And Do You Take This Stranger To Be Your Lawfully Wedded Wife?:

The Usefulness of Social Penetration Theory within Premarital Counseling

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This Project is Dedicated to My Husband

Travis M. Forkner

Who made sure I was eating and sleeping throughout the entire thesis process

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And to My Parents

Kenneth and Marcella Beich

For modeling the importance of hard work and dedication

Abstract

With fifty percent of today's marriages ending in divorce, one begins to wonder if engaged couples should be more prepared when entering into a marriage commitment. This mixed-methods study investigates the function of social penetration theory within premarital counseling programs. The research was designed to address three questions: (1) Do engaged couples believe they know the depth and breadth of their partner adequately enough to be prepared for marriage after receiving premarital counseling? (2) Do counselors indirectly support the basic premise of social penetration theory by actively using strategies to help engaged partners reveal important aspects of the breadth and depth of their personalities before entering into marriage? (3) What areas of deficiency do counselors and couples find exist in current premarital counseling programs in regards to reaching an intimate depth and breadth of each partner's personality? In order to answer these questions, ten pastoral counselors and ten newly married couples were interviewed regarding their perspectives on the premarital counseling program. The results revealed that pastors support the premises of social penetration theory in that they encourage couples to spend a vast amount of time together, learning about each other, before committing to marriage. Pastors can effectively use a variety of methods to get couples engaged in deeper conversations during premarital counseling, including asking the couple direct and meaningful questions, building a close relationship with the couple, and using an inventory or questionnaire to reveal important aspects of the couple's relationship that need addressing. Premarital counseling was perceived by both pastors and couples to be stronger at discussing certain areas in depth rather than addressing a wide breadth of topics. The majority of the couples (60%) were satisfied with the depth and breadth of their premarital counseling material, but those who did wish to discuss topics more fully wanted to engage in more conversations

about finances, developing boundaries with in-laws, sexual intimacy, and dealing with anger. Some depth and breadth of knowledge about one's partner cannot be learned until one begins marriage, and most couples found they talked more about the physical details of sex, practical finances, and coordinating schedules after their wedding day.

*Key Words:  Social Penetration Theory, Self-Disclosure, Premarital Counseling, Premarital Inventories, Engagement Period, Pastoral Counselors, Marriage, Personalities, Sexual Intimacy*

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Choosing a spouse is a momentous and special decision in a person's life in American culture. However, this pronouncement is often treated lightly, with young men and women entering into a supposed lifetime commitment without any preparation. Only 33% of engaged couples take part in marriage preparation in some form, such as through a weekend workshop or in meeting with a pastor for counseling before the big day (Silliman and Schumm, "Marriage Preparation" 138). Although couples often fail to see the value of premarital counseling— thinking their true love for one another is enough to conquer Rome in a day—perhaps there is indeed a need for marriage preparation. The divorce rate across the United States has remained at a steady high. Smith, Carlson, Stevens-Smith, and Dennison report that 40% of Caucasian children and 75% of African-American children experience divorce in the family by the age of 16 (155). Because of this epidemic of divorce, state governments are even encouraging couples to better prepare for marriage. Many states require some form of marriage education before a license is given and others offer discounted or waived license fees in exchange for proof of counseling (Stanley 272). However, making a couple aware of the importance of marriage preparation is only the first step; premarital counseling then has to be effective.

According to researchers Carroll and Doherty in the 2003 article entitled "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs: A Meta-Analytic Review of Outcome Research," a proper premarital education program is one that is "geared at providing couples with an awareness of potential problems that may occur after marriage and the information and resources to effectively prevent or ameliorate such problems" (106). A variety of approaches to premarital counseling are offered, such as skills-based programs, premarital inventories, counseling in church settings, class-settings, counseling through mentor couples, and other self-

learned methods (Williams, "Premarital Counseling" 207). Past research studies have indicated that couples are generally satisfied with their premarital counseling programs (Russell and Lyster; Williams, Riley, Risch, and Van Dyke). Other studies found what couples perceive to be the most important aspects of premarital counseling. Having a trustworthy and professional leader ranked one of the top answers in one study (Sullivan and Anderson). A separate study found couples most preferred time to interact with their partner and the use of a premarital inventory (Williams, Riley, Risch, and Van Dyke).

This current study explores another possibility for the high divorce rate. Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor's social penetration theory, which was established in 1973, supposes that people grow to know more about one another and at deeper levels through self-disclosure. Some time for interaction is thus needed for a relationship to grow intimate (15). Also, the theorists propose that with deeper levels of information revealed come greater costs and rewards for the relationship (41). This is why partners need to develop a level of trust before deeper differences can be revealed. When couples move too fast into a relationship and decide to marry before enough time is shared in which trust can be developed, they will have a more difficult time dealing with conflicts that arise later in their marriage, as opposed to couples who have progressed steadily and have a "strong reward reservoir" for differences to be absorbed (42).

Despite the numerous articles on premarital preparation programs as well as the plethora of research studies that have been conducted on social penetration theory and self-disclosure, there is still a great need for further study. For instance, although much research has been done in analyzing social penetration theory within the context of the marriage relationship (Baxter and Dindia; Hendrick; Honeycutt and Godwin; Jourard and Lasakow; Rusbult, Drigotas, and Verette; Tostedt and Stokes, "Relation of Verbal"; Van den Broucke, Vandereycken, and Vertommen),

no study to date has explored the premises of social penetration theory applied to premarital counseling. Additionally, many of the studies that address premarital counseling and self-disclosure have been conducted within the field of psychology and placed in counseling journals and not communication journals. This study therefore adds research strictly within the field of communication studies. Thirdly, most studies have focused on the couples' perceptions of counseling. No study has yet compared and contrasted the different perspectives of pastors who are conducting the counseling with the couples receiving the counseling. Finally, previous studies are also deficient because they are dated. For instance, gender roles were once more clearly defined by society. Now, the new population of young adults who are receiving premarital counseling have to discuss and define their own roles within their marriage. How gender roles need to be dealt with in premarital counseling has therefore changed. Thus, updated research on marriage preparation programming is necessary.

*Significance*

This study is significant to the field of communication because it explores social penetration theory within a new context. It is hoped that this study can also be beneficial to pastors and the engaged couples they counsel in that it addresses what topics can be better covered in premarital counseling sessions, what methods pastors can employ to help couples reach new areas of depth and breadth of disclosure, and what areas of deficit couples believe existed in their training when they entered into a marriage relationship. Marriage is a serious commitment, and premarital counselors have a responsibility to warn couples about what this vow entails. According to the founders of social penetration theory, "Americans are more prone to expose quickly many areas of themselves to others (breadth), but usually reach only superficial levels of exchanged (depth)" (Altman and Taylor 60). Therefore, a counselor should

employ strategies that evoke candid communication from the couple and be concerned with helping a couple to know each other more fully.  Certain topics must be addressed ahead of time and discrepancies in the relationship made known. Although love can conquer many trials, love will not allow the wife who does not want any children and the husband who desires a large family both to get what they want. And counselors may have the last chance to warn a couple who does not appear to be compatible in this or other areas. It is also anticipated that in improving premarital counseling programs in the future, more couples will engage in this process in days to come.

### *Purpose Statement*

The purpose of this study is to discover the role that the concepts of social penetration theory play in premarital counseling programs, to ascertain what methods counselors are using to prepare couples for healthy marriage relationships, and to determine if couples believed they were adequately equipped for marriage by their counselor's training. The theoretical framework of social penetration theory, which assumes that greater intimacy is reached between relational partners as they self-disclose new aspects of the depth and breadth of their personality, is used to determine if premarital counseling programs offer enough methods and material to help couples cover a wider breadth of information about each other on deep levels. Using the lens of a pragmatic perspective, the researcher employed a mixed-methods approach, with interviews consisting of closed-ended and open-ended questions as the method of data collection. The sample was formed through snowball-sampling and yielded ten pastoral counselors and ten newly married couples who shared their perspectives on premarital counseling with the researcher. Interview questions were developed in order to shed light on three research questions:

RQ 1: Do engaged couples believe they know the depth and breadth of their partner adequately enough to be prepared for marriage after receiving premarital counseling?

RQ 2: Do counselors indirectly support the basic premise of social penetration theory by actively using strategies to help engaged partners reveal important aspects of the breadth and depth of their personalities before entering into marriage?

RQ 3: What areas of deficiency do counselors and couples find exist in current premarital counseling programs in regards to reaching an intimate depth and breadth of each partner's personality?

*Overview*

The following thesis contains a total of five chapters and five appendices. The remaining chapters of this thesis include a literature review, the methodology, the results and discussion, limitations to the current study, and recommendations for future research. In the literature review, previous research on social penetration theory, self-disclosure, typical gender differences in self-disclosure, the role of self-disclosure within marriage relationships, and the role of self-disclosure within counseling will be presented. A brief synopsis of the history of premarital counseling will also be provided, along with current studies on premarital counseling programs. Following that section, in the methodology, the research design of this current study will be further explained and justified. The results and discussion chapter will present the data from the participants and provide answers to the research questions. The final chapter will discuss avenues for future research studies based on the limitations found for the current study and then conclude the thesis.

Now that an overview of the current study has been delineated, one should focus attention first on information that past research has yielded. Before understanding the results of

the study and the future implications, the importance of appropriate self-disclosure between romantic partners must be reviewed, along with the history and current trends of premarital counseling programs through which more self-disclosure often results. Therefore, the next chapter is a review of the literature that will provide background information upon which the current study builds.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The strongest relationship that one holds in his or her lifetime is that which is formed with one's spouse. No two people should be closer or more intimate than a husband and a wife. Therefore, one should strive to know his or her spouse more than any other individual and make this knowledge of the other grow in an attempt to become deep and wide, inside and out— complete. This comes through the social penetration process and through self-disclosure, and therefore the beginning section of this literature review is dedicated to explicating the assumptions of that theory.

Following an appraisal of this original theory, an expanded understanding of social penetration theory and self-disclosure is next gleaned through the delineation of other studies related to the theory. Included in this section is literature that has considered self-disclosure to different targets. As counselors take on various roles when counseling engaged couples in their preparation for marriage, such as the role of teacher, investigator, and parent, previous studies of self-disclosure enacted in these roles is significant to the current study. Many previous research studies have also compared and contrasted the patterns of self-disclosure of the two genders. As the current study investigates the engagement and early marriage stages of heterosexual couples, this section provides necessary insight to consider before moving into the new research.

The next section of the literature review is included because people, as well as relationships, are always changing. Irwin Altman and Dalmas A. Taylor state, "Relationships do not just grow forever or remain stable" (13). After the wedding bells ring, increased maintenance and communication are necessary to keep a marriage relationship strong. Thus, this next section brings to light useful communication patterns and strategies for marital partners to employ. One such strategy for maintenance is continued self-disclosure. This section is particularly applicable

to the current study because knowing what is necessary to maintain a marriage should be of concern to engaged couples who are preparing to enter this unique relationship and also to premarital counselors who guide couples into this union.

Finally, the topic of premarital counseling programs in general is considered. As one intention of the current study is to enhance the breadth and depth of self-disclosure between an engaged pair during premarital counseling, a review of the history and current state of premarital counseling programs is imperative. But the couple does not only build intimacy between themselves by their self-disclosure during counseling, they also self-disclose to a counselor. Research on premarital counseling processes and self-disclosure within the counseling setting is also considered here.

It should have become clear through this introduction that many pieces interrelate when developing and implementing an effective premarital counseling program. One such element is adequate self-disclosure. The current study was conducted to add to this existing research presented below.

### Social Penetration Theory Defined

Irwin Altman and Dalmas A. Taylor are the parents of social penetration theory. This theory was established in 1973 and explained in their book *Social Penetration: The Development of Interpersonal Relationships*. The general premise of the theory follows that all people are made up of complex personalities that are revealed to others gradually through interpersonal interactions that move from superficial to intimate. A personality is defined as "the systematic organization of an almost indefinite number of 'items,' represented by the smallest shaped subdivisions in the figure. These are the individual's ideas, beliefs, feelings, and emotions about

himself, other people, and the world" (Altman and Taylor 15). In this theory, personalities are divided into sections of breadth and depth.

There are two aspects to breadth. "One can refer to breadth of personality in terms of the number of major topical areas or categories, " which is called breadth category (Altman and Taylor 16). In addition, within each breadth category also lies breadth frequency, which is "the number of frequency of individual items within each personality category" (Altman and Taylor 16). For instance, if category A represents "sex," then breadth frequency includes specifics within that category such as personal sexual experiences, attitudes towards premarital sex, fears about sex, and more.

Depth, the other facet of an individual's personality, is explained by the theorists using an analogy of an onion. Each personality consists of multiple layers, like an onion skin, that must be breached one-by-one before going into the deeper layers. Altman and Taylor explain, "As one goes toward central layers, personality items vary from common to unique and from high to low visibility. By 'common' and 'visible' we mean characteristics which are easily observable and which can be inferred without extensive social interaction" (18). For instance, although demographic information such as race and gender can be seen without any verbal, interpersonal engagement, deeper emotions and attitudes lie hidden within a person. This deeper region also includes "beliefs about self-identity, dependence on others, and self-worth and is, therefore, influential, private, non-visible, and unique" (Altman and Taylor 18). So as one goes deeper into a person's layers, the information to be revealed is more intimate.

When one considers the expanse of breadth and the vastness of depth, it becomes clear to see that much time and interaction are needed to best understand the "whole" of another person. The social penetration theorists explain that "as people continue to interact and maintain a

relationship, they gradually move toward deeper areas of their mutual personalities through the use of words, bodily behavior, and environmental behaviors" (Altman and Taylor 27). Therefore, by nature, an interpersonal relationship that is growing develops in both breadth and depth of communicated topics.

A second portion of Altman and Taylor's theory involves costs and rewards. "More central layers of personality have both greater costs and rewards compared with superficial levels—in terms of influence, social desirability, vulnerability, and so on," they suggest (41). This is why social penetration theory describes a process. People generally are said to progress slowly in interpersonal relationships and to "encounter a minimum of conflict until it can be managed and absorbed by a strong reward reservoir" (Altman and Taylor 42). The greater the ratio of rewards to costs, the quicker the penetration process will occur. Once openness in breadth and depth is achieved, "people become willing to criticize and to praise one another, to demonstrate positive and negative feelings, and to be less inhibited in evaluating one another" (Altman and Taylor 135). Partners feel safer amidst their differences because of the trust that has been developed.

Most often the social penetration process has a fast rate of growth in early and middle stages and slows in later stages of development (Altman and Taylor 44). This slowdown is important, as those who do not encounter it often undergo crisis. For example, the theorists state, "Newly married couples are often rudely jarred as they over commit themselves to one another too hastily. Often they reach areas of exchange of a very intimate nature and suffer unexpected surprises…and realize that after the first period of bliss that the growth of their relationship is a long and gradual process" (44). This shows that developing greater intimacy through the social penetration process is important before committing to a marriage. Altman and Taylor even

suppose that long-term courtships, the "cultural wisdom of the past," were based on this same idea—as a way of providing a "broad experiential base" for couples (172).

Conflict is viewed by the theorists as an essential part of relationship development. "The better people know one another, or the more dependent they are on one another, the more likely it is they will have arguments or conflicts," they propose (168). Therefore, when engaged couples claim never to fight or disagree, it should raise red flags—not praises. The couple should question if they have reached adequate levels of depth and breadth in the other's core personality. "On the other hand," Altman and Taylor explain, "Longer-term relationships (broader and deeper in their profile) should be better able to withstand equivalent conflicts because of the lessened impact of disagreement on the total relationship" (172). This sheds light onto why long-term friends and spouses can typically absorb the same conflict more readily than newlyweds.

Altman and Taylor note that along with increased intimacy in verbal exchanges, physical distance zones also narrow as relationships grow. Partners begin to allow the other to use "my" things, which reflects a special relationship. The authors explain, "As a relationship grows, especially if the parties live with one another as roommates, marital partners, or otherwise, a large number of props and objects in their environment become common and interchangeably used…from very ordinary ones to relatively personal ones" (110). This area of the theory is especially of importance to the current study, as engaged partners must understand they are soon to share all areas of themselves with another, including their finances and other special possessions.

Openness is also accompanied by nonverbal communication. As intimate levels of each partner's personality are penetrated through conversation, "the more intimate and more parts of

the body [are] touched by the other person" (Altman and Taylor 134). Thus, sexual intercourse, an act traditionally saved for married partners, is a full depth and breadth of personhood revealed. To share a home and to engage in intimate touching should both be accompanied by attempts at complete verbal disclosure and knowledge of the other's personality.

These concepts of social penetration theory provide the basis of understanding for the current study. Engaged couples should strive to reach an adequate depth and breadth of knowledge of the person they are committing to before entering into a marriage relationship. However, it is important to draw attention to the fact that this is something that cannot be accurately measured. Also, no matter how far couples go in the social penetration process, it is probably never complete. As stated by the theorists, "There may be spurts and slowdowns, plateaus and sudden new upward cycles, long periods of stability…No matter how close an interpersonal relationship, each individual still exists as an integral, independent entity, to some extent impermeable and not completely understandable by the other person" (141).

### Social Penetration Theory and Self-Disclosure Expanded

Altman and Taylor's social penetration theory has been expanded through other research studies. Chen and Nakazawa noted that the empirical basis of the original theory was observations of social relationships in modern urban and suburban America. Therefore, they decided to test the applicability of social penetration theory in intercultural and interracial relationships. A questionnaire that took the 252 participants 20-25 minutes to complete was filled out in order to determine the influence of individualism-collectivism, relational intimacy, and reciprocity on both topics and dimensions of self-disclosure. The authors discovered that consistent with social penetration theory, levels of self-disclosure progressed as the intercultural/interracial relationships developed. It was also found that relational intimacy had

greater influence on close intercultural and interracial friendships than did culture. Therefore, the authors suggest that "the key to overcoming challenges implicated by cultural differences in intercultural relationships is to develop personal relationships" (Chen and Nakazawa 95).

Joe Ayres executed a study to compare Altman and Taylor's social penetration theory to Berger and Calabrese's uncertainty reduction theory. While Berger and Calabrese argued that strangers and acquaintances ask more questions than partners in more involved relationships (Berger and Calabrese 101), Altman and Taylor predicted that the amount of questions will stay the same when comparing a dyad of acquaintances and a dyad of friends but that "strangers should use more descriptive questions than friends, while friends should use more evaluative questions than strangers" (Altman and Taylor 6). In order to test these contradictory suppositions, Ayres audio-taped and coded half-hour conversations between six pairs of strangers and six pairs of friends. Results conflicted with Berger and Calabrese's assertion that the amount of questions asked lessens with time spent in a relationship. Indeed, strangers used more descriptive patterns of communicative questioning than friends, and friends used more evaluative patterns, but both types of dyads used the same frequency of questions (Ayres 199). Therefore, Ayres's study supported Altman and Taylor's social penetration theory.

Morton's 1978 study compared intimacy and reciprocity of ongoing communication between strangers and between spouses. Two aspects of intimacy were studied—description and evaluation. Description is "the privacy of facts disclosed about oneself," whereas evaluation is "the depth of emotion, judgment, and opinion one expresses" (73). Morton was aware that a person can make an important discussion topic trivial "by using clichés or abstract and impersonal forms of communication," just as one can personalize a trivial topic by "introducing very private factual information or expressing strong feelings or opinions" (73). Therefore, the

topic of discussion (e.g., suicide, sex, sleep habits, dinner plans) mattered little, while the content of the discussion was significant.

Morton's hypothesis stemmed from the premises of social penetration theory. She predicted that intimacy would increase whereas reciprocity would decrease as an acquaintance relationship progressed. To test this, twenty-four married couples and twenty-four opposite-sex pairs of strangers were video-taped while engaging in a discussion of topics from four lists, each including five intimate and five non-intimate topics. Participants were told to spend as much time as they wished on the task. Discussions were coded according to four categories: highly private facts and highly personal feelings or judgments, highly personal feelings or judgments, highly private facts, or relatively public facts and a low level of feelings or judgments (75). Many insights resulted from this study: both types of dyads discussed fewer intimate topics than non-intimate topics; there was more intimacy of self-disclosure among spouses, especially descriptive intimacy; strangers exchanged more public facts; females in both types of dyads communicated more intimately than males, especially evaluative intimacy; strangers tended to guard private facts in discussing intimate topics; spouses tended to introduce private facts into trivial topics; and communication of spouses contained more private factual material, both with and without personal affect or opinion (77). Overall, the findings of this study were consistent with social penetration theory.

One of the main components of social penetration theory, self-disclosure, has also been studied extensively in research. Hendrick defines self-disclosure as "the verbal revelation of one's thoughts and feelings to another person" (1150). Cozby details three basic parameters of self-disclosure as "(a) breadth, or amount of information disclosed, (b) depth, or intimacy of information disclosed, and (c) duration, or time spent describing each item of information" (75).

Chelune, Skiffington, and Williams expand on these parameters, identifying five: "amount of personal information disclosed; intimacy of the information disclosed; rate or duration of disclosure; affective manner of presentation; and disclosure flexibility, the appropriate cross-situational modulation of disclosure" (599).

Self-disclosure does not mean simply increasing interactions. In a longitudinal study of friendship development by Robert B. Hays, it was determined that "the intimacy level of dyadic interaction accounted for an increasing percentage of the variance in ratings of friendship intensity beyond that accounted for by the sheer quantity of interaction" (909). More intimate exchanges—not more frequent exchanges—were the result of better friendships in Hays's study. Thus purposefully deepening one's self-disclosure with his or her partner should have a role in premarital counseling.

Wayne E. Hensley explains self-disclosure in affective-cognitive terms as an innate and programmed response: "That is, when A reveals something to B, the response of B is to automatically reveal something of comparable importance to A" (299). Therefore, when paired with a high-disclosing subject, a low-disclosing subject will increase his or her disclosure output to the level of the high discloser (299). These conclusions were drawn in the article "A Theory of the Valenced Other: The Intersection of the Looking-Glass-Self and Social Penetration" through theoretical analysis. An empirical study by Ehrlich and Graeven confirms Hensley's philosophies. "Mutual self-disclosures tend to be reciprocal and to become more intimate as relationships proceed over time," the authors state (390). However, in their study of forty undergraduate students, they found that while levels of intimacy of self-disclosure were shared, topics of intimacy were not. Participants were placed at a table with an experimenter who followed two scripts—one low in intimacy and one high in intimacy—and were asked to

communicate with him for sixteen consecutive minutes. The conversations were video-taped and coded according to the smallest segment of verbal behavior that could be classified. Measurements of breadth (the number of topics self-disclosed and the total number of statements about the self) and depth (intimacy level measured by two categories of intimate and not intimate) were scored. As was hypothesized, intimacy was reciprocated according to the manipulation of the experimenter, but topical categories were not reciprocated directly (Ehrlich and Graeven 398). For example, the authors explain, "If a person tells you X about himself, it may be that any range of exchanges, e.g. W, X, Y, or Z, may be normatively appropriate" (398). Although self-disclosure follows a pattern of intimacy, it is far from being robotic.

Researchers have found both positive and negative aspects of self-disclosure. Komarovsky summarizes, "On the one hand, the desire to escape loneliness, to find support, reassurance, appreciation, perhaps absolution—all generate the need to share feelings and thoughts with others. Pitted against these advantages are the risks of sharing, e.g., possible criticism, ridicule, loss of power in future encounters, and the like" (679). Each individual in a relationship must balance the tension between over-disclosure and under-disclosure.

This was certainly true for the 238 college students who participated in a study facilitated by Derlega and her colleagues. The authors sought to discover what attributions were generated by participants for disclosing and not disclosing personal information to mothers, fathers, same-sex friends, and dating partners. After a questionnaire evoked open-ended responses from participants, the data were coded into categories of like-answers. The top reasons given to explain why the subjects disclose were "having a close relationship, trusting the other, and seeking social support" (Derlega et al. 118). Top reasons not to disclose were "protecting the other, fear of losing the other's respect, and privacy" (118). Overall, the study supported the

notion of costs and rewards. The authors explain, "Persons weigh multiple goals in managing the dialectic between the need to disclose versus the need to keep information hidden" (128).

A similar study by Hays, published in "A Longitudinal Study of Friendship Development", followed eighty-four male and female freshmen throughout their first semester of college as they began a relationship with two acquaintances they had just met. At the end of a twelve week period, participants stated the costs and benefits of their two new relationships. Seven benefits emerged from the responses, which were: "companionship, confidant, emotional support, information exchange, instrumental value of other, self-esteem, and general value of having a friend" (917). The six cost categories that were found were: "time expenditure, added responsibilities, emotional aggravation, loss of independence, negative influence of person on self, and negative effects on other relationships" (Hays 917). While all of the participants' relationships led to both positive benefits and negative costs, an interesting development the study found was that the more a friendship between two people was strengthened, the more the one became a confidant to the other. Both the dyads that developed into friendships and the dyads that remained "non-close friends" at the end of the semester listed "companionship" as a benefit, but only those dyads that became "close" friends at the end of the semester listed the benefit of having a "confidant" (Hays 918). Married partners should experience this benefit of gaining a confidant through deep self-disclosure as well.

Another noteworthy conclusion of Hays's study was that relationship costs came as a result of growth in the friendship. For example, "The subjects' reports of emotional aggravation experienced in their friendships increased as the relationships progressed" (921). When relationships were just beginning to form, the costs were few and the gains were many. However, after the ninth week of the study, costs became more frequently noted. As one female respondent

said, "I've gotten to know her better, and I feel we are closer, but I also know her bad points more, which causes her to get on my nerves at times" (Hays 922). The subjects' comments suggested that "the increase in emotional aggravation resulted from increased knowledge and familiarity between friends" (922). Therefore, one should not run from costs but embrace them as a sign of positive growth in a relationship. Likewise, conflict need not always be seen as a negative factor in a relationship. Instead, it is an opportunity for the dyad to grow.

As previously mentioned, although an appropriate amount of self-disclosure is healthy in an interpersonal relationship, too much or too little disclosure is a relational hindrance. Paul C. Cozby, after an in-depth review of the literature on verbal disclosure of information about oneself, explains an overall conclusion: "Medium amounts of disclosure from another person indicate his desire for a closer relationship and his trustfulness, yet another who communicates a great deal about himself may be seen to lack discretion and to be untrustworthy" (81). Other studies have looked more specifically at this privacy and self-disclosure dialectic.

Sidney Jourard, author of many published works on the self-disclosing self, discusses the psychological tensions of privacy in contrast to openness. In his article, "Some Psychological Aspects of Privacy", he defines privacy as "an outcome of a person's wish to withhold from others certain knowledge as to his past and present experience and action and his intentions for the future" (307). Jourard explains important reasons to remain private while also noting the necessity to display a relative amount of openness. One main reason to keep the self private is the cause of society. Society forces individuals into "roles" (male/female, mother/father, son/daughter, wife/husband, occupation, etc.), and each role has specific definitions and regulations. Should one deviate from these set standards, he or she is "faced with the prospect of punishment from patterned role-behavior" ("Some Psychological Aspects" 308). This must be

avoided; one must be careful of how he or she appears before others. Often the true private self is withheld in order to conform to an expected public image, and too much repression of self to fit these appearances. It can lead to mental illnesses. Therefore, Jourard argues that everyone must have a "private place—some locus that is inviolable by others except at the person's express invitation" in which one can be free in his or her own personality without fear of social stigma ("Some Psychological Aspects" 311). In sum, society must be made of members who draw a sharp line between the public and the private self.

However, the function of self-disclosure, according to Jourard, has a place as well. The main determinant of using self-disclosure is having a fitting relationship in which this can occur. "More specifically," Jourard explains, "it has been found that disclosure of one's experience is most likely when the other person is perceived as a trustworthy person of good will and/or as one who is willing to disclose…in the same depth and breadth" ("Some Psychological Aspects" 311). Thus, self-disclosure is viewed as a reciprocal phenomenon in which there is a reward for both the one being disclosed to and the self-discloser. This "disclosure begets disclosure" phenomenon is dubbed "the dyadic effect" ("Some Psychological Aspects" 311). It is important for every person to have a relationship that evokes self-disclosure. Jourard, as a psychotherapist, realizes that both privacy and self-disclosure have importance. Therefore, at times fully self-disclosing the inner person is healthy; at times, playing the part that society expects is safer.

Another study, which involved 400 undergraduate student participants, 57% of whom were female, tested the correlation between affinity-seeking competence, self-disclosure, and self-awareness via anonymous and self-administered questionnaires. It was found that most self-disclosure dimensions (valence, intent, honestly, amount, depth) correlated with competence in a linear manner, and "the strongest linear relationship is between self-disclosure valence and

affinity-seeking competence" (Rubin, Rubin, and Martin 120). Therefore, people are able to make themselves seem more attractive by disclosing positive information. Self-awareness was not found to mediate self-disclosure and affinity-seeking.

A meta-analysis of the existing literature on self-disclosure and liking was performed by Collins and Miller in 1994. The researchers executed a literature search for "self-disclosure, liking, attraction, and reciprocity" in all published sources (i.e. books, articles, conference papers) and coded for analysis all publications with statistical data regarding self-disclosure and liking or attraction (460). Three final conclusions resulted from the meta-analysis: "People who engage in intimate disclosures tend to be liked more than people who disclose at lower rates; people disclose more to those whom they initially like; and people like others as a result of having disclosed to them" (471).

Myers and Brann's study considered how instructors can establish and enhance their credibility through self-disclosure. Thirty-eight male and twenty-nine female (N=67) undergraduate college students were divided into nine focus groups that met to discuss ten predetermined questions. Each audio-taped group session lasted between thirty and fifty minutes. Self-disclosure was most effective when it related to the students or the course material. According to the students, character and caring were demonstrated by instructors when their self-disclosure related to the students; character and competence were demonstrated when the self-disclosure was relevant to the course. Another positive benefit of instructors' self-disclosure was the trust it developed between them and their students. Respondents did warn instructors to make self-disclosures at appropriate times and not to over-share.

Chelune and Figueroa completed a study in 1981 to test the influence of neuroticism on levels of self-disclosure. They used an experimental group of 183 volunteers from an

introductory psychology class consisting of ninety-three males and ninety females. The researchers first had their subjects complete the SDSS (Self-Disclosure Situations Survey), which consists of twenty different social situations in which young adults are often involved. Subjects ranked on a 6-point scale the general level of disclosure with which they would be comfortable. The twenty questions were grouped into situations with four target persons (friend alone, group of friends, stranger alone, group of strangers). Secondly, subjects completed the EPI (Eysenck Personality Inventory) with fifty-seven yes/no questions that measure neuroticism and stability. Chelune and Figueroa concluded that there were no significant gender differences in the subjects' total self-disclosure scores, but there was a weak negative relationship between total self-disclosure and neuroticism.

Another study by Chelune, along with colleagues Sultan and Williams, also employed the SDSS (Self-Disclosure Situations Survey). One hundred and fifty unmarried female undergraduate students filled out the survey along with a number of other self-report measures: the UCLA Loneliness Scale, twenty self-statements measured using a 4-point scale about an individual's satisfaction in interpersonal relationships; the Social Introversion (Si) Scale consisting of seventy items; and an activity questionnaire that assessed the frequency of participation in social activities. Greater loneliness was found to be correlated with lower total disclosure, which "lends support to the notion that loneliness is associated with a perceived lack of interpersonal intimacy" (465).

A two-part study by Solano, Batten, and Parish further established the relationship between loneliness and self-disclosure. Thirty-seven males and thirty-eight females were involved in this project. Part one investigated loneliness and perceived self-disclosure. Participants filled out the UCLA Loneliness Scale and the JSDQ (Jourard Self-Disclosure

Questionnaire), which has subjects rate past self-disclosure in six content areas with one's mother, father, closest male friend, and closest female friend, according to a scale that ranges from "not at all" to "in general terms" and finally to "in full and complete detail" (Solano, Batten, and Parish 526). According to the final results of both male and female participants, perceptions of the level of past disclosure to parents was unrelated to their current feelings of loneliness. However, loneliness led to less perceived past disclosure to the closest opposite sex friend. Only females perceived that loneliness influenced disclosure with a close, same-sex friend—in such cases making disclosure less intimate.

After testing for perceptions, the authors engaged in the second part of their study, which investigated actual behaviors. They hypothesized that lonely males and females will either disclose too intimately or too distantly compared with non-lonely persons. Using the same results of the UCLA Loneliness Scale, an even number of lonely and non-lonely males and females were asked to sign up for a different and apparently unrelated study. Subjects were paired with an even mix of other lonely/non-lonely subjects and opposite/same sex subjects. At the beginning of the experiment, partners rated how well they knew the other person. Partners were then provided a list of 72 randomly ordered conversational topics, each scaled for degree of intimacy. Each subject was to take turns choosing a topic from the list to discuss with the partner. After an elapse of half an hour, partners again rated how well they knew the other person. The author's hypothesis was partially supported. Results showed that "lonely subjects were more likely to pick less intimate topics for opposite-sex partners than were non-lonely subjects…Also, the opposite-sex partners of lonely subjects selected significantly less intimate topics than did partners of non-lonely subjects" (Solano, Batten, and Parish 528).

Finkenauer, Engels, Branje, and Meeus studied disclosure and satisfaction within a variety of familial relationships by investigating 262 Dutch two-parent families each with two adolescent children. Trained interviewers visited the families at home and gave each member of the family two questionnaires that measured disclosure levels and relationship satisfaction with various members of the family. A plethora of family dynamics were discovered in this study: older children reported disclosing less information to their younger siblings than vice versa; girl-to-girl disclosure was more frequent than girl-to-boy, boy-to-girl, and boy-to-boy disclosure; both boys and girls disclosed more to mothers than to fathers; both disclosure and relationship satisfaction were reciprocal in horizontal relationships more so than in vertical relationships; satisfaction reciprocity was greater in marital relationships than in sibling relationships; and married partners and siblings coordinate their feelings about the relationship, but parent-child and child-parent relationships do not (Finkenauer, Engels, Branje, and Meeus 200-205).

### *Gender and Self-Disclosure*

One particularly common avenue for studies on self-disclosure to address is in regards to gender differences. A number of studies report that women more frequently engage in self-disclosure (Cozby; Heiss; Hendrick; Komarovsky; Ragsdale et al.). Cozby found that within the marital relationship "wives tend to communicate more unpleasant feelings, including anxieties and worries, but not more pleasant feelings than do husbands" (75). Heiss reports that females are more expressive as casual daters. Also, Hendrick's study, which assessed both levels of self-disclosure and levels of self-esteem, found that women had a total score of self-disclosure that was "significantly higher than men's scores" (1156). Surprisingly, however, there was no noteworthy difference in self-esteem between the sexes, so both men and women appeared to feel good about their roles and levels of self-disclosure.

According to Stokes, Fuehrer, and Childs, however, "The tendency reported in the literature for females to self-disclose more than males is true only for target persons who are known rather well by the discloser" (193). Researchers selected fifty-four male and fifty-four female undergraduate college students to complete a questionnaire for course credit. The questionnaire was developed to measure levels of comfortable disclosure felt with a same-sex stranger, same-sex acquaintance, and same-sex good friend in regards to fourteen topics, which varied in degrees of intimacy. For each topic and relationship, a 4-point scale ranged from "definitely not willing" to "definitely willing" (192). Stokes et al. found that males actually disclosed more than females with strangers and acquaintances. Females only disclosed more in close friendships (194). Overall, the authors conclude that men avoid emotional intimacy with one another.

Gender differences are not only seen when comparing the target person to whom the disclosing is being done, but also are based on what topics are considered more intimate to disclose. Cecilia H. Solano surveyed fifty male and fifty female college students based on the Taylor-Altman intimacy-scaled stimuli and found significant overall sex differences for all of the content categories except religion and attitudes. The original Taylor-Altman intimacy-scaled stimuli ranked 671 topics of conversation according to their level of intimacy. Topics were separated into thirteen content categories: religion, love/sex, family, parental family, hobbies, physical appearance, money, current events, emotions, relationships, attitudes, school/work, and biography. A condensed version of this model was used in Solano's study. The 100 participants rated only 197 topics, but each divided into the same thirteen content categories, on an 11-point scale of intimacy. It was found that "in general, female subjects perceived topics on sexual activity as more personal…Males, however, regarded as more intimate topics concerning family

history, personal habits, opinions, feelings, and tastes" (Solano 288). Males and females find different topics more or less private.

Target person, topic, and other situational conditions were considered together when contrasting the genders in Petronio, Martin, and Littlefield's study. A questionnaire was administered to 252 students, and in four topic areas, respondents judged prerequisite conditions for disclosure on a 4-point scale of importance. Six setting characteristics, eight receiver characteristics, six sender characteristics, and four relationship characteristics were considered through the survey. Overall, women placed more importance on all prerequisite conditions for all topics (270). Sender/receiver characteristics were most important to women, however. Authors summarize, "Before women will disclose, they find it more important than do men that the receiver be discreet, trustworthy, sincere, liked, respected, a good listener, warm, and open" (273). Women said similar attributes were important for the sender to have as well. The topic of disclosure was significant to both sexes. When the topic was sexual, both males and females placed higher importance on the prerequisite conditions. In contrast, for the topic of achievements, prerequisite conditions were least important to both sexes (271).

Gender differences were also investigated in a study involving 300 participants enrolled in a basic communications course at a large Midwestern university. Participants were paired up into opposite-gender partnerships with each participant meeting someone new with whom he/she had not been previously acquainted. The dyads were instructed to talk for eight minutes about life as an undergraduate student. At the end of the eight minutes, the partners separated and each filled out a lengthy questionnaire that scaled various factors such as to what extent twelve categories of topics were talked about, who talked the most, the social attractiveness of the other partner, how much they thought the partner was socially attracted to them, the extent to which

the partner possessed seventeen positive traits, and to what extent they thought the partner viewed the same seventeen positive traits in them. The researchers' hypothesis that males would dominate these initial interactions with women was disproven as "the three measures of perceptions of partner disclosure (total disclosure, estimate of disclosure, and who talked more) yielded no significant differences between men and women" (Clark et al. 707). For both males and females, social attractiveness and positive traits were linked to self-disclosure. The authors state, "Disclosure communicates more than the content of what is said: disclosure indicates an openness and interest in getting to know the other person" (Clark et al. 707). Gender differences were not apparent throughout this study.

A study by Mirra Komarovsky focused specifically on male self-disclosure. The study described the patterns of self-disclosure of male college seniors to parents, siblings, and a close male and female friend. Sixty-two males were randomly selected and asked to fill out a 56-item self-disclosure questionnaire that would be then followed by a personal interview. In the final results, the close female friend emerged as the primary confidante, while the father and sister were the recipients of the least amount of information (Komarovsky 679). One participant explained, "The emotional outlet she [the close female friend] provides could not be replaced by any friendship with a guy" (680). Respondents indicated that the most private aspects of themselves were their personality and body.  Another interesting finding of the study was that of the sixty-two men studied, only seventeen men responded that their main confidante was a male friend, and twelve of these seventeen men were virgins. During the interviews, these twelve men reported longing for a close relationship with a woman to replace their current male confidante (Komarovsky 679). This study also confirmed previous research that higher disclosure is given to mothers than to fathers and to peers more so than to parents.

Putting a new spin on the age-old gender debate, scholars Chelune, Skiffington, and Williams did a study in order to determine if males and females attend to different aspects of self-disclosure when judging a situation where self-disclosure occurs.  Men and women participants observed self-disclosing speakers in action for this study, and the Self-Disclosure Coding System (SDCS), a "behavioral content analysis system consisting of a total of eleven coding categories designed to assess the basic parameters of self-disclosing behavior" was used with these 336 participant observers (600). Twelve video-taped segments of differing situations were shown to the participants, and after each segment, observers rated the speaker's level of self-disclosure through the self-disclosure perception scale (601). The study shed light on several theoretical aspects of self-disclosure, such as that "intimacy of content appears to be the single best predictor of perceptions of self- disclosure…what people say is apparently a powerful determinant of what others perceive as self disclosure" and that "the affective matter in which a person reveals personal information uniquely influences others' judgments" (604). Most notably, though, the study determined that the sex of the speaker in the video doing the act of self-disclosure determined observers' perceptions of self-disclosure. The results aligned with past research that "males are stereotyped in our society as being less expressive and revealing than women" (604). Surprisingly, there was no difference in results between the male and female observers. Although there turned out to be a gender-related bias affecting the perception of male and female disclosing behavior, the bias was held equally by both sexes.

One theory which explains why these gender differences in self-disclosure occur was produced in 1970 by Jeffery Z. Rubin, who noted the difference between liking and loving relationships. Rubin found that females love their same-sex friends more than males do, "which provides a reason for the finding that women tend to disclose to their same-sex friends more than

males do" (267). A different theory, by Komarovsky, resulted from her personal interviews with sixty-two college males on their patterns of self-disclosure. She states, "Several men were torn between their conception of masculine pride and their unfulfilled need for sharing worries. A plea for solace or reassurance, permissible for little boys and women of all ages, was not appropriate for a grown man. To succumb to the temptation of confiding one's worries was to regress to a childish role…" (680). Robert A. Lewis also attributes males' lack of intimate disclosure to the masculine stereotype in our society: "The traditional male sex role encourages competition among men. 'Successful' males are expected to compete and win…Since a main form of winning is exploiting the opponent's weaknesses, men close themselves off from each other, so that they do not expose any vulnerabilities" (112). Therefore, many scholars argue these gender differences to be more nurture than nature.

### Social Penetration Theory and Self-Disclosure within Marriage

Although Altman and Taylor's original social penetration theory specifically addressed self-disclosure as an important variable in relationship development, it is applicable beyond the beginning stages of a newly developing relationship as well. A relationship is always in motion—growing or withering—and never simply remains stagnant. Baxter and Dindia state, "Relationships are dynamic social processes in which the parties must engage in ongoing relationship work if their bond is to remain viable" (187). Because of this volatility, Rusbult et al. indicates the importance of marriage maintenance, "the pro-relationship activities that help relationships persist and promote healthy functioning in ongoing relationships" (116). Marriage maintenance is viewed as a cost which is balanced out by the reward of a healthy relationship. Self-disclosure, a part of the marriage maintenance process, is an integral indicator of healthy

marriages. Open communication between spouses "affects the quality of marriage and enhances trust inside the marriage" (Honeycutt, Wilson, Parker 396).

In a study completed by Sidney Jourard and Paul Lasakow, ten male and ten female married students were studied in contrast to ten male and ten female unmarried students according to the JSDQ (Jourard Self-Disclosure Questionnaire) method. Results showed that marriage did have an effect on self-disclosure, but not on the amount of total self-disclosures, rather on the distribution of self-disclosure. Married participants disclosed less to parents and same-sex friends than unmarried participants (Jourard and Lasakow 96). Also, married couples self-disclosed more to their spouses other than to any other target person (Jourard and Lasakow 96). This demonstrates the distinction of a marriage relationship in contrast to other relationships. Because disclosure to one's spouse was found to be greater than to any other person, Jourard and Lasakow conclude that "love" results in greater disclosure than simply "liking" (91).

Marriage is an intimate relationship. And intimacy comes in part from self-disclosure. Van den Broucke et al. define intimacy as "relationships characterized by the greater intensity of liking or loving, the depth and breadth of the information which is exchanged, the value and the variety of the resources exchanged, the substitutability of resources, the degree of commitment, and the emergence of a dyadic identity ('we-ness')" (220). Not just self-disclosure, Van den Broucke et al. note, but the self-discloser's feeling of being "understood, validated, and cared for" (220) after self-disclosing, produces intimacy.

A study by James M. Honeycutt and Deborah D. Godwin sought to determine the factors in a person's report of "simply being relatively happy, all things considered, in his or her marriage" (655). The authors posited that social penetration variables, "operationally defined in

terms of openness, attentiveness, flexibility, and expressiveness," (651) would result in more effective communication and therefore deeper partner understanding and marital satisfaction. Using a PCS survey administered to 383 spouses (182 males and 201 females) from several states, "openness" was deemed the most important variable leading to communication effectiveness, followed by "attentiveness" and "expressiveness" (655). "Flexibility" had the least impact on communication effectiveness (657). Overall, the study supports social penetration theory's assumption that stable relationships are built on perceived partner understanding through self-disclosure (658).

Tolstedt and Stokes took a contrasting approach in their 1984 article "Self-Disclosure, Intimacy, and the Depenetration Process", for which they studied 120 persons experiencing marital distress. Each couple was tested separately in two stages. First, participants individually completed a questionnaire measuring intimacy and self-disclosure breadth within their current relationship with their spouse. Next, partners worked together to decide the point at which they had felt closest in their marriage and to identify the various strengths and weaknesses of their current relationship. Tolstedt and Stokes found through this methodology that breadth of self-disclosure decreased with decreasing intimacy and marital satisfaction ("Self-Disclosure" 87). Also, as relationships lessened in intimacy and satisfaction, the amount of positive valence in self-disclosure decreased and the amount of negative valence in self-disclosure increased ("Self-Disclosure" 87). Therefore, when individuals feel distant from their partner, the number of topic areas that are disclosed is restricted. Interestingly, however, it was realized that rather than decreasing as intimacy decreased, depth increased. "The less the intimacy," authors explained, "the greater the tendency to discuss highly personal content and to share judgments, evaluations, and feelings" ("Self-Disclosure" 89). But the depth of discussion was negatively valenced.

In Schumm and colleagues' study of the correlation between self-disclosure and marital satisfaction, both quantity and quality of self-disclosure were investigated. Eighty-three couples from a small rural community in Kansas and ninety-eight couples from a large metropolitan area of Kansas completed various surveys with scaled measurements to yield the anticipated results. Self-disclosure and marital satisfaction were once again found to be positively related, whereas "especially for wives, combinations of low quantity and low quality were found to be extremely detrimental for marital satisfaction" (248).

Increased self-disclosure not only leads to greater marital satisfaction, but smaller amounts of marital issues as well. Fifty-one couples completed five test instruments, including a self-disclosure scale, two marriage satisfaction scales, and an attitude survey in Hendrick's study of self-disclosure in relation to marital satisfaction. It was discovered that the more self-disclosure existed in the relationship, the fewer marital problems were reported (1154).

Self-disclosure relates to any casual or non-casual human relationship, but studies relating self-disclosure specifically to the marriage relationship abound. Throughout this section, one can see that the resounding result of self-disclosure to one's spouse is greater marital satisfaction. Overall, these studies support the notion that within the context of a marriage relationship, continued self-disclosure is vital.

### *Communication and Marital Maintenance*

Communication theorist Steve Duck points out that "relationship maintenance is, like 'the poor' in the Bible, always with us" (57). As the intent of this current study is to analyze and improve the present state of premarital counseling programs according to a depth and breadth of topics that are helpful to learn before a couple enters into marriage, one must look at other communication theories and strategies that are effective in maintaining a marriage relationship.

Premarital counselors should be aware of these methods in order to teach young couples practical ways of preserving a marriage. Next, literature on communication within marriage is considered.

A study of couples' perceptions on various marriage maintenance strategies was completed by Leslie Baxter and Kathryn Dindia. Forty-five married couples participated in categorizing fifty strategies into different labels. Different themes emerged from this study, including the couples' awareness of dialectical tensions. Both husbands and wives made note of communication strategies that should be enacted on a daily basis, and, consistent with the dialectical perspective that places value on both openness and discretion, "These marital partners recognized that some communication strategies are not for everyday, ongoing implementation but rather for selective, periodic use" (Baxter and Dindia 204). For example, "frank discussions of the relationship's problems or the partner's faults" and "calling in the middle of the day to say 'hi'" were not regarded as every-day tasks (204). Togetherness and autonomy, another dialectical tension present in any interpersonal relationship, was realized by both husbands and wives. "Spending more time together" and "taking private time for eating out" as well as "individual prayer" and "seeking/granting autonomy" were all listed as constructive strategies for marriage maintenance (Baxter and Dindia 205). Baxter and Dindia's lengthy list of marriage maintenance strategies, backed by the support of forty-five married couples' real life attitudes and experiences, showed the effort marriage relationships require—and both privacy and openness are a part of that.

Honeycutt, Wilson, and Parker added to the research on the influence of communication on the quality of marriage and marriage satisfaction with their study of communicator styles used within marriages. Forty couples ranging from eighteen to seventy-two years were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their marital happiness and their communicator styles. Of the

couples who scored into the highest category of happily married spouses, "friendly, impression leaving, precise, and expressive" communicator styles were said to be the greatest indicators of marital happiness (Honeycutt, Wilson, and Parker 400). Males described themselves to be more relaxed communicators with their wives than in other situations, and females revealed that they are more open, dramatic, expressive, and attentive with their husbands (401). This study shows that marital happiness is influenced by specific communication strategies. Communication is needed in order to disclose to one's spouse, and "happily married spouses had greater flexibility in their ways of communicating than the less happily married spouses" (Honeycutt, Wilson, and Parker 403). It also demonstrates that as relationships develop, a variety of ways to convey feelings to one's partner can be found.

Tolstedt and Stokes studied the relation of marital satisfaction to three types of intimacy in their 1983 article "Relation of Verbal, Affective, and Physical Intimacy to Marital Satisfaction." Forty-three couples (86 people) completed questionnaires measuring for affective and physical intimacy, breadth of self-disclosure, and marital satisfaction and were then audio-taped during a discussion of their relationship to provide the researchers with additional insight. It was found that all three types of intimacy related to marital satisfaction, but verbal and affective intimacy made stronger contributions than physical intimacy. In their discussion section, the researchers beseech counseling psychologists who work with couples to "be aware of the need to address aspects of intimacy other than communications or verbal intimacy. Although good, open communications may lead to increased affective or physical intimacy in some cases, the consideration in counseling of all three types of intimacy is probably helpful" ("Relation of Verbal" 579).

Other theorists have studied family communication behaviors—effective and ineffective—and suggested strategies to newly married couples. Parsons and Alexander found four dimensions of family interaction to be deficient in deviant families: activity level, equality of communication, frequency and duration of positive interruptions, and clarification (195). They suggest specific positive purposes of interruptions as "interruption for clarification, interruptions designed to increase information about the topic or about oneself in relationship to the topic, and interruptions designed to offer positive feedback to other family members" and encourage the use of these strategies (Parsons and Alexander 196). Finally, these theorists draw attention to the form of poor communication used often in marriage relationships, which is mindreading. As they state, "Waiting for another to anticipate one's wishes can be defined as an inefficient interpersonal behavior" (198). Just as marriage is work, communication is work. If a couple can learn to be less silent with one another, talk equally, and increase the frequency and duration of simultaneous speech, positive affect will follow.

### *Premarital Counseling*

The first premarital education program was developed at the Merrill-Palmer Institute in 1932 (Carroll and Doherty 106). Prior to World War II, marriage preparation consisted of clergy community counseling and a few college classes (Stahmann and Hiebert, *Premarital Counseling* 37). In the decades following the war, it grew into more systematic pastoral counseling and therapy (Stahmann and Hiebert, *Premarital Counseling* 38). However, premarital education was still relatively uncommon until the 1970s. Although clergy would meet with a couple prior to the wedding day, the focus of the meeting was "education about the nature and meaning of the marriage rite itself" (Carroll and Doherty 106). After the 1970s, the focus shifted to "education geared at preparing couples for marriage" (Carroll and Doherty 106). Further developments in

research and education, as well as more adequate training of pastors and counselors, has improved the state of premarital preparation programs even more today. Yet despite "evidence of short-and long-term improvements in satisfaction, interactive competence, and marital stability," only one-third of marrying couples participate in premarital education (Silliman and Schumm, "Marriage Preparation" 138). State-level initiatives are being taken in hopes of increasing this percentage in the future. Louisiana and Arizona, for example, have established covenant marriage as an option, and Minnesota provides discounts on marriage licenses to couples who undergo premarital counseling (Stanley 272). Carroll and Doherty define proper premarital education as "programs geared at providing couples with an awareness of potential problems that may occur after marriage and the information and resources to effectively prevent or ameliorate such problems" (106).

After analyzing the content of various premarital programs through an extensive review of the literature, Silliman and Schumm found that topic selection differs based on provider expertise. They summarize, "Religious based programs most often address spiritual and ecclesiastical issues. Medical providers stress health and sexuality issues. And therapists tend to emphasize family background and couple problems" ("Improving Practice" 24). But not only do different programs offer different content, they also format their counseling sessions differently.

In Lee Williams's article "Premarital Counseling", different approaches to premarital counseling are summarized. Williams considers skills-based programs, premarital inventories, counseling in church settings, and other approaches. According to Williams, four of the most used skills-based programs on the market are Relationship Enhancement (RE), Couple Communication, Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), and Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS). These programs are typically offered in a

group format but can also be used in individual counseling. Skills-based programs such as these four approaches teach couples skills for communicating and handling conflict. Practical skills are taught, such as:

> How to identify needs, desires, and feelings, and to express them in a way that will minimize the listener's defensiveness…emphatically respond to the speaker's message…maintain a positive atmosphere when discussing issues, uncover the deep feelings and root issues, exit negative communication cycles, promote change within themselves and their partner, take time outs when discussions escalate to the point of being damaging or unproductive, brainstorm fun activities to do together, identify turn-ons/turn-offs, clarify expectations and find creative solutions through problem-solving skills. (Williams, "Premarital Counseling" 208)

Participants develop these skills through role-playing and discussion which is guided by a coach. Coaches also employ tools such as the Awareness Wheel, the Listening Cycle framework, and the Speaker-Listener Technique (Williams, "Premarital Counseling" 209). "The enrichment approach, emphasizing competence-building and preventive education, emerged as the dominant paradigm in the past two decades" reported Silliman and Schumm in the beginning of the twenty-first century ("Marriage Preparation" 137).

Premarital inventories are also a commonly used approach in premarital counseling. Such inventories as Prepare and Enrich, FOCCUS, and RELATE provide couples with individualized feedback on topics such as "communication, conflict resolution, personality match, marital expectations, financial matters, leisure activities, family, friends, sexuality, spirituality, and children" (Williams, "Premarital Counseling" 211). Inventories show a couple's personal

strengths and weaknesses so they can engage in acute dialogue about these areas. Some inventories are set up to have a trained administrator go over the results with the couple and others can be taken by the individuals themselves online (Williams, "Premarital Counseling" 211).

Churches, the administrators of most of today's premarital counseling, are employing skills-based programs and premarital inventories as well as other various methods for premarital counseling, according to William's report. Private meetings with a clergy person range from one session designed for discussing wedding plans to several sessions of marriage preparation (Williams, "Premarital Counseling" 212). Silliman and Schumm, after an extensive review of the existing literature on marriage preparation programs, identified the most common areas that premarital counseling through clergy address: communication, conflict resolution, egalitarian roles, sexuality, commitment, finances, and personality issues ("Improving Practice" 25). Churches also use mentor couples, older, experienced married couples that mentor engaged couples, for premarital counseling, and workshops with multiple speakers who each present on a topic related to marriage (Williams, "Premarital Counseling" 213).

Finally, many engaged couples are resorting to self-guided learning methods for premarital preparation. The Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education (CMFCE) and other organizations run websites that provide resources on marriage education. Individuals often find programs on websites such as these or pick up books from a local bookstore to educate themselves (Williams, "Premarital Counseling" 213). After Williams describes the plethora of approaches used in premarital preparation, he notes that "there is limited empirical support for many of the approaches that are commonly used" (216) and urges researchers to conduct further studies.

In Silliman and Schumm's 1999 article "Improving Practice in Marriage Preparation",

the authors provide advice for future premarital counselors after reviewing the existent literature.

One of their multiple tips was to "focus on a few interpersonal skills, using couple needs or

experiences with specific issues as grist for skill learning" ("Improving Practice" 40). Instead of

hypothetical examples, counselors should take a real issue the couple is in conflict over and use

that to introduce and practice new communication and conflict resolution skills. The authors also

stress that "basic communication (e.g., "I" statements), conflict management (especially

reduction of negative affect and reciprocity), and problem-solving skills should be modeled,

practiced, discussed, and reinforced for maximum retention" ("Improving Practice" 41). Finally,

enough training needs to be offered to make the experience effective. Silliman and Schumm set

the ideal standard at 12-24 hours ("Improving Practice" 42).

Because of the low percentage of engaged couples who undergo premarital counseling

before their weddings, Kieran T. Sullivan and Carmen Anderson conducted a study to examine

what program characteristics and topics are important to engaged couples. The first phase of

their study consisted of interviews with a series of focus groups (389). Thirty-two adults within

their first year of marriage, some of whom had participated in premarital counseling and some of

whom had not, were divided into four focus groups. Participants discussed what attracted them to

or discouraged them from attending premarital counseling. The focus group responses were used

to design a questionnaire for the second phase of the research (390). In this phase, eighty-six

heterosexual engaged couples were surveyed via mail using the questionnaire and asked to rate

the importance of four general areas: characteristics of the leader/counselor, setting, content, and

evidence of positive outcome. Participants were also allowed to write in additional topics of

importance (391). Fiancés were not to discuss answers until after returning their individual responses.

Sullivan and Anderson's results are noteworthy. For leadership characteristics, "94% of women and 93% of men rated having a trustworthy leader as important/very important, 91% of women and 92% of men rated having a professional leader as important/very important, and 90% of women and 87% of men rated having an experienced leader as important/very important" (392). Content areas that were rated as important or very important by the majority of the couples were educational content and insight-oriented content. Less than half of the participants said practicing or role-playing skills were important along with the opportunity for group discussions (392). The only topic that was written in by more than half of participants was communication (393), however, the authors did categorize responses into the "big four" topics that programs should address, based on a large amount of participant answers: communication, finances, problem solving, and having children. When it comes to encouraging couples to attend premarital preparation programs, the authors plead recruiters not to emphasize insight-oriented and skills rehearsal approaches in the beginning stages of a program, "although there is evidence to suggest that [these approaches] benefit couples" (395).

Russell and Lyster also conducted a study to determine marriage preparation program satisfaction rates. Couples who participated in marriage preparation programs which were provided by The Marriage Project, an interchurch agency in Vancouver, B.C. during 1990 were surveyed for this study. Nearly a thousand couples complete this program every year. The program consists of a ten hour session that offers brief lectures followed by experiential exercises for couples to sometimes complete separately and sometimes complete in small groups. Each session typically hosts twenty-five couples and is led by a trained marriage and family

therapist. In 1991, 847 couples were mailed questionnaires and 193 responded. The subjects

ranged in age from 16 to 67 years, with the average age of males being 30 and the average age of

females being 28. Eighty-nine percent of the women and 84% of the men were on their first

marriage, and 62% of all the participants had been living together before their wedding day. The

questionnaire consisted of 5-point Likert scale items measuring for satisfaction, demographic

measurements, and two open-ended questions. Couples were to complete the survey together.

Overall, satisfaction ratings were found to be strongly positive. The mean score on a 5-point

scale for general program satisfaction was 4.2. The program content area that was rated as most

satisfying was "gaining an understanding of how family of origin issues influenced the present

relationship" (Russell and Lyster 450). Differences in ratings of satisfaction were analyzed

according to participant age and timing of participation as well. Overall, older couples were

consistently more positive in their endorsement of the program (451). Russell and Lyster also

found that the further from the wedding that couples took the program, the more beneficial

couples said it was. Thus, they recommend to counselors that premarital counseling programs

not be held too close to the wedding date.

Although attendance in premarital education programs is not high, research suggests

many benefits from such programs. Scott Stanley argues the importance of premarital education

based primarily on rational argument and a little bit through empirical findings from other

studies. Stanley identifies four key benefits of premarital education, which are that "it can slow

couples down to foster deliberation, it sends a message that marriage matters, it can help couples

learn of options if they need help later, and there is evidence that providing some couples with

some types of premarital training can lower their risks for subsequent marital distress or

termination" (272).

Jason S. Carroll and William J. Doherty are also frequently cited for their research findings on the effectiveness of premarital education. The authors performed a meta-analysis of outcome research based on the twenty-three published studies which evaluate specific premarital programs with some type of outcome measure employed for effectiveness. Two databases, *PsychINFO* and *Family & Society Studies Worldwide* were used to find the research articles (107). Thirteen programs were analyzed based on the twenty-three published studies. Carroll and Doherty found that "the mean effect size for premarital programs was .80, which means that the average person who participated in a premarital prevention program was significantly better off afterwards than 79% of people who did not participate" (105). They also found that "the average participant in a premarital program tends to experience about a 30% increase in measures of outcome success…and these gains appear to hold for at least 6 months to 3 years" (105). Specifically in regards to topics related to communication, Carroll and Doherty's review found that only one program of the ten studied did not include communication training (110). Fortunately, all recent studies past 1998 showed teaching of conflict-negotiation skills (110). None of the programs used the same methods to teach these skills, however.

Duncan, Childs, and Larson reviewed studies on the effectiveness of marriage preparation and found that the research has lumped together all programs and counseling methods into one measurement of success. "This is problematic because although there are similarities and overlaps between premarital education/prevention and counseling, counseling approaches are different in that they usually involve much deeper self and couple exploration processes," the authors state (624). Therefore, they executed a study to compare the perceived helpfulness of four marriage preparation interventions: classes, community/church sponsored workshops, counseling, and self-directed learning. Data were provided by 1,409 individuals via

an Internet-based relationship survey called RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE) in which they were asked whether each intervention, compared to before they participated in it, resulted in change in eleven areas (627). Classes and self-directed methods were rated as most helpful, followed by community workshops and counseling, although individuals reported satisfaction with all forms of premarital interventions in general (629). The study also revealed that couples perceive interventions that are longer in length to be associated with higher levels of positive change in their relationship (631).

Williams, Riley, Risch, and Van Dyke analyzed the data from 1,210 surveys of couples who had been married between one and eight years and who had taken the FOCCUS (Facilitate Open, Caring, Communication, Understanding, and Study) premarital inventory to determine how much value couples place on premarital counseling after beginning a marriage. A letter and separate questionnaire was mailed to each spouse. Ninety-one percent of the participants were in their first marriage. Respondents were asked to rank how valuable their premarital counseling experience was on a 6-point scale. They also rated the helpfulness of various aspects of their marriage preparation experience according to a 6-point scale ranging from "not helpful" to "extremely helpful" (275). About two-thirds (66.2%) of the participants agreed that their marriage preparation was a valuable experience; however, "the perceived value declined with the length of marriage" (276). As far as specific aspects of the programs which couples found most helpful, the researchers studied program providers, length of programs, and program components. Among the various types of marriage preparation providers, clergy (M = 4.13) were rated as most helpful, followed closely by lay couples, then parish/church staff, and finally counselors (M = 3.98). The two most helpful components of the programs according to respondents were "discussion time with partner" (M = 4.28) and "using a premarital inventory"

(M = 3.93) (Williams et al. 277). Satisfaction with one's program increased with number of sessions up until ten sessions. After ten sessions, satisfaction levels reached a plateau.

Despite improvements in marital preparation programs, couples still find surprising issues once they become married. Michael G. Lawler and Gail S. Risch in their article "Time, Sex, and Money: The First Five Years of Marriage" review a national study of the first five years of marriage that was conducted by the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University, the National Association of Family Life Ministers, and Catholic Engaged Encounter. A sample of participants, drawn from a national population of couples who completed the premarital inventory known as FOCCUS (Facilitate Open, Caring, Communication, Understanding, and Study) completed a questionnaire and rated forty-two issues that might be problematic during the early years of marriage. The authors state, "The number one problem reported by newly married couples was balancing job and family. Since dual-career marriages now represent about 60% of all marriages in America, this is not surprising" (20). Second, couples expressed problems with the frequency of sexual relations. According to Lawler and Risch, these are "often related to the spouses' struggles to understand each other's sexual needs and languages" (20). Third most notably, economic problems were stated. And finally, expectations about household tasks were listed. When the authors evaluated male responses in contrast to female responses, these top issues remained the same. However, other minor topics were mentioned. "Different recreational interests were listed as a highly problematic issue by male but not by female respondents…[and] females listed two issues that males did not list: parents/in-laws and time spent together with spouse," the authors summarized (21). Lawler and Risch also divided participants according to categories of age to note the differences in responses. Those couples who were twenty-nine and younger rated "debt brought into marriage and finances" as the top issue while those over thirty

years of age said "balancing job and family and frequency of sexual relations" were the main problem areas (21). The authors suggest some practical strategies for counselors to recommend to couples when managing these issues. Lawler and Risch's 2001 study is similar to the current study and can be used to compare results in hopes of seeing improvements in coverage of the depth of these topics in premarital counseling today.

### *Premarital Counseling and Self-Disclosure*

In the current study, self-disclosure between future spouses is not the only key to effective premarital counseling, but self-disclosure between the couple and their counselor is imperative as well. Therefore, one should next consider the role that self-disclosure plays in this relationship. Cozby studied the therapist-client relationship and stressed the importance of full client disclosure in achieving successful therapy (86). Disclosure to a therapist was most successful when the therapist used a "probing" technique and when the therapist revealed a certain amount about him or herself first and was rated as trustworthy to clients (Cozby 86). Jourard agrees that "disclosure by experimenters will result in greater honesty by subjects, and also prevent experimenters from acting like 'spies' and inhuman manipulators" ("Healthy Personality" 505). A certain amount of equity is suggested in therapy so that the patient feels comfortable. It is expected that these techniques will be used in premarital counseling sessions as well.

Although premarital counseling should have structure in the depth and breadth of subjects addressed, Jourard's important reminders for counselors themselves should be heeded. There is a tendency for counselors and therapists to manipulate their patients into the "right" thinking and behaving. Instead, the "essential factor in the psychotherapeutic situation is a loving, honest, and spontaneous relationship between the therapist and the patient" (Jourard, "I-Thou Relationship"

174). Instead of having a set of pre-programmed questions and responses for engaged couples, counselors should strive to "know their patient, involving themselves in his situation, and then responding to his utterances spontaneously—this fosters growth" (177). To state it simply, Jourard advocates for loving the clients. A counselor should not only be a thinking entity—but a true human being. As Jourard put it, "When a therapist is committed to the task of helping a patient grow, he functions as a whole person, and not as a disembodied intellect, computer, or reinforcement programmer" ("I-Thou Relationship" 178). The counselor should not be a replica of the client, always agreeing with what is disclosed. Instead, "He does…retain his separate identity, and is thus able to see and understand things which the patient cannot" (Jourard, "I-Thou Relationship" 178). And no patient can be expected to "drop all of his defenses and reveal himself *except* in the presence of someone whom he believes is for him, and not for a theory, dogma, or technique" (178, emphasis mine). Therefore, true counseling that fosters growth should be in response to a client as an individual person—not a program. This current study will reveal the perceptions of clients to see if they felt like a unique person or a scheduled program during their premarital counseling sessions.

### *Summary*

Overall, this literature review provides a framework for the present study. The research revealed that self-disclosure increasing in breadth and depth is a healthy aspect of any growing relationship. Increased self-disclosure is linked to positive rewards outweighing costs, liking for the other, and trust within the relationship. Women have been shown more often to initiate and engage in greater self-disclosure, although men and women both tend to reciprocate one self-disclosed fact for another. Even within the context of an already existing marriage, continued disclosure and other communication strategies are vital.

New topics are addressed in premarital counseling that a couple may not yet have openly considered. The role of a premarital counselor in getting a couple to increase breadth and depth of topics is essential. Thus adequate self-disclosure between a couple and their counselor is equally important. In order to be effective, the counselor must first establish trust so that open communication can be attained.

The findings of these aforementioned studies were used to develop research questions that will be elucidated in the following methodology section. The present study will link the basic assumptions of social penetration theory to the important role of premarital counseling in increasing self-disclosure on topics vital to beginning a healthy marriage.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Because a marriage relationship involves two people with unique personalities, aspects of which have been revealed to various degrees at the time of one's engagement, premarital counselors have an important role in aiding couples through discussions of various topics to certain depths. A counselor can work with engaged couples to ensure that healthy levels of self-disclosure are perceived by both parties.

It was the goal of this research study to discover the role that social penetration theory plays in premarital counseling and to discover themes in the perspectives of topical depth and breadth that counselors and couples have in regards to their premarital counseling experiences. It was hoped that this study would not only be a new context in which to apply social penetration theory in order to support the theory's usability, but also that this study would shed light on areas of deficiency that counselors and couples find in premarital counseling sessions in order to better this experience for future couples. All this considered, the following research questions provided focus for this study:

RQ 1: Do engaged couples believe they know the depth and breadth of their partner adequately enough to be prepared for marriage after receiving premarital counseling?

RQ 2: Do counselors indirectly support the basic premise of social penetration theory by actively using strategies to help engaged partners reveal important aspects of the breadth and depth of their personalities before entering into marriage?

RQ 3: What areas of deficiency do counselors and couples find exist in current premarital counseling programs in regards to reaching an intimate depth and breadth of each partner's personality?

*Researcher Credibility*

Being a mixed-methods study that leans mostly towards a qualitative and descriptive nature, the researcher plays a key role as the primary data collection instrument. Therefore, it is important for biases, assumptions, and personal values to be clear at the outset of the study. The researcher is particularly interested in this study because of her own recent experience with premarital counseling. The researcher found her counseling experience to be a generally positive one, save for the fact that certain topics were not covered as adequately as she would have preferred. For instance, the topic of the sex was only discussed as something to be avoided until marriage. Sexual intercourse within a marriage relationship was not discussed. Overall, the researcher believes that her experience with premarital counseling has enhanced her awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to many of the challenges, decisions, and issues encountered during one's engagement and early marriage stages.

Throughout the research process, the researcher attempted to remain objective and acknowledge her own limitations. The researcher was also aware of personal biases she has on the topic. For instance, the researcher holds a personal conviction of the importance of premarital counseling. She believes that a couple should plan and work on their future marriage during the engagement period to the same extent they plan and work on their wedding ceremony. The researcher holds the belief that many couples are emotionally heightened during their engagement period and these feelings of ecstasy cloud many couples from seeing potential problem areas in their relationship. Too many couples are surprised by areas of conflict later in a marriage when the puppy-dog love feelings wear off. Therefore, she views the engagement stage of a relationship as a critical stage during which the engaged parties should seek to discover depth and breadth about their partner enough so that both parties believe they know the person

they are about to marry. The researcher also holds the assumption that marriage is a permanent covenant and therefore in most cases, divorce should not be considered. Finally, it is assumed by the researcher that increased intimacy in all contexts of a marriage relationship is best.

### Research Design

In order to conduct this study, the researcher hosted two separate types of interviews. One set of interviews collected data from the perspective of pastoral counselors, and the other set of interviews was conducted with newly married couples who recently experienced premarital counseling. Newly wedded couples and pastors are the primary sources of information on what is and is not a part of the premarital counseling experience because they are the ones most closely involved in it. Likewise, couples are the most appropriate source of first-hand information on what topics discussed in counseling were most and least effective to their marriages. Questions were both quantitative, in the form of 5-point likert-style measurements, and qualitative, in the form of open-ended discussion questions.

Pastoral counselors were first asked for the scope of their experience, including their own marriages, the length and nature of their ministry to engaged couples, and the frequency of marriage ceremonies officiated. After establishing this preliminary data, counselors were asked to describe their premarital counseling sessions, including the type of support material that they use, the nature of the counseling sessions and who is involved, and the length and frequency of the sessions so that the researcher could understand the general style of the counseling. Finally, the interviewer focused in on social penetration theory specifically and asked pastors to explain what topics they cover in their premarital counseling sessions, to what perceived depth, for what length of time, and what strategies and methods they use to help a couple reach a deeper level of discussion. Outside of the theory itself, the interviewer also sought to discover what other

general communication and conflict management tactics are being shared with couples during counseling. The final question asked of pastors was to identify any areas of deficiency that may exist within their program. For a complete listing of the interview questions asked to pastoral counselors, see Appendix C.

As for data collected from the couples, interviews were conducted together with both husband and wife, and therefore the couple had to agree on an answer to each question. General information was first gathered and served the purposes of making sure the couple fit the requirements of the study. Next, broad information about their premarital counseling experience was amassed, such as how many sessions they attended, the length and frequency of each session, how much time existed prior to their wedding when these sessions were held, who was involved in the sessions, and what support materials were used (i.e. videos, audio tapes, books). Finally, social penetration theory themes were discussed. Like the pastoral counselor interviews, couple interviews included questions asking for a list of what topics were covered in their counseling, how deep the couple perceived they reached in discussion on certain topics during this counseling, and what strategies the counselor used to get to deeper areas of information about each topic. Couples were also asked additional questions to gain their perspectives on their relationship in regard to depth and breadth of knowledge of one another before their counseling, after their counseling, and after they had some experience being married. In order to determine if any necessary topics were missed in their premarital counseling sessions, one interview question asked how their knowledge of their partner had increased since marriage and if any surprises that occurred after the wedding day would have been helpful to have been discussed with their counselor prior to marriage. In the general realm of communication, couples were asked to remember and share any strategies for effective communication or conflict management that they

learned during counseling. Finally, couples were given a chance to express any additional deficiencies that they may have perceived about their premarital counseling experience. Appendix D includes a complete listing of the interview questions asked of couples.

*Participants*

There were several criteria participants must have met in order to take part in this study. First, pastoral counselors must have had at least two years of experience with counseling engaged couples. The researcher sought counselors with some experience so as to enhance the quality of answers. Pastors with only a few premarital counseling experiences by nature would have fewer examples to draw from in answering the interview questions. Additionally, only pastors with personal marriage experience were chosen for involvement in the study. This allows pastors the opportunity to be introspective in their own marriage and therefore to better counsel engaged couples because they know what may occur later in a marriage relationship that needs to be addressed early. Pastors were chosen as participants as opposed to licensed counselors because of the fact that most couples get married in a church-setting (Stahmann and Hiebert, *Premarital and Remarital Counseling*; Summers and Cunningham; Williams, "Premarital Counseling: A Needs Assessment"), regardless of their active membership with the institution. This is because most often, in order to be married in a church, some premarital counseling is required before the pastor will agree to perform the ceremony (Williams, "Premarital Counseling: A Needs Assessment"; Silliman and Schumm, "Marriage Preparation"). Furthermore, premarital counseling through the local church is often a complimentary service to the couple; whereas, individuals must pay to meet with a licensed counselor.

The couples chosen for this study were heterosexual partners and had to be within their first year of marriage to ensure that the premarital counseling experience was still relatively fresh

in memory. The chosen couples had to be married, not simply engaged, so that the researcher could inquire about perceptions of how premarital counseling had influenced married life post-wedding date for each couple. Couples had to have undergone some type of premarital counseling before getting married in order to be able to answer the interview questions.

Interviews yield the best information in the most efficient way when completed face-to-face and in real-time environments because the researcher can then ask for clarification on answers or for further elaboration where needed and can be in tune to the nonverbal communication that indicates statements made in sarcasm or joking form. For this reason, the researcher first sought participants from her surrounding community.

The procedure for gathering participants ran as follows. In order to find pastoral participants for this study, a cover letter that explained the study objectives and methodology was e-mailed to the office secretaries of twenty local churches of different Christian denominations. The e-mail subject header read, "Possible Interview with [name of church]". A copy of this cover letter can be found in Appendix A. The office assistants discussed the opportunity with their pastoral staff and then replied on behalf of the pastors. The researcher thanked those who declined for considering the opportunity. Typically, those who were willing to participate were secondary pastors, such as Assistant Pastors or Pastors of Student Ministries. The first ten respondents who agreed to participate were chosen. For these pastors who did consent to the study, the researcher discussed the next steps. The researcher forwarded the consent form and interview questions to the pastoral counselors through e-mail. Participants were encouraged to ask the researcher any questions about the study before the interview. They were also told to think ahead on the topic, but that they did not need to do any literal work with

answering the interview questions prior to our meeting. The researcher and pastor set a time for the researcher to come to the pastor's office at the church for the interview.

The couples were recruited indirectly through a method of referral. The researcher posted a message about her study to her colleagues in an online forum in order to find participants. She also asked members of her social network for names of individuals who met the criteria previously discussed. This allowed the researcher to find participants outside of her own personal relationships, which she thought to be important for honest self-disclosure. The researcher assumed that when interviewing a friend or acquaintance, the subject would have pressure to be "safe" in answering the questions so as to remain of a good reputation in front of her. Couples who know they will remain anonymous in the study itself and who also do not personally know the interviewer would perhaps be more forthright in answering questions because there is less pressure of judgment. The costs of a friend's negative judgment to the researcher outweigh the costs of a stranger's opinion.

After names of couples who met the research requirements were provided to the researcher, she called or e-mailed the couples, based on their preferences for contact, to address the possibility of their involvement in the study. A copy of this recruitment script is located in Appendix B. As couples denied participation in the study, they were replaced by new names. Local couples who agreed to participate in the study set a time with the researcher to meet for the interview. Each couple chose the location for the meeting to maximize their comfort, although it was encouraged that the couple allow the researcher to come to their own home in order to provide a more private environment. In the end, all local couples agreed to meet in their home setting. Because the researcher struggled to find ten local couples that would agree to meet for an interview, she secondarily approached the contacts who were located out of town. Thus, in five

cases the researcher conducted e-mail interviews instead of being able to do all ten as face-to-face interviews. This was a decision solely based on availability of participants. As with the pastoral counselors, couples were also emailed the interview questions ahead of time in order to give them more time to think about and remember their experiences. A total of thirty people were included as participants in the study: ten licensed pastors, ten wives, and ten husbands.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were made. In accordance with federal regulations, the researcher took the necessary steps to receive Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from her university and to protect the rights of the participants and the organizations that they represented. The following safeguards were also employed to protect the participants' rights: 1) research objectives were articulated orally and in writing so they were clearly understood by participants, 2) involvement in the study was voluntary and permission was gained from all participants before beginning the interview process, 3) participants were given the interview questions early to allow time for withdrawal if there was discomfort with the topic, 4) all participants and their representative churches remain anonymous. A copy of the consent form that was signed by all participants before beginning the interview process can be seen in Appendix E. The secure storage of these consent forms, along with all other original records for this study, is explained below.

### Participant Anonymity and Confidentiality

Robert E. Stake, author of *The Art of Case Study Research,* speaks rightly in saying, "Most educational data gathering involves at least a small invasion of personal privacy" (57). However, participants were assured complete anonymity and confidentiality in the research study. It was explained to participants that although their names were known the researcher,

substitute names would be used in data analysis and in the final report so that readers could not identify the participants. Similarly, the names of churches that employ the pastoral counselors and the name of the organizations that provided premarital counseling to the couples are masked.

Storage of the collected data also reflects confidentiality. After each interview, the researcher took the files from the audio recorder and placed them onto her computer. The files were then deleted from the audio recording device. Only the researcher has access to her personal computer files as they are locked with a passkey. The researcher transcribed the interviews and after printing the documents, kept them with the consent forms and her other reflective notes in a securely locked file cabinet to which only the researcher has a key. The files containing the voice recordings were then deleted off her computer. After a period of three years, all data collected from this study upon which original names are included will be destroyed.

### Data Collection

Data were collected from all participants within a two-month spread—between January and February 2013. Pastoral counselors were interviewed in their church offices. Couples were interviewed in their home environments. Five of the ten couples, fifty percent of the sample, opted to complete the interview through e-mail survey form because of the distance which hindered a physical meeting. These couples who were out of town were first offered an interview via Skype. One couple did not have internet at home, and another couple did not have Skype set up on their computer. The other three long distance couples chose to complete the interview in survey form for convenience of their time. Each local couple was interviewed together as a pair so that one's response could trigger additional information from the other partner as they reflected back on their experiences with premarital counseling. Likewise, long distance couples were instructed to complete the survey together after discussing their answers with one another.

For quantitative scaling questions, a couple had to agree on a single answer to each measurement (i.e. wife could not rate a "3" if husband thinks a "2").

Because both groups of participants, couples and pastors, were volunteering their personal time, the researcher promised that the interviews would not take longer than one hour, with the expectation of only half an hour being necessary. The shortest interview came to sixteen minutes and the longest interview lasted fifty-two minutes. Interviews were audio recorded to ensure that participants were not misquoted in the study and so that the researcher was free to focus on the quality of the interview and on follow-up questions instead of being concerned with taking accurate and copious notes. Because the interviews were audio recorded, the researcher was also able to take additional reflective notes during the interview. Bogdan and Biklen define reflective notes as "speculation, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions, and prejudices" of the researcher (208). All participants were sent thank-you notes for volunteering their time and thoughts after the interviewing stage of research was completed. Couples were e-mailed this letter, and pastoral counselors received the letter physically through the mail.

Interviews were purposefully selected as the best method for primary data collection. Interviews are valuable because they "allow a researcher control over the line of questioning" (Creswell 179). Follow-up questioning can be asked of participants if their answers evoke greater discussion. Also, if participants do not understand a question, they can ask the researcher for clarification, unlike through survey data collection. It is not plausible for the researcher to be a "fly on the wall" and observe the actual premarital counseling sessions without breaching ethical considerations. It is likewise not conceivable for the researcher to be present at all hours of the day and all days of the year to observe the couple's relationship within their first year of marriage. Therefore, the couples and pastors themselves must be the spokespersons for what

happened during premarital counseling, and the couples alone know the experiences of their first year of marriage. Additionally, because the researcher sought to discover themes in the *perceptions* and opinions of the pastoral counselors and couples about their premarital counseling experiences, direct observation at all hours of each day, even if possible, would change the design of the study entirely.

Inescapably, there are limitations to any type of data collection. Interviews are no exception, and they therefore do not always reflect a perfect account of reality. "Indirect information" is "filtered through the views of interviewees," and the researcher cannot report firsthand information him or herself (Creswell 179). The study is at the mercy of the couples' recollection of their premarital counseling experience and the willingness of participants to fully disclose. There is potential for couples to conceal information from the researcher that they are shy or otherwise unwilling to report. Couples may not feel comfortable revealing too personal of information about their marriage to the researcher, or couples may want to appear to have a perfect marriage by exaggerating the extent to which they know their partner and enjoy their marriage. Finally, Creswell points out that "not all people are equally articulate and perceptive" (179). Even if a couple is willing to fully disclose information to the researcher, some information may not be clearly communicated.

*Data Analysis*

The process of data analysis followed Creswell's suggestions. First, once all of the interviews were completed, the researcher prepared the data for analysis by transcribing the audio recordings of each interview and pairing each transcription with the reflective notes taken at the time of each interview. The transcribed interviews resulted in 174 pages of typed, double-spaced data. When the records were ready for review, an initial reading of the entirety of the data

was performed. The researcher read through all of the data in order to "obtain a general sense of the information and reflect on its overall meaning" (Creswell 185). After the initial reading, a detailed, line-by-line analysis was performed. The participants' responses were compared question by question in order to note any similarities and differences. The researcher then looked for themes among the data. These themes were developed in a natural and indigenous way and were identified as they emerged from the participants' responses. Following Creswell's suggestions, these themes were well-supported by "diverse quotations and specific evidence" (189). These common themes were then used to draw conclusions in regard to the study's research questions, and suggestions for new questions that need answering were also found in the interpretation of the data.

### *Research Reliability and Validity*

Procedures were undertaken in the study to validate the findings. Reliability is defined by Creswell as "stability or consistency of responses" (190). To insure reliability of results, the researcher employed Gibbs's method of double checking transcripts (84). Not only were interviews transcribed by the researcher for a first time in data preparation, but a second check was also completed by way of listening to the audio taped interviews again and following along with the transcriptions to ensure precision. Any misplaced words or other necessary corrections were made at this time. The researcher also checked that all emphasized words were *italicized* so more accurate interpretations of speaker meaning could be made.

Other methods were also employed to ensure internal validity. Triangulation, the "converging of several sources of data or perspectives from participants" ensured that a theme was not based solely on one participant or one quotation (Creswell 192). Rich, thick description in conveying the findings also provided depth to the study. Creswell noted that not only does the

data come from the participants to be interpreted by the researcher, but the readers of the study after its completion must also interpret the data that is presented before them (176). Results are therefore revealed to the readers, but readers are able to decide, based on the fully presented and described data, if the results are the same as they would attribute from the presented data.

Finally, the researcher was committed to presenting all data in actuality, including any "negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes" (Creswell 192). Although themes were determined according to triangulation and multiple matching responses, ill-matched data was not discounted. No responses were thrown from the study and all data were original. The researcher understood that communication is abstract and complicated and that no two humans see the world in exactly the same way. According to Virginia Satir, "Absolutely clear communication is impossible to achieve because communication is, by its very nature, incomplete" (73). In fact, if all interviews yielded the exact same answers, the study would render doubt. "Contrary information adds to the credibility of an account" because it is expected (Creswell 192). The researcher took the whole of the data into consideration, including remarks that ran contrary to central themes, and displayed it in the results section of the paper.

## Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

The marriage relationships of the ten couples who were interviewed varied in length from 2 to 9 months with a mean average of 5.7 months. The shortest premarital counseling program that a couple experienced was 3 hours (1 session for 3 hours), and the longest program was 24 hours (12 sessions for 2 hours each). The mean average amount of time spent involved in premarital counseling for the ten couples was 9.7 hours. The least amount of sessions that a couple attended was 1 and the greatest amount was 12. On average, couples attended 5.6 sessions. The programs varied in the lapse of time in which they occurred before the weddings, ranging from 2 months prior to 7 months prior. The mean average from all ten couples amounted to programs being held 3.9 months in advance of beginning the marriage.

The natures of the programs were also diverse. Six couples used an inventory before beginning their counseling; five of these six used Prepare and Enrich and the other couple filled out a "detailed questionnaire" written by their pastor himself. Three of the ten couples were counseled using real-time electronic media, known as Skype. Various support materials were used in each of the programs, including a video series by Matt Chandler, a packet of homework created by a pastoral counselor, and the books *Preparing for Marriage, The Marriage Builder,* and *Love and Respect*. One couple who also worked with a book during counseling could not recall the title, and the couple who only met with a counselor for one session used the Prepare and Enrich inventory alone.

When asked who else was involved with the couple and pastor in the counseling process, five couples responded that only the pastor was present with them, one couple had the pastor's wife join for half of the sessions, two couples had the pastor's wife join them for at least one, but less than half, of the sessions, one couple was counseled by the pastor and his wife for all

sessions, and an older, married lay couple in the church performed the counseling sessions for the final couple. All ten couples associate themselves with the Christian religion. One couple came from the Lutheran tradition, one couple was Presbyterian, and the remaining couples were either Baptist or Evangelical Free in their denomination (five and three couples, consecutively).

Of the ten licensed pastors who were interviewed for the study, all were within Christian traditions. Seven led Baptist churches, two led Evangelical Free churches, and one led a non-denominational church. All pastors had been married between 9 and 44 years. The average duration of their marriages was 22.2 years. The length of premarital counseling experience for pastors varied from 7 to 32 years, with an average of 16 years of experience. The current premarital programs varied in length of time from six to ten weeks, with an average duration of 7.8 weeks. Six of the ten churches employed an inventory in their premarital counseling program; two counselors used FOCCUS, two counselors used Prepare and Enrich, one pastor used both the Minnesota Multiphastic Personality Test (MMPI) and his own design of a questionnaire, and one pastor used a survey from Sojourn Church.

Various other supporting materials were said to be used regularly within counseling, including the books *Preparing for Marriage God's Way, The Handbook for Engaged Couples,* and *Meaning of Marriage*, and a DVD series of 8 sermons from John Piper on marriage. Two counselors reported that their programs were not based on one predetermined book, but instead, depending on each couple's needs, they varied the assigned reading material. Two counselors used packets made up of their own material—sermons and worksheets they had collected over the years.

*RQ 1: Do engaged couples believe they know the depth and breadth of their partner adequately enough to be prepared for marriage after receiving premarital counseling?*

The researcher first sought to answer this question by considering how much growth of knowledge (breadth and depth) romantic partners gain about each other during premarital counseling. Couples were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how much their knowledge of their spouse grew during premarital counseling from 0, not at all, to 5, the maximum that can be known. They were then asked to explain why. Answers ranged from 1 to 4 with a mean average of 2.45 (SD = 0.99) and a mode of 2.

Mode = 2
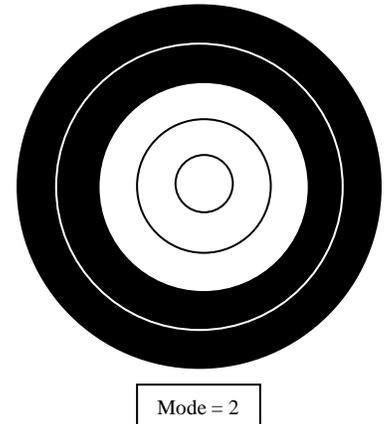
Couples who ranked their premarital counseling on the low end (1s and 2s) gave the following reasons: "We had already talked through most issues and topics that were discussed in the sessions"; "There weren't many new things that came up or surprised us about each other"; "A lot of it was common sense"; and "We had a very healthy dating relationship." Those who ranked in the middle (3s) said: "We learned a little bit about each other during counseling, but more than learning about each other, we learned how to be open to each other in the future"; "We had talked about a number of things on our own before the counseling started, but it helped us get into greater depth on some topics than we may have found on our own"; and "It wasn't a completely enlightening experience, but it did bring to the surface some things that we didn't realize about each other."

The highest ranking given by couples was a four. These couples were able to provide specific eye-opening areas that were drawn out during their premarital counseling experience. One couple said that it "brought some of [the wife's] insecurities to light and explained how they affect her, me, and our relationship. This allowed [the husband] to learn how [he] should react to

them." Another couple learned how to work together despite their differences: "[The counselor] discussed our different personality types and provided situations and examples of each of our personality types and how each type works together." The final couple found their counseling led them to new areas of depth—not breadth. They explained, "We were very open with each other prior to our counseling…However, during counseling we did see more of the emotion behind the facts." The wife in particular experienced a realization that although she knew her husband was not a virgin, she did not realize she was experiencing pain and fear as a result of it. She appreciated her pastor's work as a facilitator to approach the topic "with a means of true forgiveness instead of just ignoring the elephant in the room." This couple concluded that "we did get to see a deeper side of not only each other during our counseling, but also of ourselves."

The researcher also considered counselors' and couples' perspectives on if current premarital counseling practices were more effective at discussing a breadth of topics or at covering a few topics in depth. The question, "Do you think your premarital counseling experience was/is stronger in breadth (a lot of topics covered) or depth (a certain few topics were covered at a more serious and detailed level)?" was therefore asked of both groups of participants. Of the twenty interviews, 13 respondents (65%) said their programs mostly went deep, 2 respondents (10%) thought their program instead provided a breadth of information, and 5 respondents (25%) did not choose one over the other. See table 1.1 for a complete spread of the data.

| *Perceived Depth or Breadth of Premarital Counseling* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Total Pastors** | **% of Pastors** | **Total Couples** | **% of Couples** | **Combined Total** | **Combined %** |
| **Depth** | 6 | 60% | 7 | 70% | 13 | 65% |
| **Breadth** | 1 | 10% | 1 | 10% | 2 | 10% |
| **Both** | 3 | 30% | 2 | 20% | 5 | 25% |

*Table 1.1*

Seven of the ten couples found their premarital counseling to be a program of depth. Five of these seven responded simply with "depth;" whereas, two added *definitely* depth" for

emphasis. Those who expanded on their answer said, "A few things really deep…because we didn't cover a whole lot of topics; we really delved into the…spiritual," and "Our counselors focused on Biblical roles and servitude a lot, but did not cover other practical things as in-depth." Only one of the ten couples thought their program leaned towards breadth and not depth. They, too, responded emphatically: "*definitely* breadth." This couple met for only one session of three hours in order to walk through their Prepare and Enrich inventory report with a counselor. They described their experience as "brief, but covered a lot of ground" as they talked through the various scored sections of the exam. Two couples seemed especially pleased with their premarital counseling programs, rating them as an even mix of breadth and depth. The first couple said, "We would say that it had a nice balance. They gave us an opportunity to talk about a broad spectrum but allowed us to dig deeply into topics that were meaningful to us. We appreciated this a lot." And the other couple elaborated even further, saying, "It wasn't like…let's just popcorn talk about as many topics as we can and not go deep, but at the same time, there wasn't like two topics that like…so it was a pretty even spread. On a scale of breadth and depth, it'd be right in the middle."

Similarly to the couples' responses, pastors tended to view their programs as stronger in depth with just a few topics. Six of the ten pastors answered the question with "depth;" whereas, only one pastor thought his program covered more of a breadth of topics. The explanations for depth provide additional insight to the research question. A couple of programs were centered on issues that seemed most important to *all* couples. One program was described as being "very pointed…it hits the things that you need to know." A second pastor said, "The six sessions we go deep in. I want to tap root down into the issues." One of the programs, however, went in different directions of depth according to each couple's unique and individual needs. The pastor of this

program explained, "The counselor in me looks for the problem areas. Immediately, the first session, I'm looking for what do we need to work on." In contrast, another pastor thought depth was best in order to respect the couple's time: "I mean, we could probably talk about a lot more topics than we do, but eight to ten weeks seems to be about the max for attention span." The pastor who described his program in terms of breadth had a similar explanation to the one couple who likewise thought of their program as broad. He also uses an inventory that looks at important statistics across a plethora of areas.

Three of the pastors were confident that their programs provided an even balance of both depth and breadth of information. Of these three pastors, two said this was done mostly through the aid of their resources and homework. For instance, one pastor relied on his materials for breadth while he covered depth. He explains, "In what I deal with, I deal with deeply. But in eight to ten sessions, you can't deal with everything, so that's what the other resources are for. So I would like to say that I am very broad with what is brought to them and in the areas where I discern they have the need, then I go deep." The second pastor echoed the idea that he covered different topics in depth, depending on each particular couple's needs, but he tried also to "equip them with information and with homework. That way if [they] don't get to something, I mean, they've still *got* it." The final pastor thought that even in his own counseling, both depth and breadth were accomplished. He said:

> I think we have a good breadth of a lot of…I know you can't cover *every* scenario and you can't cover *every*thing, but I think what we do try to cover is a decent twelve to fourteen topics…and I think we cover them relatively deeply. So I don't think we're a mile wide and an inch deep, and I don't think we're really shallow in our breadth and just beat something to death as well.

Although these pastors assured the researcher that their programs offered both an adequate breadth and efficient depth, the researcher assumed that pastors may be biased in giving their own programs praise. Therefore, she developed the next portion of her study with the function of comparing counselors' and couples' perceptions of depth.

In order to judge if counselors and couples share the same perceptions of the depth of detail of premarital counseling programs, the author of the study chose four topics which are applicable to a marriage relationship (sex, money, conflict, and in-laws) and had all participants scale between 0 and 5 how deeply in detail they perceived each topic to be discussed in their programs.
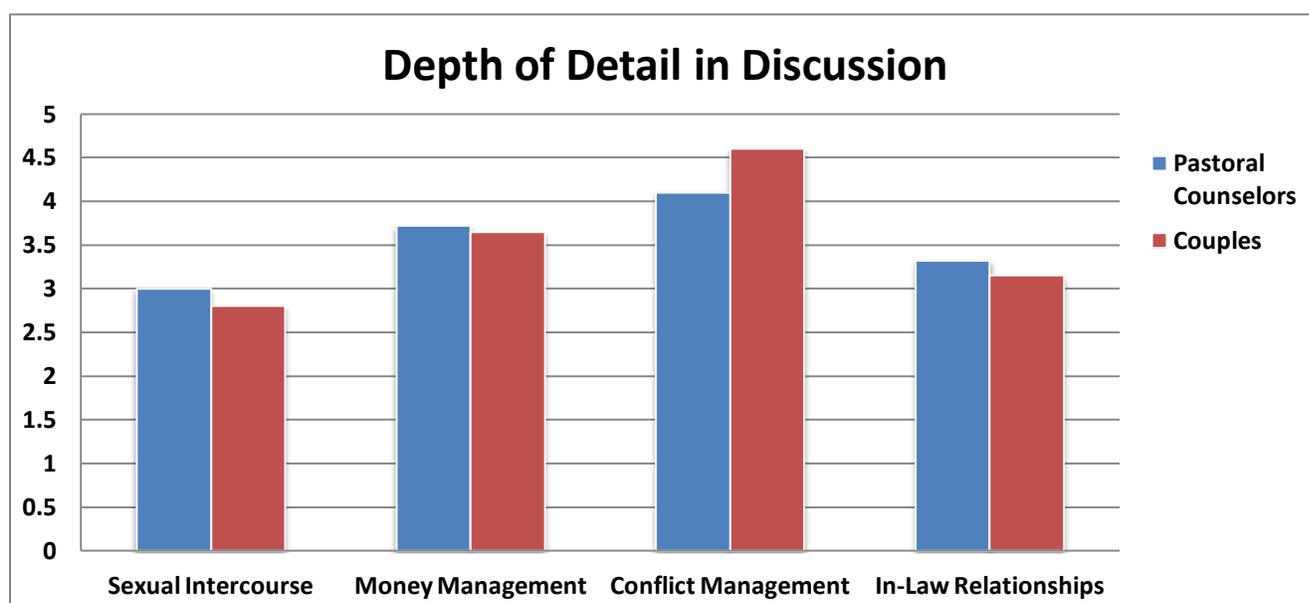


As indicated in the above chart, couples' and counselors' responses had little variance. For the category of "sexual intercourse", couples' responses ranged from 1-5, with a mean of 2.8. Pastoral counselors' responses ranged from 1-4.5, with a mean of 3. Within the topic "money management", couples perceived their programs to range from 2-5, with a mean of 3.65. Pastors' perceptions ranged from 2-5 as well, with a mean of 3.7. "Conflict management" was a high category for both couples and pastors. Couples' scores ranged from 4-5, with a mean of 4.6.

Pastors' scores ranged from 3-5, with a mean of 4.1. Results for the category of "in-law relationships" were far more spread out. The responses of the couples ranged from 0-5, with a mean average of 3.15. The responses of the pastors ranged from 1-5, with a mean of 3.3. See tables 1.2—1.5 for a side-by-side comparison of the data.

Couples' and counselors' responses were fairly even in all categories. Couples indicated slightly lesser depth of discussion in the category of sexual intercourse, money management, and in-law relationships, but greater depth for conflict management than did counselors. Also of note is that both couples and counselors scored the topic of "sexual intercourse" as the least detailed discussion of these four topics and "conflict management" as the most detailed discussion topic.

| *Sexual Intercourse* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Pastors** | **Couples** | **Difference** |
| **Range** | 1 – 4.5 | 1 – 5 | .5 |
| **Mean** | 3 | 2.8 | .2 |
| **Median** | 3 | 2.5 | .5 |
| **Mode** | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| **Standard Deviation** | 1.18 | 1.17 | .01 |

*Table 1.2*

| *Money Management* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Pastors** | **Couples** | **Difference** |
| **Range** | 2 – 5 | 2 – 5 | 0 |
| **Mean** | 3.72 | 3.65 | .07 |
| **Median** | 3.5 | 3.75 | .25 |
| **Mode** | 3, 3.5, 4.5, 5 | 5 | - |
| **Standard Deviation** | .94 | 1.10 | .16 |

*Table 1.3*

| *Conflict Management* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Pastors** | **Couples** | **Difference** |
| **Range** | 3 – 5 | 4 – 5 | 1 |
| **Mean** | 4.1 | 4.6 | .5 |
| **Median** | 4.25 | 5 | .75 |
| **Mode** | 4.5 | 5 | .5 |
| **Standard Deviation** | .66 | .49 | .17 |

*Table 1.4*

| In-Law Relationships | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Pastors** | **Couples** | **Difference** |
| **Range** | 1 – 5 | 0 – 5 | 1 |
| **Mean** | 3.32 | 3.15 | .17 |
| **Median** | 3.37 | 3.5 | .13 |
| **Mode** | 2.5 | 5 | 2.5 |
| **Standard Deviation** | 1.17 | 1.70 | .53 |

*Table 1.5*

Results for research question 1 reveal that no couple felt fully prepared (5 on the 5-point

Likert scale) for marriage, even after premarital counseling, although some couples came close

(4 on the 5-point Likert scale). Overall, the premarital counseling experience varied for couples

and counselors. Respondents who were most satisfied with their program described their

premarital counseling in terms of both breadth and depth of discussion.

*RQ 2: Do counselors indirectly support the basic premise of social penetration theory by*
*actively using strategies to help engaged partners reveal important aspects of the breadth and*
*depth of their personalities before entering into marriage?*

First, the researcher considered if counselors indirectly support the premises of social

penetration theory in their practice and therefore agree that romantic partners need to know one

another to a certain breadth and depth before healthily committing to marriage. This was

accomplished through asking pastors directly, "How important is it—or is it important—for a

couple to communicate deeply on a wide range of topics before entering into a marriage?" and

then indirectly through questioning if pastors have had any experiences in which a pair they

counseled did not know the other partner to a great enough extent of depth and breadth, and

therefore the pastor felt uncomfortable marrying them. For the latter question, all ten pastors

answered "yes," but their follow-up stories varied in the extent to which they actually addressed

issues in depth and breadth of knowledge about the other partner. Themes were found throughout

these example stories of weddings that had to be called off, however. Three pastors experienced

counseling with couples they believed had not been dating long enough, three pastors mentioned calling off a wedding for a mismatch between a "believer and an unbeliever," and three pastors mentioned cases where new issues arouse during counseling that led to postponed or canceled weddings.

Time is a necessary aspect of building a relationship, according to counselors. One pastor explains, "Love is kind of…it's difficult to tell if this is love or infatuation." His example story was of a young man who thought God was calling him to marry a young lady with extreme OCD and other mental disorders. Although this pastor admitted that God could call someone to the situation, he believed that both partners did not know the full situation they were walking into. The pastor thought they did not know each other enough and recommended time and doing more activities together. A separate case mentioned by a pastor in which a wedding was postponed was also due to the couple's need for more time. The pastor explained, "They just didn't know each other well enough from the standpoint of…time…but also just the effort given." In this situation, the pastor saw that the couple was consumed with the physical aspect of their relationship. He described them further as, "Moving very quickly…barely knew each other…and then they're engaged, and now they're planning the wedding. And that's all they're thinking about is the wedding and they don't even hardly *know* each other before that." The pastor explained that in counseling he asks the men to rate on a scale from 0-100% how well they think they know their future wives. When they give a high percentage, he begins to ask them questions and rattle off categories, and slowly the men lower that percentage and realize they actually know very little. "Some of them are just really clueless about what she's about, what she wants, what are her dreams, what are her future aspirations and hopes…all that stuff." Having a grasp of who the other person is was said by this pastor to be "critical." The third pastor's situation

echoed the same theme. He provided the story of a couple who "didn't know each other very well, hadn't been dating very long…very, very different. No direction in life. Parents weren't approving. So some red flags there."

It was a big concern for three pastors in particular when they had a couple come into their office with a mismatch of faith. For one pastor, he spent a lot of extra time building a relationship with a young man who was "not a believer" and trying to "help him come to faith." The young man did make a profession of faith, the couple was married, and then they later divorced. The pastor described the couple as "pretty focused on making this happen" despite their differences, but he regrets not helping them more. Another pastor explained the disparity of religions to be an issue of depth that many couples do not understand. He gave the story of a couple who came to him for premarital counseling in which the young man was a believer and the young lady was not. Although the pastor found it to be "a *huge* deal," the couple had not talked about it and the impact it would have when it came time to raise kids, especially. Because this pastor was able to find this big issue in counseling, bring it out in the open, and talk about it, the couple was able to deal with it. In this case, the young lady did eventually become a Christian, they were married by a different pastor a few years later, and their relationship has stayed strong.

Finally, a few pastors found that through counseling, new areas of depth and breadth were discovered, and this eventually led to the couple deciding for themselves that they were not right for each other. An inventory was the key for one pastor. He told a couple, "There are some real problems here…and these are deep issues." Showing the couple areas based on actual data opened their eyes to important areas they did not recognize they had differences in before. A separate couple did not end their relationship after counseling, but postponed the date of their

wedding because they realized they needed help. Their counselor explained that "people who are not ready to get married generally are people who come from difficult, painful, wounded backgrounds." His philosophy was that if they get married now, get married later, or do not get married at all—all are viable options. In premarital, he asserted, "There's no pressure." The pressure comes later when a couple is already married and comes back for counseling, often with children involved. This is when the counselor senses "the pressure to do everything I can to help that relationship survive." Premarital counseling, from his perspective, is still a time of figuring out depth and breadth of information about one's partner. And the goal is always about helping the couple, not hosting a wedding. His perspective was backed by a third pastor who also shared the story of working with a couple who was living together and wanted to be married. When the pastor discovered that they couple was living together because the man had lost his job and had nowhere else to live, the pastor and his wife took the man in to live with them. During counseling, issues came up and the couple "began to see things…because they weren't living together" and they did not have as many demands to make the relationship work. This couple did not end up getting married, but both formed new, healthier relationships and were married at a later time.

After it was established that social penetration theory is applicable in the context of premarital counseling, the researcher next considered the strategies or methods that counselors employ during premarital counseling to help couples discover new levels of depth and breadth in their relationship. Both counselors and couples contributed to this research question. Couples were asked directly, "What methods or strategies did your premarital counselor employ to get you beyond surface-level answers (i.e. 'I have three brothers and six sisters') to intimate answers (i.e. 'I never felt loved at home because my mom's attention was so spread between us

children.')?" Three overall themes emerged from the couples' responses: counselors got to deeper, more personal information about the counselees through communication strategies, building a more intimate relationship with the couple, and other miscellaneous activities. Two couples said that no strategies were needed because "we are both very honest and direct people" and "we really felt very comfortable talking about anything."

Of the three themes, communication strategies emerged as most frequently recognized approach. Four of the ten couples referred to their counselor's strategy of asking purposeful questions. They described the questions as "direct," "straightforward," and "blunt." Other communication strategies mentioned were asking follow-up and clarifying questions, restating the question, giving example answers, and beginning the counseling with lighter topics and moving into deeper topics as the sessions progressed. One couple described their pastor as a "digger," explaining, "He never left an answer at its face value." Aside from the asking of good questions, each of these other communication strategies were mentioned only once.

The second most recurrent theme dealt with the counselor-client relationship. It was clear through the interviews that comfort within this relationship was the key to effective counseling. Within this category, the most frequent response from couples was that their counselor related to them with personal examples. This was mentioned by three of the ten couples. One couple described it this way: "He made us feel more comfortable and showed that he could relate to us." The second most common answer, mentioned in two of the ten interviews with couples, was that they already had a relationship with the pastor beforehand which enabled them to feel comfortable with openly communicating. One couple elucidated, "We have been very close to both the officiating pastor and his wife for many years. A lot of things were already known, and…a foundation was already set which allowed us to go much deeper into topics." Couples

also mentioned that their counselors "gained [their] trust," "showed [they] cared," and "built [their] confidence" in order to help the couple open up to deeper disclosures.

A third category made up the final cluster of responses. These were miscellaneous activities that counselors facilitated with a couple. Two couples mentioned the premarital inventory as a tool which allowed them to begin their counseling at a more personal level. One couple stated, "Since we had taken several in-depth exams prior to coming, I feel he had a fair judge of us." Two remaining strategies were only mentioned once. One couple found reading Bible verses that related to the topics effective in evoking deeper conversations. And one couple's pastor used a unique activity to draw out root issues. The couple shared, "He had a list of emotions, and at the beginning of each session, we circled the emotions we had felt the week prior. He would then choose the negative emotions and ask us why we felt them. This usually led to deeper issues we needed to communicate about further." These methods that couples saw and remembered as being used by counselors to draw out depth in discussion came to a grand total of eleven strategies.

In order to draw comparisons, counselors were also asked directly, "What strategies or methods do you employ to help engaged couples discuss topics beyond surface-level answers and deeper into their true feelings, attitudes, and beliefs?" and "What strategies do you use to work with those couples who seem 'unteachable'?" Counselors emphasized to the researcher that "the most unhelpful scenario is when [the individuals] just say what you want to hear." Many strategies to make counseling deeper and more personal were shared. Responses were diverse, but trends arose. The top five answers, ranked in order of popularity, were: asking good questions (70%), using an inventory or questionnaire to target weak areas (50%), reassuring the

couple of confidentiality (40%), moving from trivial to deep topics in the curriculum (20%), and building a personal relationship with the couple (20%).

Beginning with the most frequently stated category of responses, pastors showed they were intentional in their use of questioning. "I have people that are harder to get to go to vulnerable places, but unfortunately for them, we're not going to stop until I get specifics and until I dig into an area," one stated. Pastors mentioned asking a lot of questions, asking meaningful questions, pinpointing each partner at different times for a direct answer, asking open-ended questions, and asking the question multiple times. One pastor said it was important to make it practical. For instance, after reading a Bible passage, he will ask one individual by name, "So what does it mean to listen to your wife, *Jim*?" Another pastor referred to his questioning as "blunt," such as in the case of asking every couple whether they are sleeping together or not. "Why, why, why, why, and why" was the questioning strategy of a third pastor, who assured the researcher, "Sooner or later, you get to the root cause." Making sure both partners are asked questions is imperative, according to one interviewer. He explained, "Depending on disposition you may get a very type A, go-getter, opinionated person and then somebody who's very passive and quiet. And it's not that they have less of an opinion, they just don't like to express it as much." Not asking the more introverted partner for his or her responses runs the risk of "both leaving and feeling that the more domineering personality always wins." Overall, asking questions ranked as the number one strategy. It was recognized most by couples and most intentionally applied by pastors.

The second most-used strategy from the pastoral counselors' point of view was taking advantage of inventories or questionnaires. One pastor whose church has its engaged couples first take the FOCCUS (Facilitate Open, Caring, Communication, Understanding, and Study)

inventory before meeting with a pastor for counseling put this in plain terms: "The survey is so helpful for me because I can immediately go to places that I know are issues…I see very blatantly in front of me that a couple scored a 15% in this area...so this *is* an issue. You can pretend like it's not an issue, but we're going to get to why it is an issue." This works even for churches that do not use the well-known inventories such as FOCCUS or Prepare and Enrich, but that provide other homework, worksheets and question prompts. These are still designed to target specific areas that a couple may struggle with, or as one pastor put it, "hit it head on." It was explained to the researcher why homework is such a useful tool to pastors: "For most people, their guard is down when they're writing on a piece of paper, because nobody is looking over their shoulder. They're going to be pretty honest. On paper…nobody else is there listening to it." And most of the homework is first completed separately by each partner, which helps the pastor to be able to "see how they feel about issues…and just get an honest opinion." Inventories, questionnaires, and homework of all varieties are a useful method of targeting weak areas that a couple should not hide from.

Nearly half of the pastors saw the importance in reassuring couples that their answers would be kept confidential. One pastor delineated his usual script to the couples: "This isn't about me having more stories. I have no gain in finding out your dark secrets and telling people. But you have everything to lose by not telling your spouse dark things." Another typically used line is: "Nothing that's said is going to leave this office." Being a youth pastor, one counselor is often put in a difficult position when his former students grow older and come for premarital counseling, because parents want to be nosy and check in with him on how their son or daughter is doing in counseling. He sends the parents back to the direct source—their child—and keeps his sessions confidential as was promised to his counselees.

The fourth and fifth most popular methods used by the pastoral counselors were tied in frequency, each being mentioned in two of the ten interviews. These two strategies—moving from trivial to deep topics and building a personal relationship—go hand in hand. Curriculums are often designed to peel back layers of Altman and Taylor's metaphorical onion, and as topics get more personal, the pastor is able to build a stronger relationship with the couple and reach greater levels of trust. In the first session with a couple, the pastors often start by simply asking the couple to tell them about their lives. One pastor reflected on his typical counseling program, saying, "I'll probably spend the first half an hour of my time with a couple just hearing their story…just talking and building trust." During this time surface-level answers, such as how many brothers and sisters each counselee has, are shared. Pastors may then move to discussing the personalities of each partner, or to another less serious topic. One pastor explains, "The way [the program] is set up, it's set up to be more lighter, talk through your family histories, and that kind of makes it build into when we get to the conflict and communication, which is by week three to four, we've been meeting a couple of times and we've already talked about generalities." After the pastor has spent several sessions with a couple, the individuals are more apt to open up to deeper level issues.

Having a personal relationship with a couple outside of and before premarital counseling sometimes hinders deep discussion, as a couple may not want to show faults to their own pastor. One assistant pastor, who tends to get couples in premarital counseling whom he already has established a good relationship with, has this issue. However, he assures couples that nothing they say is going to change his opinion of them, "because I've just kind of seen and heard it all…like nothing's a huge shock." Establishing this ahead of time has been helpful for the couples in alleviating that concern.

Building a more intimate relationship with the couple, as well as prompting deeper issues

from them, is accomplished by one pastor through his own personal self-disclosure. He describes

this process as follows:

> Almost always, when you start being transparent about your own relationship as a
> married couple, it won't be long before that couple begins opening up because
> they've already had those times when they've hurt each other, they've
> misunderstood each other, they've had to forgive each other….So, I find that
> when [my wife] and I as a married couple are transparent about our own need for
> the gospel in whatever area we're discussing with them, then that automatically
> opens up that couple and we're able to connect with them.

This aligns with Cozby and Jourard's previous research, discussed in the literature review, on the

benefits of therapist self-disclosure to clients.

Beyond these top five methods, other strategies were only mentioned once. One pastor

recommended using foundational scriptures from the Bible to trigger important discussions.

Another said spending a significant amount of time with the couple on a certain topic will lead to

greater depth. Getting creative with the use of different props in object lessons to show the

importance of the couple growing closer together is the method of a third pastor. Leveling with

the couple and emphasizing the importance of getting to and dealing with real issues during

premarital counseling is another strategy. Instead of using concealed methods, one counselor

says straight out, "If you guys can talk about your lives, and get deep, it's only going to make it

better for you. If you are hiding something from your spouse or your fiancé *now*, it's going to

come up. It's better to just get it all out now." And for one pastor whose background experience

is mostly counseling centered, he looks for walls that one partner may have put up to block open

and honest communication and reflection. If a major block is found, he then recommends individual counseling first before continuing with the couple's premarital counseling.

A few different communication strategies were also mentioned. One pastor suggests "getting them to respond not so much for themselves but on behalf of the other person" because it "helps them see things from another person's point of view. And it always is interesting that…they feel like they really know how the other person feels, but it's almost always a little different then they perceive." When having a counselee answer for him- or herself, one useful strategy mentioned by a pastor is to tell individuals to give one side of the story instead of the objective reality: "I say, 'I'm not asking you to give me the objective truth. I just want it from your perspective.' Cause our opinions matter. Cause that was…that was what they experienced. So even if you're *wrong*….that was your understanding." A final strategy mentioned for getting the couple to openly communicate with each other and to the pastor himself was to give the assignment of having a fight within the next week before the subsequent counseling session. This particular pastor says to the couple, "I'm not saying, 'Be mean.' I'm just saying, 'Look, arguments happen.' I want you to have an argument. I don't care what it's about, but you have to…remember what your *feelings* are when you're having it and then come talk to me about it." This pastor testified that it "*always* worked." And he used the fight to get to deeper issues of love and respect in the marriage and to clearer communication. Overall, twenty-two different strategies were noted by the pastors.

Research question two revealed that counselors agree with the basic concept of social penetration theory. Pastors relayed that time and communication are both necessary for a couple in laying a healthy foundation for marriage. Often, couples are turned away from further counseling because of inadequate depth and breadth of knowledge about their partner. Also, new

areas of depth and breadth of information about one's partner are disclosed in premarital

counseling that can lead to a break off of the relationship. Pastors were more concerned with

helping the couple than making sure the wedding was performed—and sometimes this meant

helping the couple make a hard decision.

Also in answer to research question two, various strategies are employed by pastors

during premarital counseling in order to help couples reach deeper levels of discussion. For both

pastoral counselors and couples, communication strategies, such as asking direct questions, was

the most cited method. The second most frequently used method recognized by couples was

building a close and trusting relationship between the counselor and clients; for pastors, the use

of an inventory or questionnaire ranked second. Other strategies that were suggested include

reassuring a couple of confidentiality, working from light to heavy topics throughout the

curriculum, and having couples practice fighting with the aid of the counselor.

*RQ 3:  What areas of deficiency do counselors and couples find exist in current premarital*

*counseling programs in regards to reaching an intimate depth and breadth of each partner's*

*personality?*

This research question was first explored with the couples. The researcher wondered if

couples, after beginning their marriages, discovered any new topics that needed to be added to

premarital counseling sessions (breadth) or covered more thoroughly (depth). It was assumed

that counselors cover the areas they find to be important to the marriage relationship; however,

couples have fresh perspectives on any surprises that occur after marriage and can attest to

whether or not their counseling prepared them to handle such surprises. The author of this study

asked couples a similar question in multiple ways in order to address this area of research.

Couples were asked, "What topics did you discuss only lightly during premarital counseling that

you feel needed to be covered more thoroughly?" as well as, "What topics were not discussed in premarital counseling that came up later after you were married and were a surprise to you? Do you think these topics should have been addressed in your premarital counseling experience? Why or why not?" and "Do you think that your premarital counseling experience adequately equipped you for your marriage?"

Six of the ten couples (60%) provided no additional topics or areas to be addressed more completely. Their responses were: "We can't think of anything," "I think we hit everything," and "I wouldn't have included any other topics or anything." Of the couples who did provide additional areas to explore during counseling, no major themes emerged from their responses. The only answer given by more than one couple, and even this was only said twice, was finances. One couple who wished they had more conversations about financing during their premarital counseling affirmed that it was now a "huge struggle" for them. They mentioned sharing a bank account and no longer having "my money, your money," dealing with being in debt from student loans, and one partner having a job while the other job searches. "Practical information we could apply right away," they concluded, "would have been great." The second couple reflected on the husband's insecurities with the wife having a better paying job. This has led to greater issues of trust and lack of open communication as well. They also explained, "We would have benefitted from something with a focus on a biblical perspective on handling money, on budgeting to gain freedom and trust in marriage, and the basics of investing in today's market for short term and long term goals."

Three other areas were targeted, each by only one of the four remaining couples who provided a response other than "none" when asked for topics they would add to their counseling.

For one couple, boundaries in in-law relationships proved to be a major area of stress in their relationship—especially for the wife. She explained:

> We have had a really rough time with [his] parents…they put a lot of pressure on us…They also did not understand boundaries, and we didn't know how to vocalize them. They would show up on weekends we asked them not to come, pressure us to move to [his home town], try to be involved with every decision we were trying to make as a couple, and literally never leave us alone, all the while guilting us when we didn't want to spend unreasonable amounts of time with them.

When asked if they thought their premarital counseling should have dealt with this issue before they got married, she agreed. "I think this could have been addressed as a topic more in our counseling, and we could have talked to them sooner. [My husband], just last week, had to call them to lay down the law. It would have been nice to have done that seven months ago," she reasoned. Overall, the couple responded that "feelings of rejection, pressure, and inadequacy were all a result from not being prepared for a situation like that" and wished for future couples to be warned of this possible scenario.

Another couple felt strongly that sexual intimacy was only covered superficially in their counseling. They said, "We should have been pushed to talk in more detail about attitudes and expectations for sexual intimacy." Out of the fear of arousing too much desire before the wedding, the topic was skimmed. The wife accounted the horrors of their honeymoon night which led to "trouble trusting future attempts." She said, "It took us many months…and learning to trust my husband enough to let him try things…before we got to the point of me being able to enjoy intimacy." The couple also mentioned the feelings of shame they felt at first after sexual

intimacy and desired that future couples be warned about this possible reaction. The wife explained that growing up in a Christian culture caused her to not feel freedom to get to know her body or her partner's during the engagement stage "out of fear of experiencing too much pleasure before marriage" and that once married, these same feelings contrasted with the freedom to explore sexual intimacy and made for a difficult adjustment.

Another area of concern was in conflict resolution—although the couple did not provide the researcher with much detail about this area of their lives. The wife cautiously brought up the topic, saying, "I wish we had gone a little bit more in depth into conflict resolution…", and then the husband chimed in, admitting, "I have anger issues." The husband's model of handling anger was his family's model. The wife described it as "loud and boisterous" while the husband explained, "We swear, we let it out, and then…we fix it. We pick everything up after." This was in stark contrast to the wife's family's model of handling conflict and anger, which was described as "no yelling." Both partners said they knew about this difference before getting married and read marriage books on it, but wished it was covered more in-depth during their counseling with a pastor because it remains an issue.

Counselors were then included in the research, following a similar pane of thought. However, instead of asking for specific topics that need to be added to the premarital counseling sessions, these participants were asked to describe weak areas of premarital counseling or general areas of improvement that they could better develop in their own programs. They were asked, "What deficiencies, if any, do you see in your premarital counseling program—or what areas of improvement exist?" If counselors could not think of a personal answer, they were prompted to address the question while referring to "premarital counseling programs in general" or "other programs you've seen or heard about." The answers were nearly all different; of the
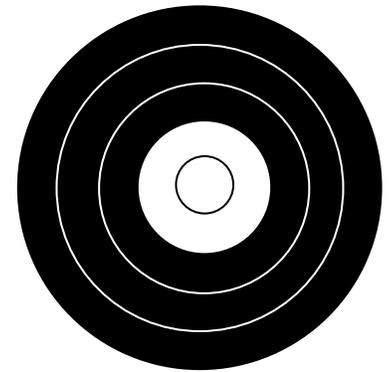
responses, only two were mentioned more than once. Two pastors said that often premarital counseling programs treat symptoms instead of dealing with the heart issues. One explained, "I find that there's almost always a sin beneath the sin, or an issue beneath the issue, and to just deal with what's being brought to the table sometimes is less than helpful…because you're only dealing with a symptom of a problem." He supposed this was a problem because of the amount of work it takes to get to "what's really going on" instead of simply giving "coping techniques." The other pastor referred to this as "life management skills" and also faulted it for not getting to the true heart of the issues.

The other theme that emerged from more than one pastor's response was the need for more experience, training, and study for the pastors themselves. Four of the ten pastors mentioned something along this line of thought. Although he met the requirement for the current study and had at least two years of marital experience, one pastor reflected back upon having begun his premarital counseling career as a "single guy" and referred to it as "crazy." Once he became married himself, he admitted that it all made more sense to him. Another pastor also recalled being fresh on the scene and not knowing how to begin counseling engaged couples. He reflected back, saying, "Seminary gave you a basic idea and then you had to run with it. So I was grasping for every straw I could find to try to build something that would work and would accomplish…getting them to talk, getting them to understand." Even after years of experience, however, some pastors are not content with their state of knowledge. One pastor laughed, "I actually told my wife not long ago that I would actually go back to school to take a class on how to do premarital counseling." He described his current premarital counseling program to be a "patchwork quilt" of things he'd picked up over the years and pieced together. He desired continuity, an overarching theme within the program, and to "start with an idea and carry it all

the way through." Another pastor, a worship pastor, spoke of his need to "read more in that area." He described his nightstand reading material as follows: "I've got four books I'm going through…none of them are counseling." And a third pastor just desired even more experience because "every couple is unique" and he sensed he was still learning to read the needs of the individuals who come into his office.

The other responses were each only mentioned once. One pastor spoke of his need to update the worksheets, articles, and other homework he gives as part of his program. Sex was an area one pastor thought he could spend more time in after reading through the researcher's interview questions and thinking about social penetration theory. However, he later backtracked, saying, "But, once again, I think by the time people have gotten to my office, the vast number of them have had some kind of sexual experience, if not intercourse already." The researcher's study made another pastor consider discussing finances to a greater extent with his counselees. He said, "Given how much money is an issue…that's probably an area that would be good for us." Other respondents instead looked outward in their answers. A pastor criticized churches for not taking the matter of premarital counseling seriously enough. "Other than the preaching at the pulpit," he stated, "I don't know anything that's any more important that a pastor does." He mentioned cases in which marriage preparation programs were too short and cases where it was not offered at all. A separate pastor criticized marriage preparation programs offered in a group format. Although he recognized the element of saved time, he thought it would either be too much of a "fly over" of the material or he would stop to address one couple's needs and "bore the other five couples to death." Only one pastor said he could not think of any areas in which his program or others needed improvement.

The next area of data gathered was information about couples' relationships post-wedding. Specifically, the researcher considered how much growth of knowledge (breadth and depth) romantic partners develop about each other after their wedding day. Couples were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how much knowledge of their spouse resulted from being married, with 0 meaning "nothing at all" and 5 being the maximum that could be learned. After agreeing on a number value, couples were next asked to explain why. Answers ranged from 2 to 5. The two most common answers were 2 and 3, each listed by

Modes = 2, 3

three of the ten couples. The mean average of couples' responses came to 3.25 (SD = 1.03). Those with low rankings explained that although they had learned small things about their partner, nothing had yet shocked them. "We haven't learned anything of big importance that we didn't know before—which is how it should be if you date and prepare for marriage effectively," is how one couple put it. Another remarked, "We learned *loads* about each other in dating and during the wedding planning process, so we haven't had too many surprises." Another couple's response was a stark contrast, however. When the husband decided upon the maximum, five, the wife added, "Thousand!"

One main reason given for some growth of knowledge was the changes that took place for the partners in routine daily life. "We have definitely learned a lot more about each other now that we spend time together that we didn't get when living in two separate spaces," one couple delineated, "both because living together brings things up, and because there's time to observe and talk about things." Three other couples also mentioned this, saying such things as: "There is obviously a lot to learn about someone after moving in with them…we learn new things every

day"; "You don't learn until you do it"; and "What we learn is how to work better with one another."

Another theme that emerged from the couples' responses to this question was that the things that were learned were not new information, but the same information in a new way. For instance, two couples said, "We know each other at a deeper level now and experience things in a deeper way." A third couple worded it differently, "The only difference would be that pre-wedding day consisted of mostly head knowledge and today we have gained much more of the experienced knowledge." This experiential depth was attributed to the sacredness of marriage by a final couple: "Being married allows you to become one—not only in sexual aspects, but emotionally and socially as well."

Most couples spoke from the perspective that a full 5 on the 0-5 scale could never be reached—or at least not for a while. One couple said, "We still find we continue to learn things about each other every month, if not weekly or daily," and another echoed, "Until everything is revealed we learn about each other more every day." Two couples agreed they will never arrive at full knowledge, even with a daily learning curve. One wife explained, "It's just that there is so much more to learn about each other—a lot to look forward to in the years to come." "And I don't think that you can ever fully know someone," her husband added, "We will be eighty years old and still learning about each other." In order to further explain these phenomena, the next area of research also addressed this same issue, only qualitatively.

Finally, both counselors and couples were asked to describe the areas of depth and breadth of knowledge about one's partner that can only be learned within the context of the marriage relationship, and therefore cannot be made known during premarital counseling. It became clear through the interview process that couples and counselors alike did believe that a

person cannot know *everything* about marriage or even about their own partner before actually being married. One couple stated, "I don't really think any premarital counseling can really equip you for *marriage*. Only marriage can equip you for marriage." Similar comments made by both couples and counselors were such things as, "Some things you only learn by doing" and "When it comes down to it, you can talk a lot about being married, but you can't simulate marriage. You have to get married and then figure it out in context." Therefore, the research questions that address how much growth of knowledge occurs after the wedding day and what topics in particular are discussed more after marriage are especially fitting to the current study.

In order to address this area of research further, couples were asked, "What topics do you discuss now that you hadn't yet breached before your marriage began (i.e. after the actual wedding day)?" The top three responses were practical sex, detailed finances, and daily life decisions. Seven of the ten couples (70%) listed sex for this question. Some elaborated, saying, "Details of sexual likes and dislikes and desires and more information about past relationships," "Our conversations went into more detail about sexual intimacy," and "Practical sexual intercourse versus the theory of having sex before."

Finances or budgeting was the next most popular answer, mentioned by four of the ten couples (40%). One couple discussed how since being married they have developed a family budget and bought a car. A separate couple was able to work on paying off some of their student loans. The final theme that emerged from the data of three couples' (30%) interviews was practical aspects of daily life. One couple called it "joint decision making" and explained, "You don't realize how important it is until after marriage. It is a part of every life decision. What are we going to eat for dinner? Who is going to do the dishes? Is it okay if I hang out with friends on Saturday night?" This couple admitted that the topic was not discussed in counseling, but

concluded, "It's one of those things you need to figure out as a couple anyway." For another

couple, there was a large adjustment in having to talk a lot more about coordinating schedules.

The third couple described their newlywed life as follows: "I was surprised by all the little

things. In premarital counseling we talked about the big things like sex, money, babies…but not

about little things like laundry and bedtime rituals and toothpaste brands."

Three other answers were only mentioned once. One couple felt free to discuss the future

more openly after they were "officially committed." Another couple mentioned the fact that

during their dating and engagement periods, they could leave for their separate homes if there

was a fight. Now, however, they were forced to talk about their feelings more and their reasons

for being upset because they could not as easily run away. This has led to deeper understanding

of how the other partner communicates and processes situations. A final couple said that the

topics were not new, but more concrete. As they put it, "Before the wedding, things were more

abstract, where they are easier to talk about because they're more reality now." To better explain,

they gave the example of having children. While they both had previously agreed they would

want kids someday, now that they are married, they realize that the idea of parenting is not

necessarily years off but "could start as soon as nine months from now!"

The perspective of counselors was also gleaned for this research question. Counselors

answered, "Are there any topics for a couple to not address at all, or not address deeply, in

premarital counseling? Any topics you avoid?" and "Are there any topics or discussions that a

couple need not delve into before the wedding—but that commonly arise later in one's

marriage?" Two pastors thought of no avoided topics and claimed they would openly address

anything that came up during counseling. Two pastors mentioned childrearing as a topic that is

not delved into during premarital counseling because it is not practical for couples who may wait

for a while to have children. One pastor wished that half of the counseling could be held after the couple was married, because "although we're talking about all this stuff, they're not living together, and they're not experiencing it yet…" He agrees with the couples' responses above which argue most of the learning can only be done after the marriage has begun.

Indirectly, one other theme was discovered in the data of counselors' responses. The researcher found the topic of sexual intercourse, for six pastors in particular, to be a masked subject in premarital counseling. Pastors either did not find the topic necessary because they expected their counselees to already understand it, or they feared that discussing it would cause premarital sex and thus shied away from it. Each pastor worded this same theme in different ways, but all comments were accompanied by a general, debasing tone. Pastors said such things as, "I don't give a b*iol*ogy lesson," "No, I don't get into the intercourse *thing*," and "I don't do anatomy and I don't do mechanic *type stuff*." The researcher found this topic to be inadequately covered both in breadth and depth of information.

For the pastors who thought sexual intercourse to be a topic couples already understood or else could figure out alone, it was explained this way. One pastor said, "I figure that most people who've gotten to my office…they're already, probably in their mid-20s or 30s anyway, or older, and they already have an understanding of sex" and others echoed, "Most couples get it. So for me, it's not about the mechanics, and I don't have to say 'Here's a visual…of how things work,'" and "*Obviously*, everyone knows physically how things work…and most people, through college, through high school…everyone's had sex education. I don't need to go through this." Another pastor admitted that he talked about sex "very little…candidly" and gave the following response: "I have found that for more than 6,000 years, men and women have figured out how to do that without a whole lot of conversation on it. I'm old fashioned that way. I just

don't see the need." Finally, one counselor generalized his clients as all from the same local university and therefore like-minded. He said, "I'm expecting you to be pretty knowledgeable as a [college] student. You've taken biology classes, okay, we don't have to go into the nuts and bolts of how things work..." This pastor said he would provide a book, if needed, but that it is usually not necessary. Otherwise, his sessions consist of "some simple questions about it, but other than that, it's not a major…that I would spend more than 15-20 minutes on it." The responsibility of the topic was therefore left with the school systems.

Those who were afraid to talk too detailed about the topic explained, "I'm not explicit about it for the reason I don't want to cause undue temptation…That's the one [topic] where I try to be cautious because I don't want to put the couple in a compromising situation, but I'll talk about anything else if they have questions." Another pastor explained his session on sex to actually be "sex prevention." He stated, "I think that we deal with sex in the sense that…you know…[The book] deals with sex before marriage. And it's extremely natural that a young man and a young woman should be attracted to each other. And so it's a matter of almost sex prevention." The researcher noticed that some of these pastors were careful not to even use the word "sex" in answering the question, but instead referred to the topic using terminology such as "the one flesh relationship" and "intimacy." In a separate case, one pastor seemed embarrassed to discuss the topic with his counselees and almost looked down on them for having inappropriate questions. "Generally, I have a qualification statement up front that you're allowed to ask any question whatsoever about premarital…," he began, "*But*, as long as you ask them in a sensible way and stuff like that. I generally threaten them…if they make me blush, I will get even. But generally most people are not really looking for the 'how's and 'why's of sex or things like this." In this case, the pastor certainly did not seem to bother about making the couple feel comfortable

to bring up real questions or concerns. On the contrary, the "threatening" made the researcher wonder if his counselees were purposefully made to feel *un*comfortable so as not to bring it up.

One final reason for the hushed conversation emerged. For two other pastors, the topic of sexual intercourse was not addressed for an entirely different rationale. One explained, "The reason why is I find that if sex isn't working, there can be medical reasons, there can be biological issues, and there can be medication that can be related to that. So there are a couple reasons why." He further explained that couples may not know about these issues yet, especially if they are still virgins going into a marriage. Similarly, a different pastor said his session that covers sexual intercourse is "usually fairly brief" and he also gave the reasoning that "actually, I've had more of those kinds of discussions probably after a marriage when somebody was experiencing difficulty…they're not going to know if they're having difficulty ahead of time anyhow. Let's be realistic…they better not." These reasons seemed logical; however, a separate pastor viewed the same arguments as merely a set of excuses.

Knowing about these possible complications that couples may face gave him all the more reason to discuss it ahead of time. He asks couples bluntly if they are aware of any medical problems or other complications that may cause issues for them. This way, if the couples are aware of something, it can be brought to light. If, however, the couple does not know of anything, then they were at least made aware that things could arise later. Other topics he mentioned discussing with couples included, "Biblically what is the purpose of sex, different stages, male and female differences that…generally people feel…different needs, responses, orgasms, all that." When the researcher noted aloud how detailed this pastor's program was in contrast to the others she had been hearing about, he further explained his perspective. His point of view stemmed from his own experiences as a newlywed. He had not been given advice about

sexual intimacy before his marriage began, and he exclaimed, "I had no clue! The only thing you have is…the movies you watch, the magazines you read, or…folklore you talk about in the gym locker rooms." This has caused him to be very upfront with couples he counsels. He tells them, "Your wedding night might not be that fun. And that's fine. By the end of the week, you might still be trying to figure out your rhythm. And that's fine!"

The session on sexual intimacy is also led by his wife. They start by telling a couple, "We're going to be so honest and probably make you feel embarrassed, but I promise you that when you get to the wedding night, you're going to be more in love with each other because your knowledge is going to be better. And so ask us anything, and we'll reveal everything." The responses that he and his wife receive after couples are married are always ones of gratitude. He had countless stories of couples coming back to thank them for being so honest. And he explained it to be because, "That's one area that…that's the most unfamiliar Christians are…with going into marriage." A second pastor, although not quite as detailed as in the example above, also prepares couples who are going into a sexual relationship for the first time. He talks about "how false the world's portrayal of the first experience is" and that the "learned practice of having sex with your spouse" gets better as the marriage goes on. He also prepares couples for the guilt that may arise the day after the honeymoon night because of their going from "zero…nothing…it's a sin and it's wrong" to viewing sex as a gift from God to be enjoyed. This transition he has found to be hard on some individuals, especially women. Despite the fact that the subject can feel awkward at times to discuss, he also mentioned how appreciated this conversation was by the couples. In these final two cases, it became clear to the researcher that this topic is an area which needs to be further explored by counselors in healthy ways.

Overall for research question three, all couples and counselors who participated in this study agreed that some learning about one's partner can only occur experientially after marriage has begun. However, couples did find certain areas of their premarital counseling to be deficient. Interestingly, these responses were all differing, with no recurring theme. Finances, in-law relationships, sexual intimacy, and conflict management were all mentioned as topics that needed to be further addressed before beginning marriage. Because of the great scope of issues that couples reveal can be missed in counseling, pastors should be sure to develop a wide breadth and depth of topics to cover with every couple. Couples should also work with counselors and be honest when thinking ahead on specific issues that may come up later in their marriage.

Pastoral counselors also mentioned areas of improvement to further develop in the future; their responses were clustered into the following themes. First, pastors were concerned with getting to root issues. For example, instead of working with a symptom of the problem (he leaves his dirty clothes on the floor), counselors can help couples get to real issues (she does not feel loved because of his lack of help). Also, pastors mentioned wanting more training and updated materials. Finally, the researcher discovered an under arching negative tone of most pastors towards the topic of sexual intimacy.

### *Discussion*

Robert E. Stake, author of many qualitative research studies, says of this field of work, "The page does not write itself, but by finding, for analysis, the right ambiance, the right moment, by reading and rereading the accounts, by deep thinking, then understanding creeps forward and your page is printed" (73). Thus, here in the discussion section the current researcher elaborates on overall conclusions that can be drawn from the data, which were "meticulously analyzed" (66). Five general outcomes resulted.

*Social Penetration Theory Supported*

This current research lends support to Altman and Taylor's original theory. Through the study, pastors' stories were shared which revealed that couples often pursue marriage without sufficient breadth and depth of knowledge about each other. Often individuals come for premarital counseling without a realistic picture of their partner, and through their counselor's aid, new information is gleaned that enables couples to make a more accurate decision on if they are ready to marry one another at that time.

Virginia Satir, a lead voice in her field of family counseling, stresses to fellow counselors the importance of working with engaged couples to help them discover discrepancies that they often unknowingly integrate between their beliefs and desires. For instance, a woman's nagging can be seen as protective and cute before marriage, but after marriage is often seen as domineering and irritating. The man's forgetfulness is also darling and loveable before marriage, but later becomes viewed as irresponsible and frustrating (129). Because engaged couples often think that love will conquer all and time will change their future spouse's personality, Satir reminds counselors that it is important they reveal these discrepancies clearly to the couple. For instance, she will ask a man, "How have you explained it to yourself that you need to have enough to eat yet are choosing a wife who hates to cook?" or ask a woman, "How can you say you desire to feel secure by owning a house, and yet choose a husband who hates to stay in one place?" (129). Bringing about these issues, according to Satir, "helps [the counselor] find out how much of the relationship is based on uncommunicated hopes rather than on communicated reality-testing…These comments, by highlighting the discrepancy between hopes and marital choice, also show each mate that he has some responsibility for his marital choice" (129). The counselor does not need to force a couple to end a relationship, but instead can help a couple see

more clearly the reality of the relationship to which they are committing. It is still, ultimately, up to the couple.

Other theorists, Miller and Steinberg, also agree that a certain amount of similarity is needed between partners' attitudes if a relationship is to develop and remain intact. Although they first admit one need not "form relationships only with those who are ideological carbon copies of themselves" (241), they also discuss cases where agreement is in fact imperative. They give the following example:

> A man and a woman may meet at a party and begin a conversation about child-rearing practices. If one is a strict disciplinarian, while the other opts for relative permissiveness, they may engaged in a small-scale debate, and each may try to win the other to his or her point of view, but neither is likely to feel very threatened or upset by the disparity in their attitudes. However, should they fall in love and talk of marriage, this disparity will assume greater significance. (Miller and Steinberg 242)

This example further illustrates why a counselor's job is so important. A plethora of topics (breadth) need to be discussed to a detailed level (depth) in order to give couples the clearest possible picture of what they are choosing.

Because these issues are often emotionally laden, Virginia Satir explains that a counselor must first inform the clients that disagreements and differences of opinion are expected (148), and should next "create a setting in which people can, perhaps for the first time, take the risk of looking clearly and objectively at themselves and their actions" (160). This setting also includes the relationship between the counselor and the couple, which is considered in the next general conclusion drawn from the current research study.

*Counselors Underestimate Relational Strategies*

In the present study, only two pastoral counselors mentioned building a personal and trusting relationship with a couple as a strategy for getting to new areas of depth and breadth of information. However, six couples mentioned this method to be the most effective. Thus, counselors often underestimate the importance of being relational with their counselees. As was indicated in the literature review, previous studies have also found that more self-disclosure came from clients after therapists revealed a certain amount of information about themselves (Cozby; Jourard, "Healthy Personality").

*Breadth and Depth through Premarital Counseling*

Although the majority of pastoral counselors and couples in the present study found their premarital counseling experience to be one of greater depth than breadth, it became clear through the answers of a small minority that both breadth and depth is possible to attain. Two couples and three pastors perceived their programs to offer both, so more pastors should consciously strive for this in their own programs. Counselors should consider using premarital inventories or other quantitative measurements with engaged couples, as this was one of the top reasons revealed in the current study for addressing an adequate amount of topics.

The two main premarital inventories mentioned by the participants in the current study were FOCCUS (Facilitate Open, Caring, Communication, Understanding, and Study) and Prepare and Enrich. FOCCUS, Inc. USA is a nonprofit organization that was developed in 1986 by three marriage and family therapists: B. Markey, M. Micheletto, and A. Becker (*FOCCUS*). Their goal was to aid couples in their preparation for marriage by creating a couple-centered inventory that would address important issues for engaged couples to discuss and understand. This resulted in a 156-item research-based inventory that assesses a couple's agreement,

disagreement, or indecision about statements related to a variety of important issues. Among this plethora of issues are communication, problem solving, religion, dual careers, marriage readiness, parenting, sexuality, and finances (*FOCCUS*). In order to take the FOCCUS inventory, a couple must first find a trained facilitator. After meeting with the facilitator, each partner pays a fee and takes the inventory separately. This can be completed online or by mail. The results of the inventories are sent to the facilitator in a "FOCCUS Couple Report" which shows the areas warranting attention (*FOCCUS*). The couple then returns to the facilitator who helps the couple interpret the report and guides their discussion.

The Prepare and Enrich inventory, like FOCCUS, is "custom tailored to a couple's relationship" and requires a facilitator to interpret (*Prepare/Enrich*). The inventory consists of twelve relationship scales, including communication, conflict resolution, roles, sexuality, finances, and spiritual beliefs, five personality scales, four couple and family scales, four relationship dynamic scales, and thirty other customized scales (*Prepare/Enrich*). Facilitators spend between four and eight feedback sessions with a couple after receiving the results of the inventory. This inventory was devised in 1980 by Dr. David Olson as a result of several other research projects at the University of Minnesota. David left the university after over twenty-five years of teaching to found Life Innovations, Inc. with his wife, Karen (*Prepare/Enrich*). Along with the premarital inventory, this company also provides couples with exercises to build their relationship skills. The resources of Life Innovations, Inc. are designed to be "proactive, practical, and skills-based" (*Prepare/Enrich*).

Such inventories as Prepare and Enrich and FOCCUS receive positive reports from couples because of their clear application to everyday life. Another conclusion to draw from the present research is that pastoral counselors should avoid over-spiritualizing their counseling.

Pastor Mark Gungor, a well-known author and speaker on Christian marriage, notes that secular couples often have wonderful marriages, while Christian couples often experience marriage failure (22). He attributes this to the general need for practical information. As the law of gravity affects believers and non-believers alike, so does the law of relationships (23). Even Christian couples need to discuss a breadth of topics at detailed and practical levels while also applying Biblical principles to those areas.

  Of the essential discussion topics, communication and conflict management must be included. Although Miller and Steinberg admit that for some couples interpersonal communication "just seems to happen" initially, as when people fall in love, they also assert that "these factors cannot sustain a relationship if the communicators lack understanding, cannot achieve communicative accuracy, or are unable to establish patterns of mutual control" (201). Communication is complex and a couple cannot expect to be naturally successful at it. As Berlo put it, "The probability of perfect communication is zero" (7). Nevertheless, open and honest communication is fundamental in order to grow and maintain a healthy relationship. Virginia Satir also asserts that the opposite is true: "The more covertly and indirectly people communicate, the more dysfunctional they are likely to be" (17). A couple should also be prepared for disagreement in their marriage relationship. Altman and Taylor inform that "compatibility may not simply reflect harmony and absence of conflict, but also a skill at coping with conflict" (68). Counselors should therefore help couples be more "compatible" by handling conflict in healthy ways. These skills have been proven necessary for relationship maintenance, as was shown in the literature review.

*Cater to the Couple*

Premarital counseling should be individualized according to the needs of the couple—not viewed as a set program implemented mainly to check off completion before the wedding day. Although six of the ten couples (60%) indicated that they were content with the depth and breadth of information that they received in their premarital counseling program, those four couples who did find areas of deficiency felt very strongly that they should have been addressed. One wife who wished she had been more prepared to enter into a sexual relationship with her husband fervently exclaimed, "I wonder how many of us there are who, when asked, 'How was your honeymoon?' try to get by without giving a real answer because the truth isn't probably what the other person wants to hear. Hopefully your work results in some important changes to the way churches do premarital counseling!" Interestingly, one pastor nailed the issues of each of the four couples in this study. He spoke on behalf of most couples when he said, "The three issues are money, sex, and family. And then communication is a weaving factor in all of that." Couples did indeed experience a lack of preparation in the areas of finances, sexual intimacy, boundaries with in-laws, and conflict resolution, which stems from lack of effective communication skills. Similar issues were found in Lawler and Risch's study, "Time, Sex, and Money: The First Five Years of Marriage", and Virginia Satir reflected on in-law relationships as an area that is "emotionally loaded and also leads to early marital conflicts" (121). Counselors should be aware of these areas in the future and make sure discussion is detailed with each.

But overall, the fact that not every couple was prepared for marriage through their premarital counseling suggests that the standard topical approach with general, routine sessions is not an adequate method of educating all couples. Every couple is unique, and counselors need to cater each counseling experience to the individuals being counseled. Some couples will face

issues with their in-laws, others will struggle to develop a fair budget, but whatever the area of concern, counselors need to make sure all couples receive the preparation they need.

*The Forbidden Fruit*

The one subject that counselors openly admitted being undisclosed about was sex. Excuses were given such as that the couple already knows the information, the couple should be able to figure it out later, or it is too dangerous of a subject to address before the wedding. The researcher finds all of these defenses unjustifiable. Men and women do not know enough about sex when they begin their married life as virgins because even veterans of marriage are still figuring out their sexuality. Faithful, loving, Christian couples go to counseling for help with their intimacy. Tim and Beverly LaHaye, authors of the book *The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love*, can attest to this. Tim writes, "Both of us have counseled enough married couples to convince us that an enormous number of them are not enjoying all the blessings of which they are capable or for which God has designed them. We have discovered that many others find the intimacies of married love distasteful and unpleasant" (12). In fact, when the LaHaye's were first approached by the executive vice president of Zondervan Publishing House to write the book, they were at first reluctant. But then Beverly counseled "at least ten wives who were averse to sexual intercourse" within the next two months (13). Clearly, there is a need for better sex education.

And for those counselors under the belief that couples can figure it out as men and women have "for 6,000 years," they should consider the fact that for most of the past 6,000 years, women were viewed as possessions and their opinions were not valued. Mutual satisfaction from the marriage act was not of concern until women gained equal status with men. Male and female bodies are designed to be dependent upon one another for satisfaction. Dr. Ed

Wheat speaks to a group of men in his audiocassette series entitled *Sex Problems and Sex Technique in Marriage*, saying, "If you do what comes naturally in lovemaking, almost every time you will be wrong." He further explains, "This is because each 'natural' or self-satisfying step in gaining sexual gratification for a man is probably incompatible with his wife's needs" (Wheat). Couples can figure out the basics, but the Bible does not advocate for ignorance. Tim and Beverly LaHaye who have counseled countless married couples in the area of sexuality state that "millions of married couples accept a second-rate experience because they don't know much about the reproductive organs and sexual functions and are unwilling to learn" (72).

As for the third justification, Christian couples who are saving physical intimacy for the marriage relationship face temptation with or without discussing the topic openly. And although it may be wise for the counselor to address the topic of sexuality last, and therefore closest to the wedding day, discussing the topic ahead of time does not make couples succumb unwillingly to their physical urges. Responsibility to act on decisions still ultimately lies with the couple. Other couples who discussed the topic prior to their marriage and still remained pure should also provide enough evidence for this. Tim and Beverly LaHaye note in their book specific things that counselors can help future spouses understand. First, frequency of sexual encounters is often a cause for conflict and disagreement in the earlier years of one's marriage (39). Also, this act of marriage should be followed by physical relaxation and innocence, not guilt (41). Another chapter of their text is devoted to "avoiding pain" (87). These, and other areas of human sexuality, should be discussed by the counselor in "an open, concrete, matter-of-fact way" (Satir 162).

The author of this paper urges premarital counselors to consider these five outcomes of this research study, as the conclusions are based on the testimony of men and women who have

recently undergone marriage preparation and have since begun their journey of marriage.

Overall, couples are pleased with what they gained from their premarital counseling programs,

but more work can be done to improve programs for the future.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

***Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research***

Although the current study was able to capture new perspectives of social penetration theory within the avenue of premarital counseling programs, the research was not without imperfection. First, it would be most beneficial in future research if the study were broken into two separate pieces—a quantitative and a qualitative study. Although the methodology of conducting interviews led to a vast array of themes and perspectives for a considerable qualitative research study, the quantitative portion of the study yielded only soft data. A larger number of participants would add to the value of the quantitative, scaled questions in this study. Specifically, more than ten couples and ten counselors should be asked to scale for depth of topics addressed in counseling for a more accurate picture of where programs stand from each point of view—those performing the counseling and those receiving it. More than ten couples should also be asked to scale how much breadth and depth of knowledge they believe they hold about each other before going into counseling, after counseling, as well as before their marriage, and once their marriage has begun. This would give a clearer statistical picture of the growth that occurs both during counseling and after marriage.

Secondly, when the researcher contacted churches to ask for participation, the head pastors of the churches typically said no or referred her to the less authoritative pastors—youth pastors, worship pastors, and assistant pastors. If participation could be gained from lead pastors, an interesting study would likely result from comparing the interview responses of the senior pastors to the responses of other church leaders. Although some churches had a set program for all pastors to utilize (i.e. the Prepare and Enrich inventory and *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*), other churches left premarital counseling curriculum decisions completely up to each

pastor, so each pastor chose different materials for study based on personal preference. The positive and negative aspects of these church decisions could be studied for additional insight.

Church size might have an impact on church decision making for premarital counseling programs as well. Smaller churches conduct fewer weddings each year and the head pastor can spare more time to meet one-on-one to counsel couples for longer amounts of time. Larger churches often have more demand for counseling than they can supply solely with the pastoral staff, and they therefore resort to group counseling or class settings. The perspectives that both counselors and counselees have in regards to these various types of programming could also be studied.

Another limitation to the current study lies in the similarity of the participants. All ten pastors were selected from either Baptist or Evangelical Free Christian denominations, and therefore all had a bias towards emphasizing the spiritual aspects of a marriage relationship to their counselees. Most of the couples were also professing Christians and recognized their faith as a key element to their relationship with their spouse. Counselors and couples from other faith groups should be studied in the future in order to compare results. Secular counselors and female counselors should also be added to the sample for a diverse perspective.

The fact that a few couples were within only a couple months of their wedding day when interviewed could be seen as a limitation. It was the researcher's goal to interview couples whose experience with premarital counseling was still fresh in memory; however, many couples were not married long enough at the time of the interview to have experienced any surprises or conflicts. The researcher was skeptical of those couples who professed everything about their marriage to be going perfectly. Perhaps more time was needed for the couple to experience marriage before being interviewed, or perhaps the limitation lies in other areas. Couples may not

have felt comfortable self-disclosing with the researcher due to the association the researcher had to a mutual friend who put them in contact. The researcher was sure to express at the first contact that the friend or family member who provided the names of the couple would not be involved in the study to know how the couple responded in the interview. Complete confidentiality was reassured at the time of the interview. However, admitting areas of weakness about oneself and one's marriage is even difficult to reveal with a stranger. Perhaps future research should use open-ended survey question prompts instead of interviews.

Another aspect of the current study's methodology that could be revised in future studies was the joint interviewing of the couples. It was hoped that the response of one partner would trigger a memory or additional insight from the other partner, leading to a deeper and more fulfilling conversation, but instead the researcher found that one partner typically did the majority of the talking. Usually the husbands were more passive and typically only said, "Yea…" to agree with whatever the wives said. No additional input was gleaned from the men. Perhaps if interviewed separately, men would add a new take on the counseling process. Furthermore, this change would allow for additional insight on gender differences.

Age was not considered as a variable in the current study and could be added as a factor in future studies. One couple themselves drew attention to their age, implying it was a significant dynamic. "We're fairly compatible and emotionally/relationally mature. We were 30 and 31 when we got married," was their reasoning for not needing any great depth to their counseling. Also, all couples who participated in this study were in their first marriage. A study could be done to compare and contrast the perspectives that divorced couples entering into their second marriage have of premarital counseling programs. Such couples would have the viewpoint of knowing what lacked in their first marriage that they need to focus on changing for their next

relationship. It is expected that counselors would also have to shift their material to be more applicable to this new audience. Further research could therefore address re-marital counseling.

Finding local newlywed couples who met the requirements for the study and were willing to participate proved to be a challenge. The researcher settled for five e-mail interviews and this limited the consistency of her study. Interviewing as a design for research has its own strengths and weaknesses. The researcher appreciated her ability to ask follow-up questions and draw out more specific answers during interviews that would not be possible if strictly using survey reports; however, because of the dynamic nature of interpersonal communication, interview scripts were not perfectly in synch. The researcher began with a set of interview questions that were asked of each participant, but some pastors and couples went deeper with certain questions than did others. For instance, the interviewer asked most pastors if their wives helped with the counseling, but forgot in two cases because it was not an official interview question. Therefore, she had to throw out the consideration of having wives help with counseling in her final analysis because not all ten interviews had addressed it. Also, many participants expanded on their 0-5 scaled answers of how deep the counseling went into detail on certain topics, but not all did. Thus, this question had to remain strictly quantitative because qualitative explanations were not gleaned for all twenty interviews. For the next time, the researcher would first conduct a pilot study in order to make sure all interview questions were applicable and that no additional questions were needed. Executing a pilot study would have also alleviated the follow limitation.

The wording of the interview questions could also be revised before use in future studies. For instance, when scaling for the amount of depth each program covers with certain topics, participants answered according to different semantics. One pastor detailed the information he covers with couples within the category of sex, which included intimacy, attitudes about sex,

pornography, standards in dating, extramarital affairs, and expectations for the honeymoon. The researcher found his program to go in depth with the category more than most of the other programs she heard about and would rank his program at a 5 on the 0-5 scale of depth. However, this pastor took "sexual intercourse" to simply mean the biology of the act, and so rated his program low on the 0-5 scale. Thus, the findings of the study were skewed based on the participants' varying interpretations of the question. The researcher should have simply labeled the category "sex" and not "sexual intercourse" for this reason. "In-law relationships" was another category that participants treated differently. Many scaled their program using the broad category of family-of-origin while others gave a low score, thinking of the category only in narrow terms of dealing with a nosy mother-in-law. One pastor explained the differences this way: "We talk a lot about 'family of origin' because then it's not an attack on the in-laws…because often times the things we're dealing with that irritate us about our in-laws are just how that family was raised…I don't want everyone to paint in-laws as the bad guys." Therefore, the categories needed further explanation. Future studies could include both in-laws and family of origin, and both sexual intercourse and other aspects of sexual intimacy, in order to provide more specific and accurate results that can be used to draw true comparisons.

Past studies have asked couples to discuss their levels of satisfaction with premarital counseling programs, as well as to explain the effect that premarital counseling has on their marriages, but this current study was the first to compare the perspectives of couples with the perspectives of counselors. Through comparing and contrasting responses, significant insight was gleaned. In the future, a study should correlate the couples with the exact pastor who performed their counseling. This would yield an exact comparison between perspectives. Pastors would then be able to see if their view of their program, particularly those who thought their

program provided an effective enough breadth and depth of information, was indeed true for couples who undergo the program.

A current trend which is arising in modern society is pre-engagement counseling. Future research could investigate if pre-engagement counseling differs from premarital counseling on the levels of breadth and depth it reaches within a couple's relationship. Perhaps counseling at one period of a couple's relationship is more effective than counseling at another stage. Studies should also investigate which couples lean towards pre-engagement counseling over premarital counseling.

Finally, the researcher noted that her study has a cultural bent. The current study found pastors in agreement with social penetration theory and therefore encouraging couples to spend enough time together before committing to a marriage relationship. While her culture values such things as true love and having free will to be able to choose one's partner, other cultures instead value arranged marriages. In those cultures, there is not a focus on knowing an adequate depth and breadth about one's partner before marriage in order to be sure the relationship is a compatible fit. The researcher would like to see a similar study done in many other cultures, including collectivistic cultures, to see what premarital preparation, if any, is available to young couples. It is assumed that more growth in depth and breadth of knowledge about one's partner would come for arranged marriages after the wedding day instead of during dating and engagement stages, but this postulation remains to be empirically studied.

### *Conclusion*

Only 33% of engaged couples prepare for marriage through premarital counseling (Silliman and Schumm, "Marriage Preparation" 138), but this minority has the advantage. Numerous studies have been conducted to demonstrate the benefits of receiving this education

before marriage (Stanley; Carroll and Doherty; Duncan, Childs, and Larson; Williams, Riley, Risch, and Van Dyke). Nevertheless, improvements to such programs can always be made. Former studies have determined aspects of premarital counseling programs that couples find most satisfying and most helpful (Sullivan and Anderson; Russell and Lyster; Lawler and Risch). This study expounds on the past research by incorporating the premises of social penetration theory into the analysis. This study is also unique in that the data collected is from both premarital counselors and their clients so that side-by-side comparisons can be drawn.

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, it is to provide a description and comparison of the experiences of pastoral counselors and couples who are involved in premarital counseling. Secondly, the study also provides insight into the importance of social penetration theory in choosing a mate and furthers the theory's utility. Three research questions guided the framework of this mixed-methods study:

RQ 1:  Do engaged couples believe they know the depth and breadth of their partner adequately enough to be prepared for marriage after receiving premarital counseling?

RQ 2:  Do counselors indirectly support the basic premise of social penetration theory by actively using strategies to help engaged partners reveal important aspects of the breadth and depth of their personalities before entering into marriage?

RQ 3:  What areas of deficiency do counselors and couples find exist in current premarital counseling programs in regards to reaching an intimate depth and breadth of each partner's personality?

Ten pastoral counselors and ten newly married couples were interviewed independently with both closed-ended and open-ended questions during the months of January and February 2013.

The questions asked of participants directly correlates to the three research questions stated above. Each interview was transcribed and coded into thematic units in order for analysis.

Overall, the study's findings support the assertions of social penetration theory in romantic relationships. The results revealed that pastors do encourage couples to spend time learning about one another before committing to a spouse, and they even occasionally oppose marriages between two people who do not appear adequately prepared with a depth and breadth of knowledge about each other. A variety of strategies can be employed by counselors to get couples to engage in conversations on a deeper level. Of the strategies that couples mentioned are asking purposeful questions, building trust, and using inventories. Pastors also spoke of asking direct questions and using inventories, but building personal relationships with couples was overlooked as an active strategy. Although the majority of the respondents found their premarital counseling to be a program of depth and not breadth, several respondents indicated that to attain both is in fact possible. Most couples were pleased with their counseling; however, some respondents found their programs to be lacking in discussion on finances, developing boundaries with in-laws, sexual intimacy, and conflict resolution. Complete knowledge of the depth and breadth of another's personality—even one's spouse—cannot be known, according to respondents. But much is learned through premarital counseling and in daily life as newlyweds.

This exploratory study benefits the field of communication because of its use of social penetration theory within a new context. Additionally, the researcher offers practical suggestions based on this study in hopes to improve premarital counseling for future couples. These propositions are as follows: Counselors should strive to include an adequate depth and breadth of information in their premarital education programs. Several respondents indicated that this is not only feasible, but also being actively pursued in some programs. Counselors should consciously

build personal relationships with couples during premarital counseling as it is an effective strategy for getting clients to open up deeper areas of their personalities. Because every person is unique and every couple is therefore made up of two unique individuals, no counseling program should be the same. Premarital education should be catered to each individual couple's needs. Finally, no subject should be off limits in premarital counseling—especially sex. Respondents for this study, in addition to past research (LaHaye and LaHaye; Satir; Wheat), indicate that sexual intimacy does not come naturally to most couples, and better sex education is needed.

Family counselor Virginia Satir found that most couples who pursue marriage without accurate information of their future spouse become "disillusioned" after marriage. She describes a typical situation this way:

> Neither Mary nor Joe ask what the other expects, hopes for, or fears, because both feel they are supposed to be able to guess about what is going on inside the other's skin. In other words, it is as if both live by a crystal ball…When Mary and Joe discover, after marriage, that the other is "different" from what each expected during courtship, they become disillusioned. What they actually now see in the other are twenty-four-hour-a-day characteristics which did not usually show up during courtship, and consequently do not fit their expectations…Mary puts her hair in curlers when she goes to bed at night…Mary persistently serves overcooked beans…Joe leaves his dirty socks strewn around the room…When Joe goes to bed at night, he snores. (10-11)

This "differentness" is often destructive to couples after marriage, but it need not be. If viewed as an opportunity for enrichment, differentness can be a positive thing. Preparation can be the key. Counselors can be active agents in warning couples about what to expect in marriage and in

getting couples to see true reality in the whole person that is their partner. Through this process,

marriage can be about more than just maintenance and survival—it can again be desirable!

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**Appendix A.**

Recruitment Letter for Church Participation

Dear Pastor [name],

I am a graduate student at Liberty University within the field of interpersonal and organizational communication, and I am in the process of a master's thesis project for which I am requesting your help. For my thesis, I am studying premarital counseling, and in particular, the topics that are discussed (and to what depth) within a premarital counseling experience. I need to interview ten licensed pastors who have at least two years of experience with counseling engaged couples. In addition, I am seeking pastors who have personal marriage experience themselves, in order to add personal perspective to the topic of premarital counseling as an important preparation for marriage.

If you are able and willing to participate, I will conduct a short interview with you that is expected to last thirty minutes, and will certainly be no longer than one hour. Prior to the interview, I will e-mail you the questions that will be asked during the interview so that you can think ahead on the topic. The questions are designed to capture the material of your premarital counseling sessions and your perspective on the premarital counseling experience. The interview will be audio-recorded so that I can reflect on your answers even after the interview while not having to be distracted with transcribing the interview word-for-word on the spot. Only voices will be recorded; no pictures.

To ensure your confidentiality, after transcribing the audio recordings onto paper, I will delete the voice recordings of the interview. I am required by Liberty University's Institutional Review Board to keep the transcriptions for three years, and they will be locked in a file cabinet for this time period. After three years, I will shred the transcripts and only my master's thesis itself will remain. Also, to protect your identity and the identity of your organization, I will use a fictional name for all participants that are interviewed for my study, so you will remain anonymous throughout the study.

I would be extremely grateful for your help with this project; I am excited to discover new perspectives on premarital counseling! Let me know if you are willing to be interviewed, and then I can call to set up a good time for you. Either way, I thank you for taking a short minute to read over this e-mail for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Katherine Forkner
kabeich@liberty.edu

**Appendix B.**

Recruitment Script for Couples

"Hello [name],

This is Katherine Forkner. I am a graduate student at Liberty University within the field of interpersonal and organizational communication, and I am currently working on my master's thesis. I got your number through [name], whom I know from [place]. S/he said that you have recently been married—congratulations!

I am doing a study on premarital counseling and particularly looking at what topics are discussed in counseling and to what depth. I am seeking ten couples who are willing to be interviewed on their experiences with premarital counseling. If you agree to participate, the interview would be with you and your husband/wife together, and is expected to only last for thirty minutes, and certainly no more than an hour. I will e-mail you the questions ahead of time so that you can look them over and be thinking ahead on the topic. I can meet you and your husband/wife somewhere you feel comfortable, and where there is privacy. These interviews will be audio-recorded so that I can reflect on the answers after the interview and not be too distracted with transcribing the interview word-for-word on the spot.

The interview will be confidential. After transcribing the audio recording on paper, I will delete the tape of the interview. I am required by Liberty University's Institutional Review Board to keep the transcriptions for three years, and they will be locked in a file cabinet for this time period. After three years, I will shred the transcriptions and only my master's thesis itself will remain. Also, to protect your identity, I will use fake names for all participants in my study, so you will remain anonymous throughout the study.

The interview questions are descriptive in nature and have minimal risk, which means, 'the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.'

I would love to hear what you and your husband/wife thought of your premarital counseling experience if you are willing to participate in the study. But either way, I do appreciate you taking a moment to hear about my research project. Do you want to think on this, talk it over with your husband/wife, and have me contact you in a few more days?"

Call-Back Script for Couples

"Hello [name],

This is Katherine Forkner calling you again about your possible participation in my graduate thesis study of premarital counseling. Have you had time to discuss this with your spouse?"

**Appendix C.**

Premarital Counselor Interview Questions

1. How long have you been married yourself?

2. How long have you been counseling engaged couples?

3. Describe the nature of your counseling program. What support materials (books, tapes, etc.) do you use in your premarital counseling sessions?

4. What strategies or methods do you employ to help engaged couples discuss topics beyond surface-level answers (i.e. "I have three brothers and six sisters") and deeper into their true feelings, attitudes, and beliefs (i.e. "I never felt loved at home because my mom's attention was so spread between us children")?

5. Do you ever have couples who seem "unteachable"? What strategies do you use to work with those couples?

6. In general practice, how deep do you go with each of the topics listed below? *(0 is not discussed and 5 is fully discussed in detail).*

   a. Sexual Intercourse:

   b. Money Management:

   c. Conflict Management:

   d. In-Law Relationships:

7. What other topics are you sure to cover in your premarital counseling sessions?

8. What topics do you spend the most time on?

9. Do you view your premarital counseling program as stronger in breadth (a lot of topics covered) or depth (a certain few topics covered at a more serious level)?

10. What practical communication techniques do you teach engaged couples (i.e. I statements, active listening, paraphrasing, mock-fighting, etc.)?

11. What deficiencies do you see in the premarital counseling program—or what areas of improvement exist?

12. Are there any topics for a couple to *not* address at all, or not address deeply, in premarital counseling? (i.e. any topics you avoid).

13. Are there any topics or discussions that a couple need not delve into before the wedding—but that commonly arise later in one's marriage?

14. Have you had any experiences in which a pair you are counseling does *not* know the partner enough (depth and breadth), and thus you feel uncomfortable marrying them?

**Appendix D.**

Newlywed Couple Interview Questions

1. How long have you two been married? *(When was your wedding date?)*

2. Describe your premarital counseling experience:

    a. How many sessions did you have?

    b. How long was each session?

    c. How much prior to your marriage were these sessions?

    d. What was the nature of the sessions?

    e. Who was involved (group sessions? individual sessions? separate counseling for man and woman? etc.)?

    f. What support materials were used (books, tapes, etc.)?

3. How deep were each of the topics below discussed during your counseling sessions? *(0 is not discussed and 5 is fully discussed in detail). (*As a couple, come to an agreement on a whole number: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5).

    a. Sexual Intercourse:

    b. Money Management:

    c. Conflict Management:

    d. In-Law Relationships:

4. What other topics did you cover in your premarital counseling sessions?

5. What communication strategies (i.e. I statements, active listening, paraphrasing, mock-fighting) did you talk about or practice during the sessions? Did they help you later in your marriage?

6. Do you think your premarital counseling experience was stronger in breadth (a lot of topics covered) or depth (a certain few topics covered at a more serious and detailed level)?

7. What methods or strategies did your premarital counselor employ to get you beyond surface-level answers (i.e. "I have three brothers and six sisters") to intimate answers (i.e. "I never felt loved at home because my mom's attention was so spread between us children.")?

8. How much did your knowledge of your spouse grow during premarital counseling? *(0 is not at all and 5 is the maximum learned).* Explain your answer.

9. How much do you know about your spouse *now* that you have begun marriage? *(0 is not at all and 5 is the maximum learned).* Explain your answer.

10. What topics do you discuss now that you had not yet breached before your marriage began (i.e. after the actual wedding day)?

11. What topics did you discuss only lightly that you feel needed to be covered more thoroughly during premarital counseling?

12. Do you think that your premarital counseling experience adequately equipped you for your marriage? Explain your answer.

13. What areas of deficiency do you feel existed in your premarital counseling experience?

14. What topics were not discussed in premarital counseling that came up later after you were married and were a *surprise* to you?

15. Do you think these topics should have been addressed in your premarital counseling experience? Why or why not?

16. What advice would you offer to a newly engaged couple entering into premarital counseling for the first time?

**Appendix E.**

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**
Social Penetration Theory and Premarital Counseling
Katherine Beich-Forkner
Liberty University
Interpersonal and Organizational Communication Studies

You are invited to be in a research study that explores the depth and breadth of topics discussed in premarital counseling. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a licensed pastor who has conducted premarital counseling sessions for at least two years. I request that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Katherine Beich-Forkner of Liberty University's communications graduate school.

**Background Information:**

Because a marriage relationship involves two people with unique personalities, aspects of which have been revealed to various degrees at the time of one's engagement, premarital counselors have an important role in aiding couples through discussions of various topics to certain depths. A counselor can work with engaged couples to ensure healthy levels of self-disclosure are perceived by both parties.

It is the purpose of this research study to discover the role that social penetration theory has in premarital counseling and to discover any themes in the perspectives of topical depth and breadth that counselors and couples have in regards to their premarital counseling experiences. Social penetration theory is an interpersonal communications theory that proposes that as a relationship progresses, individuals disclose information about a greater amount of topics (breadth) and to deeper levels (depth). It is hoped that this study will not only be a new context in which to apply social penetration theory in order to support the theory's usability within the communication discipline, but also that this study will shed light on areas of deficiency that counselors and couples find in premarital counseling sessions in order to better this experience for future couples.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I ask you to do the following things. Read over this consent form and the interview questions which were e-mailed to you and record any questions you have for me. I will contact you in a few days, and you can ask any questions then. We will set a time for me to come into the church office to interview you. If you agree to participate, I will collect your signed consent form at the time of the interview. The interview is expected to last thirty minutes, and will not go longer than one hour. After the interview, you will not be contacted again unless you request to see a final copy of the master's thesis. Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study has minimal risks, which according to LU's Institutional Review Board means, "the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests." Only in the case of a report of spousal or personal abuse will confidentiality be breached.

The benefits to participation are to society. If premarital counseling experiences can be improved, couples will be more equipped to enter into a marriage union.

**Compensation:**

There is no compensation for participation. Contribution to the study is voluntary.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In the published master's thesis, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. A code name will be given in place of your actual name in the study. Also, your church will not be identified by name, but only by denomination. Audio-recorded interviews will be carried by the researcher until transcribed onto a computer document. Then the tapes will be deleted. Transcribed data, if printed, will be stored securely in a locked file cabinet and only the researcher will have access to the records. The researcher's computer is locked and only the researcher knows the passkey. Data will be destroyed after three years and only the master's thesis paper will remain.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Katherine Beich-Forkner. You may ask any questions you have now. Also, if you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact me at kabeich@liberty.edu, or my faculty advisor, Dr. Faith Mullen, at fmullen@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ I consent to be audio-recorded for this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date: _____

**IRB Code Numbers:** 1459.121112
**IRB Expiration Date:** December 11, 2013