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Marital Preparation, Experiences, and Personal Qualities in a Qualitative Study of Individuals in Great Marriages

Jennifer M. Weiss
Utah State University

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MARITAL PREPARATION, EXPERIENCES, AND PERSONAL QUALITIES IN A

QUALITATIVE STUDY OF INDIVIDUALS IN GREAT MARRIAGES

by

Jennifer Michelle Weiss

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

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in

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Approved:

_____   _____
Linda Skogrand, Ph.D.   Scot Allgood, Ph.D.
Major Professor   Committee Member

_____   _____
Kay Bradford, Ph.D.   Mark McLellan, Ph.D.
Committee Member   Vice President for Research and
                                           Dean of the School of Graduate
                                           Studies

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ABSTRACT

Marital Preparation, Experiences, and Personal Qualities in a Qualitative Study of

Individuals in Great Marriages

by

Jennifer Michelle Weiss, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2014

Major Professor: Dr. Linda Skogrand
Department: Family, Consumer, and Human Development

This study presents findings regarding marital preparation and the socialized

meaning of marriage for couples in great marriages. Data from a national qualitative

study of couples in great marriages was gathered using a self-reported questionnaire.

Thirty-eight individuals were identified as being married for 20 years or less, and

therefore, chosen as the subsample for the current study. Their narrative responses were

analyzed and coded, using a qualitative method, to identify what marriage preparation,

socialized experiences, and personal qualities existed for these couples prior to marriage

and contributed to their successful marriages. Findings from this research support prior

research on common forms of marital preparation, but also provide crucial, descriptive

data on the experiences and socialization of individuals that influenced their choice in a

marriage partner as well as later marital success. Implications for practitioners,

researchers, and individuals are provided.

(140 pages)

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individuals are provided.

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Finally, I want to dedicate this thesis to all the single people out there who are struggling to find hope in lasting relationships of their own. Doing this research has encouraged me on my own path of preparation. I hope this work will provide a foundation for future research that will support individuals as they prepare for timeless relationships, and families as they struggle to create a healthy home environment where principles of healthy communication, commitment, service, respect, compassion, and love, and will influence and bless future generations.

<div align="right">Jennifer M. Weiss</div>

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Although several ideas about the traditional structure of the family have changed in the last 50 years, the majority of individuals still want to be married and will choose to marry in their lifetime (Pew Research Center, 2007; Waite, Luo, & Lewin, 2009). Married individuals enjoy many benefits from their choice of union; from improved emotional and physical health, to increased levels of wealth, and sexual satisfaction (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Although there has been a focus in research on the divorce rates found in the U.S. and around the world, with 51% of marriages in 2009 ending in divorce or annulment (U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011), there are still many marriages that are experiencing great success. These successes are due, in part, to the characteristics and skills developed before and during marriage (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Researchers have found that the possession of personal self-control, wisdom, humility, industry, and faithfulness all contribute to a happy marriage (Strom, 2003). The skills of communication, conflict resolution, and a commitment to the relationship have also proven crucial to increasing satisfaction in the marital union (Burgoyne, Reibstein, Edmunds, & Routh, 2010; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). For young adults, perceived readiness for marriage as well as attitudes and feelings towards marriage also serve as significant forecasters for later marital happiness (Carroll et al., 2009).

Preparation for the marital relationship can increase positive personal characteristics and skills as well as attitudes towards marriage that then contribute to the likelihood of a successful union. It then becomes important to understand what forms of both formal and informal marital preparation are available to young adults to groom them for successful and long marriages. Formal marriage preparation can be experienced in face-to-face couple counseling, or by attending a class, conference, or seminar. Informal preparation is also useful in preparing for marriage. Informal, or more self-directed preparation is described in this study as family socialization, observation of other relationships, reading a book, article, or Internet resource, or participating in a self-directed marriage preparation questionnaire. In a statewide study of marriage in Utah, individuals who participated in premarital education programs were significantly more satisfied with their marriages than those who did not participate, with the majority of couples indicating that they were "very happy" in their marriage (Schramm, Marshall, Harris, & George, 2003). Several formal premarital education programs have been found to increase awareness about the marital relationship, provide feedback, promote cognitive change, and offer relationship skills training (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001; Halford, 2004; Markey & Micheletto, 1997; Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1996). In other studies, contradictory findings suggest that these positive relationship outcomes are largely only moderately effective, and continued research, especially longitudinal research, is needed to completely understand the effectiveness of these programs (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Fawcett, Hawkins, Blanchard, & Carroll, 2010; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). Although these programs have been successful in improving relationships, it is important to note that the majority of young adults do not take

advantage of this formal premarital education, but rather are choosing the more self-directed, informal forms of education if they participate in any premarital education at all (Duncan, Childs, & Larson, 2010).

Self-directed preparation such as reading a book, using an Internet site, watching a video, or personal inquiry have also proven helpful in the marital preparation process. In their study of couples participating in couple education, researchers found that the self-directed form of using a workbook was just as useful for couples during a posttest evaluation when compared with more formal face-to-face forms. These findings were consistent at the time of the study as well as during a follow-up six months later (Busby, Ivey, Harris, & Ates, 2007). In another study of four different marriage preparation interventions, researchers found that while each intervention was helpful, self-directed forms of learning and education were preferred to the more formal structures of counseling and workshops (Duncan et al., 2010). In their framework for marriage education, Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty and Willoughby (2004) recognized the home as an important, yet often overlooked, location for marital education. They recognized the importance of encouraging parents to be more intentional in teaching and demonstrating healthy marital habits to their children. Indeed, researchers are beginning to realize the need to better understand and evaluate self-directed and informal forms of relationship education, including the influence of parents on young adult attitudes towards marriage, commitment, courtship, love, sexuality, and martial choice (Hawkins et al., 2004).

Theoretical Lens

Family researchers often approach family problems by attempting to discover

what is contributing to the conflict and discord associated with the dissolution of family relations. Instead of a focus on familial weakness, family strengths-based framework centers on what makes families or couples work and succeed (DeFrain & Asay, 2007a, 2007b). DeFrain and Asay (2007b) found that the success of the couple was directly related to the success of the family unit as a whole. Therefore, use of the family strengths-based perspective can be applied to the couple relationship as well as individual relationships within the family and evaluation of the family as a unit. With a family strengths-based perspective in mind, this study focused on understanding the preparation that contributed to the "great" marriages of these participants.

Through the process of socialization, we learn about relationships and roles in our lives (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Our parents, siblings, and other influential figures during our upbringing, as well as our community and personal experience, all come together to teach us what it means to be married and build a family. This meaning of marriage contributes significantly to when, how, and even if a person decides to marry, as well as their expectations of what the marital relationship should look and feel like (Carroll et al., 2009; McNulty & Karney, 2004). This symbolic element of marriage "consists of the larger structure of meanings that define marriage in our culture along with the interpretive logic that people then use to make sense of their own experiences" (Hopper, 2001, p. 431).

In an attempt to understand premarital contributors to marital success, Symbolic Interactionism Theory provides insight into the socialized definitions and meaning of marital roles as well as how individuals are expected to carry out these roles. Symbolic Interactionism Theory explores patterns regarding roles and societal expectations in the

family and how these roles are constructed, learned, and enacted in society. Symbolic Interactionism Theory is divided into three main themes; the importance of meaning, the development and importance of self-concept, and the interaction of self and society (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). In their comprehensive explanation of the theory, LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) explained that meaning is composed of shared interpretations and is altered through an interpretive process as, "individuals interpret reality through the symbols and the shared social meanings of their culture" (p. 143). Burr, Leigh, Day, and Constantine (1979) further explained that societies are made up of multiple cultures, which can be defined as "integrated sets of meanings and values" (p. 48).

George H. Mead, one of the founding theorists of Symbolic Interactionism, explained the development of self-concept as a process of social interaction as individuals become aware of the impact of their behavior on others and, consequently, begin to anticipate others' responses and slowly develops self-identity through role taking (as quoted in LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). These roles are distinguishable sets of social norms that have come to be associated with that role through interpersonal interaction (Burr et al., 1979). In Symbolic Interactionism Theory, neither meaning nor self-concept and identity can be separated from the society or culture in which one resides. Symbols in meanings or roles are acquired through interaction with others who have already learned the shared meanings that are part of a larger culture. Interaction in the society is not only influenced by society culture but also by the meanings and definitions held by interacting individuals (Burr et al., 1979; LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

Understanding the interactions of individuals in a successful marriage can be greatly enhanced by viewing those interactions through the lens of Symbolic

Interactionism. The successful marriage of two individuals requires the bringing

together of attitudes, expectations, cultural meanings, and symbols regarding marriage

and marital roles. Often couples are unclear or even oblivious to their personal biases and

expectations of the marital relationship (Juvva & Bhatti, 2006). Informal and everyday

marital preparation comes into play as individuals have the opportunity to recognize

personal beliefs regarding marriage and how those beliefs were ascribed to through social

interaction with family and culture. Symbolic Interaction theorists recognized the

importance of the family as the setting for learning social norms and values (LaRossa &

Reitzes, 1993). These theorists postulated that success in the family is based largely on

the ability of its members to interact symbolically and successfully take on and perform

their socialized roles. Symbolic Interactionism theorists suggest that it is not only from

formal forms of premarital education, but also largely from the informal sources of

family and symbolic social interaction that we learn the knowledge and tools necessary to

creating an enduring marriage. While family plays a contributing role in the preparation

for marriage, identifying personal perceptions and expectations contributes to a healthy

marriage both before and during the relationship (Juvva & Bhatti, 2006). Informal marital

education and socialization to marital roles can play a significant role in helping young

adults increase confidence in their ability to commit to marriage, develop positive

relationship skills while improving personal characteristics, and become aware of the

socialized symbols and expectations they have subscribed to in their life thus far.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study, within the context of Symbolic Interactionism Theory,

was to understand the different aspects of marriage preparation; including educational activities pursued, individual qualities of self and spouse, as well as personal experiences enjoyed by individuals in self-identified strong marriages. Using a subsample of qualitative data from a larger study of couples in strong marriages, the goal of this study was to better understand what premarital education and unceremonious daily experiences contributed to these "great" marriages. The purpose of this study was to examine what preparation occurred and what preparation proved meaningful. Very little research has been done on the commonplace preparation offered by parents' example and advice. This study expanded the descriptive data regarding the influence of parents on the success of their child's marriage. The current study also examined what personal qualities or characteristics contributed to an individual's belief in a successful marriage and in actual marital happiness. Here, again, I identify symbolic application in how individuals learned what characteristics would be associated with a successful marriage and how they perceived these qualities in their future and current spouse. Finally, this study attempted to understand what specific experiences and/or examples influenced their beliefs and expectations of marriage. By understanding the meaning associated with distinct experiences, the current study begins to piece together the expansive preparation of an individual for marriage.

Understanding what personal marital preparation was potent for couples in "great" marriages can have implications for individuals as they define their beliefs, and for educators as they design marriage preparation courses that can assist individuals in their preparation. There is much more to be considered in individual marital preparation than has already been examined regarding participation in formal relationship educational

courses. While these courses have proved helpful, there is much that must still be understood about the informal, self-directed preparation and learning of an individual from the example of parents as well as the personal recognition of beliefs and meaning given to the institution of marriage and marital roles. The findings of this study help to address these gaps in the literature. It is hoped that the described preparation, experiences, and personal qualities shared in this qualitative study will better inform individuals, educators, and researchers regarding their role in an individual's preparation for marriage.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter includes a survey of the research regarding contributions to the preparation for, and the successes in marriage. A Symbolic Interactionism Theory approach explains part of marriage as the sum of symbols that individuals have been socialized to understand as representing what does and does not comprise a successful relationship. Based on the experiences received in family and the community at large, individuals compile a symbolic representation of what it means to have a successful marriage. As adults prepare for and begin marriage, these socialized symbols can play a significant role in the expectations placed on marriage, the personal characteristics espoused to by both individuals in the relationship, and the overall meaning placed on the marital relationship. This literature review will begin with a description of the basic premises of Symbolic Interactionism Theory and specifically how this lens contributes to the study of marital preparation.

Section two of this literature review contains part of the research involving marriage formation in the United States as well as providing some possible contributors to marital satisfaction and the initial decision to marry. By surveying the researched benefits of marriage we can better understand why marriage continues to be a sought after union and remains a crucial topic of study. The review of literature about what makes marriages work is divided into premarital indicators of marital satisfaction as well

as qualities of success within marriage. A description of the role of marital preparation and its relationship to marital quality is also provided.

This chapter will conclude with a survey of extant premarital educational programs including the tools available and framework used to this point, as well as examining other non-traditional approaches to marital preparation. While these existing premarital programs have experienced success in identifying fundamental characteristics and skills that contribute to marital success, they have failed to recognize the more colloquial forms of education and preparation that may be occurring and also contributing to happy marriages. The current study will contribute to the small but growing body of research examining the informal preparation and socialization that also plays a role in marital satisfaction. This chapter concludes with a presentation of research questions that will be explored in the current study.

Theoretical Perspective

In 2001, Hopper explained that the "symbolic dimension [of marriage] consists of the larger structure of meaning that defines marriage in our culture along with the interpretive logic that people then use to make sense of their own experiences" (p. 431). We must understand that "what humans define as real has real consequences," (White & Klein, 2008, p. 96) and that meanings associated with experience vary depending on the individual, situation, and the cultural and social interactions that compose their history (Burr et al., 1979). Symbolic interactionism themes of meaning, self-concept, and the interaction of individual and society all work together to explain how "humans, in concert with one another, create symbolic worlds and how these worlds, in turn, shape human

behavior" (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993, p. 136). Examining three principles: the concept

of role, the concept of socialization, and the concept of the definition of the situation,

augments the understanding of symbolic meaning found in marriage.

The role is the sum of rules and behaviors that are socially accepted for a certain

position. These rules provide expectations for what someone in that role is to do. Both the

one assuming the role and others around them holds these expectations. Clarity of the

role helps both the actor of the role perform, as well as informing others as to how they

can interact with that role (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Conflict arises when there is an

inconsistency in role definition or one's enactment of the role. Differing meanings

associated with marital roles of husband or wife, father or mother, or son or daughter can

then lead to confusion and frustration in family relationships.

The concept of socialization is the procedure by which we learn the symbols,

attitudes, and beliefs of a given society or culture. Through the example and instruction

of parents, siblings, and other members of our culture, we are taught and practice the

acceptable rules that govern all the social actors of our community. It is in the

development or socialization of common symbols, that individuals learn to interact and

fulfill roles, specifically marital roles (White & Klein, 2008). This socialization teaches

individuals in society how to deal with conflict, how to communicate, and what is

considered "right" and "good" in a relationship.

Our socialization is internalized through our personal filter of meaning. William I.

Thomas, a Symbolic Interactionism theorist, explained that human behavior should not

be understood apart from the interpretations and meanings given to situations (LaRossa &

Reitzes, 1993). This *definition of the situation,* as well as our socialization to accept roles,

generates real consequences as it shapes human behavior (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

While being influenced by parental and community socialization, an individual's

personal perception of the situation, and one's role as an actor in the relationship provide

a cumulative meaning that then influence interactions and behavior.

Using a symbolic approach we see how symbols and socialization contribute to

one's ideas and expectations for marriage, which then affect the timely formation of

marriage. As individuals enter committed relationships, reconciliation of the meaning in

marriage, conflict resolution throughout marriage, and the possible dissolution of

marriage, are all influenced by the symbols and roles adopted in childhood and an

individual's ability to play out those roles and meet the socialized expectations of their

spouse. In the current study, understanding one's perception of the marital relationship

based on their socialization and experiences growing up, plays into success in marriage,

how one prepared for marriage, and how couples talk about their "great" marriage.

The Socialized Meaning of Marriage

The Symbolic Interactionism Theory asserts that "behavior can only be

understood in terms of the meanings the actor attributes to it" (Chibucos, Leite, & Weis,

2005, p. 237). Therefore, seeking to understand behavior in marriage must begin with an

investigation of the socialized meaning associated with marriage and the marital

relationship.

Researchers have found that the meaning of marriage is a significant contributor

to when and how young adults decide to marry (Carroll et al., 2009). In their study of 239

individuals, Mosko and Pistole (2010) found that both marital attitudes regarding

marriage as an institution and perceived marital readiness contributed to who one married, when one married, and later marital quality. Symbolic Interactionism Theory asserts that the meaning we place on the institution of marriage and the roles associated with married life has been developed throughout life via socialization by parents, community, and experience (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Taking a Symbolic Interactionism approach we can understand how defined life experiences shape personal beliefs regarding the world and, more specifically, marriage.

Another example of Symbolic Interactionism in marriage is an unrealistic expectation placed on the relationship. These expectations are often born of the perceived perfection of the parents' or another role model's marital relationship or the socialization of what a marriage should look like. Sometimes these unrealistic expectations can also be born of a desire to do things very different from the relationships experienced in a family of origin. Amato and DeBoer (2001) explained that parents "represent the most important source from which children learn about the nature of marital relationships, as well as specific marital behaviors" (p. 1039). Marriage then requires a reconciliation of symbols, attitudes, and beliefs as a couple works through conflict. In his qualitative research, Hopper (2001) found that when couples experience marital dissolution as a result of varying perceptions, this led to the total reinterpretation of the marriage as a sacred pact between people.

It is this meaning that also can contribute to attitudes towards and readiness for marriage. Mosko and Pistole (2010) studied how attitudes "represent a belief that marriage can be successful and happy" and readiness was also a perception that one was socially prepared and ready for marriage (p. 127). Both attitudes and perceived readiness

related to when, and if, people married. Carroll et al. (2009) found that the meaning of marriage to a young individual was a significant predictor of how and when they transitioned into young adulthood. In this way we come full circle in understanding the impact symbols and meaning have on marital relationships.

The research makes it clear that preparation for and success during marriage is influenced by personal characteristics, commitment, communication, and skill development (i.e., conflict resolution) prior to, and throughout the marital relationship. It is also apparent that shared meaning in marriage is also crucial to establishing clear expectations for the relationship. Therefore, acknowledging the meaning associated with marriage, how this meaning is derived, and what implications this meaning has for future relationships becomes helpful in understanding another aspect of marital preparation. We now turn to how individuals receive this kind of training before marriage to prepare for a committed union.

Marital Formation, Benefits, and Satisfaction

Around the world, marriage is largely accepted as a part of the traditional life cycle, although the timing and traditions surrounding this event vary by ethnicity and culture. While marriage in recent decades is being postponed until individuals are older, the majority (90%) of individuals in the U.S. still want to be married (Waite et al., 2009) and 90% of adults will choose to marry in their lifetime (Pew Research Center, 2007). While some young adults still believe marriage is a natural occurrence that is part of the lifespan, an increasing number of individuals feel that marriage is something one can choose to plan and prepare for after roles in adulthood are firmly established and any

potential marital relationship has already been thoroughly tested (Kefalas, Furstenberg, Carr, & Napolitano, 2011). While the perceived value of marriage remains high, Smock (2004) has asserted that economic well-being and social context contribute significantly to when people choose to marry and how long they remain married. Whenever young adults decide to enter marriage, the benefits of this traditional institution are numerous. Married individuals typically enjoy higher levels of wealth, better physical and emotional health, and increased sexual satisfaction over their unmarried, divorced, or widowed counterparts (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Married individuals enjoy an increased annuity value equal to increasing personal wealth by 12% to 13% percent if married by age 30 and 30% percent when the marriage continues until age 75 (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Specialization is one reason for this increase in wealth. Married men are able to specialize in earnings, with husbands and wives collaborating to increase skills and performance in this specialization (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). In his study of the National Longitudinal Survey on Youth (NLSY79), Zagorsky (2005) found that for individuals who married and stayed married, net worth was 93% higher than their single counterparts. In addition, these married participants enjoyed an increase in wealth of 16% a year, over a 14% increase for divorced individuals, and an 8% increase for single participants (Zagorsky, 2005). One might speculate that getting and staying married is associated with the accumulation of assets and wealth.

In some ways, physical and emotional health is also directly related to the increased wealth found in marriage. In one study, divorced mothers experienced greater levels of financial strain when compared to married mothers over a 10-year period. This

financial strain contributed to poor health and higher levels of morbidity in single

mothers (Wickrama et al., 2006). It follows then, that married mothers experiencing

lower levels of financial strain will also enjoy better health in marriage.

Married individuals also enjoy better physical and emotional health. In one study,

married individuals enjoyed greater satisfaction with life, which lowered ambulatory

blood pressure, improving overall health. This same study found that marital quality was

connected to lower stress levels and less depression (Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, &

Jones, 2008). While both men and women enjoy this benefit, men seem to enjoy a greater

health benefit from marriage than women do (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Physically,

unmarried, divorced, or widowed men do not eat as well; are less likely to exercise; and

more likely to smoke, drink, and participate in high-risk behavior, all increasing the

likelihood of death or injury (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). One reason for this increase in

health among married men is that in marriage, wives will monitor the health of both their

spouse and themselves, encouraging healthy habits, scheduling doctor appointments, and

providing an increased sense of meaning in life and someone to live for and for whom to

watch their health (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Both married men and women enjoy increased levels of emotional and

psychological well-being. Emotional support found in strong marriages helps individuals

heal from illness, deal with chronic disease, and other stressful life events. Inversely,

divorced individuals experience higher levels of demoralization, depression, and

emotional strain (Wickrama et al., 2006). Married individuals, on the other hand, are at

lower risk for depression (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). In one study, researchers found that

while all participants experienced an increase in psychological well-being with the

transition to marriage, the previously depressed individuals experienced a greater increase in psychological well-being when compared to their nondepressed, unmarried counterparts (Frech & Williams, 2007). Again, we see the meaning found in marriage as Waite and Gallagher (2000) explained that "new marriage partners together create a shared sense of social reality and meaning—their own little separate world, populated by only the two of them. This shared sense of meaning can be an important foundation for emotional health" (p. 75). Marriage provides meaning and purpose to what each partner does, with each spouse being crucial and essential to the happiness of the other. This knowledge that someone loves you, values you, and depends on you brings meaning that helps couples deal with the struggles of life (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Commitment to a partner also contributes to greater sexual satisfaction in marriage. Waite and Gallagher (2000) found that "married people enjoy sex more not only because their sex partners are more available, less distracted, more eager, and more able to please, but also because marriage adds meaning to the sexual act" (p. 94). Sex in marriage can remind each partner of their marital promises to love and cherish each other. This connection is associated with an emotional bond in marriage improving couples' psychological and physical health (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). It is because of this physical, emotional, and mental connection that people who are getting married still experience the best way to improve physical and emotional health and increase personal wealth and prosperity.

What Makes Marriage Work

With the benefits of marriage apparent, the next question becomes what is it, in

fact, that contributes to a successful marriage? In the research, there are many

components that have been studied that contribute to a happy and stable marriage (Carroll

et al., 2009; DeFrain & Asay, 2007a, 2007b; Larson & Holman, 1994; Strom, 2003;

Wright, Simmons, & Campbell, 2007). Researched premarital indicators include

perceived readiness (Carroll et al., 2009), quality of parents' marriage, sociocultural

factors (i.e., age at marriage, education, income, occupation, class, race, and gender),

marital expectations (Wright et al., 2007), and individual traits such as emotional health,

self-concept, interpersonal skills, and sociability, as also contributing to later marital

quality (Larson & Holman, 1994). Qualities and skills developed before and during

marriage have also been found to contribute to marital satisfaction. Some of these

qualities or virtues include self-control, wisdom, humility, industry, and faithfulness

(Strom, 2003). The following section will follow the pattern of research by first

examining the literature on premarital indicators of marital success, followed by a

discussion of qualities and skills that are developed during marriage and contribute to

healthy, satisfying marriages.

Premarital Indicators of Marital Satisfaction

Like many major life-cycle transitions, positive adjustment to marriage is related

to how prepared an individual may feel for this significant life change. In one study,

nearly two-thirds of the single participants reported not feeling ready for marriage

(Carroll et al., 2009). It is important to understand the roles of confidence,

multigenerational transmission of marital habits, inter and intrapersonal competency,

individual traits, and marital expectations as they relate to effective premarital preparation.

In the Carroll et al. (2009) study of marital readiness in emerging adults, participants reported readiness for marriage as a development of interpersonal competencies and qualities. Most individuals recognize the importance of learning to work with others and developing skills of listening, compromise, and problem-solving that contribute to successful relationships in general. However, other young adults seem to have a rose-colored view of marriage and the skills and characteristics of their ideal future spouse. In a study of young adults' and professional family educators' views on marriage, researchers found that young adults tend to have *destiny beliefs*, where they expected marriage to be ideal, subscribing to unrealistic beliefs about what constitutes a normal and healthy marriage and what characteristics their spouse should possess (Wright et al., 2007).

For young adults, preparation for marriage also comes with developing both interpersonal and intrapersonal competency. Using the *Criteria for Marriage Readiness Questionnaire*, Carroll et al. (2009) studied what criteria unmarried emerging adults believed to be of the most value in marriage preparation. They found five major themes in the criteria for marriage described by emerging adults in their study: (a) interpersonal competency, involving communication and relational skills; (b) family capacities, the ability to fulfill an expected role in marriage; (c) norm compliance, avoiding petty crime or delinquent activity; (d) role transition, or becoming independent of parents; and (e) marital preparedness as a process of developing the above mentioned qualities, making life-long commitments, and learning to care for others.

In their review of the literature on premarital predictors of marital quality, Larson and Holman (1994) have suggested several individual traits, behaviors, and interractional processes that can be developed by the individual prior to marriage. Some of these traits include interpersonal and communicational skills, self-esteem or confidence, emotional health, and physical health. Part of preparation may also include understanding one's own perception of the world and how that may or may not synchronize with the perceptions of a significant other. Here we reference the importance of symbols and the meaning developed since childhood, which are associated with marriage and which will be discussed further on in this review of the literature.

It is apparent that personal preparation plays a significant role in relationship satisfaction. Individuals who feel prepared for marriage are not only more likely to marry but to have success in their marriages. Establishing confidence in one's ability to commit to marriage, developing positive interpersonal skills and intrapersonal competency, improving individual traits, and becoming aware of personal marital expectations, all improve the likelihood of a satisfying marriage.

Qualities, Virtues, and Skills
Developed in Marriage

In the research, there are many components that that have been studied that contribute to a happy and stable marriage. With changes in how individuals traditionally view marriage (Cherlin, 2004) there has come a decrease in the "barriers to divorce" that previously discouraged the break up of marriage (Morrill, 2006). Some of these barriers include finances, emotional dependency on spouse, extended family expectations, shared children, and religious beliefs (Knoester & Booth, 2000). In their study, Knoester and

Booth (2000) found that couples perceived these barriers to divorce but when

separation is desired, barriers failed to serve as effective deterrents to divorce. Instead,

researchers suggest that future studies should focus on marital quality and what positive

attributes and skills in marriage contribute to happy marriages.

Understanding marital expectations is important in developing a healthy marriage.

Juvva and Bhatti (2006) proposed a model of marital expectations where five areas of

expectations should be considered: expectations from the partner, expectations from

marriage, expectations of and from the families of origin, expectations of the institution

of marriage, and expectations of the "ideal" partner. Juvva and Bhatti (2006) found that

couples' marital expectations are often unclear or they may be unaware of expectations

placed on the relationship altogether. Another study of 82 couples found that expectations

functioned in two ways in the relationship, serving as a goal to motivate and as a

counterfactual measure by which couples compare actual outcomes (McNulty & Karney,

2004). In the first function, known expectations can help to improve the relationships as

both individuals work to meet those expectations. Positive expectations for the

relationship were found to predict stable satisfaction in the marriage where less positive

expectations lead to declines in satisfaction (McNulty & Karney, 2004). However, these

researchers also found that "when attributions were most negative, more positive

expectations predicted steeper declines in marital satisfaction, whereas less positive

expectations predicted more stable satisfaction" (2004, p. 738).

In addition to expectations placed on marriage, other research has recognized

beliefs in marriage as also crucial. In a study regarding the young adult and professional

family educators' view on marriage, relationship educators subscribed to *growth beliefs*,

describing successful partners as individuals with positive communication patterns and

having ideas about relationship maintenance skills (Wright et al., 2007). In their study of

strong families around the world, Defrain and Asay (2007b) identified strong marriages

as directly influencing the strength of the family as a whole. They found that strong

marriages consisted of such qualities and skills as appreciation and affection,

commitment, positive communication, spiritual well-being, the ability to manage stress

and crisis effectively, and enjoyable time spent together. In their study of marital

trajectories, Anderson, Van Ryzin, and Doherty (2010) theorized that

> partners who engage in more relationship-enhancing behaviors and who have
> more positive beliefs about the relationship before marriage are likely to begin
> marriage with higher levels of marital happiness; these couples are then more
> likely to maintain these positive interactions and beliefs after marriage and thus
> maintain a higher level of marital happiness over time. (p. 588)

A large amount of research has also focused on the importance of positive

characteristics and personal virtues as contributing to strong and successful marriages

while also underpinning the development of relationship skills in marriage (Caughlin,

Huston, & Houts, 2000; Dehle & Landers, 2005; Fowers, 2001; Strom, 2003; Veldorale-

Brogan, Bradford, & Vail, 2010). In his study of 70 couples, Strom (2003) identified five

personal characteristics or virtues that he found contributed to higher levels of marital

satisfaction. These characteristics were self-control, wisdom, humility, industry, and

faithfulness. Strom (2003) found that it was not only important for an individual to be in

possession of these characteristics, but also to recognize those characteristics in self and

partner. Strom's results indicated a positive relationship for both husbands and wives

between perceived virtue in one's spouse and the reported quality of marriage (2003).

The more husbands and wives perceived these virtues in their spouse, the higher

husbands and wives rated satisfaction in marriage. Specifically, wives identified

wisdom in their husbands as a key virtue contributing to higher ratings in marital

satisfaction while husbands acknowledged industry in their spouse as a key-contributing

factor (Strom, 2003).

Personal characteristics or marital virtues contribute to levels of marital

satisfaction, perceived social support from one's spouse, and relationship adjustment in

marriage (Caughlin et al., 2000; Dehle & Landers, 2005; Veldorale-Brogan et al., 2010).

One study indicated that personal spousal characteristics moderated the reception of

social support in marriage with spousal support ratings increasing when supportive

behavior was viewed as an element of existing positive personality traits (Dehle &

Landers, 2005). In another study of 168 couples, researchers found that personal trait

anxiety or negative affectivity, was significantly associated with lower levels of marital

satisfaction for both men and women and that negative affectivity in one spouse was

related to lower levels of satisfaction and the adoption of those same negative

characteristics by their spouse (Caughlin et al., 2000). Veldorale-Brogan et al. (2010)

found that personal qualities such as other-centeredness and generosity in the relationship

mediated the relationship between well-being and relationship adjustment, suggesting

that the ambiguous measures of well-being or marital skills can only be completely

understood by also recognizing personal characteristics or virtues in individuals. Fowers

(2001) strongly argued that effective development of communication skills in marriage

could not be achieved without identifying and promoting underpinning virtues of self-

restraint, generosity, honesty, courage, trust, and vulnerability. Fowers (2001) continues

that instead of separating oneself from the moral topics of personal virtues, family

educators should promote the development of such virtues as fundamental to

relationship skills such as communication, listening, self-regulation, and the fostering of a

healthy and equal relationship (Fowers, 2001).

In another study of marital quality, an egalitarian approach to marriage was

reported as becoming an increasingly important contributor to marital satisfaction with

modern wives' enlarged earnings and an increase in decision-making equality in the

relationship (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003). This egalitarian relationship is

not only made up of modern changes in role-structure, but also more significantly by the

attitude of both couples as being in an egalitarian relationship and being married to your

best friend (Morrill, 2006). In her study, Morrill (2006) found that couples in "great"

marriages helped each other out in their more traditional gender roles, shared decision-

making power as well as the attitude that both roles in marriage, that of husband and

wife, were equally important.

We begin to see not only how the actual possession of skills and attributes

contributes to the success of marriage, but also how the perception of spousal attributes,

as well as attitudes towards egalitarian roles, also play a crucial part in the equation of

marital satisfaction and success. The Symbolic Interactionism Theory applies here as we

recognize how the perception by the individuals of the situation and spousal attributes

contributes to the outcome of marital success. It becomes apparent that if a strong and

healthy marriage is desired, some amount of development and maturity in relationship

skills, characteristics, and attributes is required as well as seeking some level of equality

in the relationship. These characteristics and skills seem to play a contributing role in

marital satisfaction when developed both before and during marital relationships.

Formal Premarital Programs: Are They Working?

In addition to relationship skills gained through the informal life processes, family educators have also recognized the need to provide relationship education for those individuals wanting to improve relationships or who did not have the opportunity to learn from positive parental examples. Premarital preparation is generally valued by young adults and also increasingly seen by adolescents as important (Silliman & Schumm, 2004). Whether individuals choose to actually participate and whether these programs are helpful is an area that needs further study. The research regarding the quality and efficacy of premarital education programs is somewhat contradictory in its outcomes. In their meta-analytic review of premarital programs, Carroll and Doherty (2003) found that "premarital prevention programs are generally effective in producing significant immediate gains in communication processes, conflict management skills, and overall relationship quality," (p. 114) although little research has followed couple outcomes later in marriage. However, a recent meta-analytic study (Fawcett et al., 2010) found no significant gains in marital quality associated with premarital programs. These findings may be due to a ceiling effect, where the majority of couples participating in premarital education are already experiencing higher levels of marital satisfaction and, therefore, show little gains. It is also important to again recognize that very few of the premarital programs analyzed in this study were followed long term. It is probable to imagine greater variance in marital satisfaction later in the marriage after the "honeymoon stage" has passed.

It is obvious that further research is needed to completely understand the impact premarital education can have on marriage. Despite overall contradictions in premarital program outcomes, some even by the same authors, it has been found that several programs are successful in improving relationship skills and enhancing marital quality. Hawkins et al. (2008) claimed that marital education programs are producing moderate but reliable affects in marital quality and particularly communication skills. In his summary of how couple relationship education can make a difference, Halford (2004) identified two main approaches to relationship education: inventories and skills training. Three of the most popular inventories are PREmarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement or PREPARE (Olson et al., 1996), Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study (FOCCUS; Markey & Micheletto, 1997), and RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE; Busby et al., 2001). Each of these programs contains both an inventory and a skills-training component aimed at increasing awareness, providing feedback, promoting cognitive change, and providing relationship skills training (Halford, 2004).

Inventories help couples identify personal factors associated with relationship outcomes, assess risk and resilience in the relationship, and provide some amount of training and education to improve future outcomes. The skills training component helps couples leave with concrete tools that can assist in further relationships development (Halford, 2004). Part of the success of these and other programs is found in their flexible delivery. While research has shown the usefulness of these and other inventories, only about one-fourth of couples are participating in current professional couple relationship education (Wilson & Halford, 2008). Reasons for lack of participation mass around the

inconvenience of attending formal counseling settings and couples' hesitance to discuss personal relationship issues in front of a group. Consequently, couples are instead choosing the self-directed forms of marital education over the formal, face-to-face counseling or workshops. We turn now to a brief discussion of these more informal, self-directed preparations for marriage.

The Role of Informal Preparation for Marriage

As previously discussed, part of preparation for marriage is the socialization of the meaning of marriage and young adult observations about what it means to be married. As opposed to formal education about marriage, research has found the majority of individuals first learn about marriage from their parents and/or other role models (Duncan et al., 2010; Halford, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2004). Self-directed learning through books, magazines, or Internet sites is also a common source of marital information. While this kind of informal preparation is somewhat obvious, there is very little in the research about how individuals have experienced learning from these sources.

In their study of almost 2,800 individuals, Duncan et al. (2010) found that while most interventions were perceived as helpful by the participants, the self-directed learning methods (i.e., books, Internet sites, online courses, and inventories) were rated more helpful than the more formal counseling or workshops. One study found no significant difference between self-directed and therapist-directed treatments with self-directed treatment being more effective than no treatment (Scoggin, Bynum, Stephens, & Calhoon, 1990). Some treatment is better than no treatment and making marital education readily available increases the use of it. In an effort to promote the use of marital

education programs, researchers are looking more closely at these informal forms of marital education and their equitable effectiveness (Duncan, Steed, & Needham, 2009).

Couple CARE is one example of a more self-directed couple educational program with minimal professional facilitation. Couples watch a DVD, employ a workbook, and discuss principles as a couple, with follow up phone calls from an independent learning facilitator. In their study of Couple CARE effectiveness, Wilson and Halford (2008) found the most effective instruments reported by the participants were the self-directed tools of the DVD and handbook. In addition, at a follow-up phone call six months later, 53% of the women and 42% of the men in the study reported using other independent self-directed learning tools since participating in Couple CARE, with the majority referencing a book or magazine article.

We can take this discussion of informal marital education one step further by returning to the example of the parents' relationship and the child's perception of their parents' relationship as a form of marital preparation and education. Parents not only set an example, but their casual advice about relationships and marriage can also prove helpful. In their framework for marital education, Hawkins et al. (2004) highlighted the home as an effective location for marital education. Parents can be the most successful educators on marriage, commitment, courtship, love, sexuality, and marital choice (Hawkins et al., 2004).

Summary

While the variations of relationship commitment and types have increased over the years, marriage remains a beneficial and sought after institution. Individuals bring

much to the marital union in qualities, beliefs, and expectations as well as formal and

informal preparation. Individuals learn about the marital relationship through symbolic

socialization by family and community who contribute to the defining of marital roles

and expectations. While formal premarital education programs are successful in helping

individuals improve personal qualities and relationship skills, it is equally important to

recognize and seek to understand the informal preparation of self-directed learning as

well as the example and advice of parents and other married role models. Using a

Symbolic Interactionistic lens, we can more carefully examine the socialization that

contributes to role taking, expectations in marriage, and meaning placed on situations or

conflict in marriage. We can also look at the personal characteristics that individuals

identified as helpful in contributing to a "great" marriage. It is hoped that this study will

contribute to the small but growing body of research taking a closer look on the informal

forms of premarital education that are also successfully contributing to the many

marriages that are committed to their union and making something "great" out of their

relationship.

Research Questions

The current study will address the different aspects of marriage preparation

experienced by individuals in self-identified strong marriages. The specific research

questions are:

1. What did couples do or wish they would have done to prepare for marriage?
2. What qualities or skills in self or partner led one to believe they could have a
   good marriage?

3. What experiences or people influenced participants' belief and expectations about marriage?

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore both the formal and informal forms of

marriage preparation that couples in the Great Marriage Research Study (GMRS)

identified as contributing to their "great" marriages. This study was part of a much larger

study, which explored multiple aspects of great marriages. The GMRS questionnaire used

for this larger study was made up of several opened-ended questions to better understand

what factors contributed to these self-identified "great" marriages. The data gathered

covered such topics as communication, commitment, preparation for marriage, finances,

conflict, and spirituality. Given the narrative form of the gathered data, a Symbolic

Interactionistic lens seemed appropriate to properly analyze the meaning associated with

events and histories described as contributing to the participants' view of marriage,

marital roles, and marital preparation. For this study, questions regarding marital

preparation, personal experiences, and individual qualities were examined with specific

intention, providing an in-depth view of both the formal and informal marital preparation

described by couples who identified themselves as being in successful and happy

marriages. In this chapter we review the chosen research design, sampling procedures for

the original and current study, as well as instrumentation and data analysis.

Design

The GMRS is a qualitative study that was designed using the strengths-based

framework to better understand the contributors of marital success for couples that identified themselves as being in "great" marriages. Family strength-based framework theorists explain that when we focus on the positive attributes of families, we will find those strengths that are contributing to the daily success of families. These families then become a model for other families to follow, and also for researchers to learn from. By studying the positive experiences individuals are having in their strong families, these families become the experts by whom we can more effectively design research and education to assist other families in their pursuit of strong family relationships. Because strong marriages contribute to strong families, taking a closer look at the couple relationship can assist individuals and families in strengthening their relationships.

With a qualitative design, participants were able to describe their personal experiences in their successful, strong, and happy marriages. In this study, a qualitative method allowed us to better understand and explore the individual experiences participants had in preparing for marriage, fostering personal qualities, and the developed meaning associated with the marital relationship and how these experiences contributed to their "great" marriages. The purpose of a qualitative research method is to understand human behavior in its natural setting, and to learn from the detailed experiences of individuals regarding a topic of study. Data gathered in a qualitative study are reported in the participants own words and are meant to represent the individual's experiences and perceptions and to better understand the meaning they contribute to the studied phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). As in all qualitative research, the findings of this study are not intended to be generalizable to the population as a whole, but instead serve to inform researchers about the preparation, personal qualities, and experiences that provide an in-

depth look into successful marriages for the participants in this study. With a

qualitative method, we are better able to understand just how individuals learned about

and prepared for marriage. The detailed experiences of participants provide researchers

with a unique perspective into the socialization of marital roles and the individual stories

of couples that are experiencing success in their marriage. Their narrative, while in no

way can lead to causal implications, does provide a deeper understanding into marital

preparation that can inform educators and researchers alike and contribute to the literature

regarding why and how these couples have thriving marriages.

Sample

The total sample for the GMRS consisted of 81 couples ranging in age from 23

years to 89 years. The purpose of the current study was to better understand what

marriage preparation, experiences, and personal qualities existed for these couples prior

to marriage and contributed to their successful marriages. With this object in mind, this

study examined only those couples married for 20 years or less. These couples were

chosen because they were more likely to remember specifics regarding their premarital

preparation. In addition, preparation, experiences, and qualities with these couples were

more likely to be applicable to couples today. By limiting our study sample, we were able

to examine a more detailed and in-depth recollection of their marital preparation efforts.

With this limit in mind, 19 couples (38 individuals) were identified as being married for

20 years or less. The average age for these individuals was 41 years for the women and

44 years for the men. Seventy-nine percent of the women and 68% of the men reported

being in their first marriage, with 21% of both men and women reporting being in their

second marriage and 11% of only the men reporting being in their third marriage. The

average length of marriage for this sub sample was 10.2 years with ten couples reported

being married for 10 years or less. Ninety-five percent of the participants identified

themselves as Caucasian with 58% of the wives and 74% of the husbands having a

bachelor's degree or higher. The average annual gross income for these couples was

$96,600 with 53% of the men and 32% of the women reporting holding a white-collar

job.

Procedures

The Great Marriage Research Study (GMRS) was designed by Dr. Linda

Skogrand from Utah State University and Dr. John DeFrain from the University of

Nebraska, with the intent of learning more about couples in happy marriages. Participants

were recruited in several ways including advertisements in newspapers around the U.S.,

an online listing at the University of Nebraska (http://unlforfamilies.unl.edu), and flyers

(Appendix C) or personal contacts inviting couples to participate in the research. Two

hundred fourteen newspapers were contacted around the country in 23 states. Each

newspaper was sent a letter (Appendix A) inviting editors to publish information about

the GMRS in the family life section of their papers. A sample press release (Appendix B)

was included in each letter, which invited married couples to participate in the research.

The printed advertisement described researchers seeking couples that were willing to talk

about the characteristics of their "great" marriage. Researchers did not know how many

newspapers did, in fact, place advertisements in their papers. The online posting was

similar to the newspaper advertisement but allowed participants to request the

questionnaire online. Personal contacts by researchers or participants recruited

volunteers by emails and word of mouth to let others know about the study. No

compensation was offered for participation in the study.

Through these varied recruiting efforts, over 200 couples in 29 different states

requested to participate in the study. These volunteers were sent a packet of instructions

(Appendix D) including explanation of the study, an informed consent form, as well as a

copy of the questionnaire (Appendix E) with a postage-paid envelope to allow return of

their questionnaire to researchers. To maintain anonymity of participants, no return

address was required. The Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of both Utah State

University as well as University of Nebraska approved the research study. Of the 200

couples that were sent packets, 81 couples completed and returned the questionnaire to

researchers. Before analysis of the data, IRB approval (Appendix F) was sought for the

current study examining premarital preparation, experiences, and qualities contributing to

these "great" marriages.

Instrument

A 31-page, 123-item questionnaire, which was divided into three sections, was the

designed instrument for the GMRS study. Each husband and wife completed their own

responses without referring to answers of their spouse to avoid any influence by their

partner. However, it was encouraged that once both spouses had completed the

questionnaire, they take time to discuss their answers regarding their great marriage

together. Section one gathered demographic information regarding the couple and their

marriage including length of marriage, number of children, educational level, and

socioeconomic indicators. Section two is the longest part of the questionnaire

containing qualitative questions to prompt thought and in-depth descriptions of the

marital relationship. Some of the questions are specifically designed to prompt

participants to tell the story of their great marriage. The open-ended qualitative form of

questions impelled descriptive responses that help researchers to fully understand the

unique perspectives and experiences of each couple. Section three is a quantitative

marital strengths inventory measuring marital quality in six different areas; appreciation

and affection, commitment, positive communication, enjoyable time together, spiritual

well-being, and the ability to manage stress and crisis effectively. Each couple also rated

the overall rating of their marital relationship in section three. For this study, the

demographic information in section one and section two which asked couples to talk

about what contributed to their strong marriages was used. While each couples' responses

were looked at as a whole, there were a few questions in section two of the instrument

that provided targeted information regarding marital preparation. For example, question

#2, "Why did you get married?" or question #8, "What was it, while you were dating, that

led you to believe you would have a good marriage?" Both of these questions examined

motives for marriage and for some participants, varying levels of preparation was a part

of these answers. Other questions provided more pointed responses to the current

research questions that were being examined. Questions 15 and 16 asked, "How did you

learn about what it takes to have a strong marriage" and "How did you prepare for getting

married (marriage education classes, books, talking with clergy, etc.)?" and follows with

the question, "How was it useful or not?" Another question asks participants what other

preparation they wish they had prior to marriage. With these exploratory questions, this

second section of the questionnaire became crucial in the current study of understanding marriage preparation, experiences, and personal qualities for these successful couples.

Analysis

Data for this study were analyzed using a qualitative procedure outlined by Creswell (2009) in his discussion of research design. First, the data were organized and prepared for analysis. This was done by identifying those couples married for 20 years or less and assigning each participant a new number in the subsample ranging from 1 to 38 (19 couples). Husbands and wives were referred to in the data as participant #5 or #22, and so forth with quotations in the findings section using the same reference system. Second, the author read through all the data to obtain a general sense of the findings and reflected on the overall meaning of participant responses. This was done by spending long, uninterrupted periods of time immersed in the data, seeking to understand the voices of these participants, what they talked about regarding preparation, and how they talked about it. In the third through fifth steps, Creswell (2009) explained how the author is to begin coding by organizing the narratives into "chunks" and categories (p.192). The author was to code by themes, settings, and images that involved describing the participants and their connection with the research questions at hand. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) described this as a process of searching through the data for regularities and patterns or topics and then writing down the words and phrases that represent these categories. These words and phrases then became the codes by which the author began to sort the descriptive data collected. Part of this coding involved a systematic searching of

the data regarding specific insights into each of the three stated research questions for the current study. For this reason, the identified themes of the participants' stories developed and were organized into data regarding preparation, qualities and skills of the participants, and experiences that led participants to believe they would have a successful marriage. In the end, the themes reflected the three research questions of the study.

Throughout step three through five, the author consulted heavily with project Principle Investigator, Dr. Linda Skogrand, who was very familiar with the data. As categories and themes were developed, the author would identify a theme and then confirm the reliability of that theme by discussing participant examples where a theme was represented with Dr. Linda Skogrand. As is common in qualitative research, working with another coder provided inter-rater reliability and was imperative to ensure that identified themes and ideas were consistent with the voices of the participants.

Finally, the author made an interpretation of the data and identified implications for research and practitioners. This final discussion of findings explores new information derived from the study which the author hopes will add to and expand upon previous literature regarding the research topic.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter contains the findings from qualitative data analysis of 38 participants who participated in the Great Marriage Research Study. These 38 participants specifically identified what forms of marital preparation and partner qualities contributed to their later great marriage. It is helpful to note that participants were numbered from one to 38 with all odd numbers representing a wife and all even numbered participants representing a husband. Using the participants' own words, the findings associated with three particular research questions are presented in order of prevalence for each main theme and sub-theme. Those research questions are: (a) what did couples do or wish they would have done to prepare for marriage; (b) what qualities or skills in self or partner led one to believe they could have a good marriage; and (c) what experiences or people influenced participants' beliefs and expectations about marriage.

What Couples in Great Marriages Did or Wish They Would Have Done
to Prepare for Marriage

The first research question examines what participants identified as things they did or wished they would have done in preparing for marriage. Thirty-three of the 38 participants spoke to this topic in their responses. In this research question, individuals simply listed or identified preparation activities without sharing much detail in regard to these activities. Participants identified five kinds of things they had done, listed in order of pervasiveness, including: attended a class, conference, or seminar; read books, articles

or in one case, a magazine; learned from family members or friends while observing

their marriages; experiences in prior relationships; and received formal counseling with a

professional or religious leader. Of the 38 individuals, only 10 commented on what they

wished they had done to prepare for marriage. A greater understanding of financial

management was the most prevalent topic among these 10 individuals while only a few

other individuals identified a desire to have a better understanding of relationships in

general.

Attending a Class, Conference, or Seminar

Different from the more intimate setting of counseling or meeting with a religious

leader, several participants talked about preparing for marriage by attending a formal

class, conference, or seminar offered by school, community, or church group. Most of

these participants simply mention these classes as one in a list of things they did to

prepare. A few of the participants shared that these classes were helpful because of the

way they helped them as a couple to discuss important issues. One wife shared how her

preparation occurred in a "religious institute class—it was helpful; we were able to

discuss things we may not have thought about on our own" (Participant #19). Another

woman felt that a premarital seminar was helpful because of the way it helped her and her

fiancé "bring up important talking points and open communication." She continued, "so

many couples focus on the wedding and being in love, that they ignore potential pitfalls

in a future marriage" (Participant #13). One man expressed a similar positive reaction to

his preparation class when he said:

> My wife and I both took classes from our church. These were preparation classes.
> . . . They were helpful because they raised issues that we would eventually be

facing anyway, things such as finances, children, sex, etc. As a result we talked frequently about what each of us thought about each topic. I think this was part of that process where there haven't been any surprises for us. (Participant #32)

The participants talked equally about attending religious classes, college classes, and community-offered conferences or seminars and often participated in several preparation courses from multiple sources. One couple was required, as a member of the U.S. Navy, to attend a premarital class in addition to a weekend seminar that was encouraged by their Catholic priest. The wife shared, "We received some excellent advice during our Catholic pre-marriage retreat. . . . The talking points raised really helped prepare us for the realities of marriage when so many couples fixate on the wedding . . . one day versus your lifetime" (Participant #13).

Participants described topics covered in their preparation courses ranging from psychology, to finances, to sex, to basic life skills in the marriage. One woman shared, "Our life skills class in high school taught us a lot about risks, saving for a rainy day, and how you never know when something will happen or change in your life" (Participant #35). Instruction in several topic areas seems to have helped individuals feel more prepared to take on this committed relationship.

Reading Books or Articles

While many of the participants talked about reading a book or article in preparation for marriage, very little elaboration is found in this category of responses. Most individuals incorporate books in a list of things they did to prepare including attending classes and counseling. One husband said, "I read at least one or two books on how to get along with others which did help" (Participant #12). One wife said that she

read "some religious books and marriage books" while continuing that "I think

anything is useful when getting some advice for a better marriage" (Participant #21).

Other participants talked about certain books and articles in particular. Both the

husband and wife in one couple specifically named the book *1000 Questions to Ask

before Getting Married* and articulated that answering questions from the book was

helpful for their preparation (Participants #37 and #38). Another wife talked about

reading "a lot of articles that [gave] pointers" (Participant #9) and her husband said that

he read good books and the scriptures to prepare (Participant #10).

Observation of Other Marriages

When talking about specific preparation for marriage, some of the participants

talked about learning by observing family members or other couples that had great

marriages. One wife said, "I learned from my parents. They had a good marriage. They

showed me through example," and "I talked to role models who I thought had good

marriages. I found it very useful" (Participant #31). Another participant also commented

on the value of role models, "Having family and friends' successful marriages as models

helped towards building a more stable foundation for our marriage" (Participant #14).

These individuals indicated that it was not only parents who helped them prepare,

but extended family members were also an important source of knowledge about

marriage. For example, one woman felt "[my] parents were good role models, as well as

quite a few aunts and uncles" (Participant #9), indicating the important role extended

family members also played in providing examples of positive relationships. Two women

specifically talk about how they prepared by learning from their sisters, who provided

examples of healthy marriages, with one explaining, "I think the best way I prepared was through seeing the things my sisters did with their own marriages" (Participant #11).

Other participants talked about examples of positive marriage relationships outside the family. One husband said, "We talked often about what our marriage would look like. We talked about positives and negatives we saw in other relationships" (Participant #28). This kind of observation and taking time to make these experiences a part of premarital discussions appeared useful in helping individuals prepare for their own successful marriage.

Prior Relationships

Several individuals in this sample talked about how the process of preparing to create a great marriage occurred in prior relationships, whether those were previous marriages, committed dating relationships, or the experience of years in their relationship prior to marriage. One wife expressed that "the experience of a bad marriage was probably the best teacher. I definitely knew what to look out for and what traits, characteristics, and attitudes would destroy a relationship" (Participant #9). She continued by explaining that making a concerted effort to take time to think about and learn why her first marriage failed helped her in preparation for a great marriage. Her husband expressed similar sentiments when he said that preparation was a process of trial and error and learning from past mistakes, "After deciding that what I had done, or the way I had related to two previous wives didn't work, I made a concerted effort to improve my life and take to heart many things I had learned from experience" (Participant #10).

Two other husbands brought up previous marriages. One stated that "Twenty-one years of my first marriage was very helpful" (Participant #34), and another also found that over 33 years in a previous marriage was helpful in learning about how to create a great marriage (Participant #12). Of the participants who talked about previous relationships having being helpful for their preparation, some specifically highlighted their own history (i.e., long courtship, living together, knowing each other) in the current relationship.

Several people said they did not do anything formally to prepare for marriage. These individuals, instead, talked about the length of courtship before marriage. These individuals dated for two, three, and ten years before they married. One husband described his experience saying, "We dated for two years to make sure she could put up with me. I don't know if I formally prepared" (Participant #20). One man expressed that preparation should include, "A wholesome courtship, humor, and respect for each other" (Participant #4). Another husband also supported the idea of preparation through courtship rather than learning from another source when he said, "We dated for three plus years and in that time we resolved nearly every incompatible trait either of us had" (Participant #10). One wife said, "We worked out the kinks before marriage" in their 10-year courtship (Participant #29) and another woman expressed that "a four-year courtship gives you lots of time to get to know each other" (Participant #33). Her husband agreed that their long courtship, with no rush or pressure was helpful (Participant #34).

Two wives said that living together with their prospective male partners prior to their marriage was also helpful. One said, "That year living together really prepared us for the realities of marriage – making our newlywed years blissful" (Participant #13).

One woman summed up this theme with her comment, "I don't know that anything else could have prepared me – it has been a lot of 'on the job' training" (Participant #19).

Professional Counseling

Of the five areas, formal counseling with a professional or religious leader was the least referenced by the participants with only a few individuals highlighting this form of marital preparation. Most of the individuals only briefly talk about how this kind of preparation occurred, with two individuals in the sample specifically saying that they did not feel that this preparation was helpful at all (Participant #15 and #23). These two referred to sessions with clergymen as "not helpful."

Conversely, two participants elaborated in some detail on their formal preparation with a pastor. This wife stated, "He [the pastor] was impactive and practical. One thing that he instructed and encouraged us with was that both partners need to give not 50%, but 100% to the relationship. He encouraged us to 'out-serve' each other (Participant #1). The husband's comments regarding their experience were very similar. This same wife continued:

> Premarital counseling with a solid Christian mentor is vital and talking through all potential issues is a priority. I feel as a counselor the underlying focus should be to talk to the couple about the "act" of getting married just to truly see how committed they really are to make this marriage one to last a lifetime. (Participant #1)

One other comment worth noting regarding professional counseling came from a husband who felt that "getting insight from professionals is very helpful" (Participant #14).

Desired Preparation

A minority of the participants indicated specific things they wish they would have done to prepare for marriage including financial preparation, taking a class to better help them understand relationships in general, and two individuals also talked about a desire to better understand the opposite gender. Of the participants who desired further preparation, several specifically identified a desire to better understand financial management and credit.

The Qualities or Skills That Led Individuals to Believe They Would Have a Great Marriage

The second research question and theme highlighted the qualities or skills that individuals identified in their potential spouse that led to the formation of a relationship and inspired them to believe their marriage would be a success. Of the 38 participants, all but three talked about positive qualities or skills they had identified in their partner prior to marriage. These individuals in great marriages had identified early on several characteristics that attracted them to their future spouse. Many of the individuals shared lists of characteristics that were still present after years of marriage. One husband shared a glowing list of his fiancé's attributes:

> She was spiritual, attractive, smart, warm, considerate, joyful, diverse, generous, compassionate, kind, gentle, and more! Loving, sweet, had a sense of humor, an active mind, democratic, sexy, decent, sympathetic, flexible, resilient, and stylish—the list continues. These characteristics were all important—then and now. (Participant #34)

Participants felt their partner "had it all" in possessing "the certain goals, traits, and qualities" that they were looking for in a spouse (Participant #32 and #1). Some

recognized that it was, in fact, these characteristics that continued to contribute to their successful marriage. In the words of one husband:

> These qualities have become more and more apparent and clear to me as time has passed. The reality is that these are the things about my wife that have made such a big difference and are what I think separate our relationship from an average to an excellent marriage. (Participant #32)

While several participants listed multiple qualities and skills they found attractive, three pervasive categories emerged from their comments: overall partner temperament and their interaction habits with others; healthy communication skills and patterns; and integrity, allowing trust to deepen in both the partner and relationship.

Partner Temperament and Friendship

Of the three categories that emerged in this research question, overall partner temperament was referred to most often, with a good majority of the participants talking about it in their narrative. Temperament included the way a person responded to others emotionally and how they interacted with others on a day-to-day basis. For example, participants were impressed with how *friendly* or *easy-going* their future partner was. They were *pleasant to be with* or *a nice person to be around*. One husband remarked, "I was looking for a kind person, someone happy with an easy-going, but caring disposition" (Participant #8). The other's temperament was the characteristic that led to the beginnings of admiration and respect.

Temperament included a person's personality. As one woman said in reference to temperament, "He was intelligent, had a quiet demeanor, and seemed really classy and mature. I have just really come to respect him as a human being. I enjoyed so much about him. It just continues to develop" (Participant #27). Personality was also much more than

just the initial attractor; it continued to contribute to the relationship after marriage. In the words of one man, "My wife is the most genuine, kind-hearted, easy-going, fun-loving person that I have ever met. Because of her personality, really everything's a pleasure" (Participant #32).

Disposition, or one's prevailing temperament, also contributed to other's attitudes about one's ability to foster healthy relationships and fulfill familial roles. One woman remarked, "He has a very calm and even-tempered disposition. That's what really made me think he would be a good dad as well as a husband" (Participant #7). This same wife also said she noticed how her future husband treated others, "He loved children and loved his own family and always showed honor to them. He is respectful to others" (Participant #7). Some particularly noticed how their partner treated family, both their own family and their partner's family. They expressed how, "He treated his family well" (Participant #23), or how "She's kind to my family and her own" (Participant #2), as well as "He loves his children" (Participant #33). Healthy relationships with family seemed very important to these participants as it allowed them to have faith in their own relationship with their partner. One husband said, "She accepted my family, which was the beginning of building trust" (Participant #24).

The women participants, in particular, commented on the importance of *respect for women*. One wife elaborated, "I loved his quiet strength, humility, respect for women, sense of humor, righteousness, and intelligence. He has a powerful job, but governs with love and respect for people" (Participant #9). Another woman said that this respect for others translated into behavior within their relationship, "He was so kind to everyone. He

had no enemies. He also treated his mom with respect. That's important. He has always treated me respectfully" (Participant #21).

Several other participants talked about how their future spouse was considerate, thoughtful, caring and compassionate, or how they *cared about people* in general. One wife admired how her partner "goes out of his way to help others" (Participant #33). Another said she was attracted by her future husband's "honesty and giving nature," "He truly cares about people and that doesn't change" (Participant #35). These characteristics also played a part in the development of the couple relationship. In the words of one participant:

> I felt like he genuinely cared about me. He was very outgoing and spontaneous. He loved to have a good time. He had a great sense of humor. He was kind and compassionate. He did not get angry often. He was creative and he frequently expressed how much he loved me. He treats me the same way he did when we were dating; only he is even better than I thought. (Participant #31)

A number of the participants talked about humor and having fun in the relationship. They commented that their partner was *fun to be with* and had a *good sense of humor*. These characteristics contributed to how open one felt they could be in the relationships. One woman said, "I had found a man who makes me laugh, smile, cry, and be open and honest with" (Participant #37). Another said, "We had fun together. I could be myself with him" (Participant #29). In reference to humor, but not games, one participant said, "I could be me, no games, no false pretenses. He made me laugh, feel good about myself, and he is my best friend. He was comfortable, easy to talk to, laugh with, or cry together" (Participant #23).

Overall, participants talked about how the temperament of their partner led to being comfortable around each other and the beginnings of a great friendship. One

husband said, "She was modest, unassuming, neat, tidy, capable, courteous, kind, pleasant to be around, and encourages me, without saying anything, to do and be better" (Participant #12). Participants described their partner as a "wonderful and caring friend" and someone they were safe with (Participant #22). In the words of one woman, "I felt that he knew all about me, but loved me anyway, and he could see my potential and he would make every effort on his part to help me reach it" (Participant #19). Even temperament and overall kindness brought these individuals together in such a way that they were able to form friendships, which contributed to their later healthy marriage.

Healthy Patterns of Communication

When talking about their budding relationship, several participants referenced how they valued the ability to communicate with their partner. Participants said that they could *talk about anything* or that their partner was *easy to talk to* and especially that communication skills were helpful when resolving concerns or working through conflict. One husband expressed, "I also found we could talk and reason together. We could talk through problems and disagree without being disagreeable" (Participant #10). His wife agreed when she said, "We are able to talk out any disagreements" (Participant #9). One participant said that communication made it easier to work through problems. He said, "She was easy to talk to. We could fight but then we could make up" (Participant #24). Healthy communication helped prevent disagreements from turning into larger issues. One wife said, "We talk things out and communicate well so we don't need to fight" (Participant #35). One man talked about his wife being "willing to talk about differences" was one of the ways he knew they would "be able to get along together" (Participant

#10). When talking about what skills led him to believe he would have a great

marriage, one husband said, "My wife constantly insisted on open communication. She

had the will to keep me doing so no matter how [frustrating] it may have been"

(Participant #14).

Whether or not they were resolving problems, just being able to converse easily

was valuable to these participants. Participants talked about how easy conversation was a

major attractor in the beginnings of their relationship. One man said, "How we would talk

was amazing. We just fit together so well" (Participant #25). Another reminisced, "When

I did talk to her, we talked all night long. I discovered that she was the kind of girl that I

would love to spend the rest of my life with" (Participant #2). The ability to talk *openly*

and freely was improved by how these individuals felt they could *talk about anything*.

One wife felt they could talk about "a lot of different topics" (Participant #5) while

another husband expressed, "We could talk about anything, laugh, cry, and were willing

to tackle challenges together" (Participant #24). For these participants, knowing they

could talk with their partner about anything and communicate about conflict seemed

central to the formation and success of the relationships for these participants.

Integrity

When asked what qualities or skills led them to believe they would have a great

marriage, several of the participants identified characteristics of integrity. They talked

about how their partner was *trustworthy, genuine, sincere, honest,* and *committed*. These

characteristics were crucial in the formation of their relationship. One husband said, "I

believed in and trusted her and, consequently, our friendship became the basis for our

loving bond" (Participant #14). One woman was particularly impressed with her future

husband's integrity. She said, "He was very principled, honest, and ethical so that I had a

tremendous respect for him" (Participant #13). Integrity and honesty in their partner were

not only attractive, but also key to the relationship. When talking about initial attractors,

one man said, "Most of all, she is very honest, sincere, and trustworthy" (Participant

#12). One wife described their relationship, "We immediately were honest and he just felt

right. That seems incredibly important for a lasting marriage" (Participant #37).

Other participants talked about how meeting someone *genuine* and *without guile*

was impressive and refreshing. Talking about his wife, one man said, "She truly is a

person without guile. With my wife, there are no hidden agendas, what you see is what

you get" (Participant #32). Individuals felt safe with someone who was honest and

accepting. One husband expressed it well when he said, "We were open and honest and

accepted each other the way we were and grew from there" (Participant #36).

Several participants expressed this characteristic of integrity as someone who was

committed to the relationship. They described this as "A commitment that would

transcend difficulties" (Participant #34) or a "strong sense to never quit" (Participant

#25). One couple described this quality in their relationship. The husband said, "She is

the kind of person who gives 100% to the relationship and doesn't really expect that,

because she gives so much, she's entitled to the same" (Participant #32). Telling her side

of the story, the wife said:

> My husband showed me while we were dating that he would do anything for me.
> He stuck it out. That's how I knew we would have a good marriage; he was
> willing to stay with things no matter what it took. I knew he loved me and that he
> would always love me. (Participant #31)

Other Characteristics

In addition to these three main themes found in response to this research question, there were other characteristics that the participants described as helpful in leading them to believe they could have a great marriage with this particular person; however, these themes were not as pervasive. A minority of the participants talked about physical attraction being important. They talked about how their future spouse was good looking, handsome, beautiful, attractive, or athletic. "Good sex" or how they were a "good kisser" were important for two participants (Participants #16 and #33). These participants acknowledged physical characteristics as part of the equation in the development of the relationship.

A few of the participants also talked about having the "same desires" and "similar goals," or being a "hard worker" as significant prior to marriage. One husband described his future wife as a "go-getter" and having a "strong work ethic" (Participant #2). Participants also recognized the importance of spirituality or religiosity in their future spouse. When talking about spirituality, participants depicted their partner as "active in their religion" (Participant #31), "loving God" (Participant #2), and "believing in the Divine" (Participant #33). One wife articulated, "My husband was a strong, confident and mature Christian when we met. That was very attractive to me" (Participant #1). One husband described it clearly when he described how religiosity seemed to contribute to other attractive qualities in his future wife:

> One of the most important reasons why I wanted to get married to her was her spirituality. She genuinely has a relationship with God. As a result of that she is kind-hearted and humble. These attributes are a big part of her life. (Participant #32)

The Experiences or People That Influenced Beliefs and

Expectations about Marriage

Through years of experience in their families of origin, the participants in this study gained insight into a larger structure of personal meaning surrounding their expectations of and preparation for marriage. The final research question presents the analysis of participants' personal experiences that influenced their beliefs and expectations of marriage. These comments are in response to questions about personal experiences and socialization prior to marriage.

The comments that shed light on this research question are defined as experiential and are qualitatively different from the references of research question one. When talking about preparation for marriage, the participants spoke briefly, often simply listing things done in preparation. In contrast, the participants' comments regarding the experiences and people that influenced their beliefs and expectations of marriage are extensive and rich in narrative. The participants tell a story about the experiences – the lives they lived – that formed their beliefs and expectations around marriage.

Their commentary revealed three significant experiences that influenced beliefs and expectations. First, participants speak at length regarding the example of parents and siblings in developing their beliefs around marriage. In addition to learning from parents' relationships, participants also talk about their expectations changing as they went through previous successful or failed relationships. Finally, individuals also talk about how religion played a role in how they viewed marriage and a potential partner.

Learning from Parents

In conducting the analysis, participants' accounts fell into three prevalent ideas surrounding their socialization from the examples of parents: (a) wanting to model the relationship qualities of parents and siblings, (b) wanting to be different from the relationships of parents or siblings, and (c) the role-taking and responsibilities perceived in parents' relationship.

Desirable family and relationship characteristics. The majority of the participants identified learning about committed relationships from their parents' or siblings' marriages. Several responses associated with this theme came when the participants were asked questions about their family of origin. It was clear that meaning around marriage and family was part of socialization in the family unit of origin. Many participants talked about how family was highly valued and this worth placed on family was something they learned as they grew up. In the words of one participant, "Marriage is something that was highly important to my family. As soon as you were old enough (18 or older), you tried to find yourself a good husband and you then would begin your family together" (Participant #31). There was a sense of the importance of family in the way participants talked about their experiences. This particular participant continued, "My family is very close. We do things all the time together. My sisters were/are my best friends. My parents taught us that it was important to go to church every week. We would have family home evenings together. On Mondays we would go on family outings together" (Participant #31). Other participants also reminisced how family was about spending time together. One man articulated, "I had a wonderful experience growing up.

We were a close family who did a lot of trips together such as camping, fishing, playing games together, etc. We still try to get together when we can and have fun" (Participant #22).

Many talked about the characteristics of parents and how those characteristics contributed to their experience growing up and their ideas about family. One husband recalled, "The differences we have [in our marriage] are mostly based on what we observed as children growing up." He continued, "My wife had a loving father who worked hard as a farmer and I had an alcoholic father who was angry and tired and frustrated a lot, but still instilled good things too" (Participant #2). Other participants described their parents as *hard workers* and committed to the relationship of marriage. When asked to describe the family he grew up in, one participant said:

> I had a wonderful father and mother with a strong marriage. My father was the foundation. He lived what the Bible teaches—a man of integrity, strong belief, loving, a follower of Christ. Mom was also loving, kind, and hard working. We are trying to model my father and his family. (Participant #6)

Characteristics that were viewed as desirable went beyond their couple relationships to family relationships. Family relationships included how parents disciplined their children. One participant referenced his parents' characteristics in how it affected the discipline patterns in the family. He explained, "Dad was somewhat quiet, while mom did most of the discipline, but both mom and dad were very hard workers and I never remember seeing them fight or yell" (Participant #22). Like other participants, he too expressed a desire to model his parents when he said, "They were wonderful examples and I hope our family is much like theirs" (Participant #22).

In addition to discipline patterns, participants also learned about communication in the family. One wife explained, "My parents did not get mad very often. They taught us that it was much better to talk about why you were angry." She continued, "They would discipline using the guilt system. If you ever did anything wrong you knew you were going to have a talk about it with mom and dad" (Participant #31). Participants talked about parents being *expressive* or *private* in their communication patterns. The words of one husband captured the difference in experiences that can occur when two family backgrounds are melded together in marriage. He acknowledged learning about both bad and good examples of communication in he and his wife's families when he said:

> My family tended not to discuss emotionally challenging issues. I grew up with parents who didn't feel comfortable (or didn't know how to) discuss their emotions. In contrast, I married a woman who grew up in a household that was not afraid to express feelings. It has taken years for me to learn to do this successfully. (Participant #14)

There was a sense of admiration among the participants who commented on what they learned from their parents. Participants seemed to acknowledge the value of the afore mentioned characteristics in building a strong marriage and the effort required to develop those personal characteristics. Two traits highlighted were respect and service in the relationship. In sharing his story, one husband captured these ideas best when he said:

> For me, I had a great example in my parents' marriage. My father tries very hard to treat my mother with respect. I think that's something that I've noticed and really tried to emulate in my own marriage. His favorite saying is, "As you wish." I really think that he would do anything that she asked him to do. Along those same lines, I try hard to show my wife that I'd do anything for her. (Participant #32)

Undesirable family and relationship characteristics. When asked

specifically how they learned about what it took to have a strong marriage, many of the

participants referenced their parents' relationship as providing a guide in how they

wanted to shape their future relationship. However, several participants realized that

parents exemplified both positive and negative relationship qualities—things they wanted

to emulate and things they wanted to change. Participants describe how their experiences

led to desires to be very different from their parents. Participants talk about "wanting

something different" and "picking out things I liked or didn't like" in surveying their

family of origin experience (Participant #23). Their experiences growing up had molded

their ideas about marriage and family by how things failed to work in their families of

origin. These observations resulted in a desire to do things differently. In this way, these

participants became transitional characters, striving to begin new patterns in their

families, different than in their families of origin. One wife explained:

> My parents were very affectionate and outgoing. There was always lively
> conversation and debate. But with this came lively arguments. I always felt that
> they were committed to each other and fundamentally loved each other, but the
> dynamics of their disputes were not productive and were often disrespectful and
> included name calling. On the other hand, I always felt loved and accepted. I
> could talk to them about anything. I have taken the good aspects of my upbringing
> (i.e., openness and candor and acceptance) and applied that to our marriage. I also
> vowed to work towards creating a respectful tone when we disagree—unlike my
> parents. (Participant #13)

Other family and relationship characteristics were also mentioned specifically.

Participants talked about lacking quality time with their parents during upbringing and

not experiencing much physical affection. In the words of two husbands, "My parents

spent very little time with us. I've tried to reverse that with my children" (Participant

#34) and "I was raised without much physical affection. I'm trying to be more attentive

and loving to my wife and kids" (Participant #36). How affection was shared and love was felt seemed to be very potent experiences for some of these participants. One wife expressed similar desires to be different from her family of origin in this regard when she said, "My family was not particularly close and did not show a lot of outward affection. I am trying to improve that relationship in the family I am creating today" (Participant #19).

Many also talked about breaking away from patterns of depression, negativity, and anger. They talk about *overcoming poor examples* and *breaking stereotypes*. Several individuals felt a need to acknowledge the negative patterns that they had learned from parents and make changes in their personal lives to insure those patterns did not continue. Participants talked about how important it was for them to create a different environment in their home than the one modeled during their upbringing. As one wife said in reference to these negative patterns:

> I grew up in a family where my dad was not involved with us. My mom was there for everything we did and she made up for him. He was always yelling at something. He didn't help with anything around the house. My mom did everything. It doesn't compare at all with the family we are creating today. My husband helps with everything. We believe a marriage is a team, an equal team. (Participant #21)

These participants acknowledge that they did not grow up in a perfect home. Their resilience came to play as they recalled those experiences in their families of origin that helped them identify what they wanted to change and improve upon in their own family moving forward.

Learning from Previous Relationships

After relationship beliefs learned from observing parents' relationships, the next most prevalent topic in regard to what experiences influenced expectations in marriage was the experiences of previous relationships. Many of the participants narrate their experiences in previous relationships, with several revealing an experience in *trial and error*. All had experienced a previous relationship of varying seriousness where they had learned about what works and what did not work. In the words of one participant, "The experience of a bad marriage was probably the best teacher. I definitely know what to look out for and what traits, characteristics, and attitudes would destroy a relationship" (Participant #9).

Participants talked about why previous relationships failed or what they may have done in relating to previous partners that did not work. One wife specifically talks about "practicing" communication skills in previous relationships and learning how to improve herself. She explained, "I'd take those lessons on to subsequent relationships—culminating in my marriage" (Participant #13). These individuals seemed to have developed an honest attitude regarding their failed relationships. They recognized their part in the relationship and made a concerted effort to improve things in their current relationship. In this way, previous relationships provided a great opportunity for learning, which influenced their ideas and expectations about marriage and contributing to the quality of their great marriages. One participant summed it up well when he said, "After deciding that what I had done, or the way I had related to two previous wives didn't work, I made a concerted effort to improve my life and take to heart many things I had learned from experience" (Participant #10).

Religious Factors

While in no way prevalent, the topic of religion was highlighted by some of the participants as influential in the development of beliefs and expectations about marriage. Individuals talked about how the organization of the family and the notion of strong marriages were highly valued in their religious upbringing. One woman shared an experience where at the young age of 14, she was taught in church to set a high standard for the person she would marry. She narrated, "Our teacher explained that we would need to personally live high standards in order to get someone with high standards. I was always taught that divorce was not an option, so I had better find the right one to begin with" (Participant #31).

Participants talked about a commitment to marriage that was instilled by their religious beliefs. They contributed the success of their marriage to this deep commitment. One woman talked about her spiritual conviction that "if we would be married, that it was a commitment for life" (Participant #1). Her husband agreed when he said, "We both shared our faith in God which caused us to know that marriage is for a lifetime. We were committed to our choice to love each other and with God's help, we will strive to out serve one another" (Participant #2). Others talked about how religion put the act of marriage into a place in the grandeur scheme of things, making commitment to the relationship highly important. The words of one wife capture this idea when she said, "We both view this early life as only a small part of our existence and know that our marriage and family will continue on even after death" (Participant #19). One participant talked about how their religion served as a foundation for their great marriage. He explained, "Our religion, spiritual values, and beliefs are of the utmost importance to our

marriage. Without these similarities, our marriage would collapse. It is the eternal perspective that it gives us, as well as the peace in our hearts" (Participant #22).

Religion seemed to have influenced these individuals' preparation for marriage, their choice in partner, as well as their commitment to the union. Participants also talked about how religion served as a tool in helping their relationships persist through the challenges of life. Others referenced how religion shaped family direction by helping them "live more simply and keep on track with God's will for us" (Participant #25). Several individuals talked about how their religion had taught them that the purpose of life was to marry and have children. In this way, religion also served as a proponent to marriage and finding the right person with whom to make this commitment.

Some participants observed other relationships in their lives. Aside from parents and siblings, participants talked about observing the marriages of others, from friends to co-workers. Different from their positive comments about observing their parents' relationship, several participants here talked about "broken marriages" and "severed relationships" that taught them what they did not want for their relationship. One wife said, "I've been a keen observer of other's marriages. I tried to learn what worked and what doesn't by watching others" (Participant #13). It is evident that through the observation of couples in general, a lot of socialization and learning was taking place as these individuals developed their own beliefs and expectations for marriage. The words of one participant capture this process. When asked how she learned about what it takes to have a strong marriage, this wife said:

> Example. Period. I have seen my share of broken marriages and severed
> relationships. I don't want that for my marriage and I will do what needs to be
> done to prevent that. I have also seen incredible examples of healthy marriages

and I desire those qualities that produce strong bonds within a marriage. (Participant #1)

Summary

In this analysis, 38 participants talked about their preparation for marriage, the qualities and skills they looked for in a partner before marriage, as well as the experiences and socialization in their family of origin that formed their beliefs and expectations around marriage and family. In regard to the first research question, the analysis revealed that when asked about preparation for marriage, most participants only briefly mention or list observing family members, attending a class, reading a book, prior relationships, or formal counseling, with observation of family members being identified most often. Participants' account of formal counseling was neither pervasive in this sample nor identified as significantly helpful in their preparation. When asked about what they wish they had done to prepare, participants talked about wanting a greater understanding of financial matters and relationship skills in general.

In response to the second research question, participants identified overall temperament as a leading indicator of why they felt they could have a successful relationship with that individual. Participants defined temperament as how individuals interacted with others and responded to others emotionally. These participants described a person with desirable temperament as being *friendly, easy-going,* and *respectful*. They also identified healthy communication and characteristics of integrity as important characteristics that led them to believe they could have a successful marriage.

Different from the lists found in response to the first research question on preparation, when participants were asked about the experiences that contributed to their expectations and beliefs in marriage, they offered a rich, experiential narrative. Participants' responses explored socialization in their family of origin and the beliefs held to regarding marriage, relationship skills, and family in general. Participants indicated learning about relationships from the examples of their parents in the way they demonstrated both healthy and unhealthy patterns. Participants talked about admiring the relationship of their parents and wanting to emulate it or recognizing unhealthy patterns and ways in which they wanted their marital relationship or family patterns to be different from the family and relationship of their parents. Participants also talked about how religious beliefs contributed to their expectations for and commitment to marriage and family.

The findings of the third research question in particular, highlight several concepts found in a Symbolic Interactionism Theory. Participants' narratives describe the process of socialization in the family of origin, as well as recount the meaning that participants associated with experiences growing up and how that meaning contributed later to their great marriage. In this way, using a Symbolic Interactionism Theory highlighted in the data a more intuitive form of marital preparation in the way individuals learned from and gathered meaning around the relationships of their family of origin.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The qualitative findings of this study provided in-depth information about what individuals did to prepare for marriage including the ways participants talked about the socialized meaning of marriage and the way in which that meaning was derived as a crucial method employed in the preparation for marriage. One of the major findings of this study is that participants referenced the positive, and occasionally negative, examples of their parents' relationships as instrumental in helping them create their own "great marriages." The findings of the current study not only call for further research regarding informal or self-directed forms of marital preparation, but also highlight the importance of supporting current families and parental dyads to help parents learn how to positively influence the rising generation in their choice of marriage partner as well as by the modeling of positive relationship skills.

Findings

Given the qualitative nature of this study, these participants provided an in-depth understanding of how individuals with great marriages prepared for these marriages in both formal and informal ways. The findings of this study support existing research and theory regarding marital preparation. The findings are organized in this section by the significance attributed them by the author and presents the ways participants talked about their preparation for marriage; including socialization for marriage, temperament and

personal skills as an indicator of later marital success, and what educational activities were participated in.

Hopper (2001) described a larger structure of meaning in marriage and how people make sense of their experiences. The findings of the current study highlighted symbolism in how participants talk about the experiences they had and the process of socialization in the family unit that contributed to their ideas and meaning about marriage. The findings suggest that for these individuals, preparation for marriage occurred in the informal setting of the home and in the symbolic interpretation of the experiences in ones' upbringing and life experiences that contributed to ideas and expectations regarding marriage. It was in these informal, daily, and yet highly symbolic interactions that participants gained the knowledge and tools to create a happy marriage. These unique findings, while not found in any current research, strongly support Symbolic Interaction Theory and are organized into two theoretical concepts: socialization and definition of the situation.

Socialization

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study was the way participants talked about how they learned about family. The concept of socialization in Symbolic Interactionism Theory is the process individuals go through to learn the meanings, beliefs, or attitudes of their family or greater society. Participants described experiences and family processes that taught them about what family meant to them both currently and in their family of origin. Participants described the process of learning about the importance of family through spending time together or the teachings of parents, as well

as having family members provide a model about what marriages and families should look like. They highlighted socialized values such as the importance of family and time spent together as a family, the value of hard work and discipline, healthy communication, respect for others, and habits of service. Participants learned the importance of marriage and family by simple interactions in their day-to-day experiences in the family of origin. While some participants referenced specific experiences that led them to these ideas, most simply referenced their experiences growing up as a whole. They expressed these cumulative ideas when they said, "Marriage was something that was highly important to my family" (Participant #31) or "We were a close family" (Participant #22).

Symbolic theorists recognized the family as the setting for learning social norms and values. The experiences of these participants supported the somewhat intuitive idea that individuals learn about what family and relationships should or should not be from the personal experiences had growing up in their family of origin. While most experiences that were shared were positive, some participants also described some family turmoil in their upbringing. They made decisions to create different kinds of marriages and families. The study also indicates that there was socialization by other relationships, families, or society that led to a belief that their own marriages and families should be different from the turbulent experiences of their youth. These individuals experienced their history differently as they attributed new or different meaning to their upbringing, creating their personal definition of the situation in which they were socialized. Socialization, therefore, must be understood through the personal filter of meaning that is inherent in each individual.

Definition of the Situation

Symbolic Interactionism Theory postulates that while the socialization and experiences of our upbringing are crucial, the lens through which we view these experiences is also important or even more important than the events themselves. Moving beyond the overall experiences of participants in their family of origin, greater meaning is discovered when we begin to look at how participants viewed and defined these experiences. As Hopper (2001) put it, it is the "interpretive logic that people then use to make sense of their own experiences," that provides even greater meaning (p. 431).

Several participants in the current study talked about how they admired the examples of their parents. They referred to their parents as having good, healthy marriages and demonstrating open communication, conflict resolution, hard work, religious faith, discipline, service to each other, and respect. Over 70% of the participants referred to their parents' relationships as an example of what they wanted in their future marriages and families. Participants had viewed their parents' relationships and judged those relationships as desirable, based on not only their socialization by family and community, but also by the way in which they interpreted the relationship of parents. Put simply, there were characteristics or relationship processes that were witnessed, attributed meaning to, and then identified as a goal or something worth emulating in future relationships.

Conversely, participants also experienced this process with other undesirable experiences or characteristics witnessed in their family of origin. Some participants talked about wanting to be different from their parents in the way they dealt with contention, wanting to make more time for family, being more affectionate, creating a

more equal partnership in marriage, and avoiding depression, negativity, and anger. Again, participants' narratives highlight a process of deriving meaning from their experiences and their interpretation of the situations of their youth. Participants went through a process where they determined that certain characteristics and processes found in their family of origin were undesirable and, therefore, sought out the establishments of different processes in their own family or more healthy characteristics in their partner of choice.

One participant in particular talked about how the differences and conflicts experienced in their marriage were largely based on the differences in their experiences as children growing up. Both individuals not only had different experiences growing up in their family of origin, but had also attributed great meaning to those experiences. The success of their own marital relationship was then based on the reconciliation of these differences and creating a new shared meaning as to what marriage means, and the new processes they would seek after in their relationship. Several participants also talked about the role of religion in the definition of what it takes to have a great marriage. For these individuals, religious beliefs became the lens through which they understood family and the attributed meaning to the experiences of their youth.

Moving forward in the findings, the participants talked less in the context of Symbolic Interactionism. Participants talked about their perception of partner attributes and skills and simply list the activities they did to prepare. In Symbolic Interactions, we understand that all behavior must be understood through the lens of the participant. In this way it would be important to understand how they viewed the attributes of their partner as compared to how their partner viewed themselves and more about the value

assigned specific marital preparation activities. While a Symbolic Interactionism lens would be helpful in fleshing out the deeper meanings in these findings, the participants failed to talk in depth about these findings in that context.

**Temperament and Friendship as
a Premarital Indicator of Success**

When asked about what characteristics or skills led participants to believe they would have a successful marriage, the most pervasive response was some reference to temperament. Participants referred to temperament, which led to friendship with their future spouse, as contributing to their desirability. Temperament was described as the way an individual interacted with others, their personality, and overall disposition. While there is minimal existing research on individual temperament and marital quality (Blum & Mehrabian, 1999), research is also lacking in any studies identifying temperament as a premarital indicator of later marital success.

When participants talked about temperament of their partner they said things like being *friendly* or *kind*. They talked about wanting to find someone who was *happy* and *fun to be with*. These characteristics contributed to admiration and respect and served as an attractor, eventually leading to a more committed relationship. Participants also reference temperament in the way they treated family members with respect. This respect for individuals and consideration of others was the beginning of building trust in the relationship, a foundational principle in lasting relationships. Temperament, as referenced by these participants, was about being comfortable around each other and how that comfort led to a great friendship, and ultimately the beginning of their great marriage. While participants did not talk about it explicitly, using a Symbolic Interactionism lens,

we understand that what participants valued in their partner in regards to temperament and friendship was a reflection of socialized values as to what society and experiences in their life had taught them is important in a lasting relationship.

It is interesting to note that while some measures of temperament exist in research (Evans & Rothbart, 2007; Nærde, Røysamb, & Tambs, 2004), the language usually used in such surveys is formal and created with the goal of fitting several concepts into a short, overarching idea. This practice limits the depth and clarity that was found in the current research as the participants used common language, such as *friendly, happy,* or *fun to be with* to describe temperament.

Communication and Integrity

The participants in the current study identify several significant characteristics and skills that served to help them decide to marry at all. Perhaps one of the most reported desirable marriage skills in existing research is communication (Carroll et al., 2009; DeFrain & Asay, 2007b; Fowers, 2001; Larson & Holman, 1994; Wright et al., 2007). Consistent with research, this study found that before marriage, healthy communication skills in the partner led participants to believe they would have a successful marriage. Participants talked about how prior to marriage one thing that attracted them to their spouse was that they were easy to talk to and that they could talk about anything. Participants indicated healthy communication contributed to deep friendship prior to marriage and a motivation to marry. Communication also was a significant part of being able to effectively talk through differences and resolve conflict both before and during marriage with participants indicating that in this way,

communication was a preventative measure as differences were discussed before they become a major source of conflict. In this way, healthy communication increased the probability of these individuals marrying each other and contributed to their later marital satisfaction.

Another finding that supported previous research was that prior to marriage, participants placed value on their partner's commitment and integrity. In his study of 70 couples, Strom (2003) found faithfulness to be one of the top five virtues to engender functional and happy marriages. Strom defined faithfulness as being true to one's marital roles, keeping promises, and being reliable and committed to their partners (2003). Consistent with Strom's study, the current study was rich with themes of faithfulness. The participants talked about an overarching idea of integrity, elaborating that having trust and honesty in the relationship contributed to greater confidence in the relationship. This idea included feeling that their partner was trustworthy, genuine, and *without guile,* meaning they were not hiding anything but were willing to be vulnerable, open, and honest in the relationship. Somewhat different from Strom's research, the current participants described faithfulness and integrity as the characteristic of sticking it out through hard times and never quitting or giving up on the relationship. Also, being honest and open during communication was described as an indication of commitment to the relationship. Again, in the spirit of Symbolic Interactionism, these participants learned to value communication and a sense of integrity in their relationships, from their interactions in society that socialized them to accept these characteristics and skills as of value in a strong relationship.

What Individuals Did to Prepare

The most prevalent activity identified by these participants in preparation for marriage was simply the observation of other marriages, including the marriages of their parents. Participants also talked about preparing for marriage by attending classes, conferences, seminars, and by reading books or articles. Prior relationships were also identified as being helpful in learning lessons and making changes from what happened in those prior relationships to prepare for marriage.

Consistent with other research findings (Duncan et al., 2010; Halford, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2004), the current study indicated that self-directed forms of preparation were the preferred method to prepare for marriage. These methods included reading books and/or magazines, including books with questionnaires to increase awareness before marriage, and the personal study of other relationships in their lives.

Somewhat interesting in the current study was the lack of individuals reporting professional counseling as a useful mode of preparation for marriage. Professional counseling was the least reported form of preparation by the current study participants, with two participants indicating their experience with counseling as "not helpful" (Participant #15 and #23).

Implications for Further Research

Overall, the findings of the current study provided an in-depth understanding of what a relatively small number of individuals did to prepare for their great marriages. These findings can provide a foundation for further research. In regard to the first

research questions, the participants referenced several forms of preparation, however, there was very little detail as to the nature of these resources. When books or classes were identified, we knew very little about the content. What marital topics were covered? What marital skills were emphasized and were any tools provided in the development of these skills? A qualitative study focusing only on marital preparation could go into even more depth about what the content was, the length of time spent with a variety of resources, and the degree of helpfulness of these resources. In addition, quantitative research surveying the nature of these forms of preparation would prove helpful.

The participants of the current study preferred self-directed preparation such as reading books or articles, as opposed to the more formal forms of preparation such as taking a class, attending a seminar, or seeking professional counseling. As resources on the Internet are more readily available one might speculate that the Internet will be an up-and-coming source of information, and research about this self-directed form of preparation would be enlightening. These types of resources are not being addressed in current research.

While some research on temperament and marital quality is available, research classifying temperament as a premarital indicator for marriage is lacking. Using the descriptive findings of the current study, a temperament scale could be created using some of the common descriptors used by participants in this study to measure temperament or personal characteristics in developing relationships. There are also some reliable instruments already used to identify temperament styles that might be employed in this research (Evans & Rothbart, 2007; Nærde et al., 2004). It might also be interesting

to look at temperament and relationship formation, researching the personality and characteristics that lend to relationship formation in the first place.

The findings of the current study indicated the example of parents was a prominent influence in the marriage preparation process of these participants. Symbolic Interactionism Theory begins to shed some light on the process of socialization and the distinct lens through which individuals experience their upbringing and assign meaning to marriage and family. We need to know more about this process of this socialization than the current study provides. We might want to know if the parents are deliberate in the process of socializing their children about marriage and family life. Are there certain times in young peoples' lives where this socialization is more salient? Do siblings get similar messages about preparation for marriage or is everyone's lens different? Is this socialization going on multi-generational, being passed from one generation to another? These are just some of the many questions that should be explored in further research.

More qualitative research might singularly explore the processes of socialization and how an individual attributes meaning to the experiences of youth. Descriptive research might survey the characteristics or relationship skills an individual might attribute as being learned from their parents. Sibling studies might also be helpful in identifying how individuals uniquely interpret the interactions of their parents, exploring how two individuals may define the same situation in significantly different ways.

This goal of this study was to better understand what a small number of individuals with great marriages did to prepare for marriage. This hope is that this information can begin the process of conducting additional research, which would help other individuals that want to have strong marriages.

Implication for Individuals and Practitioners

Although much research is still needed, there are implications for practice that can be gleaned from the current study. Individuals preparing for or desiring marriage can begin by understanding the nature of temperament, as defined in this study, as an attractor to marry. In the current findings, qualities of kindness, respect, being happy, being easy-going, and the ability to love were all parts of temperament that increased the desirability of an individual and led to relationship formation. These findings, though preliminary, may be useful for individuals as they think about preparation for marriage. Clinicians, clergy, and family life educators may encourage individuals to think about temperament as they talk with couples.

While researchers have indicated the home as an important, yet often overlooked location for marital education (Hawkins et al., 2004), very little research has actually been done to develop this idea. The current study adds to the literature by fleshing out how what happens in the home affects preparation for marriage. The current findings, although preliminary, suggest that the example of parents was distinctively influential in the preparation of marriage for these individuals. The greatest way parents can help children prepare for a meaningful and lasting marital relationship is to focus on the healthy development of their own marriage and, therefore, teach and demonstrate healthy relationships processes for their children.

As found in the current study, the negative processes of parent relationships also send a message. While the individuals of this study were able to see that they wanted

something different than what they grew up with and were deliberate in making that change, not all persons preparing for marriage are able to do that. Practitioners and family life programs can help individuals make this connection and identify meaning derived from the observed relationships of their youth. Individual counseling and family life programing can help parents develop the effective modeling of relationship skills and promote open communication with children regarding relationships skills and confidence in their child's ability to succeed in intimate relationships. Practitioners and educators can use this study as motivation when working with individuals, to build on the positive relationship examples of parents and reduce the impact of negative examples by helping individuals identify and work through those negative experiences. Because parents' ultimate generational gift to their children will be their own healthy marriages, it becomes important to provide education and support for all individuals to have strong marriages they can pass on to their children.

Limitations

While the findings of this study are informative, limitations of the methodology and data collection process make this study's findings limited to people who fit this demographic. Participants in the GMRS study were almost exclusively from a highly educated, high socioeconomic status, Caucasian population. Because participants in great marriages were self-selected as willing to complete the questionnaire, only individuals willing to spend long periods of time completing the questionnaire participated in the study. In addition, individuals who were not well-educated and/or who did not like to write or type in the answers did not participate.

The average length of marriage at the time of the study was 10.2 years with over half of participants being married nine years or more. While some participants were very descriptive in their recollection of their preparation for marriage, others were briefer and may have struggled to remember details or may have recalled their courtship in a more positive or negative light than would have described if things had been more recent. It can be assumed that a self-reported questionnaire will always contain some inaccuracy in the recording of past events.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the limitations of the current study, it serves as a crucial beginning to the research and exploration of more self-direction forms of marriage preparation as well as the socialized meaning of marriage in families and how that meaning contributes to later success in marriages and families. This research also contributes to the gap in literature regarding temperament in one's partner as a potential attractor to marriage as well as research describing the influence of parental relationships on the meanings young individuals associate with marriage and family. The current findings suggest that more must be done to support marriage and family, as parents' relationships are an essential influence on the successful relationships of their children and contribute to their own strong marriages.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A.

Letter to Newspaper Editors

EXTENSION
Utah State
UNIVERSITY
2705 Old Main Hill
Logan, UT 84322-2705

February 7, 2005

Dear Family Life Editor:

I am beginning a new research project at Utah State University about *Great Marriages*, and would appreciate your help by publishing the enclosed news story.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how couples develop highly-successful marriages, and the qualities of those marriages. A diverse sample of several hundred couples is being sought with the help of the media around the U.S. I am looking for couples that perceive they have a strong, satisfying, happy, high-quality relationship with each other. I will send them a questionnaire in order to gain an in-depth understanding of highly-successful marriages. The findings will be used for Cooperative Extension program development in Utah and nationally, and educational efforts to improve the quality of marriages.

The questionnaire has both open-ended questions and closed-end questions. The open-ended questions will be analyzed using qualitative research methodologies. I would be happy to send you a copy of the instrument, if you would like to see it. The questionnaires take couples anywhere from an hour to three hours to complete and can be mailed to us in a postage paid envelop. I encourage couples to keep the original questionnaire as an important document, a self study of their marital relationship to date and encourage them to make a copy and send it to me. The information in the questionnaires will then be analyzed, seeing what we can learn from each couple individually, and from the couples as a group.

All the couples in the study are volunteers, and so I need to get the word out. Your newspaper is an excellent resource for research using this type of methodology. I would appreciate it if you could help in the efforts to learn more about *Great Marriages.*

I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have, and would also be available for an interview on the topic of *great marriages*. I have 30 years of experience in the family field and have co-authored two books and many professional articles on family issues.

Sincerely,

Linda Skogrand, Ph.D.
Principal Investigator
Assistant Professor and Extension Family Life Specialist
Office: (435) 797-8183
E-mail: Lindas@ext.usu.edu

Appendix B.

Press Release

FOR RELEASE ANYTIME

Great Marriages Needed
for Research Project

Logan, Utah and Lincoln, Nebraska – Couples who believe they have a *Great Marriage* are needed for a new research project at Utah State University and University of Nebraska, Lincoln. This research is being conducted by Dr. Linda Skogrand at Utah State University and Dr. John DeFrain at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Dr. Linda Skogrand, Extension Family Life Specialist said, "We need the help of several hundred couples nation-wide to tell us how they have created a strong, satisfying, happy, high-quality relationship." Dr. DeFrain added, "The folks who have great marriages are the experts. We need to learn from them how they did it."

The research will be used for Cooperative Extension program development and educational efforts to improve the quality of marriages in our respective states, nationally and internationally.

Volunteer couples are encouraged to contact Dr. Linda Skogrand, via e-mail at Lindas@ext.usu.edu, by phone at (435) 797-8183 or by mail at the following address to receive a questionnaire:

<div align="center">

Dr. Linda Skogrand
Utah State University
2705 Old Main
Logan, Utah 84322-2705

</div>

Volunteers will be sent a questionnaire to complete together and return postage-paid. Couples will be able to view the questionnaire before they decide to participate anonymously in the study or not.

The questionnaire consists of 46 open-ended questions about various aspects of a strong marriage, plus an inventory of couple strengths. The questionnaire takes anywhere from an hour to three hours to fill complete. The questionnaires will be analyzed seeing what the researchers can learn from each couple, and what can be learned from all the couples as a group. Couples are encouraged to keep the original copy of the questionnaire as an important document, a self-study of their healthy marital relationship to date, and something to be passed down to their children.

Over the past 30 years Dr. Skogrand and Dr. DeFrain have co-authored 17 books and a multitude of professional articles on family issues. They have both have a strong desire to enhance marriage and family life.

Appendix C.

Flyer

Couples with Great Marriages Needed for Utah State University and University of Nebraska Research Project

Couples who believe they have a *great marriage* are being invited to volunteer to tell us about how their marriages became great. We want to know how couples, nation-wide have created strong, satisfying, happy and high quality marriages. The research conducted by Dr. John DeFrain of the University of Nebraska and Dr. Linda Skogrand of Utah State University will be used for Cooperative Extension program development and educational efforts to improve the quality of marriages locally and nationally. Volunteer couples are encouraged to contact Dr. Linda Skogrand, by phone at (435) 797-8183, via e-mail at Lindas@ext.usu.edu or by mail at the following address to receive a questionnaire:

Dr. Linda Skogrand
Utah State University
2705 Old Main
Logan, Utah 84322

Volunteers will be sent a questionnaire to complete together and return, postage-paid. Couples will be able to view the questionnaire before they decide to participate anonymously in the study or not.

The questionnaire consists of 46 open-ended questions about various aspects of a strong marriage, plus an inventory of couple strengths. The questionnaire takes anywhere from an hour to three hours each to complete. The data on the questionnaires will be analyzed, seeing what the researchers can learn from each couple, and what can be learned from all the couples as a group. Everyone is anonymous in the study. Couples are encouraged to keep the original copy of the questionnaire as an important document, a self-study of their healthy marital relationship to date, and something to be passed down to their children or other family members.

Appendix D.

Letter to Participants

Dear Participants –

The purpose of this study is to better understand how couples develop highly-successful marriages, and the qualities of those marriages. A diverse sample of volunteer couples, who perceive they have a strong, satisfying, happy, high-quality relationship, are being invited to participate in this study to gain an in-depth understanding of highly-successful marriages. The findings will be used for Cooperative Extension program development and educational efforts to improve the quality of marriages locally, nationally, and internationally

The questionnaire mainly consists of 46 open-ended questions, plus an inventory of couple strengths. I ask that you complete the questionnaire as a couple; there is a place for the husband and the wife to respond after each question. The questionnaire will take from an hour to three hours to complete. The completed questionnaire will be a *story* of each great marriage. You can choose not to answer specific questions and at any time you can choose not to participate in the study. If you choose to complete the questionnaire, you can then mail it in the enclosed post-paid envelope. The information you provide will be anonymous.

The stories will then be analyzed by the researchers. There will be an analysis of all the couples' stories as a group, seeing what general principles or themes can be ascertained from the group of couples.

In many previous studies using this type of approach, I have found that participants often gain a good deal of satisfaction in passing on to others what they have learned about life. In this particular study, your marital successes will be used as examples for others to learn from.

Risks involved are minimal, because you are volunteering for the study and can withdraw at any time. You are encouraged to contact me to ask any questions about the research you might have at the phone number listed below, and I will answer them honestly. I encourage you to keep the original copy of the story as a valuable document describing an important part of the life of your family. I do not ask for your names and identifying details which could identify you will never be used in any written or presented accounts of the research.

The results of the study will be published in journal articles, presented at scholarly meetings, and used in developing educational programs for couples and families. I have worked for many years with state and national professional organizations helping to strengthen couples and families, and the results of this study will be very influential in the creation of marriage and family programming.

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject that have not been answered by the investigators, feel free to contact True Rubal, Utah State University Institutional Review Board, at (435) 797-1821.

Please send a copy of the questionnaire to me in the enclosed, post-paid envelope. By returning the questionnaire, you are indicating your consent to participate in our study.

Thank you for your kindness and your contribution to a better understanding of the creation of strong marriages in our country.

Sincerely,

Linda Skogrand, PhD
Assistant Professor and Extension Family Life Specialist
Principal Investigator
Department of Family, Consumer and Human Development
College of Education and Human Sciences
2705 Old Main
Utah State University
Logan, Utah 84322
Office: (435) 797-8183
E-mail: Lindas@ext.usu.edu

Appendix E.

Great Marriage Research Study Questionnaire

GREAT MARRIAGES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Questionnaire

Principal Investigator:

Linda Skogrand, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor and Extension Family
     Life Specialist
Department of Family, Consumer and
     Human Development
     Utah State University
     Phone: 435 797-8183
     E-mail: lindas@ext.usu.edu

GREAT MARRIAGES, PART I:

General Information

1. Your ages:
   ___ *her* age
   ___ *his* age

2. This is *her*:
   ___ first marriage
   ___ second marriage
   ___ third marriage

   This is *his*:
   ___ first marriage
   ___ second marriage
   ___ third marriage

3. The number of years you have been in this marriage.
   ___ years

4. In your own words, please describe the ethnic/cultural group to which you belong:
   _____.

5. Highest level of education you have achieved (please describe):
   _____ *her* education.
   _____ *his* education.

6. Are you in paid employment?
   ___ *husband*, yes
   ___ *husband*, no
   ___ *wife*, yes
   ___ *wife*, no

7. How many hours per week do you work for pay?
   ___ hours of *husband*
   ___ hours of *wife*

8. What do you call your job?

_____ *husband*

_____ *wife*

9. What kind of work do you do on your job?

_____ *husband*

_____ *wife*

10. Approximate yearly gross household income:

_____

11. What percentage of your yearly gross household income does each partner contribute?

_____% *wife's* contribution

_____% *husband's* contribution

11. Age of children (if you are parents):

___years

___years

___years

___years

___years

___years

GREAT MARRIAGES, PART II

Open-Ended Questions

Three key points for couples to consider while filling out this part of the questionnaire:

- *This questionnaire looks really long. But, on careful examination, you will see that I'm simply leaving you a lot of space to express your thoughts. Depending on how much time you wish to devote to the process, I am confident you can fill out the questionnaire in an hour's time up to three hours. Since this can be an important document for you as a couple to keep, I believe the time you invest will be well spent.*

- *Answer questions without worrying about spelling, punctuation, grammar, or correct word usage. Just write freely. Tell me the story of your marriage in your own unique way. Also, add extra pages or write on the back of the pages if you need more space.*

- *So that you don't influence each other's responses to the questions, I suggest that each of you to complete the questionnaire before you look at what the other person has written. After you're finished writing, I encourage you to enjoy discussing your individual perceptions about your marriage with each other.*

1. You have volunteered for a study of great marriages. Tell us about your great marriage. What's it like, and why is it so good? Is *great* marriage the best term for you? Can you think of a better one?

    Her response:

    His response:

2. Why did you get married?

   Her response:

   His response:

3. Please describe what you consider to be your *family* and the environment in which all of you live. For example, who are the members of your family, and how old are they? (Be sure to include yourself.) What does each family member do? Please describe the places in which your family members live, and how all of you fit into the larger community.

   Her response:

   His response:

4. Please describe the family you grew up in. How would you compare it to the family you are creating today?

Her response:

His response:

5. Beside the family you grew up in, are there other families you lived in before creating the relationship you are now in? (i.e., has either partner been divorced, widowed, and so forth?)

Her response:

His response:

6. How did you meet? Please tell the story. Was it love at first sight? Were you friends first, then lovers? Details, please.

Her response:

His response:

7. What were the qualities that attracted you to your mate? Are these qualities still important to you today, or has your thinking changed on all this?

   Her response:

   His response:

8. What was it, while you were dating, that led you to believe you would have a good marriage?

   Her response:

   His response:

9. How did the age at which you got married affect your marital relationship?

   Her response:

   His response:

10. Did you live on your own before marriage, or did you go from your parents' home straight to marriage with your spouse? Please discuss.

Her response:

His response:

11. Did you live together before marriage? If so, was this useful to do or not?

Her response:

His response:

12. It has been said that, "You don't marry an individual. You marry a whole family." Could you describe the ups and downs of blending two different extended families into one marriage. How do you get along today?

Her response:

His response:

13. What are the strengths of your marriage? Please list and write about each
     strength.

Her response:

His response:

14. What are the areas of potential growth in your marriage? In other words, what are
     some things that you would like to see change? Please discuss each.

Her response:

His response:

15. How did you learn about what it takes to have a strong marriage?

Her response:

His response:

16. How did you prepare for getting married (marriage education classes, books, talking with clergy, etc.)? How was it useful or not?

Her response:

His response:

17. What preparation do you wish you had?

Her response:

His response:

18. Do you know other couples that have strong marriages? If so, what makes them strong?

Her response:

His response:

19. Do you know couples that are having difficulties? If so, what causes these
    difficulties?

    Her response:

    His response:

20. How many months or years did it take before you two had created a great marriage?
Please describe the process.

    Her response: _____Months **or** _____Years

    His response: _____Months **or** _____Years

21. Were there high points in your marriage? Please tell a story. And low points? Please
    tell a story.

    Her response:

His response:

22. What are the challenges you face in your marriage today? Please describe each.

   Her response:

   His response:

23. Please tell a story that best illustrates the strengths of your marriage.

   Her response:

   His response:

24. Please tell a story that best illustrates the area or areas of potential growth of your marriage.

Her response:

His response:

25. Please describe the challenges you have faced together. How did you deal with these challenges?

Her response:

His response:

26. Please define the word *commitment*, and describe the level of commitment you have for each other. Could you explain this for us in a way we could understand in our heart?

Her response:

His response:

27. Could you describe your thinking on the importance of expressing appreciation and affection in a marital relationship?

Her response:

His response:

28. Could you describe communication patterns in your marriage? Do you do a good job communicating with each other? Are you generally positive with each other? When you have a conflict over some issue, how is it usually resolved? Please give some examples.

Her response:

His response:

29. Do you like to spend time together? What do you do together that is enjoyable? How would you describe the balance you have between togetherness and separateness? How much apart time do you each need, besides the time you spend at work?

Her response:

His response:

30. Please describe the very best time in your marriage. A special time in which you were the happiest and most connected to each other; the most engaged as a couple and in love.

Her response:

His response:

31. Do you share religious, spiritual, ethical, or social values and beliefs which are important to your marriage? Please describe these values and beliefs. What is important about them that contributes to the strength of your marriage? Are there areas in which you have different perspectives on these issues?

Her response:

His response:

32. How do you manage stress and crisis in your marriage? Could you please describe some of the stressors you face, and how you deal with them. Have you had a major crisis or crises in your marriage in the past few years? How did you deal with them?

Her response:

His response:

33. How do you manage conflict or fight?

Her response:

His response:

34. To whom would you go if you had a problem in your marriage?

Her response:

His response:

35. Have you ever thought of divorcing and/or come close to divorcing? What was going on at that time, and how did you patch things up? Looking back, how do you feel about this experience now?

Her response:

His response:

36. Would you describe your marriage as a traditional marriage or a more contemporary marriage? (To explain further, does the man perform traditionally male roles in the marriage, and the woman performs traditionally female roles? Or, do you assign roles on a different basis?) Please explain. And, would you say your marriage is like your parents' marriage in this regard, or different?

Her response:

His response:

37. How is power divided up in your marriage?

Her response

His response

38. Talk about money. Disagreements over money are perhaps the most common type of disagreements couples have. How do you manage money? How do you deal with debt? Who is in charge? What conflicts do you have over money, if any, and how do you resolve them?

Her response:

His response:

39. [For those couples with children] How old were you when your children were born? How long were you married? Were they planned pregnancies? How did the arrival of your first child affect your marital relationship?

Her response:

His response:

40. [For those couples with children] Couples sometimes disagree over approaches to parenting. Are your approaches to parenting generally in agreement? What is your philosophy of parenthood, and how is it similar to or different from that of your spouse?

Her response:

His response:

41. [For those couples with children] Children bring joy to a marriage, and also can put a strain on the marriage. What do you think? How have the children brought you closer together? And, in what ways have they added stress to your marriage?

   Her response:

   His response:

42. Tell us about the part sex plays in a great marriage.

   Her response:

   His response:

43. Are there any ethnic or cultural issues or differences that affect your marriage relationship? Please discuss these if applicable.

   Her response:

His response:

44. If you were to draw a graph of your marital happiness over the years, what would it look like?

Her response:

His response:

45. What will the future bring for you as a couple and for your family?

Her response:

His response:

46. What would be most useful in helping couples prepare for and continue to have good marriages? Your advice please.

Her response:

His response:

GREAT MARRIAGES, PART III

Marital Strengths Inventory

On the next pages, rate each quality in your marriage on a five-point scale:

5 = very high

4 = high

3 = undecided

2 = low

1 = very low

Or, note that a particular quality does not apply to your marriage :

NA = not applicable

APPRECIATION AND AFFECTION

(5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low; NA = not applicable)

Husband Wife

_____ _____   **caring for each other**

_____ _____   **respect for each other**

_____ _____   **respect for individuality**

_____ _____   **physical and emotional affection**

_____ _____   **tolerance**

_____ _____   **playfulness**

_____ _____   **humor**

_____ _____   **put-downs and sarcasm are rare**

_____ _____   **we are both committed to helping enhance each other's self-esteem**

_____ _____   **a feeling of security**

_____ _____   **safety**

_____ _____   **we genuinely like each other, and we like being with each other**

_____ _____   _**Over-all rating of appreciation and affection in our marriage**_

COMMITMENT

(5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low; NA = not applicable)

Husband Wife

____ ____ **trust**

____ ____ **honesty**

____ ____ **dependability**

____ ____ **fidelity or faithfulness**

____ ____ **we are one**

____ ____ **we are family**

____ ____ **sacrifice**

____ ____ **sharing**

____ ____ ***Over-all rating of commitment in our marriage***

POSITIVE COMMUNICATION

(5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low; NA = not applicable)

Husband Wife

____ ____ **open, straightforward communication**

____ ____ **discussion rather than lectures**

____ ____ **positive, not negative communication**

____ ____ **cooperative, not competitive**

____ ____ **non-blaming**

____ ____ **a few squabbles occur, but generally are consensus building, rather than a winner and a loser**

____ ____ **compromise**

____ ____ **agreeing to disagree on occasion**

____ ____ **acceptance of the notion that differences can be a strength in our marriage and that we do not have to be exactly the same**

____ ____ *Over-all rating of positive communication in our marriage*

ENJOYABLE TIME TOGETHER

(5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low; NA = not applicable)

Husband Wife

_____ _____   **good things take time, and we take time to be with each other**

_____ _____   **we share quality time, and in great quantity we enjoy each other's company**

_____ _____   **serendipitous (unplanned, spontaneous) good times**

_____ _____   **simple, inexpensive good times**

_____ _____   *Over-all rating of the <u>time we share together</u> in our marriage*

SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING

(5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low; NA = not applicable)

Husband Wife

_____   _____   **happiness**

_____   _____   **optimism**

_____   _____   **hope**

_____   _____   **a sense of peace**

_____   _____   **mental health**

_____   _____   **a functional religion or set of shared ethical values which guide
 us through life's challenges**

_____   _____   **oneness with God**

_____   _____   **oneness with Nature**

_____   _____   **supportive extended family members**

_____   _____   **involvement in the community, and support from the
community**

_____   _____   **the world is our home and we feel comfortable in it**

_____   _____   _Over-all rating of spiritual well-being in our marriage_

THE ABILITY TO MANAGE STRESS AND CRISIS EFFECTIVELY

(5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low; NA = not applicable)

Husband Wife

_____   _____   share feelings

_____   _____   understand each other

_____   _____   help each other

_____   _____   forgiveness

_____   _____   "don't worry, be happy"

_____   _____   growing through crises together

_____   _____   patience

_____   _____   resilence (the ability to "hang in there")

_____   _____   *Over-all rating of <u>our ability to cope with stress and crisis</u>.*

OVER-ALL RATINGS OF THE MARITAL RELATIONSHIP

(5= very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low)

Husband Wife

_____ _____   The degree of *closeness* in my relationship with my spouse.

_____ _____   The degree of *satisfaction* in my relationship with my spouse.

_____ _____   The degree of *happiness* in my relationship with my spouse.

_____ _____   The degree of *strength* in my relationship with my spouse.

OVER-ALL RATINGS OF PARENT/CHILD RELATIONSHIPS (IF APPLICABLE)

(5= very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low)

Note: Relationships may be different between parents and individual children.
        If you would like to make separate ratings for each child, please do so.

Husband Wife

_____ _____   The degree of *closeness* in my relationship with my child or children.

_____ _____   The degree of *satisfaction* in my relationship with my child or children.

_____ _____   The degree of *happiness* in my relationship with my child or children.

_____   _____   **The degree of *strength* in my relationship with my child or children.**

Thank You!

December 7, 2004

Appendix F.

IRB Approval Document

Institutional Review Board

USU Assurance: FWA#00003308

Exemption #4

Certificate of Exemption

FROM:	Melanie Domenech Rodriguez, IRB Chair
	True M. Rubal, IRB Administrator
To:	Linda Skogrand, Jennifer Weiss
Date:	January 23, 2012
Protocol #:	4200
Title:	Marital Preparation For Couples In Great Marriages

The Institutional Review Board has determined that the above-referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #4:

Research, involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

This exemption is valid for three years from the date of this correspondence, after which the study will be closed. If the research will extend beyond three years, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to notify the IRB before the study's expiration date and submit a new application to continue the research. Research activities that continue beyond the expiration date without new certification of exempt status will be in violation of those federal guidelines which permit the exempt status.

As part of the IRB's quality assurance procedures, this research may be randomly selected for continuing review during the three year period of exemption. If so, you will receive a request for completion of a Protocol Status Report during the month of the anniversary date of this certification.

In all cases, it is your responsibility to notify the IRB prior to making any changes to the study by submitting an Amendment/Modification request. This will document whether or not the study still meets the requirements for exempt status under federal regulations.

Upon receipt of this memo, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at (435) 797-1821 or email to irb@usu.edu.

The IRB wishes you success with your research.