Premarital self-disclosure predicting distal marital outcomes

by

Laura Schachtner

B. A., Buena Vista University, 2013

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Family Studies and Human Services
College of Human Ecology

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2017

Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Jared Durtschi

Copyright

Abstract

Can having more frequent conversations with a romantic partner prior to marriage contribute to better marital outcomes several years into a marriage? Little is known regarding premarital self-disclosure and its association with distal marital outcomes. Data was utilized from 707 newly married couples assessed across the first four years of marriage through three waves of assessment as part of the Marriage Matters Panel Survey of Newlywed Couples (Nock, Sanchez, & Wright, 2008). Structural equation modeling, including common-fate analysis, was used to test self-disclosure prior to marriage and its association with later marital quality of each spouse and the odds of divorce or separation by the first four years into marriage. Couple-level reactivity was tested as a mediator of these associations, while controlling for known covariates. Results indicated that premarital self-disclosure was associated with wives' higher marital satisfaction and lower odds of divorce or separation three to four years into marriage. This relationship was mediated by reactivity. Clinical implications are discussed for couples prior to marriage, suggesting more frequent conversations about a wider variety of topics between dating couples.

Keywords: divorce, marital satisfaction, marital stability, premarital discussion content, self-disclosure, separation

Table of Contents

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mom, who provided emotional support and encouragement throughout the tough times in graduate school. Thank you for always being available whenever I called and texted you wanting to talk. This thesis is also dedicated to my dad, who guided me through the practical aspects of life so that I could focus on clinical work and academics. Without you two, I would not have learned the value of hard work, and I would not be where I am today. I am successful because of you.

Chapter 1 - Statement of the Problem

Divorce is a common phenomenon in the United States, with divorce rates gradually rising into the 1980s and then steadily declining (Amato & Irving, 2006). In partial support of Amato and Irving's (2006) article, Cohen (2014) reported a sharp decrease in the divorce rate after 2008, which began to slowly rise again in 2010. More recent evidence shows that the national divorce rate per 1,000 people has been steadily declining from 8.2 divorces per 1,000 people in 2000 to 6.9 divorces per 1,000 people in 2015, and the majority of states had lower divorce rates in 2015 than they had in 1990 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017).

Although the divorce rate has declined in recent years, the occurrence of divorce is still problematic. In recent years, "the probability of a first marriage lasting at least 10 years was 68% for women and 70% for men" (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, and Mosher, 2012, p. 7). After 20 years, the probability of a marriage lasting decreases to 52% for women and 56% for men (Copen et al., 2012). Although divorce may be beneficial for some children in especially hostile homes (Mohi, 2015; Strohschein, 2005), many studies have shown that divorce has a host of negative effects on children (Amato, 1996; Boyer-Pennington, Pennington, & Spink, 2001; Burroughs, Wagner, & Johnson, 1997; Milevsky, 2004; Riggio & Weiser, 2008; Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999). These negative effects on children include emotional neglect (Burroughs, et al., 1997), higher conflict within romantic relationships (Riggio & Weiser, 2008), decreased closeness with siblings (Milevsky, 2004), and an increased likelihood of their own divorce (Amato, 1996). Divorce also affects the partners who are going through the divorce with decreased well-being, decreased happiness, increased health problems, higher levels of depression, increased risk of substance use, social isolation, decreased self-esteem, and are likely to suffer long-term consequences from divorce (Amato, 2000; Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2008).

Beyond the impact of divorce, low marital satisfaction also negatively affects partners. Partners who report low levels of marital satisfaction also report lower levels of physical health (South & Krueger, 2013) and mental health (Miller, Mason, Canlas, & Wang, 2013; Whisman, 2007; Whisman & Baucom, 2012; Whitton, Stanley, Markman, & Baucom 2008). In addition, marital satisfaction is predictive of depression, anxiety, and alcohol use disorders, though the predictive effect of marital satisfaction on mental health is mixed (Beach, Katz, Kim, & Brody, 2003; Whisman & Baucom, 2012). In contrast, high marital satisfaction offers benefits, such as lower blood pressure, lower cortisol levels, and being a protective factor against stress (Heffner, Kiecolt-Glaser, Loving, Glaser, & Malarkey, 2004; Lincoln & Chae, 2010). These findings illustrate the importance of satisfaction within marriage for partners' mental and physical health.

Due to the negative consequences of divorce and low marital satisfaction, it is important that researchers examine factors that have the potential for decreasing the likelihood of divorce and for improving marital quality and functioning in the important foundational stages of early marriage. We propose that a greater degree of talking and getting to know each other on a more personal level on a wide variety of topics in greater depth—self-disclosure—may be an important predictor of couples who are happier several years in to their marriage, and who are less likely to divorce or separate in early marriage. The current study adds to the extant research which has examined the association of marital self-disclosure with marital outcomes. The purpose of this study is explore the relationship between premarital self-disclosure and marital outcomes three to four years into marriage. This was tested by using a longitudinal dataset of 707 newlywed couples, testing the association of premarital self-disclosure in a structural equation model (SEM) to predict marital satisfaction and divorce. The findings of this research have

significant implications regarding what can benefit couples during courtship before they even

begin their marriage.

Chapter 2 - Theoretical Foundation and Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of this study is Social Penetration Theory, which describes the role of increasing amounts of self-disclosure as a method to strengthen interpersonal relationships by disclosing more personal parts of oneself to develop and maintain relationships (Carpenter & Green, 2015). This theory suggests that as relationships develop, self-disclosure through the discussion of a greater amount of topics in more depth is used in order to learn more about an interactional partner and increase intimacy in a relationship (Carpenter & Green, 2015). There are five stages of relationship development that have been described by writers of this theory (Giri, 2009). Stage one is the orientation stage, in which people briefly talk about inconsequential topics. After stage one is the exploratory-affective stage, in which interaction partners begin to reveal themselves by the discussion about personal beliefs regarding public topics. Most relationships do not progress beyond this stage of casual friendship. If they do, they go on to stage 3, the affective stage, in which discussion about more private and personal topics occurs. This is also the stage in which criticism and arguments can occur. Physical affection may also occur at this stage. In stage four, the stable stage, personal beliefs and feelings are shared between interaction partners and interaction partners can also predict the emotional reactions of each other. In some relationships, if the costs of further intimacy outweigh the benefits, interaction partners progress to the fifth stage of depenetration in which disclosure occurs with less breadth and depth and may lead to the end of the relationship.

Applying this to the development of romantic relationships suggests that as relationships begin, partners discuss few topics with low depth and as the relationship progresses, more topics are discussed with greater depth, contributing to increased relational intimacy and relationship strength. Also of importance to this theory is the concept of reciprocity, which suggests that

when one interaction partner self-discloses, their interaction partner is more likely to also self-disclose (Carpenter & Greene, 2015). For purposes of this study, the frequency and breadth of topics discussed before marriage will be a focus of attention in predicting later marital outcomes.

In addition to being grounded in social penetration theory, this research was also based in Bowen's concept of differentiation (Crossno, 2011) and as expanded upon by Schnarch (1997, 2009). He writes extensively about differentiation and its application to couples. In *Passionate Marriage* (1997) he describes differentiation as a process of balancing emotional connection and individuality. Schnarch (1997) explains that well-differentiated people have fluid selves that are maintained throughout different circumstances and they are well-equipped to have strong and meaningful emotional bonds. Schnarch (1997) states that differentiation is the key to greater intimacy and that greater differentiation can improve mind-mapping, which is the ability to understand another's thoughts, feelings, and motivations. In his book *Intimacy & Desire* (2009) he describes four aspects of differentiation in his Crucible approach, which he coined "The Four Points of Balance," and which can help improve mind-mapping: solid flexible self, quiet mind-calm heart, grounded responding, and meaningful endurance. The lack of grounded responding, which Schnarch (2009) describes as "the ability to stay calm and not overreact, rather than creating distance or running away" (p. 72) was used as a mediator in this study and conceptualized as reactivity, to follow the work of Schnarch and Regas (2012). Social Penetration Theory suggests that greater discussion will lead to relational partners knowing more about one another and thus contribute to more accurate mind-mapping, and the concept of differentiation suggests that improved mind-mapping and decreased reactivity may be linked. Following this logic, the integration of Social Penetration Theory and the concept of differentiation in this research suggests that greater discussion will lead to less reactivity, and

thus greater marital stability and greater marital satisfaction.

Self-Disclosure and Marital Outcomes

The extant literature offers interesting information regarding self-disclosure and its impacts within marriage and romantic relationships. Marital self-disclosure was shown to be positively associated with intimacy when the disclosure was positive, personal, and involved congruent affect (Waring & Chelune, 1983). Though this research was conducted with only married couples, the authors stated, "One of the major clinical hypotheses raised by the results of the present study is that the process of developing marital intimacy might be facilitated by the process of self-disclosure of attitudes, beliefs, values and expectations during courtship" (p. 189). Though there is research supporting the claim that self-disclosure benefits marital intimacy, additional research suggests that self-disclosure's effect on intimacy may vary by gender and have differential actor- and partner-effects (Mitchell, Castellani, Herrington, Joseph, Doss, & Snyder, 2008). Mitchell and colleagues (2008) found that men's self-disclosure predicted men's own intimacy, while women's intimacy was predicted by her partner's self-disclosure. It is possible that this difference may be due to women self-disclosing at a greater rate than men (Dindia & Allen, 1992).

Multiple studies have suggested that marital self-disclosure has impacts not only on intimacy, but also on communication (Zarei & Sanaeimanesh, 2014) and satisfaction (Hansen & Schuldt, 1984; Lee, Gillath, Adams, Beiernat, Crandall, & Hall, 2016; MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Ouek, Taniguchi, & Argiropoulou, 2015). An early study by Hansen and Schuldt (1984) showed that husbands' and wives' self-disclosure was positively associated with their own marital satisfaction. In addition, they found that wives' self-disclosure was positively associated with husbands' marital satisfaction. More recent literature suggests that both nonsexual self-disclosure

and sexual self-disclosure is positively associated with partners' relationship satisfaction, and this has additional benefits by its positive association to sexual satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2009).

An even more recent study by Ouek, Taniguchi, & Argiropoulou (2015) supports these earlier findings. In their study, wives' and husbands' self-disclosure was positively associated with their own marital satisfaction in both Singapore and Greece. Interestingly, they also found that wives' self-disclosure was positively associated with husbands' marital satisfaction in Singapore and that husbands' self-disclosure was positively associated with wives' marital satisfaction in Greece. They suggested that this difference may be because the positivity or negativity of self-disclosure may have differential impacts on satisfaction. This supports Ouek and Fitzpatrick's (2013) earlier finding that wives' self-disclosure was positively associated with both her own and her husbands' marital satisfaction, whereas husbands' self-disclosure was positively associated with only his own marital satisfaction. These findings with Singaporean and Greek couples echo previous findings regarding the benefits of emotional disclosure on marital satisfaction in American couples (Cordova, Gee, & Warren, 2005).

In addition to having important effects on marital satisfaction, self-disclosure has also been shown to influence communication. Zarei and Sanaeimanesh (2014) conducted an experimental pre-test/post-test study in which randomly assigned Iranian couples participated in six 90-minute self-disclosure training sessions. They found that compared to the control group, couples who went through the self-disclosure training had significant reductions in mutual avoidance and increases in constructive communication patterns in which both partners tried to discuss and solve a problem and expressed feelings. The researchers stated, "The training of simple, but important skills of self-disclosure can help couples to improve their communication

and consequently improve their marital satisfaction" (p. 50). These findings combined with the evidence of the impact of self-disclosure on satisfaction in the United States suggests the possibility that American couples can also benefit from self-disclosure training.

Reactivity and Marital Outcomes

Two key communication behaviors significantly influence marital outcomes: withdrawal and expression of angry hostility (Schnarch & Regas, 2012) Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, and Whitton (2010) summarize the effects that these negative communication behaviors can have. They report that the less negative affect, denial, dominance, conflict, withdrawal, and negative escalation a couple exhibits, the more likely they are to stay together long-term. Stanley, Markman, and Whitton (2002) note that withdrawal "was associated with more negativity and less positive connection in relationships" (p. 659), whereas couples who did not engage in withdrawal tended to have less negative interaction and more positivity in the relationship. Angry hostility is also detrimental to relationships. Renshaw, Blais, and Smith (2010) demonstrated that angry hostility, "...the tendency to experience anger, frustration, bitterness, contempt, and resentment" (p. 330) is significantly correlated to both husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction in couples who have been married for at least five years.

Contribution of the Current Study

Although there is much research regarding communication quality and its effect on marital outcomes, there is a dearth of recent research regarding how the breadth and depth of premarital communication topics may influence marital outcomes. This study seeks to examine the effect of the variety and frequency of topics discussed before marriage on longitudinal marital outcomes of marital satisfaction and divorce or separation. In addition, due to Social Penetration Theory's suggestion that greater self-disclosure leads to greater intimacy (Giri,

8

2009), and to differentiation's suggestion that greater intimacy is associated with less reactivity (Schnarch, 1997) this study will explore the effect of self-disclosure on marital satisfaction and divorce or separation, while testing reactivity as a mediator.

Present Study

Grounded in social penetration theory and the concept of differentiation (Schnarch, 1997; Schnarch 2009) we propose that long-term benefits to marriage can result from greater self-disclosure. Greater self-disclosure has been shown in the literature described above to lead to greater intimacy, and Schnarch (2009) suggests that true intimacy enables partners to engage in more grounded responding and thus less reactivity. We propose that greater self-disclosure will increase marital satisfaction and decrease the likelihood of divorce or separation. We also propose that this relationship will be mediated by reactivity. Three hypotheses were explored:

Hypothesis 1: Higher scores on couple-level self-disclosure prior to marriage will be associated with higher marital satisfaction in wives and husbands three to four years into marriage.

Hypothesis 2: Higher scores on couple level self-disclosure prior to marriage will be associated with lower odds of divorce or separation within the first three to four years of marriage.

Hypothesis 3: The association between couple-level self-disclosure and these marital outcomes (e.g., marital satisfaction and divorce or separation) will be mediated by reactivity. Due to their known associations with these relationship outcomes, these associations were tested while controlling for each partner's baseline assessment of previous break-ups with their partner (Vennum & Johnson, 2014), premarital conflict (Caughlin, Mikucki-Enyart, & Anita, 2013; Kelly, Huston, & Cate, 1985), and covenant marriage (Nock, et al., 2008).

Chapter 3 - Method

Data Collection

These hypotheses were tested using secondary data gathered in Louisiana from the Marriage Matters Panel Survey of Newlywed Couples (Nock et al., 2008), which will be used for this study. Data were collected in three waves between 1998 and 2004, with Wave 1 collected three to six months after couples got married, Wave 2 collected about two years after marriage, and Wave 3 collected three to four years after marriage. The researchers randomly selected seventeen Louisiana parishes (counties) and in those seventeen parishes, they selected all of the covenant marriage licenses and the standard marriage licenses next to them. The researchers selected 1,714 marriage licenses in this manner and confirmed about 76% of them, for a total of 1,310 couples (Nock et al., 2008). Over the course of the study, there were 1,271 respondents from 707 married couples (Nock, et al., 2008). The number of wives who responded in Waves 1, 2, and 3 were 685, 515, and 485, respectively. The number of husbands who responded in Waves 1, 2, and 3 were 582, 422, and 380, respectively.

Information gathered by Nock and colleagues (2008) included information about each couple's wedding, cohabitation, previous marriages, their dating relationship, the topics partners discussed before getting married, views on their current marriage, premarital counseling, discussion of a covenant marriage, previous and current children, views on marriage and divorce, religious beliefs, marital satisfaction, responsibility of household tasks, and political views.

Participants

For women, the average age was 28, and 76% were White, 15% were African American, and the remaining reported coming from other ethnic backgrounds. For men, the average age was 31, and 67% were White, 12% were African American, and the rest reported other ethnic

backgrounds. For the couples, 60% were in their first marriage and 40% of the couples had at least one partner who had been previously married. The average annual family income was about $50,000. Also, about half of wives (50%) and about half of husbands (52%) reported receiving at least one year of college education. Almost half (42%) of the couples reported having a covenant marriage. Couples in this study dated an average of 2 and a half years before marriage ($M = 30.07$, $SD = 26.94$). Participants reported an average of less than one break-up per couple ($M = .40$, $SD = .69$).

Measures

Self-disclosure. Self-disclosure was used as the primary predictor variable, assessed with 15 question items. In Wave 1, husbands and wives were given the prompt "Think now about the months leading up to your wedding. To what extent did you and your partner discuss the following topics or issues?" Respondents were given the option to respond on a scale from 0 = *not at all* to 2 = *a lot*. For example, question items about topics they discussed included, "Your political views," "Your plans or desires for children," and "Other people you had dated." All items were coded so that higher scores reflected greater discussion of each topic. All of the topics discussed before marriage–not including topics discussed in premarital education programs–were summed so that the minimum score for sum of discussion topics was 0 and the maximum score was 30. Wives reported a moderate level of self-disclosure in these premarital conversations ($M = 18.67$, $SD = 4.55$), as did husbands ($M = 17.75$, $SD = 4.65$). The male and female report of self-disclosure prior to marriage were each analyzed as indicators of a latent variable labeled self-disclosure, that assessed self-disclosure in their shared relationship.

Divorce or separation. Divorce or separation was included as an outcome variable assessed at Wave 2 and Wave 3. Divorce or separation was assessed by asking participants in

Waves 2 and 3 one question: "...are you still married to the same person you were married to when we last contacted you a little over a year ago?" Participants were given the options of 1 = *yes* and 2 = *no*. For statistical purposes, marital stability for the duration of the study was coded as 0 = *still married*, 1 = *divorced or separated*. By the end of the three to four year study, 86% of couples were still married and 14% were divorced or separated.

Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was measured with 7 questions at Wave 3 using the prompt "In every marriage, there are some things that are very good and other things that could use some improvement. Right now, how satisfied would you say you are with each of the following aspects of your marriage?" Couples responded to this prompt with 7 items such as "The physical intimacy you experience" and "Your overall relationship with your partner". Items were scored using a scale from 1 = *very dissatisfied* to 5 = *very satisfied*. All items were coded in such a way that higher scores reflected higher levels of marital satisfaction. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted for the wives' and husbands' responses, with these items all loading onto just one factor for both spouses. Wives were moderately satisfied ($M = 3.85$, $SD = .86$), and husbands were overall highly satisfied with their marriage ($M = 4.00$, $SD = .74$). This measure was found to be highly reliable for wives' marital satisfaction ($\alpha = .91$) and husbands' marital satisfaction ($\alpha = .91$).

Reactivity. Reactivity was measured at Wave 2 with 6 items. Example items included "I withdraw to avoid a big fight," "I get sarcastic," and "I get hostile." Questions were also asked from the vantage point of how the partner behaved, such as "My partner gets hostile". Participants responded to each item on a 3-point scale according to the degree of truth to each statement, from 1 = *not true at all* to 3 = *very true*. Both wives ($M = 3.18$, $SD = .81$) and husbands ($M = 3.32$, $SD = .81$) were moderately reactive. The reliability for women's reactivity

(α = .69) and men's reactivity (α = .67) was adequate. The male and female report of reactivity were each tested as indicators of a latent variable labeled reactivity that assessed the reactivity in their shared relationship.

Control Variables

Length of courtship. The length of couples' relationships before marriage was assessed with the item "About how long did the two of you date each other before you got married (including your period of engagement, or cohabitation, if any)?" Participants who dated less than one year before getting married provided the number of months they dated, while those who dated more than one year provided the number of years and months they dated. The wives' reports of relationship length before marriage were used for accuracy.

Previous break-ups with the current spouse. Previous break-ups with the current spouse were assessed with the item "Sometimes couples date, break up and get back together before they get married. Other couples stay together from their first date until their marriage. How about you and your partner?" Participants responded on a 3-point scale from 0 = *we never broke up* to 2 = *we broke up and got together more than once.* Again, wives' reports of previous break-ups with the current spouse were used for accuracy.

Covenant marriage. Whether a couple had a covenant marriage or a standard marriage was measured with the dichotomous item "First, just to be sure we have it right, is your current marriage a covenant marriage?" Participants responded with 1 = *yes, our marriage is a covenant marriage* or 2 = *no, our marriage is not a covenant marriage.*

Previous marriages. The number of previous marriages for each respondent before the current marriage was assessed with the prompt "Altogether, how many times have you been married (including your present marriage)?" The number of partners' previous marriages were

also assessed using the prompt "How many times has your current partner been married (including the present time)?" Participants responded with 1 = *just this once*, meaning that there were no previous marriages to 5 = *five or more times*. For purposes of this study, a couple with no previous marriages for either partner was coded as 0, and a couple with at least one remarried partner was coded as 1.

Plan of Analysis

A structural equation model (SEM) was tested in Mplus 7.2 to determine the longitudinal associations between the extent of self-disclosure with marital satisfaction and divorce or separation. Reactivity was tested as a mediator for these associations using 2,000 bootstraps to test the indirect effects. Significant indirect effects were interpreted when the 95% confidence intervals did not include zero (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Divorce or separation was a dichotomous variable, thus, odds ratios were interpreted for path coefficients predicting divorce or separation. Reports from both husbands and wives were used in this study, and the unit of analysis was the dyad, not the individual. Actor-partner independence models are helpful when testing the associations between dyad members, obtaining actor and partner paths from predictor to outcome variables. Common-fate modeling, on the other hand, is useful for dyadic data analysis when constructs of interest are expected to have an impact on both partners, and when both members of the dyad are reporting on the same variable (Ledermann & Kenny, 2012). The extent of self-disclosure prior to marriage and reactivity in marriage are both constructs of interest of the relationship believed to impact both partners, and data from both partners is available. Thus common-fate modeling was used with this dyadic data, using two latent variables, with men's and women's reports as indicators of each latent variable (see Figure 1). The two latent variables computed were for the extent of self-disclosure between partner and for

reactivity prior to marriage and reactivity in early marriage. The two indicators for each latent variable was each spouse's reports on each variable. The factor loadings for each of these indicators was set to 1. This analysis controlled for premarital conflict, previous break-ups with the current partner, and if the couple was in a covenant marriage.

Chapter 4 - Results

Preliminary Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of variables used in this study. All continuous variables were assessed for normality and indicated normal distributions, as evidenced by skewness and kurtosis values. There were several significant correlations between the variables of the study. Men's and women's reports of self-disclosure was significantly correlated, but perhaps not as closely as would have been expected ($r = .40$, $p < .01$). Divorce or separation was significantly correlated with a few variables; divorce or separation was significantly associated with wives' marital satisfaction at Wave 3 ($r = -0.20$, $p < .01$) and husbands' marital satisfaction at Wave 3 ($r = -0.27$, $p < .01$). Wives' marital satisfaction at Wave 3 was significantly associated with husbands' marital satisfaction at Wave 3 ($r = .61$, $p < .01$). Husbands' reactivity at Wave 2 was significantly associated with husbands' marital satisfaction at Wave 3 ($r = -0.26$, $p < .01$) and wives' reactivity was significantly associated with wives' marital satisfaction at Wave 3 ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$). Wives' reactivity at Wave 2 was also significantly associated with husbands' reactivity at Wave 2 ($r = .32$, $p < .01$).

Table 4.1: Descriptive statistics of variables used in the study.

Variables	M or %	SD	Range	α
Wives' self-disclosure	18.67	4.55	0 – 30	
Husbands' self-disclosure	17.75	4.65	0 – 30	
Divorce or separation	14%			
Wives' marital satisfaction W3	3.85	.86	1 – 5	.91
Husbands' marital satisfaction W3	4.00	.74	1 – 5	.91
Wives' reactivity W2	3.18	.81	1 – 6	.69
Husbands' reactivity W2	3.32	.81	1 – 6	.67
Length of courtship	30.07	26.94		
Previous break-ups with spouse	.40	.69	0 – 2	
Covenant marriage	42%			
Previous marriages	40%			

Structural Equation Model Results

See Figure 1 to see this SEM and the results. Due to divorce or separation being a dichotomous variable, MPlus does not provide model fit indices unless all outcome variables are continuous. Thus, no model fit indices were obtained. Couples' greater self-disclosure significantly predicted greater reactivity at Wave 2 ($b = .04$, $p < .05$, $\beta = .25$) and a 21% decrease in the odds of divorce or separation by Wave 3 ($b = -0.24$, $p < .05$, $OR = .79$). Greater couple-level self-disclosure also significantly predicted wives' greater marital satisfaction at Wave 3 (*b*

= .06, $p < .05$, $\beta = .20$), but did not significantly predict husbands' marital satisfaction at Wave 3 ($b = .04$, $p > .05$, $\beta = .14$).

Greater reactivity at Wave 2 significantly predicted both wives' lower marital satisfaction ($b = -1.19$, $p < .01$, $\beta = -0.57$) and husbands' lower marital satisfaction ($b = -1.05$, $p < .01$, $\beta = -0.57$) at Wave 3. Greater reactivity also predicted a substantially greater risk of divorce or separation ($b = 2.44$, $p < .05$, $OR = 11.46$). More specifically in interpreting this trend, couples reporting greater reactivity predicted a nearly 11-fold increase in the odds of divorce or separation within the first three to four years of marriage.

The control variables covenant marriage ($b = -0.07$, $p > 0.22$, $\beta = -0.09$), previous marriages ($b = -0.03$, $p > .05$, $\beta = -0.04$), and length of relationship before marriage ($b = -0.00$, $p > .05$, $\beta = -0.06$) did not significantly predict reactivity. The only control variable that was significantly associated with reactivity was previous break-ups with the current spouse; more break-ups before marriage was significantly associated with greater reactivity ($b = .16$, $p < .01$, $\beta = .26$).

Reactivity partially mediated the association between the extent of premarital self-disclosure and the outcome variables of wives' marital satisfaction and divorce or separation, while reactivity fully mediated the association between self-disclosure and husbands' marital satisfaction. The model explained 13% of the variance in reactivity, 29% of the variance in being divorced or separated, 30% of the variance in wives' reports of marital satisfaction at Wave 3, and 32% of the variance in husbands' reports of marital satisfaction at Wave 3.

Alternative Models Tested

Several alternative models were also tested, in an effort to expand the number of confounding variables accounted for in this model. The study also attempted to control for

wives' and husbands' marital satisfaction at Wave 1, premarital conflict, and premarital cohabitation; however, adding these control variables drastically increased the odds ratios into the hundreds, thus significantly limiting the reliability of results in this model. However, when all of these variables were added into the model, self-disclosure was still not significantly predictive of husbands' marital satisfaction at Wave 3; however, with all of these variables added, self-disclosure remained predictive of reactivity, so that greater self-disclosure led to an increase in reactivity at Wave 2. Using premarital conflict and premarital cohabitation as controls did not affect the significantly predictive effect of self-disclosure on divorce or separation; however, when controlling for initial levels of husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction, self-disclosure was no longer predictive of divorce or separation. Also, when marital satisfaction was controlled for, self-disclosure no longer significantly predicted wives' marital satisfaction at Wave 3 and reactivity was no longer predictive of divorce or separation or husbands' marital satisfaction at Wave 3, though reactivity was still predictive of wives' marital satisfaction at Wave 3.

When premarital conflict was used as a control variable, self-disclosure no longer predicted wives' marital satisfaction at Wave 3, and reactivity no longer predicted divorce or separation or husbands' satisfaction or wives' satisfaction by Wave 3. Lastly, when premarital cohabitation was controlled for, self-disclosure was still significantly predictive of wives' marital satisfaction at Wave 3, and reactivity was still significantly predictive of wives' marital satisfaction, husbands' marital satisfaction, and divorce or separation by Wave 3.
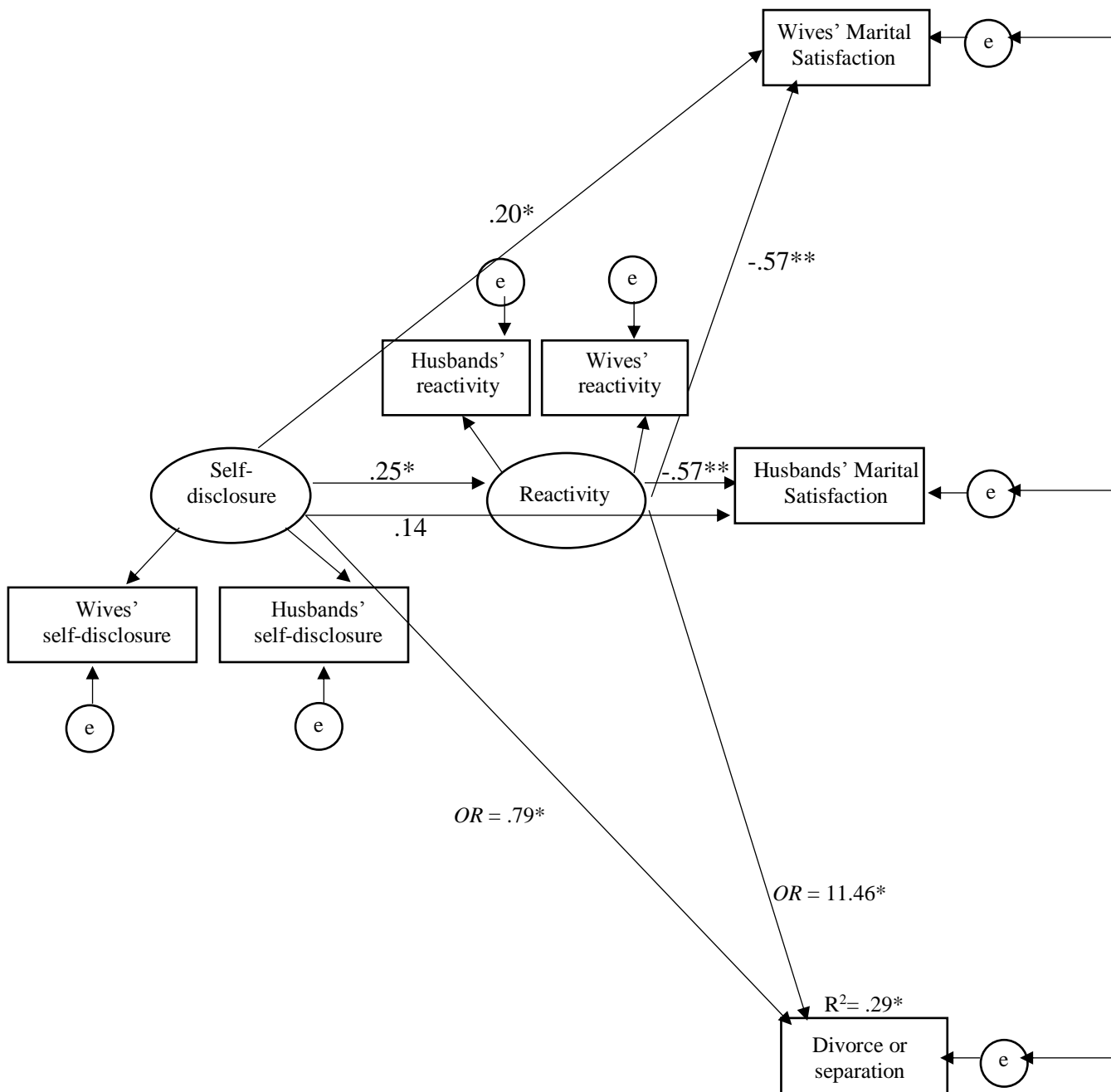
*Figure 4.1 This figure shows the model tested and the standardized significant associations identified between self-disclosure, marital satisfaction, and divorce or separation. This model controlled for the following variables not shown in the figure to ease the interpretation of the primary results: length of courtship, previous break-ups with the current spouse, covenant marriage, and previous marriages. *p < .05. ** p < .01 (two-tailed)*

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The extent to which couples more frequently talked with each other about a variety of topics was tested to determine if couples who talked more frequently (i.e., self-disclosure) about a wide range of topics before they got married were more likely to be happier later in their marriages and less likely to divorce or separate. It was believed that this association may be mediated by reactivity. Results from our study found that indeed, the more couples talked prior to marriage was linked with women reporting higher marital satisfaction, and linked with couples having lower odds of divorce or separation. However, the more couples talked prior to marriage had no effect on husbands' marital satisfaction. Further, we found evidence that part of the process for how self-disclosure may be linked with these marital outcomes was through how reactive couples were to one another However, this mediation was not in the direction hypothesized. It was hypothesized that greater self-disclosure would be predictive of less reactivity; instead, greater self-disclosure was predictive of greater reactivity. This finding was unexpected and may be due to the possibility that self-disclosure occurred during hostile fights during which couples learned more about one another, and these types of fights might have carried over into the marriage. However, this is only speculation and more research will need to be conducted on this topic to understand why more frequently talking as a couple may be linked with more reactivity. Otherwise, self-disclosure impacted marital outcomes in the expected direction. Thus, this evidence points towards the potential salience of couples getting to know each other in more depth through frequent and far-reaching conversations prior to marriage. This may be especially the case for women's marital satisfaction and for reducing odds of later divorce or separation.

The finding that direct effects were identified between premarital self-disclosure and wives' marital satisfaction corroborates previous research supporting the positive relationship between marital self-disclosure and one's own marital satisfaction (Hansen & Schuldt, 1984; Lee, et al., 2016; MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Ouek, Taniguchi, & Argiropoulou, 2015), and in part marital satisfaction of the partner (Hansen & Schuldt, 1984; MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Ouek, Taniguchi, & Argiropoulou, 2015). The finding that self-disclosure within the relationship did not have a significant impact on husbands' marital satisfaction may be due to the possibility that women have a tendency to self-disclose more frequently than men, and this may be perceived as a more important process for women than men (Dindia & Allen, 1992). Exploring the impact of self-disclosure within the relationship as a whole instead of exploring the unique impacts of wives' self-disclosure and husbands' self-disclosure can be considered a limitation of the current study. However, the current research contributes to the existing literature by its finding that greater premarital self-disclosure as a couple decreases the likelihood of divorce or separation and is positively associated with wives' later marital satisfaction.

Social Penetration Theory Support

Because intimacy has been suggested as a mediator between self-disclosure and marital satisfaction (Lee et al., 2016), this study provides tentative support for Social Penetration Theory, which suggests that intimacy increases with greater self-disclosure. This support is suggested by the finding that wives' marital satisfaction was greater when premarital self-disclosure was greater; thus, it is likely that this finding is due to the increased intimacy that greater self-disclosure provides. Starting a marriage with greater levels of couple self-disclosure may be important in setting the stage in early marriage allowing couples to continue to grow closer together. In addition, this study tentatively supports Social Penetration Theory with its

finding that greater self-disclosure was predictive of decreased odds of divorce or separation. An estimated 14% of couples at the end of the study had separated or divorced; in theoretical terms, we can speculate that most of these couples had experienced the stage of depenetration, which occurs after the initial formation of a relationship when few topics are discussed in less depth. The current study suggests that greater amounts of premarital self-disclosure decreased the odds of later depenetration occurring. This may be due to depenetration being a quicker process in couples who had lower amounts of premarital self-disclosure, that is, couples with lesser premarital self-disclosure were already covering few topics in depth so that reduction of depth and breadth of topics was already limited, making depenetration easier. It is also possible that lesser premarital self-disclosure led to lower intimacy and thus lower marital satisfaction (Lee et al, 2016). We could speculate that this lower satisfaction could have then been formative in progressing toward later divorce or separation.

Clinical Implications

This research has important implications for programs aimed at preparing premarital couples for marriage. Couples who know each other at a deeper level prior to marriage may experience more positive marital outcomes three to four years into their marriage compared with couples who knew each other to a lesser degree prior to marriage. Community and cultural changes that prioritize getting to know dating partners at a deeper level may also benefit later marriage. In pre-arranged marriages, this process is different and should be examined in its own right. It is possible, however, that in arranged marriages, or other marriages where a courtship was relatively fast, that couples may benefit from getting to know each other at a deeper level in the early stages of marriage. Also, it should be noted that there are likely some things that cannot be learned about one's partner until after marriage. However, premarital programs may have

more positive outcomes if they help couples understand more depth and detail about their partners prior to marriage.

In reference to a premarital program, most couples reported that adequate depth and breadth of topics had been covered in premarital counseling, yet other couples reported that they would have liked to talk about several topics in more depth; these topics included finances, sexual intimacy, in-laws, and conflict management (Forkner, Faith, Beavers, & Kramer, 2013). In this same study, all pastors reported that they had experience in feeling uncomfortable marrying a couple due to the lack of an appropriate depth and breadth of knowledge about one another. This study by Forkner and colleagues (2013) demonstrates that religious premarital counselors support the tenets of Social Penetration Theory and believe that couples should have both broad and deep knowledge about each other before committing to marriage. Forkner and colleagues (2013) argue that counselors have an important job in making sure that a variety of topics are covered in great enough depth so that partners are better-informed about their prospective marital partner and their marriage. This knowledge would give each partner "...the clearest possible picture of what they are choosing" (Forkner et al., 2013, p. 104). The findings of the current study and of previous research support this statement by the evidence it contributes regarding the relationship of self-disclosure and marital outcomes. Additionally, Forkner and colleagues' (2013) finding that premarital counseling increased partners' knowledge about one another provides additional support for premarital education programs from the lens of Social Penetration Theory.

Based on our results that greater self-disclosure was predictive of greater reactivity and that greater reactivity was linked with lower marital satisfaction of both spouses and increased odds of later divorce or separation, we further recommend that couples gaining skills and

experiences learning to more efficiently manage and deal with conflict may be helpful. Specifically, in reference to what was actually measured in our measure of reactivity, efforts to reduce avoidance, withdrawal, hostility, and sarcasm may be important ingredients in reducing the risk of divorce or separation and contribute to happier relationships. Premarital education programs should aim to cover reactivity in their conflict management sections so that couples can experience greater benefits during self-disclosure.

Strengths and Limitations

This study had several strengths in methodology and content that provide helpful results to guide efforts to help couples in the premarital stage. These strengths include the use of a large sample of dyadic and longitudinal data. The large sample size increased the likelihood that the data would be representative of married couples in Louisiana and the dyadic data allowed for study of the couple relationship as a whole. The use of common-fate modeling was also a strength of the current study, due to the dyadic analysis of the data using constructs of interest reported by and expected to have an impact on both partners. Lastly, the largest strength of this study is its unique contribution to what is already known regarding what impacts marital outcomes. This study advances the current knowledge of what is known about the importance of premarital conversations to later marital health by showing that frequently discussing a broad range of topics has benefits for both marital satisfaction and stability.

Although this study builds upon the existing literature with clinically relevant findings, there were several limitations that should be noted. The major limitation of the study was the way in which self-disclosure was measured. The question asked husbands and wives about the extent to which they discussed a variety of topics; as such, the available data offered only the option of using the frequency and variety of discussion topics, not the depth to which they

disclosed. This is important since the depth of disclosure and privacy of information disclosed are important factors of developing intimacy, which Forkner and colleagues (2013) discuss in their review. In addition, the question was phrased in such a way that it asked the partners to think about discussion topics in the months leading up to their wedding; as such, partners may have failed to report topics that were covered earlier in the relationship before they decided to get married.

Additional limitations involve the context in which the data were collected. Because the data were collected only from Louisiana residents, generalizability to other states is limited. Also, the finding that covenant marriage did not have an impact on the outcome variables should be interpreted with care, as Nock and colleagues (2008) reported that many couples did not know much about covenant marriage and that implementation of covenant marriage varied by parish.

Future research regarding premarital self-disclosure and its influence on marital outcomes should explore gender differences and the differential impacts of actor- and partner-effects. Future research should also examine self-disclosure and its longitudinal marital impacts by topic, as Dindia and Allen (1992) noted that self-disclosure varies by topic. Fincham and Beach (1999) also noted that different problem areas have differential impacts on couples and other researchers have found that topic of discussion was associated with positivity and negativity of both partners, even after relationship satisfaction and problem difficulty were controlled for (Williamson, Hanna, Lavner, Bradbury, & Karney, 2013). They stated "These analyses indicated an overall tendency for communication to differ by discussion topic" (Williamson et al., 2013, p. 333) and "...it is not only how couples communicate regarding their problems but also what they communicate about that matters" (Williamson et al., 2013, p. 334). Although the current study offers additional information to the extant literature, much research still needs to be conducted so

that couples, clinicians, and religious clergy can all have an understanding of how premarital self-disclosure impacts marriage, and where to focus their time and energy on premarital education efforts.

Conclusion

This study adds an important contribution to the existing field of research regarding factors of marital success. Findings suggest that greater self-disclosure before marriage has benefits for couple's long-term marital satisfaction and marital stability. This corroborates previous findings that suggest self-disclosure during marriage enhances the marital satisfaction of both partners (Hansen & Schuldt, 1984; Lee, et al., 2016; MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Ouek, et al., 2015). The current study also suggests that more premarital self-disclosure decreases the odds of divorce or separation. These associations were found to be mediated by reactivity.

The knowledge gained from the present study can be beneficial for dating couples and couples considering marriage. The findings suggest that these couples may benefit from greater self-disclosure by frequently discussing a broad range of topics. These couples should disclose to one another their values, beliefs, plans, and hopes about a wide variety of topics frequently so that they can gain greater understanding of one another. By doing this, they may be laying the foundation for a satisfying and stable marriage.

References

Amato, P. R. (1996). Explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 58*(3), 628-640.

Amato, P. R. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62*(4), 1269-1287.

Amato, P. R., & Irving, S. (2006). Historical trends in divorce in the United States. In M. A. Fine & J. H. Harvey (Eds.), *Handbook of divorce and relationship dissolution* (pp. 41-57). Mahwah, NJ. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Beach, S., Katz, J., Kim, S., & Brody, G. (2003). Prospective effects of marital satisfaction on depressive symptoms in established marriages: A dyadic model. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 20*(3), 355-371.

Boyer-Pennington, M., Pennington, J., & Spink, C. (2001). Students' expectations and optimism toward marriage as a function of parental divorce. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 34*(3-4), 71-87. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J087v34n03_05.

Burroughs, M. S., Wagner, W. W., & Johnson, J. T. (1997). Treatment with children of divorce: A comparison of two types of therapy, *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 27*(3-4), 83-99.

Carpenter, A. & Green, K. (2015). Social Penetration Theory. In *The International Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Communication*, 1- 4.

Carroll, S., Hill, J., Yorgason, E., Larson, J., & Sandberg, J. (2013). Couple communication as a mediator between work–family conflict and marital satisfaction. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 35*(3), 530-545.

Caughlin, J. (2002). The demand/withdraw pattern of communication as a predictor of marital

satisfaction over time. *Human Communication Research,28*(1), 49-85.

Caughlin, V., Mikucki-Enyart, J., & Anita, S. (2013). Conflict in dating and marital

relationships. *Handbook of Conflict Communication*, 161-185.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017). *Marriages and Divorces*.

Clarke-Stewart, A., & Brentano, C. (2008). *Divorce Causes and Consequences.* Yale University

Press.

Cohen, P. (2014). Recession and divorce in the United States, 2008 – 2011. *Population Research*

and Policy Review, 33, 615-628.

Copen, C., Daniels, K., Vespa, J., & Mosher, W. (2012). First marriages in the United States:

Data from the 2006-2010 National Survey of Family Growth. *National Health Statistics*

Reports, 49, 1 – 22.

Cordova, J., Gee, C., & Warren, L. (2005). Emotional skillfulness in marriage: Intimacy as a

mediator of the relationship between emotional skillfulness and marital satisfaction.

Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 24(2), 218-235.

Crossno, M.A. (2011). Bowen family systems theory. . In L.A. Metcalf, *Marriage and family*

therapy: A practice-oriented approach (pp. 39-59). New York: Springer Publishing

Company, LLC.

Dindia, K., & Allen, M. (1992). Sex differences in self-disclosure: A meta-analysis.

Psychological Bulletin, 112(1), 106 - 124.

Fincham, F. D., & Beach, S. R. H. (1999). Conflict in marriage: Implications for

working with couples. *Annual Review of Psychology,* 47.

Forkner, K., Faith, E., Beavers, L., & Kramer, C. (2013). *And do you take this stranger to be*

your lawfully wedded wife?: The usefulness of social penetration theory within premarital counseling, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Giri, V. (2009). Social Penetration Theory. In *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, 911-912.

Hansen, J., & Schuldt, W. (1984). Marital self-disclosure and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 46*(4), 923-926.

Heffner, K., Kiecolt-Glaser, L., Loving, J., Glaser, K., & Malarkey, T. (2004). Spousal support satisfaction as a modifier of physiological responses to marital conflict in younger and older couples. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 27*(3), 233-254.

Hooley, J. M., & Hahlweg, K. (1989). Marital satisfaction and marital communication in German German and English couples. *Behavioral Assessment, 11*(1), 119-133.

Kelly, C., Huston, T., & Cate, R. (1985). Premarital relationship correlates of the erosion of satisfaction in marriage. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships,2*(2), 167-178.

Ledermann, T., & Kenny, D. (2012). The common fate model for dyadic data: Variations of a theoretically important but underutilized model. (Report). *Journal of Family Psychology, 26*(1), 140-148.

Lee, J., Gillath, O., Adams, G., Biernat, M., Crandall, C., & Hall, J. (2016). *Self-disclosure and relational outcomes: The Context-Dependent Disclosure Intimacy Satisfaction (CDDIS) Model,* ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Lincoln, K. D., & Chae, D. H. (2010). Stress, marital satisfaction, and psychological distress among African Americans. *Journal of Family Issues, 31*(8), 1081-1105.

MacNeil, S., & Byers, E. (2009). Role of sexual self-disclosure in the sexual satisfaction of long-term heterosexual couples. (Report). *The Journal of Sex Research, 46*(1), 3 − 14.

Markman, H. J., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., Ragan, E. P., & Whitton, S. W. (2010). The

premarital communication roots of marital distress and divorce: The first five years of marriage. *Journal of Family Psychology, 24*(3), 289-298. doi:http://dx.doi.org.er.lib.k-state.edu/10.1037/a0019481.

Mattson, R., Frame, L., & Johnson, M. (2011). Premarital affect as a predictor of postnuptial marital satisfaction. *Personal Relationships, 18*(4), 532-546.

Milevsky, A. (2004). Perceived parental marital satisfaction and divorce: Effects on sibling relation in emerging adults. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 41* (1-2), 115-128.

Miller, B. M., Mason, T. M., Canlas, J. M., & Wang, D. (2013). Marital satisfaction and depressive symptoms in China. *Journal of Family Psychology, 27*(4), 677-682.

Mitchell, A., Castellani, A., Herrington, R., Joseph, J., Doss, B., & Snyder, D. (2008). Predictors of intimacy in couples' discussions of relationship injuries: An observational study. (Report). *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*(1), 21.

Mohi, G. (2015). Positive outcomes of divorce: A multi-method study on the effects of parental divorce on children. *Undergraduate Research Journal, 7* (2), 49-62.

Nock, S. L., Sanchez, L. A., & Wright, J. D. (2008). Marriage Matters Panel Survey of Newlywed Couples, 1998-2004, Louisiana. ICPSR29582-v1. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2012-06-29. http://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR29582.v1.

Ouek, K., & Fitzpatrick, J. (2013). Cultural values, self-disclosure, and conflict tactics as predictors of marital satisfaction among Singaporean husbands and wives. *The Family Journal, 21*(2), 208-216.

Ouek, K., Taniguchi, N., & Argiropoulou, M. (2015). Self-disclosure between marital couples: A

comparative study between Singapore and Greek couples. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 46*(2), 221-240.

Preacher, K., & Hayes, A. (2008). Asymptotic and resampling strategies for assessing and comparing indirect effects in multiple mediator models. *Behavior Research Methods, 40*(3), 879-91.

Rehman, U. S., & Holtzworth-Munroe, A. (2007). A cross-cultural examination of the relation of marital communication behavior to marital satisfaction. *Journal of Family Psychology, 21*(4), 759-763. doi:http://dx.doi.org.er.lib.k-state.edu/10.1037/0893-3200.21.4.759.

Renshaw, K., Blais, R., & Smith, T. (2010). Components of negative affectivity and marital satisfaction: The importance of actor and partner anger. *Journal of Research in Personality, 44*(3), 328-334.

Riggio, H. R., & Weiser, D. A. (2008). Attitudes toward marriage: Embeddedness and outcomes in personal relationships. *Personal Relationships, 15*(1), 123-140. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2007.00188.x.

Sanders, M. R., Halford, W. K., & Behrens, B. C. (1999). Parental divorce and premarital couple communication. *Journal of Family Psychology, 13*(1), 60-74. doi:http://dx.doi.org.er.lib.k-state.edu/10.1037/0893-3200.13.1.60.

Schnarch, D. (1997). *Passionate marriage: Keeping love and intimacy alive in committed relationships*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Schnarch, D. (2009). *Intimacy and desire: Awaken the passion in your relationship*. New York, NY: Sterling Productions.

Schnarch, D., & Regas, S. (2012). The Crucible Differentiation Scale: Assessing differentiation

in human relationships. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy,38*(4), 639-652.

South, S., & Krueger, R. (2013). Marital satisfaction and physical health. *Psychological Science, 24*(3), 373-378.

Stanley , S. M., Markman, H. J. and Whitton, S. W. (2002). Communication, conflict, and commitment: Insights on the foundations of relationship success from a national survey. *Family Process, 41* (4), 659–675.

Strohschein, L. (2005). Parental divorce and child mental health trajectories. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*(5), 1286-1300.

Vennum, A., & Johnson, M. (2014). The impact of premarital cycling on early marriage. *Family Relations, 63*(4), 439-452.

Waring, E. M., & Chelune, G. J. (1983). Marital intimacy and self-disclosure. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 39*(2), 183-90.

Whisman, M. A. (2007). Marital distress and *DSM–IV* psychiatric disorders in a population based national survey. *Journal of Abnormal Psy-chology, 116,* 638 -643. doi:10.1037/0021-843X.116.3.638.

Whisman, M. A., & Baucom, D. H. (2012). Intimate relationships and psychopathology. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 15,* 4–13. doi:10.1007/s10567-011-0107-2.

Whitton, S. W., Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., & Baucom, B. R. (2008). Women's weekly relationship functioning and depressive symptoms. *Personal Relationships, 15,* 533–550. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2008 .00214.x.

Williamson, H., Hanna, M., Lavner, J., Bradbury, T., & Karney, B. (2013). Discussion topic and observed behavior in couples' problem-solving conversations: Do problem severity and topic choice matter? *Journal of Family Psychology, 27*, 330-335.

Zarei, E., & Sanaeimanesh, M. (2014). The effect of self-disclosure skill training on

communication patterns of referred couples to counseling clinics. *Iranian Journal of

Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 8*(3), 50-57.