

STRENGTHEN YOURSELF, STRENGTHEN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS – A SELF-
DEVELOPMENT BASED MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION PROGRAM:
DEVELOPMENT AND INITIAL PILOT-TESTING

by

NATHAN RAY HARDY

M.S., Kansas State University, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Family Studies and Human Services
College of Human Ecology

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2015

Abstract

Marriage and relationship education (MRE) is most commonly delivered in a skills-based format that traditionally centers on teaching couples *communication* skills. Critiques against the current *skills*-development approach lead to the development and pilot-testing of an alternative *self*-development curriculum entitled, “Strengthen Yourself, Strengthen Your Relationships.” Guided by Bowen’s (1978) theory of differentiation, the current study randomly assigned forty couples to the self-development (differentiation) curriculum condition or to a relationship assessment plus feedback condition. Repeated measures ANOVA’s, independent samples t-tests, and regressions were used to analyze the data from pre- to post-test (5 weeks), post-test to follow-up (4 weeks), and pre-test to follow-up (9 weeks). Statistical analyses indicate that women responded more favorably to the feedback condition in terms of differentiation, relationship self-regulation, and problem solving, whereas men responded more favorably to the curriculum condition in terms of relationship self-regulation. Feedback about the curriculum was gathered from participants and was received favorably. Implications from the study suggest that both approaches may have unique value for couples receiving relationship education. Future research should further develop and evaluate the self-development approach in MRE.

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Dedication

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my wife Megan Maria Hardy. She has supported me through the entirety of my graduate studies while, often times, single handedly raising our three boys. She has stood by me through the many long-working hours and late nights. She has been a loving companion and friend who provided the best support.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Numerous marriage and relationship education (MRE) programs have been created to form and sustain healthy couple relationships. I refer to MRE as education for couples in emotionally committed relationships including couples who are married, planning on marrying, who currently cohabit (Halford, 2004), have made a commitment to be together long-term, or who are seriously dating. There is significant debate as to whether MRE is an effective marriage strengthening tool. The predominant emphasis in most MRE programs is a communication-satisfaction model that promotes communication skills (e.g., active listening) as the primary preventive mechanism to relationship dissolution and divorce (Hawkins et al., 2007). However, there is significant debate about what relationship characteristics are most vital to long-term relationship health (Gottman et al., 1998; Stanley, Bradbury, & Markman, 2000). A number of experts have challenged whether communication skills-training is effective in sustaining marital quality across time (Fowers, 2000; Gottman et al., 1998, Halford, 2011; Schnarch, 2009). Communication based MRE programs have shown some positive short-term effects [for a meta-analytic review see Hawkins et al., 2008 (experimental design studies indicated an effect size of $d = .448$ for communication and an effect size of $d = .306$ for satisfaction at follow up assessment)]; but studies evaluating nation-wide efforts to teach low-income couples behavioral skills have not been effective short- or long-term (Johnson, 2012). Given the lack of research support for the *long-term* effects of communication training, MRE experts (Hawkins et al., 2008; Fawcett et al., 2010) have called for educators to incorporate other characteristics of relationship development into their programs and evaluations. One such characteristic, *self-development* (e.g., clarity about who you are; developing an ability to regulate your own anxieties, to stay calm, and not overreact; developing a tolerance for discomfort in order to step up and face difficult issues

directly), has been given scant attention as a mechanism of change in relationship education programs despite its strong theoretical grounding (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Schnarch, 1991, 1997, 2009). There are several reasons a *self*-development approach may be particularly advantageous in relationship education for couples as an alternative to *skills*-development. First, communication skills are arguably not used when partners cannot regulate their own anxieties (Gottman, 1998), second, regulating competing desires, agendas, and perspectives in romantic relationships are better handled when partners develop a clear and flexible sense of self (Schnarch, 2009), third, self-development can be (and usually is) practiced unilaterally; meaning partners self-change can occur before waiting for one's partner to change or even when there's little guarantee for immediate reciprocation from one's partner (Schnarch, 2009), and fourth, the benefits of learning self-regulation can extend beyond the couple relationship and positively help couples deal with stressful contexts. Guided by Bowen's theory of differentiation (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), the purpose of the current study was to develop and pilot test a self-development based MRE program, entitled Strengthen Yourself, Strengthen Your Relationships. Forty young adult (ages 18-29) committed couples were randomly assigned to the self-development program (treatment condition) or a relationship assessment plus feedback condition (control condition). To our knowledge, no *publicly available* self-development/differentiation based education program has been developed or tested, this is the first of its kind.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Overview of the Skills-Training Debate

The two predominant types of MRE program interventions are inventories (assessment plus feedback) and skills training (Halford, 2004). Teaching *communication* skills is a key focus of all skills training programs (Halford, 2004). Although some marital and couple therapies grew beyond a strict communication skills training approach (Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy, Jacobson & Christensen, 1996; Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy, Johnson, 2004) this remains an essential element in MRE programs and continues to be the most evaluated mechanism for relationship education effects on relationship quality (Halford 2011; Hawkins et al., 2008). Yet, accumulating evidence suggests that communication skills-training may not be an effective approach for preventing couple dysfunction or increasing relationship quality long-term (Johnson, 2012; Johnson & Bradbury, 2015).

Argument for Communication Skills

Communication skills training makes up a number of programs including the Relationship Enhancement program (RE; Guerney, 1977, 1987), the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP; Markman, Blumberg, & Stanley, 1989), Couple Commitment and Relationship Enhancement program (Couple CARE; Halford, Moore, Wilson, Dyer, & Farrugia, 2004), the Couples Communication Program (CCP; Miller, Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1993), the Couples Coping Enhancement Training (CCET; Boedenmann & Shantinath, 2004), among others. Why is there such heavy emphasis on communication skills? There may be a number of reasons, but perhaps the most salient is that the predominant theoretical model of marital functioning at the time marital counseling and education programs were being developed was *social learning theory* (Bradbury & Johnson, 2015), a theory built on

ideas from behaviorism with a preeminent focus on dyadic exchanges impacting subsequent relationship quality and stability (e.g., Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Stuart, 1969; Weiss et al., 1973). As one example of a communication-based training approach, the PREP approach advanced the “Speaker-Listener Technique” (Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 2010). In this technique couples are given a card or fridge magnet designed as a checker board floor. The “floor” contains instructions for the technique and whoever has the floor can speak while the other listens. There are specific rules for the speaker (speak for yourself, do not go on and on, stop, let the listener paraphrase) and listener (paraphrase what you hear, do not rebut, focus on the speaker’s message) and rules for both (the speaker has the floor, share the floor, no problem-solving). Couples are trained in these skills and taught to practice these skills first with non-conflictual issues and then to gradually incorporate more difficult topics into their structured conversations. The goal of this technique is for couples to have clear and safe conversations. The benefits of this approach are that it gives couples a structure to create a safe climate for couples who, without structure, may get easily escalated and it helps couples match their message with their intent when they are communicating. Despite the potential advantages, this technique and communication training in general have come under scrutiny.

Argument against Communication Skills

John Gottman’s (1998) seminal paper on marriage and divorce challenged the contemporary view that the *active listening model* (listening and validating skills) is essential in successful healthy relationships. Gottman’s findings revealed that couples who have healthy relationships do not use empathy skills taught in MRE programs. Instead, he saw couples use *repair attempts* [couple’s attempts to restore the relationship to positive sentiment and calm through self- and partner-soothing strategies (apologizing, taking breaks, and accepting

influence)] to solve relationship problems (Gottman, 1999). Couples who have healthy marriages are not perfect communicators but know how to repair emotional negativity in the relationship *as it arises* preventing them from crossing a hazardous escalation threshold. These repair attempts, as he observed, do not look at all like the active listening model, and thus he argued against teaching this model to couples. Gottman (1999), instead, promoted teaching couples emotional soothing and positive bonding strategies that he saw healthy couples naturally using in his research observations. Stanley, Bradbury, & Markman (2000) argued that even if these skills are not used naturally by couples in healthy marriages they could still be a useful intervention for couples who are not *naturally* communicating well. Gottman worried, however, that “teaching people to be empathic when they are feeling attacked is like trying to teach couples a form of *emotional gymnastics*, when, in fact, they are feeling emotionally crippled and are even having trouble walking, so to speak” (Gottman, 1999, p. 10). Stanley et al.’s, (2000) contention to this is that perhaps, yes, when couples are feeling emotionally escalated they should not proceed with using the active listening model until they have taken a “time out” to calm down before reconnecting, but that reconnecting with the structured technique could help prevent escalation from occurring again.

Research Informing This Debate

Communication research may help illuminate some of the intricacies of this debate. Historically, research indicated that happy couples differ from unhappy couples in the quality of their communication (Gottman, 1979; Rush et al., 1974), but researchers have since explored how communication problems *predict* relationship distress across time. Couples whose communication contains a large degree of negative emotion (hostility, angry accusations, etc.) are more likely to have greater distress and divorce (e.g., Rogge et al., 2006), but longitudinal

studies on couples with *ordinary* communication problems (listening poorly, being stubborn, defensive, or disagreeable) provide some mixed results. For example, problem solving skills have predicted both *higher* levels of satisfaction (Gill, Christensen, & Fincham, 1999) *and lower* levels of satisfaction (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Why might this be? It is possible that couples with poor problem solving skills, but who convey warmth, respect, and positivity with one another, do not experience the negative effects from a lack of skills. Longitudinal studies support this view finding that when newlyweds' positive emotion is high, poor communication skills have little effect four years later, but when positive emotion is low, poor communication skills substantially predict a rapid decline in marital satisfaction (Huston & Vangelisti, 1994; Johnson et al., 2005; Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1990). Furthermore, research evaluating couple's physiological responses during conflict find similar results. In one study, observed conflict behaviors had some bearing on marriage outcomes 10 years later, but higher physiological arousal *during* conflict discussions was a far more potent predictor of marital distress and divorce (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003).

These studies seem consistent with Gottman et al.'s, (1998) contention that what matters more than the active listening model in relationships is the *emotional regulation model* (emotional soothing and bonding rather than communication technique). In support, Gottman and colleagues (2005) compared the communication of couples who either participated in a friendship building intervention or a conflict management intervention. Interestingly, the friendship intervention had a greater effect on reducing negativity during a second conflict discussion than the conflict management intervention. Quasi-experimental studies that have evaluated the communication based PREP approach have shown positive outcomes in improving satisfaction and preventing divorce (e.g., Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Markman,

Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993; Hahlweg, Makman, Thurmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998; Stanley et al., 2001), but the nine truly experimental studies have had mixed results with two studies showing positive effects (Kaiser, Hahlweg, Fehm-Wolfsdorf, & Groth, 1998; Stanley, Allen, Markman, Rohoades, & Prentice, 2010), five studies with null or mixed effects (Allen, Rhoades, Stanley, Loew, & Markman, 2012; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001; Laurenceau, Stanley, Olmos-Gallo, Baucom, & Markman, 2004; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, & Peterson, 2013; Trillingsgaard, Baucom, Heyman, & Elklit, 2012), and two studies showing negative effects (Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2013; van Widenfelt, Hosman, Schaap, & van der Staak, 1996).

Perhaps the most striking research against the usefulness of skills-based approaches are the government funded marriage education efforts delivered to low-income families across the United States. The Building Strong Families (BSF) study randomly assigned 5,102 unmarried couples who were new or soon to be parents to either a control condition or skills-based education. The results of the BSF study showed that after 36 months, the interventions produced no effects across all locations; but when observing the data by the eight distinct locations, one site had a small positive outcome for family stability (but no positive outcome for relationship quality or status); one site had *negative* effects for relationship status, father involvement, and family stability; and the other six sites had null effects (Wood, Moore, Clarkwest, & Killewald, 2014). The supporting Healthy Marriages (SHM) study investigated 5,395 married couples randomly assigned to skill-based treatment or no treatment. SHM had similar results: after 30 months couples in the control and treatment condition did not differ in terms of marital status, domestic violence, parenting or child well being; there was a small effect in happiness among the treatment group (Lundquist et al., 2014). The Community Healthy Marriage Initiative evaluation

(CHMI) delivered relationship education to 187,844 couples. The initiative had no effect on marital quality or stability (Bir et al., 2012). In sum, it appears that skills-based interventions do not have the expected effects in smaller studies nor in large scale efforts (Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). These results were surprising given a previous meta-analysis (Hawkins, 2008) that reported positive effects for communication skills training; nevertheless, the meta-analysis results were based on programs delivered to middle-class couples and only measured shorter-term effects (3-6 months follow-up).

Given the low marriage rates and high dissolution rates among low SES couples, the question of whether MRE can strengthen marriages among the socially and economically disadvantaged has been of central importance at the federal level. In a review of the National Healthy Marriage Initiative (and the three above mentioned studies), Johnson (2012) concluded that MRE has not produced substantial effects among ethnic minority, or socially and economically disadvantaged groups like we have seen among White and middle class groups. He provides a number of reasons that are useful to consider: 1) current MRE programs were designed with research findings from White and middle class families and programs offered to disadvantaged couples have not been sufficiently tailored to help them, 2) current MRE programs focus on marital satisfaction, which may feel like a selfish endeavor for single adults or couples who are struggling to feed and take care of their children, and 3) the couples who actually access MRE programs tend to be those who need them the least. Hawkins and colleagues (2013) believe there is still hope for the usefulness of MRE programs for low-income groups; however, more research (as an example, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a large multi-city study following the families of unmarried parents; Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001) is needed to understand what relationship processes sustain

marital outcomes among disadvantaged couples living within a challenging social context (e.g., access to resources, limited support, limited opportunity; Johnson 2013). Relationship processes that moderate contextual and relationship stress could provide a partial solution to preventing negative marital outcomes among disadvantaged couples and research will need to determine more clearly what those processes are (Bradbury & Johnson, 2015). Research will further need to find ways to adapt current MRE programs to more specifically meet the needs of low-income families (one example of such an effort is relationship education for step-families: Adler-Baeder, Robertson, & Schramm, 2010).

It may be that larger social issues impacting relationships must be alleviated in ways beyond what a simple MRE program can do; however, there may be some potential ways to help disadvantaged couples without solving larger social issues in a short course on relationships. Self-development/self-regulation is a resilience based approach that focuses individuals on dealing with a multitude of life stressors through anxiety and stress *tolerance* rather than reduction (Schnarch & Regas, 2012), which may be particularly useful for couples who cannot immediately reduce certain stressors. Additionally, an approach that broadens the meaning of marriage beyond individual satisfaction and points couples to their social network could help couples garner support for their marriage and social situation. Future research will need to test out these ideas more clearly among these groups.

What are the potential drawbacks to teaching the active listening model? Hawkins and colleagues' (2008) meta-analysis found programs produced larger effect sizes for communication skills than for relationship quality, which is not surprising to some extent given the *direct* focus on skill building rather than relationship quality. They, however, provided some possible explanations for these results — perhaps couples display these skills when being observed by a

researcher but may not use them in their natural setting; or perhaps, despite having learned the skills they may not notice significant changes to their overall relationship (Hawkins et al., 2008). Finally, it is possible that communication training leads couples to attend to relationship problems that they may have otherwise not attended to but are unable to fully resolve through the skills alone (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003; Hawkins et al., 2008). One limitation of the meta-analysis in evaluating behavioral change, is that follow-up assessments in the majority of studies reviewed occurred at 3-6 months post-intervention and even then there was a small deterioration effect in behaviors.

In a three year follow up study, Rogge and colleagues' (2013) evaluated two skills based interventions (PREP & CARE) and a relationship awareness intervention; the skill based interventions did not produce the expected behavioral changes. Women in the PREP condition reported *more* hostile conflict and women in the CARE group reported *less* emotional support (both opposite effects of their programs intended behavioral targets). They proposed a potential unintended but detrimental consequence of skills-based approaches in which couples may be sensitized to specific inadequacies in their relationship such that skill *deficits* become more salient to them (Rogge et al., 2013). Consistent with this view, Schnarch (1997) argues that an emphasis on communication skills training stimulates an 'absence' paradigm in which couples view what is lacking in the relationship; this, he feels, can demoralize couples who struggle with normal communication problems. The alternative view, the 'presence' paradigm sensitizes couples to their strengths and normalizes the presence of communication problems suggesting that these normal marital problems create opportunities for personal growth and subsequently long-term relationship health and resilience.

Changing the Landscape of Relationship Education: A Call for Alternative Approaches to Technical Skills

MRE experts have called for educators to seriously examine and evaluate the content of programs (e.g., Fawcett and colleagues, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2008; Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). First, it is suggested that relationship programs better address dominant cultural paradigms that negatively affect couples perspectives of marriage and normal marital problems including individualism (Fawcett et al, 2010; Fowers, 2000) and consumerism (Doherty, 2013) and challenge couples to think differently about marriage by offering more balanced perspectives. For instance, Doherty presents a model that blends traditional views of commitment with contemporary views of gender equality. Of the cultural paradigms that could potentially negatively affect couple's relationships, perhaps the most common in discourses on contemporary marriage, is *individualism*, a cultural trend that places emphasis on emotional gratification and personal achievement (Cherlin, 2010). Extended to marriage this view drives couples to view marriage's primary purpose as supplying them opportunities for personal achievement and self-fulfillment (Doherty, 2013, Fowers, 2000, Cherlin, 2010). This view presents an unbalanced perspective that does not take into consideration the normal ebbs and flows of marital satisfaction, the realities of having to sometimes sacrifice personal achievements to sustain a family, the fact that many couples come with broader goals than marital or personal satisfaction alone, and the role of other important stakeholders in the marriage including children, extended family, and communities. This unbalanced perspective prevents couples from garnering support from family and friends when their relationships are struggling (Doherty, 2013). Doherty (2013) extended these views to a current type of individualism he calls *consumerism*, an attitude stemming from marketplace values which places emphasis on advertising, purchasing, selling, and buying the newest and latest models. Extended to marriage,

couples bring a sense of entitlement for the best type of relationship and a sense of impermanence that makes looking for new alternatives an attractive pursuit. This consumer based outlook negatively impacts long-term commitment and relationship work and sensitizes couples to deficits in their relationships rather than to strengths and the normalcy of marital difficulties (Doherty, 2013).

Schnarch's (2009) and Rogge's (2013) point that programs which draw couples' attention to deficits in the relationship may do more harm than good becomes more significant when considering the impact of a "throw away" culture already oriented toward seeing deficits as justification for discarding and purchasing new products. Doherty is clear that many of the old cultural models of marriage had their limitations, including individuals being inhibited from leaving unhealthy marriages or advocating for their legitimate needs in a marriage, but perhaps, in today's contemporary marriage culture too many couples claim their relationship is incompatible when their problems are more like the common cold, in other words, the couple is struggling with issues common to every marriage. Research appears to support this view, in that nearly two-thirds of divorces occur to low conflict couples who report relatively high levels of relationship happiness and time spent together (Amato, 2001). Thus, a more balanced marriage perspective that emphasizes long-term commitment, community support, the individual health of each partner, and the normalcy of marital challenges, may encourage couples to find deeper meaning and purpose to their relationships, sensitizing them more to their strengths as a couple and building upon those while working through relationship challenges (Doherty, 2013). The need to address cultural trends is not lost to relationship educators. Many have tried to address these by teaching couples about lasting commitment and being wise about relationship decision making (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010); nevertheless, the scant attention to community

support and the meaning of marriage, and the intense focus on communication skills and satisfaction in these programs has not been sufficiently addressed in light of these particular critiques. For example, some argue that teaching communications skills reinforces an individualistic view that spouses should *expect* to be validated and emotionally fulfilled through their partner (Fowers, 2000; Schnarch, 1997).

Second, researchers have called for educators to give more focus to other factors beyond communication that promote relationship flourishing [e.g., commitment, sacrifice, gratitude, forgiveness, self-control and other “virtues” that promote marital quality (e.g., Fowers, 2000; Fincham, 2007)]. Some programs have given more emphasis to relationship self-regulation and dyadic coping (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013) while others focus on friendship and positive bonding (Markman, Blumberg & Stanley, 2010; Gottman, 1999). Beyond the emotional regulation model put forth by Gottman (1999), other models have been proposed as *non-technique* approaches to enhancing relationship health with a core self-development component.

Virtue Development Model

In his book, “*Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness*”, Fowers (2000) challenged the dominant communication-satisfaction model used by contemporary marriage practitioners in the U.S., Canada, Western Europe, and Australia. He proposed that in individualistic cultures, couples view relationships in terms of emotional payoffs and rewards. Accordingly, he argued that a strict focus on communication skills confines our definition of marriage to solely a source for personal fulfillment with emotional validation through communication. In contrast, he frames marriage in terms of a partnership in which couples participate in something that goes beyond their individual gratification, what he terms as a “mutual commitment to the creation of a shared life” (Fowers, 2000 p.21). Fowers proposed that instead of teaching couples behavioral *skills*

they should be taught *virtues*. Virtues, he argues, are tied to a deeper vision of marriage in which partners work together toward mutually defined goals, where the virtues of friendship, loyalty, fairness, and generosity play a central role in sustaining a partnership where worthwhile goals can be achieved. Fowers points out that although skills can be helpful at times, what really makes marriages strong is the shared commitment and devotion of spouses to be their best self in the marriage and in contributing to it equally. This approach was tested in an MRE program called “Marriage Moments” for couples transitioning to parenthood. All couples in the study were enrolled in a parenting education class but were randomized into three distinct groups: one group received encouragement by an instructor to work through the marriage moments curriculum, one group was given the curriculum at the beginning of the study but was not given further encouragement, and the last group did not receive the marriage moments curriculum. Results did not indicate any significant differences between groups (Hawkins et al., 2006). Better measurement of virtues in MRE has been ongoing (Fawcett et al., 2013). One potential criticism is that this model does not provide a clear and cohesive approach for virtue development.

Relationship Self-Regulation Model

Halford (2011) presents an alternative to traditional communication skills training in his relationship education program, Couple CARE (note, different from the “CARE” program described earlier). In his view, a superior mechanism of change is relationship self-regulation (RSR). RSR is defined as a partner’s willingness to work at the relationship, apply strategies for self-change and put forth consistent effort. Halford points out that when couples are taught communication skills they may not apply them or find they do not fit their relationship’s needs. Instead, Halford, Lizzio, & colleagues’ (2007) model encourages partners to reflect on how things are going in the relationship, set goals to improve their personal behavior in the

relationship, and evaluate their effort in maintaining changes and working at the relationship. This approach arguably addresses partner's motivation to work on the relationship, a factor not always targeted in communication-based approaches and it allows couples to identify what *they* believe they should change. Specifically, couples are given a five step process of self-change where they individually *describe* an issue they would like to work on, *focus* on what they do specifically, *develop* a goal of what they would like to have happen, *act* by planning what they will do to change, and *evaluate* what they did, what resulted, and how to move forward. The couple CARE approach still teaches communication skills but only trains couples to self-select the behaviors they would like to work on. The couple CARE approach has been empirically validated (Halford & Wilson, 2009) and shown to positively predict relationship satisfaction trajectories four years post-intervention. Although this approach presents a clear model for self-change, its focus is primarily geared toward behavior.

Differentiation Model

This approach is rooted in tenets of Bowen (1978) family systems theory, where differentiation is defined as the ability to balance the need to be connected to close others but maintain a unique independent self. The process of becoming differentiated requires partners to take responsibility for managing their own anxieties while maintaining connection to their partner. Building on the work of Bowen, Schnarch (2009) operationalized differentiation into four components which he refers to as The Four Points of Balance™: Solid Flexible Self™, Quiet Mind and Calm Heart™, Grounded Responding™, and Meaningful Endurance™. Schnarch is critical of the active listening model noting that "resolving common marital problems requires personal development rather than skills and techniques" (Schnarch, 1997, p. 45). One such elaboration is that the active listening model puts forth a *primarily* partner-

soothing model. According to Schnarch (2009), efforts to soothe one's partner may have the hidden intent of easing one's own anxiety rather than their partner's, however, when partners *first* soothe themselves they can be genuine in their efforts to soothe their partner, ultimately opening the door for greater intimacy and connection because they are not just trying to soothe themselves *through* their partner. This approach engenders *long-term* change because growth is not (initially) dependent on the other partner. Further, simple negotiation and compromising do not solve *emotional gridlock* which occurs "when one person in a relationship defines a position or an issue that blocks the preferred or acceptable position of another" (Schnarch & Regas, 2012 p. 641). Rather, gridlock is an opportunity for personal development in which partners must clarify personal values, be flexible, regulate anxiety, not over- or under-react, and tolerate difficulty. Thus, resolving gridlock is the "people growing machinery" of emotionally committed relationships that creates greater differentiation, meaning, gridlock creates a mechanism that facilitates human development and adult maturation. Unfortunately, there is of yet little evaluative research on this approach. The first published study examining The Four Points of Balance™ found them positively associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety and greater relationship satisfaction (Schnarch & Regas, 2012). Schnarch uses this model in his *Passionate Marriage* couple enrichment weekend (CEW) retreats, which was empirically evaluated in one study. Results indicated that partners going through the CEW evidenced positive changes in intimacy, sexuality, and conflict resolution. Differentiation was not measured directly in this study (Whelihan, 2000), but qualitative results revealed that most couples reported positive changes in differentiation, intimacy, conflict, and sexual meaning (Berg, 2000).

Toward an Integrated Model of Marriage-Centered Self-Development

To effectively develop the “Strengthen Yourself, Strengthen Your Relationships” curriculum, the present research, cultural critiques, and models of self-development were integrated into a framework with three main emphases: How couples (1) perceive the purpose of marriage, (2) focus on personal development, and (3) build lasting connections. This integration pulls from the work of prominent relationship experts in both the field of MRE and marital therapy.

How Couples Perceive the Purpose of Marriage

Both Doherty (2013) and Fowers (2000) have given specific attention to the role of healthy marriages that extends beyond the individual partners themselves to stakeholders in the marriage. This has been given little attention in MRE programs but is a critical aspect of healthy relationships. First, when couples understand that marriage’s purpose extends beyond their own personal fulfillment, they do not put undue pressure on their partner or the relationship for personal happiness; instead, when thinking about and approaching their relationship, they take into account themselves *and* others who might be affected by their marriage. Second, helping couples find ways to feel connected to and garner support from their larger communities can help them feel supported in their relationship, particularly when in distress. Finally, it gives self-development a purpose beyond personal achievement where self-work is directed toward the good of others and not only oneself. This can help couples alleviate misguided attempts in seeking only individual fulfillment through self-development giving couples deeper meaning for relationship work: a view of the good of the marriage itself and its stakeholders. The current MRE program will emphasize *marriage-centered self-development* by helping couples evaluate how they view marriage.

Because couples will face unavoidable marital problems, Doherty, Fowers, and Schnarch find it helpful for couples to view marriage struggles in terms of *crucibles* for personal-development, where personal development becomes the key ingredient for long-term marital health and stability. For example, Fowers' states,

one of the best ways to improve a marriage is to become a better person by cultivating and practicing such virtues as friendship, loyalty, generosity, and justice...Indeed, we find that marriage is one of the best opportunities we have to develop our characters—to become the best people we can be. (2000, p .25)

Therefore, this program extends the focus of the purpose of marriage to the purpose of marital *challenges* in that it will draw couples attention to the ebbs and flows of marital happiness and the presence of conflict and help them derive meaning from these realities. It will help couples understand that these crucibles provide partners opportunities to develop themselves into more mature adults who can better take care of themselves, their marriage, children, and communities.

Focusing on Personal Development

The second emphasis is a direct focus on self-development. Each of the self-change models center on personal development in different ways: Fowers' (2000) encourages couples to identify and put specific virtues into practice, while Schnarch (2009) focuses couples' on differentiation, which he argues, develops one's character. Halford's RSR approach provides a very simple model for evaluating *behavior* and enacting behavior self-change, whereas Schnarch (2009) and Fowers (2000) extend self-evaluation to one's values, beliefs, motivations, and personal character. Halford's approach, however, provides a structured way of teaching self-change to couples, whereas the "how to differentiate" is often difficult to describe in the differentiation model. A challenge of the present study then, was finding experiential ways to

help couples apply differentiation to their relationship in the relationship education format. The current curriculum emphasizes a self-development framework that helps couples learn to (1) develop a solid sense of self, (2) regulate their emotions, and (3) change behaviors that contribute negatively to undesirable relationship patterns.

Building Lasting Connections

The last emphasis of this integration is the importance of couples building lasting connections. Fowers' (2000) describes a virtue of marital friendship, similar to Gottman's (2000) friendship building and meaning making approach: both assert that positive marital interactions build a foundation of positive sentiment. Doherty (2013), like Gottman also encourages couples to form a foundation of emotional connection by encouraging couples to establish regular connection rituals that can help them sustain satisfaction long term. Doherty approach to rituals is that couples create a repeated experience that holds special meaning for the relationship (i.e., they are repeated, coordinated, and significant events the couple does together). For example, some couples have particular greeting or connection rituals at the end of a work day, or a regular date night. Doherty emphasizes that keeping and enhancing connections strong through rituals takes a level of self-clarity and self-regulation (differentiation). This is likely due to desire differences around particular rituals. Thus, the current program will emphasize the role of differentiation in maintaining and deepening healthy connections through rituals. Further, Fowers and Doherty emphasize the role of a couple's relationship in connection with other couples and communities. Helping couples understand the connection between their relationship and others is important as couples consider appropriate boundaries in preserving the integrity of the relationship around other important people as well as encouraging the support of others for their relationship.

Marriage educators accustomed to and skilled at altering behaviors rather than the motives and meanings behind those behaviors may find it difficult to incorporate other potential mechanisms of change (Fawcett et al., 2010), but this may truly limit their ability to help couples experience *long-lasting* effects. Marriage and family therapists are especially trained in bringing out and addressing emotional and cognitive motives undergirding behavioral patterns in relationships and cultural narratives that hinder personal development, yet MRE programs have been limited in providing couples a theoretically sound way to self-identify these hidden elements that maintain negative patterns and behaviors in their relationship. Integrating *family systems theories* (e.g., Bowen family systems theory; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) and their application to current marriage strengthening models (e.g., Doherty, 2013; Schnarch, 2009) into MRE programs could provide an important contribution that thus far appears to have been neglected. Because Bowen's theory of family systems provides a broad view of self-development and contextualizes self-work in the context of intimate relationships this theory provides an excellent foundation for the current MRE program.

Theoretical Framework: Bowen Family Systems Theory

Bowen's family systems theory (Bowen, 1978) provides a unique and helpful insight into the construction of a self-development program for committed couples. Bowen (1978) explained that problems occur between partners due to *emotional fusion*, the tendency of partners to transmit their anxieties onto one another and manifest them in negative interactions with each other. The resolution to emotional fusion is differentiation. When each partner can maintain a clear sense of self, calm their own anxieties, neither overreact nor underreact to relationship problems, and tolerate difficulty, they are better able to enjoy emotional independence and intimate connection with their partner, thus resolving emotional fusion (Schnarch, 2009). Bowen

attributed partners' levels of differentiation to how emotions were handled in their family of origin. If family members did not place undue emotional responsibility, pressure, or distance on others then family members would develop a healthy level of differentiation. But if emotional fusion was characteristic in how anxiety was handled, individuals would have lower levels of differentiation. Bowen was somewhat pessimistic about an individual's capacity to significantly improve differentiation in adulthood, but contemporary differentiation based theorists (Schnarch & Regas, 2012) are more optimistic of adults abilities to increase differentiation through marriage. The level of differentiation partners bring to marriage determines the degree to which their *sense of self* is dependent on their partner. In other words, partners high in fusion (low in differentiation) work from a *reflected* sense of self in which they depend on their partner to feel good about themselves (Schnarch, 2009). All individuals enter marriage dependent, to some degree, on a reflected sense of self, which in part explains one reason romantic attachments are so attractive to individuals; their partner and the relationship will offer them, at least initially, a *positive* reflected sense of self (Schnarch, 2009). However, the level of fusion (and reflected sense of self) will determine the *frequency* and *intensity* of emotional gridlock (conflict) couples will experience (Schnarch, 2009). This is because, if one's partner's position invalidates their feelings, and they emotionally rely too heavily on their partner, gridlock will naturally be more difficult for them; however, emotional gridlock then creates a crucible for couples to move from a reflected sense of self to a solid sense of self ultimately resolving gridlock while at the same time raising the level of each partner's differentiation (Schnarch & Regas, 2012). Thus, differentiation arguably continues to develop throughout one's life and particularly through the crucibles of marriage.

Program Goals and Curriculum:

Drawing upon and integrating critiques from multiple relationship experts including Drs. John Gottman, Kim Halford, Blaine Fowers, William Doherty, and David Schnarch, I developed a 5-unit (1 unit per week) curriculum entitled “Strengthen Yourself, Strengthen Your Relationships”. The intent of this program is to help couples address common but unhelpful perspectives that complicate relationship centered self-development, learn the process of self-development, emotional regulation, how to respond to relationship patterns in a self-dignifying way, and enact rituals of connection and garner community support to sustain a long-term relationship.

Specifically the program contains 5 specific goals:

1. Gain a balanced perspective about marriage and long-term romantic relationships.
2. Learn how to develop yourself in the context of a romantic relationship and become a better partner.
3. Learn how to soothe yourself when relationship anxieties and conflict emerge.
4. Understand how best to handle negative relationship patterns in your relationship and create healthy patterns through self-change.
5. Learn how to cultivate a long-lasting relationship through engaging in rituals of connection and embedding yourself in a community of support.

In connection with each goal is a specific curriculum unit. The five specific units are Marital Perspectives, Self-Development, Emotional Regulation, Systemic Responding, and The Long-Term View. The first unit, *Marital Perspectives*, discusses the cultural narratives of marriage including individualized and consumer- versus community-based marriage. Workshop participants discuss clips from the documentary ‘112 Weddings’ and their own views about marriage. The purpose of this intervention is to open discussion about and describe a balanced

perspective of marriage (including realities of marriage challenges and a broader perspective of marriage's purpose) as opposed to an idealized soul-mate version of marriage. This unit walks couples briefly through the history of marriage in the United States drawing from Cherlin's (2010) analysis in "The Marriage Go-Round", helping couples consider current and past perspectives of the purpose of marriage allowing them to broaden their own view and confront problems within current paradigms including individualism and consumerism. The second unit, *Self-Development*, provides a description of the differentiation process in committed relationships, provides clear examples of the concepts (including gridlock that emerges due to sexual desire differences) and helps participants understand a core aspect of self-development: developing a solid sense of self. As part of this, participants will identify personal relationship values, evaluate how well they live up to these values in their relationship, and share one core value with their partner that they are working on. The third unit, *Emotional Regulation*, explains the human stress response and emotional flooding in romantic relationships with examples. Couples are given a handout that helps them identify their signs that they are emotionally reactive. They then walk through specifics for working through reactive moments. This includes identifying self-soothing strategies and underlying triggers that partially cause their reactive cycle. Couples learn to confront these personal triggers and create a plan to take breaks when discussion becomes too escalated or unproductive. The fourth unit, *Systemic Responding*, describes systemic patterns in romantic relationships using a dance metaphor and provides a model for responding rather than reacting. The core intervention of this unit involves couples mapping out their negative interaction cycle through an activity entitled, "Stuck in a Negative Dance" in which they connect their behavior, their reaction, and their triggers. The unit then focuses couples on how to enact behavioral self-change through the comfort and growth cycle

described in Schnarch's (1997) book, 'Passionate Marriage'. This cycle teaches couples the process and challenges of changing one's self and relationship and provides them simple guidelines for stepping out of their comfort zone and working towards personal and relationship growth. This unit also contains a game entitled, 'Whose Fault Is It Anyway', in which couples dissect dialogue from a couple's conflict and rewrite the script from a more differentiated stance. The fifth and final unit, *The Long-Term View*, helps couples initiate and carry out connection rituals and find community support for their marriage as described in Doherty's (2013) book, 'Take Back Your Marriage'. Couples create one ritual for their relationship, identify friends to the relationship. They will also learn how to respond to friends and family members dealing with marriage problems as 'Marital First Responders'. The intention of these activities is to help couples fortify their relationship amidst a consumeristic and individualistic marriage culture by keeping their relationship strong through rituals of connection and learning to garner support from the couples' community.

The Present Study

Guided by Bowen's family systems theory (1978), with particular emphasis on *differentiation*, this study developed, pilot tested, and evaluated a self-development curriculum for committed couples compared to a feedback-only control condition. Integrating ideas from the various alternatives and critiques to traditional skills-based education while addressing the unique contributions of cultural narrative and context provides educators a way to emphasize self-development in a meaningful way for committed couples. To our knowledge, no MRE program has been developed that promotes both differentiation and community based marriages. Three hypotheses will be tested to evaluate the usefulness of a marriage-centered-self-

development curriculum (treatment condition) against a relationship assessment plus feedback approach (control condition):

1. Individuals in *both* groups will evidence significant positive changes across time in relationship quality (Relationship satisfaction, dedication, confidence, negative interaction, and problem solving) but only individuals in the curriculum group will evidence significant positive changes in marital meanings, RSR, and differentiation.
2. Individuals in the curriculum condition will demonstrate greater statistically significant change from pre- to post-test, pre-test to follow-up, and post-test to follow-up in all measured variables than individuals in the feedback condition.
3. At the dyadic level, condition placement will significantly predict couple's change scores across time with the curriculum condition predicting greater positive changes in measures of relationship quality.

Chapter 3 - Method

Procedure

This study aimed to recruit forty romantically involved committed couples (i.e., dating, engaged, cohabiting, or married). Participants were actively recruited through University announcements, flyers throughout the community, and word of mouth. Potential recruits completed an initial screener survey to determine their eligibility for the study. To be eligible for the study both partners had to be between the ages of 18-29 and consider themselves to be romantically committed (either seriously dating, committed, engaged, or married). Couples who were casually dating (“We are somewhat interested in each other romantically, and occasionally do dating kinds of things (either in a group or alone), but are not really in an exclusive relationship”) were not eligible to participate. Data were collected through an online survey using Qualtrics at three time points: pre-intervention, post-intervention (5 weeks after the pretest), and 4-week follow up (9 weeks after the pretest). A blocked-randomized control trial was used (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002), where 20 couples were randomly assigned to the “self-development” curriculum group (treatment condition) and 20 couples to the “RELATE assessment plus feedback” group (control condition). For the treatment condition (curriculum group), participants selected a night to come to class meetings that worked with their schedule. Two classes consisted of five couples, one class of four couples, and one class of three couples (equaling a total of 17 couples as three couples could not fit any time frame in their schedule). Couples in the curriculum group attended class in two hour units for five weeks (one unit each week) for a total of ten hours. Classes were held at the public university where the program developers were located and participants were provided water and snacks. I was the main facilitator for three of the four groups and I trained one additional leader and three co-leaders in

the curriculum material and delivery; but only one leader and one co-leader led a group at a time. At follow up, participants in the treatment condition offered their feedback for the program including its practical usefulness and relevance to their relationship. Couples who participated in either condition received an \$80 incentive (distributed across three time points).

In the control condition, each couple completed the online RELATE (Larson et al., 2002) assessment and received individualized feedback with a relationship educator. The RELATE assessment provides a computer-generated report that outlines the degree to which partners align in 10 core areas: Kindness and flexibility, emotional readiness, family background, relationship quality, relationship effort, effective communication, conflict resolution, sexuality, relational aggression, and attachment. Although couples may view their reports online, many couples have noted that having a relationship educator walk them through their results was quite helpful (Larson et al., 2007). Further, Halford (2011) has indicated that at least a proportion of couples who complete the report experience some conflict about differences in answers. One study showed that couples taking RELATE without educator assistance showed a small initial drop in satisfaction (14 days after) followed by a significant improvement over time (60 days after). With educator assistance couples showed significant gains in relationship satisfaction, commitment, opinions and feelings about marriage, readiness for marriage, awareness of strengths and challenges, improved couple communication, and the expectation of the prevention of future relationship problems (Larson et al., 2007). Five relationship educators were trained to provide relationship feedback for the control group following the protocol described by Halford (2011) In this protocol educators set up a 1-2 hour meeting with the couple in which they address questions couples had about their feedback and how their results aligned or did not align with one another. They discuss areas of strength and challenge for the couple, and help them set

specific self-change goals to enhance the relationship. No follow up occurs after the meeting. The RELATE tool was used as the control condition because it provides a similar yet distinct approach to relationship education. It is similar in that it aims at raising awareness (insight) of one's self and relationship as well as setting goals for self-change, but is different in how it arrives there. It provides couples a snapshot of their relationship via data assessment and a quick 1-2 hour meeting while the curriculum provides 5 weeks discussing an overarching approach to relationships where couples make their own intuitive sense of their relationship while applying the concepts discussed.

Participants

Of the 20 that were assigned to the treatment condition 17 couples came to the first class (three couples were unable due to time constraints). After the first class, one couple dropped out due to time constraints and a total of 16 couples completed the Strengthen Yourself Strengthen Your Relationship program and follow up surveys. All 20 couples in the control condition received the intervention and completed the post-test but only 17 completed the final follow up survey. There was one same- sex couple that was assigned to the control condition. I did not, however, include their data in the analyses so as to analyze distinguishable dyads (Kenny, Kashy & Cook, 2006). Thus I analyzed a total of 35 couples, 16 from the treatment group and 19 from the control group. Sample description was based on the 35 couples (70 individuals) in the study.

The mean age was 20.79 years old ($SD = 1.79$) for male participants and 20.23 years old ($SD = 1.66$) for female participants. On average couples had been together for 29.88 months. Only one couple in the study was married and three couples were engaged. The rest of the couples (31) classified themselves as either seriously dating ("We are definitely interested in each other romantically, we both agree that we are a couple, other people see us as a couple, and

we often do dating kinds of things, but we have not committed to staying together in the future”) or committed (“We are committed to staying together long-term”). The vast majority of couples (26 out of 31) agreed on how they classified their relationship, though five couples did not. Couples who were not married were asked the likelihood they would marry their current partner, with males reporting an 86% likelihood and females reported an 89% likelihood of marrying their current partner. Only one individual (male) in the study indicated having any children (he indicated that he had 3-4). In terms of religion 42.9% of males were Protestant, 25.7% were Catholic, 14.3% agnostic, 5.7% as atheist, and 11.4% identified as other; 42.9% of females identified as protestant, 22.9% as catholic, 11.4% agnostic, 2.9% atheist, and 20.0% as other. The majority of males were white (94.3%). One male identified as Asian/Pacific Islander and one male as multiracial. The majority of females identified as white (94.3%). One female identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, and one as Latino or Hispanic. In terms of education, one male received his master’s degree, four received their bachelor’s degree, two received an associate’s degree, twenty six were current college students, and two had a high school degree. Four females had received their bachelor’s degree, one her associates degree, twenty eight were current college students, and two had a high school degree. Twenty percent of couples indicated that their relationship had been cyclical (had experienced a break-up and reunification). Twenty-seven males were current students, five worked part-time, two worked full-time, and one reported that he was a homemaker. Twenty eight females were current students, six worked part-time, two worked full time, and one was currently seeking employment. In terms of sexual orientation, there was one bisexual male and one bisexual female. In the random assignment of couples to the two different groups, descriptives remained similar (independent samples *t*-tests indicated no significant differences at pre-test).

Measures

Psychometrically validated measures of marital meanings, self-development, and relationship quality were used. See Appendix A for measure items. Alphas for each measure were assessed for men and women separately at each time point. Please refer to Table 3.1 for a full description.

Marital Meanings Measure

Marital Meanings.

To capture participant's views about marriage, three of the five subscales from the Marital Meaning Inventory (Hall, 2006) were used, including special status of marriage vs. neutral alternative (viewing marriage as either a special institution vs. just one of many equally meaningful relationships for couples; example item: "Marriage is the highest commitment couples can make to each other"; 5 item scale), self-fulfillment vs. obligation (placing more importance on personal happiness vs. placing more importance on lifelong commitment; example item: "The personal happiness of an individual is more important than putting up with a bad marriage"; 5 item scale, reversed coded), and romanticism vs. pragmatism (believing more in romantic love as a foundation for marriage vs. believing more in working through difficulty together as a foundation for marriage; example item: "Maintaining romantic love is the key to lasting marital happiness"; 4 item scale, reverse coded). Respondents were asked to evaluate how true each statement is for "what [they think] marriage is like" on a 5-point scale ranging from *not true at all* (1) to *very true* (5). Higher scores represent greater endorsement of the special status of marriage, obligation (recoded), and pragmatism (recoded). This measure was evaluated through a confirmatory factor analysis (Hall, 2006). The mean scores of each subscale was used in the analyses.

Self-Development Measures

Relationship Self-Regulation (RSR).

The two 4-item subscales from the Behavioral Self-Regulation for Effective Relationships Scale (BSRERS; Wilson et al., 2005), relationship strategies and relationship effort, were used to assess relationship self-regulation (RSR). RSR comprises an individual's abilities in relationship-focused appraisal, goal setting, implementation of change, and evaluation of change efforts (Wilson et al., 2005). Relationship strategies included questions such as "I try to apply ideas about effective relationships to improve our relationship" and "I actually put my intentions or plans for personal change into practice." An example item from the Relationship Effort scale includes, "If my partner doesn't appreciate the change efforts I am making, I tend to give up." The validity of the construct was determined through an exploratory factor analysis that found the two separate factors which was then replicated through a confirmatory factor analysis in a separate sample (Wilson et al., 2005). Both RSR scales are answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *never true* (1) to *always true* (5) and were coded so that higher scores indicated higher levels of RSR. The mean score of each subscale was used in the analyses.

Crucible Differentiation Scale (CDS).

The CDS is a 63-item measure used to assess adult differentiation in terms of the four points of balance (Schnarch & Regas, 2012). The Four Points of Balance™ is a way of conceptualizing interrelated facets of differentiation and include partner's ability to have a clear sense of self and strong connection to other important people, an ability to regulate one's own anxieties, to modulate one's own behavior, and stay consistent with one's goals over time. The scale consists of seven factors which map onto The Four Points of Balance™. Each subscale is described within each point of balance. Point 1, Solid Flexible Self™ consists of two subscales:

Clear sense of self (e.g., “I tell people what I think they want to hear”) and connectedness (e.g., “my relationships are as much about caring for others as getting my own needs met”). Point 2, Quiet Mind and Calm Heart™ consists of two subscales: anxiety regulation through self-soothing (e.g., “I remain calm and cope with anxiety-provoking situations”) and anxiety regulation through accommodation (e.g., “I put up with more than I should in order to keep things as pleasant as possible”). Point 3, Grounded Responding™ consists of two subscales: reactivity through avoidance (e.g., “When people disappoint me, I move away emotionally or physically”) and reactivity through arguments (e.g., “I often try to argue people out of their point of view”). Point 4, Meaningful Endurance™ consists of one subscale: tolerating discomfort for growth (e.g., “I have made changes in my life that have been extremely difficult to make”). Items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all true of me* (1) to *very true of me* (6). The mean score of each subscale was used in the analyses.

Relationship Quality Measures

Negative Interaction Scale.

The 4-item Communication Danger Signs Scale (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010) was used to assess negative interaction within the couple relationship, including escalation, negative interpretation, withdrawal, and invalidation. The items are: “Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name calling, or bringing up past hurts,” “My partner seems to view my words or actions more negatively than I mean them to be,” “When we argue, one of us withdraws ... that is, does not want to talk about it anymore or leaves the scene,” and “My partner criticizes or belittles my opinions, feelings, or desires.” Higher scores indicated higher levels of negative interaction. Responses range from *never* (1) to *all the time* (6). The mean score was used in the analyses.

Interactional Problem Solving.

To assess participants' perceived ability to handle relationship problems, the 17-item Interactional Problem-Solving Inventory (IPSI; Lange, 1983; Lange, et al., 1991) was used. Sample items included: "We have little trouble in choosing a solution for a given problem," "Our quarrels often end up in discussions about who is right and who is wrong (reversed)," and "If my partner in one way or another has disappointed me, I talk to him/her about it." Participants rated each item on a scale from *totally disagree* (1) to *totally agree* (6) with higher scores indicated higher levels of problem solving. The mean score was used in the analyses.

Dedication Commitment.

Four items from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992) were used to assess dedication commitment: "My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life," "I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now (reversed)," "I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of 'us' and 'we' than 'me' and 'him/her,'" and "I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter." Response options ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7) with higher scores indicated higher levels of dedication. The mean score was used in the analyses.

Marital Confidence.

Four items were used from the Relationship Confidence Scale to measure marital confidence (Whitton et al., 2007). The items used were: "I believe we can handle whatever conflicts will arise in the future," "I feel good about our prospects to make this relationship work for a lifetime," "I am very confident when I think of our future together," and "We have the skills a couple needs to make a marriage last." Participants rated each item on a 7-point likert

scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7), with higher scores indicating greater marital confidence. The mean score was used in the analyses.

Relationship Satisfaction.

Relationship satisfaction was measured using the 4-item version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-4; Funk & Rogge, 2007). The CSI-4 was developed through an item-response theory analysis of 180 items commonly used to measure relationship satisfaction. Sample items include, “I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner,” and “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” Responses are measured on Likert scales that vary with each item, but generally range from *not at all* (1) to *completely* (7), with higher scores indicating greater relationship satisfaction. The mean score was used in the analyses.

Program Related Measures

WAI-SF Adapted for Relationship Education.

Working Alliance Inventory—Short Form (WAI-SF, Tracey & Kokotovic, 1989) is a 12 item measure that assesses goals and tasks for therapy, as well as the relational bond between the clients and therapists. Items are rated on a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7), with higher scores indicating a better working alliance. The WAI-SF is a commonly used measure of working alliance, and the reliability and validity have been established in numerous studies that compared the WAI-SF with other working alliance scales and therapy outcome measures (see Horvath et al., 2011 for a review). For the current study, we utilized the adapted version of the WAI-SF for the relationship education context (Owen et al., 2011). Example items include: “[Leader] did not understand what I wanted to accomplish in relationship education training (reverse-coded)” and “I felt that [Leader] appreciated me.” This

scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .79$ for men $\alpha = .86$ for women). The WAI-SF was administered at the end of the MRE program. The mean score was used in the analyses.

Group Cohesion in MRE.

Owen (unpublished measure) has developed a group cohesion scale for *couple* relationship education. Group cohesion scales have been developed for group therapy (e.g., MacKenzie, 1983) and used in relationship education (Owen, Antlee, Barbee, 2013), but this is the first scale to adapt the measure in way that views how couples connect with other couples during the class. The adapted group cohesion scale is a 13 item measure rated on a scale from *not at all* (1) to *extremely* (7). Example items include, “Group members were supportive of other couples making progress,” “I felt like couples in the group were mostly disconnected from other couples,” and “I learned from other group members’ comments or questions.” This scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .79$ for men $\alpha = .88$ for women). The group cohesion scale was administered at the end of the MRE program. The mean score was used in the analyses.

Questions Regarding Feedback for the Strengthen Yourself, Strengthen Your Relationships Program, Delivery, and Content.

After each unit, participants were given a notecard to indicate what they found most helpful from the unit and if they had any suggestions of things to change. The post-test survey also contained a number of questions seeking feedback from participants about the program. The following are the list of questions on the post-test survey with item response ranges: “How effective did you feel the leaders were in directing the group? (For example, explaining concepts and ideas, engaging the group, facilitating processing, etc.)” responses ranged from *very ineffective* (1) to *very effective* (7); “The program’s primary aim is to help each partner strengthen themselves and become the best partner they can be while maintaining balance

between their personal and relationship development. How effective do you feel the program was in meeting its goal?" responses ranged from *very ineffective* (1) to *very effective* (7); "Overall, how helpful do you believe the relationship class was to you personally?" response ranged from *very unhelpful* (1) to *very helpful* (7).

Next, open ended questions about the content of the program were asked: "Was there a specific unit that had particular application to you or your relationship? Please explain."; "Was there a specific unit that you felt did not apply as much to you or your current relationship? Please explain."; "There were a number of activities throughout the curriculum (viewing 112 weddings, identifying and sharing your values with your partner, learning to take breaks, identifying triggers, stuck in a negative dance, self-change plan, playing "whose fault is it anyway", creating a relationship ritual, and discussing friends to the relationship), which of these activities did you find most helpful and why?"; "Which of these experiential activities did you find least helpful and why?"

Data Analysis Plan

Five main statistical analyses were run to explore the data. First, I evaluated means and standard deviations for men and women in both groups separately across each time point (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2). Second, as recommended by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006), I assessed the degree of nonindependence in the data by conducting partial correlations in which I controlled for the effects of the between-dyads variable (treatment versus control) for each of the outcome variables (relationship satisfaction, dedication, and confidence). Partner's scores were significantly correlated on all outcome variables indicating nonindependence in the data. To handle this I ran repeated measures ANOVA's (third analysis) and Independent Sample *t*-tests between treatment and control conditions (fourth analysis) with men and women separately.

Finally, I followed a procedure recommended by Kenny and colleagues (2006) for use with nonindependent data to examine the main effects of gender and treatment on couple level scores for relationship quality measures. The dyadic nature of the data could not be handled with more advanced dyadic analyses due to the limited sample size. As the statistical power was low in the current study (small sample sizes), analyses were assessed at the $p < .10$ level and effect sizes are also reported using Cohen's d whenever significance values are reported.

Table 3.1

<i>Alphas for Men and Women in Both Groups at Pre- and Post-Intervention and Four-Week Follow-Up</i>							
Variable	Scale Range	Time 1: Pre- Intervention		Time 2: Post Intervention		Time 3: Four Week Follow-Up	
		Men Alpha	Women Alpha	Men Alpha	Women Alpha	Men Alpha	Women Alpha
Crucible Differentiation Scale (CDS)							
Clear Sense of Self	1-6	.87	.83	.84	.86	.88	.89
Connectedness	1-6	.79	.74	.72	.85	.86	.81
Anxiety Regulation: Self-soothing	1-6	.83	.90	.78	.92	.88	.91
Tolerating Discomfort for Growth	1-6	.64	.76	.67	.69	.80	.73
Anxiety Regulation: Accommodation	1-6	.75	.73	.63	.77	.78	.74
Reactivity through Avoidance	1-6	.47	.75	.73	.85	.86	.76
Reactivity through Arguments	1-6	.79	.65	.82	.76	.83	.70
Relationship Self-Regulation (RSR) Scale							
RSR Strategies subscale	1-5	.63	.75	.85	.71	.69	.81
RSR Effort subscale	1-5	.62	.71	.66	.80	.75	.73
Relationship Quality Measures							
Relationship Satisfaction	1-7	.90	.82	.93	.91	.95	.88
Relationship Confidence	1-7	.84	.85	.88	.95	.96	.98
Dedication Commitment	1-7	.80	.75	.87	.80	.87	.52
Negative Interaction	1-6	.63	.69	.67	.71	.74	.79
Problem Solving	1-6	.89	.90	.90	.92	.93	.92
Marital Meanings Inventory							
Special Status	1-5	.67	.62	.71	.54	.75	.62
Obligation	1-5	.75	.86	.82	.81	.83	.81
Pragmatism	1-5	.78	.78	.69	.68	.71	.74

Chapter 4 - Results

Quantitative Analyses

Means and Standard Deviations

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 report the means and standard deviations for all variables of interest in each group at pre- and post-intervention and follow-up assessment. For relationship quality measures at Time 1 men and women in both groups reported high levels of relationship satisfaction, relationship confidence, dedication commitment, and problem solving and low levels of negative interaction. For marital meanings measures at Time 1 men and women in both groups reported high levels of viewing marriage as a special status and moderate levels viewing marriage in terms of obligation and pragmatism. In terms of differentiation and relationship self-regulation, at Time 1 men and women in both groups reported moderate to high levels on all subscales (the inverse for accommodation, avoidance, and arguments). Significant changes between time points and groups are reported in the next two analyses.

Repeated Measures Tests and Pairwise Comparison Analyses (Hypothesis 1)

To analyze significance in each group's change across time, repeated measures ANOVA's were run, analyzing each partner's scores from pretest (T1) to posttest (T2), pretest (T1) to follow-up (T3), and posttest (T2) to follow-up (T3). These results indicate the degree to which within participant changes occur for each separate group (this analysis is only looking at whether participants evidenced significant change from one time point to another within their own group). For the curriculum group, there were significant changes at the within subjects level for both men and women in viewing marriage as a special status (Men $F(2, 16) = 3.596, p = .040$; Women $F(2, 16) = 5.107, p = .012$), showing significant decrease for men from T2 to T3 ($p = .057, d = .30$) and significant decrease for women from T1 to T3 ($p = .010, d = .54$). Men in

the curriculum group also showed significant change in relationship self-regulation strategies ($F(2, 16) = 4.272, p = .023$) with men showing an increase between T1 and T2 ($p = .048, d = .60$). No other significant changes were detected for the curriculum group.

For the feedback group, there were significant changes at the within subjects level for both men and women in viewing marriage as a special status (Men $F(2, 19) = 9.024, p = .001$; Women $F(2, 19) = 4.638, p = .017$), showing significant decrease for men from T1 to T2 ($p = .008, d = .32$) and T1 to T3 ($p = .015, d = .44$) and significant decrease for women from T1 to T3 ($p = .037, d = .31$). Women in the feedback group experienced a significant increase in relationship self-regulation strategies ($F(2, 19) = 7.266, p = .002$) from T1 to T3 ($p = .001, d = .58$). Women showed significant increases in clear sense of self ($F(2, 19) = 8.468, p = .001$) from T1 to T3 ($p = .008, d = .54$) and from T2 to T3 ($p = .006, d = .35$) and in anxiety regulation through self-soothing ($F(2, 19) = 4.182, p = .024$) from T1 to T3 ($p = .085, d = .40$).

Independent Samples T-tests (Hypothesis 2)

To analyze differences between groups, first, means were compared through independent samples *t*-tests between the groups at pre-intervention and found no significant differences on all study variables. Second, to assess for differences between groups across pre-test, post-test, and follow-up, change scores were computed for each variable from T1 to T2, T1 to T3, and T2 to T3; then, through *t*-tests, significant differences between groups were analyzed using the change scores on all study variables. As before, analyses were tested with men and women separately.

Results indicated that compared to women in the curriculum group, women in the feedback condition reported a significantly greater increase in problem solving from T1-T2 [$t(33) = -2.623, p = .013$ representing a medium-sized effect ($d = .52$)], T1-T3 [$t(32) = -3.406, p = .002$ representing a large-sized effect ($d = .85$)], and T2-T3 [$t(32) = -1.887, p = .068$]

representing a small-sized effect ($d = .36$), relationship effort from T1-T2 [$t(33) = -2.07, p = .046$ representing a medium-sized effect ($d = .60$)] and T1-T3 [$t(32) = -1.95, p = .06$ representing a small-sized effect ($d = -.44$)], clear sense of self from T1-T3 [$t(33) = -2.026, p = .051$ representing a medium-sized effect ($d = -.52$)] and T2-T3 [$t(31) = -2.237, p = .033$ representing a medium-sized effect ($d = -.53$)], and a significantly greater decrease in reactivity through arguments from T1-T2 [$t(33) = 2.393, p = .023$ representing a medium-sized effect ($d = .60$)] and T1-T3 [$t(31) = 2.106, p = .043$ representing a medium-sized effect ($d = .50$)].

Compared to men in the curriculum group, men in the feedback condition reported a significantly greater decrease in negative interaction from T1-T2 [$t(33) = 1.874, p = .07$ representing a medium-sized effect ($d = .56$)]. Men's perception of marriage as a special status in the curriculum group significantly increased more than men in the feedback group from T1-T2 [$t(33) = 3.592, p = .001$ representing a medium-sized effect ($d = .72$)]; however, both groups experienced decreases in this variable from T1-T3, with men in the feedback group experiencing a significantly greater decrease [$t(30) = 2.028, p = .052$ representing a small-sized effect ($d = .44$)].

Dyadic Regression Analyses

In order to account for gender differences and differences between dyads (couples) between treatment and control conditions, I followed Kenny and colleagues recommendations (2006) by running two types of regression models. In the first regression models, the *difference* between male partner's change scores and female partner's change scores on each variable were computed in order to test the main effect of gender (the intercept) and the interaction of gender with the between dyads independent variable (curriculum vs. feedback) across the three time points. I report the interaction of gender with curriculum vs. feedback as this conveys how the

genders between the two groups differed across time. The interaction of curriculum condition with gender indicated that from T1-T2 there was a smaller difference between men's and women's change scores in viewing marriage as a special status in the feedback group than in the curriculum group ($\beta = .510, p = .002$), with men in the curriculum group *increasing* and women *decreasing* in their views about marriage as a special status. From T1-T3 there was also a smaller difference between men's and women's change scores in viewing marriage as a special status in the feedback group than in the curriculum group ($\beta = .331, p = .064$), but this time both men and women in the curriculum group *decreased*, with women's decrease larger than that of men's. Finally, from T1-T2 there was a greater difference between men's and women's change scores in reactivity through arguments in the feedback group than in the curriculum group ($\beta = .361, p = .033$) where men slightly *increased* and women moderately *decreased*.

In the second regression models I examined the main effect of treatment vs. control by using the *sum* of partner's change scores on each relationship quality variable (relationship satisfaction, dedication commitment, relationship confidence, negative interaction, and problem solving). Results revealed that being in the feedback condition significantly predicted an increase in problem solving for couples (sum of partner's change scores) from T1-T2 ($\beta = .283, p = .099$) and T1-T3 ($\beta = .333, p = .062$). Being in the curriculum condition predicted a significant increase in dedication for couples from T1-T2 ($\beta = .303, p = .077$) and T1-T3 ($\beta = .261, p = .096$).

Pilot Program Feedback Results

Statistics Regarding Program Delivery

In the post-test analyses participants in the curriculum group were asked to complete a questionnaire about their working alliance with the relationship educators and their sense of

group cohesion. For the WAI, responses indicated a high mean score ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 0.58$, range = 1-7). For group cohesion, responses indicated a moderately high mean score ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 0.84$, range = 1-7). A few additional questions about the program were asked. Responses indicated first, a high mean score on how effective participants felt leaders were in directing the group ($M = 6.28$, $SD = 1.14$, range = 1-7), second, a high mean score on how effective participants felt the program was in meeting its goals ($M = 6.19$, $SD = 1.20$, range = 1-7), and third, a high mean score on how helpful the program was for them personally ($M = 6.53$, $SD = 0.76$, range = 1-7).

Feedback about the Curriculum

Participants receiving the Strengthen Yourself Strengthen Your Relationships curriculum were first asked to provide direct feedback about each unit (they were handed note-cards to fill out at the end of each unit). Then, during the post-test survey (following the delivery of the entire program), participants were asked to rate which units were most/least helpful overall and which experiential activities were most/least helpful overall. They were encouraged to provide their explanations. From the post-test, the degree of preference for each unit and activity seemed to differ from participant to participant. Some indicated more than one unit or activity as most/least helpful in their responses. Thirty participants made comments about *most* helpful units and activities; of the most helpful *units* 20% indicated Marital Perspectives, 33% indicated Self-Development, 37% indicated Emotional Regulation, 17% indicated Systemic Responding, and 10% indicated The Long Term View. Of the most helpful *activities* 30% indicated viewing 112 Weddings, 13% indicated relationship values, 23% indicated learning to take breaks (taking breaks to self-soothe), 50% indicated the stuck in a negative dance activity, 20% indicated creating a relationship ritual, and one participant said they were all helpful. Twenty seven

participants made comments about *least* helpful units and activities. Of the least helpful *units* 63% indicated *no* unit that was unhelpful, 11% indicated Marital Perspectives, 7% indicated Self-Development, 7% indicated Emotional Regulation, 11% indicated Systemic Responding, and 0% indicated The Long Term View. Of the least helpful *activities* 37% indicated that they were all helpful, 26% indicated the activity “Whose fault is it anyway”, 7% indicated the ritual activity, 7% indicated 112 weddings, 7% indicated relationship values, 7% indicated stuck in a negative dance, and only one participant indicated taking breaks.

In the following analysis, descriptions of each unit are provided. First, this includes initial comments participants made about their week-to-week feedback. Participants were given a note card after each session and they indicated what was most salient and helpful to them during the unit. How many participants (percentages) noted certain aspects of the unit are provided. Second, post-test responses with exemplars from those units/activities participants noted as most/least helpful are reported.

Unit 1: Marital Perspectives.

In the direct feedback following the presentation of the Unit, participants indicated a number of aspects of the curriculum they found helpful: 12% noted viewing 112 weddings, 40% noted the discussion of the meaning of marriage, 12% noted learning the benefits of marriage, 48% noted learning the history of marriage, 16% noted the discussion of consumerism and individualistic attitudes, and 44% noted the presentation of balanced marriage perspectives. Key points from their feedback: It was helpful to view 112 weddings and see real couples work through real challenges, to look at how the meaning of marriage has evolved and how consumerism and individualism effect romantic relationships today, to interact with group members and hear similar and differing views about the purpose of marriage, hear the positives

about marriage, and learn various perspectives on how to approach relationships and make them last.

In the post-test feedback, participants pointed out that this unit was helpful in explaining a realistic perspective about marriage and in describing the different ways people view marriage today. One participant noted: “I thought it was really helpful to have that more realistic view of marriage properly explained and talked about.” However, one participant noted “my partner and I both had pretty realistic views and expectations of marriage already and the first unit just kind of reaffirmed that the way I viewed marriage was already decently accurate.” As part of this unit, participants viewed clips from 112 weddings which was received favorably by many of the participants. Although many people did not mention this in their feedback directly following class, there were many comments about this intervention at post-test (30% of activity comments). Helpful aspects of this activity included a focus on long-term commitment and working through life and relationship difficulties. Participants said “[112 weddings] helped us learn about marriage from a brand -new perspective that marriage is not [just] about the happiness in the wedding but a life-long commitment” and “It is good to be reminded that it is not going to be all sun shine and rainbows and getting through the tough stuff makes you stronger in the end.” However, one participant felt that the clips from 112 weddings were too negative, “it just seemed very negative, none of the couples seemed happy that they were married and it kind of made it seem like marriage is all negatives and no positives.”

Overall feedback indicated that this unit was helpful in offering useful perspectives about the meaning of marriage. Many commented on the history of marriage and a few on 112 weddings in the immediate feedback but this reversed in the post-test feedback with most comments dealing with the 112 weddings video and less on the actual evolution of marriage.

Unit 2: Self-Development.

In the direct feedback following the presentation of Unit 2, participants indicated a number of salient aspects of this unit: 31% noted learning the balance between togetherness and individuality, 31% noted learning how to develop a solid sense of self, 31% noted the application of these ideas to sexual gridlock, and 31% noted the relationship values activity. Key points from their feedback indicate: It was helpful to learn the concept of differentiation and solid sense of self, but it was difficult to fully grasp and know where to draw the line between differentiation and fusion. The metaphors explaining differentiation and solid sense of self helped them make sense of the concepts, but they would have liked more clear steps in how to build a solid sense of self. When talking about a solid sense of self it was helpful to understand the example of sexual gridlock and how it can be resolved through developing a solid sense of self. It was also helpful to learn more about each other in the relationship values activity.

What stood out the most to participants in the post-test feedback from this unit was the general theme of self-development, “It makes sense now that to become a better couple you must become a better you” and “My partner and I tend to explode into yelling fights and I really learned how to build myself up and not lean on my partner for everything, so that I don't take everything so personally.” At least one person did not connect with a self-development focus: “I was not too interested in learning how I develop as an individual.” As part of this unit, participants were asked to identify and reflect on their relationship values and how well they live up to those values and then share this with their partner. Participants enjoyed learning about one another in this activity, for instance, one participant enjoyed being able to talk about shortcomings, “It was great to tell my partner my shortcomings and to hear hers as well!” some enjoyed learning more about their partner more generally, “I learned a lot of things about my partner that I had not known previously.” But others felt this activity was redundant to their

relationship: “we already knew that about each other” and “We have done that before many times. I feel that if you are in a committed relationship, you should probably know where your partner stands on different issues. It also is important to take into account how long you have been in a committed relationship but for me it is something you should definitely talk about early before you get really serious and find out something that you can't come to face with.”

Overall, feedback indicated that this unit was a useful set-up for the rest of the units in encouraging self-development and the example of sexual gridlock was a practical and important application to learn, but there was some difficulty grasping it initially and that more clear steps for moving forward would be helpful in this unit. The values activity was helpful in learning what each partner is working toward in the relationship.

Unit 3: Emotional Regulation.

In the direct feedback following the presentation of Unit 3, participants indicated a number of salient and helpful components of this unit: 19% noted learning about emotional flooding and 25% noted the multiple discussions with their partner. Of the discussion activities 9% noted the signs of flooding activity, 16% noted taking a break plan, 25% noted learning self-soothing strategies, 6% noted the self-care plan activity, and 13% noted the self-development approach making more sense during this unit. Key points from this initial feedback include: Participants appreciated learning about emotional flooding and ways to deal with it through self-soothing and taking breaks, they enjoyed having opportunities to discuss with their partners their own triggers to emotional flooding as well as ways they would like to self-soothe. They also enjoyed making a plan with their partner to take breaks when necessary. They also found that the explanation of emotional flooding and the clear steps to handle it helped them better understand the self-development approach and ways to put it into practice.

In the post-test feedback, many participants noted this unit as one of their favorites (37% of comments). Two major themes emerged. Participants felt this unit helped them calm themselves down to work through disagreements, “Emotional regulation has been really working in our relationship and I appreciated getting to really figure out a plan for how we can regulate our emotions in our relationship” and “My partner and I get in little fights sometimes and they usually end up with one or both of us being too emotionally flooded to actually get anything done in the argument. Emotional Regulation is still helping us figure out how to properly deal with disagreements.” Participants also talked about how this unit helped them learn why they are emotionally triggered, “Learning how we both react and recognizing our triggers allows us to work through situations better.” One participant did not connect with the unit, “Emotional regulation didn't apply to me very much. While my girlfriend has anxiety problems, I haven't had a problem with emotional flooding or the like.” As part of this unit, couples learned to take breaks. Some found this to be one of the more helpful activities (23% of comments). Some found it helpful to clear their mind and calm down, “Before we never took a break during an argument, we would just keep going at it until the argument was over. More recently we found that taking a break or calming down to talk through it has greatly helped.” Others indicated it was a good opportunity to focus on self-change “My relationship has benefited so much from learning to take breaks and really trying to change ourselves to meet each other's needs and wants.” One participant did not like taking breaks because he/she worried it would not get the problem resolved: “Taking a break bugs me. I feel like the problem won't get resolved with a break.”

Overall, many couples could relate to issues of emotional flooding and were grateful to learn ways to deal with this. Particularly, couples enjoyed discussing with one another their

triggers and ways to self soothe. They found taking breaks an important part of dealing with emotional flooding and working on self-change.

Unit 4: Systemic Responding.

In the direct feedback following the presentation of the Unit, participants indicated a number of salient aspects of the curriculum: 11% noted the dance metaphor where participants learned about the systemic nature of relationships and how one partners move in the relationship is related to the other partner's response, 7% noted the bird's eye view perspective (seeing relationship patterns, not just your own or your partner's behavior, but how they are connected) in relationships, 82% noted the stuck in a negative dance activity (where partners were asked to break off and discuss with one another a conflictual issue in their relationship), 36% noted learning the cycles of comfort and growth (couples learned how change isn't easy and sometimes involves leaving one's comfort zone), and 11% noted the activity "Whose fault is it anyway". Key points from this feedback indicated that the negative dance activity was very important and helped couples learn things they needed to confront and work on in their relationship. Couples indicated that the growth/comfort cycle was insightful and applicable to issues in their relationship.

In the post-test feedback a lot of participants found this unit helpful with its central focus on breaking down a conflict pattern in their relationship (50% of comments; the most highly rated activity). There were three major themes related to this activity: Seeing partner's point of view differently ("It helped me to see my partner's point of view in a different light than I had previously seen it"), being able to uncover the relationship pattern ("We don't often realize why someone acts the way they do we just see the external effects. Also, it gave us the chance to explore what really bothers us. It was a helpful analysis process."), and knowing what to change

about oneself (“We have set up methods to go about our arguments because I’m one who needs time to think and cool down and he just wants to fix it right then and there. It is important to come to a happy medium but I also feel it is my duty in the relationship to work on myself and better myself for us. Figuring out what makes me upset will really help to solve problems a lot faster and in a way that both of us feel satisfied.”). One participant found this activity to be difficult. “For us, the conflict part actually brought up past conflict that was completely resolved and made it worse again. We actually had our first argument ever one night after the study.”

Overall, couples found this unit helpful to dissect and discuss a negative pattern in their relationship with their partner. The stuck in a negative dance activity seemed to be the most impactful intervention of the program and helped couples gain a better perspective of their relationship, their partner, and themselves including a plan of things to work on and change. They also enjoyed learning the cycle of relationship growth and the perspective this brought.

Unit 5: The Long-Term View.

In the direct feedback following the presentation of Unit 5, participants indicated a number of aspects of the curriculum they found helpful: 63% noted learning the importance of community based marriage, 37% noted building couple rituals being impactful, and 7% noted the research on the marital first responder’s movement (a project training the public on how to respond to friends and family dealing with marriage problems). Key points from this feedback indicate: Most participants noted that they had not thought about the importance of community support (such as friends and family supporting the relationship) or rituals (learning to institute set rituals that help couples keep their connection alive) and were excited to learn more about it. Some indicated that it would be difficult to know how to get friends to support their relationship

at this stage of their relationship development. Learning about rituals helped many realize the importance of being intentional about the relationship.

The post-test feedback also centered on these two aspects of the unit: Regarding rituals participants noted this helped keep them connected amidst busy schedules, “The relationship ritual has also been awesome because life just gets so busy and it is nice to really connect in the time that we have designated as ours.” But some found it unnatural to create a ritual, “I feel it is silly to sit down and write "rules" for the date/day”, and “It seemed too artificial and not organic enough to be building rituals.” Many began to realize the importance of community support, one participant wrote, “I really value the lesson about building your relationship around a community and how important it is”. But one participant found the “friends to the relationship” activity irrelevant to their current relationship stage “Because we are in a relationship for a very short time. We share few friends together.”

Overall, participant feedback immediately following each session and at post-test was consistent. Most were impacted by the two emphases on creating connection rituals and garnering community support. In particular, rituals helped them safeguard time together and learning about the importance of community broadened their perspective about what helps long-term relationships. Many wished for more time with this unit to better understand rituals and ways to integrate family and friend support.

Table 4.1

<i>Means, Standard Deviations, for Men and Women in Curriculum Group at Pre- and Post-Intervention and Four-Week Follow-Up</i>							
Variable	Scale Range	Time 1: Pre-Intervention		Time 2: Post Intervention		Time 3: Four Week Follow-Up	
		Men Mean (SD)	Women Mean (SD)	Men Mean (SD)	Women Mean (SD)	Men Mean (SD)	Women Mean (SD)
Crucible Differentiation Scale (CDS)							
Clear Sense of Self	1-6	4.17 (0.68)	4.17 (0.61)	4.36 (0.60)	4.26 (0.73)	4.29 (0.64)	4.20 (0.81)
Connectedness	1-6	4.66 (0.61)	4.76 (0.57)	4.35 (0.60)	4.80 (0.59)	4.50 (0.67)	4.74 (0.56)
Anxiety Regulation: Self-soothing	1-6	4.27 (0.61)	3.93 (0.75)	4.51 (0.50)	4.10 (0.80)	4.50 (0.60)	4.05 (0.82)
Tolerating Discomfort for Growth	1-6	4.19 (0.56)	3.94 (0.72)	4.06 (0.67)	4.13 (0.63)	4.22 (0.79)	4.04 (0.62)
Anxiety Regulation: Accommodation	1-6	3.64 (0.95)	3.74 (0.61)	3.60 (0.76)	3.76 (0.80)	3.76 (0.98)	3.80 (0.71)
Reactivity through Avoidance	1-6	2.59 (0.80)	2.86 (0.76)	2.54 (1.01)	2.81 (0.85)	2.70 (1.05)	2.78 (0.86)
Reactivity through Arguments	1-6	2.46 (0.66)	2.18 (0.48)	2.31 (0.53)	2.28 (0.62)	2.43 (0.82)	2.31 (0.62)
Relationship Self-Regulation (RSR) Scale							
RSR Strategies subscale	1-5	3.58 (0.45)	3.78 (0.50)	3.98 (0.46)	3.88 (0.48)	3.70 (0.51)	4.00 (0.33)
RSR Effort subscale	1-5	3.39 (0.74)	3.63 (0.55)	3.38 (0.60)	3.45 (0.55)	3.61 (0.46)	3.47 (0.58)
Relationship Quality Measures							
Relationship Satisfaction	1-7	6.31 (0.68)	5.99 (0.79)	6.21 (0.77)	6.05 (0.84)	6.37 (0.60)	6.06 (0.96)
Relationship Confidence	1-7	6.44 (0.78)	6.34 (0.71)	6.44 (0.57)	6.61 (0.83)	6.58 (0.54)	6.06 (1.49)
Dedication Commitment	1-7	6.41 (0.60)	5.97 (1.01)	6.53 (0.43)	6.25 (0.86)	6.53 (0.55)	6.23 (0.68)
Negative Interaction	1-6	2.08 (0.84)	2.03 (0.71)	2.28 (0.74)	1.98 (0.56)	2.05 (0.68)	1.95 (0.68)
Problem Solving	1-6	4.53 (0.64)	4.68 (0.74)	4.43 (0.76)	4.52 (0.73)	4.47 (0.99)	4.43 (0.74)
Marital Meanings Inventory							
Special Status	1-5	4.20 (0.68)	4.40 (0.34)	4.40 (0.63)	4.25 (0.41)	4.16 (0.66)	4.08 (0.38)
Obligation	1-5	3.35 (0.75)	3.21 (0.81)	3.55 (0.79)	3.25 (0.73)	3.51 (0.74)	3.28 (0.64)
Pragmatism	1-5	2.97 (0.69)	3.27 (0.80)	3.13 (0.84)	3.50 (0.72)	3.17 (0.83)	3.41 (0.66)

Table 4.2*Means, Standard Deviations, for Men and Women in Feedback Group at Pre- and Post-Intervention and Four-Week Follow-Up*

Variable	Scale Range	Time 1: Pre-Intervention		Time 2: Post Intervention		Time 3: Four Week Follow-Up	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Crucible Differentiation Scale (CDS)							
Clear Sense of Self	1-6	4.12 (0.74)	4.19 (0.66)	4.29 (0.71)	4.34 (0.63)	4.16 (0.85)	4.62 (0.62)
Connectedness	1-6	4.53 (0.68)	4.86 (0.58)	4.53 (0.57)	4.93 (0.83)	4.51 (0.80)	4.98 (0.83)
Anxiety Regulation: Self-soothing	1-6	4.50 (0.64)	4.05 (0.79)	4.61 (0.62)	4.33 (0.93)	4.59 (0.67)	4.42 (0.98)
Tolerating Discomfort for Growth	1-6	3.96 (0.68)	4.20 (0.53)	4.03 (0.64)	4.32 (0.53)	4.14 (0.66)	4.44 (0.70)
Anxiety Regulation: Accommodation	1-6	3.73 (0.74)	4.00 (0.93)	3.66 (0.80)	3.79 (1.00)	3.76 (0.68)	3.91 (0.94)
Reactivity through Avoidance	1-6	2.58 (0.65)	2.53 (0.87)	2.51 (0.74)	2.48 (0.97)	2.56 (0.82)	2.29 (0.81)
Reactivity through Arguments	1-6	2.27 (0.78)	2.40 (0.58)	2.32 (0.97)	2.16 (0.65)	2.27 (0.84)	2.13 (0.58)
Relationship Self-Regulation (RSR) Scale							
RSR Strategies subscale	1-5	3.72 (0.60)	3.66 (0.51)	3.89 (0.55)	3.92 (0.67)	3.61 (0.57)	4.07 (0.48)
RSR Effort subscale	1-5	3.39 (0.72)	3.80 (0.66)	3.62 (0.74)	3.92 (0.55)	3.58 (0.64)	3.90 (0.74)
Relationship Quality Measures							
Relationship Satisfaction	1-7	6.09 (0.96)	6.35 (0.53)	5.90 (0.94)	6.16 (0.65)	5.49 (2.00)	6.11 (1.14)
Relationship Confidence	1-7	6.24 (0.77)	6.49 (0.62)	6.22 (1.16)	6.50 (0.66)	6.19 (1.44)	6.56 (0.74)
Dedication Commitment	1-7	5.95 (1.19)	6.42 (0.68)	5.83 (1.25)	6.39 (0.60)	5.89 (1.43)	6.40 (0.66)
Negative Interaction	1-6	2.00 (0.85)	1.67 (0.69)	1.72 (0.70)	1.58 (0.73)	1.70 (0.63)	1.65 (0.84)
Problem Solving	1-6	4.62 (0.89)	4.69 (0.73)	4.64 (0.75)	4.94 (0.74)	4.67 (0.76)	5.07 (0.67)
Marital Meanings Inventory							
Special Status	1-5	4.35 (0.57)	4.23 (0.56)	4.09 (0.66)	4.15 (0.56)	4.00 (0.69)	3.98 (0.77)
Obligation	1-5	3.45 (0.88)	3.33 (1.06)	3.32 (1.06)	3.39 (0.93)	3.45 (0.93)	3.52 (0.93)
Pragmatism	1-5	3.17 (0.85)	3.16 (0.77)	3.36 (0.78)	3.36 (0.55)	3.39 (0.67)	3.38 (0.72)

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the usefulness of a self-development based relationship education program for couples. The primary aim of the study was to evaluate the program's effectiveness in increasing levels of differentiation, relationship self-regulation, marital meanings, and relationship quality compared to an alternative relationship feedback approach. Results indicate that both approaches may have some unique advantages for men and women. The secondary aim of the study was to evaluate the content and delivery of the program by receiving feedback from couples about their experience. These findings were generally encouraging. This initial pilot-test has a number of strengths, in particular, it was a randomized controlled trial design in which the Strengthen Yourself, Strengthen Your Relationships curriculum was tested against an empirically validated assessment approach, it contained a 4 week follow-up assessment, and gathered feedback from participants who participated.

Interpretation of Statistical Analyses

The primary aim of the study was to evaluate how well participants changed on indicators of self-development, meanings placed on marriage, and relationship quality compared to an alternative treatment approach. Results indicated that of the *seventeen indicators* there were very few within participant changes and between group differences. In the curriculum group, men only evidenced change in two indicators and women in only one. In the feedback group, men only evidenced change in one indicator and women four. Between group differences indicated that men only differed in two indicators and women only differed in four. It is important to note here two primary limitations in these results: First, the sample sizes were quite small ($n = 16$ for the curriculum group; $n = 19$ for the feedback group) limiting sufficient statistical power to detect effects, and second, participants were relatively happy and reported being well adjusted in

their relationship, thus, having little room for improvement. Other relationship education programs that have been well validated in research have had similar findings with *well-adjusted couples* experiencing *no* significant changes or differences between groups (e.g., Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001). Of the few significant results, the most salient are that men in the curriculum condition experienced greater increase in relationship self-regulation strategies while men in the feedback condition experienced greater decrease in negative interaction. The most salient results for women are that women in the feedback condition experienced positive effects in relationship self-regulation strategies and effort, clear sense of self, anxiety regulation through self-soothing, reactivity through arguments, and problem solving. A more detailed explanation of these significant findings are provided below.

Within Participant Changes

First, significant changes between time points were evaluated for members within the curriculum group and also the feedback group (first hypothesis). In the curriculum group, both men and women showed significant decreases in viewing marriage as a special status. This was initially surprising as the curriculum had a special emphasis on viewing the institution of marriage in positive ways. It may be that after viewing some of the couples in 112 weddings talk about the challenges of marriage, some thought more negatively about marriage. However, this same finding was true for men and women in the feedback group (both experienced significant decreases) where there was no discussion about the institution of marriage. It should be noted that men in the curriculum group did increase initially in this, but it was not a significant change and a significant decrease occurred between T2 and T3 (between post-test and follow-up) after the initial jump. Between groups difference tests were consistent in that men's positive perception of marriage in the curriculum group experienced an increase significantly different

from men's decrease in the feedback group. Perhaps the best explanation of why change occurred in the unexpected direction is that the marital meanings measure does not quite capture the target of change. In hindsight, this measure may indicate views about marriage that were not directly addressed in the curriculum. For example, the special status of marriage measure asks whether individuals think of marriage as a *sacred union* the *highest commitment* couples make to each other, the *most intimate relationship* couples can have, and *more than just a piece of paper*. Although the curriculum *did* focus on the benefits of marriage in society and in individual's lives it did not necessarily teach that marriage was more special than other types of relationships. Rather, it focused on current cultural perspectives that can be problematic to marriage (e.g., viewing marriage in terms of payoffs and rewards rather than a lifelong partnership) and alternative perspectives (e.g., a consumer versus producer approach, the normalcy of marital challenges, and the opportunity challenges provide to become a better person).

Only one other expected change occurred for the curriculum group, which was a significant increase in men's relationship self-regulation strategies. This was promising, as the measure captures how much individuals draw upon things they are learning to work on their relationship and put ideas into practice. Thus, at least men in this group, found themselves more likely to engage in relationship work following the intervention (but this wasn't significant at follow-up).

Like men in the curriculum group, women in the feedback group experienced greater relationship self-regulation strategies. The feedback condition has a specific focus on setting goals to making positive relationship changes, so this was not surprising. Unlike the curriculum group, women in the feedback group experienced significant changes in differentiation in terms of clear sense of self and anxiety regulation through self-soothing. Thus, at least for women, the

feedback condition had some level of positive impact on two of the seven indicators of differentiation. It could be that an aspect of relationship awareness embedded in this condition could positively impact females' self-definition. This will be explored later.

Why men and women in the curriculum group did not evidence significant changes in differentiation was not completely clear but there are some possible explanations. It may be that when participants learned about concepts including solid versus reflected sense of self, self-soothing and dangers of reactivity, they became more self-aware. This greater level of self-awareness could have led to more accurate self-reports of their levels of differentiation at post-test and follow-up which likely could have been lower than their initial impressions. Greater self-awareness, therefore, could have challenged their original images of themselves. This would be consistent with differentiation theory which suggests that as people work toward differentiation they become more self-aware and honest with themselves (Schnarch, 2009) and thus real changes might only be detected in longer term follow-up studies. Another important possibility is that one's level of differentiation doesn't change that easily. Bowen argued that once one's level of differentiation was set in early adulthood, it wouldn't change much at all over the course of adult life (Bowen, 1978). Nevertheless, Schnarch (2011) was more optimistic about levels of differentiation changing, but these changes do not occur without a build-up of *critical mass for change*, or emotional pressure in a relationship. As this sample reported high levels of relationship satisfaction, it may be that the relationship challenges that induce significant changes in one's level of differentiation had not set in yet and that change effects would not be detected in a short-term study. The curriculum could be advantageous in preparing couples for these significant moments rather than detecting change; signifying a need to evaluate couples *understanding* of differentiation and not their levels alone. Another possibility is that the

differentiation measure used in the current study measures one's relationship with self and others but is not specific to their current romantic relationship. As we worked on differentiation in a specific relationship context, it may be difficult to see *global* changes in the short term.

Between Group Differences

Second, I evaluated the degree to which changes in one group differed from changes in the other group across time points (second hypothesis). Some of the results from these analyses were quite interesting. Of note was women's significant difference in relationship effort from pre- to post-test with women in the feedback group increasing more in effort. It may be that as women gained greater clarity about their own relationship from the feedback condition that they felt more empowered to put forth effort into the relationship. The feedback session is designed to bring clarity and empowerment to couples regarding their specific strengths and challenges. Thus, women in the feedback condition may have been uniquely affected in this way.

Additional findings indicated that women in the feedback group evidenced a significantly greater increase in clear sense of self than women in the curriculum group. This was also consistent with results from the pairwise analyses, however, it is interesting to consider why feedback women experienced a significantly greater change in clear sense of self. Some have argued that women's sense of self develops through social relationships. One differentiation theorist critiqued Bowen's initial differentiation scale in that it didn't take into account the view that women discover themselves *through* connection with others (Knudson-Martin, 1994). It may be possible that upon gaining greater clarity of their relationship (through feedback) women feel more self-secure. This direct feedback was not part of the curriculum course and is a specific advantage of the RELATE study over traditional MRE courses.

Women in the feedback group also experienced a significantly greater decrease in reactivity through arguments and greater increase in problem solving ability. Men on the other hand only showed greater decreases in negative interaction than men in the curriculum. This aligns with findings from Larson (2007) that feedback helped couples improve their communication; however, it does not explain *why* feedback had a greater impact than the curriculum itself. It may be that the feedback condition gives participants more specific ideas of problem areas in their communication, or possibly the inverse; facilitators could have provided more optimistic feedback about their communication (as an area of strength) than they previously perceived and could have led to more positive reports. Regardless, it is certainly harder for couples receiving a curriculum not focused on communication training to get direct feedback about their communication and conflict.

Between Group Differences for Couples

These findings are congruent with the dyadic analyses (third hypothesis) that show the *couples* in the feedback condition experienced greater changes in problem solving skills than couples in the curriculum condition from T1-T2 and T1-T3. Specific feedback about couples' communication and conflict resolution capabilities are directly targeted in this condition and thus may do more to engender positive communication *initially* than a curriculum *not* focused on communication skills. Presumably, couples communication would improve *after* differentiation improved. It was unsurprising that there were virtually no significant findings in terms of the relationship outcomes for either group (i.e., relationship satisfaction, confidence, and commitment). Since this was a very highly satisfied, confident, and committed sample to begin with there would have been little room for improvement on the scales. That being said, there was one significant finding: couples in the curriculum condition increased in dedication to the

relationship significantly more than couples in the feedback condition. This finding may indicate there is unique utility in going through a course on relationships beyond simply gaining more relationship awareness. It is possible that couples derive greater meaning about the future trajectory of the relationship when going through a course on how to have a *long-lasting* relationship than getting feedback about the strengths and challenges of the relationship. Further, going through a course connects couples to other couples who are also committed. This may bolster couple's sense of couplehood as they show up with other couples and share an experience in how to strengthen their relationships. Finally, since this curriculum focused specifically on the importance of long-term commitment, couples' commitment with each other could have been strengthened.

In summary, most of the analyses produced no significant changes across time and between groups, but of those significant results, some were expected whereas some were surprising. Overall, the curriculum appeared to positively impact *men's* relationship self-regulation strategies, and *couples'* dedication to the relationship. However, there was no apparent advantage for women in the curriculum condition on any study measures. Inversely, the feedback condition appeared to positively impact *women's* clear sense of self, connectedness, anxiety regulation through self-soothing, reactivity through arguments, problem solving and relationship self-regulation strategies. *Men's* report of negative interaction and *couple's* report of problem solving also improved in the feedback condition. Why the feedback condition was more advantageous for females while both conditions were advantageous to males and couples in different ways is intriguing to consider. Perhaps, women feel greater empowerment when given specific individualized feedback about their partner and relationship. In contrast, some research suggests that men are more interested in group membership (e.g., David-Barrett et al., 2015); it is

thus possible that men feel a sense of coalition with other males there to work on their relationship and are more motivated in this format to work on their relationship. These findings should, however, be interpreted carefully. Kerr & Bowen (1988) suggested that individuals rely on a pseudo sense of self in many social interactions, meaning they derive their sense of self from others. For instance, some feel happy with themselves and their relationship when *others* make them feel this way. It is possible that the RELATE intervention only inflated women's pseudo sense of self through the feedback and encouragement it provides, but perhaps did not strengthen their solid sense of self. Longer term studies will need to research will need to research this further.

Interpretation of Program Feedback

The secondary aim of this study was to evaluate the curriculum content and delivery. Overall, participant responses about the pilot program Strengthen Yourself, Strengthen Your Relationships were overwhelmingly positive. Statistical analyses indicated that participants experienced a strong working alliance with the leaders of the classes and a relatively strong cohesion with group members; participants felt the leaders were effective in delivering the program material and facilitating discussion and activities and that the program itself was effective and personally helpful.

Comments from participants indicated that each unit had something they felt was uniquely beneficial for their relationship. Some indicated that they found something meaningful in each unit while others focused in on a select few they got the most out of. Participants who commented on Marital Perspectives found it especially helpful to discuss the meaning of marriage and to view clips from the documentary 112 weddings, seeing the challenges married couples face. In the Self-Development unit participants found the concepts of differentiation and

reflected vs. solid sense of self new and enlightening. They appreciated learning the importance of self-development to strengthen a relationship, in particular in knowing how to handle current areas of disagreement and conflict (including sexual gridlock). Some found the values activity meaningful. The emotional regulation unit helped many couples learn how to soothe relationship tensions and keep things from escalating through breaks and self-regulation. Many found the deepened perspective from the systemic responding unit especially helpful in understanding their conflict and learning how to work through it in new ways. Finally, many couples appreciated learning how to keep a relationship strong long term by establishing rituals of connection and building a strong supportive community.

Strengths and Limitations

As a pilot test, the current study was able to use a randomized control design to test the Strengthen Yourself Strengthen Your Relationships curriculum against another research validated relationship education approach, whereas many relationship education pilot-tests use either no control or simply a *no treatment* (wait-list) control group (recent examples: Gambrel & Piercy, 2015; Falconier, 2015). The advantage here was to truly test one program's benefit against another program's. Many standard and commonly tested relationship education programs (e.g., PREP) are rarely evaluated in this way. Of those studies that actually test one treatment approach against another, it is common to find *few* if any differences. Some examples include: Couples were assigned to receive a Self-PREP (PREP with a self-regulation focus) or a guided relationship reading condition; *no* differences between *low-risk* couples were found, but significant differences for *high risk* couples emerged *only* at one year follow up (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001). Couples receiving pregnancy services received PREP or a parent preparation program, *no* differences between conditions were found (Trillingsgaard, Baucom,

Heyman, & Elklit, 2012). Clinical studies are similar: When emotionally focused therapy (EFT) was tested head to head with integrated systemic therapy (IST) for couples, *no* differences were found at post-test, but two of four variables showed differences at 4-month follow up in favor of IST (Goldman & Greenberg, 1992). Traditional Behavioral Couples Therapy (TBCT) was tested against Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy (IBCT); the only time significant differences emerged across the five year study was at two year follow up with IBCT showing a greater gain in relationship satisfaction but there were no significant differences across the next three years (in both treatments couples significantly improved similarly in outcomes) (Christensen, Atkins, Baucom, & Yi (2010). Therefore, the few significant differences in the current study are unsurprising.

Asking participants about their feedback for the program was advantageous in discovering ways to further refine the program and gain some evaluation beyond survey measurement on how participants perceived the program and its impact on them personally. Although it was difficult to detect effects with low statistical power, the various analyses used to interpret the data give a nuanced story to help interpret and make sense of the results. Despite the present strengths of this study, there are some important limitations to consider.

This study contained a small sample size limiting the analytic strategies (including advanced dyadic data analyses and growth curves) to regressions and ANOVA's, reducing statistical power to detect significant effects, and constraining the use of control variables in the analyses. In addition, longer term follow-up assessments (including 3, 6, and 12 months post-test) could have detected true differences. As noted earlier, significant relationship challenges may be necessary as catalysts in *growth* toward higher levels of differentiation. Thus, it could be

that longer term studies could show how couples apply ideas from the curriculum when emotional pressure for self-change builds up in the relationship.

Another major limitation in this study was that the sample scored high in all the outcome variables (satisfaction, commitment, confidence), creating ceiling effects, making it virtually impossible for the sample to evidence any significant changes in the positive direction. Thus it is possible that a different sample containing couples who score lower on relationship quality could evidence greater changes from the program. Additionally, the sample consisted of primarily young white middle class college students, and thus only representative of this specific population. But relationship education is often offered to low-income couples, military couples, and racially diverse couples (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Thus, although the study was designed to reach a wide audience of couples the results from this study cannot be generalizable to these other groups. Finally, the alphas in this study ranged from acceptable to good, but there were three instances of really low reliability. Men at time one demonstrated low reliability in reactivity through arguments ($\alpha = .47$). Women demonstrated low reliability in marriage as special status at time 2 ($\alpha = .54$) and dedication commitment at time three ($\alpha = .52$). These low reliabilities only occurred at one of the three time points, but the results concerning these variables should not be interpreted without taking this into consideration.

Future Research

Future research should consider how to measure changes in differentiation. As has been argued, significant changes in differentiation may not occur initially, but it is possible that attitudes about differentiation in a relationship shift significantly during and after the curriculum. Thus, future studies should more deliberately assess *attitudes* about self-development. Because other studies have struggled to detect effects in short term relationship education studies, one

recent skills-based study took an approach where participant's relationship knowledge was assessed. Their argument is that perceptions of knowledge may be an *intermediate* outcome variable likely more sensitive to short term change and that attitudes about behavioral change likely predict eventual behavior change (Bradford, Wade Stewart, Higginbotham, & Skogrand, 2015). However, the perceived knowledge scale focuses on *skills*-based relationship knowledge, not *self-development* based relationship knowledge. Future research should develop a measure to assess participant's perceived knowledge of relationship self-development as an intermediate outcome of long-term self-change.

Future research could test the effects of feedback alone, self-development curriculum alone, and feedback plus self-development curriculum. Halford tested this looking at RELATE versus RELATE plus the Couple CARE relationship education program. Findings indicated that women had greater gains in the combined condition (Halford et al., 2010). Regardless of whether couples complete an assessment and receive feedback prior to starting a relationship course, future research might consider ways to help couples become more aware of their relationships in curriculum programs and test the effects of more direct feedback to couples in education programs. Relationship awareness has proven to be as or more effective than a whole course on relationships (Rogge et al., 2013) but there could be greater utility in blending the two strategies. This has yet to be explored.

Finally, as the intention of this pilot study was to create a self-development program in response to critiques against a skills-development program, future research will need to test a purely self-development approach against a purely skills-development approach. This would allow us to begin examining nuances in the debate regarding which type of approach is more effective for committed couples.

Implications for Practice in Clinical and Education Settings

These findings have implications for clinical and relationship education work with couples. First, couples found it helpful to consider perspectives about the meaning of marriage and long-term relationships and they appreciated direct discussion about how to keep a relationship strong through rituals of connection and community support. Some educators might shy away from a question as value-centered as “What is the purpose of marriage?”, however, the couples in our study responded well to this discussion and reported that exploring different perspectives (including community versus individualized marriage) was helpful to how they approach their personal relationships. Discussing how couples view long-term relationships opens the door for educators to help couples balance notions of individualistic/consumer marriage with gender equality and personal freedom, potentially helping couples (a) make wise relationship decisions during early transitions (a vital aspect of healthy relationship formation; Stanley, Rhoades & Markman, 2006), (b) increase their dedication to the relationship (another vital aspect of healthy relationship formation; Stanley et al., 2006), and (c) appropriately handle relationship challenges in long-term committed partnerships (this could include divorce decisions: at times, this may mean working through differences without initially giving up while at other times may mean leaving a relationship that is unhealthy and has little prospect of recovering).

Prominent marriage and family therapist, Dr. William J. Doherty (2011), uses an approach with couples considering divorce (called discernment counseling), where he directly addresses current marital perspectives, challenges couples to consider these paradigms as well as the marital support or undermining from friends and family, and whether it might be possible to work on an ailing marriage by first putting forth a valiant effort in therapy. He frames these couples as going through a crucible or marriage crisis, which if handled well, may engender

increased differentiation and possibly relationship stability. Helping couples take responsibility for aspects of the relationship's downturn, discovering areas of self that can be worked on, working through tough emotional moments, and finding meaning in the crisis are key aspects of how Doherty uses differentiation to lead to positive outcomes. A divorce, in this approach, is not necessarily a "treatment failure". Rather, the goal of discernment counseling is to raise each partner's sense of *clarity* about the divorce decision, the relationship, and self, and *confidence* in moving forward on a decision (Doherty, 2011).

Although there are many so-called differentiation-based therapists, the label "differentiation based educator" has never been coined. This is likely due to the fact that no accessible relationship education program has emphasized a differentiation approach. The advantage of developing a program in this way, is that it equips relationship educators to teach these concepts in accessible and practically applicable ways. This may have a recursive advantage too in that it offers relational therapists who struggle to apply the differentiation concept clear ways to do so that go beyond trainees typical intervention: the family genogram. This education program could offer clinicians valuable tools to help couples work through issues of self-definition and relationship development by guiding them through conflict in ways that are self-dignifying/respecting *and* relationship enhancing. For example, a couples' therapist may help participants identify core values and beliefs that make conflict resolution difficult and suggest ways partners can hold tight to these areas of self while making room for their partner and adapting in ways that help them keep their self-respect. Further they may encourage meaningful disclosures in which partners, upon recognizing their personal values, can acknowledge their mistakes in not living by their deepest principles in the relationship and their remorse for its negative impact on themselves, their partner and the relationship.

Another advantage of creating a differentiation based approach for couples is that it provides a theoretically rich rationale for self-work. Most approaches assume both partner's equal effort and investment, but since mismatches in motivation for relationship work are difficult to address outside of therapy, this gives individual partners an approach to working on the relationship without an initial or immediate need for a partner's reciprocated behavior. This can provide hope for individuals who sometimes feel stuck when their partner is not making changes and can help them prepare to breach these issues when needed from a place of personal strength. Further, since it is difficult for a couple to get in the moment assistance from an educator in handling negative encounters, misunderstandings, and conflicting viewpoints, this approach helps individual partners develop these capacities regardless of how their partner responds.

A contemporary clinical differentiation approach, called the Crucible® approach, has been particularly applied to couples struggling with sexual desire differences but has also been extended to helping couples work through any number of gridlocking issues (e.g., money, children, in-laws; Schnarch & Regas, 2012). This approach applies the four points of balance in a clinical setting and seeks to construct significant moments of meaningful self-disclosure - responsibility and change that, although anxiety inducing, are ultimately healing experiences for the relationship. Considering the positive responses from participants in learning about sexual desire differences within the differentiation framework, this approach may be particularly helpful for couples mired in gridlocking issues.

Finally, relationship education can do more to address the community support around a relationship including friends and family members who may intentionally or unintentionally undermine the relationship. This may be particularly true for premarital couples who may not

recognize their union as having the potential to complicate friendships and family relationships, or couples on the brink of divorce whose own families and friends may choose sides rather than the relationship (Doherty, 2013). Further, some dating/premarital couples may not heed the sound advice/concern of family and friends and continue in a destructive relationship.

Relationship education can do more to help couples consider ways to connect with good feedback from their community. Educators would do well to inform couples of these realities and guide them to garner family and friend support for their relationship, securing more stability and lasting connection or relationship advice that could prevent unhealthy relationship formation.

Conclusion

In the field of marriage, perhaps no greater debates exist than what factors predict healthy relationship development and what helps couples positively change across time. Traditional approaches focus on communication skills as the key factor in healthy relationships and skills training as the recommended approach to sustaining marital satisfaction across time.

Nevertheless, recent debates have emerged which suggest skills-training is limited in sustaining relationship stability. Instead, theorists have begun to emphasize emotional regulation and self-development as the keys to both good communication skills, authentic and sincere interactions with one's partner, and longer-term relationship success. This study sought to develop and pilot-test a relationship education program to target self-development by addressing culturally influenced marriage perspectives, self-definition issues, emotional regulation skills, relationship pattern obstacles, intentional rituals, and community support. Findings from this study indicate that couples who received the new curriculum were satisfied with the approach and found it personally meaningful and helpful. Due to limitations in statistical power and in the length of the study, future research is needed to determine the empirical usefulness of a self-development

approach. The results were nevertheless promising for future research and the feedback from participants carries implications for couples work. Relationship education could better serve couples by addressing cultural narratives and trends related to long-term commitment and relationship centered self-development and educators and therapists can find practical ways to help couples through difficult moments in their relationship through a self-development approach.

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Appendix A - Psychometrics

Marital Meanings

Special Status of Marriage versus Neutral Alternative

1. Marriage is a sacred union that should be taken very seriously.
2. Marriage is the most intimate relationship couples can have.
3. Marriage is just a “piece of paper” (marriage license).
4. Marriage is just one of many equally meaningful relationships for couples.
5. Marriage is the highest commitment couples can make to each other.

Self-Fulfillment versus Obligation

1. The personal happiness of an individual is more important than putting up with a bad marriage.
2. It is okay to divorce when a person’s needs are no longer met.
3. A person’s marriage should take priority over individual goals.
4. Marriage means accommodating each other’s needs, even if this involves self-denial.
5. Marriage is for life, even if the couple is unhappy.

Romanticism versus Pragmatism

6. Loving each other is enough to keep marriages together.
7. Spouses who disagree with each other have a troubled marriage.
8. Maintaining romantic love is the key to lasting marital happiness.
9. Being in love is reason enough to get married

(Hall, 2006)

Relationship Self-Regulation

Effort Subscale

6. If things go wrong in the relationship I tend to feel powerless
7. I tend to fall back on what is comfortable for me in relationships, rather than trying new ways of relating.
8. Even when I know what I could do differently to improve things in the relationship, I cannot seem to change my behavior.
9. If my partner doesn't appreciate the change efforts I am making, I tend to give up.

Strategies Subscale

10. I try to apply ideas about effective relationships to improve our relationship.
11. I actually put my intentions or plans for personal change into practice.
12. I give my partner helpful feedback on the ways she/he can help me achieve my goals.
13. If the way I'm approaching change doesn't work, I can usually think of something different to try.

(RSR; Wilson et al., 2005)

Crucible Differentiation Scale

The crucible differentiation scale is not in the public domain. Special permission to use this scale was given for this study. For further information about the scale, please see Schnarch & Regas (2012).

Negative Interaction Scale

1. Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name calling, or bringing up past hurts.
2. My partner criticizes or belittles my opinions, feelings, or desires.
3. My partner seems to view my words or actions more negatively than I mean them to be.

4. When we argue, one of us withdraws...that is, does not want to talk about it anymore, or leaves the scene.

(Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010)

Interactional Problem Solving Scale

1. We have little trouble in choosing a solution for a given problem
2. When I tell my partner which points I wish that he/she would change, my partner takes notice.
3. After we have discussed a particular problem, I often feel that my point of view has not been properly acknowledged.
4. When I mention something that bothers me, I often get the feeling that my partner does not take me seriously.
5. In our relationship there are many problems which we are unable to solve.
6. Before deciding upon a solution for a particular problem, we first view the matter from different angles.
7. When I propose a solution to a problem, my partner often dismisses it out of hand.
8. Our quarrels often end up in discussions about who is right and who is wrong.
9. When we disagree, my partner tries to meet my wishes as best as he/she can.
10. When we are having an argument about a particular matter, we often end up including totally irrelevant issues.
11. If my partner in one or other way has disappointed me, I talk to him/her about it.
12. When we quarrel, I often get the idea that we do not understand each other.
13. After a quarrel I often have the impression that we missed each other's points.

14. I almost never express small irritations because I am afraid that this will damage our relationship.
15. If I do not expect my partner to accommodate my wishes, I do not bother to express them.
16. Often we cannot agree about what, at a certain moment, is the main point of the problem.
17. Quite often we are at odds because we interpret each other's irritations incorrectly.

((IPSI; Lange, 1983; Lange, et al., 1991)

Dedication Commitment

18. My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life.
19. I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now.
20. I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of "us" and "we" than "me" and "him/her."
21. I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter.

(Stanley & Markman, 1992)

Relationship Confidence 4-item scale

1. I believe we can handle whatever conflicts will arise in the future.
2. I feel good about our prospects to make this relationship work for a lifetime.
3. I am very confident when I think of our future together.
4. We have the skills a couple needs to make a marriage last.

(Whitton et al., 2007)

Couple Satisfaction Index-4

22. Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

23. I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner.

24. How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?

25. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?

(Funk & Rogge, 2007)