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# The Impact of the PICK a Partner Relationship Education Program on Single Army Soldiers

**Morgan C. Van Epp**

*University of Akron*

**Ted G. Futris**

*University of Georgia*

**John C. Van Epp**

*Private Practice Medina, OH*

**Kelly Campbell**

*University of Georgia*

*Educating singles on how to develop healthy, romantic relationships can be beneficial to their subsequent dating and marital satisfaction, and for army soldiers, their satisfaction with military life. A new relationship program, the Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge (PICK) program, was delivered to single army soldiers, and at the conclusion of the program participants demonstrated an increase in their understanding of the crucial areas to explore and discuss in a premarital relationship, gained a better understanding of how to pace their relationship, and exhibited more realistic attitudes and beliefs about marriage and mate selection.*

**Keywords:** *Army life; premarital relationships; program evaluation; relationship development; relationship education; relationship beliefs*

Although the aspiration for a happy, lifelong marriage has not diminished through the years, the dating culture has significantly changed from that of the past (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2000). Americans are marrying at older ages than ever before, with the median age of first marriage for men being 27 years and for women 25 years (Johnson & Dye, 2005). This trend of delaying marriage has lengthened the amount of time spent in premarital relationships and has provided individuals with ample time to select a lifelong partner. However, in our society there is little formal preparation or guidance when selecting a marriage partner. Singles are now largely left to their own devices when it comes to dating relationships, which is vastly different from not too long ago when individuals were exposed to highly controlled relationships or even arranged marriages. Silliman (2003) argued,

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**Authors' Note:** Morgan C. Van Epp, MS, is a doctoral student in counseling psychology at the University of Akron. Ted G. Futris, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Child and Family Development and an extension state specialist in family and consumer sciences. John C. Van Epp, PhD, is the founder/director of LifeChangers, an organization that provides clinical counseling and relationship educational programs/curricula. Kelly Campbell, MA, is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Child and Family Development at the University of Georgia. Project funded through deputy under secretary of the army, Operations Research Contract Number W74V8H-04-P-0287. The authors thank Ron Thomas, Pete Frederich, and Glenn Bloomstrom, Chaplains in the U.S. Army for their assistance and support in conducting this study. In addition, they thank Jeffrey Larson, PhD, for his editorial comments and suggestions. Correspondence concerning this article and reprint requests should be addressed to Ted G. Futris, PhD, Department of Child and Family Development, University of Georgia, 225 Hoke Smith Annex, 300 Carlton Street, Athens, GA 30602; e-mail: tfutris@uga.edu.

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Today's adolescents face personal and social conditions that place them at risk for dating and marital problems and offer little incentive or assistance in developing healthy relationships . . . Much of the effort is concentrated at marriage preparation, enrichment, and therapeutic divorce preparation and recovery, greater emphasis is needed in building healthy relationships beginning with dating competencies. (p. 278)

Some singles have been shown to hold unrealistic beliefs and expectations about their relationships (Silliman & Schumm, 2004). It is common for individuals in dating relationships to have positive illusions about their partners, which causes them to minimize partner faults and overemphasize their partner's favorable characteristics (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Some single adults also hold romanticized beliefs, thinking that love is the most important basis for choosing a mate, that each person has only one true love, and that marriage will be perfect (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Idealized and romanticized views are common among adults of both genders, but men are more likely than women to hold such beliefs (Montgomery, 2005). These unrealistic expectations, or constraining beliefs, are destructive to intimate relationships because they are associated with decreased relationship satisfaction and stability (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). According to Larson (1992), constraining beliefs about mate selection are characterized as having four qualities: (a) they limit one's choices regarding who or when one marries; (b) they encourage exaggerated or minimal personal effort to find a suitable mate; (c) they inhibit thoughtful consideration of interpersonal strengths and weaknesses and of premarital factors known to have an influence on the success of marriage; and (d) they bring about mate-selection problems and frustration and restrict options for alternative solutions to problems.

Educating singles, of all ages, on how to develop healthy and sound intimate relationships has positive consequences for their subsequent dating and marital satisfaction (Cobb, Larson, & Watson, 2003; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). Gardner, Giese, and Parrott (2004) argued that many relationship attitudes and behavior patterns are developed well before adulthood and marital engagement, which is when most couples attend premarital education programs. Studies evaluating the effectiveness of premarital education programs and courses have reported that participation is highly effective and that couples who participate are typically better off than those who do not (Cole & Cole, 1999). Gardner (2001) also found that when high school students participated in a premarital education program they were less likely to see divorce as a good option and were slightly more favorable toward marriage preparation and counseling. Schumm, Silliman, and Bell (2000) found similar results among recently married Army soldiers. Amato and Rogers (1999) argued that these shifts in divorce attitudes are essential because individuals who adopted more favorable attitudes toward divorce tended to experience declines in relationship quality, whereas those who adopted less favorable attitudes toward divorce tended to experience improvements in relationship quality. Individuals who participate in premarital education programs are 31% less likely to divorce and more likely to have relationships characterized by greater marital quality and commitment (Stanley et al., 2006). Despite the apparent effectiveness of these programs, little to no research exists to document the benefits of preparing singles for marriage (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Premarital educational programs can benefit singles by teaching them about common predictors of stable and healthy relationships. Larson and Holman (1994) argued that, "couples need to be informed of the potential influences of these factors

(that predict marital stability) before they marry, so they can make more informed choices, anticipate potential problems, and solve as many problems as possible before they get married" (p. 235). In addition, couples who are better acquainted before marriage have significantly higher marital quality (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Grover, Russell, Schumm, & Paff-Bergen, 1985), and experience fewer problems when they face the inevitable difficulties of marriage (Grover et al., 1985). Stanley (2003) argued that one of the primary benefits of premarital education is that it slows couples down and fosters greater deliberation.

Overall, singles need guidance in making conscious, intentional decisions about dating and mate selection. Educating singles about healthy dating and marital choices holds tremendous promise for reducing the risk of future marital problems and divorce. Although premarital education programming has been documented to positively affect couples (Carroll & Doherty, 2003) and adolescents (Gardner et al., 2004), no research exists on the influence that similar programs would have on single adults. Currently, half of the entire military comprises single individuals (Department of Defense, 2003). This study sought to determine whether a new program called the PICK (Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge) a Partner (Van Epp, 2006) would be useful to them in enhancing their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about marriage and the mate-selection process.

#### THE UNIQUE NEEDS FOR SINGLE ARMY SOLDIERS AND CURRENT MARRIAGE STRENGTHENING PROGRAMS

According to a 2003 report published by the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Military Community and Family Policy), there are approximately 626,777 singles and 46,998 divorcees in the military, which means that almost half of the entire Military comprises single individuals. In addition, servicemen are more likely to marry and more likely to divorce than male civilians, and subsidies for married servicepersons may encourage service members to enter into unhealthy marriages (Flueck & Zax, 1995).

The U.S. Army has taken a vested interest in the status of their families. Research has demonstrated that soldier retention rates, overall satisfaction with military life, and healthy coping methods are all affected by the soldier's marital and family life satisfaction (Albano, 1994; Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003; Rosen & Durand, 1995). Still, marital conflict in general, and domestic violence specifically, tends to be prevalent in the military. Among a sample of Navy recruits, it was found that 50% reported being involved with intimate partner physical violence, as a victim, perpetrator, or both (White, Merrill, & Koss, 2001). However, marital adjustment and familial support are both associated with lowered incidence and severity of partner violence (Rosen, Kaminski, Parmley, Knudson, & Fancher, 2003).

Since 1999, the Building Strong and Ready Families program has taught soldiers and their spouses skills on how to reduce conflict, strengthen marital ties, and improve confidence in their relationships (Stanley et al., 2005). Although all these skills are vital to the health of Army families, single or single-again individuals are left, once again, with little guidance. Given the vast number of singles in the military, it is imperative that Army soldiers are offered preventive educational programs that teach healthy relationship skills to prevent unhealthy marriages and help military singles make informed decisions about their marital and family life (Drummet et al., 2003).

## THE PICK A PARTNER PROGRAM

The PICK program (Van Epp, 2006) presents a practical and comprehensive overview of the crucial areas to explore in a dating relationship. The program provides an overarching structure for understanding how to pace growing closeness in a premarital relationship, while exploring the strongest premarital predictors of postmarital attitudes, behaviors, and satisfaction (further described below). The PICK program integrates findings from the extensive body of marriage and relationship research and presents information in a clear, direct manner.

The goals of this premarital program are twofold. First, this program alerts participants to the major predictors of marital satisfaction by describing aspects of a potential mate that should be considered during the dating relationship such as their partner's: family background, conscientious attitudes and actions, compatibility potential, other and past relationships, and skills in relationships. Second, participants are instructed on how to pace a growing attachment using a model of factors influencing feelings of closeness and cohesion in a relationship, and by explaining how to balance these factors and enforce boundaries in a relationship. The PICK program covers a vast amount of information about mate choice and relationship building. Yet, one of the primary strengths of the program is that it organizes this information in a simple format, which addresses cognitive, behavioral, and emotional aspects of relationships. The program organizes these components into two sections, termed the *HEAD* and the *HEART*.

### The HEAD

The HEAD refers to knowledge acquired about a partner in the dating phase and the processes involved in getting to know a partner deeply and accurately. The processes include mutual self-disclosure, sharing diverse experiences, and engaging in these behaviors over time, which is important in a developing relationship (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997). When developing a close relationship, certain aspects of a prospective partner are telling of what they will be like as a lifelong mate and are therefore important to get to know (Van Epp, 2006). According to the PICK program, there are five relationship characteristics one should learn about his/her partner that have been shown throughout research to predict marital success (Hill & Peplau, 1998; Larson & Holman, 1994). These five characteristics are represented by the acronym *FACES*: Family background, Attitudes and actions of the conscience, Compatibility potential, Examples of other relationships, and Skills in relationships.

*Family background.* Family background highly influences relationship quality and stability. A longitudinal study by Holman, Larson, and Harmer (1994) found that a happy, stable premarital family/home environment was predictive of early marital quality and stability. Family-of-origin conflict negatively affects subsequent marital quality; and expressiveness in one's family-of-origin has been shown to predict higher marital quality (Whyte, 1990). In addition, when individuals have a working model of their family-of-origin characterized by effective patterns of interaction they do better at managing the ordinary demands of adult intimate partnerships (Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003). Those who have the perception of growing up in a less than optimal family, tend to experience more difficulties in their intimate relationships, are more difficult to please, and set unrealistic standards for

their relationships (Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003). Overall, these studies demonstrate the strong connection between family background and one's later adult relationships. The PICK program emphasizes the importance of taking into consideration past family experiences when getting to know a partner, and how these experiences influence adult relationships.

*Attitudes and actions of the conscience.* Van Epp (2006), the founder of the PICK program, emphasizes the importance of getting to know how an individual's conscience, or perspective-taking ability, operates in close relationships. Research has shown conscientiousness to be a trait among individuals in more stable marriages (Gattis, Berns, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004; Kurdek, 1993) and that perspective taking is predictive of marital adjustment (Long & Andrews, 1990). In addition, people high on conscientiousness tend to be hardworking, responsible, dependable individuals who experience fewer areas of disagreement in their relationships (Friedman et al., 1995). Because research has demonstrated that having a healthy conscience is related to happier, healthier marriages, it is important to understand how one's conscience operates in close relationships.

*Compatibility.* Research has demonstrated that compatibility between partners in terms of personality, leisure interests (Houts, Robins, & Huston, 1996), religion (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001), and sense of humor (Priest & Taylor Thein, 2003) influence marital quality and stability. These areas of compatibility are important to explore in a dating relationship. A partner's personality is a pervasive element to a relationship and has the potential, if undesirable in nature, to cause enduring problems and frustrations. Research consistently finds that the personality traits of neuroticism (Donnellan, Conger, & Bryant, 2004; Gattis et al., 2004), conscientiousness (Friedman et al., 1995; Gattis et al., 2004), and agreeableness (Donnellan et al., 2004; Gattis et al., 2004) contribute uniquely to the developmental course of relationships. Although two individuals may have characteristics that differ from one another, each partner should complement or balance the other (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996). Couples with compatible and/or complementary characteristics experience heightened relationship satisfaction and stability (Gaunt, 2006; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000).

*Examples of other relationships.* The manner in which partners treat others and past partners is indicative of how they will treat future partners (Berk & Andersen, 2000). One way to understand this concept is through schemas and scripts (Surra & Bohman, 1991). Relationship schemas refer to the cognitive stories people form regarding their interactions in close relationships, and scripts refer to the expectations of certain events (e.g., expecting that when someone is running late, they will call to let you know) in relationships (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997). Schemas and scripts involve using past relationship experiences to form expectations about how one thinks and behaves in current and future relationships (Honeycutt & Cantrill, 2000). Empirical evidence supports the notion that schemas and scripts guide social interactions. Furman, Simon, Shaffer, and Bouche (2002) found that adolescent relationships with parents, romantic partners, and friends all influenced how adolescents treated their parents and romantic partners. Furthermore, Baxter, Dun, and Sahlstein (2001) examined the rules of relating in social networks of young adults and found that rules related to loyalty,

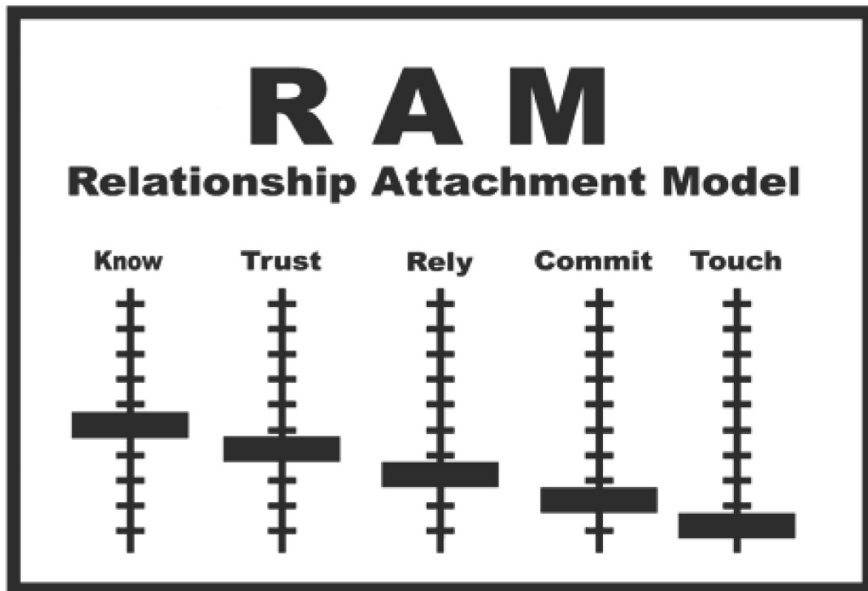
openness/honesty, and respect were applied not only to friendships but romantic relationships as well.

*Relationship skills.* The most commonly addressed topic in premarital and marital programming is the importance of conflict resolution and communication skills (Hawkins, Carroll, & Doherty, 2004). Kelly, Huston, and Cate (1985) found that premarital conflict is a precursor to marital conflict and that it relates to the extent to which couples are satisfied after the first 2.5 years of marriage. The way in which couples resolve conflict is equally important. For instance, satisfied couples report less impulsive and more cooperative, supportive, and flexible ways of resolving problems (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996). A lack of problem-solving and communication skills are related to relationship distress and deterioration (Cordova, Gee, & Warren, 2005; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). A deficiency of these skills in premarital relationships has been shown to translate into a lack of marital relationship skills (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storassli, 1988). After teaching couples to effectively communicate and use problem-solving skills, Kaiser, Hahlweg, Fehm-Wolfsdorf, and Groth (1998) found that marital dissolution was less common, rates of relationship satisfaction were higher, and positive communication behavior was more prevalent.

### **The HEART**

The HEART component of the PICK program refers to a growing emotional connection or feeling of love between partners. This connection is represented by the relationship attachment model (RAM; Figure 1), which was developed by the third author (Van Epp, 2006) as a theoretical conceptualization of the intimacy dynamics in close relationships. The RAM is comprised of five dynamics: knowledge, trust, reliance, commitment, and sex. In a relationship, these five areas develop in unison, meaning that growth in a dynamic on the right should not exceed growth in a dynamic on the left. For instance, under ideal circumstances, partners' level of trust should not exceed their level of knowledge about each other. Partners should similarly not be more reliant than trustworthy of one another, and partners should not commit to each other before sufficient knowledge is gained, and trust and reliance are established. Finally, partners should not advance too far in the sexual realm without taking the time to build up the four previous dynamics.

The RAM is characterized by five assumptions (Van Epp, 2006). First, each component is a bonding force, meaning that each of the components produces a feeling of closeness in the relationship and to one's partner. Second, each component has a range, meaning the dynamics can occur with varying degrees of intensity. Third, the components are independent but also interactive such that they develop separately but not without affecting the entire balance of the relationship. Fourth, each component is both personal and reciprocal, meaning that feelings of closeness emerge from the components but the dynamics work both ways. For example, the more you know someone the closer you feel to him or her, and the more he or she gets to know you, the closer you feel to him or her and the closer he or she feels toward you. Finally, the components have a logical, hierarchical order and can collectively illustrate healthy versus unhealthy or vulnerable versus less vulnerable relationships based on the level of each component (Van Epp, 2006). When a couple paces the development of a relationship so that the levels



**Figure 1: The Relationship Attachment Model (RAM)**

NOTE: The RAM is a visual aid used in the PICK a Partner program to illustrate how a healthy relationship develops over time. Ideally, one dynamic should never exceed the previous dynamic.

grow in unison over time, risk of dissolution is minimized, and objective insight into the partner and the relationship is maximized (Van Epp, 2006).

Overall, the objective of the PICK program is to teach singles about the five areas (i.e., FACES) that are predictive of what a partner may be like in a future marriage. In addition, the PICK program aims to empower single individuals by providing them with an understanding of how to pace their growing relationships in a healthy way. In doing so, it is hoped that singles will not overattach to a developing relationship and overlook major flaws in a partner that could lead to vulnerability, disillusionment, and relationship termination.

#### PURPOSE AND HYPOTHESES

The PICK program was offered as a compliment to existing well-being programs in the army that do not specifically address relationship stability for single soldiers. As previously noted, no published research currently exists on the effectiveness of relationship education programs for single adults. Therefore, this evaluation of the PICK program examined changes in participants' knowledge and attitudes about relationship development and marriage as a result of participation. We hypothesized that participants would develop a heightened understanding of the crucial areas to explore and discuss in a premarital relationship (FACES). Also, because beliefs about mate selection influence one's feelings and behavior in a relationship (see Cobb et al., 2003), we hypothesized that participants' attitudes would change such that they would express more positive and

realistic expectations about marriage and mate selection. Furthermore, we expected that participants would become more knowledgeable and confident in their ability to form and maintain a healthy relationship and marriage.

## METHOD

### Program Delivery Methods

The PICK program was evaluated in two U.S. Army training centers located at Fort Jackson (FJ; South Carolina) and the Defense Language Institute (DLI; California) that volunteered to participate in this pilot project. Two Army Family Life Chaplains were trained in the program and delivered it to soldiers at their respective training centers. To ensure that the Chaplains were true to the program material, they participated in an 8-hr instructor training session conducted by the developer of the PICK program. In this session, the Chaplains were provided with an in-depth explanation of the program material as well as an opportunity to discuss teaching approaches and address questions with the program developer. The PICK program consists of five, 50-min sessions: (a) overview of the RAM; (b) the predictive power of family background in romantic relationships; (c) the importance of getting to know their partner's conscience, compatibility potential, other relationships, and relationship skills; (d) trust and reliance in developing relationships; and (e) the development of commitment and the importance of enforcing sexual boundaries in romantic relationships. Instructors were provided with identical lesson plans, a PowerPoint presentation, DVDs of the program developer teaching the program, and a large RAM display board (Figure 1).

Each instructor was allowed to deliver the program in the format they found most convenient and conducive to their needs. Table 1 provides a summary of the delivery methods used by the instructors at each site. As noted in the table, the instructor at FJ conducted the program four times using three different delivery methods, whereas the instructor at DLI conducted the program three times using a single delivery method. Though the number of sessions varied, all participants received the same information within 6 to 8 hrs of program contact time via lecture format, from the Chaplain or the program developer via the video, and were engaged in discussion.

### Procedure and Participants

At the conclusion of each program, participants completed a retrospective pre-post questionnaire to document changes in knowledge and attitudes about dating and marital relationships. The retrospective design was chosen because traditional pretest-posttest designs pose several limitations, one of which is that legitimate changes in knowledge and attitudes may be masked if the participants overestimate what they know or believe in the pretest. This is likely to occur if participants lack a clear understanding of the attitude, behavior, or skill the program is attempting to affect (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000). Taking part in the program may show participants that they actually knew much less or felt differently than they originally reported in the pretest—also referred to as the response shift bias (Howard & Dailey, 1979). Response shift bias can be avoided with retrospective pretest and posttest measures because participants rate themselves with a

**TABLE 1: Program Delivery Method and Number of Program Participants**

Methods (Site)	Number of Sessions	Hours per Session	Teaching Format	Number of Groups	Number of Participants	Returned Surveys
Method 1 (FJ)	2	3	Lecture, PowerPoint, movie clips, discussion	2	63	62
Method 2 (FJ)	2	3	Program video and discussion	1	22	20
Method 3 (FJ)	1	8	Lecture, PowerPoint, movie clips, discussion	1	25	25
Method 4 (DLI)	6	1	Lecture, movie clips, discussion	3	39	16

NOTE: FJ = Fort Jackson; DLI = Defense Language Institute.

single frame of reference in both tests; in turn a more accurate assessment of changes in self-reported knowledge and attitudes may be produced with this design (Goedhart & Hoogstraten, 1992; Pratt et al., 2000). In addition, soldiers not participating in the program were recruited and voluntarily completed a survey to serve as a comparison for program participants' retrospective pretest responses. The program instructors collected and returned the completed surveys to the research team.

A total of 272 single soldiers at FJ and the DLI voluntarily completed a survey: 123 of the 149 program participants (82.5% response rate) and 149 comparison group individuals (nonprogram participants). The soldiers who participated in the pilot program and study had entry-level ranks (enlisted 1-4) and included Privates, Private First Class, and Specialists. Table 2 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample. A majority of the singles were female (55.9%) and White (60.9%). Respondents were, on average, 22.3 years old (range 17-45,  $SD = 4.9$ ) at the time of the survey and 21.0 years old ( $SD = 4.1$ ), when they enlisted in the army. Nearly all participants (96.7%) had completed high school, and 63.9% had extended their education beyond high school. All the respondents were currently single, 88.2% reported that they had never been married, and 48% reported that they were currently in a romantic relationship. A comparison between our samples from FJ ( $n = 179$ ) and DLI ( $n = 93$ ), revealed no systematic differences in age, education, religious affiliation, and prior marital status. However, compared to DLI, a higher proportion of respondents from FJ were female (44.1% vs. 62.0%;  $X^2 = 8.0$ ,  $p < .01$ ), non-White (81.7% vs. 50%;  $X^2 = 25.8$ ,  $p < .001$ ), grew up in a never-married household (3.3% vs. 16.0%;  $X^2 = 17.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and were currently parents (6.5% vs. 20.2%;  $X^2 = 8.7$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Overall, response rates for FJ and DLI varied considerably. Only 16 of the 39 participants returned their surveys at DLI compared to 107 of 110 at FJ. The reason for the variability in response rate is because the instructor at DLI allowed participants to complete their surveys at home and return them at their convenience. Although this allowed participants more time to think over their responses, unfortunately many of them chose not to return their survey.

Next, analyses were conducted to determine the homogeneity between the program and comparison groups. In contrast to the comparison group ( $n = 149$ ), the program group ( $n = 123$ ) was more likely to consist of singles who were, on

**TABLE 2: Demographic Characteristics of Program and Comparison Group Participants**

	Overall (N = 272)	Comparison (n = 149)	Program (n = 123)
Gender (% male)	44.1	49.7	37.4
Current age (%)			
17-20 years old	48.4	53.7	41.9
21-24 years old	30.6	31.6	29.5
25 and older	21.0	14.7	28.6
<i>M (SD)</i>	22.3 (4.9)	21.3 (3.9)	23.4 (5.7)
Age when joined the Army (%)			
17-20 years old	57.6	57.8	57.4
21-24 years old	29.9	32.2	27.0
25 and older	12.5	10.0	15.6
<i>M (SD)</i>	21.0 (4.1)	20.8 (3.9)	21.2 (4.4)
Race (%)			
Caucasian	60.9	66.9	53.7
African American	14.4	12.8	16.3
Hispanic	10.3	7.4	13.8
Other (multiracial)	14.4	12.9	16.2
Religiously affiliated (% yes)	83.8	85.2	82.1
Highest grade completed (%)			
Less than high school	3.4	4.1	2.4
High school Grad/GED	32.7	36.3	28.5
Beyond high school	63.9	59.6	69.1
Marital status (% never married)	88.2	93.9	81.3
Have children (% yes)	15.6	8.8	23.6
Prior participation in relationship programs (% yes)	6.6	6.7	6.5
Parents' marital status (%)			
Never married	11.6	10.4	13.1
Married	37.5	35.2	40.2
Separated/divorced	44.9	47.6	41.8
Widowed	6.0	6.8	4.9

average, 2 years older ( $M = 21.3$  vs.  $23.4$ ;  $F = 12.7$ ,  $p < .001$ ), female (50.3% vs. 62.6%;  $X^2 = 4.1$ ,  $p < .05$ ), non-White (33.1% vs. 46.3%;  $X^2 = 4.9$ ,  $p < .05$ ), previously married (6.1% vs. 18.7%;  $X^2 = 10.3$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and parents (8.8% vs. 23.6%;  $X^2 = 11.1$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### Measures

The survey assessed demographic variables, dating and relationship experiences, attitudes regarding relationships and marriage, and participants' knowledge gained and confidence in the curriculum concepts. For the measures described below, program participants were asked to first think about how they felt about each item before participating in the program and second, how they felt after completing the program. The comparison group was only asked how they currently felt about each item.

*Hypothesis 1.* A 28-item scale developed for this study was used to assess the extent to which participants placed importance on the five areas the program deems crucial to get to know about one's partner (FACES). Participants were provided the following

prompt: "Below are some things in relationships that some people consider to be less or more important than others. In other words, some of these things are not important to everybody. How important is it to you that you know the following about your partner?" Responses were based on a 10-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*extremely unimportant*) to 10 (*extremely important*). The first area, *Family background* ( $\alpha = .85$ ), consisted of five items regarding a partner's family history and relationships (e.g., my partner's family background; how affection was shown in my partner's family). *Attitudes and actions of the conscience* (six items;  $\alpha = .86$ ) reflected a partners' conscientiousness (e.g., how consistent my partner is at doing what is "right;" how good my partner is at seeing my perspective). *Compatibility* (eight items;  $\alpha = .80$ ) evaluated the extent to which partners should know about their compatibility (e.g., what my partner likes to do for fun; my partner's spiritual values). *Examples of other relationships* (three items;  $\alpha = .77$ ) measured the importance of knowing their partner's current and past relationship experiences (e.g., my partner's "bad habits" in previous relationships). Last, *Skills in relationships* (six items;  $\alpha = .90$ ) assessed the importance of understanding how their partner relates to others (e.g., how well my partner communicates; how my partner handles his or her emotions). Mean scores were computed for each area of FACES, with higher scores implying a higher level of importance on getting to know that aspect about their partner.

*Hypothesis 2.* The attitudes and beliefs held by soldiers concerning mate selection were measured using the 32-item Attitudes about Romance and Mate Selection Scale (Cobb et al., 2003). The instrument employs 28 questions, in addition to four distracter items, and comprises seven subscales (four items each) which represent constraining beliefs about mate selection: (a) *One and Only* ( $\alpha = .72$ ), for example, "There is only one true love out there who is right for me to marry"; (b) *Love is Enough* ( $\alpha = .78$ ), for example, "Our feeling of love for each other should be sufficient reason to get married"; (c) *Cohabitation* ( $\alpha = .94$ ), for example, "Living together before marriage will improve our chances of remaining happily married"; (d) *Perfect Partner/Idealization* ( $\alpha = .50$ ), for example, "I should not marry my sweetheart unless everything about our dating relationship is pleasing to me"; (e) *The Perfect Relationship* ( $\alpha = .75$ ), for example, "I need to feel entirely sure that our marriage will work before I would consider marrying my sweetheart"; (f) *Ease of Effort* ( $\alpha = .63$ ), for example, "Finding the right person to marry is more about luck than effort"; and (g) *Opposites Complement* ( $\alpha = .49$ ), for example, "I should marry someone whose personal characteristics are opposite to mine." The respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 6 (*very strongly agree*). A mean score was computed with higher scores indicating a more intense constraining belief about mate selection in that particular subscale. Alpha coefficients for the subscales are comparable to those obtained by Cobb et al. (2003).

*Hypothesis 3:* Program participants' knowledge gained from the program and confidence in their abilities to use the skills learned were evaluated via a 15-item scale developed for this study. Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Sample items for knowledge included "I can identify the things that are important to get to know about a partner" and "I understand that going too fast too soon in a relationship can result in overlooking problems in a partner." Sample items for confidence included "I feel confident in my ability to maintain a balance between

the critical bonding dynamics in a relationship" and "I feel confident that I will spend plenty of time figuring out what my partner is really like before becoming too involved." A mean score was computed for knowledge gained (10-items) with higher scores indicating feeling more knowledgeable about developing a healthy relationship that leads to a healthy marriage ( $\alpha$  reliability = .86 before, and .77 after). Similarly, a mean score was computed for confidence (five items) with high scores reflecting that they feel more confident in their abilities to use the skills taught in the program to develop a healthy relationship ( $\alpha$  reliability = .87 before, and .82 after).

*Perceptions of the program.* Program participants were asked to rate their level of agreement, 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), with a series of questions regarding their perceptions of the program. Sample items included "I learned new information from this program," "I plan to use the information I learned from this program," "Overall, I am very satisfied with the program" and "I would recommend this program to other singles." In addition, all program and nonprogram participants were asked an open-ended question at the end of the survey to describe their general thoughts on dating relationship experiences and, for program participants only, their participation in the program.

## Analyses

Analyses presented here used multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to compare program participants' retrospective pretest scores to scores from the comparison group to determine whether program participants had similar attitudes and beliefs regarding dating relationships and marriage prior to participation in the PICK program. If the multivariate analyses yielded statistically significant results, univariate analyses were conducted to identify where those differences existed. Next, similar procedures were followed using program participants' retrospective pretest and posttest scores. Repeated measures MANOVA was used to determine whether the program resulted in changes in attitudes and knowledge with time (retrospective pretest vs. posttest) as the within-subjects factor. The practical significance of the findings, or the strength of association between the dependent and independent variables (effect size), is reported using the partial eta-squared.

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Analyses

Because clear demographic differences were found between program and comparison group participants on age, sex, race, prior marital status, and parenting status, preliminary analyses were initially conducted to examine whether these differences have a significant effect on the dependent variables. First, multivariate analyses across the 12 dependent variables available from both groups showed an overall difference based on sex,  $F(12, 245) = 2.0, p < .05$ , and race,  $F(12, 245) = 1.9, p < .05$ . Univariate analyses showed that compared to males, females placed greater importance on a partner's conscientiousness,  $F(1, 256) = 5.9, p < .05$ , and relationship skills,  $F(1, 256) = 9.0, p < .01$ . Compared to singles who were White, non-Whites singles placed greater importance on their partner's family background,  $F(1, 256) = 5.1, p < .05$ , prior relationship experiences,  $F(1, 256) = 9.9, p < .01$ , as well

as exhibited more constraining beliefs that they should wait to marry until they are completely assured of marital success,  $F(1, 256) = 4.4, p < .05$  and that choosing a mate should be easy,  $F(1, 256) = 4.0, p < .05$ . Next, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was run controlling for these demographic differences between groups. Because the multivariate analysis of covariance yielded similar results, only the MANOVA findings are presented below.

*Hypothesis 1:* Table 3 presents scores on the extent to which participants placed importance on the five major areas of a potential mate that should be considered and explored during the dating relationship (FACES). On average, respondents' pretest ratings of each of the areas ranged from *slightly* ( $M = 6.5$ ) to *fairly* ( $M = 8.0$ ) important. Multivariate analyses showed an overall group difference,  $F(5, 258) = 2.3 (p < .05; \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04)$ , and univariate analyses showed only one significant difference between the program and comparison group participants' pretest scores: program participants, on average, placed less importance on getting to know their partner's family background,  $F(1, 262) = 4.6 (p < .05; \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02)$ . Following the conclusion of the program, multivariate analyses showed a significant increase in the importance program participants placed on getting to know their partner in each of the five areas the PICK program deems important (FACES),  $F(5, 115) = 20.5 (p < .001)$ , with an overall effect size of .47.

*Hypothesis 2:* Regarding their attitudes about romance and mate selection, respondents' pretest scores, on average, ranged from *disagreement* ( $M = 3.3$ ) to *strong agreement* ( $M = 5.3$ ) on each of the constraining beliefs (see Table 4). Analyses revealed no significant differences between program and comparison group participants' pretest scores,  $F(7, 260) = 1.53 (p = .16)$ . After the program, multivariate analyses showed a significant program effect,  $F(7, 113) = 9.22 (p < .001)$ , with an overall effect size of .36. Univariate contrasts showed that program participants, on average, reported less constraining beliefs that love is a sufficient reason to marry, that cohabitation can strengthen one's future marriage, that opposites complement, that choosing a mate should be easy, and that mate selection is a matter of chance or accident. In contrast, program participants, on average, tended to agree more with the belief that they should wait to marry until they find the right partner and that they must feel completely assured of marital success before getting married.

*Hypothesis 3:* Analyses showed statistically significant gains in program participants' retrospective pretest to posttest scores on knowledge gained from the program and confidence in their abilities to use the skills taught. After the program, participants felt more knowledgeable about developing a healthy relationship that leads to a healthy marriage (retrospective pretest  $M = 4.26, SD = .86$ ; posttest  $M = 5.33, SD = .50$ ),  $F(1, 116) = 175.67 (p < .001)$ , with an overall effect size of .60 (see Table 5). As well, program participants felt more confident in their abilities to use the skills learned to develop a healthy relationship (retrospective pretest  $M = 4.11, SD = 1.06$ ; posttest  $M = 5.15, SD = .74$ ),  $F(1, 116) = 124.10 (p < .001)$ , with an overall effect size of .52.

### Perceptions of the Program

After completing the program, participants described their experience as valuable and rewarding. Among the 123 participants, 96.7% agreed that they learned new information, 95.0% felt more confident in their dating relationships, 98.3%

**TABLE 3: Program and Comparison Group Mean (Standard Deviation) Scores on the Importance of Knowing and Exploring the Five Areas of a Potential Mate During the Dating Relationship (FACES)**

Construct	Comparison Group (n = 144)	Program Group (n = 120)			
		Before	After	F-value	Partial $\eta^2$
Family background	7.04 (1.78) <sup>a</sup>	6.54 (2.01) <sup>a</sup>	8.39 (1.78)	100.96	0.46
Attitudes and actions of the conscience	8.29 (1.40)	8.02 (1.69)	8.77 (1.68)	41.10	0.26
Compatibility potential	8.04 (1.32)	7.72 (1.56)	8.52 (1.60)	46.67	0.28
Examples of other relationships	6.18 (2.34)	6.45 (2.23)	7.95 (2.21)	55.64	0.32
Skills in relationships	8.27 (1.53)	8.03 (1.77)	8.87 (1.70)	40.34	0.25

NOTE: Multivariate analyses showed an overall group difference,  $F(5, 258) = 2.3$  ( $p < .05$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ ). All  $F$ -values represent Program Group retrospective pretest and posttest score comparisons, and are significant at  $p < .001$ .

a. Univariate analyses did reveal one difference between the comparison and program group on the importance of getting to know family background. Program participants placed significantly less importance on getting to know family background before the program than the comparison group ( $F[1, 262] = 4.6$  [ $p < .05$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ ].).

**TABLE 4: Program and Comparison Group Mean (Standard Deviation) Scores on the Attitudes About Romance and Mate Selection Subscales**

Construct	Comparison Group (n = 148)	Program Group (n = 120)			
		Before	After	F-value	Partial $\eta^2$
One and only	4.24 (1.36)	4.44 (1.29)	4.45 (1.40)	0.01	0.00
Love is enough	4.51 (1.29)	4.39 (1.37)	3.89 (1.41)	25.91**	0.18
Cohabitation	4.35 (1.67)	4.04 (1.63)	3.46 (1.61)	25.37**	0.18
Opposites complement	3.37 (0.84)	3.29 (0.87)	3.13 (0.96)	4.65*	0.04
Ease of effort	3.78 (1.07)	3.54 (1.30)	3.26 (1.24)	8.73*	0.07
Perfect partner/idealization	4.50 (0.96)	4.59 (1.02)	4.84 (1.20)	10.90**	0.08
Perfect relationship/complete assurance	5.50 (1.04)	5.34 (1.14)	5.83 (1.04)	28.99**	0.20

NOTE: All  $F$ -values represent Program Group retrospective pretest and posttest score comparisons. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

agreed that they planned to use the information learned, 96.7% agreed that the program was helpful, 97.5% agreed that they would recommend this program to other singles, and 96.7% agreed that overall, they were satisfied with the program. The open-ended, qualitative responses indicated similarly positive attitudes about participation in the program. In the words of one respondent, "I really enjoyed and learned a lot from this program. I highly recommend that this program be given often to singles." Another respondent noted "I think this is a good program. It actually opens your eyes to things you may not have thought to see. It has helped me think about things more clearly."

**TABLE 5: Program Participants' Mean (Standard Deviation) Knowledge and Confidence Scores**

Construct	Program Group (n = 117)			F-value	Partial $\eta^2$
	Before	After			
Knowledge	4.26 (0.86)	5.33 (.50)		175.67*	0.60
Confidence	4.11 (1.06)	5.15 (.74)		124.10*	0.52

\* $p < .001$ .

### Post Hoc Analyses

To ensure that the program effects (i.e., change in scores on all dependent variables) were observed among participating singles, regardless of personal characteristics, additional analyses were conducted to examine the interaction effects of time by sex, race, current dating status (in a romantic relationship or not), prior marital status (previously married or not), and current parental status. No significant interaction effects were found, with one exception: a significant Time  $\times$  Gender effect was detected in participants' attitudes about romance and mate selection  $F(7, 112) = 2.11$  ( $p = .05$ ). Univariate contrasts showed that after the program, female participants, on average, tended to agree more with the belief that one should wait to marry until they find the perfect partner than male participants (females: 4.6-4.9; males: 4.6-4.7),  $F(1, 118) = 4.10$  ( $p = .05$ ). Also, female participants agreed less with the belief that love is sufficient reason to marry compared to male participants following the program (females: 4.3-3.6; males: 4.6-4.4),  $F(1, 118) = 6.10$  ( $p = .02$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ ). Overall, the program was found to positively influence, on average, all participants.

Last, MANOVAs were conducted to examine the interaction effects of time by delivery method to determine whether the program effects were influenced by the four approaches used by the instructors (see Table 1). The analyses revealed no differences in program participants' retrospective pretest and posttest scores on the importance placed on FACES,  $F(5, 112) = 1.5$  ( $p = .10$ ); their attitudes about romance and mate selection,  $F(7, 110) = 1.1$  ( $p = .31$ ); and knowledge and confidence gained,  $F(2, 112) = 1.4$  ( $p = .23$ ). Thus, on average, changes in retrospective pretest to posttest scores were similar for each of the four delivery methods.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of our research was to evaluate the PICK program, a relationship education program for singles that was offered as a complement to existing well-being programs in the U.S. Army. When comparing program participants to the nonprogram participants, results showed that program participants were, on average, older, female, non-White, previously married, and parents. Because participation in the program was voluntary, perhaps those who are older may have felt that marriage is more imminent and were, therefore, more likely to volunteer. Similarly, individuals who had been previously married and suffered a divorce might have been more likely to seek out guidance for selecting a partner the second time around. As one program participant who was going through a divorce commented, "This seminar made me feel more confident about dating once again

and identifying the mistakes I made in the past." Although these demographic differences are important to note, they offer further support to the idea that single individuals desire guidance in the mate-selection process, and they are likely to equally benefit from the program regardless of their prior experiences.

This evaluation of the PICK program examined three specific hypotheses. First, it was expected that participants would develop a heightened understanding of the key areas to explore in premarital relationships. The program focused on five key areas that are predictive of marital success: family background, attitudes and actions of the conscience, compatibility potential, examples of other relationships, and skills in relationships. Results showed that compared to those who did not participate in the PICK program, participants of the program placed significantly greater emphasis on getting to know the key predictors of marital success when dating a potential marriage partner. After completing the program, participants made comments in their open-ended responses, which reinforced these attitudinal shifts. One participant noted that the "program really taught [her] how important family is when it comes to marriage choices!" Another participant remarked that the program "opens your eyes to things you may not have thought to see. It [helps you] think about things more clearly." A clear attitudinal change was reported for participants following the program; however the longevity of this attitudinal shift, as well as the translation, into behavioral changes is unknown.

Next, we hypothesized that participants' would have more positive and realistic expectations about marriage and mate selection after completing the program. Results indicated that program participants were significantly less likely to adopt the unrealistic or constraining beliefs that love is enough (particularly females), that cohabitation is a good idea before marriage, that opposite personalities are complementary, that choosing a partner should be easy, and that finding the right partner is just a matter of chance. Thus, participants became more cognizant of the intentional efforts involved in courtship and mate selection. According to one participant, "[This program] gave me insight and made me think over what I thought a relationship should be."

However, an unexpected, yet enlightening, finding from this study was that program participants, and in particular females, formulated more (vs. less) constraining beliefs regarding idealization (i.e., waiting to marry until they find the right partner) and complete assurance (i.e., waiting to marry until they are certain of marital success). It has been argued that persons who hold these unrealistic beliefs may be constrained from making the decision to marry (Cobb et al., 2003). Together with the finding that no change occurred in the belief that there is a one and only partner for them, it is possible that program participants became more attentive to the importance of taking time during the courtship process to get to know their partner, to select the "right" partner, and to see whether their relationship is ready for matrimony. These findings may be attributed to the PICK program's emphasis on being more deliberate in the mate-selection process, which could have influenced respondents' perceptions of the questions regarding these specific constraining beliefs. As one participant described, "I basically knew all the facts but used to toss them aside and 'follow my heart.' Now I understand the importance of being rational when entering a relationship." Still, caution is warranted in future delivery of this program so as to not unintentionally increase participants' unrealistic expectations, while educating them on the value and process of getting to know a partner and pacing their relationship in a healthy way.

For our final hypothesis, the program was found to significantly improve participants' knowledge and confidence in their abilities to use the skills taught in the program. Program participants felt more knowledgeable about developing a healthy relationship that will lead to a healthy marriage. As well, program participants felt more confident in their abilities to use the skills learned to develop healthy relationships compared to nonprogram participants. As one participant noted, "This program has reassured me that I am making a right decision in my engagement because all the steps that should be taken I've seen that I have taken them." The confidence expressed by this participant stands in stark contrast to the uncertainty expressed by a nonprogram participant regarding her current relationship and decision to marry:

My boyfriend and I have been dating for a year, but it has not gotten serious until about 4 months ago when we moved in together. Now I am pregnant, I think we moved too fast but on the other hand maybe we should get married just to make it right and easier. But I really don't know what to do.

### IMPLICATIONS

The Army has a vested interest in the health and well-being of military families because of the influence that marital and family life satisfaction have on soldier retention and readiness (Drummet et al., 2003). The findings of this study lend preliminary support to the advantages of educating single soldiers, in addition to married couples (Schumm et al., 2000; Stanley et al., 2005), about the development of healthy relationships that could lead to happy and stable marriages. This program may assist in educating soldiers about the importance of taking time in their relationships to make lasting and healthy relationship decisions. Understanding the relationship development process and feeling confident in practicing the skills learned also can be helpful in discouraging premature marital transitions, particularly prior to war-time and service deployment. As noted by a commanding officer at the DLI, "This training is a valuable tool in helping young soldiers make informed and balanced choices before entering relationships."

In addition, the PICK program content is not military specific and, therefore, is also appropriate for civilian use in general. As previously noted, an increasing number of today's youth are at risk for forming unhealthy relationships (Montgomery, 2005; Silliman & Schumm, 2004), and this program may be particularly helpful to them. In fact, some of the program participants noted that "this program should be given to high school students, and be wide spread" and "hopefully, it can be offered to more people at a younger age." As well, post hoc analyses revealed that, on average, this program had a positive influence on all singles regardless of sex, race, dating, and prior marital and parental status. These findings suggest that educators may be able to offer this program to heterogeneous groups, which makes marketing and recruitment efforts more manageable; however, additional research is needed to reinforce these findings.

Our findings also have implications for how family life educators may choose to teach the program. Analyses indicated that the findings remained constant across the four delivery methods employed by the Chaplains. Although the number of sessions within which the program was offered varied, each method exposed the participants to the same content within a minimum of 6 hrs, which included lectures

of some sort, either live or by video, and incorporated discussions. In fact, during follow-up interviews to process their experiences in teaching the program, Chaplains emphasized that group discussion, where stories and examples of the concepts were shared, made the presentation and comprehension of the abstract concepts of relationship dynamics and partner selection much easier. Also, Chaplains who used movie clips believed that this approach helped participants (and instructors) better understand the pragmatic application of the PICK concepts to "real life." When asked what helped them most effectively convey the material to their participants, all the instructors also hailed the RAM visual (Figure 1) as the most beneficial teaching aid. Overall, the instructors only reported a couple of challenges with teaching the program. For example, the Chaplain at FJ who taught the program in a 1-day format (Method 3), commented that "[this] was overwhelming for the participants—information overload." Another Chaplain noted that the only challenge he experienced was digesting the material as a new instructor and offered a helpful recommendation for fellow educators:

There is a lot of material that is brand new and daunting to teach, so team up with some others and share the sessions. It is much less intimidating when you can sit back and watch the co-instructors. You learn by their strengths and weaknesses. When you watch another teach you figure out what you want to do differently, and what you want to emulate from their style and approach. But as these experiences accumulate you begin to own the program, while still being true to the material. We all found that we taught more confidently and energetically when we knew the material, had taught it a couple of times, and felt like it had become our own.

Hence, the delivery method of this program seems to be flexible and can be left to the discretion of the family life educator, as long as in some capacity it includes the common elements suggested (i.e., lecture, discussion, minimum of 6 hrs to cover the program content).

### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although the short-term attitudinal shifts influenced by this program were positive, the long-term effects of the PICK program cannot be determined from this study. One limitation of this study is that the data were based on self-report questionnaires. Although self-report methods generally provide accurate assessments of participant attitudes, responses based on social desirability may be of concern. By including behavioral assessments and/or observational assessments in future studies, researchers can be expected to better understand whether reported attitudes are reflective of actual behaviors. Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether the short-term attitudinal shifts are predictive of long-term behavioral changes in premarital relationships.

Another methodological limitation of this study was the use of a retrospective pretest to assess initial knowledge and attitudes rather than a true pretest design. Our decision to use a retrospective pretest/posttest design was deliberate because of limitations associated with true pretest–posttest assessments, the short duration of the program, challenges in collecting and matching pretest and posttest surveys, and advantages of the retrospective design. However, until there is more evidence that retrospective pretests yield reliable data in studies of personal and family relationship issues, future research on the effectiveness of this program

should use a traditional experimental design. Alternatively, future research could consider collecting pretest data at the beginning of the program and retrospective pretest data at the end of the program to determine whether response shift bias is a factor to be considered. As well, collecting posttest data from a comparison group would more assuredly reveal whether changes in attitudes were truly a function of the program content versus time or other circumstantial factors that may influence a single adult's experiences and beliefs. Still, the current findings offer a clear and initial demonstration of the potential effectiveness relationship education can have for single adults.

An additional limitation also lies with the variation in the delivery of the program. Post hoc analyses showed that variations in instruction were not associated with variations in program participants' retrospective pretest and posttest scores. However, the relatively small within group sample sizes and the nonrandomization of our sample into each delivery method may have limited the power of our analyses to detect statistically significant differences. Additional research is warranted before conclusively determining that the effects of this program actually hold constant across various methods of delivery (e.g., number of sessions, hours/session, teaching format).

A final limitation is related to the homogeneous sample of U.S. Army soldiers. Although the participants were varied in terms of age, race, and other demographic characteristics, the results are reflective of a select group of people and may not be generalizable to all singles. Soldiers spend much of their time immersed in an environment consisting of other soldiers. Individuals who belong to a less homogeneous group may be different from soldiers who share a similar lifestyle. Still, the finding that the program positively influenced all participants, regardless of demographic characteristics or past relationship history, offers an optimistic outlook for those who replicate and further the study of this relationship education program with different audiences. It is recommended that future researchers evaluate the PICK program with other military groups, as well as with nonsoldier populations of singles.

## CONCLUSION

Nielsen, Pinsof, Rampage, Solomon, and Goldstein (2004) argued that, in general, singles "lack a map for dealing with the highly predictable difficulties that are associated with future marriages" (p. 487). Thus, educating singles on how to develop healthy, romantic relationships can be beneficial to their later dating and marital satisfaction, and for U.S. Army soldiers, their satisfaction with military life. Notably, there is limited research that specifically explores the effectiveness of relationship educational programming on youth and singles entering romantic relationships. These findings demonstrate that educating singles on how to develop healthy, romantic relationships is advantageous and can serve as a stepping stone for future researchers to evaluate the long-term effects of premarital education programs.

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