

USING WHAT PREMARITAL COUPLES ALREADY KNOW TO INFORM MARRIAGE EDUCATION: INTEGRATION OF A GOTTMAN MODEL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: The Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act of Florida stimulated a study of premarital couples. “What are the best things that you do in your relationship” was asked in a survey of persons seeking marriage licenses. The sample consisted of 962 participants. Responses were examined using Gottman’s “Sound Marital House” (1999) as a theoretical framework. Results indicate that premarital participants view specific aspects of the Sound Marital House as the best things they contribute to their relationship. Responses can be used as a guide to the development of a Gottman-based marriage preparation curriculum.

KEY WORDS: marriage education; marriage preparation; sound marital house; Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act.

A recent study that asked “Who are the marital experts?” found that either newlyweds, those who were in long-term marriages, or

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recent divorcees made the most accurate predictions of marital satisfaction. These groups of non-professionals were more accurate in their predictions than trained professionals and students in the profession of psychotherapy and family therapy (Ebling & Levenson, 2003, p. 130). Although it has been asserted that engaged couples may be idealistic about their marital future (Olson, 1983), couple's knowledge about elements of successful marriages is an untapped resource (Ebling & Levenson, 2003; Williams, 1992).

Separation and divorce are common occurrences in the United States. Although the divorce rate may have reached a plateau, research indicates that marital quality may be declining (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003). Concerns about the stability of today's marriages are being addressed through statewide initiatives promoting marital education in states such as Louisiana, Arizona, Texas, and Florida (Stanley, 2001). The intent of many marriage education programs is to diminish the negative effects of marital distress and divorce (Williams, Riley, Risch & Van Dyke, 1999; Silliman & Schumm, 2000; Stanley, 2001).

Research has revealed that marital distress can be a significant health hazard for adults and children. Studies have linked marital distress and/or dissolution to a significant number of mental and physical problems (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Coie, Watt, West, et al., 1993; Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1993), physical health difficulties, impaired parent-child relationships (Erel & Burman, 1995), decreased work productivity (Forthofer, Markman, Cox, Stanley, & Kessler, 1996), poverty, and juvenile delinquency (Houseknecht & Sastry, 1996).

In addition, findings from a number of studies demonstrate that the quality of interaction between spouses appears to be associated with marital dissolution (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Markman, 1981; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Celments, 1993; Matthews, Wickrama & Conger, 1996). The more negativity present in a relationship, the lower the amount of positive interaction between the couple. When there are higher levels of negativity there is less empathy and caring, less smiling and laughter. Mathews and colleagues (1996) assert that "the weight of the evidence, then, suggests that the quality of the marital interaction whether warm and supportive or hostile and negative, relates to risk for marital distress and even dissolution of the relationship" (p. 643). Despite the continued growth of research predicting marital stability and dissolution, "with few exceptions, the theory base in marriage preparation remains underdeveloped and inadequately tested" (Silliman & Schumm, 2000, p. 137).

GOTTMAN'S WORK AS A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Gottman and associates delineate stages of divorce (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman, 1993). They conclude that couples who eventually divorce first remain unhappily married for a time, then seriously consider dissolution, separate, and finally divorce. They assert that the cascade toward divorce is drawn from the interaction of three interrelated domains (the perceptual, the behavioral, and the physiological domains), each of which has the potential for balance. Data show that in each of these domains, the ratio between negative and positive is the best discriminator of marital dissolution, leading to the conclusion that successful marriages depend on a balance between positive and negative interactions.

Gottman's research has demonstrated that the best and most consistent predictor of marital satisfaction is negative affect reciprocity. In negative affect reciprocity, a spouse's response to a partner's negativity will likely be met with negative affect (Gottman, 1999). But all negativity is not equal. Several affect-laden communications in particular are especially corrosive to relational satisfaction and stability. These particularly detrimental communication patterns are criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling, termed the Four Horsemen of Apocalypse (Gottman, 1999).

Physiology is a predictor variable of marital stability (Gottman, 1999). Diffuse physiological arousal (DPA) is the body's response to perceived danger. In this response, couples experience a reduced ability to process information, making it extremely hard to listen during DPA-laden circumstances. There is less access to new learning and greater access to habitual behaviors and cognitions. In this process, fight-flight responses become more accessible and "creative problem solving goes out the window" (p. 75). According to Gottman (1999), it is vital for married partners to be able to ameliorate the "fight-flight" response. They must learn how to "slow things down, restore calm, and refocus attention" (p. 77). They must discover how to regulate "strong blends of emotion." Not only will this "soothing" of self and other facilitate more fruitful dialogue; it will also contribute to the physical and emotional health of each marital partner. In sum, the core triad of alliance (behavior flow, perception, and physiology) has a bi-directional relationship. This triad determines flooding which leads to the distance isolation cascade (mediated by the Four Horseman), which, in turn leads to distress and frequently dissolution.

According to Gottman (1993), there are two “staples” of marriages that work: overall level of positive affect and an ability to reduce negative affect during conflict resolution. These two qualities are expanded in Gottman’s theory of the Sound Marital House (1999). The Sound Marital House, comprised of seven floors, rests on the foundation of marital friendship (the first three floors). The next level is positive sentiment override, followed by regulation of conflict through problem solving, then supporting one another’s dreams. The top level consists of creating shared meaning. Using the Sound Marital House, strengths and areas for improvement in couple’s relationships can be identified.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Silliman and Schumm (2000) assert in a literature review of marriage preparation programs that improvements in the assessment of couple’s attitudes and interaction patterns have led to an enhancement of marital interventions. The trend in marriage education in the past two decades has been the enrichment approach, which is aimed toward enriching couples strengths (Silliman & Schumm, 2000), but what do couples say are the strengths of their relationship and how can this information be used for prevention and education? “What are the best things that you do in your relationship” was asked of premarital participants. Responses were examined using Gottman’s theoretical framework.

METHOD

Sample

The sample of this study consisted of 962 premarital individuals. Of the respondents, 50% were female ($n = 481$) and 50% ($n = 481$) were male. The mean age of males in the sample was 36.4 years compared to 34.6 years for the females. The mean length of time the couples knew each other, at the time of completion of the premarital survey, was 2.5 years. Of the respondents 53.6% had never been married before, 28.1% had one previous marriage, 9.4% had been married twice before, 4.8% had three previous marriages, 2.3% had four previous marriages, and 1.9% had been married five or more times prior to their current relationship.

The average level of education was “some college” for both males and females. Personal income for male respondents ranged from \$30,000 to \$39,999 whereas the range of personal income for females was \$20,000 to \$29,999. Additional information about the sample is provided in Table 1.

Procedure

Convenience sampling was utilized and premarital surveys were disseminated by county court officers to persons applying for a marriage license in the state of Florida. One specific question on the survey asked “What are the best things that you do in your relationship?” At the

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the Sample

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Race		
White	647	67.3
Black	173	18.0
Hispanic	95	9.9
Asian	34	3.5
Native American	13	1.3
Number of Previous Marriages		
0	516	53.6
1	270	28.1
2	90	9.4
3	46	4.8
4	22	2.3
5 or more	18	1.9
Number of Children		
0	522	54.3
1	203	21.1
2	131	13.6
3	65	6.8
4	24	2.5
5	10	1.0
6	6	0.6
8	1	0.1

time of analysis, a total of 1,119 surveys had been returned. Of those, 962 participants responded to the open-ended question, and comprise the final sample of this study. As it was not possible to determine how many people received the survey, it was not possible to calculate a response rate. Thus, the Gottman model was applied only to the responding couples and it is not known how representative the sample is of all persons applying for a marriage license in the state.

Data Analyses

Premarital individuals were asked to answer the aforementioned open-ended question. This question, with the plentitude of responses, was a commitment to examine. The researchers used a grounded theory informed methodology for coding the responses. In grounded theory, themes emerge as data are analyzed (Rafuls & Moon, 1996, p. 64). Applying grounded theory methods, a research approach that allows substantial meaning and formal theory to be extracted directly from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), we critically reviewed respondents' phrases and sentences to define categories that capture the perspective of premarital respondents' strengths as they self-identified them.

The authors met to discuss the emerging categories and to determine the ultimate process to use during the open coding process. After the responses were sorted into themes, a constant comparative method was employed and themes were continually identified until there was a saturation of categories. Using the constant comparative method, going back and forth from the raw data and comparing it to the open coding, we created categories and linkages in the data (Banks, Louie, & Einerson, 2000) that reflect overarching themes.

The selective coding of the data was the result of careful examination of the open and axial coding. It is in this phase of the analysis that the authors veered from the traditional grounded theory methodology. Strauss and Corbin (1994) assert that grounded theory is designed to direct researchers to produce theory. Opposed to creating new theory from the data, the authors chose to apply the existing theory of Gottman's Sound Marital House to the data. In the selective coding process, responses were grouped by theme and compared to the seven levels of the Sound Marital House. Then, based on their similarity to the levels, responses were sorted into Gottman's model and coded based on which level of the Sound Marital House was identified. Then, this coding system also became a numeric means of describing the frequencies of responses for each floor of the sound marital house. Because the number

of responses was so large, the emergent quantitative data were entered into SPSS 9.0 and frequencies of responses were examined for each level of the Sound Marital House. Since individuals could report more than one aspect, it was possible for one participant to have multiple levels of the sound marital house represented in one response.

RESULTS

The researchers wanted to capture the perspective of premarital participants' self-identified strengths of their relationships. Specific themes discovered through the open and axial coding process include the importance of "spending time together," "sex," "love," aspects of communication, "respect," physical affection, "intimacy," "openness," "understanding," church related activities, being "best friends," "making plans for the future," and "humor." These categories represent aspects of relationships that participants found rewarding, or ranked as "the best things" they do in their relationships. Although these responses were rich with information, the researchers found that these categories of responses could be further examined from the perspective of Gottman's Sound Marital House.

Gottman's Sound Marital House

The Sound Marital House is based on two staples of marriage: overall positive affect and the ability to reduce negative affect during conflict resolution. The seven levels of the Sound Marital House are love maps, fondness and admiration, turning toward versus turning away, positive sentiment override, problem-solving, making dreams and aspirations come true, and creating shared meaning (Gottman, 1999). We added an additional category of "other" to include responses that did not fit the existing seven levels of Gottman's model.

Love maps. The foundation of the Sound Marital House is based on the three components of positive affect in marital friendship, which make up the first three levels of the Gottman model. The first is love maps, or the ability of each partner to "actively make maps of one's partner's psychological world" (p. 81) and recall details of their partner's life as well as details of the relationship. Love maps include dimensions of friendship, hope, and aspirations.

Respondents cited specific characteristics of love maps as impor-

tant in their relationship in 259 instances. Categories of responses that emerged within the category of love maps included being “best friends,” compatibility, and “love.” Respondents asserted that friendship or being “best friends” was an important aspect of their relationship. Statements such as “We are each others best friends” and “My partner is my best friend” depict the priority given to friendship. Some participants seemed to identify a parallel between connection and compatibility. They highlighted the importance of compatibility by stating “Getting along with one another” and “We are compatible in all aspects” are the best aspects of their relationships.

Respondents also conveyed that love was an essential element of relationships. Statements such as “We love one another unconditionally” and “We show one another that we love each other unconditionally through our actions” described the importance of unrestricted love. The reciprocal expression of love was revealed through statements such as “We treat each other with much love” and “Shower each other with love.” Love also serves as the foundation of a relationship as depicted by one respondent who claimed “Our relationship is based on a strong love and friendship.”

Fondness and admiration system. In the sound marital house, the second level of positive affect in marital friendship focuses on the rate of spontaneous fondness and admiration expressions. Affection and respect in the marriage are encompassed within this level.

The data revealed that fondness and admiration were also important to the premarital respondents, being cited 538 times. The emphasis on respect was denoted by participants in direct statements about the high esteem they possess for one another. “We respect each other for who we are and (we) respect each other’s opinion” is one example of responses that fell within this category. “Respect the love and friendship that we share” was another respondent’s answer, focusing on the mutual respect they share as a couple.

Caring for one another, not including physical care, was illustrated through descriptions of “looking out for each other,” sharing and appreciation. Responses included statements such as “I love taking care of my family (and) care(ing) for my partner,” “Share ourselves and care for one another” and “Appreciate how much the other means to each other.” “Attend(ing) to my partner’s needs and desires” and “We want each other to be happy as well as ourselves” were also stated to imply the significance of caring in relationships.

“Taking care of my partner” was demonstrated through partners’

physical affection, which included specific mention of acts such as kissing and hugging. "Being affectionate privately and publicly," "sex" and "hug and hold each other" were affirmed as strengthening relationships. The ways in which couples physically respond to each other was included in statements such as "My whole body tingles when we touch." Lastly, intimacy signified through non-physical closeness was described by statements such as "Share(ing) those feelings with each other."

Turning toward vs. turning away. Also termed the "Emotional Bank Account," turning toward versus turning away marks the final component of positive affect and the third level of the Sound Marital House (p. 88). This level focuses on the couple's positive and negative exchanges in their relationships. When couples spend quality time together, they invest "emotional money in the bank account" (p. 107) that will help them get through more difficulty times. Positive sentiment override is possible when the couple has sufficient positive affect in non-conflict situations.

Turning toward versus turning away was the most frequently cited aspect of all of the levels of the Sound Marital House, where 866 respondents attested that this was their best contribution to their relationship. Respondents denoted that spending time with one another was a positive exchange, including general things such as "spending quality time together," and "going out." Respondents also described positive exchanges embedded in "Spend(ing) time with good friends and family, enjoy going places and doing things together." Others replied with references of "simply being together" as strengths in their relationships through assertions such as "Spending time together, just being together brings me happiness and peace" and "We always enjoy being together no matter what we do." Another stated "The best thing are going out and doing stuff together, just being together doing stuff."

Positive sentiment override. When the three components of positive affect in marital friendship are working well, they lead to the forth level of the house, Positive Sentiment Override. Everyday marital interactions are important determinants in effective conflict resolution at this level (Gottman, 1999). Negative Sentiment Override occurs when these same mundane daily interactions are viewed negatively, or with insufficient positive affect.

The category with the least number of responses within the sound marital house was positive sentiment override ($n = 114$). Respondents referred to the importance of positive affect through accounts of the

use of humor in relationships. One respondent asserted that "Our humor plays a major role." Another claimed a strength to be that "We both try to maintain a sense of humor." Respondents also emphasized the importance of humor when describing laughter through statements such as: "We laugh together," "We are always laughing and joking," and "We're always laughing."

Problem solving. Regulation of conflict rather than resolution opens the door to the next level of the house, the problem solving level. The three parts of problem solving include "(1) dialog with perpetual problems, (2) effective problem-solving of solvable problems, and (3) physiological soothing" (p. 105).

The importance of problem solving was also denoted by respondents ($n = 175$). Participants described communication, compromise, openness and understanding as ways to problem solve in their relationships. Communication included talking to one another, sharing thoughts, and listening to one another. Individuals exemplified the value of expression through their responses.

Compromise was stressed through statements such as "We talk and listen to one another, if there is something we disagree on we compromise." Strategies for handling disagreements were described in statements like "We never leave an issue open, we talk things out," "Talk about everything and agree on the proper way to handle situations," "We talk a lot and discuss problems instead of arguing," "Try to listen and not "hit below the belt" when arguing," and "Try to listen, not be impulsive in the things I say before I say it." Listening and sharing were exemplified through statements such as "Listen(ing) to each others wants and needs, and we have time to listen as friends," "We listen to each other" and "We share our feelings, we talk."

Openness was a quality signified through comments like "We are always open and honest with each other, even if we know the other might disagree" and "Show how we feel very openly." Some participants found understanding pivotal and explained "We always try to understand each other so we can work things out" and "Try to understand when we do the things we do."

Making dreams and aspirations come true. Couples tend to either dialog or gridlock perpetual marital problems. Marital gridlock is avoided in this level of the house by allowing for conversation with positive affect regarding continuous problems the couple faces in their marriage. This level targets the ability of the couple to honor each other's dreams and aspiration and work to make them reality.

Participants also revealed that supporting their partners' dreams *is* important ($n = 143$). Support was demonstrated pragmatically through statements such as "I Provide moral and financial support to my mate" as well as means of emotional support such as "Confide and support each other" and "Encourage each other in our creative pursuits." A sense of support led some to feel secure as shown in the statement "Help each other stay focused and productive, and feel secure" as well as general statements such as "We're very supportive of each other."

Planning for the future and considering the dreams of their partner was another way in which couples signified the strength of their relationship. Responses included "Plan things that will make us happy in the future" and "Talk about dreams and hopes for our future."

Creating shared meaning. In order to deepen and strengthen the relationship the couple must be able to create shared meaning, the final level in the Sound Marital House. Creating shared meaning is comprised of "(1) meshing individual life dreams, and (2) meshing rituals of connections, goals, roles, myths, narratives, and metaphors" (p. 106). The four target areas include rituals, roles, goals, and symbols in the relationship.

Shared meaning was the second largest category of responses, where 360 references to creating shared meaning were provided. Respondents shared the various activities they enjoy doing together to enhance their relationship. Spending time together in a specific context included mention of activities such as sports, going to movies, and going out to eat. Other responses included time spent outdoors "We love being outdoors with our animals, and there's nothing better than surfing with your mate" and "We spend time fishing, going to the beach, sunsets, looking at stars, taking pictures, going to parks in the area." Other activities highlighted by couples included "We like movies, plays, museums, hiking, reading, eating, and fine wine," "Golf, watching movies, gardening, boating" and "Travel, spend time outdoors, physical fitness activities, having coffee together."

Parenting was another valuable component of relationships in which there were children. Participants stated that "Having fun with the children," and "Attempting to be the best parents to our three children that we can be" enhance their relationships. The importance of joining families was also acknowledged through statements such as "It is important to raise our children together" and "Always treat his son the same as mine."

Spiritual growth, through church-related activities, was described as a staple of some relationships. “We pray together” and “Pray with and for each other” were specific comments related to spirituality. Church was also described as a strength in relationships by responses such as “Go to church” and “Go to the church and sing.”

Other. Survey respondents answered the question: What are the best things that you do in your relationship? Although the researchers determined that the majority of the responses did fit into categories corresponding with the Gottman’s Sound Marital House, there were categories of answers that emerged that did not fit with in the levels of the model. These groupings, coded as “other,” were comprised of 38 responses and included things such as home management and general statements such as “everything.”

“Manage time and finances” was a general theme under home management. Respondents attested to the importance of a “well running household” as a relational asset by stating they “Keep the house in order and make sure the bills are paid,” “Cooking, cleaning and keeping a nice yard” and “Provide a pleasant home environment.”

Some participants responded generally, by stating that they enjoyed doing “everything” together. Answers included under this category include statements such as “We do everything together,” “We share everything that goes on in our lives” and “We work together on everything.”

Other responses that did not fit into categories of the Sound Marital House ranged from “Try to keep things new and exciting” to “Being faithful.” Additional replies included “Smile, and help each other deal with everyday stress,” “Commitment,” and “Protect each other.”

Frequency of responses. As individuals could report a number of things that they thought were the best things they did in their relationships, frequency of responses was the most accurate way to depict the proportion of responses that corresponded with the various levels of the sound marital house. As seen in Figure 1, turning toward versus turning away was the most frequently cited response where 866 respondents attested that this was their best contribution to their relationship. Fondness and admiration was cited 538 times, followed by shared meaning ($n = 360$), love maps ($n = 259$), problem solving ($n = 175$), dreams ($n = 143$) and positive sentiment override ($n = 114$). The smallest category that emerged included the responses that fell under the category of “other” comprised of 38 responses.

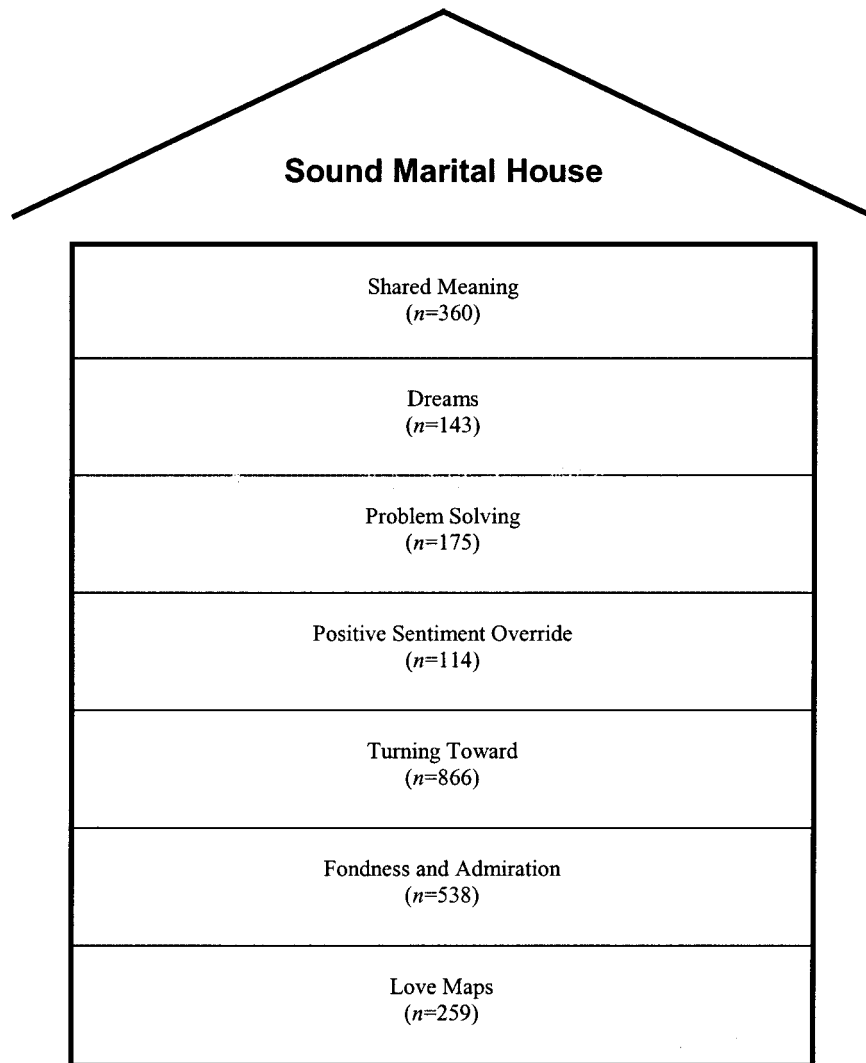


FIGURE 1

Participant Responses of Elements of the Sound Marital House (Gottman, 1999)

DISCUSSION

The researchers sought to use premarital individuals' self-reported strengths to explore ways to enhance the content of pre-marital education programs. By assessing the strengths as identified and described by premarital participants, the researchers looked to determine new approaches to marriage education, aimed toward enriching couples self-reported strengths. Results indicate that premarital respondents view specific aspects of the Sound Marital House as the best things they contribute to their relationships. These aspects can inform educators about premarital attitudes and how these attitudes relate to Gottman's theory of predictors of marital success and dissolution.

These responses are valuable for family therapists and educators, as they depict the qualitative opinions of a large sample of a population in the state of Florida. By coupling what we know as researchers and practitioners, with that which couples recognize as strengths in their own relationships, marriage education may assist in the couples' identification of factors that enhance and hinder their relationship. Furthermore, couples may be able to apply this knowledge to make lasting changes in their relationships.

The responses of the participants provide support for the development of a Gottman-based curriculum. In accordance with the Marriage Preparation Act of Florida, a marriage education curriculum and pilot study are being developed in the state of Florida.

Implications for Curriculum Development

Premarital education programs aim to promote marital quality and marital stability. Well-researched marriage education programs have demonstrated that brief, skills-based programs increase couple satisfaction, improve communication skills, and reduce negative conflict (Markman et al., 1993). Coupling this research with those factors identified by couples as strengths of their relationship, a marriage preparation and preservation (MPREP) team devised the goal to construct a curriculum that was simple, based on research, and was able to be adapted to diverse populations.

The delivery of the MPREP curriculum was dictated by state statute. The timing of the intervention is premarital, the format for the intervention is a four-hour course, the content is relationship skills, and the participants are volunteers. The four-hour premarital workshop commences with an introduction and a discussion of research that

indicates predictors of marital success. Using the strengths based approach, an overview of the components of the sound marital house is provided. The remainder of the curriculum is spent participating in activities that reveal specific communicative processes and then an in-depth discussion of each of the floors of the Sound Marital House and how they relate to relationships is discussed.

The content emphasizes that premarital couples can typically identify specific aspects of relationships that are important to the future success of that relationship. Reinforcing strategies to maintain those successful components of the relationship are taught. Additionally, couples are instructed on how to identify negative interaction patterns and ways to override these. Reinforcement strategies are employed to help them learn how to keep doing those positive things in their relationships that they are already doing so well.

Limitations

The inherent limitations of survey research affect this study. Babie (1998) contends, "surveys are inflexible" thus limiting the amount of possible information attainable (p. 273). Thus, by using this approach, the researchers were not able to control for how participants interpreted the question. Probes could not be used to gather more information and since the responses were anonymous, member-checks were not possible to help strengthen the credibility of the findings. Furthermore, since it was the county clerks who disseminated the survey, the research team did not have direct control over to whom the survey was given and how the survey was introduced to the couples. Furthermore, no information is known about when the survey was completed. Given each of these factors, the generalizability of these findings is extremely restricted.

The sample is another limitation of this study. The sampling frame consisted of individuals in one southeastern state. The subjects who chose to complete the survey may not represent all premarital couples in the state of Florida for the given year. Additionally, because the questions were written in English, it is unlikely that the respondents represent the rich diversity of the population of this area. Thus, the lack of representativeness of the sample is another weakness.

Another limitation of this study involves the data analysis process. All responses were combined together, without categorizing individuals into groups based on characteristics such as age, ethnicity, previous marital status or whether or not they have children. Additionally, re-

searcher bias is another important factor. The researchers chose to use a Gottman model in the selective coding process. Beyond the seeming relatedness between the themes that emerged in the open and axial coding to the sound marital house, the decision to use this model was also influenced by the researchers familiarity and concurrence with the theoretical and empirical underpinning of Gottman's work. Thus, multiple perspectives about how the categories were made and the subsequent results that emerged are clearly possible.

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