

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
COUPLES ATTENDING EXPERIENTIAL, ATTACHMENT-BASED PREMARITAL
WORKSHOPS

by

James Joseph Kasten

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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APPROVED BY:

Fred A. Milacci, D.Ed., Committee Chair

Fred Volk, Ph.D., Committee Member

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of couples who attended an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop. Schlossberg's transition theory provided this study's theoretical framework, which strived to answer the following research questions: How do couples describe their experiences attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop? How do participants describe their expectations for the workshop prior to their participation in the workshop? In what ways were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the premarital workshop? How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their workshop experience? Data collection involved demographic questionnaires, interviews, and cognitive representations. The data was analyzed by using Moustakas' phenomenological methodology. Three Primary themes emerged from the data analysis. The first theme of Before the Workshop contains the subthemes of Discovery, Motivation, and Expectations. During the workshop, the second theme includes What they Learned, How they Learned, and Emotional Experience. The subthemes of Recall, Impact on Relationship, and Perceived Strengths and Weakness are included in the third theme, After the Workshop. The most prominent result was that the participants could not recall topics from the lecture portion of the workshop, but they could remember what they experienced and what they felt. This is a crucial element for educating adult learners.

Keywords: premarital education, couple relationship education, marriage, attachment theory, relationships, experiential learning theory, transition theory, transcendental phenomenology.

Copyright Page (Optional)

Dedication

I dedicate this manuscript to my wife, Michelle. This accomplishment would never have happened without your unconditional love, life-giving words, steadfast support, personal sacrifice, extreme patience in tolerating all the meltdowns and mood swings that came with this. This feat is as much of your accomplishment as it is mine. Words will never be able to articulate my love for you entirely. You are, and always will be, the best part of my life.

I would also like to dedicate this to my children, Caleb, Julie, Seth, and Josh. My heart beats with joy and love every time I think of you. You make being a dad easy. I hope that this accomplishment will encourage you to follow your dreams regardless of your age, never give up, and always work hard.

In addition, I want to honor my parents Joseph and Patricia Kasten. When I was a child, I watched my parents work hard and sacrifice so my dad could attend seminary. My parent's example of dedication, hard work, always pursuing their dreams, perseverance, and their love for each other, children, and God helped me get where I am today. To all my loved ones, friends, and colleagues, you played a part in helping me finish this journey. Whether it was a moment of laughter, an encouraging word, an ear to listen to, or a shoulder to lean on, you provided fresh air to my heart.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to God. It was through Him alone that I was able to finish strong. I am forever grateful for His love and His always-present hand upon my life. His grace and mercy truly astound me.

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Finally, I would like to thank all the couples that took time out of their busy schedules to talk to me. Each couple was a delight to get to know, a joy to interview with, and provided a wonderful experience. I am honored that you entrusted me with your personal experiences.

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List of Abbreviations

Accessibility, Responsiveness, Engaged (A.R.E.).

American Psychological Association (APA)

Couple Relationship Education (CRE)

Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT)

International Centre for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy (ICEEFT)

Imago Relationship Theory (IRT)

Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP)

Premarital Interpersonal Choice and Knowledge (PICK)

Prepare/Enrich (P/E)

Religion and Spirituality (R/S)

Sound Relationship House Theory (SRH)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological research was to describe the experiences of couples who attended an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop. In this opening chapter, there are eight important sections which include 1) the background of the problem that this qualitative research study intended to answer, 2) an explanation of the motivations, identify philosophical assumptions and the framework that guided this study, 3) a discussion of the general problem, the specific problem, the focus of the research, and the population sample, 4) the purpose statement in which describes the focus and intentions of this qualitative research study, 5) a description of the theoretical, empirical, and practical significance that the research will contribute to, 6) a brief description and discussion of the central research question and the three sub-questions, 7) definitions of terms that are pertinent to this qualitative research study, and 8) a summary that synthesizes the information presented in chapter one.

Background

This section will briefly summarize the literature related to the historical, social, and theoretical contexts for the need for further research for premarital education, primarily experiential and attachment-based ones. The historical context will explain how the research problem developed over time. The social context will explore the societal environment for why the need for premarital education continues to grow. The theoretical context will discuss what the current literature says about Schlossberg's Transition Theory and its theoretical principles and concepts.

Historical Context

Throughout most history, couple relationship education (CRE) and premarital education were the responsibility of clergy members and religious institutions (Arcus et al., 1993; Markman et al., 2019; Wilmoth & Smyser, 2012). Because of the rising divorce rates in the 1970s, premarital education became a focus of psychologists and other mental health professionals (Markman et al., 2019; Wilmoth & Smyser, 2012). Today, premarital education is delivered by clergy and religious institutions, licensed clinical professionals, or paraprofessionals in various formats, including classes, workshops, counseling, and self-directed studying (Clyde et al., 2020). Premarital education aims to help couples prepare for marriage and experience long-term marital satisfaction. Premarital education is also viewed as a preventive measure against divorce by equipping them with communication skills and other marital skills to enhance their relationship (Markman et al., 2006).

CRE has been proven to be valuable to helping couples improve the quality of their relationship, improve marital satisfaction and increase positive communication and interactions (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013). Specifically, premarital education has also been shown to be beneficial to marriages with results such as higher marital satisfaction levels, marital harmony, commitment, lower levels of destructive conflicts, increased chances of seeking marital help in the future when the couple feels distressed, and a 31% decrease in divorce odds (Doss et al., 2009a, 2009b; Muluhy Keverenge et al., 2020; Onserio et al., 2016; Stanley et al., 2006). While CRE has been a consistent research topic to date, the focus on premarital education has waned and is lacking compared to CRE research (Clyde et al., 2020). Communication has been the primary topic in premarital education, yet these skills do not always improve couples' relationship satisfaction (Asadi, 2014; Benson et al., 2012; Blanchard et al., 2009; Hawkins et

al., 2008; Kennedy et al., 2019; Lavner et al., 2016; Markman et al., 2010; Rogge et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2014). Premarital education has been lacking in helping couples understand relationship principles, relational connectivity, and building secure attachment bonds (Galovan & Schramm, 2018; Gilmore, 2018; Johnson, 2008; McNelis & Segrin, 2019; Schramm et al., 2017).

Social Context

Society and marriage have gone through significant changes over recent years. Couples have delayed marriage to their late 20's; many have chosen cohabitation to prepare for marriage and sometimes enter a marriage with children (Allred, 2019; Horowitz et al., 2019; Manning & Carlson, 2021; Payne, 2019). These dynamics can produce ambivalent attitudes towards marriage, a struggle to let go of self-centeredness, complex histories of sexual and cohabitation experiences, and unhealthy relationship development (Clyde et al., 2020). These resulting variables put couples' marriages and marital satisfaction at risk.

Divorce has a considerable adverse impact on people's lives. For adults, the experience of divorce can cause significant economic, physical, and psychological health problems (Alviar et al., 2014; Björkenstam et al., 2013; Knöpfli et al., 2016; Mortelmans, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2014; Simó-Noguera et al., 2015). It also has a detrimental impact on the children of divorces, including behavioral, physical, and psychological health problems and distorted views on family life (Chun et al., 2016; Fuller-Thomson & Dalton, 2011; Kleinsorge & Covitz, 2012; Stanley et al., 2006). Researching attachment-based premarital education programs, such as this study, may further create effective premarital educational programs that increase the couples' ability to develop higher marital quality and satisfaction and lower divorce odds.

Theoretical Context

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory was birthed out of the author's personal experience, creating feelings of confusion and angst even though it was her choice to move due to an excellent job opportunity (Schlossberg, 2011). Much of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory focuses on transitions based on work and the business field but was later applied to higher education (Schlossberg, 2011). Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory provides an excellent framework for understanding transitions, including planned events, unplanned events, and nonevents. Understanding the framework is accomplished by looking at how an individual goes through the three distinct phases of a transition – *Moving In*, *Moving Through*, and *Moving Out* (Anderson et al., 2012; Charner & Schlossberg, 1986; Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1982; Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg et al., 1989). This research study aims to add to Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory literature by focusing on how premarital couples transition through experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America.

Situation to Self

My motivation to conduct this qualitative research study originated from my desire to help couples thrive in their marital relationship. In religious and professional clinical settings, I have worked with premarital couples getting ready for their marriage, couples who wanted to enhance their marriage, and distressed couples. When working with distressed couples, I usually see dysfunctional patterns that make couples feel disconnected from each other. As I witness the couples' distress, I am often left to wonder how much the couples could have avoided unnecessary emotional pain if they had been taught how to create secure attachment by attuning and responding to each other's emotional cues.

As a researcher, clergy member, and licensed professional counselor, the philosophical assumption that guided my research was ontological. Creswell and Poth (2018) point out that ontological assumption is based on the idea that multiple realities exist due to individuals' different experiences. The interpretive framework used in conjunction with epistemological assumptions was social constructivism. Social constructivism is where individuals seek to understand their world by developing their lived experiences' subjective meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Listening to the participants' lived experiences of attending experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops allowed me to find themes within the presenting different perspectives of the participants studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants' detailed descriptions provided texture to a new premarital educational experience that has not been studied up to this point.

Problem Statement

Getting married is one of the most important decisions that individuals can make, whether they see it as a transition to becoming an adult or making such a serious commitment (Kefalas et al., 2011). A loving, healthy, committed relationship is a primary life goal for many individuals (Anderson et al., 2012). Unfortunately, between 40 to 50 percent of those marriages will end up in a divorce (American Psychological Association, 2021). The primary factor in determining whether the marriage will last is the level of marital satisfaction that the newlywed couples possess at the time of marriage (Williamson & Lavner, 2020). A critical variable that has a powerful influence on marital quality is an adult attachment style (Bradley & Hojjat, 2017; Johnson, 2019, 2020; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013; Tavakol et al., 2017). Couples that have secure relationships can have the capacity to be sensitively attuned to each other's needs, have

empathic responsiveness, compassion for each other, and be better at handling differences and conflict (Gillath et al., 2016; Johnson, 2019).

Since divorce has numerous negative consequences on the individuals involved, including children, there is a vital need for effective premarital preparation (Clyde et al., 2020). Most premarital programs concentrate on communication and problem-solving skills but potentially leave the couples desiring more help in implementing their new skills (Fawcett et al., 2010). Gilmore (2018) identified the lack of attachment theory in premarital programs and the need for experiential learning identified by Kolb (1984). Therefore, Gilmore (2018) created the first premarital program to address the need for attachment and safe emotional connection between spouses and learn new skills in an experiential format that helps the couple integrate the new skills into their marriage. The problem is that there has been no qualitative research done on the experiences of an attachment-based premarital education program.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of couples who attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America. An experiential, attachment-based premarital program can be defined as a workshop where a couple experientially learns how to share deeper feelings and establish a secure attachment in their relationship. The experiential, attachment-based premarital program also helps the couple to develop communication skills while discussing important topics such as decision making, expressing affection, managing differences, exploring one's roles and expectations, sexual intimacy, and setting goals for their relationship (Gilmore, 2018; Gilmore & Jorgensen, 2019). To promote further understanding to the reader, the term "attachment-based" refers to Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory. He proposes that human beings form a lasting

psychological/emotional connectedness. The term “experiential” comes from Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory, where he proposes that individuals learn knowledge through experiences. The theory that guided this study was Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory. It provided the framework to describe the couples’ decision and the expectations before attending the premarital workshop, the actual realities experienced while attending the workshop, and the initial and long-term effects after attending the workshop.

The Significance of the Study

This phenomenological research study can add significance empirically, theoretically, and practically. For the researcher of premarital education, transition theory, or adult attachment, this study provides current information in the research involving individuals transitioning into marriage. For the premarital educator, whether a clergy member, a licensed clinical professional, or a paraprofessional, this study proposes to give insight and understanding to the couples who experience the benefits and challenges of engaging in premarital education. This study can impact their premarital education for future premarital couples, offering them a workshop to better prepare them for marriage.

Empirical Significance

Studying the lived experiences of couples who attended an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop is empirically significant in a couple of ways. First, this study relates to other research previously conducted on premarital education and its impact on couples (Clyde et al., 2020; Doss et al., 2009a, 2009b; Duncan et al., 2010; Futris et al., 2011; Halford et al., 2006; Markman et al., 2010; Muluhy Kevenge et al., 2020; Onserio et al., 2016; Stanley et al., 2006; Williamson et al., 2014). Up to this point, studies only have been conducted on premarital education with an emphasis on communication skills and other marital life skills (Asadi, 2014;

Benson et al., 2012; Halford, 2011; Lavner et al., 2016; Markman et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2014). This study adds to the body of premarital education, specifically related to the foundation of adult attachment theory.

Secondly, research on couple relationship education focuses on helping couples develop a secure attachment by becoming emotionally accessible, responsive, and engaged (Johnson, 2008, 2010). This attachment-based couple relationship education has been used with success across various cultures, different faith traditions, and various populations such as post-deployment military couples and couples facing cardiac disease (Conradi et al., 2018; Johnson & Sanderfer, 2017; Kennedy et al., 2019; Lesch et al., 2018; Morgis et al., 2019; Tulloch et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2018). This study added to the body of attachment-based couple relationship education by focusing on the premarital couple population.

Theoretical Significance

Since this study utilized Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, the results added to the growing literature on transition theory and benefit premarital education, couple relationship education, and transitions researchers. While Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory has been applied to careers and job loss (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986; Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1982), higher education (Schlossberg et al., 1989), and other areas, scholars have not yet applied this lens to couples going through a premarital education program. By exploring how couples transitioned during the experience of attending experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops, the research provided descriptions and familiar themes of how couples viewed the transitional experience of premarital education.

Practical Significance

From a practical perspective, gaining a detailed, textural description of how couples experienced the premarital workshop may significantly contribute to stakeholders of the studied workshops. The data provided positive relational gains achieved by couples that the creators could highlight as potential positive benefits for drawing future couples to the premarital workshop. The results also revealed challenges couples experienced, where the creators can re-evaluate and strengthen any identified weaknesses. Adjusting to premarital couples' needs will ensure a robust premarital education program that will help couples prepare for marriage (Fawcett et al., 2010).

Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to capture and describe the essence of the collective experiences of the couples who attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops. The researcher developed the following research questions to guide the study. All the data was collected directly from the premarital couples who attended an experiential, attachment-based workshop phenomenon about the central research question and sub-questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Central Research Question

The central research question asked was, *How do couples describe their experiences attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop?* According to Fawcett et al. (2010), premarital and marital educators need to critically evaluate the content, methods, intensity, and delivery mechanisms of premarital education to remain beneficial and relevant for today's couples. The purpose of this central question is to describe and understand the phenomenon of attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop.

Sub question One. The first sub-question asked was, How do participants describe their expectations for the workshop prior to their participation in the workshop? In this study, the experiences of couples attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop were described using the theoretical framework of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012; Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Schlossberg, 1981, 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory provides the framework of how an individual experiences transition in three distinct phases: Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving Out (Anderson et al., 2012). The purpose of this question was to help describe the thoughts, circumstances, and motivations of the premarital couples as they enter the Moving In phase of the transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Schlossberg, 1981, 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1989). It is important to understand why the couples chose to attend the premarital workshop because few couples choose to engage in premarital programs when offered even though premarital programs are effective (Tambling & Glebova, 2013).

Sub question Two. The second sub-question asked, In what ways were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the premarital workshop? This question is designed to describe the Moving Through phase of the workshop. How the participants experienced the premarital workshop was answered with this question. Couples may experience mixed results from attending a premarital workshop, such as positive progression of their relationship or finding out that their partner was not who they thought they were or had irreconcilable differences (Kruenegel-Farr et al., 2013). Hearing former participants' experiences with success and challenges while attending an experiential, attachment-based workshop yielded information that is potentially beneficial for the future of

premarital programs, whether they are experiential, attachment-based in nature, or some other modality.

Sub question Three. The third sub-question asked, *How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their workshop experience?* This question was designed to describe the participants' experiences with *Moving Out* phase of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. It was also intended to allow the participants to reflect on their premarital workshop experience and how the premarital workshop positively or negatively impacted them intrapsychically. The participants' responses to this question provided information on whether the objectives of the premarital program were accomplished or not. Ultimately the answers to this question will significantly strengthen experiential, attachment-based workshops and other premarital programs.

Definitions

The following terms and definitions are pertinent and used throughout this dissertation. These terms and definitions are related to this study's topic, theoretical framework, or research design based upon the literature.

1. *Attachment Styles* – Adult attachment styles are how adults relate, interact, and behave in relationships (Gillath et al., 2016; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Johnson, 2019, 2020; Shaver et al., 1988). They include secure, anxious, avoidant, and fearful-avoidant attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Gillath et al., 2016; Johnson, 2019).
2. *Attachment Theory* - The theory developed by Bowlby (1969/1989, 1973, 1980) and further developed and applied to adults (Gillath et al., 2016; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Johnson, 2019, 2020; Shaver et al., 1988; Weiss, 1975, 1982). Attachment theory is built on the premise that humans have an innate desire to form emotional bonds with other

humans. The type of emotional bonds that are formed will result in predictable behavioral patterns known as attachment behaviors (Bowlby, 1969/1989, 1973, 1980; Gillath et al., 2016; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver et al., 1988; Johnson, 2019, 2020; Weiss, 1975, 1982).

3. *Experiential Learning Theory* - The learning theory developed by Kolb (1984) involves a holistic process where the learner attains knowledge through a transforming experience that involves perception, cognition, and behavior (Kolb, 1984; McCarthy, 2016).
4. *Moving In* - The first stage of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory is where an individual starts (moves in) a new transition experience (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg et al., 1989). For this study's purposes, a couple was in this phase when they registered for the premarital workshop.
5. *Moving Out* – The third and final phase of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory is where the individual finishes one series of transitions and begins to move into the next transition (Anderson et al., 2012). For this study's purpose, the couple was considered in the Moving Out when the couple had finished attending and completed the premarital workshop.
6. *Moving Through* - The second phase of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory where the individuals are in the middle of the transition and will "confront issues such as how to balance their activities with other parts of their lives and how to feel supported and challenged during their new journey" (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 16). For this study's purpose, the couple was considered in the *Moving Through* phase when they were attending and participating in the premarital workshop.

7. *Premarital Education* – Education that supports and guides engaged couples on topics including communication, sexual intimacy, spousal rights and responsibilities, and skills and principles associated with a stable, healthy relationship (Markman et al., 2019; VandenBos, 2015). Premarital education can be presented in multiple formats, including classes, workshops, counseling, and self-directed studying (Duncan et al., 2010; Futris et al., 2011).
8. *Qualitative research* – A distinctive research methodology where the researcher seeks an in-depth understanding of a social or human problem. This process includes building a complex, holistic picture by analyzing words and reporting detailed views of participants unencumbered by the researcher's expectations or what has been read in the literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
9. *Transcendental phenomenology* – A distinctive qualitative research methodology where the researcher studies multiple participants' lived experiences and focuses on the common themes found within the participant's detailed descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).
10. *Transition* - An event or non-event that results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships (Schlossberg, 1981, p.5).

Summary

This chapter introduced the phenomenological study that described the couples' experiences who attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America. In addition, this chapter briefly pointed out that CRE and premarital education are beneficial to couples who engage in these programs (Doss et al., 2009a, 2009b; Halford &

Bodenmann, 2013; Muluha Keverenge et al., 2020; Onserio et al., 2016; Stanley et al., 2006). It has also been presented that there is a need for further research on premarital educational programs, specifically attachment-based (Galovan & Schramm, 2018; Gilmore, 2018; Johnson, 2008; McNelis & Segrin, 2019; Schramm et al., 2017). This chapter also presented the purpose statement of this research study and the resulting empirical, theoretical, and practical significance.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two provides an overview of the literature and theoretical framework. This chapter begins with an explanation of the theoretical framework upon which the research was built. It continues with a literature review of present research about premarital education, experiential adult learning theory, and attachment theory. I will then show how the current literature reveals the problem and the research gap, demonstrating the importance and necessity of my research project. Chapter Two specifically includes (1) a current overview of marriage, (2) the history of attachment theory, (3) an explanation of adult attachment styles, (4) the importance of marital quality, (5) the different couples therapy models that help distresses couples, a brief history of couple relationship education, (6) the need and efficacy of premarital education, and (7) necessary changes needed in premarital education. Chapter Two will summarize the literature presented and establish the research gap I attempted to fill.

Theoretical Framework

The reader must be informed of the theoretical framework guiding this qualitative study. According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), the theoretical framework can be compared to a house blueprint. The theoretical framework informs how the researcher will construct and support the study and provides structure to convey his approach to the dissertation philosophically, epistemologically, methodologically, and analytically (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Regarding qualitative research, "a useful theory is one that tells an enlightening story about some phenomenon. It is a story that gives you new insights and broadens your understanding of the phenomenon" (Anfara & Mertz, 2014, p. 5). The theoretical framework best suited to describe

premarital couples' experiences that attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America is Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's transition theory's origins can be traced to Schlossberg's personal experience with a geographical move that caused her to experience confusion and angst even though it was her choice to move due to an excellent job opportunity (Schlossberg, 2011). This personal experience compelled Schlossberg to study transitions with an emphasis on work for over 35 years (Schlossberg, 2011). Schlossberg readily admits that her transition theory is built upon others' research and theories that studied transitions and adaptive behavior through the lens of individual idiosyncrasies, life stages, or chronological age (Schlossberg, 1981). These researchers include Daniel Levinson, Bernice Neugarten, George Valliant, Marjorie Fiske Lowenthal, Majda Thurner, David Chiriboga, Orville Brim, Jerome Kagan, Barbara Snell Dohrenwend, Thomas Holmes, Richard Rahe, Erick Erickson, Roger Gould, Morton Lieberman, Jean Lipman-Blumen, Colin Parkes, and Nicholas Zill (Schlossberg, 1981).

The foundational concept that Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory rests upon is the proposition that individuals are continually experiencing transitions throughout their lives. These transitions are non-sequential and can be experienced differently due to the uniqueness of everyone. A transition can be defined as "an event or nonevent results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (Schlossberg, 1981, p.5). Leibowitz and Schlossberg (1982) would further clarify the definition as an event that necessitates a change in the individual's assumptive world and a change in the individual's relationships. When facing a transition, everyone brings their combination of assets and deficits to the event or nonevent (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). An

individual's coping assets and liabilities determine how the individual will experience the transition process (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986).

Transition Process. Schlossberg's transition model has three major components, which include 1) Approaching Transitions: Transition Identification and Transition process, 2) Taking Stock of Coping Resources: The 4 S System, and 3) Taking Charge: Strengthening Resources (Anderson et al., 2012). In the first part, Approaching Transitions, three types of transitions are identified that an individual could experience. The first type is an anticipated transition. Anticipated transitions are where transitions involve a significant life event that most people can expect to happen, such as graduating from high school, getting engaged and married, starting a new job, the birth of a first child, changing careers, and retiring (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011).

The second type of transition is an unanticipated transition. An unanticipated transition is where an individual experiences an unexpected, unpredictable, and unplanned disruptive life event, which could include but are not limited to severe car accidents, major surgeries or illnesses, natural disasters, job losses, and divorces (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011). A distinguishing characteristic between an anticipated transition and an unanticipated transition is that individuals can prepare for the former and be unprepared for the latter (Anderson et al., 2012). The final type of transition is a nonevent transition. A nonevent can be described as a transition when expected events or transitions fail to occur, which still changes one's life (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011). Examples of nonevent transitions include marriages that never happened, a child who was never born, false positives of severe illnesses, not receiving the promotion, and not having enough money to retire at the desired age (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011).

Also, in the Approaching Transitions part of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, comes another important concept that is vital to the theoretical framework of this study, the three distinct phases of a transition – *Moving In*, *Moving Through*, and *Moving Out* (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg et al., 1989). *Moving In* is seen as the first stage of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. Individuals in the *Moving In* stage "need to become familiar with the rules, regulations, norms, and expectations of the new system" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57; Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 15). For this study's purposes, a couple was only considered in this phase when they registered for the premarital workshop. The couple's registration signals that the couple was aware of what the premarital workshop would have to offer and what would be required of the couple, such as financial obligation, date and times, and participation expectations.

The second phase of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory is the *Moving Through* phase. The beginning of the *Moving Through* phase is marked by the fact that the individuals "know the ropes" and will "confront issues such as how to balance their activities with other parts of their lives and how to feel supported and challenged during their new journey" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57; Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 16). The couple was considered in the *Moving Through* phase when attending and participating in the premarital workshop for this study's purpose. The couple actively learned how to share deeper feelings, establish a secure attachment in their relationship, goal setting, and develop communication skills that involved important topics such as decision-making, expressing affection, managing differences, exploring one's roles and expectations, sexual intimacy.

The final phase of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory is *Moving Out*. Up to this point, an individual has entered, processed, and emerged from a growth process (Anderson et al.,

2012). Another way to consider this phase is that the individual finishes one series of transitions and begins to move into the next transition (Anderson et al., 2012). For this study's purpose, the couple was considered in the *Moving Out* when the couple had finished attending and completed the premarital workshop. Ideally, in the *Moving Out* phase, the couple has 1) integrated the lessons learned into their lives, 2) developed the ability to share deeper feelings and establish a secure attachment in their relationship, and 3) the continued development of communication skills that involves essential topics such as decision making, expressing affection, managing differences, exploring one's roles and expectations, sexual intimacy, and have set goals for their relationship.

The 4 S System. The second component of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory is Taking Stock of Coping Resources: The 4 S System (Anderson et al., 2012). The 4 S system is a way to look at the potential resources that an individual might possess to cope with the transition process (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011). The 4 S System refers to the four sets of resources that influence one's ability to cope during the transition, which includes (1) the Situation variable, (2) the Self variable, (3) the Supports variable, and (4) the Strategies variable (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011).

The Situation variable answers the question: What is happening at the time of transition (Anderson et al., 2012)? Numerous factors make everyone's transition unique, which includes (Anderson et al., 2012, pp. 67-68):

- triggers (i.e., what set off the transition?),
- the timing of the transition (i.e., how does the transition relate to one's social clock?),
- control (i.e., what aspects of the transition can one control?),

- role changes (i.e., does the transition involve role change?),
- duration (i.e., is the transition seen as permanent or temporary?),
- previous experiences with a similar transition (i.e., how has the individual met similar transitions?),
- the concurrent stress (i.e., what and how great are the stresses facing the individual now, if any?),
- how an individual is assessing the situation (i.e., does the individual view the situation positively, negatively, or as benign?)

The second variable is the Self variable, which refers to an individual's "inner strength for coping with the transition" (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160). Because one's Self is unique, each person brings their own positive and negative attributes to their life situation. According to Anderson et al. (2012), it is difficult and complex to get a sense of Self. However, they were able to identify key characteristics of one's Self that are pertinent to cope with the transition which includes, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation, age and stage of life, state of health, ethnicity/culture, psychological resources, ego development, outlook (optimism and self-efficacy), commitment and values, and spirituality and resilience (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 73).

Next in the 4 S System is the Supports variable. This variable considers the support available critical to one's sense of well-being when the transition occurs (Schlossberg, 2011). The types of support essential to one's well-being include intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and the institutions and communities they belong to (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 84). Support provides a vital role in an individual because of its purpose one's affect (expressions of liking, admiration, respect, or love), affirmation (expressions of agreement or acknowledgment of the appropriateness or rightness of some act or statement of another person),

aid (the exchange of things, money, information, time, and entitlements), and honest feedback (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 85). Also included in the Support variable is Kahn's (1975) concept of the convoy of social support. The convoy of social support is the individual's social support network as they move through various life transitions (Anderson et al., 2012).

The final 4 S System variable is the Strategies variable. The Strategies variable is the coping strategies that individuals will engage in as they move in, move through, and move out of the transition process (Schlossberg, 2011). The Strategies variable of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory relies heavily on Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) systematic way to think about coping strategies when an individual faces a transition. The three basic coping strategies include trying to change, modifying the transition, reframing the meaning of the transition, and reducing the transition's stress (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011). Schlossberg's (1981) Strategies variable is also built upon Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) two major coping strategies (changing the situation [instrumental] or relaxing one's Self [palliative]), as well four possible modes of coping, which include direct action, inhibition of action, information seeking, and intrapsychic (Anderson et al., 2012 p. 91).

Strengthening Resources. The final component of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory is Taking Charge: Strengthening Resources (Anderson et al., 2012). As previously stated, individuals can control how they will respond to a transition. In this component, the individual utilizes new strategies and strengthens their Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies (Anderson et al., 2012). Since a transition has no endpoint, individuals must continually assess whether they are *Moving In*, *Moving Through*, and *Moving Out* and include phases of assimilation (Anderson et al., 2012).

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory makes an excellent framework to study a premarital couple as they go through an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop. Having the premarital couples reflecting upon their experience through the lens of *Moving In*, *Moving Through*, and *Moving Out* will provide valuable information. The premarital couples' rich description of their experience should give insight into the workshop's strengths and weaknesses and impact on their relationship.

Related Literature

The transition into adulthood brings new challenges, roles, and responsibilities (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011). A significant challenging process that many adults will experience is entering into adult romantic relationships, choosing one's spouse, and establishing a family. Marriage is considered a normal part of the human life cycle's adult stage (McGoldrick et al., 2016). According to the APA, marriage is defined as a:

“social institution in which two (or, less frequently, more) people commit themselves to a socially sanctioned relationship in which sexual intercourse is legitimated, and there is legally recognized responsibility for any offspring as well as for each other. Although there are exceptions, the marital partners typically live together in the same residence” (VandenBos, 2015, p. 624).

When it comes to adult relationships and forming adult romantic-attachment bonds, many individuals choose to enter marriage later than years past and decide to cohabitate (Manning & Carlson, 2021; Payne, 2019; Wang & Parker, 2014). While many individuals choose to enter marriage later or choose cohabitation, 73% of young men and 78% of young women have expectations of marriage (Allred, 2019). Even for those who choose cohabitation, most view it as a pathway towards marriage (Horowitz et al., 2019; Manning & Carlson, 2021).

Reason for Marriage

There are various reasons why one will choose to get married. Such causes can include love, companionship, wanting to make a formal commitment, financial reasons, convenience, and pregnancy, with love and companionship being the primary reasons (Horowitz et al., 2019). However, there is an innate need for intimate connection (Umberson et al., 2010). Speaking to the natural desire for connection, Johnson (2020) proposes that “From the cradle to the grave, humans desire a certain someone who will look out for them, notice and value them, soothe their wounds, reassure them in life’s difficult places, and hold them in the dark” (p. 34). Attachment Theory provides an excellent theoretical understanding of individuals' innate desire in marriage and intimate relationships.

Overview of Attachment Theory Development

Bowlby (1969/1989, 1973, 1980) is the founder of attachment theory. The theory came about from his curiosity of why children had difficulty forming close, emotional relationships. While working at Canonbury Clinic in London, Bowlby studied the children at the clinic and discovered that most children had separated from their mothers repeatedly or lost their mother to death. Bowlby formulated his theory that children’s mental health development needed a continuous, warm, supportive relationship with their mother or mother-like figure (Gillath et al., 2016). Bowlby would conduct further research concerning maternal separation with James and Joyce Robertson in the 1950s. Through this research, Bowlby discovered that when children were separated from their caregiver, they would enter a predictable three-stage pattern, including protest behaviors, despair, and detachment. Bowlby classified these behaviors as attachment behaviors because there is an emotional bond being formed between the child and his or her parents or primary caregiver (Gillath et al., 2016). Another reason Bowlby labeled the behaviors

as attachment behaviors is because they maintain or restore a comfortable closeness with the child's caregiver (Gillath et al., 2016).

Bowlby's colleague, Mary Ainsworth, expanded Bowlby's theory by studying the children's differences when separated from their parents. Ainsworth et al. (1978) observed that the children would engage in three distinct behaviors, therefore, creating three categories: secure, insecure-resistant/anxious-ambivalent, or insecure-avoidant/anxious-avoidant. When the parent came back, a secure child would actively seek the parent and be easily comforted and soothed. When a parent of an anxious-ambivalent child would return, the child displayed conflicting behaviors to the responding parent's attempt to soothe and comfort. An anxious-avoidant child does not appear distressed when the parent leaves and actively does not engage with the returning parent. A fourth category was later identified and labeled by one of Ainsworth's students, Mary Main, as the disorganized/disoriented attachment. Children in this category displayed behavior where they appeared confused or unable to organize a way to meet their attachment needs which usually was the result of the mother's depression after birth due to experiencing trauma immediately before or after the child's birth (Gillath et al., 2016; Main & Hesse, 1990; Main & Solomon, 1990).

Bowlby (1969/1989) firmly believed that attachment behaviors continue into adulthood and that attachment plays a vital role "in the life of man from the cradle to the grave" (pp. 207-208). Weiss (1975, 1982) continued to develop this concept as he claimed that 1) the attachment behaviors displayed in childhood would be like what is displayed by adults, and 2) adults' attachment relationships provided the adult feelings of safety and security, and when disrupted, individuals would experience loneliness and insecurity (Gillath et al., 2016).

This idea would be further studied and confirmed by Hazan and Shaver (1987) that adults experienced attachment styles with other adults just like parent-children attachment styles. Continued research would reveal that the adult attachment behavior system lay under adult romantic relationships (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Gillath et al., 2016; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Johnson, 2019, 2020; Shaver et al., 1988). While adults and children both have attachment styles and attachment behavior systems, Johnson (2020) points out that adult attachment is different from parent-child attachment in three distinct ways. The first reason is that adult relationships are representational, meaning that adults can carry around loved ones in their minds where a child needs tangible, physical contact. Secondly, Adult relationships are sexual, and sex is a bonding activity. Thirdly, adult relationships are reciprocal. Johnson (2020) summarizes decades of attachment theory research by stating that there are 10 central tenants of attachment theory which are: 1) Attachment is an innate motivating force, 2) Secure constructive dependency complements autonomy, 3) Attachment offers an essential, safe haven, 4) Attachment provides a secure base, 5) Emotional accessibility and responsiveness build bonds, 6) Fear and uncertainty activate attachment needs, 7) The process of separation distress is predictable, 8) A finite of insecure forms of engagement can be identified, 9) Attachment involves working models of Self and others, and 10) Isolation and loss are inherently traumatizing (pp. 27-33).

Adult Attachment Styles

Modern researchers of adult attachment theory have termed the adult attachment styles as secure attachment, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, and fearful-avoidant attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Gillath et al., 2016; Johnson, 2019). Adults with secure attachment styles can be characterized as comfortable with closeness and recognizing their spouse's interdependence (Johnson, 2019). Secure attachment to another person depends on the

emotional responsiveness of the one they are turning towards in the moment of emotional distress for comfort. Emotional responsiveness must involve the three components of Accessibility, Responsiveness, Engaged (A.R.E.). Accessibility involves one spouse being open to the other's emotional signals, attachment needs, and fears. Responsiveness is where the partner emotionally responds to the other's emotional cues, attachment needs, and fears by sending clear comfort and caring signals. Engaged refers to a spouse being emotionally present and emotionally engaged with the partner that has expressed emotional cues, attachment needs, and fears.

When a spouse employs a bid for attachment connection and feels the other spouse is inaccessible, unresponsive, disengaged, or even threatening, the spouse will engage in the fight or flight attachment behaviors to gain the other spouse's attention (Johnson, 2019). An anxious attachment spouse is often hypersensitive to signs of love, attachment threats, negative messages, or threats of rejection (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Gillath et al., 2016; Johnson, 2019; Mikulincer et al., 2002). Spouses with an anxious attachment usually fear rejection and abandonment and low self-worth feelings (Brennan & Shaver, 1998; Gillath et al., 2016; Karantzas et al., 2010). The anxious attachment will engage in "fight" behavior to close the felt sense of disconnection between them and their spouse (Gillath et al., 2016; Johnson, 2019). An avoidant spouse struggles with emotional closeness engages in compulsive, excessive self-reliance due to not being able to depend on the other spouse for their attachment needs of comfort and security (Brennan & Shaver, 1998; Gillath et al., 2016; Johnson, 2019; Karantzas et al., 2010). The avoidant spouse engages in "flight" behaviors by physically or emotionally withdrawing, ignoring emotional signals and attachment needs, suppressing, or disassociating from their distressful feelings (Gillath et al., 2016; Johnson, 2019; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007, 2016).

The spouse with a fearful-avoidant attachment usually has experienced traumatization from an attachment figure. The fearful-avoidant attachment spouse will demand A.R.E. from their spouse but will withdraw/flight and attack/fight when their spouse tries to respond to their emotional signals and meet their attachment needs (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Gillath et al., 2016; Johnson, 2019).

Attachment theory continues to be researched and impacts interpersonal relationships since its inception by Bowlby. Simpson and Rholes (2015) point out that attachment theory has been one of the most prolific theories researched in the past decade. Magnavita and Anchin (2014) further argue that “the impact of attachment theory on conceptualizations of personality, psychopathology, psychological health, and psychotherapy over the past several decades has been nothing short of explosive” (p.xxiii).

Importance of Marital Quality

Research has shown that marriage benefits its spouses, including socially, economically, physiology, and psychologically. Overall, those who marry enjoy more life satisfaction than those who chose to remain single (Grover & Helliwell, 2019; Næss et al., 2015). Compared to single adults, married adults experience many health benefits such as living longer, lower risk of cardiovascular disease, more likely to survive a heart attack and leave the hospital two days sooner, less likely to present a metastatic disease, and less likely to die from the result of the disease, and long-term benefits in autonomic, endocrine, gut microbiome, and immune systems (Aizer et al., 2013; Hayes et al., 2016; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Kiecolt-Glaser, 2018). Married individuals experience better mental health and well-being, greater happiness, and lower levels of depression and anxiety (Horn et al., 2013; Soulsby & Bennett, 2015; Uecker, 2012).

However, as research continues, marital satisfaction is more of the determining factor than simply the fact of being married (Gustavson et al., 2016; Khalatbari et al., 2013; Kiecolt-Glaser, 2018; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010; Lavner et al., 2012, 2018, 2020; Zhang et al., 2016). Robles et al. (2014) did a meta-analytic review over the past 50 years and found that low marital quality is a risk factor for poor health. Robles et al.'s (2014) study strengthened the research data of Miller et al. (2013), where they found that marital happiness was predictive of better health. In contrast, marital problems were a predictor of poor health. Couples with great marital satisfaction are more protected against stress, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, while couples with lower marital satisfaction are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation (Santini et al., 2015; Shrout et al., 2020; Teo et al., 2013).

Marital satisfaction can be defined as a mental state or attitude that reflects the perceived benefits and costs to the spouses within the marriage (King, 2016; Stone & Shackelford, 2007). In other words, a spouse's perception that there are more benefits than costs will lead to a higher sense of marital satisfaction, whereas if the spouse perceives that there are more costs than benefits will lead to greater feelings of marital dissatisfaction (Stone & Shackelford, 2007). Numerous research studies have been done to show what contributes to high marital satisfaction. Tavakol et al. (2017) reviewed over 80 articles and found that the literature showed that 10 common factors influenced marital satisfaction in ordinary circumstances. They discovered that demographic specifications, personality attributes, attachment styles, communication, religion, forgiveness and sacrifice, couple's families, emotional intelligence, personal health, and sexual relations were consistent factors that significantly influenced a couple's marital satisfaction. For the sake of brevity, this paper will only focus on marital satisfaction factors of demographics,

communication, commitment, mutual reciprocity and responsiveness, sexual satisfaction, stress and emotional regulation, friendship, religion and spirituality, and attachment styles.

Demographics. Numerous demographics can positively impact marital satisfaction. The first demographic is age. Early in the marriage, high marital quality is reported, but couples can decrease in marital satisfaction as they age. The decline in marital satisfaction in middle-aged couples could result from having children, increased responsibilities, and financial pressures (Abbasi et al., 2010; Tavakol et al., 2017; Zaheri et al., 2016). Many couples see an increase in marital satisfaction as they transition from being middle-aged and when their children become independent (Abbasi et al., 2010; Tavakol et al., 2017; Zaheri et al., 2016). Another demographic is the age gap between the spouses. Marriages that have age gaps between the spouses tend to experience a more significant decline in marital satisfaction than marriages where the spouses were closer in age (Lee & McKinnish, 2018). While there seem to be differing results concerning the age gap difference and marital satisfaction, the consensus is that the larger the age gap, the greater the risk of decreasing marital satisfaction (Tavakol et al., 2017). Education is another demographic that impacts marital satisfaction. Couples with higher education levels experience higher marital satisfaction, mental health, and social skills (Madanian & Mansor, 2013; Tavakol et al., 2017). Couples with higher education levels demonstrate a better understanding of essential marital relationship factors than couples with lower education levels (Mihalcea et al., 2013). The final demographic to point out is income and economic status. There is a significant relationship between couples' finances and marital satisfaction with financial stressors as a predictor for marital dissatisfaction (Archuleta et al., 2011; Williamson et al., 2013). Couples who felt satisfied with their finances had more marital satisfaction than the couples who were experiencing dissatisfaction with their finances (Copur & Eker, 2014).

One of the most recognized factors that leads to a successful marriage is communication. Conflict resolution often falls within communication and is also tethered to daily marital communication, shaping the marriage relationship quality (Li et al., 2018). When looking at couples' satisfaction, satisfied spouses' communication was more positive, less negative, and more effective (Lavner et al., 2016). Communication can serve as the link between marital commitment and marital satisfaction (Hou et al., 2019). Just as effective communication can stabilize the marriage and higher marital quality, the lack of effective communication within a marriage can be the root of most marital problems and leads to lower marital satisfaction and marital instability (Esere et al., 2011).

Commitment. Commitment is also essential to creating high marital satisfaction (Givertz et al., 2016). When spouses experience their partners' commitment, they can feel safe, enjoy marital satisfaction, and have a sense of stability (Schoebi et al., 2012). Zineldin's (2019) research revealed that trust and commitment appeared to be more important than communication. As with the other marital satisfaction components, when one spouse's level of commitment increases or decreases, the responding spouse's marital satisfaction increases and decreases, respectively (Carandang & Guda, 2015).

Mutual Reciprocity and Responsiveness. Mutual reciprocity and responsiveness to each other's needs are also conducive to high levels of marital satisfaction. Emotional closeness is achieved when the spouses prioritize responsiveness to each other's physical and mental well-being, therefore, assuring each other that their well-being has been and will continue to be protected and enhanced by their spouse (Clark & Lemay, 2010). For example, when spouses perceived that their spouses were highly supportive, they had lower levels of depressive symptomology (Choi & Ha, 2011). Couples that held the following view about responsiveness

had positive marital satisfaction before marriage and two years into the marriage: The way marital relationships should operate is that each person should pay attention to the other person's needs. Each person should benefit the other in response to the other's needs when the other has a genuine need that he or she cannot meet by him- or herself. Each person should do this to the best of their ability so long as the personal costs are reasonable. When one person does something for the other, the other should not owe the giver anything (Clark et al., 2010). When a spouse perceives that their partner is not doing their part to maintain their relationship or be responsive, the spouse will begin to anticipate their spouse's negative behavior and experience greater dissatisfaction within the relationship (Ogolsky & Gray, 2016).

Sexual Satisfaction. Another widely recognized contributor to marital quality is the couple's sexual relationship. A spouse's sexual satisfaction contributes significantly to their marital happiness, marital satisfaction, and emotional closeness (Impett et al., 2014). Not only does satisfying romantic and sexual relationships impact marital satisfaction, but these factors also affect each spouse's psychological and physical health (Diamond & Huebner, 2012). It is important to note that not only does sexual satisfaction influence marital satisfaction, but sexual satisfaction can also greatly influence marital satisfaction (McNulty et al., 2016). However, when there is a lack of intimacy and a sexual relationship, it can negatively impact the marriage relationship's mental and emotional balance, leading to frustration, annoyance, anxiety, and ultimately relationship failure (Zineldin, 2019).

Stress and Emotional Regulation. Another critical factor for high marital quality is the ability to handle stress. The greater stress levels experienced by a spouse will contribute to lower personal feelings of marital satisfaction (Mak et al., 2011; Maroufizadeh et al., 2019). Spouses that can reduce and cope with the stress, whether external or within the marriage relationship,

improve overall marital functioning and communicate more effectively (Ledermann et al., 2010). Bloch et al. (2014) discovered marriages where the husband can soothe and downregulate his wife's negative emotion after experiencing adverse emotional events; the husband experienced current greater marital satisfaction levels with the wives experiencing greater future levels of marital satisfaction for wives. As with previously mentioned marital satisfaction factors, higher marital satisfaction levels can influence emotional stress by limiting the adverse effects of various types of emotional stress (Røsland et al., 2012).

Friendship. Still another factor contributing to marital satisfaction and long-term marital success is friendship (Chimoga, 2018). Gottman and Silver (2015) propose that the happiest marriages are those where the spouses enjoy a deep friendship which includes mutual respect and enjoyment of each other's company" (p. 21). Those that consider their spouse their best friend doubled the well-being benefits than other couples that do not (Grover & Helliwell, 2019).

Religion and Spirituality. Religion and spirituality (R/S) can contribute to a high marital quality (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Mahoney, 2010). Ellison et al. (2011) suggest that when couples embrace the belief that their marriage is sanctified, where they regard their unions as sacred and believe God's presence is in their relationships, they tend to report higher levels of positive emotions fewer negative feelings toward their partners. While R/S itself does not shield a couple from experiencing a decline in marital satisfaction, it can positively impact the couple's behavior and commitment while experiencing the decline (Bahnaru et al., 2020; Stafford et al., 2014). As with other marital satisfaction factors, the lack of R/S, discrepancies, or differences of R/S can lead to lower levels of marital satisfaction (George et al., 2015).

Attachment Styles. The last marital satisfaction factor to discuss is that of attachment styles. Clark et al. (2010) propose that marital satisfaction is directly linked to the marriage

relationship's attachment styles. Secure attachment styles enhance marital satisfaction due to the spouses engaging in constructive interpersonal behaviors, creating a relational environment where the relationship flourishes (Bradley & Hojjat, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013).

Avoidant attachment styles and anxious attachment styles hurt marital satisfaction. Research has shown that spouses with avoidant attachment styles usually experience low resilience and marital satisfaction and are more likely to divorce, with spouses with an anxious attachment style will also experience low marital satisfaction (Bradley & Hojjat, 2017; Karreman & Vingerhoets, 2012; McNelis & Segrin, 2019). Attachment styles can even impact sexual and marital satisfaction. Research suggests that secure-attachment spouses and anxious-attachment spouses tend to enjoy a noncontingent responsive approach to sex, while avoidant-attachment spouses tend to approach sex as an exchange, causing it to negatively impact the couple's sexual and marital satisfaction (Clark et al., 2010; Raposo et al., 2020).

Couples Therapy

Couples are going to experience relationship frustration, conflict, and disconnection within their relationship. Some couples need the assistance of a couple's therapist to help them navigate through the relational challenges. There seem to be three predominant modalities within the field of couples counseling: Imago Relationship Therapy, Gottman Method Couples Therapy, and Emotionally Focused Therapy.

Imago Relationship Therapy. Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT) was founded by Harville Hendrix and Helen Lakelly Hunt in 1980. IRT incorporates a combination of ego psychology, object-relations psychology, and attachment theory (Gehlert et al., 2017). IRT has four primary interventions: *The Couples Dialogue*, *The Parent-Child Dialogue*, *The Behavior Change Request Dialogue*, and *The Imago Workup* (Gehlert et al., 2017). *The Couple*

Dialogue intervention involves the spouses learning how to effectively communicate by taking turns as the Sender (the spouse who is speaking) and the Receiver (the spouse that is listening). *The Parent-Child Dialogue* involves the spouses taking turns identifying thoughts and emotions regarding their primary caregiver and sharing with their spouse to build empathy for their spouse's unmet childhood needs and how it impacts their current relationship. *The Behavior Change Request Dialogue* is designed for a spouse to share a current frustration related to unmet childhood needs and request three small behavioral changes. The Receiver then can choose one of three proposals to help fulfill that need. This process also involves goal setting and the encouragement for the expression of gratitude. *The Imago Workup* is an intervention where the spouses identify both their partner's positive and negative traits, like their primary childhood caregiver. The goal is that the spouses become aware of how these similarities can create frustrations within the relationship.

There has been limited research done on IRT, including one completed randomized controlled trial, with a second randomized controlled trial currently taking place (Imago Relationships Worldwide, 2019). The research from the first trial revealed that 1) couples experienced an increase in marital satisfaction, 2) the levels of marital satisfaction decreased after treatment but were still higher than before treatment, and 3) the improvements were statistically significant but not clinically significant (Gehlert et al., 2017).

Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT). John Gottman and Robert Levenson began researching in 1972 to observe, describe, measure, and find patterns in couples' relationships and emotions. In the late 1980s, Gottman and Leveson partnered with the University of Washington to create an apartment lab, also known as "the Love Lab," where they could fully monitor couples for 24 hours using video cameras and physiological recording

equipment. A couple of the significant contributions to couples counseling came from Gottman and Leveson's years of studying couples. The first was the physiological and psychological impact that the body experiences the fight-flight response. Secondly, the research showed that the amount of positive affect would significantly impact the marital quality. Gottman was able to narrow down to four predictors of a couple's marriage was deteriorating known as *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, which included attack-defend behaviors of criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Gottman, 2015, 2017; Gottman & Silver, 2015).

The foundational theory that Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT) rests upon is the Sound Relationship House Theory (SRH) which came from Gottman's research. There are nine parts to the SRH, which can be seen as "seven floors that are supported by two walls" (Gottman and Gottman (2015, p. 22). The first three floors include building love maps, sharing fondness and admiration, and turning towards versus away. These three floors represent three primary parts of the relationship: how couples can maintain friendship, intimacy, and passion (Gottman & Gottman, 2015, 2017; Gottman & Silver, 2015). The fourth floor, having a positive perspective, is the result of the three previous steps. The following two floors consist of managing conflict and making life dreams come true, essential for good conflict management. The final floor is where a couple creates shared meaning and which is designed for the spouses to discuss what gives purpose to their lives and their desired future legacies. The two walls are trust and commitment, which provides strength to the other seven building blocks.

The GMCT therapist has four main goals for couples therapy which include: 1) to disarm conflicting verbal communication, 2) to increase intimacy, respect, and affection, 3) to remove barriers that create a feeling of stagnancy in conflicting situations, and 4) create a heightened

sense of empathy and understanding within the context of the relationship (The Gottman Institute, 2021). The GMCT therapist accomplishes these goals by focusing on interventions that help repair and strengthen the couple's relationship into three targeted areas: the couple's friendship, the couple's conflict management, and the couple's creation of shared meaning (The Gottman Institute, 2021).

Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) was developed in the 1980s (Johnson & Greenberg, 1985) out of research that was trying to understand why the couples were not responding to established couple counseling interventions (Johnson, 2020). Before developing EFT, emotion was seen as a secondary issue that could be remedied by focusing on behavioral and cognitive interventions. EFT focuses on addressing the emotion in relationship repair due to 1) emotion playing a crucial role in marital happiness and distress and 2) the emotional nature of human attachments (Bowlby 1969/1989, 1980; Johnson, 2003; Johnson & Bradbury, 1999). Since emotion can both be a systemic variable and experiential, the EFT model blends experiential and systemic therapies, which address the interpersonal and intrapersonal components of relationships (Johnson, 2020).

According to International Centre for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy (ICEEFT), there are three main goals for EFT: 1) to expand and re-organize key emotional responses and, in the process, the organization of Self, 2) to create a positive shift in partners interactional positions and patterns, 3) to foster the creation of a secure bond between partners (ICEEFT, 2021.). The EFT model had a roadmap that includes three stages with nine steps (Johnson, 2020). The first stage is the *De-escalation of Negative Cycles of Interaction-Relationship Stabilization*. This stage consists of four steps: 1) Creating an alliance and delineating conflict issues in the core attachment struggle, 2) Identifying the negative

interactional cycle where these issues are expressed, 3) Accessing the unacknowledged emotions underlying interactional positions, and 4) Reframing the problem in terms of the negative cycle, underlying feelings, and attachment needs. The second stage is *Changing Interactional Positions*. Stage two is comprised of the following three steps, which are: 5) Promoting identification with disowned attachment emotions, needs, and aspects of Self, and integrating these into relationship interactions, 6) Promoting acceptance of each partner's experiences and new interactional responses, and 7) Facilitating the expression of needs and wants and creating open emotional engagement and bonding events that redefine the attachment between partners. The final stage is *Consolidation and Integration* and focuses on the last two steps of 8) Facilitating the emergence of new solutions to old relationship problems and 9) Consolidating new positions and new cycles of attachment behaviors (Johnson, 2020, pp. 21-22).

Emotionally focused therapy has a significant amount of empirical research proving the EFT model's efficacy and establishing it as an evidence-based therapy model (Beasley & Ager, 2019; Carroll & Doherty, 2003). To date, there have been 42 studies showing that the EFT significantly reduces marital distress, including when there are comorbidities of traumatic symptoms and depression, increase marital satisfaction, fosters secure attachments for the spouse within the marriage by reducing avoidance attachment and anxiety attachment, intimacy and sexual satisfaction, more resilience to stress, a greater sense of Self, and developing greater empathy skills (Burgess Moser et al., 2015; ICEEFT, 2021; Johnson, 2013, 2020; Johnson et al., 2013; Wiebe et al., 2019; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). There have also been 16 process and predictors research studies, 18 reviews and commentaries of EFT research, three meta-analyses, and seven studies on learning and training of the EFT model. Based on APA's standards, EFT

meets the gold standard in empirical validation in couples therapy (Johnson, 2020; Sexton et al., 2011).

Premarital Education. Couple relationship education has been around since the early 1930s usually offered in religious settings predominantly by clergy, and then gained traction in the psychological field in the 1970s due to rising divorce rates (Markman et al., 2019; Wilmoth & Smyser, 2012). Couple relationship education can be defined as teaching couples “skills and principles associated with a stable, healthy relationship and marriage with the aim of improving or enhancing relationships and preventing future distress” (Markman et al., 2019, p. 307). Based on this definition, two groupings fall within it: education that involves marriage enhancement and maintenance for established marriages and education that involves couples preparing for marriage. It is important to note that CRE is distinctive from couples therapy in a few ways such as 1) CRE is usually done in a group setting whereas couple therapy serves individual couples, 2) a trained paraprofessional can facilitate CRE whereas couples therapy is delivered by a licensed professional, 3) a couple’s past is a one of the area’s focus for couples therapy, and CRE usually is ahistorical, and 5) Couples therapy requires the couple to talk to a third party about personal matters whereas, in CRE, the couple usually talks personal issues with each other (Markman & Ritchie, 2015, p. 656). Couple relationship education has been shown to increase positive communication, improve marital quality, enhance relationship satisfaction for most couples (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013). CRE also seems to be the most effective when the interventions happen earlier in the relationship (Gilmore, 2018; Rhoades & Stanley, 2009; Scott et al., 2013).

Formal approaches to premarital education began in the early 1930s when the Merrill-Palmer Institute launched a premarital educational program, and Philadelphia Marriage Center created a premarital counseling program (Arcus et al., 1993). Premarital education can be

presented in multiple formats, including classes, workshops, counseling, and self-directed studying. Within the field of premarital education, the terms premarital counseling and premarital education are often used interchangeably (Clyde et al., 2020). Although the terms are used interchangeably, there are some differences between the two terms (Bradford et al., 2015). Premarital counseling is designed for individual couples and is designed to give “educational and supportive guidance to individuals planning marriage” that “includes matters as the timing of marriage, spousal rights and responsibilities, birth-control and sexual intimacy and may use assessment instruments to identify and thereby address potential conflicts in the marriage” (VandenBos, 2015. p. 823). Premarital education is usually done in a group format such as a class or workshops. It is broader in scope (Clyde et al., 2020). The premarital education delivery method was not a factor; whether it was multiple conjoint sessions, classes, one-day workshops, or self-directed study, the couples that engaged in a marital preparation intervention benefitted from their experience (Duncan et al., 2010; Futris et al., 2011; Stanley et al., 2020; Tambling & Glebova, 2013).

The Need for Premarital Education. Marriage is a significant transition that involves new challenges, roles, and responsibilities. Therefore, marital satisfaction is crucial for a couple’s long-term success; premarital education could play a vital role in helping the couple transition well and develop a secure, healthy marriage (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011; Stone & Shackelford, 2007). The need for premarital education is just as essential as before and maybe even more so now. Clyde et al. (2020) describe four characteristics of contemporary young adults (18-35 years old) entering a marriage that makes the need for premarital education apparent: 1) While they still value and plan for marriage, the contemporary young adults have more ambivalent attitudes towards the institution of marriage, 2) Since contemporary young

adults are marrying at a later age and they grew up in a self-focused, individualistic culture, they may struggle to develop a sense of we-ness within the marriage, 3) Due to current societal norms, many contemporary young adults are entering marriage with complex histories of sexual and cohabitation experiences which can be risks to long-term marital satisfaction, and 4) Contemporary young adults live in an era where they are surrounded and impacted by an ever-present media that can threaten the development and maintenance of healthy relationships (p. 150).

Another reason for premarital education is that it can serve as a preventive measure for divorce and its impact on the spouses and children affected by it. Research has shown that divorcees reported lower self-rated health and faced an increased risk of chronic anxiety and chronic depression, hospital-diagnosed infectious diseases, psychiatric disorders, and cardiovascular disease (Alviar et al., 2014; Björkenstam et al., 2013; Knöpfli et al., 2016; Nielsen et al., 2014; Simó-Noguera et al., 2015). The research on the impact of divorce on children reveals that they will have distorted perceptions of family life in adulthood, have more significant mental health difficulties, have greater misconduct problems, have lower academic scores and grades, are at greater risk for suicidal ideation throughout their entire life, and are more likely to experience interpersonal difficulties in all domains of their lives and their marriages ending in divorce (Chun et al., 2016; Fuller-Thomson & Dalton, 2011; Kleinsorge & Covitz, 2012; Stanley et al., 2006).

The Efficacy of Premarital Education. Research on CRE has been taking place since the mid-1970s with over 300 research studies and continues to be a topic of interest; however, this is not the case for premarital education (Clyde et al., 2020). Clyde et al. (2020) report that premarital education research has been relatively limited compared to the overall CRE with less

than 40 peer-reviewed empirical evaluations. Premarital education research seemed to peak in the 1980s and has garnered less interest, with only three-five premarital education research every five years (Clyde et al., 2020).

Although limited in the quantity of peer-reviewed empirical evaluations, the available premarital education research does show that premarital education benefits couples' marriage. Premarital education has been associated with higher marital satisfaction levels, marital harmony, commitment, lower levels of destructive conflicts, and a 31% decrease in divorce odds (Muluhy Keverenge et al., 2020; Onserio et al., 2016; Stanley et al., 2006). Premarital education can also serve as a gateway for couples therapy later because the couple has already experienced the benefit of seeking help with their relationship (Doss et al., 2009a, 2009b). Premarital education has been shown to help couples learn the necessary skills to handle the inevitable difficulties in marriage and protect the positive gains within their relationship, increasing their marital satisfaction (Markman et al., 2010). Although research shows that premarital education is beneficial, only a small minority takes advantage of it (Halford et al., 2006; Williamson et al., 2014).

Approaches to Premarital Education. Most premarital education is being done through religious organizations that create and use their curriculum (Clyde et al., 2020; Wilmoth & Smyser, 2012). As a result, there is a lack of a standardized premarital curriculum. However, there have been a couple of programs that have been researched and established as being effective in premarital education: The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), Prepare/Enrich (P/E), and Premarital Interpersonal Choice and Knowledge (PICK).

The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). PREP is a psychoeducational program delivered in a workshop format and built upon over 35 years of

empirical research on marital health (Stanley & Markman, n.d.). Much of the research came out of University with Denver, with notable researchers including Dr. Howard Markman, Dr. Scott Stanley, and Dr. Galena Rhoades (Stanley & Markman, n.d.). With its rich history of empirical research, PREP has been proven to effectively help couples develop their commitment to each other, communication skills, problem-solving and conflict management skills, and preserve their friendship (Allen et al., 2015; Markman & Rhoades, 2012).

Prepare/Enrich (P/E). P/E is another premarital program with over 35 years of research with high validity and high reliability (Olson et al., 2012). The goals for P/E include teaching couple communication and conflict resolution skills and increasing their awareness of areas of strength and growth as well as important topics that potentially lead to significant marital problems (Life Innovations, Inc., 2014; Olson et al., 2012). This is accomplished by the couple completing an assessment with the couple receiving semi-structured feedback, either in an individual or group format (Futris et al., 2011; Olson et al., 2012). The P/E assessment process includes 1) 10 core scales including idealistic distortion, communication, conflict resolution, partner style and habits, financial management, leisure activities, sexuality affection, family and friends, relationship roles, and spiritual beliefs, 2) A SCOPE personality profile derived from the five-factor model of personality, 3) Relationship dynamics including assertiveness, self-confidence, avoidance, and partner dominance, 4) Couple and family map assessing the dimensions of closeness and flexibility within their relationship and families of origin, 5) Personal stress profile which identifies their most stressful issues, 6) Individual and relational satisfaction, 7) Commitment and 8) Abuse and substance abuse (Life Innovations, Inc., 2014; Olson et al., 2012).

Premarital Interpersonal Choice and Knowledge (PICK). PICK, developed by Dr. John Van Epp (2008), is built upon the Relationship Attachment Model (RAM). PICK focuses on educating individuals on factors that impact overall marital stability and satisfaction, known as the family of origin experiences, attitudes, compatibility, relational skills (Bradford et al., 2016; Van Epp, 2008). It also educates the individual about the dating process to help them pace the relationship properly by concentrating on knowledge, trust, and commitment (Bradford et al., 2016; Van Epp, 2008). There have been three published studies that shown that PICK has a positive impact on individuals by helping them develop healthy relationship behaviors, skills, and attitudes, relational patterns, and choosing compatible partners (Bradford et al., 2016; Brower et al., 2012; Van Epp et al., 2008).

Communication Skills. Behavioral interventions have been developed in premarital education to help couples establish positive communication and prevent negative communication (Halford, 2011). Moreover, for many relationships education programs, communication has been one of the primary goals for prevention (Benson et al., 2012; Blanchard et al., 2009; Hawkins et al., 2008; Lavner et al., 2016; Markman et al., 2006; Wood et al., 2014). By being taught healthy, effective ways to communicate, couples can avoid negative communication patterns that can lead to marital adjustment difficulties for the first five years of marriage (Markman et al., 2010). Communication skills education has also helped couples develop and improve other marital life skills (Asadi, 2014). The research shows the positive gains in couples' marriages when learning communication skills warrants an essential place within premarital education. However, teaching these skills to couples may not always produce relationship satisfaction (Kennedy et al., 2019; Rogge et al., 2013). The reason could be that when couples become emotionally distressed, they

are often unable to use communication skills and strategies (Bodenmann et al., 2006; Kennedy et al., 2019).

New Strategies Needed. When it comes to helping couples, it must be based on evidence-based practices (Halford et al., 2003). While communication and behavior skill training has been effective for helping premarital couples, premarital education needs to incorporate strategies to understand relationship principles, relational connectivity, and attachment (Galovan & Schramm, 2018; Schramm et al., 2017). It is also vital for premarital education to increase couples' awareness of marital satisfaction and how it can impact their marriage (Ghofranipour et al., 2017; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010). When looking at the three established premarital educations of PREP, P/E, and PICK, and despite their effectiveness, there is a significant missing element: attachment. Attachment is a crucial element for forming a marital relationship that experiences high marital quality levels, marital satisfaction, marital stability, and the lack of attachment security threatens the marriage's future (Cooper et al., 2018; Creasey & Jarvis, 2009). The programs mentioned above do not provide the couples with an experiential understanding of building secure attachments to create emotional safety and emotional connection within their relationship (Gilmore, 2018; Johnson, 2008; McNelis & Segrin, 2019). The experiential knowledge of building secure attachment increases the odds of successfully navigating inevitable arguments, marital stressors and avoiding establishing negative interactional cycles (Gilmore, 2018; Johnson, 2008; Karney, 2010). CRE programs that are attachment-based have shown that the couples reported an increase in marital quality, improved relationship satisfaction, improved marital functioning, increased attachment security, higher levels of trust, improved interactional skills, and increased hope (Conradi et al., 2018; Kennedy et al., 2019; Lesch et al., 2018; Morgis et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2018).

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). When helping couples learn, the material must be presented so that the learner can understand, absorb and utilize the knowledge. Conveying knowledge to the learner is not enough because learners may grasp and understand the knowledge but may be reluctant to engage in tasks due to a lack of experience (Manolis et al., 2013). Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) addresses this concern of helping the learner to be able to make use of the knowledge. Kolb (1984) defined learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). ELT intends that the learner is engaged in a holistic, adaptive process that involves the four components of experience, perception, cognition, and behavior" (McCarthy, 2016). Kolb argues that the process of learning from experience can always be found in human activity (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Kolb's (1984) ELT is built upon the following six propositions:

1. Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.
2. Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience.
3. Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation.
5. Learning results from synergistic transactions between the person and the environment.
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p. 47).

ELT is considered one of the most influential models for adult learning and is often used in higher education (Kayes, 2005). With Kolb's (1984) ELT in mind, a premarital education

program where the couples were engaged in experiential learning activities could benefit their marriage long term.

Summary

In summary, the review of the literature reveals that marital dynamics continue to change. Even though marriages are uniquely different, attachment science provides an understanding of the marriage's interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics. The literature also reveals that spouses' marital satisfaction is a critical factor for long-term marital stability and quality. Numerous factors can influence marital satisfaction, such as demographics, communication, commitment, mutual reciprocity and responsiveness, sexual satisfaction, stress and emotional regulation, friendship, religion and spirituality, and attachment styles.

It has been established that CRE and premarital education can cause higher levels of marital satisfaction by teaching the couples communication and conflict management. Although research has shown the efficacy of premarital education, the focus of premarital education has been primarily on communication and other behavioral skills. Premarital education has been severely lacking in equipping couples to build a secure attachment to create emotional safety and emotional connection. Until this study, there has not been any research on a premarital workshop that was experiential and focused on attachment building.

This transcendental phenomenological study explored the experiences of couples who attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America through the lens of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. This research study answered the central research question of how couples experienced experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops by asking the following questions: 1) How do participants describe their expectations for the workshop before their experience? 2) In what ways were the participants' expectations met, and

what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the workshop? 3) How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their workshop experience?

Based on this study's results, the stakeholders may adjust and strengthen their experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops to help couples launch their marriages with secure attachment and strong communication skills.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of couples who attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America. The purpose of Chapter Three is to provide a comprehensive explanation of the procedures, research design, and analysis used in my qualitative study. The subsections within Chapter Three will specifically describe the reason for and appropriateness of the transcendental phenomenological research design, the research questions, the setting/site for the research, the participant selection process, my role as the researcher, the data collection and analysis methods used, the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness, and conclude with a discussion of the ethical considerations.

Design

For this qualitative study, the transcendental phenomenological research method was used to describe the experiences of the couples who attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America. Qualitative research is useful when researchers need an in-depth understanding of an issue established by allowing people to talk and share their experiences unencumbered by researchers' expectations or what has been read in the literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since this dissertation sought to listen to premarital couples' stories and experiences, the researcher selected the qualitative research design.

Out of the different types of qualitative research studies, the phenomenological research design was chosen since phenomenological research is appropriate when a researcher is trying to understand and describe individuals' experiences of a shared phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Moustakas (1994), "In accordance with phenomenological principles,

scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge sought is arrived at through descriptions that make possible an understanding of the meanings and essences of experience” (p. 84).

Phenomenology was birthed out of the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl (1931, 1970, 1973) and has been popular in the fields of social and health sciences, nursing and health sciences, and education (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016).

There are various approaches within the phenomenological design; however, researchers have two primary approaches to choose from: hermeneutical and transcendental. The hermeneutical approach to phenomenology, as developed by Heidegger (1962, 1972) and refined by the educator Van Manen (1990, 2014), is distinctively different than the transcendental approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Van Manen (1990, 2014) focused his research on lived experiences and involved an interpretive process where the researcher interprets the meaning of peoples’ lived experiences and stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental approach to phenomenology, built upon Husserl’s (1931, 1970, 1973) model, is more concerned with capturing rich, descriptive data from people’s experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Due to the researcher’s intention to capture descriptive data of couples’ experiences of attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop and not interpreting them, Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental approach was chosen (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). As part of Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental approach, bracketing is a major component that helps prevent bias that would influence the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Questions

For this transcendental phenomenological study, the following questions guided the research:

Central Research Question

How do couples describe their experiences attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop?

Sub question One

How do participants describe their expectations for the workshop prior to their experience?

Sub question Two

In what ways were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the workshop?

Sub question Three

How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their workshop experience?

Setting

This study focused on the lived experiences of premarital couples who attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America. The premarital workshop consisted of a structure of five essential components that build upon each other: attachment, communication, navigating differences, physical intimacy, and goals (Gilmore & Jorgensen, 2019). At the foundation of this program is attachment theory, where couples learn about the nature of love and core concepts of attachment. As the couple progresses through the workshop, attachment principles are integrated into the other sections to strengthen attachment as a crucial factor for marital quality and success. The reinforcement of attachment is accomplished in brief didactic presentations and discussions, exercises that allow the couple to practice and experience the knowledge being taught, and further processing in the large group experience

(Gilmore & Jorgensen, 2019).

This study's interviews took place virtually using Zoom, a telecommunication software. Due to COVID-19 health concerns and the numerous geographical locations, this was the most effective method for interviewing the participants. The participants were in their own personal, comfortable environments, which allowed the participants to express themselves freely.

Participants

Heppner et al. (2016) proposed that in phenomenological research studies that the sampling is criterion-based. Essentially, there are only two requirements for a phenomenological research study, which are 1) the participants have experienced the phenomenon that is being researched, and 2) they can articulate their experiences with that specific phenomenon (Heppner et al., 2016). For this study, the sampling type was a combination of purposeful criterion, purposeful intensity, and maximum variations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016; Patton, 2015). The purposeful criterion included: 1) participants needed to have been a couple at the time of the workshop, 2) their attendance to the workshop has been at least a year since, and 3) the participants would be willing and able to describe the phenomenon.

According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), a guiding principle for qualitative research is for the researcher to sample only to the point of data saturation. Data saturation can be accomplished for phenomenological research studies between 3-10 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). For this study, data saturation was achieved at eight participants.

Maximum variation sampling is essential to qualitative research, for it allows the researcher to get a wide variation of the phenomenon that is being researched (Schwandt, 2015). Maximum variation was accomplished by selecting participant couples who had completed a

voluntary questionnaire (Appendix A). The voluntary questionnaire allowed the researcher to choose participants considering variables such as age, ethnicity, date of a workshop attended, the workshop facilitator, and their belief in their ability to recall and discuss specific emotions, feelings, details, and events associated with their experience regarding their workshop. I collaborated with the founders and administrators of the premarital workshop to reach out to the numerous workshop facilitators by email and in the workshop's trained facilitators private Facebook group to explain the purpose of the study and to enlist their help in reaching out to premarital couples of their facilitated workshops for recruitment of the appropriate participants.

Procedures

Before initiating the study, I submitted my application Institutional Review Board (IRB) application to Liberty University's IRB for approval. Once approval was granted from Liberty University's IRB (Appendix B), I activated the online demographic questionnaire using Google forms. Next, I initiated contact with the workshop facilitators to begin recruiting and selecting appropriate premarital couples to become participants for the study. I emailed or corresponded through the private trained facilitators' Facebook group with the workshop facilitators asking them to identify premarital couples who had attended their workshops (Appendix C). Once the premarital couples were identified, an email was sent to the candidates inviting them to participate and explain the purpose and processes of the research study (Appendix D). The couples who chose to participate completed the online demographic questionnaire that captured demographic information and information about their experience with the workshop. The couples selected to participate were emailed a welcome letter with an informed consent document attached (Appendix E). The informed consent letter included information about the purpose of the study, procedures, and expectations of the participants, the known risks and

expected benefits of the study, an explanation of how confidentiality would be protected, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data was collected by demographic questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and cognitive representations. The interviews and cognitive representations were conducted using Zoom's telecommunication software. All data collection was recorded electronically and stored on two password-protected personal computers. All couples were given pseudonyms in the transcriptions to protect their confidentiality.

The Researcher's Role

In a qualitative research design, the researcher plays a vital role as he is the research instrument (Yin, 2011). The reason the researcher is seen as the instrument in qualitative research is that the "researcher is involved in all stages of the study from defining a concept to design, interview, transcription, analysis, verification and reporting the concepts and themes" (Sanjari et al., 2014, p. 2). Due to the researcher being the primary research instrument, the researcher must be transparent of his roles, experience, assumptions, traits, and interests that might impact the research and the study's outcome (Yin, 2011). As this study is a transcendental phenomenological research design, the transparent method is known as epoche or bracketing (Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Epoche/Bracketing is where the researcher does his best to set aside his roles, experience, assumptions, traits, and interests to understand best the lived experiences of the study's participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

Regarding premarital education and marital relationships, I have invested a lot of time and resources to learn to help other couples. Around the time my wife and I were married, three other couples got married. Those other three marriages would result in divorces over the next

few years. As I witnessed more marriages end, I began to study books on marriages to learn the principles needed to ensure that my marriage would not end the same way. While studying marriages, I developed a passion for helping premarital couples prepare for marriage and helping marriages in distress. I have led marriage and family ministries in the ministry, conducted pastoral premarital counseling and pastoral marriage counseling, taught marital workshops, and preached sermons on marriages.

To become more efficient at helping others, I completed a Master of Arts in Professional Counseling. In 2019, I became a licensed professional counselor (LPC). As an LPC, with continued interest and passion, I became a Prepare-Enrich facilitator, a Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts facilitator, and attended an Emotionally Focused Therapy externship. At the time of this study, I continue to provide premarital counseling and marriage counseling as an LPC. It is important to note that in the summer of 2020, I participated in the Building a Lasting Connection Facilitator Training. From the Building a Lasting Connection workshops conducted by other facilitators, I recruited the participants for this study. In this training, I was taught the foundation of what the workshop was built on, the workshop's content, and how to facilitate the workshop. While I am intimately familiar with the material of this experientially attachment-based workshop, I have not conducted or participated in a workshop. While I have some ideas of the benefits of attending an experientially attachment-based workshop, I am determined to set aside my opinions to focus on the lived experiences of the participants of this study. Before the recruitment of the participants, I had no interaction or relationship with the participants to ensure trustworthiness for this study

Data Collection

For this qualitative study, the transcendental phenomenological research method was used to describe the experiences of the couples who attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America. Data collection for this study began once Liberty University IRB granted approval. Data collection was obtained using four different methods: demographic questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and cognitive representations. By utilizing these various data collection methods, triangulation was accomplished and therefore added trustworthiness to this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Demographic Questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was created to capture demographic information about participants that included their age, ethnicity, length of the current relationship, number of marriages, date of a workshop attended, and their workshop facilitator's name. The questionnaire further explored their belief in their ability to recall and discuss specific emotions, feelings, details, and events associated with their experience attending their workshop. Lastly, the demographic questionnaire asked the premarital couple to reflect on their workshop and share their most memorable, meaningful moments. By considering the answers to the questionnaire, I was able to select premarital couples to be participants. The participants were chosen based on their workshop experience's perceived significance to collect full, richer descriptions of their experience, whether positive or negative.

Interviews

In qualitative research, the research interview is seen as the most important method of collecting data (Qu & Dumay, 2011). In the interview process, the researcher views the participant as the source of answers for factual and experiential questions (Schwandt, 2015). The

researcher's goal with the qualitative research interview is to collect data from the participants to understand the world from the participants' point of view and discover the meaning of the participants' lived experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). With these principles in mind, I used semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions to understand the participants' shared experience of the phenomenon (Appendix G).

Once interview questions were finalized, the semi-structured interviews for data collection began. Before starting each interview with each couple, I reviewed the purpose of the study, procedures of the study, how their confidentiality was protected, their rights to withdraw, and the importance of the participants' being candid and forthright. I also allowed the participants to ask any questions or voice concerns before starting the research interview. Interviews were scheduled for approximately 90 minutes to allow enough time for answers to be fully expressed. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed afterward by a professional transcriptionist. To practice reflexivity, I journaled my thoughts, feelings, and reactions after each interview. The following is the formal list of in-depth questions that were used in the semi-structured interviews:

Opening Questions

1. Please tell me a little about yourself as if we were meeting for the first time?
2. How did you guys meet?
3. What made you decide to become engaged?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your parents or parental figures growing up?
5. How would you describe your parent's marriage while growing up?

Questions Related to the Experience of the Moving In Phase

6. Please describe your experience of learning about the workshop. What were your initial thoughts when you heard about the workshop?
7. Please describe the process you took as a couple to decide to participate in the workshop. What were the circumstances surrounding your decision? What was the appeal of the workshop that helped sway you to say yes?
8. After registering for the workshop, what were your expectations prior to attending the workshop?
9. How would you describe your relationship prior to attending the workshop?

Questions Related to the Experience of the Moving Through Phase.

10. How were your expectations met while attending the workshop?
11. What challenges did you experience while attending the workshop?
12. What were some unexpected experiences you encountered while attending the workshop?
Were they positive? Were they negative?
13. While attending the workshop, how would you describe your experience with the interactive exercises of the workshop?
14. While attending the workshop, what did you experience as you learned the material that was being presented?
15. While attending the workshop, how would you describe your relationship?

Questions Related to the Experience of Moving Out Phase

16. As you look back at your workshop experience, how would you describe your experience with the workshop? Was it an overall positive experience or negative, and why?
17. How do you feel that you, your sweetheart, and your relationship benefitted (or did not

benefit) from you completing the workshop?

18. How would you describe your relationship since attending the workshop?

19. What would you tell other premarital couples that were considering attending the workshop?

20. Is there anything else related to your workshop experience that you would like to add that we have not already discussed?

21. If needed, would it be okay if we did a follow-up or a clarifying interview if needed?

The semi-structured interview questions were developed and divided into four categories.

The first category was opening questions and consisted of questions 1 through 5 and was intended to capture further background information about the participants. Questions 1 through 3 were designed to allow the participants to get comfortable with the interview process by answering factual questions about themselves and their relationship with one another that were easy to answer. Question 4 was designed to capture information that may reveal each of the participants' attachment styles while growing up and the style they might bring into the relationship. Question 5 was designed to get a sense of what type of marital relationship was modeled to the participants as they grew up. An individual's childhood and relationship with one's parents can impact the quality of adult marital relationships (Reczek et al., 2010).

The next three categories align with Schlossberg's transition model's three distinct phases of a transition – *Moving In*, *Moving Through*, and *Moving Out* (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg et al.). Questions 6 through 9 were designed to elicit information about the premarital couple's *Moving In* phase. Specifically, the questions were looking for information about the participants' experiences with becoming familiar with the rules, regulations, norms, and expectations of the workshop. (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Questions 10 through 15 addressed

the participants' experience with Schlossberg's transition theory's (1981) *Moving Through* phase. The researcher was looking for data about how the participants "knew the ropes" and how they faced "issues such as how to balance their activities with other parts of their lives and how to feel supported and challenged during their new journey" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57; Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 16). Questions 16 through 21 referred to the participant's experience of the *Moving Out* phase of attending an experiential, attachment-based workshop. Since the participants' have entered in, went through, and emerged out of a growth process, it is vital to learn the growth process's impact (Anderson et al., 2012). The questions also sought how they integrated lessons learned as they moved forward to the next transition process, including marriage (Anderson et al., 2012).

Cognitive Representations

At the end of each couple's first interview, the couples were asked to gather white paper and colorful drawing instruments of their choice (i.e., crayons, colored pencils, markers, etc.). The researcher then asked the couples to take a few minutes to reflect upon their thoughts and feelings of having gone through the workshop. Once they had reflected, each partner was asked to draw an image, with or without words, that described their thoughts and feelings of having gone through the workshop. Each partner was asked to share their drawing with their spouse and the researcher. This data collection method was designed to capture any cognitive representation that the participants had but could not communicate verbally during the interview (Hubach, 2020; MacKenzie, 2018). The researcher recorded all the participants' comments and interactions with their partners.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process that the researcher engages in to make sense of, interpret, and theorize the data (Schwandt, 2015). From a qualitative research design perspective, this process includes organizing, reducing, and describing the data, drawing conclusions or interpretations of the data, and warranting those interpretations or conclusions (Schwandt, 2015, p. 57). Since this qualitative study used the transcendental phenomenological research method was to describe the experiences of the couples who attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America, Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological methodology for analyzing data was used. Moustakas' (1994) process for data analysis includes 1) epoche, 2) phenomenological reduction, 3) imaginative variation, and 4) synthesis of meanings and essences.

Epoche

The first step of analyzing the data was epoche, also known as bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process is where the researcher attempts to put aside the researcher's preconceived experiences and biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Yüksel and Yıldırım (2015), the researcher begins with writing a complete description of the phenomenon. Then the researcher writes their subjectivity statement before starting the data analysis. This statement also includes a description of their own experience with the phenomena. This process allows the researcher to understand the participants better (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I began the epoche process by describing my roles, experiences, and interests in the *Role of the Researcher* section of this study. To ensure that the epoche/bracketing process continued throughout the dissertation's research phase, I kept an ongoing reflexive journal (Appendix G) that included my thoughts, feelings, and reactions throughout the data collection and analysis

processes. Before each interview, I would intentionally transition my mindset from a therapist mindset to a researcher mindset to observe and report the participants' lived experiences.

Phenomenal Reduction

The phenomenal reduction phase aims to describe the participants' experiences in textual language and has five critical steps (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The first step is horizontalization. Horizontalization is where the researcher lists every significant statement relevant to the topic and assigns its equal value (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The next step is reducing the experiences to the invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). In this step, the researcher clustered the horizons into themes, then split the themes into meaning units where each theme has only one meaning or meaning unit (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The third step is thematic clustering to create core themes. Here, the researcher clustered and thematized the invariant constituents to create the shared phenomenon's core themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The fourth step is the phenomenal reduction phase, in which the researcher compared the core themes across the multiple data sources to confirm the accuracy and clear representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The final step in the phenomenal reduction phase consisted of constructing individual textual descriptions of the participants. In this step, the researcher provided a narrative to explain “what” happened with the participant’s experiences with the phenomenon and included verbatim examples from the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Imaginative Variation

The third phase of Moustakas' (1994) process for data analysis is imaginative variation. The goal of this phase is to "seek meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the

frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 97-98)."

Ultimately, the researcher is trying to figure out the "how" to go with the "what" from the textural descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). To accomplish this goal, the researcher created individual structural descriptions from the participants' textural descriptions. The researcher then developed composite structural descriptions that consisted of an "integration of the individual structural descriptions into a group or universal structural description of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p.181).

Synthesis of Meanings and Essences

The fourth and final phase of Moustakas' (1994) process for data analysis is the synthesis of meanings and essences. The researcher intuitively integrated the fundamental textural and structural descriptions to create a comprehensive statement that captures the essence of experiencing the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) points out that a researcher will never completely capture all the essence of any given phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

Just as quantitative research needs to address internal and external validity, it is equally crucial for qualitative researchers to address their validity. Trustworthiness is defined as the quality of an investigation and its findings that made it noteworthy to audiences (Schwandt, 2015, p. 308). Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed criteria that are more effective in judging qualitative research's trustworthiness than the criteria used in quantitative research. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research is equivalent to internal validity found in quantitative research (Schwandt, 2015). According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), “Credibility establishes whether the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants’ original data and is a correct interpretation of the participants’ original views” (p. 121). To ensure this study's credibility, the researcher engaged in the processes of triangulation, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and member checks (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Triangulation was accomplished when the researcher compared the data collected from multiple sources, including the demographic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and cognitive representations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Prolonged exposure was accomplished by the researcher spending sufficient time to understand how the experiential attachment-based workshop operated and the participants' experiences. To accomplish persistent observation, the researcher identified the most relevant information to the study of the phenomenon and filtered out any misinformation collected in the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Finally, the researcher verified the data interpretation's accuracy by checking with the participants to receive feedback (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability is concerned with consistency which the researcher makes sure that the analysis of the collected data is within the chosen research design and is concerned with consistency (Cope, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Confirmability is concerned with neutrality and the researcher’s ability to demonstrate that the interpretation is derived from the data, not the researcher's biases or viewpoints (Cope, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

The strategy that is used to accomplish dependability and confirmability is the audit trail. To ensure dependability and confirmability, I documented all steps. I followed the logical progression of the transcendental research design method, which includes the purpose of the study, selection of the participants, the setting, the process of data collection, how I conducted the analysis, and strategies to ensure trustworthiness (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). This information remained available for all inquiries and audits to verify the data and methodology that led to the dissertation's completion. I also kept a reflexive journal to notate my thoughts, feelings, and reactions to bracket any biases or presuppositions. While interacting with the participants, I strived to take on the role of a reporter to let the participants speak for themselves and not guide or lead their answers.

Transferability

Transferability is an essential component of the qualitative research design. Lincoln and Guba (1985) lists transferability as one of the four criteria of a research study's trustworthiness. Ideally, the purpose of qualitative research is "is to establish and delineate theories and conceptual structures that can be generalized and applied to other contexts" (Sousa, 2014, p. 217). Sousa (2014) further explains that "the construction of conceptual networks about particular phenomena of human experience, while not universally true, may be useful and important for contexts and populations beyond those upon which the theories were created" (p. 217). For a qualitative research study to be transferable to another context or population, the researcher must provide a thick, rich description and provide sufficient descriptive data of the phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). With this concept in mind, I have strived to make all the research data of the phenomena descriptive as possible for the research study to be beneficial to other contexts and populations.

Ethical Considerations

It is essential in qualitative research that researchers concern themselves with ethical issues during each phase of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research study began with applying for and receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the research to accomplish this goal. Once IRB approval was obtained, participants were selected from demographic questionnaires to achieve variation amongst the research population. The information from each completed questionnaire was kept in a secure location. Once the participants were selected, the participants were advised of the research design, the steps of the research process, and their right to withdraw from the study or discontinue participation at any time. After answering the participants' questions, the participants signed their informed consent forms to consent to participate in the study. Participants' identities were protected by the researcher assigning pseudonyms to the participants' names to ensure confidentiality. All research data collected through this study were stored in a password-protected file on no more than two password-protected computers.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of couples who attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America. This chapter provided a comprehensive explanation of the procedures, research design, and analysis used in my qualitative study. I also specifically described the reason for and appropriateness of the transcendental phenomenological research design, the research questions, the setting/site for the research, the participant selection process, my role as the researcher, the data collection and analysis methods used, the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness, and concluded with a discussion of the ethical considerations.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of couples who attended an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop. The research questions that directed the data analysis process include: How do couples describe their experiences attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop? How do participants describe their expectations for the workshop prior to their experience? In what ways were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the workshop? How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their workshop experience?

In this chapter, the couples who agreed to participate are introduced. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the couples as well as to reflect their culture. Following the participants' introductions, the results from the data collected from the demographic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and cognitive representations will be presented. The themes were created by coding and clustering following Moustakas' (1994) method of phenomenological reduction. Chapter Four will conclude with a summary of the findings from the data collection.

Participants

This study was conducted with the assistance of couples describing their experience of attending an experiential, attachment-based workshop by sharing their narratives and drawings of their experience. I emailed the founders and administrators of the premarital workshop and received a trained workshop facilitators list. This allowed me to reach out to the numerous workshop facilitators by email and enlisted their help in reaching out to couples of their

facilitated workshops to recruit the appropriate participants. The workshop facilitators were able to secure the interest of nine individuals/couples. One of the interested couples was excluded from participating in the study for not meeting the criteria of no longer being in the committed relationship. Eight couples filled out the demographic questionnaire and met the criterion to participate in the research study. Out of the eight couples, three were considered premarital at the time of their workshop, whereas the other five were married. Since their workshops, two couples have married, and the remaining couple is planning to get married. Although there were five married couples at the time of the premarital workshop, these five couples provided rich data to the study that would have otherwise been omitted if the study only consisted of premarital couples. Their valuable input is described further in the subtheme of Unanimous Consensus. The eight couples recruited were given the pseudonyms of Alison and Aaron (Couple A), Breanna and Brian (Couple B), Claire and Connor (Couple C), Danielle and Daman (Couple D), Emily and Ethan (Couple E), Faith and Flynn (Couple F), Grace and Gavin (Couple G), and Heidi and Henry (Couple H). Pseudonyms were assigned by order of their interviews conducted and their correlating letter in the alphabet. The following table provides an overview of the common and individualistic characteristics of the group.

Table 1.*Characteristics of Couples*

Couple's Pseudonym	Ages	Genders	Ethnicity	Relationship Status at time of the workshop	Current Relationship Status	Length of Relationship	Workshop Date	Workshop Format
Allison & Aaron	22/25	F/M	Caucasian & Caucasian	Premarital	Married	4 Years	May 2019	In-Person/2 Day
Breanna & Brian	35/35	F/M	Caucasian & Caucasian	Premarital	Married	2.5 Years	May 2020	Hybrid (Online & In-Person)
Claire & Connor	30/32	F/M	Caucasian & Caucasian	Married	Married	14 Years	February 2020	In-Person/2 Day
Danielle & Daman	35/36	F/M	Ashkenazi Jewish & South Asian	Premarital	Premarital	2 Years	May 2020	Online
Emily & Ethan	50/52	F/M	Caucasian & Caucasian	Married	Married	30 Years	February 2020	In-Person/2 Day
Faith & Flynn	41/44	F/M	Caucasian & Caucasian	Married	Married	21 Years	May 2020	Hybrid (Online & In-Person)
Grace & Gavin	57/60	F/M	Caucasian & Caucasian	Married	Married	35.5 Years	Fall 2019	In-Person/2 Day
Heidi & Henry	44/48	F/M	Caucasian & Caucasian	Married	Married	16 Years	Fall 2019	In-Person/2 Day

Note. Characteristics of Sample Participants.

Alison & Aaron

Alison, who was born in Arizona, was the oldest daughter in her family that includes three identical sisters who are two years younger than her. Alison was a competitive diver from childhood through her senior year of college and recently graduated with a degree in exercise science and is currently pursuing further education to become a pediatric physician assistant. Aaron was born in Utah, ran track and field throughout high school and into college before injuries impacted him from being a collegiate athlete. Aaron recently graduated with a degree in engineering education, enjoys teaching and running. Alison and Aaron met each other while attending Birmingham Young University (BYU). One of the things that they bonded over was what they didn't like. Aaron shared what they didn't like and how it was favorable to their relationship:

We said we hated sushi. Then she was like, do you like scary movies? I hate scary movies. I do not. I do not see the point of paying to be scared. She was like, no. She hated them too. We were like perfect. We both hate sushi. We both hate scary movies. When the rest of our friends want to go do those things, we felt like we could go do something together.

At the time of the interview, they were a few days away from celebrating their second wedding anniversary.

Breanna & Brian

Breanna grew up on a farm in Idaho and was one of four daughters, two of whom were adopted. Breanna has work experience as a cosmetologist, receptionist, office manager and is currently working as an administrative assistant. Brian was born in Utah and was the youngest of four children. Brian initially pursued an education in marriage and family therapy but switched

to finance because he could impact marriages and families more by helping them with their finances. Brian is currently in banking in pursuit of furthering his career in finance. Breanna and Brian met each other at a church activity that he was leading that Breanna coincidentally led the year before. Brian, when discussing what attracted him to Breanna, stated:

And so, I knew exactly what I was looking for. I think time and trial and error; you find all of a sudden, your focus just gets to, you know what you want. And it was pretty simple to see like she's full of energy, she's happy, she's...you know, we're at this religious event. That's always awesome too. We have random connections with La Croix and how much we hate that, and I don't know, things just...that was kind of...and it just kind of got better, and it just got comfortable, and things were just pretty easy, and it was just easy to get along with her.

Breanna described a similar sentiment, "Just the fact that it was really easy to talk to him, and then the more I got to know him, he actually helped me open up a lot, and it was really hard for me to do that before." Breanna and Brian have been married little less than two years.

Claire & Connor

Claire and Connor have been married for 10 years and have two children. Claire currently is a stay-at-home mother; however, she does a lot of policy advocacy work for maternal mental health and mental health. She recently started graduate school to become a marriage and family therapist. Claire also works part-time as an administrative assistant for her mother, the co-founder of the attachment-based, experiential workshops studied. Connor is currently in middle management and serves as a night floor manager for his company. Claire & Connor met while in high school and were friends and began dating in college. Claire credits their friendship as

having a "stronger foundation" to what drew them together. Connor summed it up when he mentioned:

But I think largely for us -- like she said, for me, it's because we had a really solid foundation of friendship that lasted through our other dating relationships. We stayed really strong friends through. And that kind of carried us to realize that that was what we were looking for in a marriage more than what we were looking for when we were dating.

Danielle & Daman

Being of the Ashkenazi Jewish culture, Danielle is from Toronto, where her family has been for three generations. She currently works for a Jewish center in Toronto; however, she recently got her license to be a registered massage therapist. Daman is from Toronto, but his parents were born in Tanzania, moved to East Africa in the 1920s, and settled in Toronto in the 1970s. Daman states that his religious background is "mildly Muslim" but is "not truly practicing." Daman is currently finishing his psychiatry residency in his pursuit of becoming a psychiatrist. Danielle and Daman met through the dating app Bumble. When asked about what drew them to each other, Danielle described her feeling of calmness when she is with him and being comfortable with him. Daman expressed how thoughtful she was and that she "generally understood" him, which has been a struggle with other people. Danielle commented after Daman: "There's something I forgot to say. Because I take it for granted now, but feeling an intellectual match was a really big part of that for me."

Emily & Ethan

Emily grew up in Alaska and lived "everywhere from Ketchikan to Point Barrow." Ethan grew up in the Vancouver/Portland area. Emily and Ethan met while recruiting for a tiny

Christian College, Columbia Christian College. Emily and Ethan got married shortly after her graduation and lived in Los Angeles, and they have lived in the same house in the Phoenix area for the past 25 years. They have been married for 30 years and have three children. Emily is a stay-at-home mother while Ethan does computer report writing and consulting for his company. When asked what attracted her to Ethan, Emily stated: "I just remember really liking him. We were very, very good friends. We had a lot of fun together. And we worked really well together that summer when we worked recruiting. We were a really good team."

Faith & Flynn

Faith, the oldest of three children, was born in Arizona but considers herself from Washington state. Faith graduated from BYU with a degree in nursing. Faith has enjoyed working on and off as a nurse and has enjoyed the past four and a half years staying at home taking care of her family. Flynn grew up in Utah. He went to Weber State for a year before serving a two-year mission in Fresno, California. After serving his mission, Flynn attended BYU and graduated with a degree in business management with a marketing emphasis. Flynn has worked in life insurance and investments, market research, product development, computers and is currently running a business with his brother, which they formed together in 2014. Faith and Flynn met while attending BYU. One of the many qualities that attracted Flynn to Faith was that "she was an active and faithful member of our church--and that was important to me, and I could tell that that was very important to her." Faith echoed the same sentiment:

The more I got to know him, we seemed to have a lot of the same goals for our life, and the same things were important for him were for me. And so, that was really appealing to me to find someone who just shared my same goals and desires for the future."

Faith and Flynn currently live in Utah with their family and have been married for 21

years.

Grace & Gavin

Grace grew up in a "pretty tight family" in Utah, where her extended family gets together often. Throughout the years, Grace has been a stay-at-home mother but did a lot of volunteering with her children's school and the church she and her family attended. For the past ten years, Grace has been working part-time for her State Legislature. Gavin is originally from Wyoming. He came to Utah to attend the University of Utah and became an engineer. Gavin has only worked for three to four companies in his career and is currently working program and financial management for an engineering insurance company. Grace and Gavin met at a college dance that different colleges attended during the summer. After seeing Grace not hand out her phone number to his friend, Gavin "didn't dare ask," instead, he simply asked where she worked. It soon became costly for Gavin. Gavin would go to the men's department and buy clothes from her to get to know her and have conversations with Grace. Grace's thoughts on what led to a deeper relationship were, "I think we just had so much fun. I think from the very beginning; we were really, really good friends." After hearing Grace's response, Gavin replied, "I didn't realize you felt that way about us being friends, but that's what I was going to say, too, is we always just felt like we were friends." Grace and Gavin have been married for 33 years and recently have become empty nesters.

Heidi & Henry

The oldest of four children, Heidi, was born in Salt Lake City and graduated from BYU with a degree in music, dance, and theater. She also served on a mission for her church in Hong Kong. She is an aesthetician and a wellness representative for doTERRA. Henry, the second of six children, was raised in Blackfoot, Idaho. After serving a mission in Nashville, Tennessee,

Henry moved to Salt Lake City. Henry served a vice president of sales for many years before and now does social media production that curates the history of the Rock music era. Both Heidi and Henry were previously married before meeting each other. Heidi was married and had two children from her previous marriage, and Henry was married for seven years with no children. Heidi and Henry met through a dating website that focuses on the single population of their church denomination. While there were many mutual interests, such as old movies, movie scriptwriting, and the arts, their mutual faith played a significant role in their attraction to each other. Heidi said,

But what really did it for me was after the date, and when and he dropped me off at home, we started talking about our missions. And we really connected spiritually, which for me was the gold star right there. And then after that, I knew that, not only so, people can be religious, but for us, we're religious in the same way. We looked at it the same way.

For Henry, spirituality was vital because he got out of a marriage where spirituality was lacking. Heidi and Henry have been married for almost 16 years and also have two children together.

Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of couples who attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America. The results were collected from the eight couple's responses to the demographic questionnaires, the semi-structured interviews, and the cognitive representations.

Theme Development

As outlined in chapters three and four, participants were recruited with the help of founders, administrators, and workshop facilitators of the experiential, attachment-based workshop. The workshop facilitators emailed their attendees on my behalf to inform them of the research study and invited them to participate. When a couple responded to the facilitators that they were interested, the facilitators forwarded me the participants' contact information. I emailed the participants the invitation letter that explained the purpose of the research study, the processes of the research study, and the google forms link for them to complete the demographic questionnaire. Once I received notice that the demographic questionnaire was finished, I reviewed it to see if they were viable candidates to participate in the research study. When a candidate met the criteria, they were sent two more emails: 1) the first thanking them for their interest, letting them know that they were selected to participate, as well as beginning correspondence to schedule the semi-structured interview, and 2) an email from DocuSign that provided a link for them to fill out the informed consent document electronically.

The semi-structured interviews and cognitive representations were conducted using the teleconferencing platform, Zoom. After the interviews, those who participated in the cognitive representation exercise were asked to take pictures of their drawings and email them to me. I paid attention to my thoughts and feelings throughout the data collection and analysis and then wrote brief notes in a journal (Appendix G). This was done to help prevent my personal bias from entering the study. After each interview was conducted, I submitted the audio file within 48 hours to a professional transcription service. Upon receiving the transcription, I verified the accuracy of the transcription by listening to the audio file and comparing what was written. Only a few minor corrections were needed. Once I confirmed the transcription, I made a second copy

replacing the real names with the designated pseudonyms. I then imported the pseudonym transcripts and the cognitive representations into the data analysis software NVivo. I also sent the transcripts to each couple, asking them to read their answers and see if they felt their answers captured their intent or felt they needed to clarify any information or change their response.

Upon entering the collected data in NVivo, I continued to relisten to the audio recordings, reread the transcripts, and began to code. During the data analysis, I became bogged down in the data, where I recognized numerous subthemes but struggled with putting them into primary themes. To help regain perspective and receive guidance, I consulted with my Chair. My Chair asked pointed questions to help pull the information out of my head which assisted me in regaining perspective and seeing the data in a more precise way. Through the discussion, we realized that Schlossberg's (1981) *Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out* phases created the three primary themes. After the conversation with the Chair, I began to code again, using the primary themes to reorganize the data, which resulted in clarification of subthemes. I then organized the themes and subthemes in outline form for visual organization. Due to the recoding process, there were multiple versions of the codes as themes and subthemes were organized.

Themes

Just as the purpose statement and theoretical framework guided this research study, data analysis was driven by the research questions and the theoretical framework. Data analysis revealed three primary themes *Before the Workshop, During the Workshop, After the Workshop*, each having three subthemes. The first theme of Before the Workshop contains the subthemes of Discovery, Motivation, and Expectations. During the Workshop, the second theme includes What they Learned, How they Learned, and Emotional Experience. The subthemes of Recall, Impact on Relationship, and Perceived Strengths and Weakness are included in the third theme,

After the Workshop. The list of themes, subthemes, and the number of open-code enumerations in subthemes are listed in Table 2.

Table 2.

Organization of Themes, Subthemes, and Enumerations

Primary Themes	Number of Open-Code Enumerations in Subthemes	Subthemes
Before the Workshop	14	Discovery
	24	Motivation
	31	Expectations
During the Workshop	130	What Couples Learned
	126	How Couples Learned
	53	Emotional Experiences
	66	Recall
After the Workshop	59	Impact on Relationship
	40	Perceived Strengths and Weakness
	24	Unanimous Consensus

Note. Researcher's organization of themes, subthemes, and enumerations.

Before the Workshop. Before the Workshop theme aligns itself with Schlossberg's (1981) *Moving In* phase. In this theme, three subthemes emerged from the research questions as participants answered the interview questions.

Discovery. This subtheme is reflective of how the couples became aware of an attachment-based, experiential premarital workshop. Within this subtheme, there are two categories that the couples fell into one or the other, Receivers and Seekers.

Receivers. The receivers category represents couples that did not intentionally seek out information about an attachment-based, experiential workshop; instead, they were presented with the information. Six of the couples fell within this category. All the receivers had a pre-existing relationship with the sharer, whether familial or professional. The familial relationships included the couples: Aaron and Alison, Claire and Connor, Faith and Flynn, and Grace and Gavin. Alison and Aaron were about to get married when Aaron's brother and sister-in-law gifted them the premarital workshop as a wedding gift. Claire and Connor already were aware of the workshop due to their relationship with the creators:

We kind of had an insider track on the workshop being developed and watching it go up from the ground up. So, we kind of -- I think our thoughts were formed for us because the creators were telling us about it while it was in development.

Faith and Flynn found out about the workshop from Flynn's sister, who was becoming a facilitator:

So, she told us about it, and she said that she and her husband had taken this workshop; and even though they had a strong relationship, she felt like it really helped their marriage. And then now, she was going to teach it, and she really wanted us to be part of the workshop; because I think she it was her first-time teaching, so I think she wanted to know there were some friendly faces there, but also, she thought that it could be helpful for us.

Grace and Gavin found out about the workshop from their son. Their son and fiancé had just attended a workshop and had a positive experience. Due to the positive experience, the son encouraged Grace and Gavin to participate because he felt it would benefit them.

The couples that found out through an established professional relationship included Breanna and Brian and Heidi and Henry. Breanna and Brian learned about it when Breanna's dating coach found out they were dating and invited them to the first workshop she facilitated. Heidi and Henry were encouraged to attend by their therapist, with whom they had established a supportive, trustworthy relationship.

Seekers. The term "seekers" represents those couples who intentionally went looking for relational help. In this group, two couples fell within this category, Danielle and Daman, and Emily and Ethan. Danielle described her discovery of the workshop when searching out a couples therapist:

So, we learned about it from our therapist, Irene, when I reached out to inquire about just general couple's therapy. She was doing it as an experiment to try virtual zoom groups.

Initial thoughts were, yeah, that sounds like we knew we were interested in EFT, and I wanted to do premarital counseling at some point. So, it worked out well.

Emily and Ethan had previously gone through a Hold Me Tight workshop and were impressed by EFT. Ethan's desire to know more about EFT and other available workshops led him to search Facebook for people who did EFT. It was through these online connections that Ethan learned about the workshop.

Motivation. After learning and hearing about the workshop, each couple had to decide whether to attend or not. This subtheme describes the motivation that led the couples to say "yes" and attend. Each couple had their motivation for attending but fell within three categories of motivation: intrinsic, extrinsic, and a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic. For the purpose of the study, the following definitions were used for intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation was where the primary motivation was driven by the desire to improve their

relationship. Extrinsic motivation is when the primary motivation is externally based, such as fulfilling obligations, doing a favor, or for a chance to "getaway."

Intrinsic Motivation. Alison and Aaron were both excited when Aaron's brother and sister-in-law gifted them the workshop. Up to this point, both Alison and Aaron had spent time in individual therapy. During their engagement and as they spent time in their counseling, Alison and Aaron had talked about the desire to be in therapy together and how they should try to do something every year that they are married to improve their relationship. So, when presented with this wedding gift, they saw it as an opportunity to fulfill their desire. Aaron reported, "That is when we became really excited about it. We both thought, oh, we want to be in therapy together. This is probably a great place to start before we got married." Alison affirmed Aaron's sentiment, "I do not know that I would have ever thought of gifting someone that, but I am so glad they did. It was one of the best. It was probably the best gift we got, honestly."

Breanna was interested in doing the workshop when she learned about it because, as Breanna stated I've gone to a lot of personal development workshops, and I've loved them." While she was excited about going, she felt 'really scared' to tell Brian because she was not sure if he would be interested in going to the workshop. Brian, however, was very interested in going. He expressed, "I would love to participate in something I've already studied and have a passion for, so I'm going to be able to contribute a ton to it because I already have a desire to do this." Brian further explained his motivations when he expressed:

I was like, yeah, absolutely, let's do it, this is a great opportunity to kind of, one, learn about each other, two, that I get to really participate a ton in it because I feel like a lot of guys don't pursue...like, I should take a marriage and family class in college. They don't think that. But it's like, if you want to get married at all in life, you should probably take

that, because, in the end, you find out, okay, I'm ready, or I'm not ready. And then it's like, okay, I have things I need to work on too, to like, what's a successful marriage?

For Danielle and Daman, Danielle sought out general couple's counseling because she was struggling with her mental health in a way that was impacting her relationship with Daman. Danielle also knew she wanted to do premarital counseling, so she saw the workshop as a similar experience that would fulfill the goal. For Daman, he really did not have strong opinions but was "just kind of happy to go along."

Extrinsic Motivation. Faith and Flynn's motivation was that they saw attending the workshop to support Flynn's sister as she facilitated her first workshop. Flynn reported:

I think we probably kind of shrugged our shoulders and said, "We're good; we probably... like we communicate well, and I don't know if we'll get a lot out of this, but if it'll be helpful for you, we will participate.

For Emily and Ethan, Ethan was more motivated than Emily. Emily reported, "You know when you say that one partner is more interested in it, it was definitely him." However, Emily also stated that she usually will "say yes to anything Ethan wants to do eventually." Emily and Ethan viewed it as a weekend getaway.

Both Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation. Grace and Gavin also saw it as a chance to get out of the house and away for a few days. However, they also saw it to help them with their new life transition. After hearing about their son's and future daughter-in-law's experience, Grace expressed, "the whole idea sounded kind of cool and I think as we were new to being empty-nesters, it just sounded kind of fun to have something new and exciting and different that would help us down this new road." Gavin agreed with his wife and expressed, referring to his son:

He talked about the mat and how it walks you through these stages of emotional feeling.

And I thought, “Well, that sounds interesting. That’s something new that we haven’t really experienced before. It’d be worth a try. I mean, it’d be worth exploring.

Heidi was excited about learning the workshop, especially since she considers herself a “very emotionally based person, very much an emotionally based person.” She enjoys learning in an environment that is small because it allows her to be focused and engaged. However, initially, Henry was not as excited as Heidi and did not even want to go at all due to not liking sitting in a class learning. Heidi and Henry had attended two marriage conferences before attending this one. In both marriage conferences, Henry had walked out after the first session. Henry felt that the presenters were “little cheesy” and that the people “weren’t very real, they were, kind of, like caricatures of people.” He also felt that the environment was “more like entertainment than I felt like that they were trying to help you to connect.” However, what led Henry to attend was the relationship with their therapist:

I think the experience of having spent time with our therapist, and knowing that she helped us through things emotionally, so especially me, and some of the things I was facing. That I really, really enjoyed, I thought that, yeah, I like how her mind works, and how she, how she, she, and again, I just, I trusted her because I had worked with her for so long. And I think she captured my imagination with the way that it would help with so many other couples and some of the things that we were going to do.

Claire and Connor started with extrinsic motivation. Connor explained their original rationale, “The process we took to decide to participate was pretty easy because we were invited to go learn it during the facilitator training, and that was the initial reason for us to start.” However, Claire and Connor quickly moved into having intrinsic motivation. Connor shared that

during their marriage, they would fluctuate with their ability to communicate needs and that he “was grasping to try and find something that would help us out of what we felt were in a rut.”

Claire confirmed the shift from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation:

I needed to go to the facilitator training in-person to help with little executive stuff, but it was an opportunity for us to take a little get away from home and away from the kids to kind of just work on the marriage. Connor didn’t have to go, but my mom thought it would be fun to have us both train as facilitators and lead workshops together as a couple, and I really just liked the idea of Connor having this knowledge as well. Like we recognized that this knowledge would be valuable for both of us to improve our marriage because we have this shared agreement that our marriage is something that we need to maintain long term and that we want to work on it, and we want to do everything we can to make sure that our relationship stays strong, and we can resolve conflict in a healthy and productive way.

Expectations. The final subtheme that appeared Before the Workshop's primary theme focused on participants' expectations. There were a couple of expectations that were common amongst the couples including communication, and emotional connection.

Communication. Six of the eight couples verbalized the topic of communication when they were asked about their expectations. Grace and Gavin’s back and forth banter illustrated their expectation of learning “good communication skills.”:

Grace: “I was hoping that there would be easy fixes. I was hoping that you'd tell us exactly how to word things, or I don't know; somehow, I just thought, ‘Oh, this will be great. We won't ever have any problems after this, or we'll communicate great.’ Yeah, what were you hoping?”

Gavin: “You know, I don’t know that I had any particular expectations. I guess I was hoping that we wouldn’t say something that would make each other mad at each other forever. [Laughter] Communication. We have different ways of making our points. We do math differently.”

Grace: “We have different ways of seeing things.”

Gavin: “Different ways of seeing, yeah.”

Grace: “And that was one thing - and maybe this is part of the during the workshop thing. But at the very beginning, they asked us, you know, “What are you hoping to get out of this?” And I remember writing down that I wanted to be able to communicate better and, you know, communicate in loving, caring ways that were not hurtful to each other. Which normally, we’re pretty good at except for those ten years there. But we’re pretty good at that. But I thought I wanted to improve that because I knew that there were - you know, we can always get better.”

While expecting to learn how to learn the material and become workshop facilitators, Claire and Connor were also expecting to improve their communication skills. For Connor, learning the new skills would strengthen his marriage with Claire:

I think the closer we got to it, the more excited I was about finding the magic fix to learning how to communicate, and I thought all of our marriage problems would be able to be handled like magic from now on once we have this magic skill. And I didn't truly think it was going to be like that, but I think there was a small part of me that was like, sweet, let's go learn this, let's get it figured out, then let's get our marriage figured out and go back to being perfect.

After hearing about the workshop, Danielle and Daman expected that there would be a "more intense" weekend that would involve a lot of self-disclosure to each other. When hearing about the experiential piece of the workshop, Daman also expected to learn how to "communicate vulnerably" while being "in front of other couples." While Faith and Flynn's motivation was to provide support for Flynn's sister, and they felt they had good communication skills, they both expected to learn new communication methods. Faith, echoing her husband's expectations, stated, "I think I was mostly hoping to gain just some--maybe, like Flynn said, just a higher level of communication skills."

Emotional Connection. Emotional Connection was another expectation that was specifically expressed or alluded to by couples when interviewed. Couples were attending with the hope of strengthening their relationship. Two couples, Alison and Aaron and Heidi and Henry explicitly mentioned emotional connections while several others alluded to it. While Alison expected to have in-depth conversations, she went into the workshop with the mindset this was more for Aaron than herself:

I had the expectation that it was going to be just for Aaron. I think back then, that was just my thought. Okay, we are going to go, and they are going to teach Aaron how to have a good marriage.

Meanwhile, Aaron recognized that he "lacked the tools to emotionally connect with others in a healthy way," so he headed into the workshop intending to learn those tools for himself and his relationship with Alison. Heidi and Henry also gave voice to wanting to learn more about how to connect emotionally. Heidi and Henry wanted to know "ways to connect as a couple, ways to solve problems together, ways to communicate with one another, just ways to really, overall improve our, our marriage and our relationship."

General Expectations. Two of the eight couples didn't verbalize specific expectations. Emily and Ethan did not have expectations going into the workshop but simply wanted to experience another workshop that involved the concepts of EFT like Hold Me Tight. Brian and Breanna were another couple that did not have specific expectations heading into the workshop. For Brian, he was expecting to "just learn, and learn and participate and share my knowledge, and hopefully, I learn something as well." However, Breanna was heading into the workshop with some anxiety. She knew that Brian was involved and wanted to participate due to his past interest in being a marriage therapist. However, she was unsure where their relationship stood:

So, we still hadn't...we had talked about marriage, but I didn't know if we were going to end up that way. So, for me, I was like, what if I take him to this workshop, and then we break up. We're both going to learn, but then it's going to be like, maybe, later on, I'll be talking about this with my Brian, and it'll be different because he wasn't there, you know. So, then it's like...I don't know...

While excited about going to the workshop, Breanna focused on these thoughts of uncertainty and anxious feelings rather than any specific expectations.

In summary, the first primary theme was *Before the Workshop*. Within the *Before the Workshop* primary theme, three subthemes emerged. The first subtheme, Discovery, explained how the couples found out about the workshop. Motivation, the second subtheme, gave light to why the couples decided to sign up for the workshop. Lastly, the subtheme of expectations explored what the couples were hoping to get out of attending the workshop.

During the Workshop. The second primary theme is *During the Workshop*, which correlated with Schlossberg's (1981) *Moving Through* phase. In this primary theme, there were three subthemes of What the Couples Learned, How the Couples Learned, and Emotional

Experiences. These subthemes come from the data collected from the participants' interviews, demographic questionnaires, and cognitive representations

What Couples Learned. When couples were responding to questions about their learning experience, the couples described learning a new way to communicate, learning about each other, and emotional coregulation. Emotional co-regulation will be further discussed *During the Workshop's* third main theme of Emotional Connection.

A New Way to Communicate. When answering questions about what they experienced in the workshop, each couple reported or alluded to learning a new way to communicate with each other. Faith and Flynn thought they communicated well before the workshop. The couple felt that they gained a new outlook and communication skills that enhanced their relationship by attending the workshop. Before the workshop, Faith and Flynn did not discuss minor things that bothered them. Faith learned that it was okay to share how she was feeling about minor things, which resulted in her being a little more open with Flynn. Flynn realized that by talking through the "small things" safely, their marital relationship became better. Flynn also described learning the new communication skills like advancing to a higher-level class:

I think, again, we have good communication skills; that's something that we have learned as a couple to do. But this was like a higher level; this is like from algebra to calculus as far as communication goes, it really was. There were things that we would never have done without course and without the skills and the techniques that they showed us.

Brian also compared learning the new communications skills and applying them as an advanced course in communication:

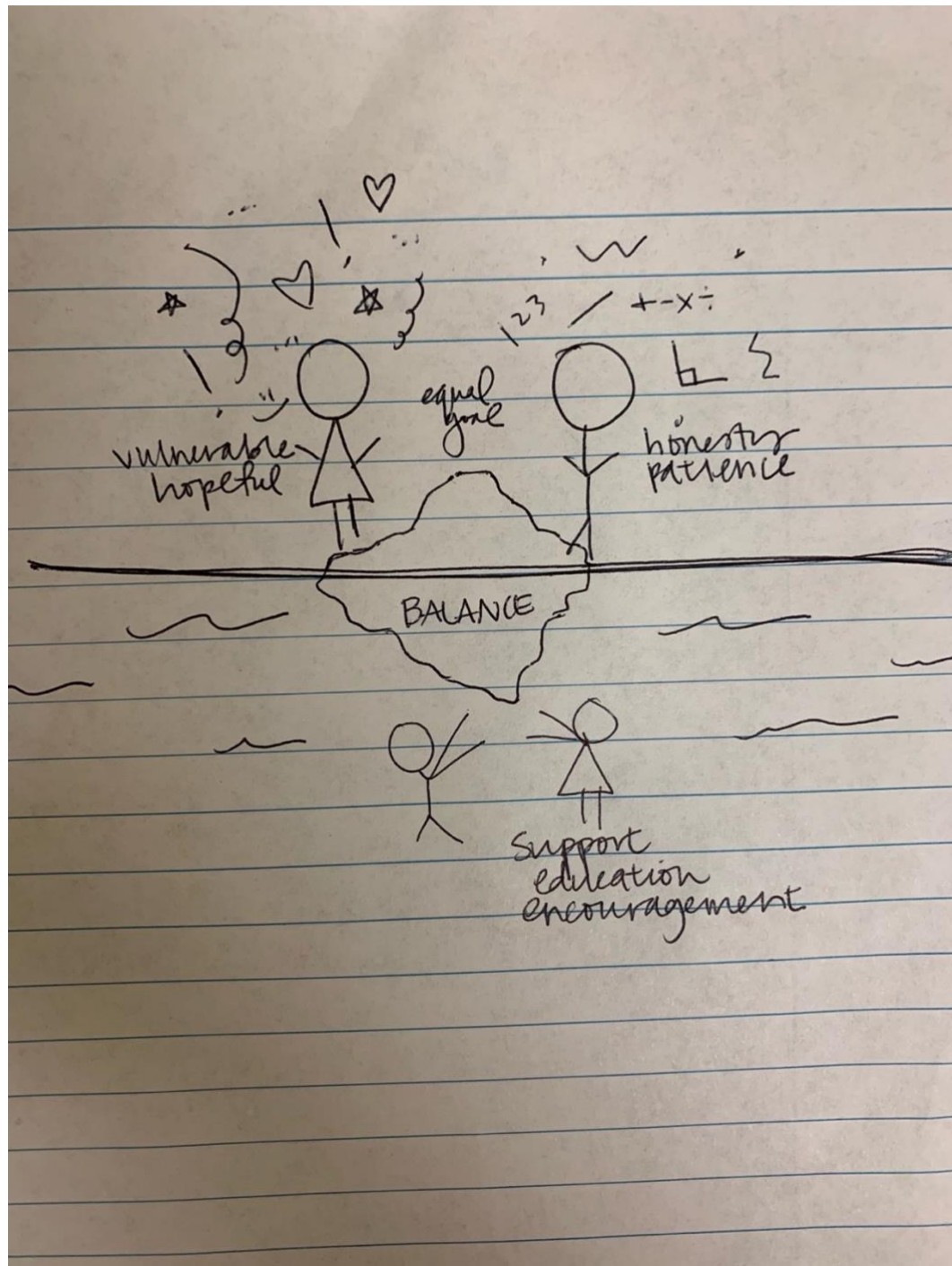
So, this is the advanced course, where it's like, okay, you might have studied, but now let's go into it with your partner and let's do an interactive scenario so you guys can learn how to communicate, or whatever it needs to be.

For Danielle and Daman, as they learned the new communication skills, it also created a self-awareness that the way they had been communicating up to this point was “maybe not the most effective or at least not getting to the heart of the issue a lot of the time.”

Learning About Each Other. Another common subtheme was that the couples reported that they learned more about each other as they began to identify their attachment styles and coping strategies when they felt disconnected. Alison expresses this when describing her cognitive representation, "I just kind of drew the first thing on my mind that we have very different minds. Learning to understand each other and how we are wired – very obviously here we are different.”

Figure 1.

Alison's Cognitive Representation



Note. Alison's drawing of what came to her mind when she thought of her workshop experience.

Breanna felt learning about attachment styles was impactful:

And for me, like, that was a deeper level, like understanding what kind of attachment style you have. I've never really dived into that before. And so, for me to understand that part of it was pretty powerful because then I understood how that correlated with him and I.

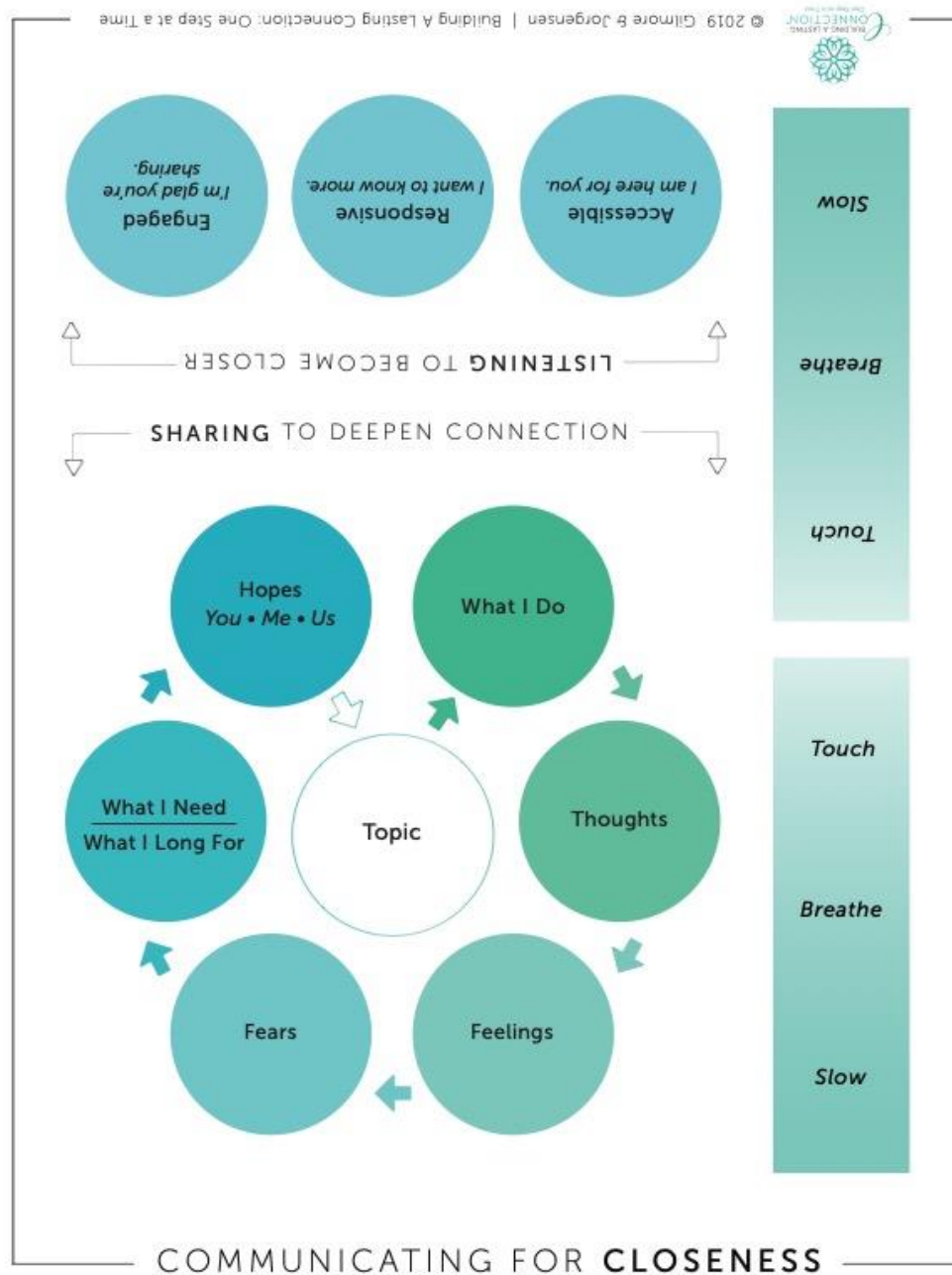
Danielle and Daman found that viewing their communication through an “attachment insecurity lens” created self-awareness of each other’s behaviors and needs when they struggled to communicate. Connor and Claire expressed how knowing the attachment styles benefitted them individually as well as relationally. Connor said:

I feel like I benefited from understanding more about our relationship dynamic and from learning more about why Claire tends to respond the way she does. I feel like she benefited from learning the same things about me. Understanding why I react the way I do in certain situations. And the relationship itself, I think, has benefited a lot from that knowledge.

How the Couples Learned. In this subtheme, there were three categories of how the participants learned while attending the workshop. This included experiential learning, group learning, and guided support.

Experiential Learning. The experiential exercises and the group discussion were the most discussed topic in all the interviews. Experiential learning activities included filling out worksheets, interactive exercises, group discussion, and processing after the interactive exercises. Each couple mentioned experiential activities and the group discussion numerous times.

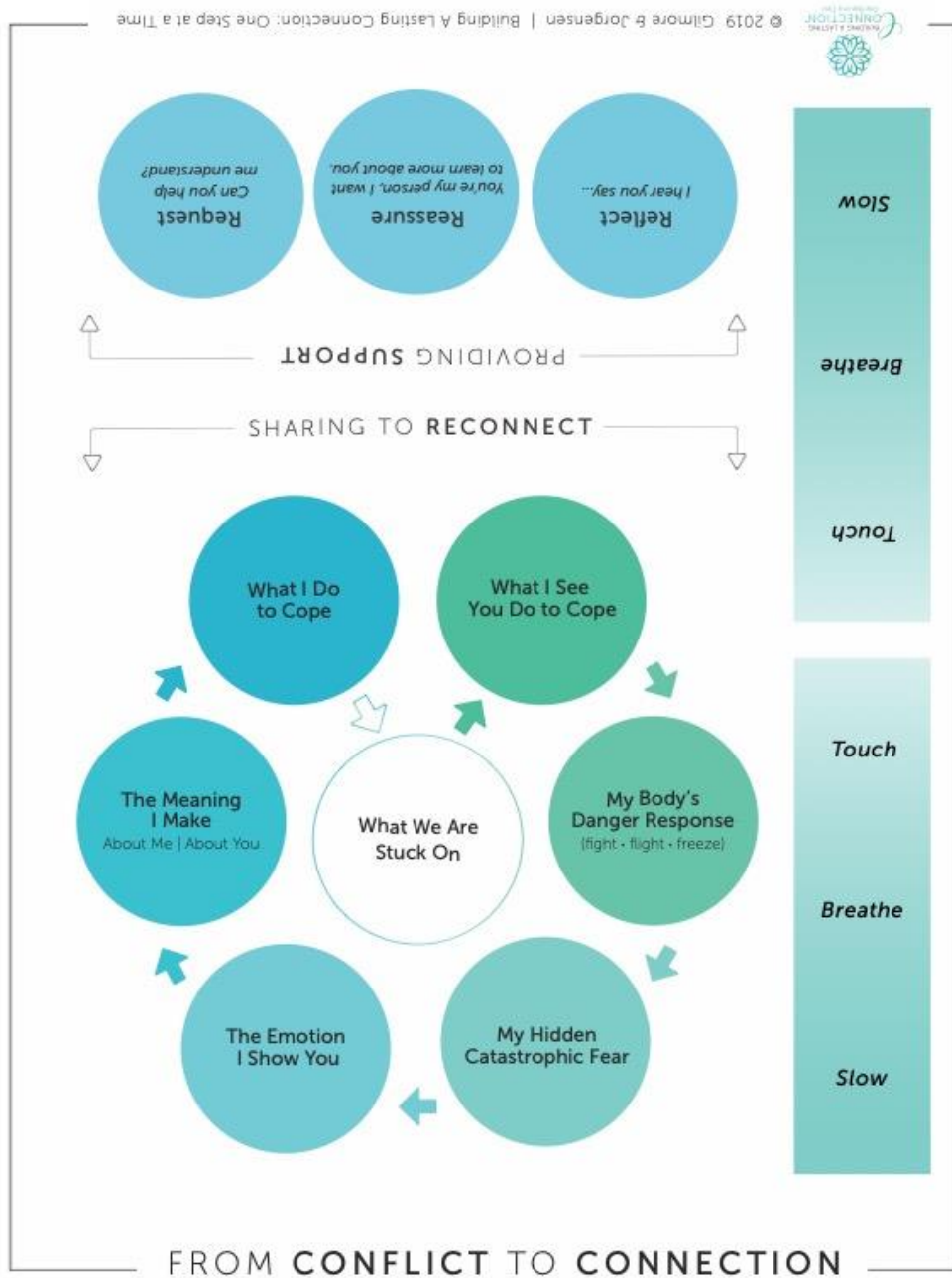
One of the interactive exercises that were consistently mentioned was the “mat.” The mat exercise was a communication tool for couples to experience attachment-building conversations that comes from the Lasting Connection System. It is a physical mat where the participants stand and move around based upon where their conversation is. It consists of three sections, the pause box, the speaker’s circles, and the listener circles. The mat is reversible; one side is for lighter conversations entitled Communicating for Closeness (see figure 2). The second side is for difficult conversations that carry emotional pain, which is called From Conflict to Connection (see figure 3). The process is similar on both sides but has different content. The couple first goes through the pause box, which includes slowing one’s inner world down, deep breathing, and some form of touch. The couple then decides who will be the speaker and who will be the listener. Each speaker’s circle corresponds to what the speaker must share while standing within the circle. The Listener cannot interrupt the speaker and can only respond to one of the listener’s three circles. Once the speaker has moved through all the circles, the couple goes through the pause box. After completing the pause box for a second time, the couple switches listening and speaker sides roles and work through the process again. Finally, after each partner has been a speaker and listener, they conclude finishing by going through the pause box for a final time. The pause box is also used at any time when a partner is feeling emotional dysregulation.

Figure 2.*Communicating for Closeness Mat Experiential Exercise*

Note. Side one of the communication mat for couples to experience attachment-building conversations. Image used with permission.

Figure 3.

From Conflict to Connection Mat Experiential Exercise



Note. Side two of the communication mat for couples to experience attachment-building conversations. Image used with permission.

Some of the participants initially found the interactive communication exercises to be awkward or difficult to understand. For example, Brian shared, “Like, I love sharing information, but then this mat thing was really throwing me off because...I'm not exactly sure what I'm supposed to be sharing here.” Connor shared his feeling of being uncomfortable, “I thought it was awkward and uncomfortable to talk to each other while being so close to another couple and also when asked to interact with the other people at your table.” Any difficulty or uncomfortable feelings dissipated by the end of the workshop. Connor shared, “it was a lot of fun by the end, but it started out pretty awkward.”

Heidi and Henry found experiential learning to be helpful for them:

“We're, kind of, energetic beings, meaning, not, I'm talking about but energy like in pep; I'm talking about, we feel the vibrations. So going through those motions of stepping through different hoops into different stages of communication is actually an energetic exercise that worked for us.

For Faith and Flynn, it created an opportunity to realize that there were minor things that had a hidden layer of emotion under them and deal with it a helpful way:

Let's talk about some issues, and it was a little bit of a struggle to come up with something worthwhile to discuss on the mat that we wanted to, but I think we did; we came up with some things that maybe we didn't... we didn't realize were worth going through the process on. But we did, and I remember feeling like it was useful to be able to talk through in a very slow, methodical detailed way.

Grace described her experience with experiential learning:

There's probably something to the whole fact that, okay, you're talking about it, and then, your body is doing it. But it's different than a role-play because role-plays, I feel like, are

kind of pretend. Where this was like, okay, you're working on something, going through something where you guys - so, it kind of just feels like there are three different stages to it that are reinforcing it.

For Breanna, the experiential communication exercises gave her the experience and confidence to talk about more challenging topics:

I liked the interactive exercises how you started off with like something small, and you got used to the rhythm of it and what it looked like, and then you could move on to bigger issues later on in the workshop. And then, I don't know; I felt like it really helped you open up your mind to what that looks like. And you can't do that unless you interact on the mat.”

Group Learning. Another subtheme that appeared within how the couples learned was the group learning experience. Breanna, who attended a hybrid format of the workshop, pointed out while she did enjoy learning through Zoom, she is one to “feed off of other people’s energy.” Because of that, she “actually liked the class better when it was in person because there were people that were attending that had been married for years.”

For some of the couples, it provided a norming experience. Emily shared that it had a positive impact on her and Ethan’s relationship, “We feel like wow, we’re not the only ones that have these problems, and we feel closer after we’ve gone through it, even if the going through it is difficult.” Gavin shared a similar sentiment when he expressed, “It makes you feel like; oh, we’re not so abnormal after all. A lot of couples seem to have a lot of the same sort of communication issues maybe, fears or whatever.” Henry, referring to group discussion, mentioned:

And they would ask those questions; we were able to convey our feelings and share experiences. And I think that that helped all of the couples in the room to feel like they weren't alone about some things that were very personal; sexual relationships and things like that.

A few couples reported that observing and interacting with other couples increased a more positive outlook on their relationship. Gavin shared his thoughts when watching a few of the other couples, "I think when you saw some of the others, and it looked like they were worse off than we were, we were going, "Wow, we're great. We don't have problems." In Alison and Aaron's case, the other group members provided validating feedback:

Then everyone, once we started talking, they were like you guys are so smart to be here right now. It kind of validated my feelings of we do have some skills. We do have some tools. Us being here and us being willing to have these conversations this young and we are not even married yet felt really good for me and very validating. We were on the right track.

Claire and Connor found that the group learning allowed them to observe other couples, which was beneficial. Claire discussed how watching a couple doing an experiential exercise was impactful:

We really loved watching other couples work on the mat, like as the example. That was one of the things that really stood out. I remember just the whole room being so engaged and experiencing the shift in the relationship while this couple is working through their conflict. That was a sweet experience.

Guiding Support. Another critical element in how the couples learned was the guided support the workshop facilitators and staff members provided. For Emily and Ethan, the

facilitator provided "a calming and lovely presence" as the facilitator "semi-counseled" through one of their experiential exercises. Heidi and Henry expressed that it felt like they were a team with facilitators because "if we got lost, or we're stuck, you could, someone was right there to help." Claire and Connor benefited from having a trained marriage and family therapist work with them through the first experiential exercise. They felt that "having that additional insight of someone familiar with communication skills and EFT, in general, was really helpful." Aaron expressed that he thought that they needed the guiding support of the facilitators:

Probably because we did not have enough experience on the mat, even though she told us where we should go and what we should talk about next. Without her there to really specifically probe and ask follow-up questions with some of these questions on the mat, I felt like the times that we did get stuck were typically where we did not quite have somebody to navigate us. We were not sure. Where do we go from here? I did not know what to say. She did not know what to ask and/or vice versa.

Alison described this interaction with the facilitator as "game-changing" because as the facilitator would help Aaron and Alison, Alison "could relax" and say exactly how she was feeling. Breanna had a similar experience as Alison. Breanna said it was "perfect timing" when the facilitator assisted them due to Breanna asking her marriage question to Brian. Breanna described how helpful the facilitator was:

I also remember her being like, okay, other parts of this question that you could consider, like, how are you feeling this, are you feeling this, are you feeling this. So, instead of just my mind being like, I'm so anxious, or I'm so sad, or I'm so mad that I don't know what the answer is, she really helped my mind expand and be like, okay, but there's maybe another whole realm that is related to this question, and because you're in your box, you

can't see it. And so, I think her just like walking me through, okay, but what does that look like, and just like poking and prodding additional deeper questions really helped me so that like, there was nothing left for me wanting to know why basically.

While other couples described how helpful the guided support was at critical moments, one couple experienced not having that type of help. Daman expressed, “it would’ve been good to be able to do some of the mat exercises with the facilitator as well potentially. Like I guess I felt that I was facilitating it sometimes.” Danielle supported Daman’s statement, “yeah, I think that would’ve been helpful.”

Emotional Experiences. Due to the structure and content of the workshop, there were noticeable emotional moments experienced by the couples. One of the emotions that were repeatedly expressed was vulnerability. Feeling vulnerable, in turn, created some unpleasant emotions. Emily, for example, reported experiencing feelings of unsafe during the experiential exercise, which made a challenge for her and Ethan as a couple, “I didn't feel completely safe using the mat. Like, Ethan was still pursuing while I was trying to withdraw, so it was a little scary.” Alison also experienced some of the fear while being vulnerable during the experiential exercise, “This is one of the beginning experiences I had of saying exactly how I felt and saying it out loud. It is scary.” Breanna was another partner feeling scared because she was about to be vulnerable. She was going to ask if Brian even wanted to marry her because she was unsure of “where he was with the whole thing.” Because of the intensity of the vulnerability and fear, Breanna began to cry before asking the question.

For Faith and Flynn, it created a sense of awkwardness because they were vulnerable by having conversations with other people in the room. Flynn stated:

There was discomfort--and again, you almost felt like you were standing there naked, and you were talking about things that were quite sensitive--and there were other people in the room doing their own, involved in their own lives, but there was a little bit of awkwardness associated with that, being able to talk about these kinds of things when you might have had an observer--either active or passive observers. It wasn't particularly negative or unpleasant, but it was... it was a little awkward.

Grace reported that being vulnerable was a challenge because to have a successful vulnerable conversation, "you're going to unearth some stuff." In Grace and Gavin's particular conversation, "there were tears and frustration and some hurt feelings. But not so much new hurt feelings as it was just pulling up the feelings that you buried."

However, while there were these moments of challenging emotions, the couples were taught how to be emotionally responsive to their partner's needs and co-regulate each other's feelings. By strengthening their emotional connection, the couples experienced positive emotional encounters as well. Alison's and Aaron's experience highlights this subtheme. Aaron was surprised by the "depth of emotion" of some of the questions in the workshop. He expected to have challenging discussions; however, he did not expect "to have such a reservoir of feelings come to the surface as well as perhaps overflow." Alison was happy to see Aaron experience these emotions:

I was hoping he would feel how I was feeling, too, with just this overwhelming outpouring of love and understanding. He got there way more than I had ever seen. That was unexpected for me. I wanted that, but I did not know that he was going to get there.

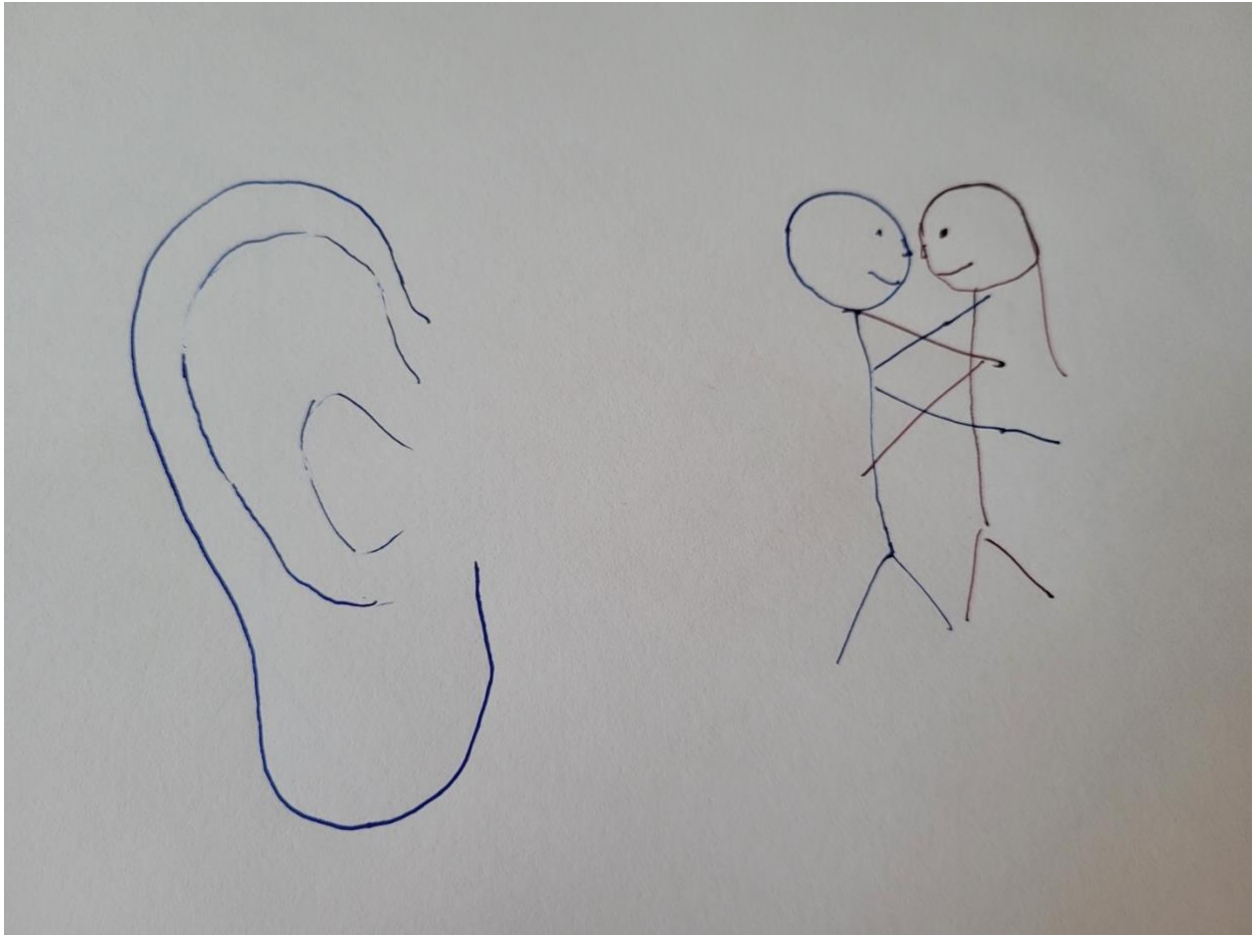
Many of the cognitive representations significantly portrayed the concept of being emotionally responsive to their partner's needs and co-regulating each other's emotions.

Faith and Flynn's cognitive representations capture the ability to talk, be listened to, share needs, and have one's partner respond. Although the drawing is simple, Flynn's description is very rich in detail:

So, I felt... during this process, I felt heard, I felt like I could talk, and she could listen, and I just really felt like it was a good opportunity to be heard, and that was really helpful. And then I remember that there was a lot of hugging when we were on the mat, and it just felt like--because I said before that I felt vulnerable, but then when I did feel vulnerable, I remember that she would come over and we would just hold each other, and it was safe, and it was comfortable, and then I felt better because I was no longer vulnerable, I felt protected.

Figure 4.

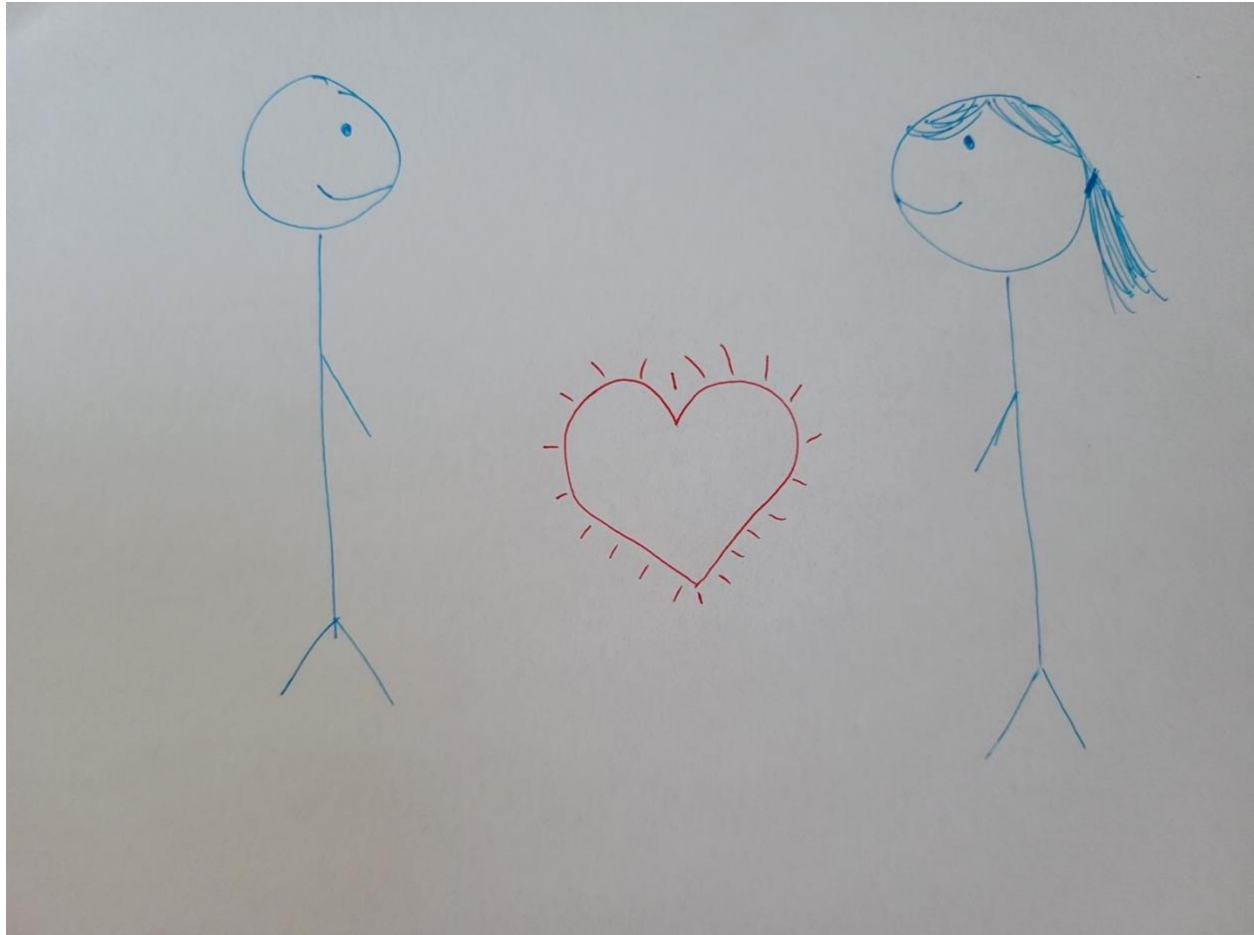
Flynn's Cognitive Representation



Note. Flynn's drawing of what came to his mind when he thought of his workshop experience.

Faith explained her drawing in this way:

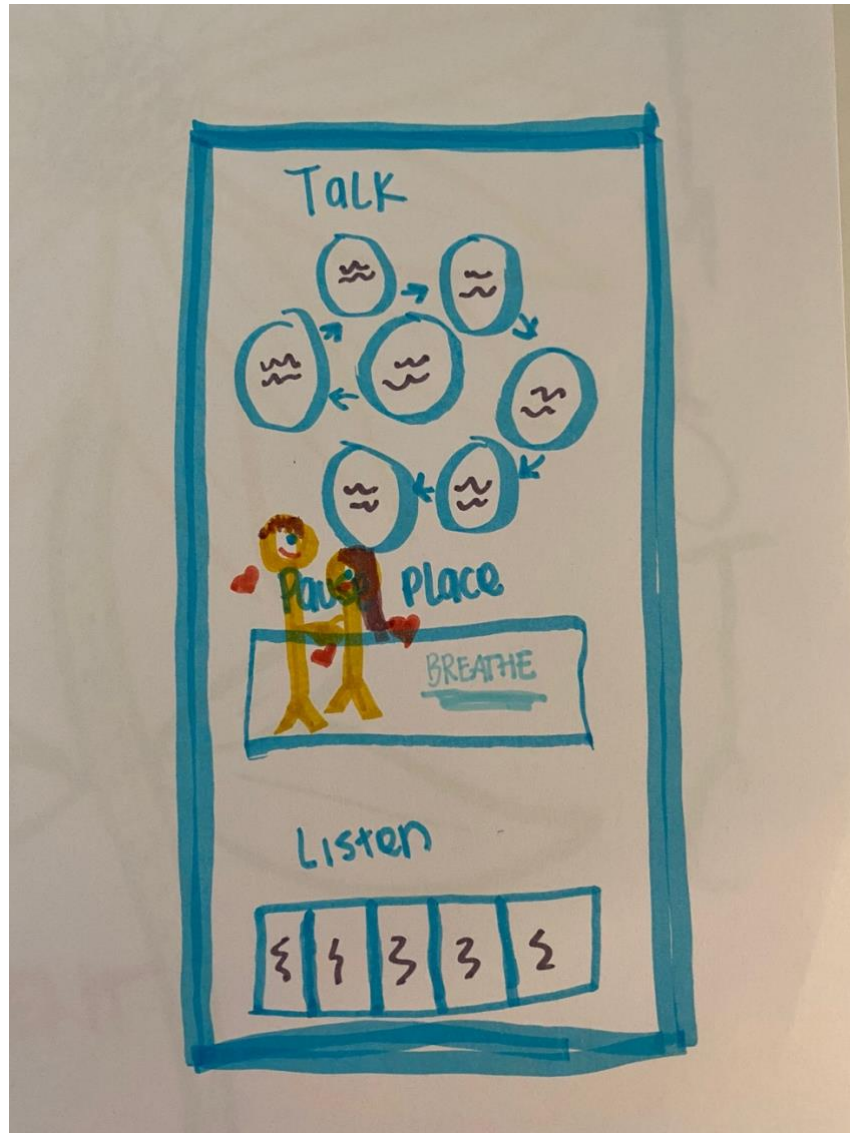
I just felt a lot of love as we were going through the process--even really the whole workshop, not just on the mat, but being able to face each other, look at each other and talk through some things, I felt... yeah, a lot of love for my spouse.

Figure 5.*Faith's Cognitive Representation*

Note. Faith's drawing of what came to her mind when she thought of her workshop experience.

Claire's cognitive representation captures the experiential part where they learned to respond to each other's emotional bids. Claire describing her cognitive representation:

This is us on the mat on the pause place, and I remember just pausing there every once in a while, and I get flooded because I'm the one who gets flooded usually. And we just stopped there, and I remember just breathing. We both just hold each other, and you breathe, and we feel peaceful and okay and reinforce that we love each other and we're there for each other.

Figure 6.*Claire's Cognitive Representation*

Note. Claire's drawing of what came to her mind when she thought of her workshop experience.

Both Danielle and Daman unintentionally drew similar pictures to each other's that described their experience with co-regulating each other when Danielle felt distressed. Daman explained his cognitive representation, "There's the mat at the bottom. here is me talking, and

Diana is concerned and stepping towards the pause space.” Danielle, when responding to Daman’s drawing and describing her own:

That’s really interesting because I drew a very similar thing which was ... was like a memory of the feeling of being on the mat and coming together, which happened frequently because I had to go to the pause place for getting emotional.

Figure 7.

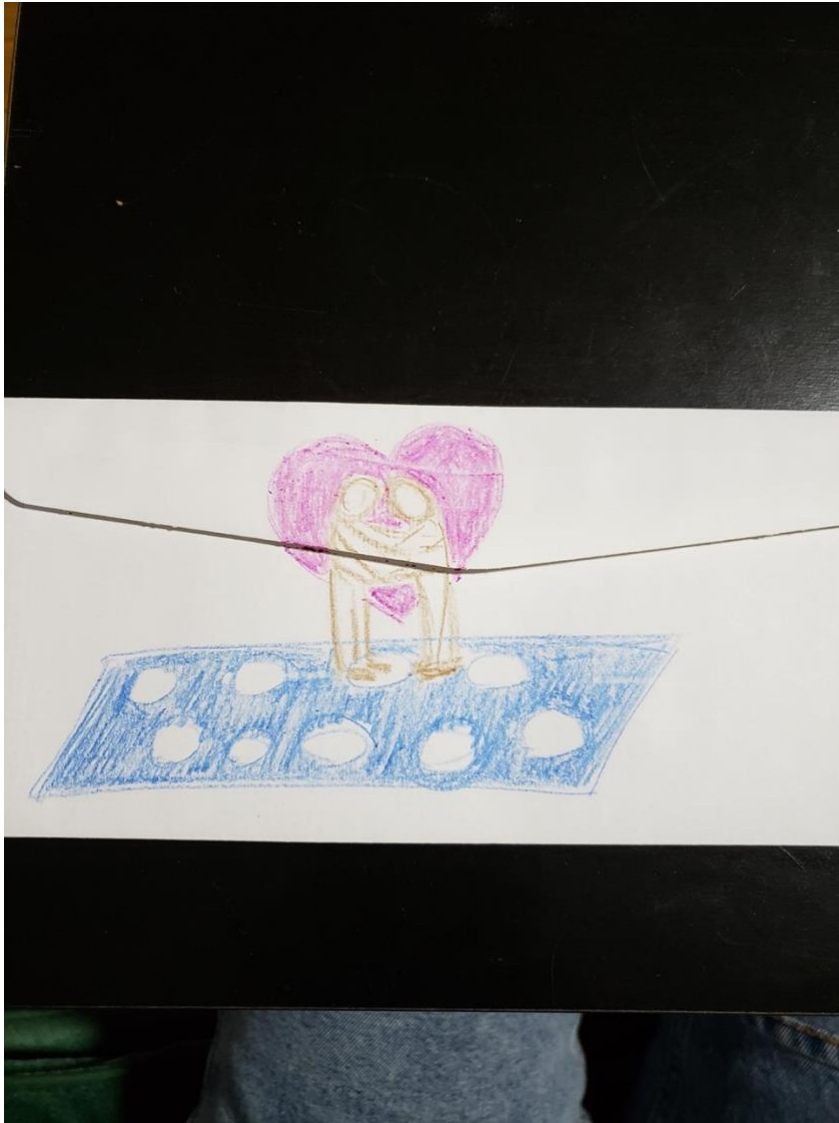
Daman’s Cognitive Representation



Note. Daman’s drawing of what came to his mind when he thought of his workshop experience.

Figure 8.

Danielle's Cognitive Representation



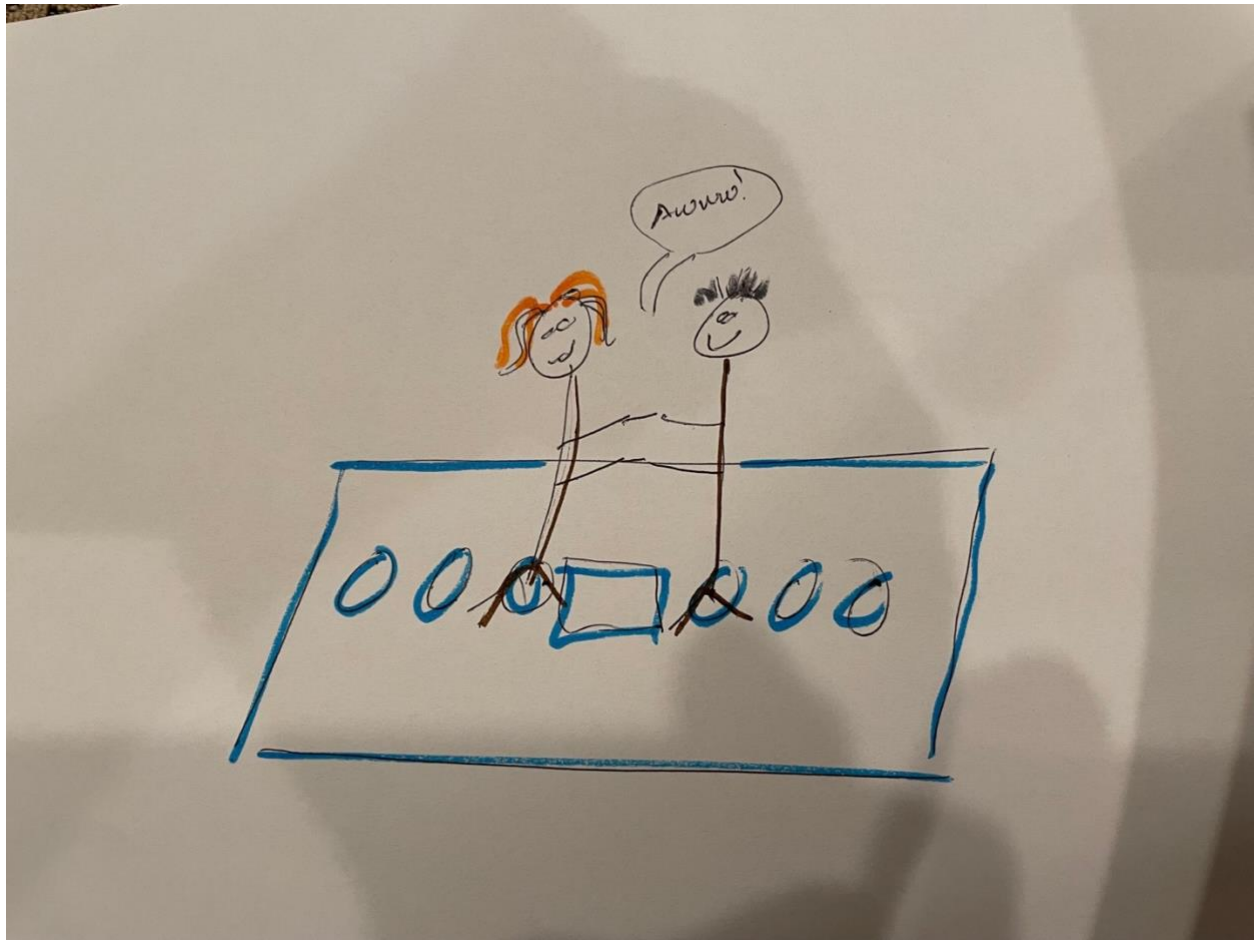
Note. Danielle's drawing of what came to her mind when she thought of her workshop experience.

Gavin's cognitive representation also captures the concepts of responding to each other's emotional bids. Gavin described his drawing, "it's the mat, but it's where you come together and hold hands in the middle and go, "Ahh." When asked what "ahh" meant to him, Gavin responded

with, "You're comfortable and relaxed at that point. You're safe, comfortable, relaxed, and you know, whatever follows you can deal with."

Figure 9.

Gavin's Cognitive Representation



Note. Gavin's drawing of what came to his mind when he thought of his workshop experience.

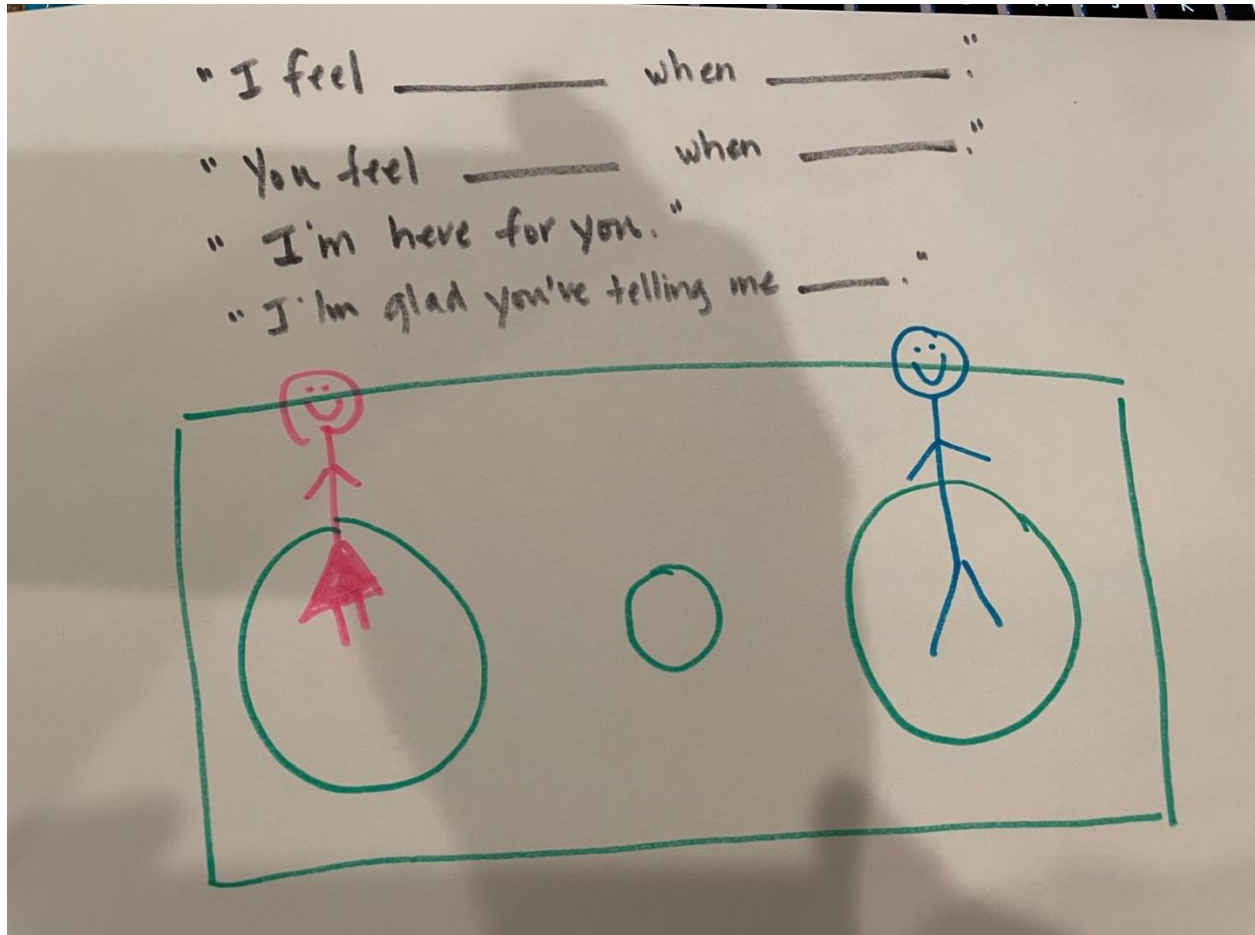
Grace's cognitive representation also confirmed that she learned new communication techniques, leading to a stronger emotional connection and emotional coregulation. Grace described her drawing:

Well, I think the mat was the most memorable part. But then, there were some key phrases, and these, I think, were the key phrases; the "I feel sad," or, "I feel hurt," or

whatever it is, the “I feel” when something else happens. And then, the confirmation of, “Oh, you feel...” you know, “Am I understanding you correctly? When this happens, this is how you feel.” And then, the - I’d kind of forgotten how reassuring it was, the phrase, “Well, I’m here for you.”

When Grace was asked what she experienced when Gavin would express “I’m here for you,” Grace responded:

Then, I felt safe explaining more. I mean, I don’t want to drag this out too long. But for many years, we would have an annual fight where we would have to get in the car and leave the house because we didn’t want to traumatize the kids. And so, you know, we would fight as long as we could, and then, at some point in time, we would just say, “Okay, we’re done.” But things never really got resolved, and I think there were things that never got talked about because we never got that far. And so, when you say, “I’m here for you,” then I think it gives the other person permission to not feel like they have to stop or be careful, but they can finish the thought. And if there’s more that they need to share, then they feel like there’s more that they can share.

Figure 10.*Grace's Cognitive Representation*

Note. Grace's drawing of what came to her mind when she thought of her workshop experience.

In summary, the second primary theme was *During the Workshop*. Within the *During the Workshop* primary theme, three subthemes emerged. The first subtheme, what they learned, discussed what the couples learned, including a new way to communicate, more about each other, including one's attachment style and coping strategies, and emotional coregulation. How they learned was the second subtheme, and it explained how the couples learned while attending the workshop, which included experiential exercises, group learning, and support from the workshop team. Thirdly, the subtheme of emotional experiences provided descriptions of the

emotional experience that the couples had during the workshop, which included both challenging emotions and positive emotions.

After the Workshop. The *After the Workshop* theme aligns itself with Schlossberg's (1981) *Moving Out* phase. In the final primary theme, four subthemes developed from data from the participants' interviews, demographic questionnaires, and cognitive representations.

Impact on the Relationship. Every couple reported continued improvement to their relationship since attending the workshop. Danielle and Daman feel that their relationship is better since attending. Danielle even expressed feeling more secure in their relationship, "I definitely felt that way, not that I didn't feel solid before but like I feel way more solid after." Emily also reported an increased sense of emotional safety, "I feel like our relationship is so much better than it was, but we both realize that we have room to work and grow still. It's just that it feels so much safer to do it now." Grace feels that they are "better off than we were before the workshop because we can use some of those tools." She also feels that they have been kinder to each other since the workshop.

Breanna and Brian felt that their ability to communicate significantly improved. Breanna felt that having the experience of having difficult conversations at the workshop to later communication success in their marriage, "I honestly attribute a lot of our deep conversations that we've had and the hard conversations that we have had because of this workshop because we had hard conversations there." She further expressed:

So, I think for me, since attending the workshop, I feel like our relationship has had a lot of depth. And I feel like a lot of couples don't experience that amount of depth this early on in their relationship. And I think it's partially because of communication, but it's also like, the things that we got lifted with, you know.

For Claire and Connor, their ability to resolve conflict has significantly improved.

Connor shared how:

No relationship is perfect, and I still have those fears, and Claire still likes to run. Those baseline emotions haven't changed for us, but we're able to work through them a lot faster and a lot easier and with a lot of less pain in between A to B or start to finish, which has been a huge benefit for us.

Claire agreed with Connor and also expressed that their emotional coregulation has also improved:

I feel like we're better about giving space and honoring those emotions that the other one is feeling and validating and saying I recognize that you're feeling this way, and I would like to help you feel safe and important to me.

Heidi and Henry also identified an improvement in their ability to resolve conflict, avoid emotional escalation, and understand each other. Heid reports, "We don't get as escalated as we used to in our, in our conversations with each other. We understand each other better, and we've also pursued understanding each other more, just continually since then." Henry confirmed their ability to handle conflict has improved:

"Yeah, I would say that our, we're able to resolve conflict in a way where we don't – if she's, we say we need a break from one another, we're able to do that. In the past, I think, yeah, especially me, I would have a hard time. I'd want to argue or, kind of, if she wanted to go and be away, I would follow her and try to talk it out right then and there."

Recall. An interesting trend took place when interviewing and analyzing the data. When asked about the lecture portions of the workshop, many of the participants struggled to remember the topics presented. The one topic that was remembered by four of the couples was that of

intimacy. For Alison and Aaron, it was a topic of importance. For them, that was an ongoing conversation taking place through their "whole dating and engaged life" to the point Alison was experiencing some nervousness around the topic. Aaron found it to be "really eye-opening" when the presenters taught how "men and women pass through intimacy kind of like doorways at different times." This was helpful in that Aaron learned that it is "very rare" that spouses are "both feeling intimate at the same time." For Flynn, it stuck out as a topic and experiential exercise "because it's not something we discuss a lot. We don't talk a lot about our intimate relationship." And as a couple, Faith and Flynn had to talk about intimacy "slowly, deliberately, and specifically." Grace and Gavin found the topic of intimacy to be helpful. For Grace, it was the first time that she had ever been somewhere where they talked about sex. And that was "nice." Gavin agreed that the topic was good. He appreciated how the matter was discussed because "it was kind of open. Here we are in our older years and still learning something." Grace further expressed, "it felt very safe and very appropriate and very healthy."

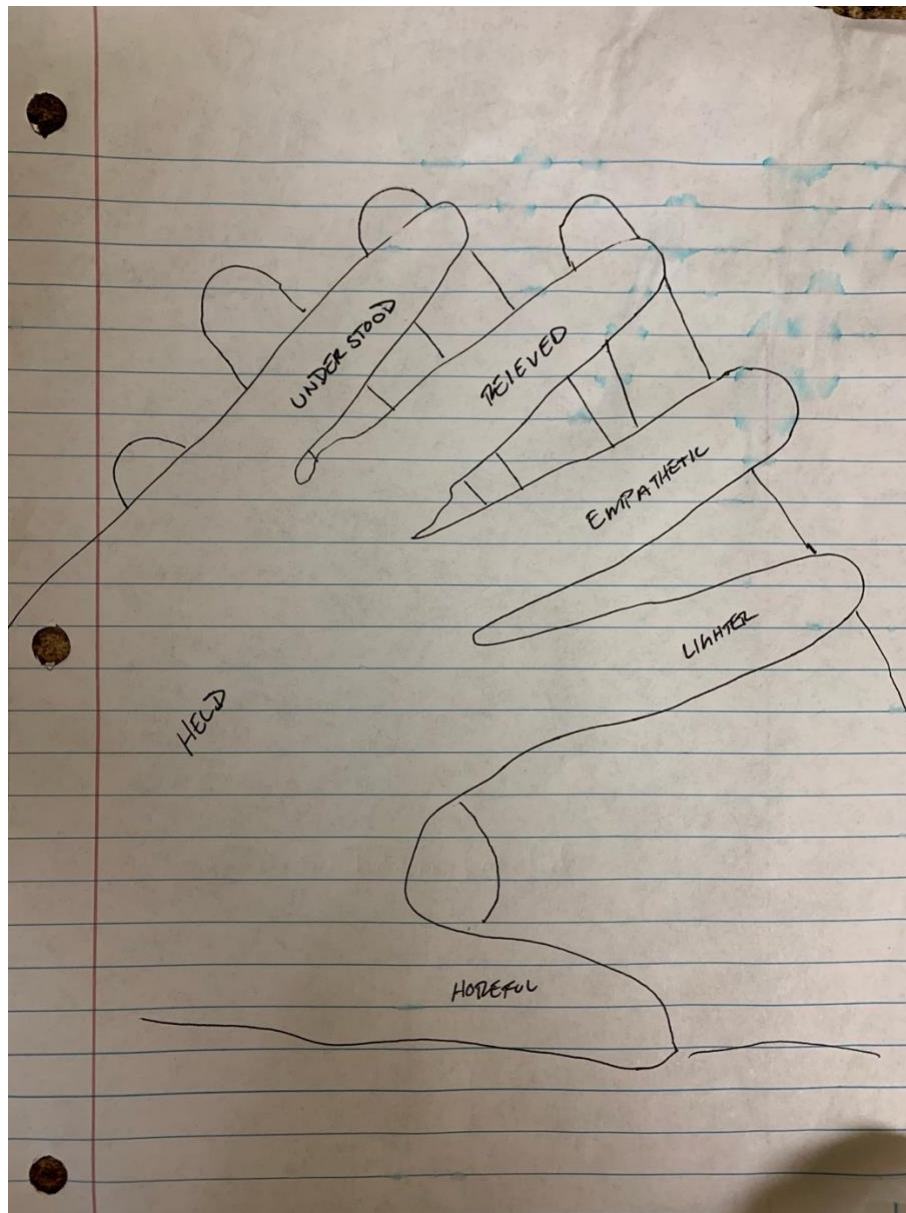
Many of the participants could not recall the lecture topics, but they did remember what they felt. For Aaron, for example, remembers the feelings from the weekend more than the topics, "I wish I remembered it better than I do. I do not recall exact topics all that much. It is more just like how I felt." Aaron's Cognitive representation solidifies this statement as well as captures some of the feelings he remembers. Aaron described his cognitive representation:

I just traced both of my hands, kind of overtop of each other. I just wrote down a couple of things that I was feeling while we were. They were things that I remember feeling. I wrote down understood, relieved, empathetic, lighter, held, and hopeful. Yeah, I was having a hard time thinking about what else I thought. Just for some reason, I had the

image of hands in my head through kind of the entire conversation today. You know, these were the words that kind of came to me.

Figure 11.

Aaron's Cognitive Representation



Note. Aaron's drawing of what came to his mind when he thought of his workshop experience.

Aaron's cognitive representation was not the only cognitive representation that captured the feelings and emotions experienced from the workshop. Connor also made a drawing about what he experienced at the workshop. He described his cognitive representation:

It's a sunflower, and it says confident, empowered, optimistic ... As I think back to the workshop, the memories are stronger going in or coming out of the building. So, I don't know if I saw a sunflower there and it's just sticking with me or if that's just what I come up with, but I remember feeling warm, and I felt strong emotionally. So, as I started to think about, I sat in there, reflected for a minute, and the thing that popped into my head was a sunflower. And maybe it's because they are resilient and strong, and they're big, and they grow anywhere, but they're also pretty. Anyway, I just put the words on there to better convey how I felt.

Figure 12.

Connor's Cognitive Representation



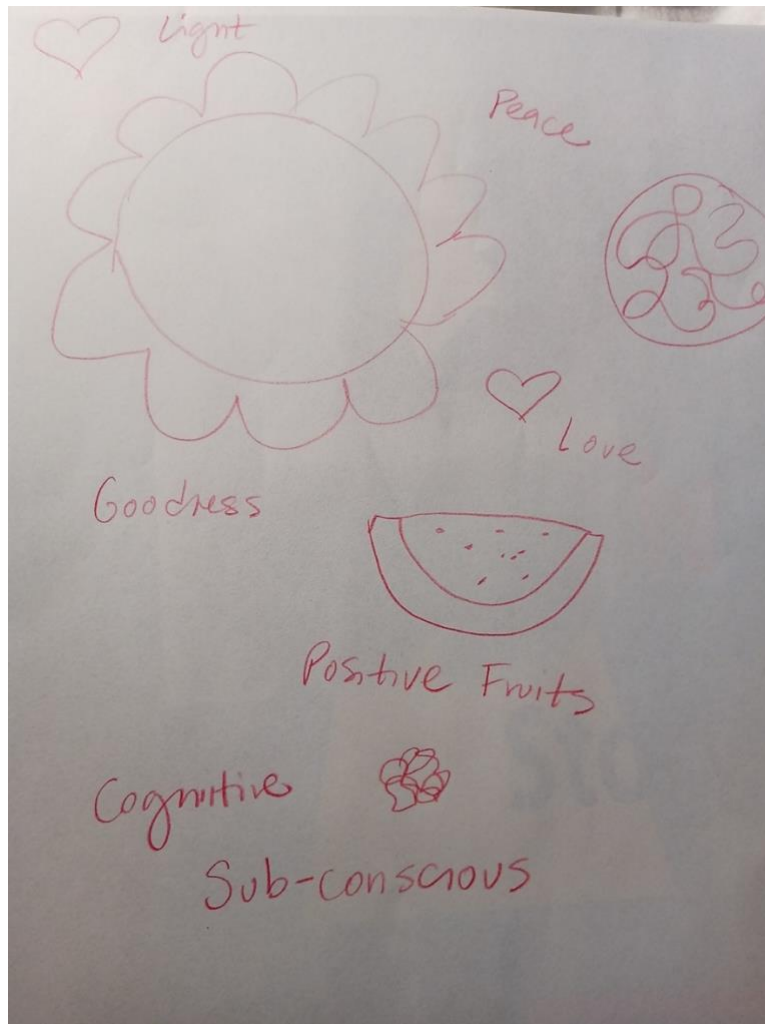
Note. Connor's drawing of what came to his mind when he thought of his workshop experience.

Heidi's cognitive representation also captures what she felt. Her description of her cognitive representation is as follows:

Just when you were talking, that's what came into mind, a flower and some hearts. And then these are the words that came into mind. That's, kind of, like, my abstract, peaceful. That's... I tried to make a brain, but that didn't really work. My brain was really engaged so that the words are love, peace, light, goodness, positive fruits, cognitive, and sub-cognitive or subconscious. I don't know why I've thought of that, but I did.

Figure 13.

Heidi's Cognitive Representation



Note. Heidi's drawing of what came to her mind when she thought of her workshop experience.

While many of the participants struggled to remember the lecture material, the experiential exercises were remembered by every participant. When discussing “What sticks out in their mind the most?” Alison remembered the experiential method in learning attachment-based communication, “The famous mat! Loved the ideas behind it and the process in which you moved through the conversation.” Emily and Ethan expressed a similar thought, “We both really liked the mat and felt like it was a very good way to organize the conversation.” For Daman and Danielle, it was the experiential exercise of learning to emotionally co-regulate when emotionally unsettled. Brian, when discussing the experiential exercises, “So, I’ll say that was probably the one thing that was beneficial of the exercises, the interactive exercises.” Breanna felt that the interactive exercises “was like some of my favorite parts.” Grace and Gavin expressed the intimacy discussion as well as the experiential communication exercises. Flynn also voiced the experiential conversation regarding intimacy as sticking out in his mind:

I don't know that I ever would have probably said or told her the things that I did because I had to, because it was part of the process, and I had to say something. And so, I told her things, and things are better now. It was good for us. So, I think that was impactful, and it did change us in a positive way. That's what stands out to me.

Faith agreed with Flynn and shared how the experiential exercise was the most impactful for her:

I mean, the mat definitely... like what he said, it helped us to say things to each other that we wouldn't normally say, which was good because it took us to a deeper level of communicating, which was really helpful.

Besides group norming, Henry expressed, "getting out of our chairs and actually doing, doing things physically was good with the map, and with touch, and the, some of the things that we did. So, to me, those are the parts that stuck out for me.

Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses. As the couples reflected on their experience of the workshop, the couples were able to verbalize what they felt were the strengths of the workshop such as experiential exercises and guiding support. The couples were also able to identify what they felt were weaknesses of the workshop such as recall and time management.

Weaknesses. When discussing the inability to recall specific topics, four of the eight couples brought up the concept of needing a way to reacquaint themselves with the material and sharpen the attachment-based communications skills that they learned. Alison and Aaron agreed that they wished they "had done either another clinic like this or something specifically related to this so this material would have stayed fresh." Heidi felt that if there was "a little summary, and you had the mat, I think people who went to the workshop could jump right back in, and have it be even, have it be very significant in relationships." Brian pointed out that:

"Just because you do it once doesn't mean you're going to remember it or how to do it. So, maybe, you know, updates every now and then, like once a year, would be good because then you can continue to remember how to communicate and be open and all these things, and use the mat."

Flynn also thought it would be beneficial for the facilitators to continue to help the couples to remember the material that they learned:

"Well, it would be good if they would remind us to review the materials that we went over; I think it would be a good idea for us to go back and go through that because we learned a lot, but there's a lot that I don't remember."

Three of the eight couples mentioned time as being something that was a challenge. For Alison and Aaron and Claire and Connor, they felt that they did not get enough time for the experiential exercises. Grace and Gavin felt that the facilitator "had to go pretty fast through a couple of the sections" towards the end of the workshop as they were running out of time. Daman and Danielle again brought up the lack of guided support during the experiential portions, and they recommend "more supervision and interaction" during the interactive portions of the workshop. Heidi mentioned that she wishes she had a way to give information about the workshops to couples that she knows "who need to strengthen their relationship." Alison and Aaron also mentioned that they wish they could have experienced more group discussion and cross-communication with other participants for empathy development and learning from each other's experiences. Connor and Claire would have preferred more group icebreakers to get more comfortable with feeling vulnerable.

Strengths. The primary strength that every couple mentioned was the experiential exercise that involved a mat that guided the couples through an attachment-based conversation as discussed in the experiential and recall subthemes. Also, another frequently mentioned strength was the facilitators and support staff. Not only was it the guided support when needed to the couples, as mentioned earlier in the paper, but also how they presented the material in relatable ways. Henry expressed that their "instructors were very personable, and it was great, it was easy to relate to the situations that they were talking through." Heidi also mentioned that the instructors had a "flow of teaching, and then engaging you, and then not letting everybody take over, and then go too long." Daman pointed out that his facilitator was able to present and explain "attachment theory in a digestible and practical format for couples."

Unanimous Consensus. When answering an interview question about what advice they would give to premarital couples considering attending an attachment-based, experiential workshop, every couple would encourage them to attend. This was articulated by a simple but highly emphatic “Do it.” Emily would “definitely encourage them to attend.” She would explain to the premarital couple that “marriage is hard and being with another person all the time is hard.” To provide context to a premarital couple about the difficulty of marriage, she would offer to share a bit of her and Ethan's story and "how disconnected they were for so long," and these types of workshops helped them "so much."

The encouragement for premarital couples to attend comes from the belief in the necessity of learning new communication skills. From Brian's perspective, that “if your communication sucks, definitely do it. Like, if you cannot get on the same page, you've got to do it.” Daman finds learning the communication skills to be valuable because “you're able to have conversations and be able to kind of regulate yourself to some extent to be able to like pause yourself when you're getting a little bit heated or overly emotional.” Aaron expressed that attending a premarital workshop provides a “wonderful opportunity to discuss things that may or may not come up in natural conversations, even though they should come up in natural conversations in your home and in your relationship.” He further exclaimed that he felt “something like this should be required with every young couple that is engaged.” Flynn also felt that attending a workshop:

Ought to be almost required for couples to go through something like this because so many people go into relationships, and they bring a lot of baggage with them, but they don't bring the skills necessary to be able to talk through and work out problems.

Heidi further expounds on the concept of each partner bringing in their issues into the relationship, "You bring your crap from your family of origin and your past relationships into your marriage. And that's probably the biggest deterrent."

The importance of timing was also highlighted in the participants' responses. Alison pointed out that "pre-marriage is the best time to do it because you are both agreeing to this right now. You are in that good stage where everything is good, happy, and awesome." Heidi stated, "it's very valuable for before they get into marriage to understand how to communicate, and how to connect with one another." that Breanna felt that this type of workshop creates a strong start for the marriage:

I think, going through something like this, especially if they're considering marriage, going through a workshop like this with your future spouse is super powerful because then you are starting from the same foundation of communication, and then that creates a great base for a great marriage.

Connor voiced similar statements to what Breanna stated. Connor that couples would "learn skills early on before you're married that it takes some couples 40 years to figure out on their own and probably a good way to start your marriage." Claire further explained why this would be beneficial for premarital couples when she expressed:

You need to be able to know yourself well to be able to improve your interactions with others, and this workshop helps you figure out your own internal workings and why you are the way you are in your relationship. And then you can get to know why your partner reacts the way he or she or they do in the relationship, and just having that mat of how you work and how your partner works is so much easier. Then, on top of that, you learn

these problem-solving skills and these communication skills that will prevent you from getting into these massive communication ruts in the future.

For the couples that were already married at the time of the workshop, the question of “How do you think you guys would have benefited from this if you had taken this right before or right after you guys got married?” Faith and Flynn conveyed how it would have helped them save time. Faith expressed that early on in their marriage, they “definitely had some miscommunications and some hiccups, and something like this would have been helpful for us to be able to talk through it more effectively.” Faith, whose personality is “more quiet and reserved,” had come from a family that “doesn't communicate very well at all.” Because of this family dynamic, Faith said that “learning how to communicate with him, it took me a while.” Flynn had come from a family background that was “much more communicative and willing and able to talk about things that were bothering us.” Flynn agreed that they “did not have the communication skills that we have developed over time.” Flynn felt that if they had attended a workshop like this before marriage, it would have helped them learn how to communicate faster, “could have accelerated that process and enhanced it because it would have given both of us skills that we didn't have before.”

When she reflected on this question, Grace felt that maybe their rough patch might not have happened or would not have been as bad. However, Gavin expressed that he thought “there’s almost some advantage to doing this after you have a little experience with life, you know, with being with your partner and knowing where the real weaknesses are.” He questioned whether a couple is “really going to communicate back and forth in an honest way when you’re newly married or engaged or still in that honeymoon phase?” Hearing Gavin voice this question,

Grace responded, “Well, I think that’s the whole idea, though, with this is you can bypass all the big stuff and maybe start doing it in the beginning - I think that’s the whole idea.”

Heidi and Henry also felt their relationship would have been positively impacted if they had had an opportunity to attend a workshop before the start of their marriage. Henry conveyed,

“I think we would end up and be able to problem-solve more effectively if we would had before we were married. I think it would have helped us with some of the baggage we brought into the marriage and understand to let some things go.”

Heidi pointed out that “there are certain things that all couples need to face.” Such as finances and parenting. Heidi stated, “We could have talked about before we got married and said, “We’ll never do that.” There are certain things we won’t do, and these are, these are the boundaries.”

It has already been stated that learning new communication techniques has allowed Faith to be more open with her husband and talking through the minor things has caused what was a great relationship to become even better. Faith and Flynn have even applied their new communication techniques with their then 16-year-old son, with who they were struggling to communicate:

“So, the skills that we learned, we immediately saw benefit in being able to create a safe space and an environment for us to be able to talk to him in a non-threatening way where we could calmly discuss what his thoughts and feelings were--and help him figure out what his thoughts and feelings were.”

Response to Research Questions

In this section, the research questions will be addressed using the primary themes and subthemes that the data analysis provided. There was one central research question that guided

the focus of this phenomenological study: How do couples describe their experiences attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop? Additionally, three sub-questions also provided further focus to this study: 1) How do participants describe their expectations for the workshop prior to their experience? 2) In what ways were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the workshop? 3) How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their workshop experience?

How do couples describe their experiences attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop? The primary themes of *Before the Workshop*, *During the Workshop*, and *After the Workshop* provides a detailed description of what the couple experienced going through the workshop experience. The *Before the Workshop* theme revealed how the couples heard about the workshop, their motivation in signing up for the workshop, and what their expectations of the workshop included. The *During the Workshop* explained what the couples learned, how the couples learned, and the emotional experiences they experienced while attending the workshop. In the third primary theme, *After the Workshop*, gave light to their experience since attending the workshop, which included the couples' ability to recall the experience, the workshop's impact upon their relationship, the couples' perceived strengths and weaknesses of the workshop, and the couples' thoughts regarding the benefits of this workshop provides for premarital couples.

How do participants describe their expectations for the workshop prior to their experience? The response to this question can be found within the subtheme of expectations. There were not that many expectations that the couple had for the workshop. As stated earlier, six of the eight couples expected to learn how to communicate better with their spouse. The second expectation was that the couples would benefit relationally by learning new behavioral

skills that would increase their emotional connection. Two couples only had the general expectation of learning something new.

In what ways were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the workshop? The response to this question can be found within the second primary theme of *During the Workshop*. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the couples expected that to learn how to communicate better with their spouse, learn relational skills that would create stronger connections, and that they would learn something new. Each couple reported positive gains in each of the three described expectations. For the unexpected outcome, many of the couples did not anticipate the emotional experiences that created intense feelings, both uncomfortable and positive.

How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their workshop experience? The response to this question can be found within the third theme of *After the Workshop*, primarily the subtheme of impact on the relationship. Each couple reported that they experienced and maintained positive gains within their relationships. Some of the relationship's gains mentioned included the ability to be open and honest with each other, ability to have difficult conversations, ability to resolve conflict, emotional safety, secure attachment, being kind to each other, and a better understanding of each other.

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings from the lived experiences of couples who attended experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops in North America. The participants were described as a group and as couples. Through demographic questionnaires, semi-focused interviews, and cognitive representations, the couples were able to share their experiences. Three primary themes were discovered as the data was analyzed, Before the Workshop, During the

Workshop, and After the workshop. These themes resulted from looking at the data through the lens of Schlossberg's (1981) Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving Out phases. The Before the Workshop experience revealed the subthemes of how the couples became aware of the workshop, the motivation to attend the workshop, and what they expected from the workshop. The During the Workshop theme, participants, revealed how they learned, what they learned, and the emotional experiences they had while attending the workshop. Finally, the After the Workshop theme revealed the participants' ability to recall the workshop, the workshop's impact on the couples' relationship, the participants' perceived strengths and weaknesses of the workshop, and the unanimous consensus that premarital couples should attend an attachment-based, experiential workshop.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of couples who attended an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop. This chapter includes a summary of the findings and a discussion of the results in the relationship to the literature review from Chapter Two. There will also be a discussion of the research study's theoretical, empirical, and practical implications and the study's delimitations and limitations. Lastly, the chapter will conclude with recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to describe the experience of couples who attended an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop. The description of the shared phenomena was captured by the participants completing a demographic questionnaire, answering semi-structured interview questions, and drawing a cognitive representation. The data from the couples were typed by participants, drawn by the participants, or transcribed by a professional transcription service. The couples were sent the transcription of their semi-structured interview to fulfill the member checking step. Moustakas' (1994) process for data analysis produced three main themes of Before the Workshop, During the Workshop, and After the Workshop.

Research Questions Addressed

The research questions that guided this study resulted in the development of themes that aligned with Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. The primary research question for this study was: How do couples describe their experiences attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop? This question was answered through all three primary themes. The first

theme, Before the Workshop, shed light on how the couples found out about the workshop, what their motivation for signing up was, and what their expectations were once they had signed up. The couples either learned about the workshop by either seeking out relational help or by hearing about the workshop through a pre-existing familial or professional relationship. The couples' motivation varied but fell within three categories of intrinsic, extrinsic, and a combination of extrinsic motivation. Finally, the couples attending the workshop expected that they would learn how to communicate with each other and strengthen their relationship.

The second theme, During the Workshop, highlighted the couples' experience of attending the workshop and what the couples learned, how the couples learned, and the emotional experiences the couples encountered during the workshop. The couples who participated in the workshop learned new ways to communicate and learn more about each other. There were three primary ways that the couples learned while at the workshop. The couples emphatically expressed their experiential learning experiences. The couples also learned by being within a group which provided the benefits of norming their experience, observing other couples' exercises, and an increased positive outlook on their relationship. The couples also described emotional experiences while attending the workshop. The emotional experiences included challenging emotions such as vulnerability, anxiousness, and awkwardness. It also had positive emotional encounters because couples were being taught how to be emotionally responsive to their partner's needs and co-regulate each other's feelings.

The third and final primary theme was After the Workshop. This theme focuses on the couples' experience after attending the workshop. The couples described how the workshop positively impacted their relationship, including improved communication, feeling more secure within their relationship, conflict resolution, and a stronger emotional connection. This theme

also revealed the couple's ability to recall the learned material since attending the workshop. The couples struggled to remember the topics or the lectures, but they could recall the experiential exercises and the feelings they experienced while they were there. The couples also shared their perceived weaknesses and strengths of the workshop. The few perceived weaknesses included the inability to recall the workshop material without some type of refresher class, the pace of the workshop, which led a few couples not feeling there was enough time for different portions, and the need for facilitator's support in one couple's experience. The couples reported the perceived strengths of the workshop to include the interactive, experiential exercises and the guiding support of the workshop. This theme also had a unanimous consensus amongst the couples that premarital couples should attend the attachment-based, experiential workshop before they get married or shortly after that.

Research Sub question One: How do participants describe their expectations for the workshop prior to their experience? This research question was primarily answered through the first theme, *Before the Workshop*. As mentioned in Chapter Four, there were three categories that the couples' expectations fell in. Six of the eight couples expected that they would learn communication skills that would help them communicate better with each other. Another expectation that couples expressed was learning skills to strengthen their emotional connection and relationship. Lastly, two couples did not have specific expectations but had general expectations of learning something new.

Research Sub question Two: In what ways were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the workshop? This research question can be answered from the second primary theme, *During the Workshop*. Since most of the couples expected to learn new communication skills and develop a stronger

relationship, the couples' responses indicate that the participants' expectations were met, as discussed in Chapter Four. The most common outcome not expected by the couples who attended the workshop was their emotional experience. Couples were surprised by the emotional depth that came from the experiential exercises that focused on attachment-based conversations.

Research Sub question Three: How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their workshop experience? This third research question contributed to the third primary theme, After the Workshop. Each couple reported that they felt their relationship benefitted from attending the workshop in significant ways:

- Alison and Aaron: Ability to be open and honest with what they are feeling.
- Breanna and Brian: Communication and the ability to have difficult conversations.
- Claire and Connor: Ability to resolve conflict, ability to co-regulate emotionally.
- Danielle and Daman: Feeling more secure in the relationship and emotional coregulation.
- Emily and Ethan: Emotional safety.
- Faith and Flynn: Ability to open up more and talk about more minor issues
- Grace and Gavin: Being kinder and communicating better.
- Heidi and Henry: Ability to resolve conflict, avoid emotional escalation, and better understand each other.

Discussion

The purpose of this next section is to discuss the results of this study as it relates to the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The findings of this study verified and extended the literature regarding attachment theory, emotionally focused therapy, couple relationship education, and experiential learning theory. It also added to the body of research on transition theory and its application to premarital education.

Empirical Literature

The study on the lived experiences of couples who attended an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop confirmed the body of attachment theory literature, EFT's steps to improving a relationship, and experiential learning. Not only did this study corroborate with the current literature on premarital education, but it also added to it.

Attachment Theory. As pointed out in Chapter Two, attachment theory has been one of the most prolific theories researched in the past decade (Simpson & Rholes, 2015). This study supports the current body of research on attachment behavior and building secure attachment, as I will explain below.

It has been established that individuals will engage in attachment behaviors and coping strategies when they feel their significant other is inaccessible, unresponsive, disengaged, or even threatening (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Gillath et al., 2016; Johnson, 2019). Some of the behaviors that might be exhibited include being hypersensitive to signs of love, attachment threats, negative messages, or threats of rejection (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Gillath et al., 2016; Johnson, 2019; Mikulincer et al., 2002) or experiencing fear of rejection and abandonment and low self-worth feelings (Brennan & Shaver, 1998; Gillath et al., 2016; Karantzas et al., 2010).

For example, during the workshop, there were three instances where one of the partners felt some emotional distress. Alison felt scared because this was “one of the beginning experiences I had of saying exactly how I felt and saying it out loud.” After dating Brian for the past eight months, Breanna was uncertain where her and Brian's relationship stood. Breanna experienced intense fear, and she began to cry before she even asked whether Brian wanted to get married. Breanna reported that it was a “really scary conversation” due to the “fear of how he would react or what he would say.” Emily (avoidant attachment) and Ethan's (anxious

attachment) demonstrated what happens when one spouse is inaccessible, unresponsive, disengaged, or threatening. Emily described experiencing fear when she did not completely feel emotionally safe and began “trying to withdraw” and “retreat to a safer spot,” but Ethan continued to pursue.

To build secure attachment, a spouse must be 1) being open to the other’s emotional signals, attachment needs, and fears, 2) emotionally respond to the other’s emotional cues, attachment needs, and fears by sending clear comfort and caring signals, and 3) be emotionally present and emotionally engaged with the partner that has expressed emotional cues, attachment needs, and fears (Johnson, 2019). In all three situations, the partners of the distressed individuals were able to practice being accessible, responsive, and engaged, which led the couple to build secure attachment (Johnson, 2019). Alison reported that the scary, vulnerable moment resulted in feeling safe to be open with Aaron, “With Aaron, I feel like okay. We had such a positive experience in that situation that it gives me courage to say something else that is bothering me. I know it went so well before.” Breanna shared similar sentiments as Alison as Breanna felt that this experience of having a difficult conversation with Brian made it easier to have difficult conversations, which resulted in a deeper relationship:

I think for me...I think...and obviously since then, we’ve had, like I said, harder conversations. So, I think for me, since attending the workshop, I feel like our relationship has had a lot of depth. And I feel like a lot of couples don’t experience that amount of depth this early on in their relationship.

Emily discussed what she experienced as she and Ethan engaged in attachment-building communication skills: “Any time you do this and have these conversations and are open and honest, it always brings a sense of peace and understanding. So that’s what I’m going to say. It

just brings us peace and togetherness.” Emily felt that their relationship grew and became emotionally safer in the process. Emily conveyed, “Our relationship is so much better than it was, but we both realize that we have room to work and grow still. It’s just that it feels so much safer to do it now.” These examples confirm that when a couple establishes secure attachment, it enhances marital satisfaction (Bradley & Hojjat, 2017; Clark et al., 2010); Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013)

Emotionally Focused Therapy. The Emotionally Focused Therapy model has identified three necessary steps that lead to distressed couples experiencing an improved marriage which included: 1) to expand and re-organize key emotional responses and, in the process, the organization of Self, 2) to create a positive shift in partners interactional positions and patterns, 3) to foster the creation of a secure bond between partners (ICEEFT, 2021; Johnson, 2020). When couples can accomplish these three steps, they are better at reducing avoidance attachment and anxiety attachment, increasing intimacy and sexual satisfaction, more resilience to stress, a greater sense of Self, and developing greater empathy skills (Burgess Moser et al., 2015; ICEEFT, 2021; Johnson, 2013, 2020; Johnson et al., 2013; Wiebe et al., 2019; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). The results of this study corroborate EFT's steps to building an improved relationship with the participants describing they experienced a reduction avoidance attachment and anxiety attachment, satisfaction, more resilience to stress, a greater sense of Self, and developed greater empathy skills, as seen below (Burgess Moser et al., 2015; ICEEFT, 2021; Johnson, 2013, 2020; Johnson et al., 2013; Wiebe et al., 2019; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). While the couples interviewed were not at a high level of distress, the workshop had these goals embedded within the structure of the workshop.

The first step of expanding and re-organizing key emotional responses and, in the process, the organization of Self can be seen in some of the participants' responses. Connor demonstrated this step when he stated:

I feel like I benefited from understanding more about our relationship dynamic and from learning more about why Claire tends to respond the way she does. I feel like she benefited from learning the same things about me—understanding why I react the way I do in certain situations. And the relationship itself, I think, has benefited a lot from that knowledge.

Some participants also expressed the second step of creating positive shifts in partners' interactional positions and patterns. One of Grace's earlier answers highlights the positive changes in interactional positions and patterns within her relationship with Gavin:

We would fight as long as we could, and then, at some point in time, we would just say, "Okay, we're done." But things never really got resolved, and I think there were things that never got talked about because we never got that far. And so, when you say, "I'm here for you," then I think it gives the other person permission to not feel like they have to stop or be careful, but they can finish the thought. And if there's more that they need to share, then they feel like there's more that they can share."

Flynn described the benefit of experiencing positive shifts in interactional positions and patterns within a conversation with Faith:

So, I felt... during this process, I felt heard, I felt like I could talk, and she could listen, and I just really felt like it was a good opportunity to be heard, and that was really helpful. And then I remember that there was a lot of hugging when we were on the mat, and it just felt like--because I said before that I felt vulnerable, but then when I did feel

vulnerable, I remember that she would come over and we would just hold each other, and it was safe, and it was comfortable, and then I felt better because I was no longer vulnerable, I felt protected."

Since this was an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop, the third step of EFT of fostering the creation of a secure bond between partners was also the primary goal for the workshop. This became apparent in some of the spouse's comments. A few examples include Emily and Ethan when Emily expressed, "I feel like our relationship is so much better than it was, but we both realize that we have room to work and grow still. It's just that it feels so much safer to do it now." Danielle similarly expressed, "I definitely felt that way, not that I didn't feel solid before but like I feel way more solid after."

Experiential Learning Theory. Kolb (1984) stated that for an individual to learn, the individual must gain knowledge through a transformative experience. The Association for Experiential Education (2005) also emphasizes experiences as a critical element of education when they described experiential education as "a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experiences" (www.aee.org/faq/nfaq.htm). Through these direct experiences, one can retain the knowledge to be able to apply to their life (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Cambridge (2017) explained the importance of long-term memory when he wrote:

The role of long-term memory is a significant part of experiential learning because it is only those elements of an experience that are stored in memory that will be available at a later time for retrieval, reflection, and perhaps cognitive construction and personal growth (p. 112).

The subtheme of Recall from the third primary theme of "After the Workshop" clearly demonstrates the importance of learning from experiential exercises. When asking questions

about the material they learned, the couples showed an inability to recall specific information specifically. However, every couple remembered and articulated the experiential exercises that they engaged in, including the group discussion, reflection, and participating in communication exercises that practice the communication skills taught. This confirms that adult learners need to be engaged in a holistic, adaptive process that involves the four components of experience, perception, cognition, and behavior” (McCarthy, 2016).

Couple Relationship Education. In Chapter Two, the research showed that CRE and premarital education had been around since the early 1930s (Arcus et al., 1993). Most premarital education programs focus on communication or behavior skill training (Benson et al., 2012; Blanchard et al., 2009; Hawkins et al., 2008; Lavner et al., 2016; Markman et al., 2006; Wood et al., 2014). While this study focused on experiential, attachment-building premarital workshops, these workshops still consisted of communication and behavioral skill training. Therefore, the study’s findings fall within the current research and confirm that communication and behavioral skill training are essential components and beneficial for couples to learn (Asadi, 2014; Halford, 2011; Markman et al., 2010).

However, there is a need for premarital education programs that help couples to understand relationship principles, relational connectivity, and attachment (Galovan & Schramm, 2018; Schramm et al., 2017). Up to this point, there have only been a few effective premarital programs that have been researched, PREP, P/E, and PICK, which all lack in helping couples understand emotional connection and attachment. Due to the lack of experiential, attachment-based premarital programs, this type of premarital education has not been researched.

It has also been established that CRE and premarital education have benefited couples who engage in it. This study's results align with recognized benefits of CRE and premarital

education, such as higher marital satisfaction levels, marital harmony, commitment, and lower levels of destructive conflicts (Muluha Keverenge et al., 2020; Onserio et al., 2016; Stanley et al., 2006). For example, Henry reported that he and Heidi are "able to resolve conflict in a way" that they do not escalate, and they are experiencing higher emotional connection.

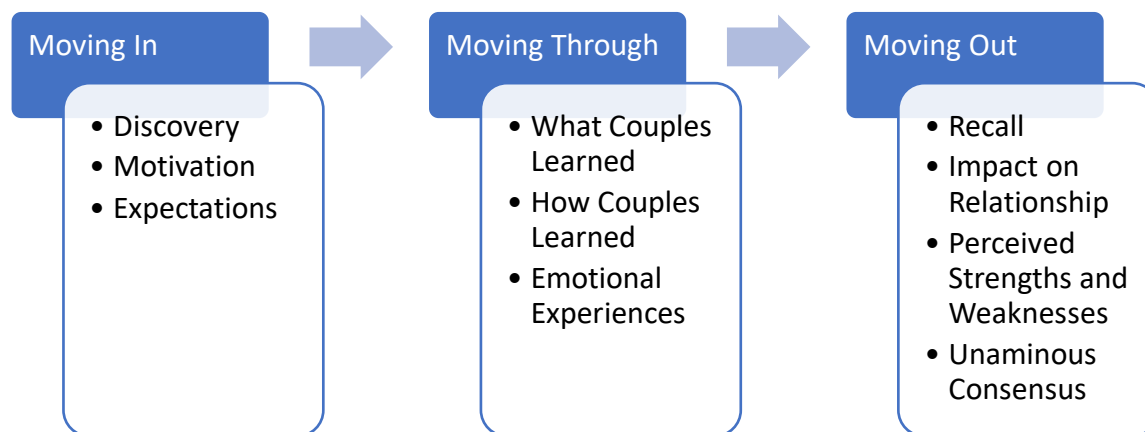
The findings of this study fill this information gap as it examined what a couple experiences as they move in, move through, and move out of an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop. The findings describe how the couples found the experiential learning to be helpful and how to build secure attachment.

Theoretical Literature

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) provided an excellent theoretical framework to explore how a couple moves in, moves through, and moves out of an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop. In doing so, this study added to the body of research about Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) by being applied to premarital education. Remembering that transition is defined as an event that necessitates a change in the individual's assumptive world and a change in the individual's relationships, each couple experienced a transition when attending the workshop. By examining this study's primary themes and subthemes, one can explicitly describe the three stages of transition of attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop through the participant's eyes, as displayed in Figure 8.

Figure 14.

The Transition Process of Attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop



Note. Created by James Kasten to show the *Moving In*, *Moving Through*, and *Moving Out* process.

Implications

This phenomenological study provided results that have theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. The purpose of this section is to describe all three implications and the impact the following stakeholders: 1) the researcher of premarital education, transition theory, or adult attachment, 2) the premarital educator, whether a clergy member, a licensed clinical professional, or a paraprofessional, and 3) future premarital couples.

Theoretical Implications

This study provided results that have theoretical implications for researchers of premarital education and transition theory. Using Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory provided the framework that allowed the descriptions of what couples experienced as they moved in, moved through, and moved out of an experiential, attachment-based premarital

workshop. The findings of this study reveal that couples went through a positive transformative experience that required the couples to learn new ways to communicate and be emotionally accessible, responsive, and engaged. The three primary themes and 10 subthemes provided descriptions of each stage of transitions as well as the 4 S System, which included situations, self, supports, and strategies

Situations. Attending the experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop was an anticipated event by all the couples within this study. Whether hearing about the workshop through familial or professional relationships or seeking out the workshop, each couple had to make a conscious decision to attend. Each couple had different types of motivation to attend that included intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, or a combination of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Self. Once the couples made a conscious decision, they had expectations that they hoped the workshop would meet. There was a common expectation that the couple would experience growth in their relationship. Heid and Henry can summarize this as they described their expectations, "ways to connect as a couple, ways to solve problems together, ways to communicate with one another, just ways to really, overall improve our, our marriage and our relationship." More specifically, there were two expectations that the couples had that would benefit their relationship. The first expectation was learning a new way or more effective communication. Connor was hoping to find the "magic fix" of learning how to communicate, while Daman wanted to know how "communicate vulnerably." The second expectation was that

Supports. Anderson et al. (2012) describe that the different supports include intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and the institutions and communities they belong to, can positively impact one's well-being. This positive impact was seen in the results of this

study. As couples began to engage in experiential exercises, seven of the eight couples reported that they did not have to do it alone. By having the workshop staff and facilitators available for help, the couples were able to feel the support and were able to engage in the experiential exercises. As the couples continued to receive the support and experience, their confidence increased within themselves and confidence in their partners. A few couples even mentioned that by being in a group setting, they were encouraged by the feedback and observing other couples. As the couples utilized the help of the facilitators and workshop staff, they were able to experience positive transformative experiences within their relationship.

Strategies. Each couple had to develop coping strategies to move in, move through, and move out of the transition process of attending the workshop. The most common coping strategy was to reduce the stress they may have felt when engaging in vulnerable experiential exercises. The couples also showed they used one of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) two major coping strategies: relaxing oneself. This also included the following modes of coping: couples taking direct action, information seeking, and intrapsychic dealing with difficult emotions.

Empirical Implications

This phenomenological study also had empirical implications. For the researcher of attachment theory and couple education, this study explored premarital education with attachment building exercises that proved to be effective in helping couples regardless of the length of the relationship to foster a secure attachment. This study reveals what couples can experience when attending premarital workshops that are experiential and attachment building. It also shows the positive impact on couples' relationships when they have positive emotional experiences that produce secure attachment feelings within the relationship.

For the researcher of adult education and experiential learning and adult educator, this study adds to the growing literature of wholistic learning. Also, the participants' inability to recall the lecture portions of the premarital workshop demonstrates the necessity of combining experiential exercises with lecture material if adults are to retain knowledge. As Kolb rightfully points out, the process of learning from experience can always be found in human activity (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

For the researcher of premarital education, this provides information that is severely missing. Because of a lack of standardized premarital education programs and that there has been very little research conducted on premarital education, this study helps provide information on premarital education. It provides information on premarital education in general; more importantly, it focuses on an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop which adds greater depth to the research available.

For mental health counselors, this study has implications on what happens within a session. If counselors want to engage in psychoeducation, they need to realize that just presenting and teaching the information is not enough. If counselors wish to increase the retention of knowledge within their clients, they need to create an experience that their long-term memory can access later. This experience should incorporate an emotional experience or an experiential exercise, or a combination of both. This will help the client remember the behavioral skills or corrective emotional experiences after therapy is over.

For premarital educators, it provides a blueprint to help their couples to develop the skills and behaviors to build better relationships. One needs to keep in mind that when couples become emotionally distressed, they can often use communication skills and strategies (Bodenmann et al., 2006; Kennedy et al., 2019). However, helping couples learn to be emotionally responsive

and co-regulate each other provides the environment where the couple can effectively engage in their behavioral skills

Practical Implications

This study yielded practical implications for the premarital educator (clergy members, licensed clinical professionals, or paraprofessionals) and future premarital couples. Implications and recommendations for the above stakeholder are listed below.

An important consideration for future premarital educators and workshop facilitators is that of awareness. As pointed out earlier in Chapter Two, very few couples take advantage of premarital education (Halford et al., 2006; Williamson et al., 2014). While further research is needed to figure out why not many couples take advantage of premarital education, this study showed that participants fell within two categories of those couples who sought it and those who were made aware through familial or professional relationships. When deciding to hold a premarital workshop, the educator needs to strategize how to get the information about the workshop to the targeted audience.

Another recommendation for premarital workshop facilitators is to ensure enough workshop staff to be available for couples. As the findings from this study show, it can be a challenging experience for couples as they learn new communication and behavioral skills while being in a position of vulnerability with each other and in front of a group. Staff needs to help guide the couple through the various exercises and make the workshop attendees feel emotionally at ease.

When choosing to conduct an in-person, online, or hybrid workshop, a final consideration should be considered. For many of the participants, it was the physicality of the experiential exercises that helped with their ability to recall and remember. This physical element of the

experiential activities could be lost when holding an on-line workshop. It is recommended that on-line facilitators become creative in adding the physical aspects to their workshops.

Delimitations and Limitations

A researcher needs to report the delimitations and limitations of one's research study. The purpose of this information is to inform the reader of accuracy and dependability, strengthening the reader's confidence in the data analysis and the resulting themes. The delimitations and limitations listed below can also inform and guide future research studies.

Delimitations

Delimitations are intentional decisions made by the researcher to limit or define the study's boundaries to achieve the study's aim and objectives. By nature of the study, the age of 18 was an automatic delimitation. The study needed adults since it was designed to look at couples experiencing an attachment-based, experiential workshop through the lens of Schlossberg's (1981) *Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out* phases. Another delimitation chosen was the time elapsed since attending the workshop because there needed to be sufficient time for the couple to experience the *Moving Out* phase. A year was decided as enough time to allow the couple to complete the *Moving Out* phase but still provide a rich description of their experience. Lastly, the delimitation was that the couple still had to be together at the time of the interview. This was intended so the couple could reflect, assess, and describe the short-term and long-term impact that the workshop had upon their relationship.

Limitations

Limitations are imposed weaknesses outside of a researcher's control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Regarding qualitative research studies, limitations are related to validity and reliability (Simon & Goes, 2013). For this study, there are a few noticeable limitations. The first

limitation to this study was the failure to reach the goal of finding only couples that were premarital at the time of their workshop. Out of the eight couples interviewed, only three were premarital at the time they took the workshop. While there have been numerous workshop facilitators trained, very few workshops were held. Due to the limited workshops, it decreased the population to recruit participants from. There appear to be two main reasons for the limited number of workshops held: 1) the attachment-based, experiential premarital workshop was recently created in 2019, and 2) COVID-19 and the resulting health restrictions impacted the trained facilitators to hold workshops.

Another limitation was that there was homogeneity that took place within the population. While the goal was to get a diverse sample, except for two individuals, the rest of the participants identified themselves as Caucasian. Due to the limited participant population, it was necessary to continue the research study with a lack of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Another unintentional homogeneity that appeared within the data was that six of the eight couples are from the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints. This limited variability restricts the transferability of the research's findings.

A third limitation is that "most qualitative methodologies cannot be truly replicated (as in controlled experimental conditions) and therefore are unable to be verified per se (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018, p. 156)." This study is limited in transferability and application because it was limited to one type of attachment-based, experiential premarital workshop. A more diverse research sample in both population and other types of attachment-based, experiential premarital workshops would increase the applicability and transferability of this research study's results to a broader population.

Recommendations for Future Research

The focus of this study was on the experience of couples who attended an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop. The following suggestions for future research are proposed based upon the results of this study:

Due to the premarital workshop being the first of its kind and recently developed, most of the premarital workshops consisted of premarital couples and married couples. It is recommended that future research consists of just premarital couples.

Also, since this workshop was recently developed, the population was small to recruit from. Due to this, there was the occurrence of homogeneity within this study. Future research should recruit diverse ethnic backgrounds to ensure variation within the study's participants. There also needs to be diversity regarding religion. It would be helpful to examine the experiences of attending this type of workshop with members of other denominations and those who consider themselves non-religious. By increasing the variation amongst the participants, the transferability also increases.

Also, since most of the couples were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, future research should explore this denomination's view upon relationships, marriage, and family. Doing so may provide additional insight if there was a religious influence upon the participant's perception of their relationship and experience of attending the workshop that may be different from those of other faith and non-religious backgrounds.

Due to the difficulty of recruiting participants for the study, the focus group was dropped to make the time commitment more palatable for potential participants. Since the focus group did not happen, I recommend that future research around this subject include a focus group. Focus groups can be a valuable data collection method as they can "yield rich, in-depth data and

illuminate agreement and inconsistencies” around the phenomenon being explored (Gill & Baillie, 2018, p. 7). The group interaction could provide additional rich descriptions of the shared phenomenon as the participants answer the focus group questions, share their point of view, comment on each other’s experiences, ask each other questions, and stimulate each other’s memory. Focus groups can also serve as a way of member-checking the data collected from the semi-structured interviews, ensuring the credibility of the study. (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Another recommendation for future research would be a quantitative research study to provide statistical analysis of the impact of attending an attachment-based, experiential workshop. A researcher could utilize the Brief Accessibility, Responsiveness, and Engagement (BARE) Scale. The BARE scale is designed to measure a couple’s attachment behavior that examines the perception of one’s ability to be accessible, responsive, and engaged, as well as their partner’s ability (Sandberg et al., 2016). Since this workshop taught couples to have attachment-based conversations, the Couple Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS) could also be used. The CCSS measures a couple’s satisfaction regarding their communication by looking at five factors of self-communication presence, self-emotional experience, partner responsiveness, partner contribution, and communication characteristics (Jones et al., 2018). A researcher could administer the BARE scale in conjunction with CCSS before the workshop, during the workshop, and a year after the workshop to measure couples’ attachment behaviors and communication satisfaction.

This study revealed the importance of the facilitators and support staff to the couples who attend the workshop – to their ability to learn, understand, and implement attachment-based communication techniques and the overall quality of their experience. Additional studies on the

facilitator's training and the facilitators themselves could help reveal the necessary attributes, strategies, and components to ensure an effective attachment-based, experiential workshop.

Since this study was limited to one type of attachment-based, experiential workshop, a case study could also have been an appropriate qualitative research model. However, I chose the phenomenological approach for broader transferability. Moving forward, a case study on this specific experiential attachment-based premarital workshop would be beneficial. A case study would provide the key stakeholders and researchers with expected and unexpected insight into this phenomenon and reveal the necessary and unnecessary conditions.

Finally, a long-term research study is recommended. It would be beneficial to see if the couples could maintain positive gains within their attachment security within their relationship, communication, and conflict resolution. It would also be beneficial to see if the couple's positive gains deteriorated over time and the contributing variables.

Summary

The purpose of this study transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of couples who attended an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop. By using the transcendental phenomenological methodology, the couples' voices were heard, which provided three primary themes and 10 subthemes.

The first primary theme was Before the Workshop. It revealed three subthemes experienced by the couples: how they learned about the workshop, their motivation for attending, and what they were hoping to get out of it. The Second primary theme was During the Workshop, which also had three subthemes. The couples described how they learned, what they learned, and their emotional experiences while moving through the workshop. Lastly, the third primary theme had four subthemes: the couples' ability to recall, the enduring impact on their

relationship, the couples' perceived strength and weakness of the workshop, and the unanimous consensus that premarital couples should attend an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop.

Previous research establishes that premarital education that involves the development of communication and behavioral skills has been beneficial for couples. Research also shows that attachment theory plays a vital role in how a couple behaves with each other when they sense an emotional disconnection by engaging in the fight, flight, or freeze behaviors. Yet up to this point, there has been a lack of premarital workshops that combined experiential communication and behavioral exercises with attachment theory. This study was able to fill in the information gap about premarital workshops that are experiential and attachment based.

This study has implications for stakeholders that include 1) the researcher of premarital education, transition theory, or adult attachment, 2) the premarital educator, whether a clergy member, a licensed clinical professional, or a paraprofessional, and 3) future premarital couples. Those who study transition theory can use the finding as a starting point for further research on Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory as it applies to couple relationship education and premarital education. The premarital educator can use the information gathered in this study to provide more effective premarital workshops that will impact the premarital couples attending.

Marriage is hard, and couples experience a lot of stressors that can strain their relationship. Couples must learn communication and behavior skills and be emotionally accessible, responsive, and engaged. Attending a workshop like the ones within this study would help the premarital couple set themselves up for long-term success.

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Appendix A.

Demographic Questions

The purpose of my research study is to investigate how couples experienced attending a premarital workshop that combines attachment theory and experiential learning. This questionnaire is intended to capture demographic information, confirm your completion of the premarital workshop, assess your perceived level of ability as couple to reflect on and discuss your premarital workshop experience, and to record your overall reflection and perceptions of your premarital workshop experience.

* Required

Email address: * _____

1. First and Last Names * _____
2. Ages of Partners: * _____ & _____
3. Gender of Spouses: * _____ & _____
4. Race/Ethnicity: * _____ & _____
5. Date of Premarital Workshop Attended (Month/Year): * _____
6. Name of Workshop Facilitator: * _____
7. Length of Relationship: * _____
8. Are You Currently Married? * Yes: _____ No _____
9. We Are Confident That We Can Recall Details About Our Experience Prior To Attending The Premarital Workshop (e.g., Our Relationship Prior To Attending, The Events That Led To Our Interest In Participating In The Workshop, Expectations of The Workshop, etc.): *

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

10. We Are Confident That We Can Recall Details About Our Experience While Attending The Premarital Workshop (e.g., Challenges Experienced, Positive Moments Experienced, etc.): *

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

11. We Are Confident That We Can Recall Details About Our Experience After Attending The Premarital Workshop (Differences in Our Relationship, Short Term & Long-Term Impact, etc.):

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

12. Please Take A Moment To Share A Memory From Your Premarital Workshop Experience: *

Appendix B.

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Former Participant of a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop:

My name is James Kasten, and I am a doctoral student at Liberty University in the Department of Community Care and Counseling. I am conducting a research project to learn about your experience of attending a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop. The purpose of my research study is to investigate how couples experienced attending a premarital workshop that combines attachment theory and experiential learning.

If you are above the age of 18, have attended a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop, and the workshop took place at least one year ago, you will be asked to do the following tasks:

- Complete the demographic survey at <https://forms.gle/DqJ9sN7HMUk1enGe9>. I will then contact you regarding your inclusion in the study, which includes the following steps.
- Participate in a one-hour interview with the researcher. The interview will take place through Zoom, a video conferencing software. The interview will be audio and/or video recorded.
- Illustrate your experiences of having attended the premarital workshop. This will be completed at the time of the interview and should take no more than 15 minutes.
- Participate in a focus group with the researcher and other study participants. The focus group will take place in an online chat room or group text software format, therefore allowing you to respond to the focus questions at your convenience. The invitation will be sent after completing the one-on-one interview with the researcher and will be conducted with the other participants from other couples who attended a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop.
- Participate in the member-checking process to review the researcher's findings and conclusions and provide feedback on the accuracy of the information you provided.

It will take approximately two hours for you to complete the procedures listed. Your participation will be completely confidential as no personal identifying information will be collected. A consent document will be provided to you before the interview that contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to me before the interview.

If you choose to participate and selected, you will be sent a \$50 amazon gift card electronically at the completion of the tasks mentioned above as a token of my appreciation.

Sincerely,
James J. Kasten
Doctoral Student

Appendix C.

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 2, 2021

James Kasten
Frederick Milacci

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-816 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COUPLES ATTENDING EXPERIENTIAL, ATTACHMENT-BASED PREMARITAL WORKSHOPS

Dear James Kasten, Frederick Milacci:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

Appendix D.

Facilitator's Help Recruitment Letter

Dear Building A Lasting Connection Workshop Facilitator:

My name is James Kasten, and I am a doctoral student at Liberty University in the Department of Community Care and Counseling. I am conducting a research project to learn about the couples' experience who attended one of your Building A Lasting Connection Workshops. The purpose of my research study is to investigate how couples experienced attending a premarital workshop that combines attachment theory and experiential learning.

I need your help in recruiting couples that were premarital couples at the time of your workshop. I'm trying to get a sample that includes a diversity of couples (age, race/ethnicity, length of the relationship, etc.) across from different facilitators. Please think of couples who meet the requirements, and that might be a good fit for the study and forward their names and emails to me. I will then send them an invitation email to the research study, outlining the purpose of the research study, the participants' expectations, and the compensation for participating. For your information, I have listed below the relevant information of what the participation requirements and expectations would be for the couples.

- Couples will need to be above the age of 18, have attended a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop, and the workshop took place at least one year ago. If selected, the couples will be asked to do the following tasks:
- Complete the demographic survey at <https://forms.gle/DqJ9sN7HMUk1enGe9>. I will then contact the couple regarding their inclusion in the study, which includes the following steps.
- Participate in a one-hour interview with the researcher. The interview will take place through Zoom, a video conferencing software. The interview will be audio and/or video recorded.
- Illustrate their experiences of having attended the premarital workshop. This activity will be completed at the time of the interview and should take no more than 15 minutes.
- Participate in a focus group with the researcher and other study participants. The focus group will take place in an online chat room or group text software format, therefore allowing you to respond to the focus questions at your convenience. The invitation will be sent after completing the one-on-one interview with the researcher and will be conducted with the other participants from other couples who attended a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop.
- Participate in the member-checking process to review the researcher's findings and conclusions and provide feedback on the accuracy of the information you provided.
- It will take approximately two hours for couples to complete the procedures listed. The couples' participation will be completely confidential as no personal identifying information will be collected.

If you can suggest names and I can recruit a couple from your list, you will be sent a \$25 amazon gift card (electronically) at the couple's completion of the tasks mentioned above as a token of my appreciation.

With My Sincerest Gratitude,
James J. Kasten
Doctoral Student

Appendix E.

Participant's Recruitment Letter

Dear Former Participant of a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop:

My name is James Kasten, and I am a doctoral student at Liberty University in the Department of Community Care and Counseling. I am conducting a research project to learn about your experience of attending a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop. The purpose of my research study is to investigate how couples who attended an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop describes their experiences.

If you are above the age of 18, have attended a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop, and the workshop took place at least one year ago, you will be asked to do the following tasks:

- Complete the demographic survey at <https://forms.gle/DqJ9sN7HMUK1enGe9>. I will then contact you regarding your inclusion in the study, which includes the following steps.
- Participate in a one-hour interview with the researcher. The interview will take place through Zoom, a video conferencing software. The interview will be audio and/or video recorded.
- Illustrate your experiences of having attended the premarital workshop. This will be completed at the time of the interview and should take no more than 15 minutes.
- Participate in a focus group with the researcher and other study participants. The focus group will take place in an online chat room or group text software format, therefore allowing you to respond to the focus questions at your convenience. The invitation will be sent after completing the one-on-one interview with the researcher and will be conducted with the other participants from other couples who attended a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop.
- Participate in the member-checking process to review the researcher's findings and conclusions and provide feedback on the accuracy of the information you provided.

It will take approximately two hours for you to complete the procedures listed. Your participation will be completely confidential as no personal identifying information will be collected. A consent document will be provided to you before the interview that contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to me before the interview.

If you choose to participate and selected, you will be sent a \$50 amazon gift card electronically at the completion of the tasks mentioned above as a token of my appreciation.

Sincerely,
James J. Kasten
Doctoral Student

Appendix F.

Informed Consent Form

Title of the Project: Exploring The Lived Experiences Of Couples Attending Experiential, Attachment-Based Premarital Workshops

Principal Investigator: James J. Kasten, M.A., Liberty University, Department of Community Care and Counseling

You are invited to be in a research study regarding the experiences of couples attending an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshops. You were selected as a possible participant because you attended a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop in the past. In order to participate, you must be above the age of 18, have attended a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop, and the workshop took place at least one year ago. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

James J Kasten is a doctoral candidate in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

The purpose of my research study is to investigate how couples experienced attending a premarital workshop that combines attachment theory and experiential learning. I'm looking to hear directly from the couples and listening to their perception of the workshop and its impact on their relationship.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following tasks:

- Participate in a one-hour interview with the researcher. The interview will take place through Zoom, a video conferencing software. The interview will be audio and/or video recorded.
- Illustrate your experiences of having attended the premarital workshop. This will be completed at the time of the interview and should take no more than 15 minutes.
- Participate in a focus group with the researcher and other study participants. The focus group will take place in an online chat room or group text software format, therefore allowing you to respond to the focus questions at your convenience. The invitation will be sent after completing the one-on-one interview with the researcher and will be conducted with the other participants from other couples who attended a Building A Lasting Connection Workshop.
- Participate in the member-checking process to review the researcher's findings and conclusions and provide feedback on the accuracy of the information you provided.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include:

- Helping describe benefits of an attachment-based workshop.
- Providing a description of couples attending an attachment-based premarital workshop.
- Participating in a qualitative research study

Additionally, findings from this study may be published and potentially prove beneficial to premarital educators, couples who may attend future premarital educational workshops, and help strengthen the Building A Lasting Connection Workshop.

Compensation:

By fully participating in the procedures in this study, you will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card. Upon completing all the participation requirements, the \$50 amazon gift card will be sent to you electronically.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records, recordings, and associated transcripts will be stored securely in password-protected data files. Written and hard copy records will be kept in a secure file cabinet until such time that they are converted to electronic form and stored on a password-protected computer. All electronic files will be backed up using an online backup service. Access to data will be limited to the researcher and will not be used for purposes outside of this study without additional consent of research participants. Furthermore, participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Assigned pseudonyms will be used in all written or electronic records and reports to protect participant identity. All pseudonyms will be kept on a list stored separately from the data in a separate password-protected folder. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings. However, because focus groups require the involvement of other participants, I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How to Withdraw from Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, please do so by emailing the principal investigator, James Kasten at [REDACTED] or

_____ or by calling _____. Should you decide to withdraw from the study, any information or materials you provided will be excluded from data collection, analysis, and study findings. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is James J. Kasten. **You are encouraged** to contact the researcher regarding any questions you have now about this study via e-mail to _____ or _____ by calling _____. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Frederick Milacci, _____.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher or those listed above, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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

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

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Participant Names: _____

Participants' Signatures: _____ Date: _____

Appendix G.

Interview Questions

Opening Questions

1. Please tell me a little about yourself as if we were meeting for the first time?
2. How did you guys meet?
3. What made you decide to become engaged?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your parents or parental figures growing up?
5. How would you describe your parent's marriage while growing up?

Questions Related to the Experience of the Moving In Phase

6. Please describe your experience of learning about the workshop. What were your initial thoughts when you heard about the workshop?
7. Please describe the process you took as a couple to decide to participate in the workshop. What were the circumstances surrounding your decision? What was the appeal of the workshop that helped sway you to say yes?
8. After registering for the workshop, what were your expectations prior to attending the workshop?
9. How would you describe your relationship prior to attending the workshop?

Questions Related to the Experience of the Moving Through Phase.

10. How were your expectations met while attending the workshop?
11. What challenges did you experience while attending the workshop?

12. What were some unexpected experiences you encountered while attending the workshop?

Were they positive? Were they negative?

13. While attending the workshop, how would you describe your experience with the interactive exercises of the workshop?

14. While attending the workshop, what did you experience as you learned the material that was being presented?

15. While attending the workshop, how would you describe your relationship?

Questions Related to the Experience of Moving Out Phase

16. As you look back at your workshop experience, how would you describe your experience with the workshop? Was it an overall positive experience or negative, and why?

17. How do you feel that you, your sweetheart, and your relationship benefitted (or did not benefit) from you completing the workshop?

18. How would you describe your relationship since attending the workshop?

19. What would you tell other premarital couples that were considering attending the workshop?

20. Is there anything else related to your workshop experience that you would like to add that we have not already discussed?

21. If needed, would it be okay if we did a follow-up or a clarifying interview if needed?

Appendix H.

Reflex Journal

- 6/16/21 Couple A: I was extremely nervous beforehand for this was my first interview. I enjoyed interviewing this couple. They were such a cute couple, and it was fun watching them interact. I found it interesting to hear their experiences as well as learn about them. They were passionate about their experience with the workshop and its impact on them individually and their relationship.
- 6/17/21 Couple B: Again, I was nervous before this interview. I wonder if this will go away but I don't think so. I always have "butterflies" when meeting people for the first time or doing a new activity for the first time. This was a fun couple, but I found the interview to be a little frustrating at times. I felt that the husband was joking around a lot and wasn't taking the interview seriously at times. This was interesting because the wife described a similar experience with him during the workshop. Maybe just his personality?
- 6/18/21 Couple C: A little less nervous this time around but I had already interacted with the wife a few times due to her being the administrative support for the workshops that I was recruiting participants from. They brought an insider's perspective. I learned during this interview that they attended a combined workshop experience that was providing training to become facilitators but also had to go through the experience. I am wondering if this was a valid interview. I'll need to talk to Dr. Milacci about it.
- 6/24/21 Couple D: I felt really positive and excited about this interview. This couple provided the most diversity regarding demographics than the other couples so far. They were willing and engaged in answering the questions. It was also interesting to interview them because of all the couples so far, they were still premarital. It was interesting to hear how the workshop made Danielle feel more secure within the relationship. This interview went well and enjoyed interviewing this couple.
- 7/1/21 Couple E: Trying to secure this interview was a battle. I had to beg but I want to get enough interviews. I ended up only interviewing the wife because of the husband's work schedule. While the wife was lovely to talk to, I wish the husband was there as well. She provided short answers without expounding on them. My theory is that the husband, based on the interview, would have provided much richer data. It is going to be challenging to give voice to this couple in the data.
- 7/12/21 Couple F: Yep, nervous again. Once the interview started going, I settled into the groove real quick. I feel this was a great interview. The couple was generous with their answers and gave good descriptions of what they experienced. It also helps that the husband has been a researcher in his previous career and understood what I was trying to accomplish.

- 7/13/21 Couple G: This was probably my favorite couple to interview. There was a lot of laughter and they responded easily to the questions. The couple played off each other well. They were such a delight to spend time with. I also think they offer a great perspective on the impact because of the length of their marriage
- 7/21/21 Couple H: I was ready to interview but received a text saying that the husband was experiencing kidney stones. I'm experiencing mixed emotions. I have experienced a few kidney stones in the past and know the pain that it causes so I felt for the husband. I was also disappointed that I couldn't complete my eighth interview.
- 7/27/21: Couple H: I noticed I experienced fewer nerves with this interview; I wonder if is because I felt a little more confident or it could be that I already went through some of the nerves last night. The wife was very outgoing and had a "Bubbly" personality." Some minor frustration was experienced with this interview. It felt that the wife, due to her personality, would cut off her husband at times when he was answering. Also, the husband seems a bit distracted by being on his phone. There was a moment that the interview had this weird pause because the couple got caught up trying to figure dates and recall events. But overall, I enjoyed interviewing them. I'm also relieved that hit 8 interviews.

Appendix I.

Copyright Permission



January 6, 2022

Dr. James J. Kasten, LPC, NCC
 Doctor of Education in Community Care and Counseling
 Liberty University
 1971 University Blvd.
 Lynchburg, VA 24515

Dear Dr. Kasten:

Building A Lasting Connection®, LLC ("Licensor") is owner of the copyright protected mats used in connection with Licensor's Lasting Connection System™ (the "Licensed Work") and Lasting Connection Workshop™. By this letter, Licensor grants to Dr. James J. Kasten ("Licensee") a limited license to use the Licensed Work in Licensee's doctoral dissertation and to publish images of the Licensed Work as part of any publication of Licensee's doctoral dissertation. This license grant is perpetual but is limited to use with Licensee's current dissertation. Any additional use must be approved by Licensor. The Licensed Work is part of Licensor's Lasting Connection System™ and should be referenced in the dissertation as Lasting Connection System™.

The license grants is not transferrable without Licensor's written consent and is binding on and will inure to the benefit of either party and their respective heirs, successors, and permitted assigns.

Sincerely,

Dr. Debi Gilmore LMFT
 Dr. Rebecca Jorgensen CMHC
 Owners, Developers, and Founders of Building A Lasting Connection®, LLC