

Does a Marriage Ideal Exist? Using Q-Sort Methodology to Compare Young Adults' and Professional Educators' Views on Healthy Marriages

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Published online: 9 August 2007
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Abstract This study sought to understand whether young adults and family educators share beliefs about the components of a successful relationship. Young adults viewed successful relationships as having partners who agree on most issues. Educators characterized successful partners as exhibiting positive communication patterns and using relationship maintenance strategies. A third prototype included young adults and educators who described successful relationships in terms of agreement and problem solving behaviors. Implications for researchers and practitioners conclude the article.

Keywords Interpersonal relationships · Family life education · Marital expectations

Intimate relationships are part of most individuals' lives, and research indicates that the majority of Americans view securing a long-term partner as a desirable life goal (Feldman et al. 1998; Popenoe and Whitehead 2002; Skolnick and Skolnick 1997). In fact, it is estimated that 85% of adults in the U.S. will marry, and that 94% expect to marry their true love (Popenoe and Whitehead 2000, 2004). For young adults, the formation of intimate relationships is considered one of the central tasks of development; as such, these relationships are explored more deeply between the ages of 18–26, as individuals prepare for mate selection (Feldman et al. 1998). It is perhaps then possible to assume that most young adults hold personal beliefs regarding what a healthy, satisfying relationship should

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be like, and that these beliefs guide their decision-making as they prepare for mate selection and marriage.

The relationship beliefs of young adults are influenced by schemas, or the expectations people have for their intimate relationships (Honeycutt and Cantrill 2000). Schemas are based on both personal experience and the experiences of others. A common schematic belief of young adults is romanticism. People with this characteristic believe partners should be perfect, that each person has one true love, and that love can conquer any difficulties (Sprecher and Metts 1999; Weaver and Ganong 2004). A related set of expectations are called destiny beliefs. Individuals who hold such views believe once a person finds his or her true love, he or she is not likely to experience relationship troubles and will have a life full of happiness (Knee et al. 2003). There are other schematic expectations people have for their intimate partners that are not associated with healthy, satisfying relationships. These include the idea that healthy couples should not argue, that sex should always be perfect, and that good relationships do not require effort and maintenance (Goodwin and Gaines 2004). Views such as these are destructive to marital relationships because they are unrealistic and impossible to uphold.

Many marital expectations are due in part to recent cultural shifts in American society. Young people have higher expectations for marriage today than they did in the past. Prior to 1960, for example, young people married for reasons other than love such as economic, political, and family connections (Ackerman 1994; Coontz 2005; Pinsky 2002). Although individuals today seek similar fulfillments from marriage, currently one of the primary reasons for marriage is love (Sprecher et al. 1994). Individuals expect their marriages to be passionate and exciting. Such love-based ideals, typical of individualistic cultures, are problematic because passion and excitement tend to fade over time (Houston and Houts 1998), and individuals' expectations go unfulfilled (Barich and Bielby 1996; Kurdek 1991, 1993; Larson 1992; Larson and Holman 1994). The individualistic nature of American culture is also causing people to spend less time with family and friends and to rely more on their spouses for friendship and emotional support (Putnam 2000). These demanding expectations on the marital relationship are difficult to satisfy and eventually lead to unhappiness (Attridge and Berscheid 1994; McNulty and Karney 2004). In fact, the percentage of people who report being happy in their marriage has declined 20% in the past 25 years (National Fatherhood Initiative 2005; Popenoe and Whitehead 2004), while the percentage of overall reported conflicts has increased (Amato et al. 2003). One national survey found that only 33% of marriages today are both happy and stable (National Fatherhood Initiative 2005).

Evidently, young adults hold unrealistic beliefs about what constitutes a normal, healthy marital relationship, and these expectations lead to unfulfillment (Barich and Bielby 1996; Kurdek 1991, 1993; Larson 1992; Larson and Holman 1994). In light of these findings, researchers have attempted to determine whether family life education (FLE) courses focused on marriage help reduce unrealistic relationship beliefs among college students (Laner and Russell 1994; Sharp and Ganong 2000). Such courses are taught by educators and marital and family therapists who have extensive knowledge about relationship development and maintenance. These educators teach couples about realistic, healthy expectations, which are also termed growth beliefs (Knee et al. 2003). Growth beliefs include the ideas that satisfying relationships require effort and that healthy relationships result from solving problems and overcoming challenges as a couple. Partners with growth belief schemas fare better during stressful times. Rather than avoid problems like individuals with destiny beliefs, they manage conflict effectively and remain hopeful that the situation will improve (Knee et al. 2003).

One of the best-known premarital education programs, designed to help reduce unrealistic expectations and to prepare individuals for marriage is the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP, Markman et al. 1994). This program teaches couples to be realistic in their expectations, to communicate expectations clearly, and to recognize that unrealistic expectations lead to adverse relationship outcomes. Couples learn to use effective communication skills, be clear and honest about their sexual desires, and be open to altering their perceptions and behaviors (Markman et al. 1994). In learning that good relationships require effective communication, time, and effort, it is hoped that partners will change their unrealistic destiny beliefs to growth beliefs. The more realistic partners' views are about marriage, the more satisfied they tend to be (McNulty and Karney 2004).

Although individuals report fewer unrealistic beliefs after completing family life education courses, these programs have not been shown to produce statistically significant differences in beliefs over the long-term (Laner and Russell 1994; Sharp and Ganong 2000). If education and/or training does not significantly impact individuals' expectations of marriage, what does? We propose that there may be an over-riding, cultural ideal of what a healthy, satisfying marriage is, and that this ideal guides individuals' views on marriage. Taking this one step further, if there is indeed a cultural ideal, then professionals trained in relationship development and maintenance will share ideas with young adults about what constitutes a healthy, satisfying marriage. The young adults enrolling in family life education courses may not experience significant shifts in their beliefs because the educators themselves are re-affirming the unrealistic expectations already held by program participants. If professionals and young adults share a culturally imposed idea of healthy relationships, which includes unrealistic beliefs, the content and execution of FLE courses will need to be evaluated. This study explored whether there are differences between what young adults and professional educators define as a healthy, satisfying marriage.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of undergraduate students ($N = 23$, mean age 19.9 years) and professional educators with master's level training ($N = 18$, mean age 32.2 years) from various disciplines. The professionals were recruited from marriage and family therapy training programs at three southeastern universities and identified themselves primarily as marriage and family therapists (83.3%) and social workers, researchers/professors, or psychotherapists (16.7%). Undergraduate students were recruited from college courses at a southeastern university. Participants in the student group were 78.2% female and 21.7% male; 52.2% white/non-Hispanic, 39.1% black, 4.3% Hispanic, and 4.3% biracial (white and black); and reported their longest relationship lasting an average of 1.5 years. Participants in the therapist group were 44.4% female and 55.6% male; 83.3% white/non-Hispanic, 11.1% black, and 5.6% did not identify; and reported their mean post-master's clinical training as 3.6 years.

Measures

In order to explore what young adults and professionals define as a healthy, satisfying marriage, it was important to use a methodology that captured the attitudes of each of the

two groups and permitted comparison of these attitudes. Q-sort methodology, which requires individuals to rank order items and limit their choices with a prescribed number of placements, forces individuals to consider their attitudes carefully. It also provides data that permit easy comparisons of these attitudes (Prasad 2001). It is important to assess marital expectations within the framework of constructs already used in the marital literature. Recognizing that not all marital research could be included, a Q-set was developed using the literature from two areas in particular: (a) marital adjustment, as defined by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS, Crane et al. 1991; Spanier 1976); and (b) marital stability, as defined by Gottman (Gottman and Levenson 1999a, 1999b; Gottman et al. 1998).

The DAS has been widely used in marital research (Graham et al. 2006). It has been used to distinguish clinical (distressed) from nonclinical (nondistressed) couples, for evaluating marriage and cohabitation over the life span, and for examining the relationship between married and cohabitating couples' conventions (expectations) about their relationship and subsequent adjustment to married life (Graham et al. 2006; Sullivan and Schwebel 1995). The DAS also has been used to clinically evaluate and document changes in marital adjustment over the course of therapy, and to measure pre- and post-therapy outcomes (Carrere et al. 2000; Estrada and Holmes 1999; Whisman and Jacobson 1992).

Like the DAS, Gottman's research on marriage has a longstanding and well-documented history (Gottman et al. 1998; Gottman and Krokoff 1989; Gottman and Levenson 1999a, 1999b). Gottman is perhaps best known for his work on marital interaction as it relates to marital satisfaction. His observational coding of couples' interactions has led to the development of two observational coding systems: (a) the Couples' Interaction Scoring System (CISS); and (b) the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF). He has used information from his research to gain a better understanding of both current marital satisfaction, and how current marital satisfaction can predict change in marital satisfaction over time (Gottman and Krokoff 1989).

Items for the Q-set in this study were generated from the DAS and the CISS (Georgia Marriage Q-Sort, Wampler and Halverson 1990; Georgia Family Q-Sort, Wampler et al. 1989). Using these Q-sets as a guide, items were generated that did not overlap and that included a set of behaviors and/or qualities that reasonably constituted the range of description from a "satisfactory" and/or "healthy" marriage to an "unsatisfactory" and/or "unhealthy" marriage. Each of the Q-set items can be classified along a continuum from "satisfactory/healthy" to "unsatisfactory/unhealthy". The ranking of items was based on previous Q-set research that identified optimal profiles (Wampler and Halverson 1990; Wampler et al. 1989).

The Q-set was piloted on ten undergraduate students at a southern university. In order to identify the most salient items, a master list of DAS and CISS items was given to the students who were asked which factors they viewed as characteristic of "satisfactory/healthy" and "unsatisfactory/unhealthy" marriages. This method is consistent with previous research using Q-set methodology (Kogan et al. 2002). Based on their feedback, a final set of 48 items was selected for inclusion in the Q-Sort (Table 1).

A nine category distribution was used with items ranging from least like/extremely uncharacteristic of a healthy/satisfactory marriage (4 items), not like a satisfactory/healthy marriage at all (5 items), somewhat or a little not like a satisfactory/healthy marriage (5 items), very little like a satisfactory/healthy marriage (6 items), neutral or unimportant for a satisfactory/healthy marriage (8 items), very little like a satisfactory/healthy marriage (6 items), somewhat or a little like a satisfactory/healthy marriage (5 items), like a satisfactory/healthy marriage (5 items), and most like/extremely characteristic of a satisfactory/healthy marriage (4 items).

Table 1 Q-set items

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1. Both husband and wife think that things are going well
 2. Criticism is expressed
 3. It is okay for the husband to not respond, leave the room, or avoid an argument or disagreement
 4. It is okay for the wife to not respond, leave the room, or avoid an argument or disagreement
 5. Most problems and/or arguments remain unsolved
 6. Romance and emotional connection are maintained in everyday interactions
 7. Sarcasm, cynicism, sneering, hostile humor, eye rolling, and name calling occur during an argument
 8. The couple agrees about how to handle family finances
 9. The couple agrees on career decisions
 10. The couple agrees on correct or proper behavior
 11. The couple agrees on friends
 12. The couple agrees on how much time to spend together
 13. The couple agrees on major decisions
 14. The couple agrees on religious matters
 15. The couple agrees on the number and types of physical displays of affection
 16. The couple agrees on their aims, goals, and things they consider important
 17. The couple agrees on ways of dealing with parents and/or in-laws
 18. The couple agrees on who completes what household tasks
 19. The couple can have a stimulating exchange of ideas
 20. The couple discusses or considers divorce, separating, or ending the relationship
 21. The couple does not show love
 22. The couple gets on each other's nerves
 23. The couple is happy
 24. The couple is too tired for sex
 25. The couple regrets that they married
 26. The couple will do what they can to see that their relationship succeeds
 27. The husband accepts responsibility for part of the problems in the relationship
 28. The husband brings up most of the problems in the marriage
 29. The husband calms himself down in the middle of an argument
 30. The husband confides in his wife
 31. The husband demonstrates he is listening to his wife using nonverbal gestures like facial movements, nodding his head, eye contact
 32. The husband discusses problems with his wife in a calm manner
 33. The husband makes sure that the number of positive and negative acts he and his wife do are equal
 34. The husband suggests solutions for problems in the relationship
 35. The husband uses humor or laughter to keep an argument or fight from getting too heated
 36. The marriage is based on a deep friendship
 37. The wife brings up most of the problems in the marriage
 38. The wife accepts responsibility for part of the problems in the relationship
 39. The wife calms herself in the middle of an argument
 40. The wife confides in her husband
 41. The wife demonstrates she is listening to her husband using nonverbal gestures like facial movements, nodding her head, eye contact
 42. The wife discusses problems with her husband in a calm manner
 43. The wife makes sure that the number of positive and negative acts she and her husband do are equal
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Table 1 continued

44. The wife suggests solutions for problems in the relationship
45. The wife uses humor or laughter to keep an argument or fight from getting too heated
46. There is an absence of loud arguments or screaming matches
47. When the husband confronts the wife, it is okay for her to first defend herself before she listens to her husband's complaint
48. When the wife confronts the husband, it is okay for him to first defend himself before he listens to his wife's complaint

Procedure

Prior to performing the Q-sort, participants were given a demographic questionnaire to complete. The young adult group was asked primarily about their relationship history, while the professionals were asked about their clinical training history. After collecting demographic data, the participants were asked to arrange the Q-set items according to the following directive: "This stack of cards includes a list of some behaviors and qualities that might describe a marital relationship. Sort each card/item according to those behaviors that seem least like or extremely uncharacteristic of your idea of a satisfactory or healthy relationship to those that seem most like or extremely characteristic of your idea of a satisfactory or healthy relationship." On average, it took the young adult group approximately 25 minutes to complete the Q-set, while it took the professional group approximately 35 minutes.

Results

A five-step process was used to analyze the data. First, a principle components analysis with varimax rotation was used to analyze the Q-set data and determine whether different typologies of a healthy, satisfying marriage existed in the sample. The analysis resulted in four components with eigenvalues greater than 1. The first component accounted for the majority of the variance (65.4%), while the other three components each accounted for only 3 to 5% (see Table 2).

Second, the factor loadings for each individual were reviewed to determine two things: (a) which of the participants could be used to develop a representative prototype of the resultant factors based upon the degree to which they loaded on the different factors; and (b) which of the factors contained "enough" data (i.e., at least 3 cleanly loading

Table 2 Results from principle components analysis

	Eigenvalues	% Total variance
Factor 1	26.83	65.43
Factor 2	2.10	5.11
Factor 3	1.50	3.65
Factor 4	1.23	3.01

Table 3 Individual weights for each component

Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3	
Subject	Weight	Subject	Weight	Subject	Weight
S01	1.17	S15	0.816	S05	0.918
S02	1.18	S37	1.21	S08	1.07
S03	1.41	S101	1.16	S30	0.941
S04	0.82	S102	0.88	S43	1.47
S07	1.77	S105	1.86	S129	1.24
S11	1.03	S125	1.21		
S14	1.39	S126	0.785		
S16	1.13	S127	0.992		
S46	1.23	S150	1.73		
S103	1.31	S210	1.21		
S128	1.11	S212	1.45		
S211	1.44				

individuals) to be considered a stable component. To determine which individuals could be used to develop the prototypes, only those individuals who loaded significantly (a factor loading $\geq .50$) and cleanly (retained this value on only one factor, with all other loadings $\leq .49$) were used. This review demonstrated that three of the four factors contained 3 or more individuals and could be considered stable components.

The third step in the data analysis was to calculate weights for each item from the factor loadings for each individual to be included in the prototype. The weights were designed to develop the most representative prototype of the factor by ensuring that each individual contributed to the prototype only as much as they loaded onto the prototype (i.e., individuals who had lower factor loadings would contribute less to the prototype than individuals who had higher factor loadings). The formula used to calculate the weights was $f/\sqrt{1-f^2}$, where f was the individual's factor loading. Table 3 shows the weight values for the individuals within each component.

The fourth step was to use the weighted sums on the items to create the prototypes. For each individual, the calculated weight was applied to his or her unique item placement. For each item, the weighted placements were summed to determine final item placement in the prototype. Table 4 shows the final prototypes side by side by rank order (1 = low; 9 = high). A difference of 2 or more between item placements was considered significant.

The final step in the analysis was to compare each of the prototypes for similarities and differences. Composite 1 ($n = 12$) was comprised mostly of young adults and the items were consistent with an agreement-oriented view of a healthy and satisfying marriage. That is, the items were arranged such that participants viewed healthy and satisfied couples as exhibiting agreement behaviors and limiting their expression of disagreement behaviors. Composite 2 ($n = 11$) was comprised mostly of professionals, and the items were consistent with a communication-oriented view of a healthy marriage. That is, they viewed couples in healthy/satisfying marriages as demonstrating positive communication behaviors and as limiting negative communication behaviors. These items indicated an underlying sense of the need for effort to maintain the marital relationship. Composite 3 ($n = 5$) was comprised of both young adults and professionals. The items in this prototype

Table 4 Comparison of item placements in resultant composites

Item	Composite		
	1	2	3
The couple regrets they married	1	1	1
Most problems and/or arguments remained unsolved	1	2	2
The couple gets on each other's nerves	1	3	2
Sarcasm, cynicism, sneering, hostile humor, eye rolling, and name calling occur during an argument	1	1	3
The couple does not show love	2	1	1
It is okay for the husband to not respond, leave the room, or avoid an argument or disagreement	2	3	1
When the husband confronts the wife, it is okay for her to first defend herself before she listens to her husband's complaint	2	1	2
When the wife confronts the husband, it is okay for him to first defend himself before he listens to his wife's complaint	2	2	2
The couple discusses or considers divorce, separating, or ending the relationship	2	2	4
It is okay for the wife to not respond, leave the room, or avoid an argument or disagreement	3	3	1
The husband brings up most of the problems in the marriage	3	3	2
The wife brings up most of the problems in the marriage	3	4	3
The husband makes sure that the number of positive and negative acts he and his wife do are equal	3	3	4
The couple is too tired for sex	3	4	4
The wife makes sure that the number of positive and negative acts she and her husband do are equal	4	2	3
Criticism is expressed	4	2	5
The husband calms himself in the middle of an argument	4	7	5
The wife calms herself in the middle of an argument	4	7	6
The husband uses humor or laughter to keep an argument or fight from getting too heated	4	6	7
The wife uses humor or laughter to keep an argument or fight from getting too heated	4	6	8
The couple agrees on friends	5	4	4
The couple agrees on the number and types of physical displays of affection	5	5	5
The wife demonstrates she is listening to her husband using nonverbal gestures like facial movements, nodding her head, eye contact	5	7	5
The wife accepts responsibility for part of the problems in the relationship	5	8	5
The couple agrees on ways of dealing with parents and/or in-laws	5	4	6
The husband accepts responsibility for part of the problems in the relationship	5	8	6
The wife suggests solutions for problems in the relationship	5	5	7
The husband suggests solutions for problems in the relationship	5	5	8
The couple agrees on who completes what household tasks	6	5	5
The husband demonstrates he is listening to his wife using nonverbal gestures like facial movements, nodding his head, eye contact	6	7	5
The couple can have a stimulating exchange of ideas	6	7	5

Table 4 continued

Item	Composite		
	1	2	3
The wife discusses problems with her husband in a calm manner	6	5	6
The couple agrees on career decisions	6	5	6
The husband discusses problems with his wife in a calm manner	6	5	7
There is an absence of loud arguments or screaming matches	7	4	3
The couple agrees on how much time to spend together	7	6	3
The couple agrees on correct or proper behavior	7	4	4
The wife confides in her husband	7	8	9
The husband confides in his wife	7	9	9
Both husband and wife think that things are going well	8	6	4
The couple agrees about how to handle family finances	8	6	7
Romance and emotional connection are maintained in everyday interactions	8	9	7
The couple agrees on religious matters	8	5	8
The couple will do what they can to see their relationship succeed	8	9	9
The couple agrees on their aims, goals, and things they consider important	9	6	6
The couple agrees on major decisions	9	8	8
The marriage is based on a deep friendship	9	9	8
The couple is happy	9	8	9

1 = Most unlike

9 = Most like

Difference of 2 or more in item placement = Significant

did not demonstrate a clear pattern, but rather, combined problem-solving and agreement-oriented characteristics. In other words, healthy/satisfying marriages were viewed as having partners who could effectively solve problems and who agreed on most issues.

Discussion

Results from this study indicate that for young adults and professional educators, three prototypes of healthy or satisfying marriages exist. The prototypes are similar in a number of ways. Each prototype includes the notion that in a happy or satisfying marriage: (a) couples will be happy; (b) couples will do what they can to succeed; (c) couples will agree on major decisions; (d) couples will not regret they married; (e) couples will show love; (f) the marriage will be based on a deep friendship; (g) couples will not be defensive during an argument or disagreement; and (h) most problems will not remain unsolved. Therefore, professionals and young adults agree on some core expectations for healthy, satisfying marriages. These expectations fall into the realms of love, agreeing on major decisions, and doing what partners can to succeed.

The results also indicate that compared to individuals without training, individuals with training have different ideas about what constitutes a healthy or satisfying marriage. This is exemplified in the young adult prototype, which included many agreement-oriented characteristics, and the professional prototype, which included many

communication-oriented characteristics. Young adults indicated that in healthy relationships, partners agree on most issues and rarely disagree. This is consistent with previous research indicating that young adults hold romantic, destiny-type views, believing partners should be perfect, couples should not argue, and that few difficulties arise when true love exists (Goodwin and Gaines 2004; Knee et al. 2003; Sprecher and Metts 1999; Weaver and Ganong 2004). Professionals however, were more realistic in their beliefs and indicated that healthy relationships are characterized by effective communication between partners. Professionals also believed good relationships require effort and maintenance, which is reflective of the growth beliefs described in the introduction (Knee et al. 2003; Markman et al. 1994). Individuals who hold these more realistic beliefs are likely to experience increased marital satisfaction and stability (McNulty and Karney, 2004).

A third prototype was found to exist among both young adults and professionals. This prototype did not demonstrate a clear pattern, but combined problem-solving and agreement-oriented characteristics. Healthy marriages were viewed as having partners who could effectively solve problems and who agreed on most issues. This prototype included a combination of romantic, destiny beliefs (i.e., partners should usually agree) as well as growth beliefs (i.e., good relationships require maintenance and problem solving) (Knee et al. 2003).

Whereas young adults and professional educators produced distinct prototypes in their beliefs about healthy marriages, there was some overlap in their responses related to love, agreeing on major decisions, and doing what partners can to succeed. Young adults and professionals also shared views in the third prototype, but that prototype contained the fewest items and did not demonstrate a clear pattern. Overall then, young adults and professional educators had different ideas about the characteristics of healthy, successful relationships. If there is an overarching cultural ideal, professionals do not appear to be using this ideal to guide their Q-set responses about what constitutes a healthy, satisfying marriage. Still, the overlap that did appear in the findings opens the question of whether in a study situation, professionals responded to questions about marital functioning based on theories and educational training, but share information in FLE courses that reflects their culturally held, idealistic beliefs. In other words, incongruence may exist between what educators *think* about marital functioning and what they actually *teach* in FLE courses. Future researchers should therefore assess whether professionals' beliefs match up with what they are teaching in the FLE courses.

The findings of this study also suggest the need to evaluate existing programs. Perhaps the content and/or extent of marriage education programs need to be enhanced. It is also possible that some individuals respond better to FLE programs than others. This would explain why only modest effects have been found for people enrolled in FLE programs (Sharp and Ganong 2000). For instance, it may be that the marital expectations of women and men differ, or that one sex is more influenced by an FLE program aiming to alter expectations. Ethnicity is another variable that should be considered when examining the effectiveness of such programs. The majority of participants in marital education programs such as the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) are middle class, Caucasian individuals (Freedman et al. 2002). It is possible that people of varying ethnicities respond differently to programs addressing personal issues such as marital quality and functioning. In evaluating the effectiveness of FLE programs, future research should therefore investigate the influence of moderating variables such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study was the small sample size. A larger sample size might have provided additional insight about the degree to which individuals' perceptions of healthy marriages varied. A second limitation was related to the qualitative interpretation of the results. Once prototypes are developed, Q-sort methodology does not provide a definitive means for analyzing the data from a qualitative framework. A third limitation was related to the participants' understanding or interpretation of the individual items. Although the items were originally derived from the marital literature, there was no way to assess whether the individuals sorting the items understood what they meant. For example, how do individuals define "major decisions" and what do they consider "defensiveness" during an argument? These issues make interpretation of the prototypes somewhat more challenging.

Practical Implications and Conclusions

Despite these limitations, this study is important because it demonstrates the similarities and differences in professionals' and young adults' marital expectations. The study's findings can be used to refine FLE courses. For instance, FLE courses should devote less time to topics that educators and young adults agree on, and spend more time on topics they view differently. This study has identified specific expectations young adults hold about their marital relationships. Educators can directly address young adults' unrealistic beliefs in FLE classes and ensure that the romantic, destiny beliefs are changed to more healthy, realistic beliefs (Knee et al. 2003). This study also points to the need for FLE educators to evaluate their own beliefs and the information they are sharing in marital expectation courses. Prototype three revealed that professionals, too, hold unrealistic beliefs about healthy, successful marriages, although they hold considerably fewer of these beliefs than young adults. Professionals must ensure that their own beliefs are consistent with research about what constitutes a healthy, successful marriage, and that they are relaying valid information to program participants.

Educators who teach university courses on intimate relationships also can benefit from the results of this study. Because the young adult participants were recruited from undergraduate classes, this study's results are reflective of their beliefs. Professors who teach courses covering marital expectations and relationships can address the difference between romantic, destiny beliefs and more realistic, growth beliefs. They can inform students that growth beliefs are associated with greater marital stability and can use scales such as the Romantic Beliefs Scale (Sprecher and Metts 1989) to assess students' relationship schemas. Instructors also can encourage students to participate in FLE courses and premarital counseling before getting married. Premarital programs can provide more extensive information about realistic expectations and can offer young adults guidance for marital success.

Therapists working with couples in premarital counseling should assess partners' beliefs prior to marriage to ensure they have realistic expectations. Therapists can help partners understand that problem solving, conflict resolution, and overcoming challenges are characteristics of a successful marriage (Knee et al. 2003; McNulty and Karney 2004). Partners should be informed that this realistic outlook will help them better cope with stress and thus experience heightened marital satisfaction. Premarital education programs such as PREP (Markman et al. 1994) teach partners the importance of effective communication

and realistic expectations. Through these programs, therapists educate partners about the effort and maintenance required for a healthy, long-lasting marriage.

Findings from this study not only may help therapists with premarital counseling, but also may help therapists working with couples in distress. As noted in the introduction, North Americans expect love, excitement, and passion from their spouses, characteristics that inevitably decline over time (Houston and Houts 1998), and cause expectations to go unfulfilled (Barich and Bielby 1996; Kurdek 1991, 1993; Larson 1992; Larson and Holman 1994). Partners rely on their spouses to fulfill more needs than ever before, which has added to the stress experienced in marriage (Amato et al. 2003; Attridge and Berscheid 1994; National Fatherhood Initiative 2005). Due to the changing nature of North American society, therapists can anticipate dealing with issues related to marital expectations when seeing clients. By assessing spousal expectations, therapists can identify unrealistic beliefs and can focus on the skills needed for a healthy, successful relationship.

This study also points to areas that require investigation in future studies. In evaluating programs, researchers should examine whether educators' beliefs about a healthy, satisfying marriage match up with what they are teaching in FLE courses. Researchers should investigate whether some groups are more likely to benefit from FLE programs about marital expectations. If some groups benefit more than others (i.e., based on gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.), adjustments should be made to the content and/or structure of FLE programs to ensure that all people find relevance and importance in these programs.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that professionals hold realistic views about what constitutes a healthy marriage, while young adults hold unrealistic, idealized views about marital relationships. Clearly, young adults require education about how to sustain a healthy, satisfying marriage. By equipping young adults with the skills necessary for a successful marriage, and by teaching them how to form realistic expectations, family life educators can be more effective. However, the content and administration of FLE courses requires further evaluation. Information from the current study may help program evaluators tailor FLE courses to meet the needs of the participants. More attention should be devoted to topics that educators and young adults view differently, so that participants will gain the most from their time in these courses. It is possible that this shift in curriculum focus will create more long-lasting results in participants' marital expectations.

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