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THE CORRELATION BETWEEN CURRENT MARITAL SATISFACTION
AND PREMARITAL COUNSELING

California Family Study Center
Burbank, CA
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A Project submitted to the Faculty
of California Family Study Center,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the field of
Marriage, Family, and Child Therapy

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BY
DAVID P. GUNDERLACH

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Student's Name: David P. GunderlachClass Day: WednesdayDate: Nov. 27, 1984Advisor: Dr. Varnes

I. Title and Topic:

The Correlation Between Current Marital Satisfaction and Pre-marital Counseling.

II. Principal Hypotheses (cite references that are your basis for each hypothesis):

1. Couples who had pre-marital counseling will report greater current marital satisfaction than couples who had no pre-marital counseling (Schumm & Denton, 1979).
2. There will be a positive correlation between a more mature age at marriage and having received pre-marital counseling.

3.

III. Method (Original Study) or Criteria for Methodological Critique (Library Research):

Participants: 30 married couples, all members of a mainline Protestant church in the San Fernando Valley.

Instruments: Current marital satisfaction will be measured by a 9-point scale (Rhyme, 1981). Participants will self-report whether or not they received pre-marital counseling; they will also self-report their age at time of marriage. (Continued, next page)

IV. Data Analyses (Original Study) or Source of Studies Reviewed (Library Research):

The point-biserial correlation method will be used to determine the correlation between marital satisfaction and whether or not the couple had pre-marital counseling.

Chi square tests will determine whether the difference in marital satisfaction differs significantly between couples who have and have not had pre-marital counseling.

V. Discussion and Implications (list the implications and conclusions you expect):

1. The correlation between receiving pre-marital counseling and marital satisfaction will be positive.
2. The correlation between receiving pre-marital counseling and age at marriage will be higher than the correlation in "1." above.
3. More research is needed as to whether pre-marital counseling or post-marriage enrichment is more effective (Krauss, 1983).

VI. Append a list of all references (with complete bibliographic information) in American Psychological Association (APA) format.

Approved by: [Signature]Date: 11/27/84

III. Method (continued)

Procedure: Subject selection will find 15 couples who had pre-marital counseling and 15 couples who did not. Compare scores on 9-point marital satisfaction scale.

Abstract

While much importance has been attached to premarital counseling, this study asks a more basic question: "What is the correlation between premarital counseling and current marital satisfaction?" Age at time of marriage is also included.

Investigation of this question among two sample populations found virtually no correlation between premarital counseling and current marital satisfaction. There is a moderately negative correlation between age at time of marriage and premarital counseling in one of the samples, and there is a moderately positive correlation between age at time of marriage and current marital satisfaction in the same sample.



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I. Statement of the Problem

To look at premarital counseling today is like trying to examine a large diamond. Many are touting the value of premarital counseling, but it seems that each voice is heralding a different facet of this gem. "Although engaged couples-with gross problems may seek counseling, many couples receive no formal preparation whatsoever. The few that do usually receive assistance in the form of one or two lecture meetings with a clergyman or doctor" (Gleason & Prescott, 1977, p. 277).

Among clergy, for example, the number of sessions has been increasing over the past 25 to 30 years, and clergypersons have increased their awareness of the quality of their training for doing premarital counseling. A "surprising inadequacy," however, is the "failure to investigate needs of premarital couples, as perceived by the couples themselves" (Schumm & Denton, 1979, p. 24).

Premarital counseling takes place at the initial stage of the family developmental life cycle. Its goals, therefore, are more likely to be preventative and educational rather than remedial and therapeutic. "For clinical intervention to be most effective it should be guided by sound theoretical reasoning and that intervention into family systems should be based upon a coherent theory of family process and family development" (Bagarozzi & Rauen, 1981, p. 14).

"Premarital counseling is an absolute waste of time. There is no way that anybody can say anything to any couple before they get married that's really going to have an effect" (Friedman, 1984).

I am a Navy chaplain and, therefore, a clergyman. I have done premarital counseling and, over the years, have changed my style, content and number of sessions. One thing I have not changed is my requirement for premarital counseling, at the very least in order to spend some structured time with the prospective couple. If nothing else, we will get acquainted. But does premarital counseling work? Does it make any change or any difference in the way the couple relate to each other?

Most clergy I know require some type of premarital counseling of a prospective couple before performing the ceremony. Clergy are not alone in this requirement. California law, for instance, also requires premarital counseling before issuing a marriage license to a couple where one or both of the partners is less than 18 years old. Accordingly, the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services provides a premarital counseling service which meets the law's requirements. This service was developed out of a conviction that guidance provided by premarital counseling "offers an opportunity to prevent or at least reduce future marital and family difficulties" (Shonick, 1975, p. 321). Through another program, provision of prenatal services, the Los Angeles County people discovered a lack of health knowledge. "It was felt that premarital counseling for this population [less than 18 years of age] might be a particularly useful service [for] young couples who needed information and advice on important matters before problems arose" (Shonick, 1975, pp. 321-322). Belief in the usefulness of premarital counseling is noble, but does it make any difference in the lives of its recipients?

Part of the problem seems to be the "presumption that perceptions of the engaged couple are of less importance than the wisdom of the counselor" (Schumm & Denton, 1979, p. 24). Well-trained and well-intentioned professionals have produced a spate of studies about which method or how many sessions or what content or what format is optimum for premarital counseling. Many comparisons have been made among various formats, contents and methods of premarital counseling, but few if any comparisons have been made using a control group who had no premarital counseling.

The following studies, for example, have found different and often novel ways of doing premarital counseling. Yet none has determined whether marital satisfaction was increased as a result of the "better" premarital counseling method. Ridley, Jorgensen, Morgan, & Avery (1982) compared the self-reported relationship adjustment of two groups. One group had participated in a relationship enhancement training; the other was a relationship discussion group. The relationship enhancement group increased from pre- to post-test on all measures of relationship quality, while the discussion group decreased. However, there was no control group in this study which was exposed to neither experience.

Gurman and Kniskern (1977) researched marriage enrichment programs and determined six areas for improving their quality: (a) durability of enhancement-induced change, (b) generalizability of enhancement-induced change, (c) range of potential participants, (d) timing of enrichment programs to fit participants' developmental needs, (e) demonstration of change through non-participant rating sources, and (f) elucidation of salient change-producing components.

Premarital counseling is not among these areas.

Gleason & Prescott (1977) note six areas of relational importance for engaged couples and suggest that premarital counseling using a group method is a flexible and attractive response to an identified need. Again, no evaluation of the effectiveness of premarital counseling is made against a control group who simply had no premarital counseling.

Trainer (1979) incorporates a medical examination into his 5-session model of premarital counseling. The non-medical portions (sessions 1 and 4) deal with assumptions about marriage in the areas of personality, money, pregnancy, household management, recreation and religion. Session 5 is scheduled within 12 weeks after the wedding to allow the couple to check back with the physician regarding any problems that have arisen. Trainer's evaluation of the program is quite informal. He runs into former students who remember the positive impact of his work five to 20 years later. There is no attempt to compare the marital satisfaction of his couples to a control group who received no premarital counseling.

Effective handling of legal rights and obligations in marriage constitutes yet another approach to premarital counseling (Bernstein, 1977). Since the first marriage is the only simple one, partners should consider a prenuptial agreement and partitions of property. Topics covered in premarital counseling of this type are varied, "yet few couples enter into realistic premarital legal counseling with their attorney, nor is this recommended by their family counselor" (Bernstein, 1977, p. 416). There is no word about

effectiveness here, nor is there any attempt to compare results with a non-counseled control group.

A 10-session premarital counseling model has been tried with developmentally disabled and retarded young adults. This covered social, economic and personal responsibility, problem-solving skills, and the use of assertiveness in daily life situations (Walker, 1977). Social workers want to assure a greater success factor for developmentally disabled clients before family and community blessings are given. No comparison of results against a non-counseled group was done.

Rational-emotive therapy is another avenue for premarital counseling, specifically to help couples develop realistic expectations and challenge unrealistic ones by locating and correcting irrational thoughts that precipitate conflict (Ball & Henning, 1981).

Relationship discussion was compared to problem-solving training as vehicles for premarital counseling (Ridley, Avery, Harrell, Leslie, & Dent, 1981). The couples trained in problem-solving skills showed a statistically significant increase in communication and mutual problem-solving skills than those couples who were in a relationship discussion group.

Ridley & Bain (1983) demonstrated that relationship enhancement training was significantly more effective than relationship discussion in increasing self-disclosure to one's partner.

Most & Guerney (1983) deal with the shift from a remedial to a preventative model. An integral part of prevention rather than repair of marital difficulty is good communication. Their research

showed a pre-test to post-test increase in communication skills and confidence in couples' abilities to successfully resolve hypothetical future marital problems. There was, however, no check later on to see if the learned communication skills actually enhanced marital satisfaction.

Markman & Floyd (1980) place their focus on understanding how marital stress develops, since increasing the supply of treatment services seems to increase their usage rather than reduce the incidence of marital difficulties. In response, they suggest an identification of risk factors from a behavioral standpoint-- assessing how groups independently identified as competent or incompetent behave in specific situations.

II. Problem Formation

Bienvenu sums it up well: "The ability to communicate effectively is generally regarded by counselors and teachers of family life education as a major component of mental health and is imperative for problem solving in human relationships" (Bienvenu, 1975, p. 65). If we view marriage as a pencil, then we know from the literature that there are many ways to sharpen that pencil. What we are asking in this study, however, is "Does the pencil have a lead?" (Varnes, 1984). That is, we want to get at a more basic question: "Is there a correlation between premarital counseling and current marital satisfaction?"

As stated earlier, premarital counseling is required by many clergy. While it would be interesting to speculate as to the reasons for that requirement, I believe it is more helpful to try to find

a correlation, if any, between premarital counseling and current marital satisfaction. Personal maturity probably enters into the process somewhere, too, so a look at one's age at the time of marriage seems to fit the question.

Our hypothesis, then, is that the mean self-reported level of marital satisfaction would be higher for people who received premarital counseling than for those who didn't.

III. Method

Sample

Two sample populations were used. The first consisted of 28 people from a Protestant church of the author's denomination in the San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles County, California.

The second sample consisted of a group of people who obtained marriage licenses in the Burbank or Glendale offices of the Los Angeles County Clerk and whose weddings took place during October, 1983. For this sample, $N=54$.

Procedure

In the church sample, 36 questionnaires were provided by hand to 18 couples selected by the pastor. Thirty (83.3%) were returned by hand, sealed in the envelope provided. Two of these were left blank, for a total sample of 28.

In the marriage license sample, 158 of the same questionnaires were mailed to 79 couples whose names and addresses were obtained from the Los Angeles County Hall of Records. The post office returned five mailings (i.e. 10 questionnaires) as undeliverable. Of the

remaining 148, 54 (36.5%) were returned in the postage-paid reply envelope. Fifty-two of these were ostensibly from couples; two questionnaires were returned individually, each annotated indicating divorce had occurred. No follow-on reminder was used. The total for this sample, then, is 54.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire requested four items of information:

- (a) a yes/no answer to "Did you receive premarital counseling?" with the definition of "premarital counseling" left to the respondent,
- (b) age at time of current marriage, (c) current marital satisfaction on a scale of 1 ("very satisfied") to 9 ("not at all satisfied") and (d) gender (wife or husband).

Limitations

People who live in the San Fernando Valley, who attend church there and are willing to participate in a study such as this one may be, ipso facto, the type of people who would invest energy in making their marriage as satisfying as possible anyway. The same might be true of people who obtain their marriage licenses in the Burbank or Glendale office of the Los Angeles County Clerk.

IV. Results

Comparison of means

The results of the questionnaires are mixed. In the marriage license sample, results are slightly opposite of expectations. The mean marital satisfaction response of those who received premarital counseling was 2.48 compared to 2.39 for those who did not. In the

church sample, results showed the same pattern: the mean response of those who received premarital counseling was 2.25 compared to 2.0 for those who did not. Thus current self-reported marital satisfaction is higher in both samples for people who did not receive premarital counseling. (Remember, lower response scores represent higher satisfaction.) The hypothesis is not supported.

T-test results of 0.0289 for the marriage license sample and 0.477 for the church sample were nowhere near significant at the .05 level. (To be significant at that level they would have had to exceed 1.678 and 1.706 respectively.)

Correlations

The point-biserial correlation coefficient for current marital satisfaction and premarital counseling for the marriage license sample is -0.019 . For the church sample it is 0.093 . Both of these hover around zero and indicate a virtual lack of correlation between current marital satisfaction and whether or not one had premarital counseling.

The correlation coefficient (Pearson r) for age when married and marital satisfaction is -0.25 for the marriage license sample and 0.051 for the church sample. This actually indicates a slightly positive correlation for the former sample, since a lower number on the marital satisfaction scale represents higher satisfaction. For the church sample the correlation is very near zero. (Scattergrams are displayed as Figures 1 and 2.)

The point-biserial correlation coefficient between age when married and premarital counseling is -0.49 for the marriage license

sample and 0.105 for the church sample. The -0.49 coefficient for the former hints that the older the respondent, the less likely it is that s/he had premarital counseling. Perhaps this is a reflection of the greater age at marriage for the marriage license sample compared to the church sample. It might represent rejection of premarital counseling by people with more life experience.

V. Discussion

Does premarital counseling make any difference in current marital satisfaction? We found out that there is virtually no correlation between premarital counseling and current marital satisfaction. This was true for both samples. Our hypothesis is not supported.

The slightly positive correlation (0.25) we discovered between age at time of marriage and current marital satisfaction for the marriage license sample may be a confirmation that more life experience enables one to select a more suitable mate. It might also mean that humans more experienced in life are more adept at making the best of real-life circumstances found in a marriage relationship.

There is, of course, no causality suggested here. The question "Why?" is beyond the scope of this study.

Further research with a larger and more focused sample would hone the results obtained here. Several areas suggest themselves. One might be a truly random sample from the church membership rolls of all congregations in a regional jurisdiction. Another twin-

population study might include random samples from shore-based and seagoing Naval commands. An even larger project would be a two-year follow-up study in marital satisfaction among participants in earlier studies of effectiveness of premarital programs.

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