success and Satisfaction

Sexuality is seen as a key part of a couple’s relationship, so it would be important to know what kind of impact it would have on marital success and satisfaction. The two aspects of sexuality are pre-marital sexuality and marital sexuality. One study by Legkauskas and Stankevičienė (2009) examined the effects that premarital sex has on marital satisfaction for Lithuanian couples. In order to conduct this study, they used a convenience sampling of 41 middle-age couples from Lithuania. This study examined potential links between marital satisfaction and the age when the individual first had sex, whether the individuals had experienced premarital intercourse, the number of partners the individual had had before marriage, and whether the individuals had lived together before marriage. The researchers did not find evidence supporting a relationship between premarital sex and marital satisfaction. They showed that having more premarital partners tended to decrease marital satisfaction for both men

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and women. For men, they found that cohabitation led to lower marital satisfaction while younger age at first sexual experience led to lower marital satisfaction for the women. In order to measure marital satisfaction, Legkauskas and Stankevičienė (2009) created a 16 item Marital Satisfaction Scale and had the couples complete it. They also had the subjects fill out a questionnaire on their previous sexual experiences. It is important when looking at these results to remember that the individuals were from a different country and culture, but they still provide some insight into the potential effects.

Another study looked at the effects that marital sexuality has on the likelihood of marital disruption. This study was designed and run by Dzara (2010). Dzara discovered that there were limited effects found on the likelihood of marital disruption from marital sexuality. Dzara used panel data from the Marriage Matters Panel Survey of Newlywed Couples, 1998-2004, to examine whether the frequency of, satisfaction with, and agreement on marital sexual interaction early in the marriage has any effect on the likelihood that the couple would experience a marital disruption. The sample for this study was 1310 couples living in Louisiana. While these findings provide little insight into how important sexuality is on the marriage, it could imply that there are more important factors to consider when looking into how to keep marriages together.

Premarital Cohabitation and Marital Success

Similar to sexuality, premarital cohabitation has been considered a factor that could impact marital success and satisfaction, so it is important to evaluate the effects it might have. Jose, O'Leary, and Moyer (2010) conducted a study that examined the effects that premarital cohabitation could have on marital stability and quality. In order to study these effects, they used meta-analysis techniques on 20 articles. They found evidence that could imply that premarital

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cohabitation can have a negative impact on marital quality regardless of who the other individual is. They also found evidence that when considering the effects cohabitation would have on marital stability, it is important to know who they were cohabitated with, since there was no link found between cohabitation and marital stability if the person is cohabitating with their future spouse. Jose, O'Leary, and Moyer (2010) found that there was an overall negative relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital stability. However, they also found that when only looking at premarital cohabitation with the future spouse, there was no significant link between the cohabitation and marital stability. Jose, O'Leary, and Moyer found a negative relationship between premarital cohabitation on marital quality, whether the person cohabitated with their future spouse or with some other individual. One could conclude that when just looking at marital stability, it might make a difference who the person would be cohabitating with before marriage, but the identity of the premarital cohabitant doesn't matter when considering marital quality. As mentioned earlier, Legkauskas and Stankevičienė (2009) were also able to show that premarital cohabitation lowered marital satisfaction for the men in their study.

Together Time and Marital Satisfaction

It is expected that spending time together would be an important activity for couples, but what effect does spending time together have on overall marital satisfaction? Johnson and Anderson (2012) performed a study that looked at the relationship between marital confidence, time spent together, and marital satisfaction. In order to conduct their study, Johnson and Anderson collected data in three waves spread out at 18 month intervals on 610 newly married couples. They were able to find two key themes in their study. First, those with higher levels of marital confidence when they get married are more likely to spend more time together and have higher levels of marital satisfaction. Second, it can be reasonably assumed that couples that

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spend more time together will report higher levels of marital satisfaction than those who don't spend as much time together. The results of their study showed several key points. First, it showed that couples who had higher levels of confidence at the first point of data collection would have spent more time together at the second point of data collection. Second, it showed that those with greater amount of time spent together at the second point of data collection reported a higher level of marital satisfaction at the third and final point of data collection. Therefore, it is important for premarital counselors and marriage counselors to assess for the couples' confidence in their marriage and to recommend that couples make a point in spending quality time together to improve their marriage or increase the likelihood of higher marital satisfaction and success.

Partner Support

As discussed in the introduction, one consequence of divorces is the loss of a key source of support. Knowing this, what kind of effects does the presence of that partner support have on marital success and satisfaction? Lawrence, Bunde, Barry, Brock, Sullivan, Pasch, White, Dowd, and Adams (2008) performed a study on 275 married couples to compare the extent to which two sets of factors affected marital satisfaction. They found evidence that implies that husbands should try to provide more support without being solicited and wives' should try to solicit more support in order to try to increase marital satisfaction. Lawrence et. al wrote: "Whereas husbands' support provision (but not their support solicitation) predicted husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction, wives' support solicitation (but not their support provision) predicted both partners' marital satisfaction" (2008, p. 458). The first set of factors that was compared was the amount of support and the adequacy of the support. The second set of factors that was compared was support provision and support solicitation. Lawrence et. al. (2008) found that husbands and

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wives did not differ in their feelings towards support amount, but that husbands were more satisfied with the support adequacy than the wives were. For the husbands, the adequacy of the support received was found to be predictive of their marital satisfaction, while the amount received was not found to be predictive. For wives, both the amount and adequacy of support received were found to be predictive of their marital satisfaction. This finding implies that the adequacy of support was important for both, but the wives were affected more by the amount than husbands were. The husband's provision of support was found to be significantly predictive of both the husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction. The wives' positive solicitation of support was found to be predictive of the husbands' marital satisfaction. Both the wives' positive and negative solicitations of support were found to be predictive of the wives' marital satisfaction.

Attachment

One therapy model that is used in work with couples is the Emotion Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT), which is modeled around the Attachment theory. A couple of studies were examined to determine what type of effect an individual's attachment orientation would have on marital success and satisfaction. Mondor, McDuff, Lussier, and Wright (2011) performed a study that looked into the relationships between adult romantic attachment and marital satisfaction. For their study, they had a sample size of 172 distressed therapy-seeking couples and 56 non-distressed therapy-seeking couples used for comparison. Mondor, McDuff, Lussier, and Wright found that attachment avoidance was a characteristic of distressed couples. They also found that attachment orientations were relevant predictors of marital dissatisfaction in distressed couples and suggested that therapists assess the partners' attachment orientations to gain important information. Feeney (2002) used a sample of 193 married couples to examine the relationships between attachment, marital interaction, and relationship satisfaction. Feeney found that marital

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satisfaction could be predicted by reports of partner behavior and measures of attachment.

Feeney discussed that the relationship between attachment security and relationship satisfaction could be moderated by the individual's reports of their partner's behaviors. In other words, a partner's behaviors could lessen or enhance the relationship between relationship satisfaction and attachment security but not eliminate it all together.

Summary

Throughout the review of the previous studies, several key ideas were found. First, it was shown that a successful marriage can have a significant impact on one's psychological well-being. Gottman's ideas that communication styles and how the couple interacts being important to marital satisfaction was discussed. Other factors were discussed that could potentially affect the success and satisfaction of a marriage. Research that examined effects that the age at marriage has on the overall success of the marriage was discussed and it was seen that there is a general consensus that there is an age range where the success of the marriage increases until the effects level off. It was also found that the increased use of mindfulness techniques could lead to increased marital success and satisfaction. An individual's sexual experience before and during marriage was also discussed and, while there was no direct relationship between marital sexuality and marital success and satisfaction, several aspects of premarital sexuality for men and women were discovered to potentially have effects on overall marital success and satisfaction. Premarital cohabitation was found to have an impact on marital quality regardless of the cohabitant while the effects of cohabitation were limited on marital stability if the cohabitant was the eventual spouse. It was also seen that spending time together can impact the couple's overall marital satisfaction. Lastly, it was seen that the amount and type of support, as well as whether the support was provided or solicited, had impacts on overall marital satisfaction.

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Throughout the review of the literature, it was noted that most of the studies that had been run were run either in the quantitative method or by way of systematic review. It was also noted that most of the research centered around individualistic factors, while only a few looked into the effects that society could have on the couple. Therefore, this study will be conducted in a qualitative manner and will try to look at a wider range of viewpoints by examining the societal and communal factors as well as the individualistic factors.

Conceptual Framework Methodology

The purpose of this study is to attempt to identify the key factors that are impacting marital success and satisfaction. Licensed clinical social workers working as marriage counselors will only be successful if the social worker can understand the issues facing the couple and where those issues arise within the systems. Clinicians must be able to examine the different levels of the couple's system. This further examination will help the clinician to understand the experiences and processes each individual within the couple goes through and brings into the relationship. Without knowing the experiences and processes brought by each individual, the clinician will not be able to understand what is driving the individuals to act as they do. Limited understanding of the forces driving the behaviors and the systems within which the couple, and the individuals within the couple, operates could lead clinicians to choose wrong interventions and prevent them from serving their clients to the best of their ability. In order for clinicians to do their work well, there is a need for a framework to focus their work around. For this area of study, the ecological framework is an ideal framework to be utilized.

The ecological framework is a "broad, overarching paradigm or metatheory, bridging several fields of theory and research, and orienting practitioners and researchers to the importance of integrative, multilevel, and multidimensional approaches to person-environment relationships" (Kemp, 2009). According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), there are five levels of the ecological system: the micro-system, the meso-system, the exo-system, the macro-system, and the chrono-systems. For marriage counselors working with married couples, the most important levels to examine are the *micro-system*, the *meso-system*, and the *macro-system*.

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According to Oswalt (2008), the *microsystem* is the small, immediate system the individual is in. For the purposes of this research, the microsystem will be looking at the individuals within the couple and how they are with the couple itself as the system. For instance, an individual's sexuality or use of mindfulness might impact the couple as well as the stress on the couple might impact the individual's use of mindfulness or their sexuality. This shows an interplay between the individual and the system of the couple itself. For the marriage counselors, knowing how the two individuals interact with each other is important as the key goal for the clinician would be to increase satisfaction within the relationship for the individuals. Marriage counselors are told to focus on the relationship as the client, and by viewing the couple as the microsystem, they are examining the microsystem and can plan interventions to assist the individuals in the relationship with that specific system.

According to Sincero (2012), the *mesosystem* "involves the relationships between the microsystems in one's life". In this case, the mesosystem will be looking at the interaction processes between the couple and other systems around them, such as in-laws or work. It can be reasonably assumed that these systems, which have such impact on the individuals, could also impact the couple as a whole and lead to more issues with marital success and satisfaction. It could reasonably be expected that the quality of the interactions between the two individuals and the other systems around them would have a significant impact on the satisfaction within the relationship. For example, the working conditions of each spouse could affect the relationship via limiting the time they can spend together.

According to Sincero (2012), "the *macrosystem* setting is the actual culture of the individual". For this project, the macrosystem will be the various other environmental systems that interact with the couple. These influences could include different social classes, social

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policies regarding marriage, and any other areas the couple could and would be influenced by.

For example, the law allowing gay marriage affects many relationships in America.

By using the ecological framework, and specifically the systems theory, clinical social workers who perform couples counseling can better serve their clients who are undergoing relationship distress. The ecological framework goes hand in hand with what research has shown, namely that multiple different factors and areas of the couples' environment affect the success and satisfaction of their relationship. The lack of understanding how each different area and factor would play its part would leave the clinician missing an important category of information that might ultimately decide whether the therapy is successful or not. Therapy will be most efficient and effective if it brings change collaboratively to all areas of the couples' life that are in need of attention.

There will be one primary use of the ecological perspective in designing this research project. That use will be to assist in formulating the questions which will be asked during the interviews. The researcher, while formulating the questions, will keep this perspective in mind and strive to develop questions that will generate thoughts and conversations on how the different levels and systems affect the couple, and what effects need to be looked with regard to marital success and satisfaction.

Methods

Research Design

This research focused on what are some factors that could impact marital success and satisfaction. In order to narrow this broad topic down, this project examined the opinions of marriage therapists or couples counselors. The specific research question was what do marriage counselors believe to be the key factors affecting marital success and satisfaction.

In the past, there have been several studies that have looked into how specific factors affect marital success and satisfaction. While reviewing these studies, it was noted that most of the studies were largely either performed using a quantitative research design or a systematic review research design. With this mind, in conducting this study, a qualitative research design was selected. With this design, marriage therapists were selected and interviewed to determine what they believe to be the key factors that influence marital success and satisfaction. The qualitative design was chosen to get opinions on the causes. The qualitative design was also selected because most of the previous studies in the literature review were either quantitative or systematic reviews, so a qualitative study would provide a new and fresh perspective on the issues. Marriage therapists were selected as they have relevant education and they have personal experience working with couples who are going through challenges, so they might be able to provide a unique perspective on the issue. By interviewing marriage therapists, we would also be hearing from professionals who deal intimately with the issues surrounding marital success.

Sample

The sample for this study included marriage therapists who have had personal experience providing therapy to couples. This research project consisted of a sample of seven marriage

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counselors. These therapists were either Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists (LMFTs), Licensed Independent Clinical Social Workers (LICSWs), Licensed Psychologists (LP's), Doctoral Psychologists (Ph.D.'s), or Licensed Professional Clinical Counselors (LPCC's) who have at least one year of experience providing counseling to married couples. In order to obtain this sample, a mixed sampling method was used. This mixed sampling method consisted of snowball sampling methods and convenience sampling methods. Convenience sampling was used as it would be difficult to obtain a complete and exhaustive sampling frame. Therefore, the researcher used the ones available who would be willing to be interviewed. A snowball sampling method was used to gain further access to potential subjects by asking the potential subjects to potentially refer their associates or acquaintances to be subjects as well. This opened up another source of subjects that the researcher might not have had access to otherwise.

Protection of Human Subjects

This research proposal was reviewed and approved by the University of St. Catherine Institutional Review Board. This project did several things to ensure confidentiality for the subjects. The first thing that was done was to remove names and other identifying information from transcriptions. When names needed to be used for discussion the subjects were given fake names to further ensure that they remain confidential. An outside transcriber, who signed a transcriber confidentiality agreement, transcribed the interviews. The signed consent forms and interview transcriptions were stored in a locked container and the audio recordings were stored on a password-protected phone or laptop until June 8, 2016 at which point they were erased.

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The consent form and list of interview questions were distributed to potential participants to help them decide whether to participate or not. In addition, the consent form was reviewed and completed just prior to the interviews. See Appendix A for a copy of the consent form.

Instrument

The questions that were asked of the subject were developed using the topics discussed in the literature review and the conceptual framework. There were ten open ended questions, which were grouped according to the three systems of interest- micro, mezzo, and macro. Some examples of the demographic information collected were years working with the population, average number of clients seen per year, and education and licensure. The questions were reviewed by the research committee to ensure the quality of the questions and remove potential bias. A copy of the list of questions can be seen in Appendix B.

Data Collection

Data Collection was done using the following steps:

- 1) Each committee member identified 2-3 potential participants for the study and provided contact information to the researcher.
- 2) Researcher contacted each potential participant, informing them how he got their name and introducing his study using a protocol.
- 3) Researcher distributed questions and consent form so potential participant could review before making a decision to participate or not.
- 4) If interested, potential participants set up an interview with the researcher.
- 5) If the potential participant did not call within a week, the researcher made one follow-up contact to see if they were interested in participating.

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- 6) The interviews lasted between 15 and 60 minutes and were conducted at the participant's workplace or an alternate site agreed on by the researcher and participant.
- 7) The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.
- 8) Each participant was asked for an additional 2-3 names of potential participants and the data collection process was repeated until the researcher had conducted 7 interviews.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was based on a grounded theory methodology perspective, due to the raw data being “grounded” and representing the respondent's answers as closely as possible (Monette, Sullivan, DeJong, & Hilton, 2013). Data was assessed as the interviewer read over the transcriptions of the interviews verbatim. While analyzing the data, the researcher looked for emerging themes and examined what those themes showed to be the key factors for marital success and satisfaction.

Bias

In conducting research, it is important to be aware of one's own bias and how it might affect the project. In this case, the researcher's bias was his own set of expectations for what the key factors are for marital success and satisfaction. The researcher expected communication styles and level of support to be key factors. The researcher also had a limited amount of experience counseling couples during his internship, which could have affected his views and the formulation of the questions. In order to limit the effects that this bias had on the results of the study, the researcher had his list of questions be peer-reviewed, and reviewed by his committee to ensure accuracy, correct wording, and to remove as much bias as possible.

Findings

Sample

In order to obtain the sample for this study, 20 professional marriage counselors were invited to be interviewed. Out of these 20 invitations, seven professionals chose to participate in the study, for a response rate of 35 percent. Of the seven participants, five, or 71 percent, were male and two, or 29 percent, were female. Six of the seven participants had over five years of professional experience, with four of the six having more than ten years of experience. The one participant who had less than five years of experience had between three and four years of experience. Four of the professionals reported that they saw more than ten couples a year on average while the other three professionals reported seeing between four and six couples a year on average. Four of the seven participants had a doctoral level of education, although one of the three master's level participants is currently a doctoral candidate. Five of the seven participants were Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists, one was both a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker and a Doctor of Social Work, and the seventh was a Licensed Psychologist. On the whole, the sample that was obtained proved to have various backgrounds but all had high levels of education and high levels of experience in the topic area of this study. The interviews took place during the time period between January 6, 2016 and February 9, 2016.

Themes

Throughout the analysis of the interviews, nine themes were discovered, although with varied strengths. These themes were external support, communication, time spent together, forgiveness, respect, intentionality, empathy, compromise, and then factors that aren't present in

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healthy relationships. This section will examine these themes starting out with the strongest and then moving on to the weakest. Any quotes from the interviews will be placed in italics.

External support. One of the themes that was present in every interview was the importance of having external support for the marriage. Most of the responses came in response to the questions “What do you believe to be the common factors for a successful marriage?”, “Based on your experience, what kind of effects does societal support and approval have on marital success and satisfaction?”, and “Based on your experience, what kind of effect do you believe the in-laws have on marital success and satisfaction?” One professional said,

I think that what people don't realize is that when a mother or father-in-law or something bad mouths the spouse to the family member that they're harming the marriage and harming their relationship with their child. Because this child has chosen this person, and if you make them choose between part of the family and their spouse, you put them in a really bad bind. So, “How can I be helpful in supporting the marriage?” rather than “How can I undermine it?” Even if I wish my child had married somebody else or something, but, “OK, this is who you chose and unless they are being violent or something I am here to support it.” (Interview 2, p.7-8)

A second professional who was interviewed responded,

I think that that circle is an important thing to think about how it figures into your marriage in terms of balance. How much time are

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you spending with your family and your friends? How much are you letting them speak into or influence your marriage? Are they supporting your marriage? Are they supporting your spouse? Do they speak good things about your spouse? When you vent about your spouse do they join in? What kind of influence do they have? Are they speaking ill about their own marriages? What kind of influence do they have on you? Because that second circle I think is very influential on you not only in value systems but also in how you spend your time and your balance, too. (Interview 3, p.3)

The topic of social support appears in the sixth interview when the respondent responded,

One of the family factors I think is helpful is when you have a family that supports the relationship. And then community is the same. If the community supports the relationship, the community possesses resources and supports the family. When I say community, I'm going to extend it to more than just like your neighborhood or whatever. Bigger community is, you know, what state you live in, or what country you live in, what city you live in, and I think all of those factors play into your support because these entities are making decisions about married couples or people who have relationships all the time. (Interview 6, p.2)

Communication. Communication is the only other theme that was present in the responses of all seven subjects. The two questions which prompted these responses were “Can you define what you consider to be a healthy marriage?” and “What factors do you believe contribute to a successful marriage?” One respondent in discussing the importance of communication for a successful marriage said,

I think in healthy relationships people are able to express their totality of their thoughts or feelings, but having that expression doesn't always mean that your partner will agree with you, but will maybe you hear you out and understand you and respect where you're coming from even though they may not share the same beliefs and thoughts. (Interview 1, p.2)

Another respondent discussed communication in this way,

And communication, clear communication that is a balance of assertiveness, not aggressiveness but assertiveness, meaning that they know how to communicate what they want. Of course they know what they want and they know how to communicate it clearly to that person. And then they know how to work towards, not get what they want, but work towards what they want. That's what therapy is to me. And active listening. So the balance of assertiveness and active listening. Active listening is so important and so hard to do, but that is key in really being able to understand that person and it circles back to that respect. (Interview 4, p.2-3)

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A third respondent discussed communication when he said,

And I have a tendency to even explain to couples that I want you to be able to communicate effectively in your disagreements. How that is done may look different for couples because some couples are much more directed towards speaking softly, others speak more loudly and it's okay as long as there's not conflict behind the communication that is occurring. (Interview 7, p. 1-2)

Factors not present in healthy relationships. Six of the seven respondents in the study listed factors that are not seen in relationships that are healthy. These responses were mainly prompted by the questions “What factors do you believe interfere or block married couple’s ability to experience a successful marriage?” and “What factors do you believe contribute to a successful marriage?” As the first respondent said, *Sometimes the healthiness of a couple's relationship would be characterized by what's not there as well. It would be free from issues of addiction, abuse, infidelity. There is really no place for threat or coercion in a healthy relationship. (Interview 1, p.2)* The same respondent also said, *it is way easier to have a good relationship if you are emotionally stable, if you're not encumbered by a mental illness. (Interview 1, p.3)* A second respondent described entitlement and selfishness as being not seen in successful relationships by saying, *Individually I think their sense of entitlement or kind of the opposite of selflessness would be selfishness, which I think can kind of come or be kind of all wrapped up into this sense of hurt or entitlement. (Interview 3, p. 3)* Another respondent said, *the first thing that came to mind for me that blocks successful marriage is rigidity. (Interview 4, p. 4)* When discussing factors that hinders relationships, the fifth respondent said, *individually, obviously addictions and mental health problems... History of abuse of any kind. Abusive*

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neglect. (Interview 5, p. 3) The sixth respondent responded to what a hindering factor might be by saying, *I think the biggest factor is trauma.* (Interview 6, p. 2) The last respondent answered by saying, *Well I've seen mental health issues be a big factor in creating conflict within a marriage or blocking a successful marriage.* (Interview 7, p. 3)

Time spent together. The factor of time spent together appeared in five of the seven interviews. The responses came from the question “Based on your experience, what kind of effect do you see time spent together having on success and satisfaction of the marriage?” The third interview respondent said,

So I think it's very important that they set aside quality time to connect. To emotionally connect, to do fun stuff. Whether it's playing cards or having a dance party. Whatever's fun for them, they need to remember what it was like to be playful and have fun because the business of running a family together or running a house, that's stuff they're going to have to do regardless, that's part of marriage. But that's not spending time together. Don't even, “Well we spent all this time together.” No. That doesn't count. (Interview 3, p. 7)

During the fourth interview, the respondent said,

Couples need time together, and it's interesting that a number of couples that I've seen come in work opposite schedules... And I've seen with these couples how it's almost like you need to have, you know you can't live parallel lives... And what I see in a lot of

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couples, unless you have what I call touch points, you have to have points where you come together. Intentionally, maybe even not intentionally, but you have touch points. And whatever those touch points are I think are unique to each couple. Whether it's date night, or you just hang out on the couch together or you have sex together or you go out to eat or you cook a meal together or you go on walks, those touch points I think are critical to keeping the marriage intimate and close and connected. ... Whatever that looks like, finding that time together as a couple. (Interview 4, p. 6-7)

The sixth interview subject responded,

I think time together has a great impact on the success of a marriage, but I don't necessarily think that time together has to be physical time. I think if you have mental time together, you are thinking about the other person and you're including that other person in your decisions, you know that's also helpful. And I think that time together becomes more important when you spend time together in the midst of conflict because I think the thing that really exacerbates a relationship is when you're in conflict and then you isolate. That always makes things worse and before you know it, you're misinterpreting whatever the other person is saying or doing and then it just gets worse because the trust starts to deteriorate. So if you can find a way to stay connected or spend

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time together even when you're fighting, I think that's a very strong indicator of a successful relationship. (Interview 6, p. 3)

Forgiveness. The theme of forgiveness was present in three out of the seven interviews. The responses came to the question “Based on your experience, can you discuss what types of personal characteristics lead to more successful marriage and what personal characteristics lead to less successful marriages?” The second respondent answered this and talked about forgiveness by saying, *I think being willing to forgive is really important. I think if you don't forgive then every time there is a wound you just end up farther and farther and farther apart.* (Interview 2, p. 7) The third interview subject stated, *they are willing to not only ask for forgiveness but also receive.* (Interview 3, p. 5) The seventh respondent discussed forgiveness by saying,

I'll have to say forgiveness is one of the most important characteristics personally that leads to that success. I think acceptance and when I say acceptance, forgiveness is more when an individual feels wronged in some way, being able to let that go and say, “We're going to move on. I've been hurt, but I still recognize the love we have and we'll move forward.” Well acceptance is much more the things that I can't change. “I'm going to love you in spite of the fact that you leave your socks on the floor every night instead of getting them in the hamper.”

(Interview 7, p. 3)

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Respect. Respect is a theme that was discussed by three of the seven professionals who were interviewed. The responses came from the questions “What factors do you believe contribute to a successful marriage?” and “Please define what you would consider to be a successful marriage.” The second respondent mentioned respect as a factor by saying, *and respecting the other person’s values, instead of trying to recreate the one or the other...* (Interview 2, p. 2) A second response that discussed the importance of respect was when the third interview subject defined a successful marriage by saying, *one that in which the partners have mutual respect for one another. One in which they are both willing to learn from one another and learn from their mistakes.* (Interview 3, p. 2) The fourth respondent was the other subject who discussed respect as a factor for a successful marriage. This was discussed when she said,

But respect I think is huge. A mutual respect for each other. That it’s mutual, that it’s not one-sided, that it’s not-- I’m getting into the factors that aren’t helpful-- that it’s not about power or control. So a mutual respect. (Interview 4, p. 2)

Intentionality. Intentionality is another theme that was brought up in three of the seven interviews. There were two main questions that drew responses about intentionality. These questions were “Based on your experience, what kind of effects do you believe children have on marital success and satisfaction?” and “Based on your experience, can you discuss what types of personal characteristics lead to more successful marriages and what personal characteristics lead to less successful marriages?” The first subject brought the subject of intentionality up multiple times. His first mention of intentionality was when he said,

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I think being intentional, purposeful, with your relationship, understanding that the things that got you together during one's courtship or during couple's courtship or their dating. During those times we were investing, we were curious about what the other person was doing, we wanted to spend time with them. But as our marriages or our long term relationships grow or as we spend more time in them, it's maybe harder to be curious about what your partners doing, to be interested in what your partner's doing. You may even find that over time your interests change, and the person you thought you married you're no longer married to. Well, then how do you deal with that? How do you stay curious about those things? (Interview 1, p. 6)

Another time the theme of intentionality was discussed was by the sixth interview subject when he said,

One of the things I have found is that a couple, when they have kids, really need to make time for each other to kind of create a balance. If they do that, those periods where there's marital dissatisfaction like in the beginning stage when the kids are young, they can stay connected. (Interview 6, p. 4)

Empathy. Empathy is a theme that is also seen in the responses of three of the seven interview subjects. The responses all came from the question “Based on your experience, can you discuss what types of personal characteristics lead to more successful marriages and what

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personal characteristics lead to less successful marriages?” The first respondent discussed empathy by saying,

The ability to empathize with the other, to take the position of the other. You know when your partner comes to you and says “Hey, today’s been really hard.” If you just can’t get your head around how hard their day has been, over time they’re not going to come to you and tell you about that and there’s going to be an estrangement that grows. (Interview 1, p. 6)

The third respondent discussed empathy by saying, *and how simple validating someone’s emotions, just like slowing down and saying, “Oh, I see how that could make you feel that way,” can diffuse an argument. It can stop it before it even starts.*(Interview 3, p. 5) An additional time empathy was discussed was by the sixth respondent when he said, *again, I’d say that most successful marriages have personality characteristics like being open, being able to see things from other people’s point of view, being flexible in the way you think and feel.* (Interview 6, p. 3)

Compromise. The theme of compromising was present in two of the seven interviews.

This theme was found in the responses to the questions “Can you define what you consider to be a successful marriage?” and “What factors do you believe contribute to a successful marriage?”

The first respondent made mention of compromise by saying *I think healthy couples understand the need to compromise from time to time, as well as to sacrifice for the benefit of the couple or the family.* The second respondent brought up the theme of compromise twice in his interview.

First he said, when describing what a successful marriage was,

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...when the home is a sanctuary from all the other stressors of life and that the couple works as a team and that they compromise without sacrificing. What I mean by that is that a compromise is each person probably gets their second choice whereas a sacrifice is somebody gives up, stops being an authentic person and that's not sustainable. (Interview 2, p. 1-2)

The second respondent also mentioned compromise when he discussed factors for successful marriages and said, *being willing to compromise like I said, being able to be a team player...* (Interview 2, p. 2)

Summary of Themes

Throughout analysis of the transcriptions of the interviews, it was seen that there were nine themes that showed up, each with varying strength. There were four themes that presented strongly, four that were moderately represented, and one that was weakly represented. The strong themes were external support, communication, factors not present in successful marriages, and time spent together. The moderate themes were forgiveness, respect, intentionality, and empathy. The weakly represented theme was that of compromise.

Discussion

Sample

The sample that was drawn could have affected the responses that were received in several different ways. First, the fact that most of the respondents had their educational background in the field of Psychology was likely to influence their perspectives when compared with those professionals with Social Work backgrounds who provide marriage counseling. Even though there were different educational backgrounds, it was difficult to see much of difference of opinion. It appears that experience with the same population might be more impactful than their educational differences. Second, the fact that a large majority possessed many years of experience definitely affected the responses in that they were able to speak more confidently and had more personal knowledge and examples to back up their thoughts. Third, there were a couple of respondents who had experience working with same-sex couples so they were able to address any differences seen in that specific population. The sample of respondents didn't adequately represent the study population of all marriage therapists in that it consisted of a higher percentage of respondents with Psychology background than the percentage found in the overall study population. Also the sample consisted solely of professionals with multiple years of experience with none having less than three years, while the overall study population of marriage therapists would include professionals with less experience in the field. Even with these differences from the overall population of marriage therapists, it is likely that the responses would provide us with some insight into the beliefs of the overall population, even if it is not definitive in nature.

External Support

External support was one of the themes that was seen pretty strongly in every interview and appears to have significant impact on the overall successfulness of marriages. The importance of having support from family, friends, and society was emphasized, but the respondents also said that the marriages could still succeed without the support. They discussed the possibility of success without support, but stressed that it would be much more difficult for the marriage to be successful. This theme weakly supported the literature as Lawrence et. al. (2008) discussed the importance of partner support but did not discuss much about the support received from people outside of the married couple. While it is probable that there are studies out there that have been conducted on the effects of external support on marriages, these were not uncovered during the literature review for this project, whether it be because of too narrow search terms or researcher oversight. This theme of external support shows the importance of doing genograms and social network mapping early on in sessions with the couple to examine the support networks that the couple has in place.

Communication

Communication is another theme that was very strongly seen throughout the interviews conducted. The respondents all stressed the importance of the individuals in the marriage being able to communicate openly and effectively on the overall success and satisfaction of the marriage. This theme strongly reflects the findings in the literature as the effectiveness of communication in relationships is important in the findings of Gottman as discussed in the literature review. Gottman et. al. (1998), Gottman (1999), and Driver and Gottman (2004) all discuss the importance of examining the partners' communication styles and the quality of their

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interactions when working with a couple. Knowing communication is important to relationships is key for marriage counselors as it helps them prioritize working on the communication skills or a couple when issues arise.

Factors Not Found in Successful Marriages

Finding factors that were not present in successful marriages was helpful in the sense that the review of the literature focused on what helped marriages be successful but did not look much into what was detrimental to successful marriages. Billingsley et. al. (2005) is an example of this as all the factors they listed in their study were present in the successful relationships. All the factors discussed in this section should provide more ways for marriage therapists to examine and evaluate marriages to better help the couple improve their relationship. The factors that were discussed as not being found in successful marriages were addiction, abuse, infidelity, mental health issues, and selfishness or entitlement. Some of these factors might be more readily apparent than others, but it is important to keep in mind that they all have the ability to hinder a marriage's overall satisfaction and successfulness.

Time Spent Together

Spending time together was another theme throughout the interviews that was strongly represented. It is apparent that the subjects largely considered not only the amount of time that the couple spends together important, but also the quality of the time that is spent together. This would appear to be important as the time spent together allows the couple to grow together and stay connected with each other as they move through life. The results for this theme strongly reflect what was found in the literature about the importance of married couples spending time together. Johnson and Anderson (2012) found in their study that spending time together helped

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lead to increased confidence in their marriage, which in turn led to increased marital satisfaction. This goes right along with what the subjects said as a large majority of them discussed how important it was for the married couples to spend time together in order to have higher levels of marital success and satisfaction.

Forgiveness

The theme of forgiveness was found in the responses of the subjects with moderate strength. They discussed how it is important to forgive, but also how important it is to receive forgiveness in a marriage. This would appear to be an important piece to consider when working with a married couple due to the fact that everybody is human and will make mistakes. The fact is that some of these mistakes are going to hurt the ones you love, so if there is no forgiveness in the relationship, it would be difficult for it to be successful, as resentment and anger would likely become an issue. This theme of forgiveness was not discussed in the literature that was reviewed so it provides more valuable insight into some factors that could significantly affect the overall successfulness and satisfaction of marriages. While there are likely to be a fair number of articles focused on the effects of forgiveness, none were found in the review of the literature for this project due to several possible reasons. These reasons include the studies not directly linking forgiveness to married couples, the narrowness of the topics searched during the review of the literature, and the researcher potentially overlooking them in his review of the results.

Respect

The theme of respect shown between the partners was also moderately present in the interviews. The subjects discussed how important it is for married individuals to continuously strive to treat their partners with respect in order to keep their relationships running smoothly.

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With a lack of respect comes the increased possibility of resentment, frustration, and overall dissatisfaction with their partners and the relationship as a whole. This theme was also found in the literature, especially with Gottman, as the “horseman” of contempt is, at its core, treating the other person with disrespect. Gottman (1999) is the main source in the literature review that discusses his four “horsemen”, which includes contempt. This is vital as Gottman notes that the presence of contempt, thus the total lack of respect for the other individual, virtually always leads the married couple to divorce.

Intentionality

The theme of intentionality was moderately represented throughout the course of the interviews. The subjects talked about how it is important for the married couples to be intentional in their efforts to communicate and spend time together. The subjects discussed that this was especially important when thinking about times where it gets really busy or when kids are in the picture and are requiring a lot of their time and attention. Without intentionality being placed on the relationship during these times, it would be understandable that the relationship could suffer from lack of attention. This ties into the research in the sense that being intentional can be linked to how time spent together affects the marriage in terms of success and satisfaction. Johnson and Anderson (2013) found that time spent together positively impacts overall marital success and satisfaction so being intentional about spending time together should have similar positive impacts.

Empathy

Empathy was the final theme that was moderately represented in the discussions with the interview subjects. The subjects mentioned that it is important to have empathy towards one’s

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partner in a marriage because everybody reacts differently to situations. Being able to think about the situation from their point of view, and trying to figure out where their reactions are coming from, has the possibility of limiting the number of arguments the couple has. There will always be arguments and disagreements in a marriage but if the couple is able to keep them to a minimum, their relationship has a better chance to be more successful and satisfactory. Without empathy, there would be an increased possibility of lack of understanding, which could lead to criticism, defensiveness, contempt, or stonewalling, which are Gottman's "four horseman" that predict divorce. In that way, the subjects in their discussion of the theme of empathy are indirectly supporting Gottman's findings, as seen in Gottman (1999), which is discussed in the literature review.

Compromise

Compromise was a theme that was weakly represented in the findings of this study. The study subjects who mentioned it felt that it was important to work together and come to a consensus that both individuals in the marriage would be satisfied with. This theme was not found much in the literature and was not discussed in this study to any great extent. The lack of it in the literature could possibly be linked to it being a weak factor, too narrow of search terms, or general researcher oversight as he was reviewing the existing literature.

Factors Not Discussed

There were several factors that were present in the literature that was not discussed much by the interview subjects in this study. One of these factors that was largely absent from the findings was that of sexuality. It appeared that most of the subjects did not view sexuality as a contributing factor to the successfulness or satisfaction level of the marriage. The subjects might

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not have mentioned it much in their responses if they felt it was not a key factor, if they believed it was majorly impacted by the factors they had already mentioned, or if the questions were not aimed in a way that drew this factor out in their responses. The main place where sexuality was even brought up by a subject was in the discussion that they believed communication around sexuality was important to the marriage. This discussion was more on the importance of communication, however, not necessarily centered on sexuality. The other factor from the literature that was not discussed by many of the interviewees was that of premarital cohabitation. This was briefly touched on by one of the subjects but might not have been discussed as a factor since the subjects tended to be focused on personal characteristics and interactions between the couple and the environment instead of logistics of when they moved in together. The researcher also did not ask a question directly inquiring about premarital cohabitation. This had the possibility of limiting the possibility of the subjects discussing this factor.

Researcher Reaction

During the course of the interviews, a majority of the responses were responses that were not that surprising, however there were a few times that the response or lack of response was slightly unexpected. All of the themes about factors that were present in successful and satisfied marriages were ones that the researcher expected to find, however the discussion of factors that are absent from successful or satisfied marriages was not fully expected. One surprise was the presence of mental health issues being a hindrance to successful and satisfactory marriages. While it is understandable how mental health issues can negatively affect marriages, the researcher did not enter the interviews with the expectation or thought that mental health would be brought up as a factor in this study.

Limitations/ Recommendations for Future Research

There were several limitations to this study that limits the ability to consider it fully impactful. First, the nature of qualitative research means that the findings will be based on impressions and opinions without any numerical data to back them up. One way to address this limitation in future research would be to run a mixed method study where you begin with qualitative research to gather the themes and then find a randomized representative sample to run quantitative research on with these factors to gather data backing up or rejecting the results from the qualitative study.

The second limitation is that the sample was largely composed of professionals with a psychology background and from one geographical area. One recommendation for future research to improve this would be to determine the breakdown of educational backgrounds for all the professionals providing marriage counseling and to ensure that your sample has that same proportion as the national population of marriage therapists. Also, it would be important to ensure that your sample was found across the nation to provide the researcher with insights from the whole country. One possible way to make this more feasible for the researcher would be to have the interviews be conducted over skype or some other electronic communication technology.

The third limitation was the possibility that researcher bias was present in the findings of this study. One recommendation to improve on this limitation would be to ensure that the interviews are conducted by someone who has limited consideration in the study and has no background education or expectations on the subject matter. Another possible solution would be

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to have multiple different individuals review the transcripts and only use the themes that the reviewers agreed upon.

Implications for Social Work

While the themes found in this study cannot definitively provide answers to what factors lead to increased marital success and satisfaction, this study still has implications for the field of Social Work. The implications are largely found in the fact that the study still provides insight from professionals in the field on what they believe to be important factors for marriages to succeed. This will allow social workers who are providing marriage therapy to have a better understanding of the issues their clients face and what might be important areas for them to work on with their clients. There are several interventions that could be used increasingly as a result of this research.

The first theme that could lead to an improved intervention is that of external support. This theme was strongly represented in the study. One potential intervention that could be utilized more as a result of this theme would be the earlier use of genograms and social network mapping. This could provide a further look at where the couple can find support from the people around them.

The second theme that could lead to a potential intervention would be factors that they discussed as being absent in healthy relationships. This was a theme that was also strongly represented in the research. This theme could lead to an intervention that would be looking for the factors that were discussed as not being seen in successful relationships during the therapy and then discussing how those factors have impacted the married couple's relationship.

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A third theme that could lead to an increased use of an intervention would be the theme of the importance of time being spent together. This theme was another theme that was strongly evident in the findings. The potential intervention that could arise from this theme would be to evaluate the couple's time spent together and assigning them homework to try spending more time together and discussing their experiences with this in therapy.

One more theme that could lead to an increased role in therapy was the theme of communication. This theme was found in all seven interviews and could lead to a potential intervention of working more intensively on practicing active listening and respectful communication in the therapy room so that they would be more likely to utilize this in real life situations. The therapists could also use role plays to help the couples learn to communicate more effectively and efficiently.

The results of this study could also allow social workers who are working with couples going through premarital counseling to have better ideas of the more important areas to be discussed during this process to best prepare the couple to have a successful and satisfactory marriage. The counselors would have a general list of factors to evaluate in the process and know how to better spend the limited time that is available to them in this time-limited process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provided findings that showed what marriage counselors believe to be important factors for marital satisfaction and success. This study had several strengths that helped it be able to provide meaningful results. First, the sample was limited to professionals with qualifying education, licensure, and enough experience to lend credence to their insights. These professionals all had at least three years of experience with most having over seven years

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of experience. Second, the questions were designed by an individual with education on the subject matter and cleared through a committee to remove bias and ensure quality responses. Another strength for this study was that the researcher has had some experience providing therapy to couples. Even though the experience is limited, this was a strength for this project as the researcher was more able to be sensitive to the key issues on the topic. A final strength in the project was the fact that the therapists will be from one geographical area. This was a relative strength for those working in that specific area, as the data might be more representative of the local population than national surveys or projects might be. The major factors that were most mentioned were the presence of external support, quality communication, and quality time spent together by the married couple. While there were other factors that were found to be moderate or weak, including forgiveness, empathy, compromise, intentionality, and respect, it is important to remember that marriages are best suited for success when the individuals spend time together, communicate effectively, and are supported by those around them. Even with these themes being prevalent in this study, it is important to look at each couple independently. As one subject said, *So my definition is kind of like a recipe. And the idea is you put the ingredients in, and there are probably really helpful ingredients, and not-so-helpful ingredients, but you get out what you put into it. And so those ingredients can be unique to each couple...that's, I guess my definition of a successful marriage (Interview 4, p.2).*

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Appendix A: Consent Form

Important Factors for Marital Success and Satisfaction: Marriage Counselors' Perspectives INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Introduction:

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating what marriage counselors say are the important factors affecting marital success and satisfaction. This study is being conducted by Bradley Vanover, a graduate student at St. Catherine University under the supervision of Dr. Michael Chovanec, a faculty member in the School of Social Work. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you have experience counseling married couples and were referred to the researcher. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to discover what marriage counselors believe to be the key factors in marital success and satisfaction. Approximately 6-10 people are expected to participate in this research.

Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet with the researcher and answer questions regarding your experiences and beliefs while being audio recorded. These questions and answers will provide understanding of what you believe to be the key factors in marital success and satisfaction and why. This study will take approximately one hour over one session.

Risks and Benefits of being in the study:

The study has minimal risks. In the discussion of experiences and beliefs, it is possible you might be triggered by a difficult or troubling case. If this happens and you wish to stop participating, the interview will be stopped, the recording will be deleted, and any information gathered will not be used in the study.

There are no direct benefits to being in the study.

Compensation:

If you participate, you will receive a ten dollar visa gift card upon completion of the interview. Should the participant choose to end the interview early, they will still receive a five dollar visa gift card.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable. If talking about individual subjects and their opinions, I will use false names to further protect your confidentiality.

I will keep the research results in a locked chest in my house and only I and my advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by April 2016. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you. Audio recordings will be stored on a password protected phone or laptop where only I will have access to them. They will be sent to a transcriber who has signed an agreement to keep everything confidential and all copies will be destroyed no later than June 1, 2016.

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Voluntary nature of the study:

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with St. Catherine University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships. If you withdraw early, you will receive a five dollar visa gift card instead of the ten dollar visa gift card.

Contacts and questions:

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Bradley Vanover, at 316-303-2619. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Dr. Michael Chovanec at 651-690-8722, will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or jsschmitt@stkate.edu.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study.

I consent to participate in the study and I agree to the use of audio recording.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix B: Question List

Important Factors for Marital Success and Satisfaction: Marriage Counselors' Perspectives

Instructions: Please check or briefly answer the following demographic questions before you participate in the interview.

Demographics:

1. How many years of experience do you have working with married couples?
 1-2 years 3-4 years 5-9 years 10+ years
2. Average number of clients per year?
 1-3 4-6 7-9 10+
3. What is your education level?
 Master's Doctorate
4. What is your level of licensure?
 LICSW LMFT LAMFT LP LPCC LMHC PHD

Instructions: Please review before interview and think about married couples or domestic partners (for same-sex couples) you have worked with to formulate your responses. For questions 3 and 4, please consider all three areas listed below the question in your response. Doing this will allow for more thought out answers and help the interview proceed in a timely manner.

Definition of successful marriage:

1. Please define what you consider to be a successful marriage?
2. Please explain how your professional experience has impacted your definition of marital success.

Factors

3. What factors do you believe contribute to a successful marriage?
-Individual
-Family/Friends/Work
-Community/Society at large
4. What factors do you believe interfere or block married couples' ability to experience a successful marriage?
-Individual
-Family/Friends/Work
-Community/Society at large
5. Based on your experience, can you discuss what types of personal characteristics lead to more successful marriages and what personal characteristics lead to less successful marriages?

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6. Based on your experience, what kind of effects do you see the age at which one gets married having on the success and satisfaction of the marriage?
7. Based on your experience, what kind of effects do you see time spent together having on the success and satisfaction of the marriage?
8. Based on your experience, what kind of effects do you believe the in-laws have on marital success and satisfaction?
9. Based on your experience, what kind of effects do you believe children have on marital success and satisfaction?
10. Based on your experience, what kind of effects does societal support and approval have on marital success and satisfaction?

I appreciate you taking the time to complete this interview.