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## **Marital Satisfaction: The Impact of Premarital and Couples Counseling**

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COUPLES COUNSELING

Marital Satisfaction: The Impact of Premarital and Couples Counseling

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Social Work

St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas

St. Paul, Minnesota

In Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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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.

# MARITAL SATISFACTION: THE IMPACT OF PREMARITAL AND COUPLES COUNSELING

## **Abstract**

Marital dissatisfaction affect people of all ages, races and cultural backgrounds and often leads to divorce. Divorce can have negative implications that last for years. Social workers and other allied professionals providing premarital and marital counseling work to ameliorate marital discord and improve marital satisfaction. The purpose of this study was to examine the connection between premarital and marital counseling and marital satisfaction for couples. Using a cross-sectional design, the following three questions were asked: Is involvement in premarital counseling linked to a greater satisfaction of a marriage? Is marital or couples counseling during times of marital discord linked to greater satisfaction of a marriage and less likelihood of divorce? Is a positive experience of premarital counseling linked to a greater likelihood that couples will engage in marital or couples counseling during times of marital discord? Twenty-seven individuals responded to an anonymous Qualtrics survey about couples' involvement with premarital and marital counseling as well as self-ratings of marital satisfaction. Data was analyzed using chi-square analyses. Findings were not significant for any of the three research questions, however a trend was detected showing that individuals who took part in premarital counseling indicated greater marital satisfaction than those who did not take part in premarital counseling. Limitations of this study include the lack of variability in individuals' experiences. Future research is needed to explore this relation more fully and to develop a solid base of knowledge that can inform the development of effective social work intervention strategies in the area of premarital and marital counseling.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the following people:

To my committee chair, Dr. Laurel Bidwell, thank you so much for your perceptiveness, support and expertise in helping make this a successful research project. Your dedication to my work has been greatly appreciated!

To my committee members, Meghan Williams, LMFT and Abigail Henderson, MSW, thank you both for your time, dedication, and support throughout this process.

To my closest family and friends, thank you for your support, encouragement and unconditional love. I could not have done any of this without you. Words cannot express my gratitude for all of your understanding and inspiration.

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## **Introduction**

### **Marital Success**

The majority of Americans highly value a successful marriage. Carroll and Doherty (2003) found that 93% of Americans listed “having a happy marriage” as one of their most meaningful purposes in life. While the motivations behind wanting to engage in a happy and satisfying marriage are undoubtedly diverse, researchers have found that there are many associated benefits to a happy marriage, including emotional and physical health and longevity. In contrast, marriages that are opposed and unbalanced have been found to challenge well-being and cause couples to experience financial burden (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Although a majority of Americans may desire a happy marriage and despite evidence of the multiple benefits of a positive marriage, research shows that this is not always possible. Today, there is a 40-50% chance of couples divorcing, with nearly two-thirds of these separations transpiring within the first ten years of matrimony (Clark, 1995). It is therefore important for social work practitioners to consider prevention and intervention efforts that support the attainment of a happy and satisfying marriage and decrease the likelihood of divorce.

### **Divorce**

Although many marriages fail, they do not all fail for the same reason. There is not just one concrete reason for the collapse of marriage. Some of the common factors behind divorce include: lack of communication, financial issues, infidelity, differing expectations, commitment, child-rearing concerns, employment, etc. Lack of communication is identified as one of the most common explanations for divorce. Communication entails discussions about issues and other important roles that play into

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marriage. Open communication is fundamental in the relationship to guarantee that partners understand one another (Clark, 1995).

Presently, there is a great amount of social and political attentiveness in marriage planning and premarital counseling as services delivered throughout the community (Stahmann, 2000). The existing insecurity of marriage has encouraged greater demand for preventative tactics to marriage such as marriage education and development programs (Stahmann, 2000). Specific attention is being placed on preparation for marriage and premarital intervention programs (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Some states have even explored encouragements and requirements as a way to encourage involvement of couples into premarital education programs (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004).

### **Prevention and Intervention**

According to the American Psychological Association, marital education programs have served as a prevention strategy to strengthen marriages. One example of marital education prevention is the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, also known as PREP. PREP focuses on teaching couples how to properly communicate and use problem-solving skills, which has been associated to successful marital functioning. These problem-solving skills typically include guidelines for managing conflict, forgiveness, speaker/listener practices, and how to maintain and develop enjoyment and companionship (Futris, Aholou, & Seponski, 2011).

Research conducted on PREP has found that couples that have participated in this prevention strategy are experiencing considerably greater levels of marital satisfaction and are less likely to get divorced. PREP is unique in that it acts as a prevention and

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intervention model. A longitudinal study on PREP found that couples who participated in the prevention model prior to marriage had fewer negative interaction, further positive interaction, decreased rates of relationship hostility, smaller joint rates of separation or divorce and advanced levels of relationship pleasure up to five years following the completion of PREP (Futris et al., 2011).

Research on the prevention and interventions for marital suffering has led to the improvement of empirically constructed and examined programs that can help change the development of marriage and counteract the divorce rate. Premarital education and couples counseling happen to be some of the most effective prevention programs for couples (Marital Education Programs Help Keep Couples Together, 2004).

### **Premarital Counseling**

Premarital counseling has numerous classifications. However, it commonly refers to a method that is intended to improve and enhance premarital relationships leading to more pleasing and established marriages with the envisioned consequence intended to avoid divorce. The providers of premarital counseling can be private or faith-based, although they come from different backgrounds, they share the same goals. The ultimate goal of premarital counseling is to support relationships prior to marriage in order to prevent the risk of future divorce and give them a better base for a stable and satisfactory marriage (Stahmann, 2000).

The primary goals of premarital counseling includes: facilitating the shift from single to married life, increasing stability and satisfaction (long and short term), developing the couple's communication skills, enhancing the companionship and promise to the relationship, enhancing intimacy between the couple, introducing and

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implementing problem-solving and decision-making abilities in the capacities of finances and marital responsibilities (Pre-marital Counseling, 2011).

### **Couples Counseling**

Marital counseling, also known as “couples counseling,” is a style of psychotherapy. Couples counseling assists all types of couples in recognizing and resolving conflicts in order to advance their relationships. This type of counseling calls on considerate decision making about reconstructing the relationship or choosing to go your individual ways. Couples counseling is typically a short-term process. The individual treatment plan will be contingent on the situation.

Many couples will seek this form of counseling to intensify their relationships and achieve a better appreciation of one another. Couples counseling is often used to address specific concerns, including: divorce, betrayal, anger, financial concerns, substance use and abuse, conflicts around parenting, blended families, sexual problems, lack of communication, etc (Marriage Counseling, 2011).

### **Current Study**

With the desire of most Americans to attain a happy and satisfying marriage, and divorce rate in the United States continuing to remain high, clinicians need to be aware and educated on prevention and intervention strategies that support the attainment of a positive marriage and interrupt patterns of divorce. This study aims to explore whether couples who engage in premarital and couples counseling have higher rates of satisfaction in their marriage and a lower chance of divorce than are found in current statistics. The following three questions will be explored:

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1. Is involvement in premarital counseling linked to greater satisfaction of a marriage?
2. Is marital or couples counseling during times of marital discord linked to greater satisfaction of a marriage and less likelihood of divorce?
3. Is a positive experience of premarital counseling linked to a greater likelihood that couples will engage in marital or couples counseling during times of marital discord?

### **Literature Review**

The following review of the literature examines the research in regards to the impact of premarital counseling on relationship satisfaction and whether or not positive premarital counseling experiences are associated with future counseling among married couples.

### **Marriage**

**Value of Satisfaction.** A successful marriage is one that is highly valued by the majority of Americans and more than 80% of adults will get married at some point in their lifetime (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). Carroll and Doherty (2003) found that 93% of Americans listed “having a happy marriage” as one of their most significant intentions in life. It is obvious that the search of a stable and joyful marriage continues to be an ambition for most Americans (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Successful marriages are ones that reflect couples’ ability to see imperfect people in flawless ways. Intimate partners commonly engage in an array of perceptive processes that sanction them to see each other and their relationships in an optimistic way and sustain their obligations to one another (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996).

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There is widespread research on what makes marriages work; Researchers have discovered that no single feature is accountable for determining relationship quality or permanence (Fincham, Stanley, and Beach, 2007). However, a consistent finding is that marital stability and happiness are to a large extent reflected in the ratio of positive to negative behaviors in the relationship.

**Positive to Negative Behaviors.** Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, and Rusckstuhl (2000) found that partners in happy marriages are more prone to associate positive meanings to their spouse's behavior than spouses in unsatisfying marriages. As cited in Phillips, Bischoff, Abbott, and Xia (2009), Gottman (1999) reviews these findings and other similar research by describing happy spouses as more likely to see the optimistic, relationship-building behavior of their partner. Negative behavior occurs in all marriages but when it happens among happily married couples, they are more likely to justify it as being unusual or as attributable to the pressure and anxiety of the situation (Phillips et al., 2009).

Similar research has found that a repetition of everyday positive interactions and routine involvement in joint activities produces an increase in marital satisfaction and adjustment (Phillips et al., 2009). Driver and Gottman (2004) discovered that couples that are satisfied in their marriage frequently participate in behaviors such as kissing, hugging, and conversing with the spouse about their day. The routine engagement in these types of communications leads to thoughts of closeness and connection that give to a shared value; when repetitive, patterned, and significant, they take on a symbolic and strong meaning of cohesion (Phillips et al., 2009).

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According to Gottman (1999), shared meaning refers to a mutual idea about behaviors, events, values, roles, and symbols (as cited in Phillips et al., 2009). Shared meaning is established through involvement in joint activities through positive interactions with ones spouse. Shared meaning indications a common concept of marriage and mutual goals. Spouses who have shared meaning see themselves more as a pair than as two individual persons (Phillips et al., 2009).

The initial stages of marriage are predominantly significant to developing a sense of partnership and to defining the course that the marriage will take. It makes instinctive sense that marriages that begin well will have an improved chance of maintaining stability and happiness than those that do not. As cited in Phillips et al. (2009), Gottman (1999) discovered that communication among couples and interactions projecting marital insecurity are existent early in marriage and that marital insecurity and divorce can be anticipated through reflection of newlywed couple discussions about problematic topics (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson, 1998).

Marriage in the United States is problematic, because a large quantity of research shows that marriage endorses emotional and physical health, while unbalanced marriages that result in divorce can challenge well being and lead to a large social and financial burden (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

### **Benefits of Positive Marriage**

**Longevity.** Married people live longer lives than single persons. Unmarried males have death rates that are 250% greater than married males. For females, single women have death rates that are 50% greater than married females (Waite & Gallagher, 2001). Single women are less likely to rate their health as very good when compared to married

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women, and 40% more likely to rate their health as only poor or fair in comparison to married women. Evidence from life expectancies indicates that nine of ten married males and females alive at age 48 are still alive at age 65, while only six of ten single men and eight of ten single women make it to 65 years of age (Waite & Gallagher, 2001).

**Mental Health.** Males who are married are half as probable to commit suicide as single men, and one third as probable as divorced men. Couples who are married report having reduced rates of depression and distress when compared to single individuals. 40% of married individuals state that they are happy with their lives, while only 25% of single individuals report that they are happy with their lives (Waite & Gallagher, 2001).

### **Divorce**

Despite these aspirations for successful marriage, there is a 40-50% chance of first marriages ending in divorce and a 60% chance of second marriages. Nearly two-thirds of divorces transpire within the first ten years of marriage (Clark, 1995).

Prior research has been directed on circumstances of divorce among discrepancies in gender, socioeconomic status, and the life course. In terms of gender, women in the Amato & Previti (2003) study identified problematic behavior from their previous husbands (cheating, substance abuse, physical and emotional abuse) and men were more likely to identify that they were unsure of what triggered the divorce. However, differing from other research findings, this study discovered that men and women equally reported problems with communication (Amato & Previti, 2003).

According to Thompson & Walker (1991), women are more likely to monitor their relationships and identify relationship problems sooner than males (as cited in Amato & Previti (2003). Males tend to withdraw from discussions of relationship

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problems, which stems from a lack of strong communication skills. The major reason for marital breakdown is communication conflict between spouses (Amato & Previti, 2003).

**Communication.** All couples experience conflict in their relationships – about how much time to spend with friends, how much money is spent individually, or who transports the children to and from activities – but some couples are able to work through their issues more effectively than other couples. One study found that many Americans consider open communication to be crucial for individual well-being and relationship satisfaction (Caughlin, 2003).

John Gottman has conducted studies on the practices that extinguish and strengthen relationships. Fundamentally, the reflection is that suffering and satisfied couples manage their disagreements in different ways.

Gottman places couples into “regulated” and “nonregulated” categories. Gottman specified nonregulated couples as those who are more likely to engage in conflict, more defending, more persistent, more irritated, more extracted as a listener, less caring, less interested in their companions, and less happy than regulated couples (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Regulated couples are couples that overcome their disagreements in ways that enable problem solving and does not harm their relationship. However, the communication between nonregulated couples can be destructive; instead of using problem solving techniques, it creates escalated tensions and increases the couple’s anguish. Unsurprisingly, nonregulated couples take a lengthier time to bounce back from a disagreement and are less likely to obtain a resolution to their issue, which results in reoccurrence of the disagreement and continuance of their original dispute (Clarke & Brentano, 2006).

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One study found that disagreement content and communication style are both contributors of divorce. The association between argument topics and the process of communication increases the likelihood of divorce. This is specifically true when couples are disagreeing about finances (Dew et al., 2012).

**Finances.** In addition to communication, financial issues have been a research concentration around divorce. Researchers are increasing their focus on financial concerns in marriage, but it is still understudied comparative to the influence that everyday finances have on family life (Dew, 2010). However, studies have disclosed that financial issues are significant predictors of divorce (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Britt & Huston, 2012; Dew, 2011).

When spouses are incapable of resolving contrasting implications of money or have conflicting goals for spending or saving their money, disagreements tend to arise. Both husbands and wives report that their financial arguments are more difficult to solve, last longer, and are more significant to them than other types of disputes (Dew, Britt, and Huston, 2012). Even while researching for other explanations for arguments, there is evidence to insinuate that money disputes between spouses are correlated with a reduction in marital gratification (Dew et al., 2012).

In Risch's study (as cited in Dew et al., 2012) of newlywed spouses (five years of less) indicated that couples classified financial problems (debt, employment status, financial decision making) as the third (among ten) source of conflict within their marriage. Another study found financial troubles to be ranked 13<sup>th</sup> most frequently conveyed reason for divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). Dolan and Hoffman's 1998 study (as cited in Dew et al., 2012) asked individuals to classify whether 51 reports categorized

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into the following scales: emotional encouragement, career support, maltreatment, incompatibility, housekeeping, financial issues, intimacy problems, parenting conflicts, and daycare contributed to their choice of divorcing. The five highest causes of divorce were incompatibility, emotional encouragement, maltreatment, intimacy problems, and financial issues (Dew et al., 2012).

Financial inclinations are so personal that they can prevent husbands and wives from sincerely creating a combined appreciation of being a couple. Due to the extensiveness and the power of distinct connotations of money to couples, the Dew, Britt, & Huston (2012) study hypothesized that financial discrepancies would more intensely forecast divorce than other sorts of marital disputes. This study found that financial disputes seem to be qualitatively diverse than other types of disputes in that they are associated with both a growth in destructive conflict management skills and an increase in divorce.

### **Negative Effects of Divorce**

**Physical and Emotional Health.** Divorced adults are commonly less happy than married adults. Particularly women are more prone to depression after divorce. They have increased levels of psychological anxiety, decreased levels of overall psychological well being, and lower self-esteem. Divorced adults are said to consume more alcohol than married adults; they are believed to be the highest percentage of “heavy” drinkers. This is exceptionally true for males, which is not too shocking being that studies show that men and women commonly decrease their consumption of drugs and alcohol after marriage (Corcoran, 1997).

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Given the positive benefits of successful marriages and the negative impact of divorce, there have been many attempts to establish preventative efforts to both reduce the likelihood of experiencing divorce and when problems do arise, to find ways to establish improved communication, specifically in terms of finances.

### **Premarital Counseling**

Many couples spend a substantial amount of time, money, and energy planning their wedding, while minimal time, if any, is devoted to preparing for marriage.

According to the novel, *Saving Your Marriage Before it Starts* (2006) (as cited in Vail, 2012), less than one-fifth of all marriages in the United States are initiated by involvement in a premarital counseling program. Couples premarital programs deliver a substitute, preventative method of foreseeing and concentrating on the risk factors related to couples' dissatisfaction and divorce (Valiente, Belanger, and Estrada, 2002).

### **History of Premarital Counseling**

Premarital education programs have been used since the 1930's. The first marriage preparation program was established at the Merrill-Palmer Institute in 1932. In 1941, the Philadelphia Marriage Council developed a concrete program with the intent of assisting couples to gain an enhanced understanding of what marital relationships entail and to then assist them in avoiding some of the foundations of marital distress (Duncan, Childs, and Larson, 2010).

It was not until the 1970's that premarital counseling became more common. Since that time, the concentration has transferred from teaching couples about marriage to preparing them for what marriage entails. In the past thirty years, ministries, as well as

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counseling experts, have shown more attentiveness in preparing couples for marriage through recognized premarital counseling programs.

Premarital counseling has greatly evolved since the 1970's to be offered in a number of diverse structures, including conferences, partnered couples counseling, group meetings, workshops, courses accessible through schools and universities, self-directed programs, books, websites, online courses, and catalogs.

### **Goals of Premarital Counseling**

There are many types of premarital counseling/education programs, such as: CMP (Community Marriage Policy), FOCCUS (facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding, and Study), PAP (Premarital Assessment Program), PCI (Premarital Communication Inventory), PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program), PREPARE (PREmarital Personal AND Relationship Evaluation), and SYMBIS (Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts), etc. Essentially, they all share similar goals of improving communication in a relationship, recognizing and discussing how to cope with major stressors, resolving conflict, financial planning, creating goals, and understanding and valuing the personality disparities of one another (Vail, 2012).

The advantage of having couples create their own goals is that they can develop an awareness of possible areas of incongruity, beliefs, and methods of handling conflict. It often incorporates a deeper insight into one's genuine personality and personality flaws that can be simply disregarded or deliberately ignored throughout the dating stage. Premarital counseling that concentrations on realistic, feasible goals, and incorporates meaningful, intimate interaction during the first stages of marriage, could be more significant and beneficial in the future (Vail, 2012).

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### **Effectiveness/Satisfaction of Premarital Counseling**

According to the article *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs: A Meta-Analytic Review of Outcome Research*, premarital programs have become a concentration of nationwide public policy (Ooms, 1998). Several states in the U.S. have recommended or authorized legislation that compels or proposes incentives for couples to partake in premarital education. Family professors and experts have been advocating for improved arrangement for marriage. Despite the prevalent backing for marriage education programs, questions remain concerning their success in establishing marriage and avoiding divorce (Stanley, 2001).

In order to address these questions, researchers opened a comprehensive, meta-analytic review and critical evaluation of conclusive research relating to the success of premarital education programs. This study addresses the diverse descriptions used to distinguish the kinds of premarital programs, including: premarital counseling, premarital education, premarital therapy, premarital education counseling, and marriage preparation. According to researchers, the literature uses these terms interchangeably. This study uses premarital prevention because it is a more general term and is intended to represent any type of prescribed, uniform tactic to preparing premarital partners for marriage (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Carroll and Doherty (2003) identify premarital prevention as comprehension and skills-based preparation that offers information to couples on techniques to support and progress their relationship throughout their marriage (Senediak, 1990). According to researchers, these programs are aimed to provide couples with a mindfulness of possible complications that may transpire after marriage and the information and assets to

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successfully avoid or improve such problems. Research has presented uniformity in the topics classically covered in premarital programs, with some of the shared topics including: communication, conflict resolution, commitment, roles, financial management, sexuality, etc (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

According to Carroll and Doherty (2003), this study evaluated an assortment of educational techniques used by premarital programs, such as: informal and formal groups, discussion and group presentations, couple experiences, and a mixture of presentation and experiential schemes. Research found that these structures were correspondingly effective in developing preparation for marriage (Stanley, 2001). Stanley and colleagues studied the success rate of a premarital programs ran by clergy versus skilled counselors and professors and found no distinctions between the two methods in consideration of producing positive change in interactions or on couples' rankings of fulfillment with the education (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Carroll and Doherty's (2003) study found that intervention groups presented noteworthy increases in communication and joint problem-solving abilities at a six-month post intervention (p. 115). A chain of reports also distinguished that experimental couples exhibited substantial development in empathy and cordiality, relationship modification and affection, and self-disclosure among partners (Avery, Ridley, Leslie, and Milholland, 1980).

Premarital prevention programs are commonly successful in constructing meaningful instantaneous advances in communication processes, conflict management abilities, and general relationship value, and that these achievements seem to maintain for at least six months to three years. Unfortunately, the shortage of comprehensive follow-

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up research, minimal information can be determined on the longer-term outcomes of premarital education, specifically on divorce (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

There is remarkable consistency of the effectiveness in premarital education programs that speak to conflict compromise in relationships. This consistency leads researchers to determine that some sort of teaching in conflict compromise is essential. This conclusion is linked to other marriage research that has discovered that the cooperation and managing of perceptual disparities between couples is a central component of relationship gratification. The research today seems to propose that diverse educational systems (individual couples counseling, weekend retreats, group therapy, etc.) and the kinds of instructors (lay leaders vs. professionals) may be equally operational in accomplishing positive outcomes (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

One study determined premarital intervention to be more applicable than no intervention in improving the connections of premarital partners and in counteracting later problems (Hahlweg & Markman, 1988). Another study determined that couples that participated in premarital counseling rated their marital satisfaction higher than their counterparts who did not participate in premarital counseling. This study concluded that participation in premarital counseling does correlate with a greater marital satisfaction. In addition, numerous studies have concluded the positive relationship between marital satisfaction and marital permanency. The results of this study indicated a momentous reduction in the divorce rate for those couples that have participated in premarital counseling (Vail, 2012).

According to Yilmaz and Kalkan (2010), premarital enrichment programs significantly increase the relationship satisfaction level. Their findings showed that

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couples that took part in premarital counseling demonstrated higher relationship satisfaction levels when compared to couples in the control groups. The couples that took part in the premarital counseling were identifying embedded problems and developing ways to solve these problems.

Carroll and Doherty (2003) examined premarital relationship programs' helpfulness with a meta-analytic study. They discovered that premarital relationship programs produce an increase in the value of communication skills, conflict-solving methods, and relationships.

McGeorge and Carlson (2006) attempted to determine the effectiveness of a premarital counseling program involving twenty-nine participants for eight weeks. Their results indicate that fittingness for marriage and marriage desire are advanced for individuals who partook in premarital counseling programs, in comparison to the individuals who were placed in control groups.

One study found that 94.6% of people who participated in premarital counseling indicated that they would recommend it to couples that are considering marriage. Even though there are a great variety of premarital programs, that statistic speaks well of the value of premarital counseling. It is even more notable that 80% of survey participants in this study, who did not partake in premarital counseling, said they would recommend couples to participate in a premarital counseling program (Vail, 2012).

Couples who participate in premarital counseling start to evaluate marriage with more of a realistic approach. They have been provided skills to increase their communication patterns. Premarital counseling has taught couples to decrease their negative attitudes that affect their happiness. They have a better understanding of their

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partner and how to discuss issues in a healthier way. These skills contribute to an increase in relationship satisfaction (Yilmaz & Kalkan, 2010).

### **Couples Counseling**

Another type of prevention of marriage dissolution is marital counseling, also known as couples counseling. Couples counseling is presented to support couples that may be contemplating separation or pursuing better-quality intimacy and understanding. In couples counseling, the relationship is the primary emphasis, while each spouse should also anticipate focusing on self-improvement and awareness (Foote, 2014).

By the time a couple reaches out to a counselor, they have predictably been distressed with the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive symptoms that are forecasters of relationship displeasure, instability, and eventually divorce (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). It is said that increasing couples' gratification across problem areas in relationships, enlightening interactional patterns of communication and conflict resolve, and concentrating couples on a more precise interpretation of their partner has revealed increased relationship gratification and stability (Casado-Kehoe, Vanderbleek, & Thanasiu, 2007).

### **History of Couples Counseling**

Physician Abraham and Hannah Stone opened the first marriage-counseling center in 1929 in New York City. Unlike individual therapy, marriage counseling was originally considered a short-term endeavor to mend an impaired relationship, and it characteristically dealt with present issues instead of the past. The introduction of general systems theory and family research triggered marital counseling to concentrate on the structure as a framework for behavior (Gagliardi, Guise, Lapidus, & Vickers, 2001).

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Originally, marriage counseling was performed collaboratively (spouses were seen individually by different therapists) or concurrently (spouses worked with the same therapist at different times). Conjoint therapy was introduced in 1959 by Don Jackson, in which spouses were seen together with the therapist (Gagliardi et al., 2001). Jackson devised concepts like homeostasis, quid pro quo, and double blind for couples counseling, and started investigating how systems processes transpired between the two individuals. In 1986, Emotionally Focused Therapy, Solution-Focused Therapy, and Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy were established and getting good experiential support (Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002).

Marriage counseling was legitimized in the 1960's by receiving licensure. By the mid-1980's, couples therapy established sustained theory development and empirical research than before. 1986 was the year of publication of Jacobson and Gurman's *Clinical Handbook of Marital Therapy*. The coverage of that handbook seemed to indicate couple's therapy as perceptible and permanent (Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002).

### **Goals of Couples Counseling**

There are multiple types of couples counseling, however, they all share similar goals of defusing disagreeing verbal communication, increasing intimacy and respect, eliminating barriers that create a feeling of constant disputing states, and to generate an intensified sense of compassion and understanding within the framework of the relationship (Foote, 2014).

In an interview with Dr. Bader, a distinguished couples therapist, she described the importance of goal setting with couples in counseling. Goal setting is generally incorporated into multiple sessions; it can be exceedingly complex and an intricate skill

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that takes time. It is not something that can be done in one session, except if the couple has participated in counseling previously and they are aware of what they want to do. Dr. Bader believes an efficient goal is one that compels an individual to do some reflecting and confrontation of themselves. These goals should be individually focused and not reliant on on what the other person says or does (E. Bader, personal communication, 2010).

### **Effectiveness/Satisfaction of Couples Counseling**

One study found that marital therapy is more successful than no treatment in decreasing marital unhappiness. The average percentage of enhancement after therapy is about 40%. The chance of the relationship improving increases from about 30% (projected enhancement rate for the control group) to about 70% for persons who received marital therapy. Additionally, this study determined the similarity between the European and United States studies, revealing that marital therapy is about uniformly successful in diverse cultural locations. This delivers strong indication for generalizability of the outcomes of marital therapy (Hahlweg & Markman, 1988).

After treatment, another study initially found that couples progressed more than 83% of untreated spouses. Second, this study used the reliable change index to determine 66% of spouses showed improvement after treatment. Third, following treatment, 62% of spouses fell into the non-distressed scope on psychometric methods of marital distress and 54% preserved these improvements six months to four years later. This study signifies the impact of marital counseling on couples (Byrne, Carr, & Clark, 2004).

Another study discovered findings that indicated a variety of fulfillments for clients ranging from improved understanding of their circumstance through emotional

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encouragement to enhanced communication with their husband or wife. These findings indicate that marriage counseling is an operational aid for couples dealing with marital dissatisfaction (Brown & Manela, 1977).

Research that evaluated changes in marital satisfaction after counseling has found that approximately 48% of couples exhibited either enhancement or complete recovery in marital satisfaction at a five-year follow up. It was determined that relationship decline resulted for 38% of spouses and 14% stayed the same (Foote, 2014).

There is limited research on the satisfaction rate of couples counseling among partners who participated in some form of counseling prevention. According to the study conducted on client satisfaction with marital counseling, 75% of the clients who participated found it helpful (Brown & Manela, 1977).

### **Satisfaction in Premarital Counseling linked to Couples Counseling**

According to Bradbury and Karney (2014), Premarital education increases the likelihood of couples participating in couples counseling in the future. These findings are coherent with preceding research that implies that former use of counseling services is a predictor of later participation. This research proposes the probability that premarital education is beneficial to couples because of the information they obtain and because it signifies an opportunity toward future help seeking. The act of making couples conscious of the accessibility of relationship interventions and familiarizing them to the practice of seeking support for relationship problems may make help seeking more probable later in their relationship (Bradbury & Karney, 2014).

### **Conceptual Framework**

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The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between premarital counseling and marital satisfaction, as well as how premarital counseling preventions may impact couples decision to seek couples counseling in the future. It is hypothesized that premarital counseling will have an impact on how satisfied married couples are with their relationship. It is also assumed that couples that received premarital counseling are more likely to consider and participate in couples counseling post-marriage. The conceptual framework for this research study is grounded in Gottman's cascade theory of marital dissolution.

Gottman's (1993) development theory of a cascade regarding marital displeasure and dissolution integrates both behavioral theory and social exchange theory. He looked past the assortment of considerations attributed for the sharp increase in percentages of marital dissolution, such as women's independence and more accessible divorce laws, and acknowledged that they do not offer clarification for why certain marriages last and others do not. In comparison to theories and information presented by counselors who have produced their material constructed on their work with the couples they happen to see in their practice, Gottman's theory is grounded on scientific research studies with the use of hundreds of couples over several years.

Based on Gottman's research (1994), a permanent marriage is one that results from a couple's capacity to resolve disagreements that are predestined in any relationship. The chief factor lies in the equilibrium among positive and negative behaviors. Marital permanency is greater when the positive behaviors outweigh the negative behaviors. However, not all negative behaviors lead straight to marital dissolution, but four behaviors specifically are said to move towards closure and

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frustration. Criticism cultivates towards contempt, which then causes defensiveness and conclusively stonewalling or withdrawal, this is known as the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.”

Gottman’s research has formed evidence of a method of change over time in spouses’ opinions of their relationship that produces a “distance and isolation” cascade. Eventually, their spouse’s pessimism becomes overpowering, unanticipated, and/or extreme to the point that the spouse grasps a level of hopelessness such that he or she will do whatever they can to eliminate the behavior. When a couple reaches this point, a perceptual change happens in which the feelings of affection, respect, and security are substituted by feelings of pain, sorrow, being threatened, anxiety, and irritation. Once this perceptual change has transpired, it can be extremely difficult to see the marriage in an optimistic light. Gottman’s cascade theory and the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” visibly display the influence of verbal and nonverbal communication and behavior, predominantly in conflict circumstances, to form the experience of marriage.

Since the nature of premarital counseling and couples counseling focuses on communication and other ways to promote and maintain a healthy, satisfying marriage, the conceptual framework for this study is focused on how premarital counseling can lead to a greater satisfaction in marriage and possibly impact a couples likelihood of receiving counseling in the future.

### **Methods**

This method section includes the purpose of the current study, the research design, sampling procedures, details of the protection of human subjects, details about the data collection instrument, and data analysis plan.

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## **Purpose of Study**

The research has indicated that divorce rates in the United States are skyrocketing. Studies have shown us that there are multiple reasons why couples decide to divorce. However, research also shows us that premarital counseling can lead to satisfaction in the marriage and better prepares couples for what marriage entails. Research also tells us that premarital counseling can impact couples decisions to partake in couples counseling post-marriage.

This study will further explores the following three questions:

1. Is involvement in premarital counseling linked to greater satisfaction of a marriage?
2. Is marital or couples counseling during times of marital discord linked to greater satisfaction of a marriage and less likelihood of divorce?
3. Is a positive experience of premarital counseling linked to a greater likelihood that couples will engage in marital or couples counseling during times of marital discord?

## **Research Design**

For this study, the researcher used a cross-sectional survey design in order to explore the relation between premarital counseling and marriage satisfaction among couples, as well as how premarital counseling has or has not impacted a married couples decision to seek out/engage in couples counseling.

## **Sample**

The sampling frame for this study consisted of previously married and currently married individuals. It was anticipated that approximately 20 individuals would participate in the study. This was a convenient sample, and participants involved in the study were people who are affiliated with St. Catherine University. A link was posted to

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the online survey through Gateway - that was available to all potential participants. The Gateway posting explained the purpose of the study, as well as the risks and benefits involved in participation. An explanation was made in regards to entire anonymity and voluntary participation.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

The researcher sought approval of the current study from the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB reviewed all research that involves human participants in order to protect and respect the rights and welfare of human subjects. A letter of informed consent was created and followed by the standards set forth by the IRB at St. Catherine University. The informed consent explained the purpose of the research and introduced the researcher. Participants were informed of the procedures of what they would be asked to do, including: following the website link to the online survey and reading through the informed consent before completing the survey. The consent form informed the participants of their ability to stop the survey at any time if they wished to do so. The participants were informed of the minimal risks involved in the participation of the study, including the risk of emotional distress following the completion of the survey. As a result of emotional risk potentially involved in the study, participants were provided contact information for Emotional Coping and Divorce, a 24-hour crisis line that they could call at any time for consultation.

Participants were given contact information for the researcher, the faculty chair/advisor, and a contact person for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. Catherine University. Participants were asked to provide implied consent by reading

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through the informed consent and acknowledging their consent by completing the online survey. There were no incentives or direct benefits for their participation in this study.

The principle investigator went through the CITI training. CITI training allows researchers to maintain high quality web based programs in order to protect human subjects in research. When all the requirements were completed, the researcher received a CITI training certificate.

### **Data Collection**

The instrument used for data collection in this study was a voluntary survey consisting of ten questions designed by the researcher. Data was collected through self-administered online surveys. The researcher used the Qualtrics software program to collect data from the survey once participants completed the survey. To distribute the survey, the researcher posted an invitation to the St. Catherine University Gateway website, which is accessible to students and staff. Once participants completed the survey, the data was automatically entered into the online Qualtrics software program.

The survey also called on the participants to identify demographic information. Survey questions asked participants to identify their age, gender, their relationship status, gender of their spouse (if applicable), whether or not they are currently married, how long were or have they been married, whether or not they participated in premarital counseling, their satisfaction with premarital counseling (if applicable), whether or not they have or would participate in couples counseling, and an indication of their satisfaction with couples counseling (if applicable). These questions were proposed to provide data for questions about how these variables are correlated with marital satisfaction (See appendix A for list of survey questions).

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The question on marital satisfaction was as follows: If you are currently married or widowed, how satisfied are/were you with your marriage? The categories of marital satisfaction included *very satisfied*, *satisfied*, *somewhat satisfied*, *neutral*, *somewhat dissatisfied*, *dissatisfied* and *very dissatisfied*. The participant results were divided into two groups based on responses.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collected from the survey was transferred from Qualtrics to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software program to compare the differences in responses. The researcher used this program to code some of the responses from participants. Data analysis included descriptive statistics including mean, mode, standard deviation, and frequencies of the survey responses. For the first research question, “Is involvement in premarital counseling linked to greater satisfaction of a marriage?” The participants were divided into two groups based on their responses, those who participated in premarital counseling and those who did not participate in premarital counseling.

The marriage satisfaction scale was divided into two groups (low satisfaction and high satisfaction) in order to explore the relation between the variables of interest. Of the 27 responses, 23 individuals were placed in the high satisfaction range and four individuals were placed in the low satisfaction range. For the first research question, Chi-square analysis was used to explore the relation between premarital counseling and the level of current marital satisfaction.

For the second research question, “Is couples counseling during times of marital discord linked to greater satisfaction of a marriage?” The participants were divided into

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two groups, those who received couples counseling and those who did not receive couples counseling. Chi-square was used to explore the relationship between couples counseling and marital satisfaction.

For the third research question, “Is a positive experience of premarital counseling linked to a great likelihood that couples will engage in couples counseling during times of marital discord?” The participants were divided into two groups, those who received premarital counseling and those who participated in couples counseling. Chi-square was used to explore the relationship between premarital counseling and its predictor of later couples counseling.

### **Participants**

A total of 27 subjects participated in this study. They were recruited through St. Catherine University online information system “*Kateway*.” Study details and a link to an online survey were posted on four different dates over the period of four weeks. A total of 30 subjects began the survey but only 27 (N=27) completed the survey.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

**Age and Gender.** The participants in this study were all asked to identify their age range. A total of five (17%) participants identified within the age range of 18-25. Six (21%) participants reported in the age range of 26-30. Of the 29 participants to this question, a total of eighteen (62%) participants identified themselves in the age range of 30+.

When asked to identify their gender, the participants were given the option of female, male or other. Of the 27 participants who made it through the screening questions, they all identified themselves as *female* (100%). When the participants were

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asked to identify the gender of their current or most recent spouse, of the 23 participants that answered this question, they all reported that their spouse was *male* (100%).

**Number of Marriages.** This study asked the participants to share the number of marriages that they have experienced. All participants (N=27) responded to this question. The mean number of marriages that the participants had experienced was 1.15 ( $SD=0.46$ ). The minimum reported marriages experienced was one and the maximum was three. Twenty-four participants (89%) identified only having been married once. Two participants (7%) had been married twice. One respondent (4%) had been married three times.

**Length of Marriage.** The participants were asked to identify the length of their current or most recent marriage. Of the 25 participants who responded to this question, three participants (12%) identified their marriage as being *less than one year*. Eight participants (32%) reported their marriage as being in the *1-5 years* range. Another two participants (8%) identified their marriage as being in the *6-10 years* range. Twelve participants (48%) reported their marriage as being *10+ years*.

**Premarital Counseling.** The participants were asked to identify whether or not they participated in premarital counseling with their current or most recent spouse. All participants (N=27) responded to this question. Of the 27 responses, sixteen participants (59%) said *yes*, they did participate in premarital counseling. Eleven participants (41%) reported *no*, they did not participate in premarital counseling.

The sixteen participants who participated in premarital counseling were directed to a question that asked whether or not they found premarital counseling beneficial (*not at all beneficial, somewhat beneficial, beneficial, mostly beneficial, extremely beneficial*).

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Of the sixteen participants who received premarital counseling, one (6%) reported it as being *not at all beneficial*, seven (44%) participants reported it as being *somewhat beneficial*, two (13%) reported it as being *beneficial*, three (19%) reported it as being *mostly beneficial*, and three (19%) reported premarital counseling as being *extremely beneficial*.

**Couples Counseling.** The participants were asked to identify whether or not they had participated in couples counseling. Of the 27 participants to this question, five (19%) reported *yes* and twenty-two (81%) reported *no*. The five (19%) who reported participation in couples counseling were directed to a question that asked whether or not they found couples counseling beneficial (*not at all beneficial, somewhat beneficial, beneficial, mostly beneficial, extremely beneficial*). Of the five participants who received couples counseling, one (20%) found it *not at all beneficial*, two (40%) participants found it *somewhat beneficial*, one (20%) found it *beneficial*, and another individual (20%) found it *mostly beneficial*.

The twenty-two participants that reported no participation in couples counseling were directed to this question: If you were faced with marital distress, how likely would it be that you would seek Couples Counseling (*very unlikely, unlikely, somewhat unlikely, undecided, somewhat likely, likely, very unlikely*)? One participant (5%) reported *undecided*, seven participants (32%) reported *somewhat likely*, seven participants (32%) reported *likely*, and seven participants (32%) reported *very likely*.

**Premarital and Couples Counseling.** Of the four participants who participated in both premarital and couples counseling, they were asked to identify whether or not

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their participation/experience with premarital counseling influenced their decision to seek couples counseling (yes or no). All four (100%) of these participants answered *no*.

**Marital Satisfaction.** This study was interested in the marital satisfaction of couples that have participated in premarital counseling. Of the 25 participants who answered this question in regards to satisfaction with their marriage, 14 (56%) identified being *very satisfied*, 7 (28%) reported being *satisfied*, one (4%) reported being *somewhat satisfied*, two (8%) participants reported feeling *neutral*, and one (4%) reported *somewhat dissatisfied* with their marriage. For the purpose of analysis, a dummy variable was created (high satisfaction and low satisfaction) where low satisfaction included *Somewhat Dissatisfied*, *Neutral* and *Somewhat Satisfied* and high satisfaction included *Very Satisfied* and *Satisfied*.

### Results

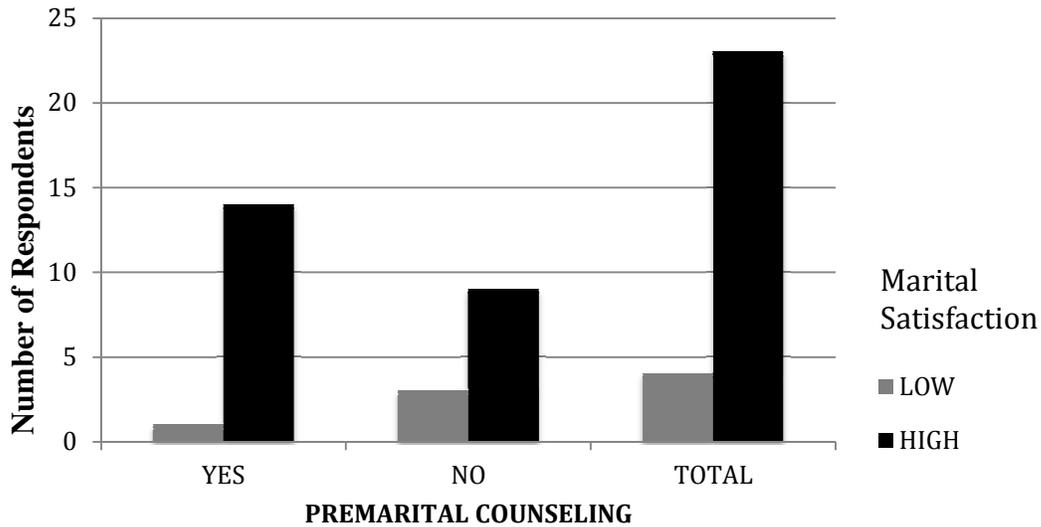
**Research Question One.** The first research question was as follows: Is involvement in premarital counseling linked to greater satisfaction of a marriage? The research hypothesis was as follows:

- Spouses who participated in premarital counseling will have a higher level of marital satisfaction than spouses who did not participate in premarital counseling.

Chi-square results revealed that the relation between variables was not significant,  $X^2$  (df, N = 27) = value,  $p = 1.776$ . Results show that spouses who participated in premarital counseling did not have a significantly higher level of marriage satisfaction than those who did not participate in premarital counseling. Although results were not significant, examination of the results in Figure 1, show that participants who had taken part in premarital counseling do show a trend toward high marital satisfaction.

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Figure 1. Premarital Counseling and Marital Satisfaction



**Research Question Two.** The second research question was as follows: Is marital or couples counseling during times of marital discord linked to greater satisfaction of a marriage and less likelihood of divorce? The research hypothesis was as follows:

- Spouses who participated in marital or couples counseling will have a higher level of marital satisfaction and less likelihood of divorce than spouses who did not participate in marital or couples counseling.

Chi-square results revealed that the relation between variables was not significant,  $X^2$  (df, N = 27) = value,  $p = 3.084$ . Results show that spouses who participated in couples counseling did not have a significantly higher level of marital satisfaction than those who did not participate in couples counseling.

**Research Question Three.** The third research question was as follows: Is a positive experience of premarital counseling linked to a greater likelihood that couples will engage in marital or couples counseling during times of marital discord? The research hypothesis was as follows:

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- A positive experience with premarital counseling is linked to a greater likelihood that couples will engage in marital or couples counseling during times of marital discord.

Chi-square results revealed no relationship between participation in premarital counseling and a greater likelihood of pursuing couples counseling in times of marital discord. Chi-square results revealed that the relation between variables was not significant,  $X^2$  (df, N = 27) = value,  $p = 2.743$ .

### **Discussion**

This research study sought to further our understanding of marital satisfaction by examining the relationship between premarital counseling, couples counseling, and marital satisfaction among couples. The interest in the relationship between these variables is derived from the literature that emphasizes many of these variables individually but not in relation to each other. Furthermore, the literature has focused primarily on types of premarital and couples counseling, indicators of marital satisfaction, and experiences and hardships of divorce.

The literature speaks to the need for research to focus on preventing divorce by using programs that increase or assist with marital satisfaction. The literature indicates divorce as an outcome in relationships due to marital dissatisfaction and continuing weight that becomes increasingly challenging to endure over time (Hirschberger, Srivastava, Marsh, Cowan & Cowan, 2009). Premarital counseling and couples counseling use a variety of interventions to help couples deal with marital distress, communication, finances, conflict resolution, etc. In order for many couples to address

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marital dissatisfaction, they need to identify appropriate strategies for working through their problems.

In the current study, significant relations between premarital counseling, marital counseling, and marriage satisfaction were not found. This most likely has more to do with the number of participants and the lack of variability in all of the variables measured. One trend was found suggesting that participants who did receive premarital counseling were more likely to rate their satisfaction with their marriage more highly than those who did not receive premarital counseling.

Another interesting aspect of this study was that the average number of marriages experienced was 1.15. Twenty-four of twenty-seven participants have only been married once. Of the 27 participants, 18 of them are at least thirty years old. These results contrast with what research has been telling us. According to Gretchen Livingston, remarriage has been on the rise for older Americans (55+). Younger generations are less likely to remarry, while 67% of 55 – 64 year olds are remarried (Livingston, 2014). Although 30+ is not a specific age group, it is fair to consider what research is telling us in comparison to what the participants reported. These numbers also suggest possible limitations of this study, in that the participants, who did respond, perhaps are not representative of the general population.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This research study has strengths and limitations that are important to identify. In regards to strengths, the research method is quantitative in nature and uses an online survey method to collect anonymous data. The online format of the survey allows for quick distribution and convenient, easy access for participants. The anonymous nature of

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the survey may allow the participants to feel more comfortable in answering the questions honestly (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2008). Another strength of this anonymous survey is the ability to hinder any sort of influence from the researcher to the participants (Monette et al., 2008).

In addition to the strengths of this study, there are several limitations that may have impacted the results of this research study. The main limitations in this study were related to the number of participants (N=27) and the lack of diversity in both marriage satisfaction and use of premarital and marital counseling. When participants were asked to identify their satisfaction with marriage, 23 individuals fell into the category of high satisfaction. The remaining four participants fell into the category of low satisfaction. Trends indicate that if a larger number of participants had taken part in this study, the potential of finding significant results might have been achieved. Some other limitations and suggestions for future research are explored below.

The second limitation is that the gender distribution in this study was 100 percent female. The distribution of zero percent male participants further emphasizes the need for more research into the male perspective, as the entire portion of the research has emphasized only female responses. It is not unusual that this study only received female responses. According to the U.S. News and World Report on Education, as of 2015, the student gender distribution of St. Catherine University was 96.5% female and 3.5% male; it is unknown what the staff gender distribution is within the University. Further, 100 percent of the participants reported that their spouse was a male. Further research is needed to determine how marital satisfaction and help seeking may differ between same-sex couples, as compared to heterosexual couples. The relationship between same-sex

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couples may face different challenges in a marriage, as well as societal strain due to stigma and cultural beliefs.

A third limitation to consider in this study is the fluctuation that occurs in marriage. This survey was taken at one point in time. For the participants who took part, the level of marriage satisfaction might fluctuate to some degree as marriages often experience ups and downs as stress and changes occur in life. If the sample was larger, this would not be a concern but in this study, again, the sample size was relatively small and the circumstances of what was going on in the participants' lives as they were taking the survey may impact the results.

Another limitation to note in this study is an assumption that the researcher made prior to analyzing the data. The researcher made the assumption that the majority of participants would identify as a younger population. This assumption was made due to the restrictions of posting on a college forum website. However, the results of the participants' ages were exceptionally different from the researcher's assumption.

A final limitation is around the type of premarital counseling received. The researcher did not ask the participants to identify whether they had faith-based premarital counseling or secular premarital counseling. They were not asked whether premarital counseling was provided by a clergyperson or a licensed mental health professional. Premarital counseling can look different depending on who is providing the support, which can also impact how the participants reacted to premarital counseling.

Future research would be needed in order to explore these research questions more fully, controlling for the identified limitations of this study. A larger sample size, including both men and women with a range of levels in marriage satisfaction is

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indicated. Additionally, it will be important to identify the types of premarital and marital counseling in order to explore the effectiveness of different types of counseling as it relates to marital satisfaction.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

The findings of this study have indicated that premarital counseling may be associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction. This study was unable to determine the true nature of relationships between couples counseling and marital satisfaction, as well as the relationship between premarital counseling and couples counseling. The findings in this study cannot be generalized to the greater population of married couples. Therefore, it will be important to do further research, review previous research, and use the results when working with couples.

We already know from previous research that people who are married have a higher rate of happiness in their lives than those who are not married or label themselves as single (Waite & Gallagher, 2001). It is also important to recall the negative outcomes of divorce on emotional, physical, and social well being. Research tells us that married people have a longer longevity than individuals who are single. With all of the supportive research on marriage and its association with happiness, still, almost half of marriages are failing (Marriage Counseling, 2011).

Although this study is not generalized to the overall population, the findings from this study are useful for interventions in social work practice. Social workers have been and will continue to work with couples and families in times of distress. This study and previous research has indicated that families do experience discord. Therefore, social workers can help introduce couples to coping strategies and provide education that fits

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into their specific circumstances and moves the attention away from divorce and towards reconciliation.

In order for social workers to move couples towards a successful marriage, there needs to be a focus on communication. A lack of and inadequate communication has been identified as one of the major reasons for couples to experience conflict (Amato & Previti, 2003). Social workers can educate and promote successful, appropriate, and supportive language through communication intervention strategies with couples. In order to address communication styles proactively, social workers can promote premarital counseling and marriage preparation courses. Social workers can offer these services in a faith-based or secular environment in order to target a larger population and actively prevent future discord.

This study found that premarital counseling was beneficial for those who participated. Of the fifteen participants who received premarital counseling, fourteen of them rated their marital satisfaction level as high. Social workers could use this development to provide premarital counseling to couples in order to promote more satisfying marriages. With this knowledge, social workers can use this as a motivator to strengthen relationships and avoid divorce and all of the burdens that come with it.

In order to encourage more couples to participate in premarital counseling, many states are implementing incentives. For example, in the 2014 Minnesota Statutes, section 517.08 subdivision 1b: couples who participate in twelve hours of premarital counseling that include the teaching of conflict management skills and communication, will only be required to pay forty dollars for their marriage license. However, individuals who do not

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participate will be required to pay \$115 if they did not meet the premarital education requirement.

Although there are incentives for participation in premarital counseling, couples counseling continues to face stigma in the United States. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of research on why there is a stigma attached to couples counseling. Assumptions can be made that the stigma is around embarrassment, fear of being judged by other couples, or even the fear of being seen as a dysfunctional couple. Social workers need to use this information to promote couples counseling in a judgment-free manner. They should advocate for incentives for couples that participate in couples counseling rather than seeking divorce. Social workers could also advocate for relational well-being by asking lawmakers to consider couples counseling interventions before a couple decides to terminate a marriage.

It is often found that faith-based communities are the first line of support for couples in preparation for marriage or in terms of marital discord. Social workers could benefit from collaborating with faith-based organizations to bring together the strengths and areas of support for couples, as well as de-stigmatizing couples counseling. This holistic approach can promote overall relationship wellness.

Conclusively, there are a lot of different steps that social workers can take to promote happy and supportive marriages. Their ability to provide, encourage, advocate and collaborate with other premarital counseling providers can assist in targeting a higher population of couples. As for couples counseling, social workers can continue to support the impact of couples counseling, as well as provide judgment-free settings where

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couples feel comfortable and willing to discuss their areas of concern as an alternative to divorce.

### **Conclusion**

Previous research has identified the importance of premarital and couples counseling. Additionally, previous research has identified various programs and skill areas that are beneficial to couples. However, the specific areas related to preparing for marriage and problem solving during conflict in relation to satisfaction have not been thoroughly explored. This research aimed to explore the impact of premarital counseling and couples counseling on marital satisfaction.

Through an anonymous online survey, 27 participants who are currently or were previously married were asked to call on their experiences with premarital counseling, couples counseling, and satisfaction with marriage. A chi-square analysis determined the association between variables. However, due to multiple limitations, the results were not significant. This research evaluated how premarital counseling and couples counseling impacted marital satisfaction among couples. Although the researcher did not find significant results, there was a trend between participation in premarital counseling and marital satisfaction. The results suggest that further research needs to be conducted in order to determine the associations between premarital counseling, couples counseling, and marital satisfaction.

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MARITAL SATISFACTION: THE IMPACT OF PREMARITAL AND COUPLES  
COUNSELING

# MARITAL SATISFACTION: THE IMPACT OF PREMARITAL AND COUPLES COUNSELING

## Appendix A: Survey Protocol

- 1) What is your age?
- 2) Are you currently married or widowed?
  - a) Yes
    - i) What is your gender?
    - ii) What is/was the gender of your spouse?
    - iii) How long have/had you been married?
    - iv) How many marriages have you had?
    - v) How satisfied are you with your current (or most recent) marriage?
    - vi) Did you and your current (or most recent) spouse receive premarital counseling (education and/or preparation – this can be through a religious organization or not)?
      - (1) Yes
        - (a) Premarital Counseling was: on a scale from 1 – 10 (1 being not at all beneficial and 10 being extremely beneficial)
      - (2) No
        - (a) Have you participated in couples counseling (therapy for couples who are experiencing distress, seeking support, problem-solving techniques, or parenting education)?
          - (b) Yes
            - (i) Couples Counseling was: on a scale from 1 – 10 (1 being not at all beneficial and 10 being extremely beneficial)
          - (c) No
            - (i) If you were faced with marital distress, how likely would it be that you would seek couples counseling from 1 – 10 (1 very unlikely and 10 being extremely likely)
    - b) No
      - i) Have you ever been married?
        - (1) Yes
          - (a) How long was your last marriage?
          - (b) Did you receive premarital counseling?
            - (i) Premarital Counseling was: on a scale from 1 – 10 (1 being not at all beneficial and 10 being extremely beneficial)
          - (c) Did you and your spouse participate in couples counseling?
            - (i) Yes
              1. Couples Counseling was: on a scale from 1 – 10 (1 being not at all beneficial and 10 being extremely beneficial)
            - (ii) No
        - (2) No
          - (a) Thank you for your time in filling out this survey however; your information is no longer needed for this research.

*For individuals who participated in both premarital and couples counseling: Do you feel that your experience with premarital counseling influenced your decision to seek couples counseling?*