

The Lived Experiences of Premarital Counseling and its Influence on Martial Satisfaction

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Department of Community Care and Counseling, 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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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who have engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland. How do couples experience premarital counseling is the study's central research question. The theory guiding this study is Gottman's (1993) cascade model of marital dissolution. This model offers a theoretical framework for understanding how minor issues in marriage can exacerbate and foster the entire marital experience. The study is quantitative research using an interpretive phenomenological design to recruit the participants for the study. The study conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with couples to collect data regarding lived experience. A thematic analysis technique was used to analyze the data by identifying common meanings and essences through textual and structural analysis of what was expressed by the participants. The study found that couples engage in counseling mandatorily or voluntarily due to religious needs, yearning to learn skills for a successful marriage, and managing relationship challenges affected by past experiences and communication. Besides, the study determines that counselors' knowledge is crucial in creating a warm environment. In conclusion, counseling is an important platform for couples to learn new skills, manage relationship issues, and prepare for marriage, underscoring the role of counselors' supportive environments and expertise in this process.

Keywords: premarital counseling, phenomenology, relationship issues, marriage, marital skills

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this dissertation to my Heavenly Father, who is my joy, strength and reason for living. This is also dedicated to my family who never gives up on me but saw the best in me.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge my Lord and Savior Jesus who continues to impart his wisdom, knowledge, and understanding through this dissertation. Sincere appreciation extends to the following individuals: Dr. Bridgette Hester, my chair, who expertly guided me throughout the dissertation process with her words of encouragement and reminder that this process is not a sprint but a marathon. To Dr Fred Milacci, committee member and reader, thanks for his willingness to review my work and impart great knowledge and feedback. It has been a humbling experience to have you both on this journey with me.

Next, I acknowledge my Husband Leonard who is my biggest champion and would continue to push even when I feel like giving up. I must also thank my children for their patience and encouragement even through those grumpy days when papers were all over the table and my workspace was so messy. You all have been amazing; words are insufficient to say how grateful I am for your support. Lastly, to everyone who encouraged me, especially Devon Blackwood, Dr Reid and my church family. I could not have done this without your support.

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List of Abbreviations

The title of this page should be a Title heading, centered, 1 inch from the top of the page. Entries should be double-spaced. Examples are provided below.

American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC)

Attachment to God Inventory (AGI)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Premarital counseling is a “technique meant to develop and enrich premarital relationships leading to much more satisfying and stable relationships” to prevent separation (Kepler, 2015, p. 3). Deciding to marry is a significant event in one’s life. Just before a person gets married it is often one of the most sensitive and critical periods in life and is very influential in preventing marital problems after marriage (Moharrami et al., 2017). Premarital counseling is a therapy that helps prepare couples for future challenges and expectations in marriage (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019; Carlson et al., 2020; Moeti et al., 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018). Most premarital counseling services address common issues such as medical screening, beliefs and values, expectations, partner knowledge, roles and duties, sex, parenthood, financial management, communication, and conflicts (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020). Premarital counseling is also one of the most robust ways to prevent hereditary diseases; it provides the capability to intervene according to identified risks, vaccinations, genetic consulting, nutrition, behavior, and advice regarding contraception (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019).

However, traditional premarital counseling is no longer as respected or conducted as in-depth as it was in the mid to latter part of the 20th century (Moeti et al., 2017). In the 21st century, brides have increasingly questioned the value of premarital counseling because they feel it infringes on women’s rights (Moeti et al., 2017). There is evidence that this decline in premarital counseling is negatively impacting the establishment of marriages (Moeti et al., 2017). A study by Moeti et al. (2017) suggested that inefficacy in implementing premarital counseling and the overfocus on mixed-gender couples,

dissatisfaction, discord, and divorce among couples has led to an unbalanced perspective of relationships.

The purpose of the current study was to explore the lived experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland. By understanding the lived experiences of couples engaged in marriage counseling, the researcher anticipates obtaining data that can speak to a myriad of marital concerns premarital counseling addresses. Identifying concerns could prevent a cascade of dissolution, as seen in Gottman's (1999) theoretical framework used as the foundation for this study. Furthermore, this study addressed a gap in the present literature pointed out by Hart (2018), Scott et al. (2018), and Afdal et al. (2019) concerning how marital satisfaction and relationship longevity can be impacted by premarital counseling. The study also expanded on current works by including couples from various demographic backgrounds, including those who have traditionally been excluded from this type of research (Scott et al., 2018).

This proposed study involved face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 19 married couples from diverse backgrounds who have been married for at least one year and attended premarital counseling before marriage. Interviews were conducted with participants to answer two research questions:

RQ1: How do couples experience premarital counseling?

RQ2: How do couples interpret learning the skills in premarital counseling to avoid the dissolution of their marriage?

The present study's findings contribute to the current understanding of the value of premarital counseling. Through these insights, the study findings are of particular

value for informing premarital counseling practices. For instance, this study has practical implications, as the findings offered critical insight into premarital counseling strategies that therapists can use and recommendations to increase its efficacy. Furthermore, this study could potentially benefit couples by providing information about others' experiences with premarital counseling.

This chapter presents background information on the experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling. Additionally, this chapter includes an explanation of the current social context of premarital counseling as well as the historical context of premarital counseling in the United States. Furthermore, this chapter reviews the theoretical context of premarital counseling. To provide context for this study, the chapter also details the researcher's situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, the significance of the study, research questions, and definitions. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary of the chapter's main points and an overview of the rest of the proposal.

Background

The purpose of the current study was to explore the lived experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland. By focusing on the lived experiences of couples engaged in marriage counseling, this study provided valuable insight into the potential benefits of premarital counseling. Specifically, this study addressed a gap in the present literature regarding how marital satisfaction and relationship longevity can be impacted by premarital counseling. Furthermore, the present study included couples from a variety of demographic backgrounds, including those who have traditionally been excluded from

this type of research, to gain valuable insight from this often-neglected perspective. A study by Moeti et al. (2017) suggested that inefficacy in implementing premarital counseling and the overfocus on mixed-gender couples, dissatisfaction, discord, and divorce among couples has led to an unbalanced perspective of relationships. Additionally, Hart (2018), Scott et al. (2018), and Afdal et al. (2019) have emphasized the importance of additional research from a more modern perspective on this topic, underscoring the importance of this to establishing best practices amongst premarital counselors and to presenting premarital counseling as a useful tool for couples seeking to achieve marital satisfaction (Scott et al., 2018).

According to White (2019), 93% of Americans ranked having a good marriage among life's most important goals. While individuals may report various reasons for desiring a pleasant and fulfilling union, a happy marriage has been linked to numerous specific benefits, including personal health and an increased lifespan (Shmerling, 2016). On the other hand, marital stress and imbalanced marriages can reportedly incur health risks and can be associated with couples experiencing financial strain (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). While many Americans believe marriage counseling is beneficial, seeking counseling is only sometimes feasible. Various studies have provided empirical evidence that couple's therapy can improve marital relationships, but only a minority of couples actually seek out help. Relationship interventions are even less common among low-income couples despite having a higher risk of marital distress and dissolution than couples that earn a higher income (H. C. Williamson et al., 2019). As a result, counselors must examine preventative and intervention strategies that are more accessible to help couples achieve a happy marriage and decrease the risk of divorce (Kepler, 2015).

Premarital counseling can be classified into several unique types based on the specific areas of focus (Kepler, 2015). Premarital counseling may benefit relationships by facilitating better communication structures to avoid separation (Udofia et al., 2021). Furthermore, if warranted, premarital counseling can improve attitudes toward receiving marital counseling later on in the relationship (Mary, 2016). Other benefits include assistance with the transition from solitary to marital life, improving the couple's skills in communication, emphasizing the existing friendship as an important component of the partnership, increasing affection between members of the couple, and teaching how to utilize problem-solving and judgment skills regarding finances and marital obligations (Kepler, 2015). The premarital process includes couples attending counseling and training sessions to mitigate risks such as separation and disagreement between partners before the union (Hahlweg & Richter, 2010). The setting of premarital counseling is often in secular or religious organizations (Bawa, 2018). Couples that seek counseling originate from diverse religious, social, or ethnic backgrounds to achieve a happy and sustained marriage (Bawa, 2018). Couples seeking counseling include married couples, although the research is limited to non-traditional couples (Hart, 2018; Scott et al., 2018).

Premarital counseling has strong implications for marital stability. Marital stability refers to a strong, well-balanced, and successful marriage partnership between two people (Echebe, 2010). Marital stability requires a constantly evolving interpersonal relationship (Adejare et al., 2019). As a result, love and a sustained commitment to the relationship may accompany periods of conflict or separation (Adejare et al., 2019). Hence, marital stability is necessary to help couples work through difficult situations together. According to Echebe (2010), maintaining a well-adjusted family also requires

marital stability. Thus, marriage stability and satisfaction contribute to a satisfying marriage that may further develop and improve with premarital counseling.

Social Context of Premarital Counseling

Although marriage is between two people, the factors related to marital pleasure and stability include social, cultural, and demographic aspects of the individual, the couple, and those they interact with outside the marriage, such as family, friends, and the community (Cohen & Strong, 2020). In critical situations, Karimi et al. (2019) found that commitment preserves the pillars of marriage, whereas intimacy plays a crucial role in constructing marital identity and satisfaction. According to Karimi et al. (2019), interpersonal and intrapersonal factors contribute to marital stability in long-term marriages. The authors identified several specific factors, including spirituality and religion, commitment, intimacy, communication, children, love and attachment, and approaches to conflict resolution (Karimi et al., 2019). Cohen and Strong (2020) posited that these are only a few aspects that might impact marriage satisfaction, finding that individuals from similar cultural backgrounds are more likely to understand each other than cross-cultural couples (Cohen & Strong, 2020). Premarital counseling facilitates a couple's acceptance of cultural differences to create a healthy marriage among interracial or cross-cultural partners (Singh et al., 2020). Furthermore, researchers have proven that premarital therapy assists in achieving marital satisfaction among partners by aiding couples to prepare for conflicts arising from breakdowns related to any factors that impact marital stability (Cobb & Sullivan, 2015; Kepler, 2015).

Communication is also essential in a marriage (Udofia et al., 2021). Premarital counseling can serve as a useful tool to help partners improve their communication skills,

set reasonable marriage goals, and develop effective conflict-resolution skills. Improving these skills contributes to a successful marriage (Jafari et al., 2021). Parhizgar et al. (2017) explained that premarital educational programs could significantly improve spouses' communication skills. Furthermore, in a parallel intervention study, Parhizgar et al. (2017) concluded that partners who attend premarital counseling programs have better social skills, as these partners report having better communication and marital satisfaction.

Another critical facet of marriage is contentment. Lawrence et al. (2019) described marital contentment as a psychological state that reflects a couple's positive sense of the rewards and expenses of marriage. Conflict, discontentment, and resentment jeopardize marriage longevity (Davoodvandi et al., 2018). Issues within the marriage can cause conflict that leads to discontentment and increases the likelihood of future conflicts, thereby creating a negative sense of marital rewards (Rajaei et al., 2019). Similarly, responsibility imbalance can cause partner resentment, decreasing marriage contentment (Parker et al., 2022). The more obligations one partner imposes on the other, the less likely they are to be content with the relationship and marital companion (Echebe, 2010). In contrast, relationships characterized by more evenly distributed obligations tend to be associated with greater satisfaction with their marriage and partner (Polenick et al., 2017).

Family support is also vital in a marriage (McGhee et al., 2021). It is important to recognize that intimate relationships do not occur in isolation but within a social network of relatives and friends (Felmlee, 2001). Most researchers contend that individuals receiving help or advice from their social network have more committed marriages (Jin &

Oh, 2010; Mert, 2018). Support from family and friends, is often associated with reports of greater romantic connection, affection, fulfillment, and dedication (Jin & Oh, 2010). Emotional and social support from relatives and acquaintances include demonstrations of affection, compassion, or encouragement, which researchers have proven alleviates stress and reduces anxiety while increasing marital satisfaction (Don & Hammond, 2017; McGhee et al., 2021).

Several aspects of marriage are essential from a social context. For example, communication in a marriage is vital, which extends beyond the marriage to improve social and conflict resolution skills (Jafari et al., 2021). Reasonable expectations regarding the rewards and expenses of marriage are vital, as they determine factors in marriage contentment (Lawrence et al., 2019). Social support from family members also impacts overall marriage satisfaction (McGhee et al., 2021). Premarital counseling has facilitated partners' communication, setting realistic expectations, reducing conflict, and improving their social skills.

Historical Context of Premarital Counseling

The distinct professional practice of marriage therapy dates back to the 1900s (Stone, 1949). In the United States, Dr. Abraham Stone and Dr. Hannah Stone opened the first marital consulting clinic in New York in 1929 (Stone, 1949). The introduction of a consulting clinic quickly led to a rise in similar facilities that began providing information and counseling to engaged and married individuals.

The American Institute of Family Relations, founded by Paul Popenoe in Los Angeles in 1930, was among the first dedicated facilities for marriage therapy (Duncan et al., 2010). In 1932, Bally H. Mudd opened the Philadelphia Marriage Counsel to serve

married couples working through episodes of marital discord. In 1942, this same facility offered a couple's support program to educate engaged and married individuals about various root causes of marital pain (Duncan et al., 2010). The marriage counselors at the Philadelphia Marriage Counsel were a highly multidisciplinary group of specialists with medical, psychiatric, social service, philosophy, teaching, theology, sociology, and law (Goodman, 1972).

Premarital counseling became increasingly common in the 1970s because its focus transitioned from primarily educating couples on marriage to equipping them with the skills to navigate and improve their marriages (Popenoe, 2009). Since the 1970s, premarital counseling has evolved to include various program types, including but not limited to (a) seminars, (b) paired couples therapy, (c) discussion groups, (d) university and college courses, self-directed programs; (f) publications; (g) informative websites; (h) online classes; and (g) catalogs (Kepler, 2015). Through the last several decades, groups and individuals offering these services have increasingly utilized government-approved premarital guidance and counseling tools, including online programs like Couples Therapy Inc., ReGain, and Our Relationship (Doss et al., 2020). Additionally, some in-person premarital counseling programs, like religious counseling, are done by religious leaders, and premarital counseling sessions are done by licensed premarital counselors (Zlmlch, 2022).

Theoretical Context of Premarital Counseling

The theoretical foundation of this study was Gottman's (1993) cascade model of marital dissolution. The cascade model for marital dissatisfaction and disintegration combines the social and behavioral exchange theories. Gottman asserted that numerous

factors contributed to the profound rise in annual marital breakdowns (Gottman, 1993). These breakdowns include emotional flooding, aggression, and irreconcilable personal views that are more accepting of divorce (Gottman, 1993). This model resulted from numerous scientific studies involving hundreds of marriages spanning decades.

Several observational longitudinal studies exist, covering over four decades of research, including over 3,000 couples as participants. Gottman's 1993 study included 85 opposite-sex couples. Gottman identified certain behaviors and their influence on marriage satisfaction and conflict resolution from these studies. Gottman's 1993 study states that a permanent marriage depends on a couple's capacity to settle inevitable arguments. The essential component of this ability is conflict resolution.

Then, in 1994, Gottman found that nearly one-third of all conflicts may resolve themselves using the right approach. Gottman (1994) posited that the right approach involves each partner examining the conflict from the other's perspective, expressing empathy, and asking questions or seeking clarification. Gottman (1994) stated that marital permanence increases when good actions double the negative ones. However, not all harmful or undesirable behaviors contribute to marital disintegration, but four behaviors are known to cause marital dissatisfaction; these behaviors were coined *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* by Gottman (Gottman, 1994, p. 3).

Gottman (1994) identified four behaviors that impact marital dissatisfaction and disintegration: criticism, disdain, hostility, and avoidance. Gottman's (1993) cascade theory shows how interpersonal communication and conduct, especially during crises, shape marital bonds (Gottman, 1994). Both premarital and couples counseling services aim to enhance and sustain strong and satisfying marital relationships through dialogue

and strategies. This merger justifies its selection as the conceptual framework for this study. It centers around how premarital counseling can result in increased marital satisfaction and longevity of marriages, potentially by increasing a couple's chances of seeking out future counseling services (Kepler, 2015). Although Gottman's model dates back to 1993, it offers a rare opportunity to explore premarital counseling clients' experiences through an established renowned theory founded on decades of research (Peluso et al., 2019).

Several researchers, including Kepler (2015), Aeni (2016), and Rajaei et al. (2019), have employed Gottman's theory. These and other researchers have broadly employed the theoretical framework in numerous applications, from Aeni's (2016) analysis of the literary portrayal of divorce to Kepler's (2015) and Rajaei et al.'s (2019) discussions of roles for premarital and couples counseling, respectively. However, the theory is not without criticism. The primary complaint about Gottman's (1993) theory is that Gottman did not include participant demographic statistics to make the findings generalizable (Deylami et al., 2021). This research elucidates participant demographics and extends Gottman's findings.

Situation to Self

The term premarital counseling only recently emerged within this context, yet it offers profound possibilities and applications. The researcher was born and reared in a developing country. A developing country is a class of economically growing nations characterized by poor education and infrastructure, improper sanitation, limited healthcare access, and a lower cost of living (Isaei Nejad et al., 2011). By early adulthood, the researcher became acquainted with counseling fields, including marriage

and family counseling, which are often used interchangeably. As a psychiatric rehabilitation program counselor, the wife of a minister, and a highly active member of several ministries within the local church, the researcher has counseled many engaged, newlywed, and long-married couples since 2000 (Isaei Nejad et al., 2011). During those sessions, the researcher perceived a relationship between peaceful marriages and the lifespan of those she counseled. In the researcher's experience, the knowledge that God wants humans to live in peace (Hebrews 12:14a) remains the driving force behind completing this research.

Phenomenology allows researchers to understand unique individuals' experiences and interactions with others (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Interpretive research is specifically focused on social interactions and operates under the assumption that all human actions are meaningful (Garrick, 1999). This proposed interpretive phenomenological qualitative study is rooted in interpretivism. Interpretivism is a methodological approach that focuses on how people derive meaning from their worlds (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020). This approach is frequently associated with case studies, phenomenology, ethnography, and ethnomethodology (Žukauskas et al., 2018).

In contrast, positivism assumes an objective reality and employs surveys, experiments, and quasi-experiments rather than interviews to obtain information about the subject of study (Žukauskas et al., 2018). A phenomenon is understood best when the researcher can interact with participants to understand their perceptions, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, expectations, and behavior (Burns & Groove, 2007). The ontological assumption is that, for any phenomenon, there is not only one reality but rather multiple realities (Speziale & Carpenter, 2003). Furthermore, every individual has a different

experience of reality; thus, they perceive, interpret, and experience situations from their particular points of view (Polit & Beck, 2008). Conversely, epistemology refers to examining what distinguishes reasonable assurance from opinion and is focused on how the researcher can obtain knowledge about the phenomena under study (Walker & Evers, 1988; Žukauskas et al., 2018).

In the present study, the researcher interacted closely with the participants. The researcher aimed to explore and understand the participants' perspectives on their lived experiences regarding the impact of premarital counseling on marital satisfaction. Despite my personal experiences and beliefs, the researcher maintained an objective position and utilized measures to limit researcher bias.

Problem Statement

It was not known how married couples from various demographic backgrounds have engaged in pre-marital counseling. Marital discord negatively impacts mental and physical health; although premarital counseling is a viable option to improve marriage satisfaction, it is often underutilized. People who are unhappy with their marriage are approximately 40% more likely to die during their marriage, and unhappy spouses face similar or even worse health and mortality risks as compared to individuals who have never wed, are separated, are divorced, or are bereaved (Lawrence et al., 2019). While premarital counseling effectively helps solve common marriage issues, such as communication, finances, parenting, and sexual satisfaction (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020), it is underutilized among American couples (C. H. Williamson et al., 2019). Researchers observed a decline in the utilization of premarital counseling (Moeti et al., 2017). Moeti et al. (2017) attributed the decline to an inability of counseling to meet the expectations

of many people regarding their marital issues, as the services are no longer in-depth, thus leading to a decline in popularity and presence. This conclusion necessitates further review and documentation of its implementation to instruct how premarital counseling should be performed (Moeti et al., 2017).

Given the current research and the importance of premarital counseling, how married couples from various demographic backgrounds experience premarital counseling warrants additional research. The divorce rates in the United States have increased steadily since the 1970s, and marriage rates have simultaneously declined (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2020). It is essential to understand how premarital counseling can be made most effective and more routine to preserve the state of marriage (Clyde et al., 2020). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the participants' experiences using a qualitative interpretative phenomenological design.

The general population of this study was married couples living in the United States. In contrast, the target population of this study was married couples who had undergone premarital counseling in Maryland. The sample included 19 married couples, but the researcher recruited 20 couples to account for attrition. The data collection method for this study was face-to-face, dyadic, semi-structured interviews. Exclusion criteria for the study included (a) being younger than 18 years old, (b) being unmarried, (c) being divorced, (d) being married but never attending premarital counseling, and (e) having not been married for a minimum of one year.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who have engaged

in premarital counseling in Maryland. Premarital counseling prepares couples for future challenges and expectations in marriage (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019; Carlson et al., 2020; Moeti et al., 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018). Marital topics covered include common issues, such as (a) medical screening; (b) beliefs and values; (c) expectations; (d) partner knowledge; roles and duties; (f) sex; (g) parenthood; (h) financial management; (i) communication; and (j) conflicts (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020). Premarital counseling is also one of the most robust ways to prevent hereditary diseases by providing the capability to intervene according to identified risks, vaccinations, genetic consulting, nutrition, behavior, and advice regarding contraception (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019). By understanding the lived experiences of couples engaged in marriage counseling, the researcher obtained data that can speak to marital concerns addressed in premarital counseling and how these couples utilized the skills they learned to avoid marital dissolution.

Ineffective premarital counseling leads to increased divorce rates, discord and dissatisfaction with marriage, and unbalanced opinions about marriage relationships (Clyde et al., 2020; Hart, 2018; Moeti et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018). Despite aspirations for successful marriages, about half (40-50%) of first marriages end in divorce, and the chances increase to 60% for second marriages (Karney & Bradbury, 2020; Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). While reports on the efficacy of premarital education or counseling in reducing divorce rates are variable (Clyde et al., 2020; Fawcett et al., 2010), these statistics are generally positive, with one study suggesting that premarital education or counseling can decrease the divorce rate by as much as 31% (Stanley et al., 2020).

Increased research on this topic is essential to improve the utilization and efficacy of premarital counseling across demographic groups. The paucity of research on the lived experiences of how premarital counseling influences the relationship of married couples justifies the current study. The results of the current study contribute to the extant literature and improve knowledge of premarital counseling. The findings of this study more broadly provide insight to researchers working in premarital counseling, sex counseling, pastoral counseling, and other marriage studies. The findings also have practical implications for premarital counseling, such as enhancing premarital counseling effectiveness. Additionally, by providing practitioners with the perspective of the participants' lived experiences, that data is helpful in terms of which skills and tools were found useful by those who have engaged in premarital counseling.

Significance of the Study

Premarital counseling aids in the development of healthy relationships by helping couples prepare for marriage, improving communication and marital satisfaction, and ultimately facilitating a more stable marriage (Afdal et al., 2019; Sagesse, 2018). Premarital counseling centers on dialogue and other means of improving and maintaining a strong, happy marital relationship. A link exists between marital satisfaction, health, longevity (lifespan), and general contentment (Lawrence et al., 2019). According to Gottman (1994), a permanent marriage requires a couple to be able to settle inevitable arguments, which will occur in every marriage. This study is significant because the recent increase in divorce rates is associated with increased mortality rates and other health problems (Sbarra, 2016); thus, the researcher sought to add to the existing literature by gaining descriptions of participants' experiences with premarital counseling.

It is anticipated that by obtaining these descriptions, it may be possible for clinicians to improve premarital counseling in Maryland.

This study can potentially increase the understanding of premarital counseling, thereby adding to the theoretical framework and existing literature. The study may support Gottman's model, the theoretical foundation for this study, by indicating that premarital therapy, which is based on this model, is successful at enhancing the quality of marriages for couples from diverse demographic backgrounds. Additionally, the findings of this study result in an extension of Gottman's model to include new concepts or procedures that are useful in tackling these issues. The current body of literature places an excessive focus on dissatisfaction and divorce, resulting in an unbalanced perspective on the factors that influence and complicate relationships; research conclusions and recommendations from Hart (2018) and Afdal et al. (2019) support the existence of a gap in the literature about the effectiveness of premarital counseling concerning marital satisfaction as well as relationship longevity. This research is particularly lacking concerning racial and ethnic diversity and neglects to include same-gender partnerships (Scott et al., 2018). The researcher anticipates that this study's findings will be useful to those who perform premarital counseling services and those considering engaging in premarital counseling. Furthermore, the findings may benefit local communities and promote social stability.

Research Questions

Research on premarital counseling and associated topics remains scant within the available recent literature. Hart (2018) asserted that the research on the balanced exploration of complex and dynamic relationships still needs to be expanded. Scott et al.

(2018) also identified a need to explore premarital counseling from the lens of couples from varying demographic characteristics. Thus, this study fills the gaps identified by Hart (2018) and Scott et al. (2018) by exploring the lived experience married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling. The research design for the study was a qualitative interpretive phenomenological design to explore the phenomenon effectively. A phenomenological research design is contextualized in numerous philosophical paradigms that balance a diverse conception of reality. A qualitative methodology provides the means and process to explore how and why questions without manipulating the subjects and the context involved in the study (Busetto et al., 2020). The researcher invited twelve to fifteen couples that met the inclusion criteria to help address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do couples experience premarital counseling?

RQ2: How do couples interpret learning the skills in premarital counseling to avoid the dissolution of their marriage?

The research questions directly addressed the purpose of this study. Research question one allowed married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling to describe their experiences concerning this specific type of counseling. As such, the first research question explored the experiences of couples engaging in premarital counseling. Meanwhile, the second research question explored how couples interpret learning the skills to avoid the dissolution of their marriage. Therefore, the second research question incorporated the study's conceptual framework by exploring skills the participants learned in their premarital counseling to prevent marital dissolution.

The research study's conceptual framework was Gottman's (1994) cascade theory of marriage disintegration, also known as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. This theory demonstrates how interpersonal communication and conduct, particularly in crises, shape the marital bond. Premarital counseling and couples' counseling services may promote dialogue and other ways of improving and sustaining a strong, satisfactory marital relationship. Gottman's (1994) theory informed the construction of the two research questions this study will address, as the questions target the couple's experiences and skill-building.

Definitions

Avoidance - Avoidance occurs when the listener stonewalls, retreats from conversations, becomes unresponsive and ceases communication with their partner (Gottman, 1994).

Criticism - Criticism is a fundamental character attack on one's partner. When a person criticizes their spouse, it can destroy their partner's entire being. Criticism develops into the second horseman, disdain (Gottman, 1994).

Disdain - Disdain occurs when one spouse communicates cruelly with the other and disrespects them. Examples that lead to disdain include making fun of the other person, name-calling, mimicking, or using condescending facial and body language like scowling or eye-rolling. Disdain leads to the third horseman, hostility (Gottman, 1994).

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – This refers to the cascade of events that leads to marital disintegration and includes critique, which develops into disdain, which leads to hostility and, ultimately, avoidance or retreat (Gottman, 1994).

Hostility - Hostility, also known as defensiveness, often occurs when a partner frequently replies defensively to questions and plays the victim in response to criticism. Finally, criticism, disdain, and hostility lead to the fourth horseman, avoidance (Gottman, 1994).

Marital Satisfaction – Marital satisfaction is the process of both spouses adapting so that disputes are avoided or resolved to the point where both partners are content with the relationship and each other (Brown, 2019).

Opposite Sex Couple - A couple consisting of two members of the opposite sex, i.e., a man and a woman. Also referred to as a traditional couple (Scott et al., 2018).

Premarital Counseling – Premarital counseling is a type of therapy that helps prepare couples for future challenges and expectations in marriage (Scott et al., 2018).

Non-traditional Couple - A couple consisting of two members of the same gender, i.e., two women or two men (Scott et al., 2018).

Socioeconomic Status (SES) – Socioeconomic status (SES) is an individual's social standing or class, often measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation. Examinations of socioeconomic status often reveal inequities in access to resources, plus issues related to privilege, power, and control (Matthews & Gallo, 2011).

Summary

This study addressed the lack of exploration into the lived experiences of couples that have utilized premarital counseling, which has resulted in an imbalanced view of partnerships within the literature, which focuses excessively on mixed-gender couples as well as negative relationship dynamics such as discontent, strife, and divorce (Hart, 2018; Scott et al., 2018). Chapter One included the study's introduction, the background of the

problem, The researcher 's situation to the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study to the literature, research questions, the definition of terms, and concluded with a summary of Chapter One.

This study contributes to the literature and improves knowledge; the findings of this study could aid academics and scholars in the fields of premarital counseling, relationships, and happiness studies. The findings might have practical ramifications for those engaging in premarital counseling. For instance, this study's findings may enhance clinicians' effectiveness in premarital counseling.

Chapter Two documents the background of the study based on the literature review, exploring premarital counseling implementation. Further, the chapter explains Gottman's (1994) theory of marital dissolution and elucidates the applications of this theory to the present study. The chapter also discusses the current literature, including themes relevant to premarital counseling and the field's challenges. Chapter Two concludes with a summary.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland. Chapter Two offers a critical review of the existing literature. The chapter contains five sections: (a) background of the problem, (b) literature search procedure, (c) theoretical framework guiding the study, (d) a review of literature relevant to the problem in question, and a chapter (e) a summary.

A literature review provides context to the study and allows the researcher to summarize and evaluate the current literature as an important justification component for the proposed research. The literature review is thus a chance to provide knowledge and understanding of relevant issues regarding the topic, consider the potential weaknesses and advantages of the existing literature, and situate themselves concerning current discourse (El Hussein et al., 2017). This comprehensive overview of the existing literature helped the researcher direct and construct the research to ensure that it is novel and significant (see El Hussein et al., 2017). Chapter Three will provide an in-depth discussion of the method used to achieve the study's purpose, while Chapter Four will present the study's findings. Lastly, Chapter Five will present an in-depth discussion and interpretation of the findings in the context of the current literature, theory, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Title Searches and Documentation

This literature review presents in-depth research from various scholars. This research represents the body of knowledge regarding the role premarital counseling can

play in improving marital satisfaction, sexual education, and strengthening relationships. In addition, this literature review will provide insight into what areas of this topic need further exploration. To ensure that this section contains only relevant literature, the researcher used specific search terms to search different databases for studies on premarital counseling. The databases used for this literature review included Google Scholar, ResearchGate, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, PubMed, and the American Psychological Association database. The following keywords and phrases led to the identification of relevant literature from 2017 to the present: *perception, premarital, counseling, and examinations, marriage, counseling, attitude, awareness, genetic blood disorders, practices, premarital counseling, forgiveness, successful marriage, marriage counselors, marriage readiness, need assessment, marital satisfaction, ideal distortion, conflict resolution, communication, sexual satisfaction, and married women.*

This section contains themes and subthemes to build the research foundation and reveal this study's literature gap. The themes and subthemes include the theoretical framework literature: (a) premarital counseling; (b) premarital counseling's impact on emerging adults; (c) premarital counseling in poorly functioning relationships; (d) premarital counseling an income and marginalized backgrounds; (e) premarital counseling and health; (f) premarital counseling and marital stability and satisfaction; (g) premarital counseling and non-traditional couples; and (h) challenges and the future of premarital counseling.

Background of the Problem

To adequately provide context for the literature review, background information regarding the problem under exploration is necessary. Moharrami et al. (2017) observed

that the premarital period is an important and sensitive stage that could birth a range of problems in marriages if not approached with caution. To avoid developing or escalating these problems, scholars have explored the effectiveness of premarital counseling for engaged couples. Prior research defines premarital counseling as therapeutic programs that prepare prospective couples on the pros and cons of marriage in addition to advising how to approach issues in marriages to maintain a strong and healthy marriage (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019; Carlson et al., 2020; Moeti et al., 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018). Premarital counseling effectively solves common marriage issues, such as communication issues, finances, parenting, and sexual satisfaction (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020). However, Moeti et al. (2017) observed that premarital counseling was becoming less popular because it did not meet the expectations of many regarding marital issues. The lack of efficacy in implementing premarital counseling and the current shift of attention to mixed-gendered couples, increased divorces, discord, and dissatisfaction with marriage life have yielded unbalanced opinions about marriage relationships (Hart, 2018; Moeti et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018).

Marriage counseling centers sought to address and solve the increased divorce and separation rates among married individuals (Carlson et al., 2020; Kepler, 2015). The history of premarital and marriage counseling in the United States began with the works of Dr. Popenoe Berat Heiratswillige in the 1930s. Popenoe (2009) described the high divorce and separation cases as psychologically fueled, following the clinical work of German medically guided racial purification marriage counseling centers. To address this problem, Popenoe opened a marriage counseling center in Los Angeles to improve family relationships and solve family disputes. While Popenoe's (2009) ideas of healthy families

are founded on each gender fulfilling their traditional roles, the sexual revolution and feminism in the 1970s proposed a more integrative approach that considered individual needs and desires, challenging Popenoe's (2009) approach and description of marital satisfaction.

A closer examination of existing literature showed that scholars had investigated the significance of premarital counseling in developing healthy relationships. For instance, Backhaus et al. (2016) examined the potential for premarital counseling to be provided as a group intervention to individuals with brain injury, determining that this was beneficial concerning relationship satisfaction and communication. Parhizgar et al. (2017) further explored the effect of communication skills on couples' marital satisfaction within premarital counseling centers. Moeti et al. (2017) also demonstrated the value of traditional premarital counseling for marital stability. Other scholars, including Sagesse (2018), studied premarital counseling, religiosity, and marital satisfaction in married couples and found that couples who attended premarital counseling were satisfied with their marriage. Afdal et al. (2019) and Carlson et al. (2020) reported similar findings, documenting that a stable relationship and mutual understanding developed in marriages due to premarital counseling led to marital satisfaction.

Of concern, however, is that despite positive reviews of premarital counseling on relationships and the quality of marriages, scholars such as Backhaus et al. (2016), Parhizgar et al. (2017), and Moeti et al. (2017) have raised questions over the effectiveness of premarital counseling centers and whether there exist means of improving the outcome of premarital counseling. Moeti et al. (2017) discussed that the high and increased divorce cases among couples and disharmony in marriages have made

people question the efficacy and efficiency of premarital counseling in building strong relationships. Parhizgar et al. (2017) concurred with Moeti et al. (2017) in questioning the effectiveness of premarital counseling, given the lack of effective communication and high levels of misunderstanding in relationships and marriages. The findings and conclusions by Scott et al. (2018) and Hart (2018) on the effectiveness of premarital counseling, coupled with the concerns raised by Parhizgar et al. (2017) and Moeti et al. (2017), prompted this research project. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research will be to understand the lived experiences of how premarital counseling influences the relationship of married couples from various demographic backgrounds.

Theoretical Framework

All married couples express their dissatisfaction with their spouses from time to time. However, if negative interaction patterns do not reverse in time, there is a point of no return, after which not much, if anything, can save the marriage (Gottman, 1999). The conceptual framework to ground this study is John Gottman's cascade model of marital dissolution (Gottman, 1994). This cascade consists of four stages, also known as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, including complaining or criticizing behavior, defensiveness, contempt, and, finally, stonewalling (Gottman, 1994). Several researchers have employed Gottman's theory.

Employing Gottman's (1999) conceptual framework, Kepler (2015) examined the relationship between premarital counseling and marital satisfaction and how premarital counseling prevention might impact couples' decision to seek counseling. Kepler (2015) reported that individuals who attended premarital counseling indicated greater marital

satisfaction than those who did not. Also, grounded in the cascade model of marital dissolution, Aeni (2016) explored a series of situations that led to divorce experienced by the characters in a novel and indicated the evident stages, including contempt and stonewalling. The defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling stages happened almost at the same time.

Other scholars also relied on Gottman's (1994) cascade theory of marital dissolution. Rajaei et al. (2019) used Gottman's (1994) theory as their conceptual framework to examine the effectiveness of couple's therapy in decreasing emotional divorce and improving verbal-nonverbal communication skills among Iranian couples dealing with conflicts. These researchers reported that the Gottman model reduced emotional divorce and improved the participants' verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Therefore, this researcher selected Gottman's cascade model of marital dissolution conceptual framework for this study because of its relevance to premarital counseling, marital, and relationship studies.

One needs to understand the four stages within the model to clearly understand Gottman's (1994) cascade model of marital dissolution. According to Gottman (1994), the first stage of marital dissolution is criticism. Gottman defined *criticism* as an attack on a person's or a partner's character and personality. Unlike constructive criticism, this kind of criticism is incessant and tends to dismantle a person's overall feelings by attacking the inner core of who they are by nature. Gottman observed that couples with poor or unregulated communication fall victim to this criticism. The continued trend pushed them into the second stage of the marital dissolution cascade.

Gottman (1994) identified the second stage of the dissolution cascade as contempt. Partners in this stage treat each other unkindly and disrespectfully. Gottman explained that at this stage, a partner constantly mocks or ridicules the other through sarcasm, mimicking them, calling them names, and using body language to mistreat the other partner. The essence of this second stage is to demean the other partner and make them feel despised, unwanted, and worthless.

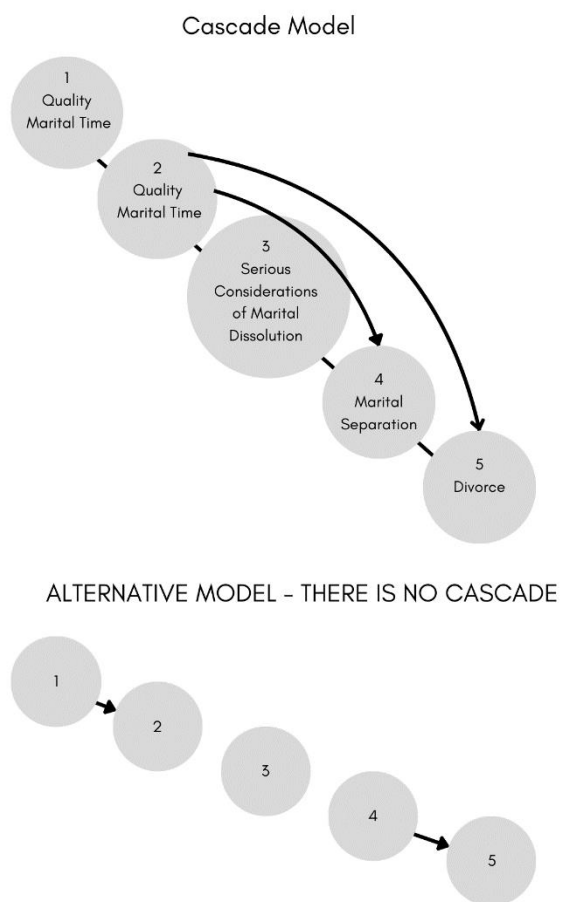
The third stage of Gottman's (1994) cascade of marital dissolution is defensiveness. Defensiveness describes a partner's reaction or response mechanism to the preceding two stages: criticism and contempt. An individual develops a protective behavior or shield against contempt and criticism in defensiveness. Manifesting of defensive behavior is from the need to protect one's pride. The body may switch to either a fight or flight response or use counter-attack behaviors such as denial of responsibility or making negative assumptions about someone's feelings (Gottman, 1994). Gottman described that while defending themselves, partners tend to shift blame and, in most instances, fail to take responsibility for their actions; this behavior occurs more commonly in men. The fourth and final cascade of Gottman's (1994) cascade model of marital dissolution is stonewalling.

In stonewalling, the listener or partner withdraws from all communications and interactions by pretending to be busy or responding with grunts (Gottman, 1994). This stage is both physical and mental separation and is common in men. This fourth stage is important because it describes the most common behavior of avoiding conflicts, which eventually leads to divorce or separation as the two parties cannot interact verbally or physically. For purposes of this study, understanding the lived experiences of married

couples with premarital counseling through this theoretical lens may provide insight regarding how these four stages may or may not have contributed to the decision to engage in premarital counseling.

Figure 1

Adapted from Codes Gottman's (1991) Cascade Model of Marital Dissolution



Note. Figure 1 adapted from Gottman, J. M. (1991). Predicting the longitudinal course of marriages.

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Gottman contends that marital conflict is not destructive for marriage if it also includes positive effects such as affection, humor, positive problem-solving, agreement, assent, empathy, and active non-defensive listening; positive effects reduce physiological arousal (Gottman, 1991). Not all conflict within a marriage is damaging, however. For instance, Gottman (1991) found that some patterns of marital conflict were beneficial to the marriage long-term, even if the conflicts were upsetting at the time. In contrast, marriage would deteriorate over time when wives were only agreeable and compliant, indicating that gender roles and their relationship to conflict resolution may mediate how marriages function (Gottman, 1991). According to the cascade model of marital dissolution, all married couples occasionally experience and express dissatisfaction with their spouses, which is normal. However, if negative patterns of interaction do not eventually reverse, the couple may reach the point of no return, where nothing can help the couple reconcile (Gottman, 1999).

Related Literature

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to seek to explore the lived experience of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who have engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland. This purpose stemmed from the problem that despite its wide application in mending relationships and marriages, premarital counseling has not been shown to have the expected benefits for couples in the United States (Moeti et al., 2017). Several authors asserted that the problem develops from the lack of premarital counseling implementation strategies and the selective focus on mixed-gender couples, causing dissatisfaction, discord, and divorce among couples that has resulted in an unbalanced perspective of relationships (Hart, 2018; Moeti et al., 2017;

Scott et al., 2018). The researcher examined the problem to illuminate the current research gap and organized the findings of the literature into the following themes, subthemes, and topics: (a) premarital counseling; (b) premarital counseling in poorly functioning relationships; (c) premarital counseling an income and marginalized backgrounds; (d) premarital counseling and health; (e) premarital counseling and marital stability and satisfaction; (f) premarital counseling and non -tradition couples; and (g) challenges and the future of premarital counseling.

Gottman's Theory in Assessing Marriage Satisfaction

A Gottman-like scale has been useful in elaborating the process of dissolving conflicts in marriage. After decades of research, the scale—The Sound Relationship House (SRH) Scales—was designed by Gottman and Silver (2015). From their research and interactions with couples, Gottman developed the sound relationship house theory and the Gottman method of couples therapy aimed at dissolving conflicts, increasing intimacy, respect, and affection, removing barriers to intimacy, and creating a heightened sense of empathy and understanding within relationships (Davoodvandi et al., 2018; Gottman, 1999; The Gottman Institute, 2022; Vinney, 2021). Several researchers have assessed the validity and reliability of Gottman's scale. For example, Davoodvandi et al. (2018) examined the efficacy of Gottman couple therapy and found that this approach had enduring positive effects on marital adjustment and couples' intimacy.

Between 1983 and 1987, Gottman and Levenson (1992) studied 73 married couples to identify marital processes associated with dissolution. Gottman and Levenson (1992) used the Rapid Couples Interaction Scoring System (RCISS) to categorize couples into two groups, regulated and nonregulated. Regulated couples were defined as those in

which both husband and wife RCISS speaker slope scores were significantly positive; nonregulated couples had at least one of the RCISS speaker slopes that were not significantly positive. Regulated couples consistently displayed more positive than negative RCISS codes. Compared with regulated couples, nonregulated couples had:

(a) marital problems rated as more severe; (b) lower marital satisfaction; (c) poorer health; (d) smaller finger pulse amplitudes (wives); (e) more negative ratings for interactions; (f) more negative emotional expression; (g) less positive emotional expression; (h) more stubbornness and withdrawal from interaction; (i) greater defensiveness; and (j) elevated risk for marital dissolution (lower marital satisfaction and higher incidence of consideration of dissolution and actual separation) (Gottman & Levenson, 1992, p1).

Gottman and Levenson (1992) used structural equation modeling to understand factors that cause marital dissatisfaction to prevent dissolution. They hypothesized that a consistently low level of marital satisfaction would eventually lead to dissolution, separation, and divorce. Based on the findings of their study, Gottman and Levenson (1992) developed the cascade model of marital dissolution. Short-term longitudinal studies of marital dissolution by Gottman and Levenson (1992) have demonstrated low base rates of separation and divorce, evidencing the importance of the cascade model.

The conceptual framework of the cascade model of marital dissolution is appropriate for studying and explaining the research phenomenon of the lived experiences of individuals taking part in premarital counseling, a precedent set by Gottman and Levenson (2000). Grounded in the cascade model of marital dissolution, Gottman and Levenson (2000) discussed the interaction variables during conflict and in

an events-of-the-day discussion following spouses' separation for at least eight hours. They used noninteractive variables, such as negative affect, rather than interactive variables, such as conflict discussions, to predict divorce early and later in the marriage. Gottman and Levenson indicated that "a different set of variables predicted early divorcing than later; negative affect during conflict predicted early divorcing but did not predict later divorcing" (p. 737). Conflict and events of the day that had little positive effect were associated with later divorce but not early divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Based on marital satisfaction, thoughts of dissolution, and affective interaction in both conversations, Gottman and Levenson suggested prediction over the 14 years of the study.

Gottman and Levenson (2004) explored what predicted the deterioration of affective marital interaction over four years. The researchers compared four models for their ability to predict dysfunctional marital interaction: (1) baseline physiology; (2) interaction physiology; (3) a balance model based on the ratio of positivity to negativity; and (4) cognitions about the relationship operationalized from the coding of the Oral History Interview. Gottman and Levenson (2004) indicated that all four models predicted dysfunctional marital interaction and could also predict change. Gottman and Levenson (2004) suggested that the balance ratio model in predicting change was the most powerful.

Using the Gottman conceptual framework, Kepler (2015) studied the relationship between premarital counseling and marital satisfaction and how the act of going through premarital counseling could influence a couple's decision to seek counseling in the future, finding that those who attended premarital counseling reported greater marital

satisfaction than those who did not. Grounded in the cascade model of marital dissolution, Aeni (2016) explored a series of situations that led up to divorce experienced by the characters in a novel and indicated that contempt and stonewalling comprise the evident stages. Further, the defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling stages happened almost simultaneously.

South and Hughes (2018) uncovered the aspects of post-dissolution communication in a two-part study using the conceptual framework of the cascade model of marital dissolution. In this study, 1,271 participants experiencing a breakup completed surveys regarding their communication with an ex-romantic partner. South and Hughes empirically operationalized these behaviors in the Post-Dissolution Relational Communication Index and reported on the factor structure, reliability, and convergent validity of the 2-factor solution produced. Both factors were significantly correlated with participants' reports of communication satisfaction with a former relationship partner and the perceived seriousness of the relationship (South & Hughes, 2018). In Study 2, self-reports from 151 participants who had experienced a divorce supported its use with divorced couples (South & Hughes, 2018). South and Hughes also identified a third factor, illustrating differences between nonmarital and marital ex-partners.

Using the Gottman cascade model of marital dissolution conceptual framework, Rajaei et al. (2019) examined the effectiveness of couple therapy in decreasing emotional divorce and improving verbal-nonverbal communication skills among Iranian couples dealing with conflicts. Rajaei et al. (2019) showed that the Gottman method reduced emotional divorce and improved verbal-nonverbal communication skills. By understanding what factors predict divorce, premarital counselors can develop guidance

to avoid or mitigate those factors. Therefore, The researcher selected Gottman's cascade model of marital dissolution conceptual framework for this study because of its high relevance to premarital counseling research and marital and relationship studies.

Premarital Counseling

Premarital counseling informs couples about what to anticipate in the changeable matrimonial world. Premarital counseling is an educational intervention that teaches couples the skills to develop relationship quality and maintain long-lasting relationships (Carlson et al., 2020). Marriage readiness is a new concept that can help adolescents learn how to make the right choices when seeking better marital life (Satari et al., 2019) and aid couples in improving communication, parenting quality, and overall relationship satisfaction (Carlson et al., 2020). Therefore, traditional premarital counseling helps prepare couples for future challenges and expectations in marriage (Moeti et al., 2017). Many premarital counseling programs exist to prepare couples for the realities of family life, yet those programs may not adequately serve couples due to inadequate expertise and counseling experience (Odero, 2018).

Premarital counseling has evolved from early premarital education interventions and has grown in popularity due to significant support from the U.S. federal government (Carlson et al., 2020). While initially provided to help well-functioning couples seeking to maintain healthy relationships, the influx of federal support has expanded the reach of premarital counseling to people from low-income and marginalized backgrounds who would not otherwise have access to relationship enhancement programs. Many people participating in premarital counseling have greater relationship distress and may attend it singly or with their partners (Carlson et al., 2020).

Although traditional premarital counseling has been successfully employed to decrease the likelihood of divorce, the divorce rates recorded in the United States have resulted in many married couples in troubled relationships seeking alternative avenues for their marital problems rather than premarital counseling (Moeti et al., 2017). Despite the tremendous efforts and benefits of traditional premarital counseling, there have been concerns that traditional premarital counseling is not helpful to couples and individuals in relationships with the intended benefits. The negative review of the effectiveness of traditional premarital counseling has negatively impacted the establishment of marriages. Moeti et al., in a qualitative phenomenological study, explored the experiences of married women with traditional premarital counseling on marital stability, emphasizing their perceptions of the value thereof. Researchers found that most participants had positive reviews on the benefits of premarital counseling in keeping marriages stable, but that, unlike in the past, traditional premarital counseling no longer receives the honor it deserves and is being conducted shallowly rather than in-depth, as designed (Moeti et al., 2017).

While not all marriages have been successful, people and organizations have taken steps to address the issues that hinder or hamper the development of successful marriages. Realistic expectations from marriage are essential factors in a successful marriage, and premarital counseling is a practical step (Pashib et al., 2017). This stage occurs before a person gets married and is one of life's most profound and decisive periods. Furthermore, it can determine the health and quality of marriage in later life and avert marital problems after marriage (Moharrami et al., 2017; Odero, 2018). It is an

opportune time for potential life-long couples to prepare themselves for marital life (Odero, 2018).

Premarital Counseling's Impact on Emerging Adults

Interestingly, premarital counseling research included emerging adults who are not preparing for marriage. For instance, Pashib et al. (2017) examined the impact of premarital counseling on marriage expectations among university students by using a quasi-experimental study conducted using the Marriage Expectation Scale Assessment Tool and demographic information. Pashib et al. (2017) indicated that before the study, there were no significant differences between the two groups regarding background variables. Pashib et al. (2017) concluded that premarital counseling helps students establish a good and suitable marriage.

Similarly, Moharrami et al. (2017) investigated the effect of premarital counseling on shyness and expectation from marriages among students of Medical Sciences Torbat Heydariyeh, Iran. Employing a quasi-experimental study on 30 single students with the assessment tools of shyness and expectations from marriage scales, Moharrami et al. (2017) revealed no significant difference between the background variables of the two groups. The authors found no significant difference in shyness and expectation from marriage in the control group before and after the study.

While different in their aims, Pashib et al. (2017) and Moharrami et al. (2017) contributed to examining premarital counseling and emerging adults. Premarital counseling helps students deal with shyness, cynicism, and idealistic expectations from marriage. Pashib et al. (2017) found that premarital counseling improves university students' expectations of marriage and empowers the establishment of good and stable

marriages. Moharrami et al. (2017), on the other hand, opined that premarital counseling helped students in selecting their preferred spouses, something that can save the hassle of identifying and sifting disturbing behaviors from potential partners in the dating period.

Other researchers have also reported students' perceptions of premarital counseling. Hebatallah et al. (2019) assessed 210 third-year nursing students' perceptions regarding premarital counseling and examinations utilizing a descriptive study.

Hebatallah and colleagues found that 74.6% of students were correctly informed about premarital counseling, and 75.7% had positive attitudes regarding premarital counseling and examinations. Hebatallah et al. (2019) indicated a highly statistically significant difference between students' total score of knowledge and the total score of their attitude, indicating that the more students knew about premarital counseling, the more they were likely to have an affinity toward it. In their study, Hebatallah et al. (2019) concluded that undergraduate students should have the opportunity to learn about premarital counseling.

Researchers have assessed the need for training priorities on marriage readiness among students. Like Hebatallah et al. (2019), Satari et al. (2019) observed that premarital counseling in students paved the way for them to sift expectations from realities in marriage. Employing a descriptive study design, Satari et al. (2019) included a sample of 400 students and 28 specialists and counselors in marriage, covering three areas of individual, interpersonal, and contextual skills. The researchers revealed that the average age of students was 21.05 years. In the field, 20 training needs had priority scores; the highest priority for youth in this area was the lack of sexually inappropriate behaviors and habits and the lack of disabling diseases (Satari et al., 2019). For interpersonal skills, the highest priority is regarded as participation in premarital

counseling, the ability to regulate the cost of living, and parenting ability. Ten training issues scored priority in the contextual skills field, and the highest priority was having a vehicle, sufficient income, and financial independence (Satari et al., 2019).

While most students in Hebatallah et al. (2019) had high marriage expectations, Satari et al. (2019) helped caution them from these expectations by using premarital counseling to equip them with interpersonal skills, and parenting advice is critical in developing stable marriages and relationships. Although Hebatallah et al. (2019) reported a positive relationship between premarital counseling and examination, Satari et al. (2019) noted with concern that student views and the counselor's views on marriage and relationships were not aligned. It was a difficult task getting students to accept or take into perspective counselors' viewpoints (Satari et al., 2019). Satari et al. (2019) further revealed that marriage and relationship experts found it challenging to counsel students on relationship matters due to opposing viewpoints.

Evolved from early premarital education interventions and premarital counseling and has grown in popularity due to significant support from the U.S. federal government (Carlson et al., 2020). As a result of government support, premarital counseling now reaches people from low-income and marginalized backgrounds across the globe (Carlson et al., 2020). Findings from several authors have demonstrated that premarital counseling helps couples improve communication, parenting quality, and overall relationship satisfaction (Carlson et al., 2020) and helps prepare couples for future challenges and expectations in marriage (Moeti et al., 2017).

Despite the benefits of premarital counseling in building strong relationships, some scholars have pointed out that traditional premarital counseling should benefit

couples more. Researchers have determined that this kind of counseling does not benefit marriages as intended and negatively impacts the marriage establishment (Moeti et al., 2017) by neglecting relationship factors and ignoring less traditional marriages (Scott et al., 2018). As such, the student community and the understanding of the couple's traditional premarital counseling need to be better understood (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020). Furthermore, other researchers have reported that student reactions to premarital counseling included high expectations for marriage, how premarital counseling paved the way for marital stability, and their opposing viewpoints with counselors (Hebatallah et al., 2019; Satari et al., 2019). While premarital counseling prepares the couple for what lies ahead in their relationship, it is also crucial that the counselor address issues related to poorly functioning relationships.

Premarital Counseling and Marital Relationships in Poorly Functioning Relationships

Premarital counseling programs and sessions have effectively developed quality and strong relationships in low-income neighborhoods. Expanding premarital counseling into suburban areas and other low-income neighborhoods improves with the federal government's entry and support (Carlson et al., 2020). In their study, Carlson et al. (2020) discussed that assistance from the federal government regarding personnel training, building counseling centers, and paying salaries for counseling professionals have enabled couples from low-income communities to access this vital service. In advancing knowledge on the significance of premarital counseling in marital relationships, this theme explores how couples and individuals from low-income neighborhoods benefit from premarital counseling.

Divorce and separation are common among couples with poor financial stability and living in low-economic communities compared to high-income communities. To explain this phenomenon, Trail and Karney (2012) investigated why people in low-income neighborhoods married less and divorced more. Despite valuing relationships, a survey that included 6,012 people from low-income neighborhoods found that poor economic situations negatively impacted the strength and quality of the relationships of couples from low-income communities. Trail and Karney (2012) further developed social issues coupled with drug use and drinking of alcohol strained relationships in low-income neighborhoods. Similarly, H. C. Williamson et al. (2019) found that poverty and the inability of many couples to meet basic needs led to many separations.

Regarding sexual intimacy and the strength of the relationship in low-income urban communities in India, Schensul et al. (2018) discussed that 50% of the women in the qualitative study viewed sexual intimacy negatively with their husbands. When interpreting this phenomenon, the researchers reported that a lack of physical privacy in crowded homes, poor communication, and marital relationships exacerbated poor sexual intimacy between husbands and wives from low-income communities (Schensul et al., 2018). Overall, despite people from low-income neighborhoods valuing marriage and relationships as important institutions (Trail & Karney, 2012), negative and poor economic and financial levels have strained these relationships, resulting in separation and divorces (Schensul et al., 2018; H. C. Williamson et al., 2019).

Expanding the understanding of the marital relationship in low-income neighborhoods, Jackson et al. (2017) examined the impact of household income on marital satisfaction in early marriages. Marital satisfaction of 862 Black, White, and

Latino women was studied and assessed five times at nine months. Analyzing the collected data, Jackson et al. (2017) established poor marital satisfaction in low-income households.

Unbalanced income and living in poor and crowded places increased the individual risk of marital dissolution among this group. Karney (2021) reported that people from low-income communities prioritized cohabiting and giving birth but rarely married those of poor socioeconomic status, who explained the same phenomenon differently. Unlike their financially stable counterparts who preferred investing before marriage, a lack of investments exposed them to poverty and unstable relationships from which the chances of dissolving the relationship were high. In line with the current study, while poverty partly describes the increased number of separations and divorces in low-income families, stabilizing these families through premarital counseling rather than prioritizing satisfaction may reduce divorce and separation rates.

Notwithstanding the benefits of premarital counseling in stabilizing relationships and marriages, couples and individuals from poor neighborhoods and finances were highly unlikely to attend such sessions. C. H. Williamson et al. (2019) found that these couples rarely visited premarital counseling clinics in a study that explored help-seeking behavior among couples with poor financial practices. Analyzing 231 self-reported responses, H. C. Williamson et al. (2019) discussed that the cost of premarital counseling and uncertainty about the benefits prevented this group from seeking help. Karney (2021) reached similar conclusions and discussed that poor socioeconomic status and the costs of attending a premarital counseling session kept many at bay. However, Karney (2021) asserted that following government plans addressed by Carlson et al. (2020) would see

more people and couples in low-income neighborhoods visit premarital counseling centers.

Moreover, helping families in low-income neighborhoods stabilize their relationships could convince most to attend premarital counseling sessions (Arafani, 2017). Karney et al. (2018) reiterated that addressing key issues that affect low-income families' daily well-being by aiding in housing and financial security and initiating policies favoring low-income communities in counseling centers may draw them to premarital counseling. Cobbinah and Osei-Tutu (2021) and Omar et al. (2021) found that premarital counseling improves premarital relationships among low-income couples. Lastly, while training couples on effective communication, respect in the relationship, and financial wisdom helped stabilize relations in low-income communities, the researcher highlights the differences in couples from other backgrounds related to premarital counseling.

Premarital Counseling, Income, and Marginalized Backgrounds

Wealthy neighborhoods differ from low-income neighborhoods because while more financially stable marital relationships characterize one, the other is defined by high cases of divorce and separation due to poor income. H. C. Williamson et al. (2019) reported that wealthy people were likelier to attend premarital counseling before getting married. H. C. Williamson et al. (2019) described this ease with the availability of finances and the need to form long and healthy relationships. Expanding on these findings, Carlson et al. (2020) investigated the significance of educational programs and premarital counseling in preventing couple stress. Carlson et al. (2020) asserted that premarital counseling and education would help aspiring couples keenly observe and

decide the kinds of people with whom they want to associate. Karney (2021) noted that apart from lack of finances, constant misunderstanding and stress were also strong predictors of marital dissolution.

Considering the benefits of premarital education, Carlson et al. (2020) contended that premarital counseling allowed couples and individuals to understand stress areas and how to tackle them. In meta-analytic literature analysis, Bradbury and Bodenmann (2020) gave similar reports which found premarital counseling effective in protecting couples against stress. Specifically, technology-based interventions encouraged individual attendance of premarital education remotely (Bradbury & Bodenmann, 2020). Overall, premarital counseling programs not only handle relationship issues but also address a couple's mental health problem, from which the above scholars have found successful and consistent attendance to premarital education helped improve participants' mental health.

Besides protecting couples from stress, premarital counseling may have other health benefits. For example, Barton et al. (2021) investigated whether interventions such as premarital counseling had additional benefits on couples' health. Barton et al. (2021) studied the effects of the Protecting Strong African American Families prevention program. The intervention program was assessed in 25 months, after which the program's overall impact was assessed. In the randomized control study involving 346 African American couples, it was found that apart from strengthening their mental health post-intervention, participants recorded improved general health and sleep functioning (Barton et al., 2021). In prior research, Barton et al. (2018) studied a sample of 164 couples and found that the Promoting Strong African American Families (ProSAAF) program

effectively strengthened couples' marriages using marital therapy. Barton et al. (2018) found that improved communication between couples, commitment, and support from spouses' post-intervention programs enhanced couple relationships and prevented unintended marital dissolution.

While strong families may not need premarital counseling, Barton et al. (2018) and Barton et al. (2021) argued that attending premarital counseling for strong couples helped strengthen the bond and relationship. For people aspiring to marry or getting married, Barton et al. (2018) observed the ProSAAF intervention program effective in retaining and attracting prospective couples for marital engagement. Barton et al. (2018) discussed that men who attended ProSAAF marital enrichment programs reported improved communication and relationship commitment.

Agreeing with the findings of Parhizgar et al. (2017) and Moeti et al. (2017) on the definition and benefits of premarital education, Fathi et al. (2021) established that the benefits of premarital counseling are important to couples from all socioeconomic levels. The PREP instrument used by Fathi et al. (2021) collected and analyzed information on four critical areas: social integration, communication skills, communication danger signs, and friendship and emotional safety. Examining the outcome of PREP on the 15 participants included in the study, Fathi et al. (2021) found that individuals who were preparing for marriage valued interpersonal relationships, and couples who used PREP as a premarital educational program acquired the much-needed knowledge and skills to navigate the complex institution of marriage. This qualitative phenomenological study's problem was the lack of literature on how premarital counseling addressed rampant divorces and separation from the participants' perspectives. Therefore, the information

presented in this theme helps illustrate the benefits of premarital counseling, strengthening well-functioning relationships, and effectively preparing prospective persons for marriage.

Premarital Counseling and Marital Stability and Satisfaction

One potential significant concern in a marriage is divorce, especially given the high divorce rate in the U.S. Marital satisfaction is one of the factors affecting life that influences the permanence and durability of married life (Nouri et al., 2018). This theme is important to the overall purpose of the study in the sense that it allows a description and understanding of premarital counseling from the perspective of individuals satisfied with their marriages courtesy of marital or premarital counseling. Marital satisfaction is when the husband and wife enjoy marriage and fulfill each other's emotional needs (Bozhabadi et al., 2020). Researchers have established that individuals who experienced premarital counseling gained high marital satisfaction (Arafani, 2017; Moeti et al., 2017; Moharrami et al., 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Pashib et al., 2017).

Communication is vital in premarital counseling, especially for couples seeking marital satisfaction. In addition to helping couples achieve marital satisfaction, premarital counseling can establish and facilitate communication between couples. Communication has a fundamental role in marital life, and a lack of effective communication is a common complaint of married couples attending counseling and treatment centers (Parhizgar et al., 2017). Parhizgar et al. (2017) observed that before counseling a couple or married people in a marital conflict, a counselor first assessed the level and depth of communication between them before the conflict. These researchers attested that couples who practiced effective communication in terms of listening were more accommodating and forgiving.

Examining the impact of communication in bringing conflicting couples together, Arafani (2017) asserted that effective communication led to forgiveness. Forgiveness changes a person's cognitions, emotions, and behaviors toward somebody who committed a hurtful act (Arafani, 2017). Forgiveness can be useful for a counselor to deal with clients' problems, including marital issues. Overall, couples who were ready to forgive or practiced forgiveness and were effective communicators had higher levels of marital satisfaction (Arafani, 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017). Parhizgar et al. (2017) showed that scores in marital satisfaction in the intervention group that practiced effective communication skills were higher than in the control group.

Besides using communication in premarital counseling to achieve marital satisfaction, Waititu (2017) examined the connection between premarital counseling programs, marital success, and marital satisfaction for couples. Using a questionnaire to establish whether participating couples attended premarital counseling, Waititu (2017) examined the impact of counseling programs and marital success on the participants' marital relationships. Analyzing the data collected from the questionnaire, the researchers found that 52% of the participants reported being excited when their partner came home. In comparison, 53% did not believe in listening when their partners were talking. In terms of communication, researchers found that participants excited about their partners coming home had developed good communication (Waititu, 2017). The importance of good communication is evidenced by 96% of the participants admitting that it was dangerous not to deal with marital conflicts conclusively (Waititu, 2017). In comparison, 96% agreed it was wrong to criticize their partner (Waititu, 2017).

Waititu's (2017) findings were comparable to those of Parhizgar et al. (2017) and Arafani (2017). Waititu (2017) concluded that premarital counseling effectively develops and enhances good communication between conflicting couples. Waititu (2017) and Arafani (2017) agreed that couples or individuals who attended premarital counseling with their partners reported higher marital satisfaction than those that did not. While Waititu (2017), Parhizgar et al. (2017), and Arafani (2017) examined communication and marital satisfaction, other researchers examined additional variables such as religiosity.

A quantitative correlational study by Sagesse (2018) examined the relationship between premarital counseling of married individuals, religiosity, and marital satisfaction. Using the conceptual framework of the Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts (SYMBIS) model, the study's findings revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between premarital counseling and marital satisfaction (Sagesse, 2018). The results also showed a statistically significant positive relationship between premarital counseling and religiosity (Sagesse, 2018).

The effectiveness of premarital counseling on individuals preparing for marriage was also reported by Kariuki (2017). Investigating a sample of 105 couples from the Presbyterian Church of East Africa in Nairobi County, Kenya, Kariuki (2017) utilized the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) to measure marital stability. Analyzing the data collected by RDAS, Kariuki (2017) found that focusing premarital counseling on improving communication, managing finances, and improving one's personality effectively prepared aspiring couples for marriage. In other studies, on premarital counseling and couple or individual preparation for marriage, Rajabi and Abbasi (2020) found that premarital counseling helped shape participant expectations about marriage.

The results by Rajabi and Abbasi (2020) showed that premarital counseling helped aspiring couples reduce pessimistic expectations about marriage in addition to helping them increase and have realistic expectations about marriage. In a similar study, Fathi et al. (2021) investigated the effectiveness of preparing for marriage with PREP in Iran.

To expand on Sagesse's (2018) findings, Odero (2018) investigated premarital counseling and its influence on marital quality among the Seventh Day Adventist Kibera District Churches, Kibra Division, Kibra Constituency, Nairobi County, Kenya.

Anchored on the Solution Focused Theory of counseling and employing a descriptive survey research design, Odero (2018) targeted the population of Christian couples in the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) churches in Kibera, Nairobi County. The results of Odero (2018) showed that respondents generally described the content of premarital counseling as comprising communication skills, work-family balance, family finance, the role of husband and wife, companionship, parenting, and the importance of forgiveness in marriage. Both Sagesse (2018) and Odero (2018) indicated that key aspects of communication skills, family finance, and the role of husband and wife were major sources of conflict in married couples. However, the scholars noted that religion played a critical role in the outcome of premarital counseling. According to Sagesse (2018), understanding and using some aspects of religion in premarital counseling helped diffuse conflicts between couples during pre-counseling. Odero (2018) argued that religion had nothing to do with the positive or negative outcomes of premarital counseling. Odero (2018) arrived at the same conclusions as Sagesse (2018): individuals who attended premarital counseling scored higher in marital quality and satisfaction than those who did not.

While the success of premarital counseling is influenced by the factors associated with marital satisfaction, Nouri et al. (2018) assessed the impacts of premarital counseling on marital satisfaction and some of its associated factors. In a cross-sectional study that used Enrich Marital Satisfaction Scale, Nouri et al. evaluated 500 married women referred to healthcare centers, especially obstetrics and gynecology clinics, in 2018. Nouri et al. revealed that the mean score of marital satisfaction was 118.33 ± 22.06 . Based on the marital satisfaction score, 1.2% of the participants had low marital satisfaction; 26.4% had moderate marital satisfaction; 56.2% had high marital satisfaction, and 16.2% had very high marital satisfaction (Nouri et al., 2018). After analyzing the collected information, Nouri et al. observed significant relationships between marital satisfaction and its associated factors. Specifically, there were significant relationships between marital satisfaction and age, length of the marriage, spouse's age, number of children, age at the first marriage, education, income, pregnancy experience, and childbirth experience. Nouri et al. (2018) found no significant relationship between marital satisfaction and job, husband's job, and place of residence.

Hossein et al. (2018) investigated the effect of premarital counseling on couples' marital satisfaction during the engagement period. The 30 couples participating in this quasi-experimental control group, pre-and post-test, and follow-up design settled in Yazd. Participants showed a significant increase in the mean of marital satisfaction in the post-test in the experimental group. These findings confirmed the effectiveness of premarital counseling on a couple's marital satisfaction during the engagement period. This information can facilitate designing counseling and educational planning for individuals in the engagement period. The results of Hossein et al. (2018) concur with

those of Nouri et al. (2018). In their study, Nouri et al. (2018) established that the success of premarital counseling was influenced by age, education, age of the spouse, length of the marriage, number of children, income, pregnancy experience, and childbirth experience, all of which were also associated with marital satisfaction. Overall, both Hossein et al. (2018) and Nouri et al. (2018) concluded that premarital counseling helped married couples achieve satisfaction in their marriage. The findings of Brown's (2019) qualitative phenomenological research corroborated these conclusions. In presenting their results, Brown (2019) established that premarital counseling helped African American couples make sense of marital satisfaction in their marriage.

Other researchers broadened the research of Brown (2019), Hossein et al. (2018), and Nouri et al. (2018). Rajabi and Abbasi (2020) examined the effectiveness of premarital counseling based on a relationship education program designed to reduce the idealistic marital expectation among single young adults in Ahvaz city. This quasi-experimental study included a pre-and post-test with a 60-day follow-up design and a control group. The researcher used Jones and Nelson's Marital Expectation Scale across the three stages. Rajabi and Abbasi (2020) found that premarital counseling based on the relationship education program reduced the idealistic marital expectation in the intervention group from the pre-test to the follow-up stage. Rajabi and Abbasi (2020) established that with premarital counseling, young people achieve marital satisfaction by accepting marriage for what it is. They also found that premarital counseling is an effective divorce prevention strategy. Rajabi and Abbasi (2020) concluded that the marriage expectations of young couples could be improved with premarital counseling and education. Rajabi and Abbasi (2020) further posited that irrational, idealistic, and

romantic expectations and beliefs about marriage could ruin marital satisfaction and stability.

Bozhabadi et al. (2020) found similar results but added that religious beliefs impact the stability of families. Bozhabadi et al. (2020) explored the relationship between religious orientation, sexual satisfaction, and marital satisfaction in women of reproductive age to examine the effects of religious beliefs on the stability of families. Employing a correlational study performed on 150 married women aged 45 years in Neyshabur comprehensive health services centers, Bozhabadi et al. (2020) administered three questionnaires: Spinner Marital Satisfaction, Larson's Sexual Satisfaction, and Allport Religious Orientation Questionnaire. Bozhabadi et al. showed a significant positive relationship between religious orientation, sexual satisfaction, and marital satisfaction. Religious commitment has a predictive role in promoting sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction, increasing religious commitment, sexual satisfaction, and marital satisfaction (Bozhabadi et al., 2020). Bozhabadi et al. (2020) found that sexual satisfaction boosts marital satisfaction. In their findings, Bozhabadi et al. (2020) posited that in premarital counseling, psychologists and counselors emphasize sexual satisfaction to individuals and couples with sexual problems. The researchers found that achieving sexual satisfaction and grounding oneself in religious and spiritual teachings helped young couples achieve marital satisfaction (Bozhabadi et al., 2020).

Marital satisfaction is one of the factors affecting life, which influences the sources of conflict and how to apply communication skills (Parhizgar et al., 2017). It also incorporates the art of forgiveness, as taught in educational programs (Arafani, 2017; Brown, 2019), which improves the attainment of permanence and durability of married

life (Nouri et al., 2018). The diversity in the findings on the impacts of premarital counseling on marital satisfaction attests to the significance of premarital counseling in marriages. Researchers have reported that individuals who actively embraced premarital counseling gained high marital satisfaction (Arafani, 2017; Moeti et al., 2017; Moharrami et al., 2017; Odero, 2018; Pashib et al., 2017; Rajabi & Abbasi, 2020; Sagesse, 2018).

From the religious perspective, Sagesse (2018), Odero (2018), and Bozhabadi et al. (2020) agreed that premarital counseling is critical in achieving marital satisfaction. Incorporating and advocating for premarital counseling helped young and old couples navigate engagement and marriage easily, as they could identify marital satisfaction for many couples compared to those who did not attend premarital counseling sessions. Further, in the religious context, Odero (2018) recommended designing and incorporating premarital counseling sessions in church programs for couples to receive counsel and marital advice before marriage, with follow-up programs embedded in premarital counseling sessions included in church programs years after marriage. The next section describes how premarital counseling prevents the spread of disease and the impact of sex education.

Premarital Counseling and Health

Dissatisfaction with sexual intimacy is reportedly a major driver of divorce in many countries. The high and still growing figures for divorce highlight the importance of emotional and sexual intimacy. These factors culminate in sexual satisfaction and development and promotion of knowledge about sexual compatibility in couples as the most important and efficient approach (Torkestani, Nejad et al., 2017).

Knowledge about sexual health is one of the basic needs that young couples need to be aware of (Khalesi et al., 2020). Knowledge and information about sex are imperative to adolescents, considering it is a critical developmental stage of sexual maturity (Triningtyas & Muhayati, 2017). In this stage, adolescents experience rapid changes in their body functions brought about by hormonal function, resulting in high sexual arousal. The tendency to have free sex in adolescence can lead to early marriage (Triningtyas & Muhayati, 2017). Committing to marriage early in life can impact marital longevity and success (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). Therefore, engaging adolescents in premarital counseling, especially sexual education, is crucial to individual health and family stability to prevent unplanned pregnancies and early marriages (Khalesi et al., 2020; Triningtyas & Muhayati, 2017).

One of the formal methods of sexual education is premarital counseling education (Hamzehgardeshi et al., 2019). Premarital counseling is also the best opportunity to provide childbirth counseling for young people on the verge of marriage (Khadivzadeh et al., 2020). A conventional approach is currently implemented in premarital counseling centers (Torkestani, Ramezannejad et al., 2017). Torkestani, Ramezannejad et al. (2017) investigated the effect of acceptance commitment therapy-based premarital counseling on couples' sexual function. With a study population of all couples referring to premarital counseling centers in Isfahan in 2015, 60 couples were selected (Torkestani, Ramezannejad et al., 2017). They then randomly divided them into two groups, resulting in an experimental group of 30 couples and a control group of 30 couples. Torkestani, Ramezannejad et al. (2017) showed the lack of significant difference in the couple's sexual function between premarital counseling and the approach based on acceptance and

commitment. Torkestani, Ramezannejad et al. (2017) found no significant difference between the effect of premarital counseling acceptance and commitment therapy-based approach on the couples' sexual function compared to a conventional one.

Teaching methods such as the acceptance and commitment approach are ineffective for couples attending counseling shortly before marriage or immediately afterward because, during those periods, couples experience a particular excitement. They often have yet to encounter the challenges that make them seek counseling (Torkestani, Nejad et al., 2017; Torkestani, Ramezannejad et al., 2017). Nevertheless, adolescents need to be knowledgeable and understand the age of a good marriage, per physical and mental development, since marriage at an early age may increase the risk of maternal mortality (Triningtyas & Muhayati, 2017). Based on the phenomenon, implementing prenuptial counseling through information and consultation services can increase adolescent understanding of maturation age marriage (Triningtyas & Muhayati, 2017).

Khalesi et al. (2020) explored engaged couples' sexual health education needs through a qualitative study with conventional content analysis. Sexual and reproductive health needs and their associated factors in couples participating in marital counseling were investigated, and indications are that premarital counseling should meet couples' needs and wishes (Hamzehgardeshi et al., 2019). By extracting principal codes, the researcher found that a couple's needs fall into four categories: bio-psychological, social-moral, religious-moral, and educational-cultural.

Khalesi et al. (2020) and Hamzehgardeshi et al. (2019) concluded that premarital counseling for young or old couples should effectively cover their sexual education

needs. These findings were like those posted by Torkestani, Nejad et al. (2017) and Khadivzadeh et al. (2020). For Torkestani, Nejad et al. (2017), allowing young couples to understand the role of sexual satisfaction in marriage was the sole reason for engaging them in premarital counseling, apart from cushioning adolescents from early birth and marriage. In contrast, Khadivzadeh et al. (2020) demonstrated that although excitement for the newly married was high, premarital counseling was needed to prepare young individuals on the verge of the final stages of marriage. An in-depth discussion of the research of Khadivzadeh et al. (2020) is provided below.

Khadivzadeh et al. (2020) compared the effects of integrated and group counseling on the attitude towards childbearing in women on the verge of marriage in an experimental study of 162 women receiving premarital counseling in healthcare centers in Mashhad, Iran, from 2015 to 2016. Khadivzadeh et al. (2020) divided the subjects into three groups who received varying durations of counseling. The integrated group received two sessions of group counseling and one session of individual counseling; the group counseling received three sessions of two-hour counseling at one-week intervals; the control group received only the routine counseling. Khadivzadeh et al. (2020) revealed that after the intervention, the attitude toward childbearing significantly changed in participants of integrated and group counseling compared to that of the control group, with no significant difference in attitude identified between the two intervention groups. The researchers recommended integrated and group counseling methods because they provide a favorable attitude toward childbearing in young people. Khalesi et al. (2020) suggested that engaged couples require knowledge and skills in bio-psychological, social-

moral, religious-moral, and educational-cultural dimensions. However, current premarital educational programs rarely incorporate or address these dimensions.

Lack of satisfaction with sexual instinct is one of the main factors causing divorce in many countries (Torkestani, Nejad et al., 2017). Research indicates that knowledge of sexual health affects the individual's health and family stability (Khalesi et al., 2020; Triningtyas & Muhayati, 2017). Knowledge about sexual health is a basic need for young couples (Khalesi et al., 2020; Triningtyas & Muhayati, 2017). One of the formal methods of sexual education is premarital counseling education (Hamzehgardeshi et al., 2019), which also offers the best opportunity to provide childbirth counseling for young people on the verge of marriage (Khadivzadeh et al., 2020). A comprehensive sexual health education program does not exist in the healthcare system (Khalesi et al., 2020). Khadivzadeh et al. (2020) highlighted that enough time must be spent on childbearing counseling for women on the verge of marriage by attending premarital counseling clinics. Khalesi et al. (2020) argued that implementing need-based educational programs could increase the effectiveness of premarital education.

In the existing literature, premarital counseling is an essential program that, apart from helping people, plays a role in conflict resolution and the prevention of diseases. Premarital counseling has been one of the most robust ways to prevent hereditary diseases (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019). Premarital counseling provides a means through which interventions can be achieved based on the identified risks, vaccinations, genetic consulting, nutrition, behavior, and advice regarding contraception. Premarital counseling is also one of the most important strategies to prevent genetic disorders, congenital anomalies, and several medical and psychosocial marital problems (Shaimaa et al., 2017).

The essence of this theme is to provide more information and a better understanding of the significance of premarital counseling in terms of how married couples or individuals can share information about their health conditions. Developing the ability to communicate effectively, set realistic expectations, and formulate strategies for seeking help is vital to premarital counseling.

Maternal mortality during pregnancy, childbirth, and puerperium phase is an evaluation of maternal health status before pregnancy (Wati, 2020). The marriage preparation period is to prepare for physical, psychological, and social health thoroughly. In Arab countries, genetic blood disorders related to many other physical and mental disorders are prevalent (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019). Therefore, before couples marry, there is a need for premarital counseling on health and possible genetic disorders that may impact the health of a newborn or the ability of a woman to conceive.

Premarital counseling can lead to an awareness of hereditary diseases. Shaimaa et al. (2017) evaluated the effect of the Health Belief Model on females' knowledge and practice regarding premarital counseling. Using a quasi-experimental design, Shaimaa et al. studied a purposive sample of 340 female students randomly assigned into intervention and control groups. The authors used a structured interview questionnaire consisting of socio-demographic characteristics and females' knowledge regarding premarital counseling, a health belief model questionnaire, and a questionnaire to assess the intention to practice premarital counseling for data collection. Shaimaa et al. found no significant difference between both groups in general characteristics. However, there were statistically significant differences in females' knowledge, health beliefs, and intention to practice premarital counseling in the intervention group compared to the

control group two months after applying the health beliefs model. Shaimaa et al. revealed a positive and statistically significant correlation between total knowledge and intention scores in both groups before and after two months of premarital counseling.

The additional assessment involved university students exploring their knowledge and attitude and practicing premarital counseling at King Khalid University (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019). Conducting a cross-sectional study at King Khalid University in Abha city from May to August 2018, Al-Qahtani et al. (2019) selected the students using a two-stage stratified cluster sampling technique and included 541 students. The researchers found that 73.4% of the participants were aware of premarital counseling, 95.2% reported its importance, 96.5% of the participating students reported their willingness to do premarital counseling on marriage, and 72.1% said it should be mandatory (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019). Shaimaa et al. (2017) suggested that the health belief model effectively improved females' knowledge, health beliefs, and health Practice. Shaimaa et al. Al-Qahtani et al. (2019) suggested that nearly 75% of the participants had a good awareness of premarital counseling. Most participating students have a positive attitude toward premarital counseling and their readiness to adopt it before marriage (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019).

Other researchers conducted comparable studies exploring students' awareness of premarital counseling. Kabbash et al. (2019) identified the knowledge and attitude of medical students toward premarital counseling. Conducting a cross-sectional study at Tanta Faculty of Medicine on 379 students using a predesigned questionnaire, Kabbash et al. (2019) revealed that 79.4% of the participants believed that premarital counseling could detect hereditary diseases, and 73.8% believed that premarital counseling could

detect sexually transmitted infections. Among participants, 76.2% indicated they would be willing to take advantage of free premarital counseling, 18.8% expressed awareness of premarital investigations, and only 49.7% knew about places providing premarital counseling.

Concerning the level of information, 27.6% of participants indicated that they did not have enough information about premarital counseling. The primary sources of information were mass media and the internet. The principal reason for not utilizing premarital counseling was not to interfere with “Allah’s will” (Kabbash et al., 2019, p. 73). Kabbash et al. (2019) also found that more males thought premarital counseling might delay marriage than females. Students with consanguineous parents showed a significantly higher level of knowledge than those with unrelated parents.

Researchers continue to explore the connection between illness and premarital education through an assessment of sickle cell disease knowledge, attitude, and practice regarding premarital genotype counseling and testing among the lecturers of Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto, Nigeria (Isah et al., 2019). Conducting a descriptive cross-sectional study among 269 permanent lecturers of Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria, Isah et al. (2019) revealed that 99.3% of the 269 respondents were aware of sickle cell, and 89.2% of them had good knowledge of the disease. Only 20% and below respondents showed a negative attitude toward the test (Isah et al., 2019). Isah et al. (2019) also found that although 70.3% of the respondents were willing to take the test, 47.6% took the test before getting married. Wati (2020) determined the function of managing premarital counseling and health screening programs in Kediri.

Using a qualitative case study research design, Wati (2020) demonstrated that the premarital counseling and health screening program in Kediri includes four aspects of management functions – planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating. In the implementation function, Wati (2020) indicated that this program was an individual health effort of the Public Health Center with a transparent service flow and administrative system, coordinating with the stakeholders. However, since the program is relatively new and lacks an official team, the implementation process requires additional support to improve its implementation and optimize it (Wati, 2020).

Kabbash et al. (2019) suggested that students had a good perception of the importance of premarital counseling. Wati (2020) suggested analyzing the program under SE Mayor No. 441.7 / 7178 / 419.108 / 2017 to achieve an optimal program. The assessment function must optimize monitoring, supervision, and appreciation to become the leverage force for achieving program objectives (Wati, 2020). Wati (2020) also suggested carrying out interprofessional collaboration according to its authority.

Premarital counseling has been one of the strongest ways to prevent hereditary diseases and intervene according to identified risks, vaccinations, genetic consulting, nutrition, behavior, and advice regarding contraception (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019). In the preceding discussion, for instance, Isah et al. (2019), Kabbash et al. (2019), and Shaimaa et al. (2017) all illustrated the significance of premarital counseling in identifying medical conditions before getting married. Because premarital counseling prepares couples to lead healthy and wholesome lives, the theme to follow will discuss marital stability and satisfaction that can be achieved through preparedness from counseling. Isah et al. (2019) reported that individuals willing to participate in premarital counseling knew

their condition or had knowledge of sickle cell anemia. Premarital counseling is also one of the most essential strategies for preventing genetic disorders, congenital anomalies, and several medical and psychosocial marital problems (Shaimaa et al., 2017). Shaimaa et al. (2017) recommended disseminating premarital counseling based on the health belief model among females to increase awareness.

Few studies have directly discussed the role of premarital counseling in preventing diseases such as hereditary and genetic disorders. However, most concerned scholars described people as willing to try premarital counseling before marriage (Isah et al., 2019; Shaimaa et al., 2017; Wati, 2020). Therefore, there is a need for more empirical research on how premarital counseling helps prevent diseases besides making the engaged couple aware of existing or underlying medical conditions.

Premarital Counseling and Non-traditional Marriages

Nontraditional couples also utilize premarital counseling. The essence of including this theme here is that the current qualitative study is investigating the effectiveness of premarital counseling on marriage relationships from the perspective of diverse couple relationships. The discussions under this theme will explain how nontraditional relationships view the effectiveness of premarital counseling. Scott et al. (2018) studied providing relationship intervention to nontraditional couples. Some non-traditional relationships differ significantly in relationship strength, and individuals in these alternative relationships are discriminated against in society compared to their opposite-sex counterparts.

In the systematic review of the literature, Scott et al. (2018) observed that particular nontraditional couples were subject to immense stress that negatively impacted

their dyadic experiences. Additionally, these couples endure heterosexual bias from medical professionals, and before treating such couples, heterosexual care officials must confront their biases. Scott et al. (2018) found premarital counseling effective in helping nontraditional couples cope with societal discrimination and isolation. Noteworthy, through premarital counseling, prospective nontraditional couples were prepared for what to expect and how to communicate with each other and different-sex couples. The identified concern with some nontraditional couples was the lack of intervention and training programs for premarital counselors on the unintended bias when providing guidance and counseling.

In a study investigating couple intervention programs for nontraditional couples, Pepping et al. (2017) reported that 87% of the interviewed these couples were dissatisfied with the current premarital intervention programs. Participants in this study described the content and explained how the services were tailored only to fit different-sex couples. According to Pepping et al. (2017), stigma-related discrimination, the high cost of accessing premarital counseling programs, and the lack of nontraditional oriented professionally trained couple coaches resulted in many declining premarital counseling visits. As such, more research is necessary to ensure that intervention programs specific to nontraditional couples are available.

Building on Pepping et al.'s (2017) work, Kousteni and Anagnostopoulos (2020) examined psychological intervention for nontraditional couples in a systematic literature review. After systematically analyzing 583 studies conducted between January 1996 and December 2017, Kousteni and Anagnostopoulos (2020) found that most nontraditional couples did not visit premarital counseling centers because of discriminatory treatment.

Like Pepping et al. (2017), Kousteni and Anagnostopoulos (2020) suggested developing and training counselors specific to different genres of nontraditional couples.

In a more recent study on the effects of marital education on nontraditional couples, Barden et al. (2022) conducted a randomized controlled trial of 52 nontraditional married couples. The participants completed the PREP *Within Our Reach* to establish the relationship between marital programs and the success of these relationships. Before analyzing the collected information, Barden et al. (2022) agreed with Scott et al. (2018) that the vulnerability experienced by individuals in such relationships required intervention programs that were unique to the challenges faced by these individuals. Hence, the last theme will address challenges and the future of premarital counseling.

Overall, research has demonstrated that premarital counseling has utility in numerous circumstances. In general, premarital counseling teaches couples skills that focus on improving relationship quality and maintaining long-lasting relationships (Carlson et al., 2020). For example, Pashib et al. (2017) demonstrated that premarital counseling helped young couples improve their expectations of a healthy relationship. The utility of premarital counseling has also been investigated concerning socioeconomic background, with several studies showing disparities in marital satisfaction amongst individuals from marginalized groups and both Cobbinah and Osei-Tutu (2021) and Omar et al. (2021) finding that premarital counseling improves premarital relationships among low-income couples. Premarital counseling has even been positively associated with positive health outcomes as a critical tool for education about and prevention of hereditary diseases (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019) as well as a platform for education on sexual health (Khalesi et al., 2020; Triningtyas & Muhayati, 2017). However, a review of the

literature demonstrates a gap in both research on and utilization of premarital counseling among some nontraditional couples, demonstrating a need for the present study.

Summary

The conceptual framework of the cascade model of marital dissolution is appropriate for studying and explaining the research phenomenon (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Using the Gottman cascade model of marital dissolution conceptual framework, Rajaei et al. (2019) examined the effectiveness of couple therapy in decreasing emotional divorce and improving verbal-nonverbal communication skills among Iranian couples dealing with conflicts. Therefore, the researchers selected the conceptual framework of the cascade model of marital dissolution for this study because of its high relevance to premarital counseling research and marital and relationship studies.

While premarital counseling helps couples improve communication, parenting quality, and overall relationship satisfaction (Carlson et al., 2020), traditional counseling helps prepare couples for future challenges and expectations in marriage (Moeti et al., 2017). Premarital counseling now reaches people from low-income and marginalized backgrounds across the globe, thanks to government support (Carlson et al., 2020). However, traditional premarital counseling is threatened and does not benefit couples as it should, which has negatively impacted the establishment of marriage (Moeti et al., 2017). Researchers have demonstrated that individuals who experienced premarital counseling gained a high level of marital satisfaction (Arafani, 2017; Moeti et al., 2017; Moharrami et al., 2017; Odero, 2018; Pashib et al., 2017; Rajabi & Abbasi, 2020; Sagesse, 2018). Moreover, premarital counseling is vital in preventing hereditary diseases and intervention according to identified risks, vaccinations, genetic consulting, nutrition,

behavior, and contraception advice (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019). Premarital counseling is also one of the most definitive strategies for preventing genetic disorders, congenital anomalies, and several medical and psychosocial marital problems (Shaimaa et al., 2017). It is also the best opportunity to provide childbirth counseling for young people on the verge of marriage (Khadivzadeh et al., 2020).

A gap in research exists in the premarital counseling field. Hart (2018) highlighted the preponderance of research in premarital counseling focusing on dissatisfaction, discord, and divorce among couples, which often led to an unbalanced perspective of relationships' complex and dynamic nature. Scott et al. (2018) explained that most premarital counseling research over-emphasizes mixed-gender couples and neglects some relationship factors. Despite a growing number of female same-gender relationships, this study aimed to explore this phenomenon from diverse couples, including couples from well-functioning relationships, low-income and marginalized backgrounds, and gay and lesbian couples. Hart (2018) asserted that research on creating a balanced exploration of relationships' complex and dynamic nature is scant. Scott et al. (2018) also identified a need to explore premarital counseling from the lens of both traditional and non-traditional couples, including couples from varying demographic characteristics.

This study contributes to closing the gap identified by Hart (2018) and Scott et al. (2018) by seeking to understand the lived experience of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland. The next chapter presents the study's methodology and research design. The chapter also describes the participants, study setting, and procedures associated with data collection,

organization, and analysis, establishing the credibility and dependability of a qualitative study. The researcher discusses the ethical considerations and assurances and concludes the chapter with a comprehensive summary.

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland and how this relates to their experiences with marital satisfaction. The review of the extant literature revealed that problems develop from the lack of premarital counseling implementation strategies and the selective focus on mixed-gender couples, causing dissatisfaction, discord, and divorce among couples that has resulted in an unbalanced perspective of relationships (Hart, 2018; Moeti et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018). Additionally, the literature showed that while premarital counseling improves communication, parenting, and overall relationship satisfaction (Carlson et al., 2020), conventional counseling helps couples prepare for future problems and expectations in marriage (Moeti et al., 2017).

Chapter Three includes the introduction, design and methodology, population and participants, instrumentation, and research questions. Additionally, Chapter Three addresses elements such as the expert panel utilized to review the instrumentation for the proposed study, the completed field test, the credibility and dependability of the study, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Chapter Three also includes the ethical considerations of the proposed study and a chapter summary.

Methodology and Design

The research methodology was qualitative. A qualitative methodology effectively explores how and why questions within the normal context of the subjects and their lives (Yin, 2014). This methodology allows for the identification of themes and insights not

anticipated by the researcher, making qualitative methods suitable for understanding the characteristics of a phenomenon to serve as a framework for a study (Yin, 2014). Unlike quantitative methodology, which works with numbers and measures, qualitative research relies on participant words and focuses on meaning, facilitating open-ended explorations of phenomena (Yilmaz, 2013).

Qualitative data and inductive theorizing are essential attributes of qualitative research and are vital to understanding the lived experience of the participants of the proposed study. The qualitative research methodology also considers a phenomenon's context and participants' perceptions of contextual influences (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). Another valuable attribute of a qualitative methodology is its platform for inductive theorizing; a process based on qualitative data is well suited to new or understudied empirical contexts (Bansal et al., 2018).

Design

The research design for the study was an interpretive phenomenological design. A phenomenological research design is contextualized in numerous philosophical paradigms that balance a diverse conception of reality (Yin, 2014). A phenomenological research design was appropriate for this study because the researcher aimed to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of the selected married couples who completed premarital counseling before marriage.

According to Sloan and Bowe (2014), "The meaning of human science notions such as 'method,' 'objectivity,' 'subjectivity,' and 'understanding,' and the meaning of 'description,' 'analysis,' 'interpretation,' etcetera, are always to be understood within a particular rational perspective" (p. 2). While the study was qualitative, as a design,

interpretive phenomenology assumes the positivist paradigmatic assumption that reality is "...ordered, rational, and logical" (Reiners, 2012, p. 1). The interpretive phenomenological design with an interpretative phenomenological analysis was appropriate, as the reality under exploration is the phenomenon of the lived experiences of premarital counseling. These research decisions are best for understanding the lived experience of well-functioning married couples from various demographic backgrounds engaged in premarital counseling.

An interpretative phenomenological analysis is a psychological qualitative research design used to understand participants' subjective realities. This process involves exploring the personal interpretation of their lived experiences and the meanings attached to these experiences within the context of couples' interviews (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2018). While other methods, such as case study methods, also focus on real-world experiences (Padgett, 2017), the case study design is not exclusively qualitative. Therefore, it would not support the iterative analysis required to derive meaning from participant responses and the essence of the phenomenon under study (Padgett, 2017; Williams, 2007). The same holds for ethnography, which, like the case study design, focuses on a holistic theme in the data rather than identifying what is telling and meaningful about the phenomenon (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). This study is congruent with existing literature by other researchers, such as Brown (2019), who utilized the qualitative phenomenological design to explore the application of premarital counseling and how it affects couples' marital satisfaction. Other researchers have used various methodologies to explore premarital counseling and its impact on marital satisfaction. Some of the research designs used by these researchers include quantitative

methods (Cobb & Sullivan, 2015; Yilmaz & Kalkan, 2010), cross-sectional survey design (Kepler, 2015; Udofia et al., 2021), and descriptive survey design (Ansah-Hughes et al., 2015).

Research Questions

It is not known how married couples from various demographic backgrounds interpret their lived experience of premarital counseling. According to Hart (2018), more research is necessary to understand the complex and dynamic nature of relationships in a balanced manner. Additionally, Scott et al. (2018) advocate exploring premarital counseling from the perspective of married couples, including couples from various demographic backgrounds. By exploring the lived experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who have engaged in premarital counseling, this study addressed the gap identified by Hart (2018) and Scott et al. (2018).

A qualitative interpretive phenomenological design was an appropriate method for exploring these experiences. The qualitative methodology provides the means and process for exploring how and why questions without manipulating the subjects and context (Busetto et al., 2020). The sample included 19 couples that meet the inclusion criteria to help address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do couples experience premarital counseling?

RQ2: How do couples interpret learning the skills in premarital counseling to avoid the dissolution of their marriage?

Setting

This proposed interpretive phenomenological study involved face-to-face semi-structured interviews with married couples from diverse backgrounds in a city in

Maryland. This city was near the researcher and has a population of 575,584; the majority (483,209) are adults that identify as Black/African American (62.35%), White (30.46%), Asian (2.58%), Native American (0.28%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.04%), mixed-race (2.49%), or another race (1.80%). Additionally, for this geographic area, the median household income is \$52,164, per capita income is \$32,699, and 20% of the population lives in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The demographic breakdown of this area was ideal for gathering a diverse sample of participants for this study.

A church and a secular counseling practice were chosen as sites for recruitment. Most churches offer premarital counseling to their members due to the seriousness of the sacred nature of marriage (Chimoga, 2019). The site church was in a semi-urban environment in Maryland; this place of worship was within five miles of a major highway servicing the greater city area, and it was not unreasonable to assume that the church is likely to attract diverse participants. The church was given the pseudonym *city church* to protect the confidentiality of the church, the participants, and all people who worship at this location. Recruitment also took place at a secular counseling practice within this same city because not all couples seek premarital counseling from a religious organization.

To obtain permission to recruit participants, site authorization letters were sent to the local church's pastor and the secular counseling center in a city in Maryland, asking permission to recruit participants for the study. Site authorization was granted for two locations (Appendix A). These locations used the pseudonyms *City Church* and *Counseling Center* to protect the confidentiality of the facility and potential participants. Similarly, recruited participants for this study received alphanumeric identifiers to ensure

confidentiality assigned by the researcher (e.g., C1, C2, ... C19). No participants were recruited prior to receiving signed site authorization letters and Liberty IRB approval.

The data collection for the study took place at a location of the participant's choosing to ensure comfort and convenience. However, the participants could choose the church's location or secular counseling practice where the researcher recruited the sample. The interviews were face-to-face, but if this was not possible due to the ongoing pandemic or other situations, the interviews were virtual using either Zoom or another meeting application. After the initial intake, all participants in the study received an alphanumeric pseudonym to ensure confidentiality (e.g., C1, C2, ... C19) and encourage participants to speak more freely and openly with the researcher (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

The general population for this phenomenological research was married couples in the United States. The target population was married couples of varying demographic backgrounds from a city in Maryland, recruited from a local church and a secular counseling practice. The inclusion criteria for this study included that couples married for at least one year and had attended premarital counseling before marriage. Exclusion criteria for the study included: (a) being younger than 18 years old, (b) being unmarried, (c) are divorced, (d) are married, but never attended premarital counseling and (e) have not been married for a minimum of one year. The researcher derived a final sample from the target population, including 19 married couples, to engage in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. The researcher recruited 20 participants to account for attrition.

Hart (2018) asserted that research is scant regarding a balanced exploration of relationships' complex and dynamic nature. Couples in traditional and non-traditional

types of marriages were included to ensure married couples from various backgrounds are assessed in this study. Scott et al. (2018) also identified a need to explore premarital counseling from the lens of various types of couples, including couples from varying demographic characteristics. To ensure these elements recommended by Hart (2018) and Scott et al. (2018) are addressed, the researcher collected relevant demographic information from each participant, including age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, length of the marriage, and yearly income (see Appendix D). The questions on the demographic survey are necessary for describing the sample of the study (Creswell, 2014; Hart, 2018), as well as obtaining information to ensure the researcher gathered participants that were diverse in demographic backgrounds to address the gaps within the literature adequately.

The researcher used a purposive sampling technique to select the participants that met the inclusion criteria. The purposive sampling technique is a nonrandom technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants; instead, the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by knowledge or experience (Etikan et al., 2016). The purposive sampling technique is typically used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases to maximize available resources. It is also valid in qualitative sampling to identify and select individuals or groups of proficient and well-informed individuals with a phenomenon of interest (Etikan et al., 2016).

Unlike quantitative sampling, qualitative sampling does not have steadfast rules about sample size that must be applied. In qualitative research, a sufficient sample size for interview studies is 15 ± 10 (Kvale, 2007). Additionally, according to Yin (2014), the

sample size of 12 couples should be sufficient to reach data saturation, at which no additional data will bring new information (Guest et al., 2020). The sample size of 19 couples for different couples for this study falls within this normal range; the researcher worked to recruit various types of married couples.

To further protect participants, the researcher obtained informed consent from each married couple (both spouses must sign an informed consent). Participants were reminded that participation is not compulsory and that they can leave if they become uncomfortable with the research (Busetto et al., 2020). If this occurred, another couple was recruited in the same manner as described in the setting section, and no data gathered by the existing couple was analyzed.

Procedures

The researcher obtained site authorization letters from the church and the secular counseling center (Appendix A). The authorization letters provided an overview of the qualitative descriptive research study, details about the research process, the recruitment process to garner participants, and the process to gain informed consent from each participant (Appendix C). Once Liberty University's IRB approved the proposal (Appendix B), the researcher began recruiting participants for data collection by posting a flyer (Appendix H) at the secular counseling practice and delivering one to the church pastor for their bulletin. Additionally, both sites received a digital flyer form to post on their social media pages (see Appendix I). Several hard copies of the flyer were provided to both sites for distribution, allowing potential participants to take a flyer home with them. Similarly, the researcher met with marriage counselors in the chosen secular counseling practice to give them the recruitment letter to share with potential participants.

These counselors provided their clients with my contact information and study background for interested couples.

While the general population for this phenomenological research was married couples in the United States, the target population was married couples in a city in Maryland. Specifically, the target population included married couples from the greater city area. The researcher conducted open-ended, face-to-face, or virtual semi-structured dyadic interviews with 19 couples but recruited 20 couples to account for attrition. Once a potential participant couple contacted the researcher, each selected participant was invited to participate via an email (Appendix J) describing the study, inviting participation, and providing an informed consent (Appendix C) form and the demographic questionnaire (Appendix D). The participants completed those documents and returned them to the researcher via DocuSign. Once received, the researcher contacted the participants to schedule the interview. Each participant chose to meet on-site or do the interview virtually via Zoom.

On the day of each interview, the researcher reviewed the informed consent document, answered any questions the participant(s) had, and asked for verbal consent to conduct the interview. Following these preliminaries, the researcher turned on an audio recorder or engaged Zoom recording features to record the interviews. The researcher also took field notes to record the expressions of the interviewees and to reinforce data collection from the audio recording(s), as indicated by Busetto et al. (2020) and DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019). After each interview, the researcher explained that the interview was complete, verbalized that the recording device was turned off, and reminded the interviewees that data will remain confidential and that they would receive

their interview transcript for member checking (Birt et al., 2016). Furthermore, the researcher explained to participants that all data collected (recordings and field notes) would be secured electronically. Any printed transcripts for hand-coding and handwritten field notes would remain secure in a locked file cabinet. All data (electronically stored and paper copies) would be destroyed after three years (Mack et al., 2005). Data collection ended when the researcher transcribed the interviews. Audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher with the aid of the Otter.ai transcription software within one week to send the transcripts to the participants for member checking (Birt et al., 2016) promptly when the interview was still at the forefront of their minds.

The Researcher's Role

In this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study, the role of the researcher was, primarily, that of the research instrument (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). The researcher's function and duty were to examine and unravel the influence of the study subject matter on the participants' lived experiences. Hence, when instruments are included in qualitative studies, an individual will be the fundamental part of the procedure (Fink, 2000). As an instrument for the study, the researcher was responsible for designing the research plan, developing research questions, writing the interview questions, conducting the interviews, and analyzing collected data to answer the research questions (Fink, 2000). Also, it is noteworthy that being the principal instrument, the researcher must be transparent about her responsibilities, experience, expectations, mannerisms, and curiosities that could influence the study's outcome (Yin, 2016).

The researcher brought experience as a psychiatric rehabilitation program (PRP) counselor, wife of a minister, and active member of different ministries within the local

community. The researcher counseled many engaged, newlywed, and established couples. With over thirty years of marriage, the researcher had the opportunity to attend several marriage counseling workshops and, at one point, had a certification as a marriage counseling facilitator, which helped formulate the interview questions.

This experience helped gather resources, tools, and information for the literature review and assisted in conducting the study, qualifying data, and supporting the interviewing of study participants. However, the researcher must also deliver trustworthy, credible, and reliable research (Stahl & King, 2020). To sustain research integrity, ensure objectivity, and eliminate any bias, the researcher adhered to guidelines established in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Adherence to this report helps control personal biases, avoid influencing study participants, and suspend the researcher's preconceived ideas or assumptions that could negatively affect the credibility of the research findings.

The fundamental purpose of the qualitative researcher keeping a reflexive journal was to document a thorough account of the research progression and the researcher's contemplations of their standards, benefits, and perceptions as the instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, as the instrument for the study, it was easier to retain thoughts and reflections by using a reflective journal to document all the stages of the research collection and analysis. The reflective journal also helped to address and mitigate any biases the researcher may have had regarding the topic under investigation.

Concerns of thoroughness in qualitative research lend to the report's trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as some elements of rigor involve credibility,

dependability, and transferability. The researcher allowed the participant to develop their own opinions of others and offer precise, honest responses. The researcher did not engage with the participants prior to collecting the data to ensure the trustworthiness and prevent bias of this research. Finlay (2002) suggested that the reflexive journal is one method qualitative researchers can utilize to address the bias that most certainly infiltrates the socially dependent description of qualitative research.

Data Collection

The data collection process involved the following steps: approval of the interview questions, data collection, and analysis procedures. The researcher held face-to-face semi-structured interviews with couples, following an interview protocol (Appendix F), after obtaining the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix B) and participants' informed consent (Appendix C). Semi-structured interviews are a successful technique for data collection when the researcher wants to gather qualitative, open-ended data by investigating the interviewee's thoughts about a particular topic (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The researcher aimed to explore how premarital counseling influenced the lived experience of the participants after engaging in premarital counseling.

To secure IRB approval, the researcher completed and submitted the proposal and application to Liberty University's IRB (Appendix B). Three supporting documents accompanied the application, including the informed consent form (Appendix C), the recruitment email flyers (Appendices H-I), and the participant invitation email (Appendix J). Following IRB approval (see Appendix B), the researcher solicited participants per the recruitment process dictated by the site authorization letters. This recruitment included posting a flyer at the church and secular counseling practice on both organizations' social

media pages and approaching potential participants in-person at the church. Once potential participants voiced interest, the researcher used a purposive sampling technique to select the participants that met three inclusion criteria. Couples were eligible to participate in the study if they:

1. They had been married for at least one year, and
2. They attended premarital counseling before they were married.

There were several exclusion criteria for the study. Exclusion criteria for the study included: (a) being younger than 18 years old, (b) being unmarried, (c) are divorced, (d) are married, but never attended premarital counseling and (e) have not been married for a minimum of one year.

From the pool of those who met the inclusion criteria and did not meet the exclusion criteria, the researcher selected participants sufficient for reaching data saturation; approximately 19 couples. Participant recruitment proceeded as described in the procedure section of the proposal. In the participant invitation process, participants for this proposed study were invited to participate in open-ended, face-to-face semi-structured interviews via an email sent by the researcher. In the email, the participants were provided with a brief explanation of the study, its purpose, and how it may benefit them. The participants, if they agreed via email to participate, were sent the required informed consent and demographic information.

The participant invitation email also offered the participants a variety of times and dates that the researcher was available for the interview. The participants replied to the researcher's email with the chosen date and time and return the signed consent form and demographic information. The researcher then confirmed the day and time with the return email and sent the participants a follow-up email 24 hours before the meeting.

During the scheduled interview, the researcher followed a designed interview protocol to achieve this study's goals (Appendix F). The protocol ensured that each interview was administered in the same manner to ensure consistency of the data and interview experience. Furthermore, this allowed for the data gained by participants to be compared and analyzed accordingly. The interview protocol consisted of the following sections: (a) Participant Invitation Process; (b) Interview Setup and Location; (c) Materials; (c) Interviewer; (d) Interview Overview; and (e) Process for the Interview.

On the day of each interview for each study participant, It started by reviewing the informed consent document and distributing a demographic questionnaire for each member of the couple to complete via Docusign (Appendix D). The collection of information on participant demographics helped ensure that the findings were transferable (Deylami et al., 2021). The researcher asked participants if they had any questions and explained their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher asked for verbal consent to conduct the interview. Following these preliminaries, the researcher turned on an audio recorder to record the interviews.

I also took field notes to record the interviewees' expressions and reinforce data collection from the audio recording(s) (Tessier, 2012). After each interview, the researcher stated that the interview has been completed, turned off the recording device, and verbally stated that the recording device has been turned off. The researcher reminded the interviewee(s) that data (a) will remain confidential, (b) that their interview transcripts would be submitted to them for member checking, and (c) that all data collected would remain secured in a locked file cabinet and destroyed after three years

(Daniel, 2016). A summary of the data collected during the interviews is provided in Table 1.

Table 1*Summary of Interview Data Collected in This Study*

Participant	Interview	Duration	Transcript Pages
Couple 1	July 18, 2023	48 minutes	13 pages
Couple 2	July 19, 2023	56 minutes	18 pages
Couple 3	July 19, 2023	30 minutes	11 pages
Couple 4	July 23, 2023	43 minutes	13 pages
Couple 5	July 24, 2023	46 minutes	13 pages
Couple 6	July 25, 2023	55 minutes	18 pages
Couple 7	July 25, 2023	34 minutes	10 pages
Couple 9	August 4, 2023	25 minutes	8 pages
Couple 10	August 6, 2023	26 minutes	10 pages
Couple 11	August 6, 2023	56 minutes	20 pages
Couple 12	August 16, 2023	54 minutes	20 pages
Couple 13	August 17, 2023	56 minutes	18 pages
Couple 14	August 19, 2023	20 minutes	7 pages
Couple 15	August 24, 2023	49 minutes	14 pages
Couple 16	August 28, 2023	24 minutes	10 pages
Couple 17	August 31, 2023	48 minutes	13 pages
Couple 18	September 9, 2023	45 minutes	14 pages
Couple 19	September 12, 2023	26 minutes	10 pages
MEAN	N/A	38.1 minutes	13.3 pages
TOTAL	N/A	685 minutes	240 pages

Note. Transcripts were typed in Calibri, Font size 11, single spaced.

The interviews were recorded with the Zoom platform's recording capabilities and transcribed using Otter. ai. The interview data indicates that the average interview length was 38 minutes, ranging from 20 minutes to 56 minutes (Table 1). The transcriptions were compared line-by-line with the original audio to ensure accuracy. Transcripts were exported from Otter.ai as Microsoft Word documents typed in Calibri font size 11. The average transcript length was 13.3 pages, ranging from 8 pages to 20 pages.

Interviews

The researcher utilized face-to-face semi-structured dyadic interviews to collect data from participant couples. The interviews occur on-site at the church and secular counseling practice. However, if the participants could not meet face-to-face or were uncomfortable completing an interview at either location, the interview was completed virtually or in a place of the participant's choosing. In an interview, a researcher can ask questions related to facts, people's beliefs and perspectives about facts, feelings, motives, present and past behaviors, standards for behaviors, and conscious reasons for actions or feelings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Notably, the interview questions were constructed in such a way as to answer the research questions (see Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2018).

An open-ended semi-structured interview is a meeting in which the interviewer does not strictly follow a formalized list of questions. Instead, the interviewer asks more open-ended questions, allowing for a discussion with the interviewee rather than a straightforward question-and-answer format (Kallio et al., 2016). In qualitative research, a face-to-face semi-structured interview tends to be informal and friendly (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). All the face-to-face semi-structured interviews in this research were audio-recorded. If the participants could not meet face-to-face, interviews were recorded audio and visually using the selected virtual meeting application's integrated recording features.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews include open-ended questions with the researcher following an interview protocol (Busetto et al., 2020). An interview protocol includes a short list of guiding questions supplemented by follow-up and probing questions determined by the interviewee's responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

However, it is not simply a list of interview questions (Jacob & Fugerson, 2012) since it contains predefined topics from the literature, preliminary observations, or document study (Busetto et al., 2020). An interview protocol (see Appendix F) guided the interviewer through the interview process, for example, by prompting the interviewer to request informed consent and cues the interviewer to ask the right questions that speak to the study's research questions (Jacob & Fugerson, 2012). Using an interview protocol can help a researcher overcome bias, thus strengthening the study and improving the study's dependability (Busetto et al., 2020).

Expert Panel

The researcher utilized a panel of three experts in premarital counseling or relationship therapies (e.g., researchers who explored premarital counseling or counselors holding a terminal degree) prior to data collection to develop and review the interview questions, offering recommendations for improvement (see Appendix G). Expert panels are useful when specialized input and opinion are required to evaluate and develop comprehensive, evidence-based guidelines (Jesus, 2011). Kallio et al. (2016) indicated new synthesized knowledge on the development of a semi-structured interview guide, including five phases: (a) identifying the prerequisites for using semi-structured interviews; (b) retrieving and using previous knowledge; (c) formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide; (d) field testing the guide; and (e) presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide. The rigorous development of a qualitative semi-structured interview guide contributes to the objectivity and trustworthiness of studies and makes the results more plausible (Kallio et al., 2016).

Field Test

The researcher also conducted field tests of the finalized interview questions to ensure the questions were worded to elicit detailed and relevant data. In the field test, the researcher invited one or more couples who met the inclusion criteria and were personally known to the researcher to do field test interviews. The couples answered the approved interview questions reviewed by the expert panel and The researcher's committee. Additionally, these couples used in the field testing of the interview questions will provide information to help the researcher refine and improve the interview questions (Kallio et al., 2016). The researcher expected that the field test could lead the researcher to revisions to avoid ambiguity and bias, reduce the questions' repetition, or adjust word choice to establish authenticity (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2018). The researcher did not use these couple's data in the study.

Open-Ended Semi-Structured Interview Questions

As the singular data source in a phenomenological study, interview questions must elicit enough data to answer the research questions. Other studies within psychology, marital counseling, and marriage also utilized the data collection method of interviews; in a study completed by Demment (1992), the researcher utilized in-depth interviews to investigate the phenomenology of marriage as experienced by couples who professed to enjoy a successful marriage. Asadi et al. (2016) also employed in-depth interviews to explore how women deal with different points, ideas, and behaviors in marital life. Additionally, Brown (2019) also employed a phenomenological design utilizing interview questions to explore the application of premarital counseling with African American couples and how it affects their marital satisfaction.

The following questions were utilized with participants in the proposed study.

There are ten questions with 36 probing questions. The questions and probing questions include:

1. Could you generally describe your experience in premarital counseling?
 - a. How many premarital counseling sessions did you attend?
 - b. What was the setting of your premarital counseling?
2. Could you please describe the circumstances/experiences that led you to participate in premarital counseling?
 - a. Were there any specific issues you were hoping to address in premarital counseling?
3. What role did communication play in your decision to participate in premarital counseling?
4. How would you describe your experience with your premarital counselor?
 - a. How long were you engaged in premarital counseling?
 - b. Describe your premarital counselor. Please include any details you think are important or relevant.
 - c. Did you feel comfortable with your premarital counselor?
 - d. What made you feel comfortable or uncomfortable?
5. What do you remember from your premarital counseling experience?
 - a. How, if at all, do they think their premarital counseling impacted your marriage?
6. Can you please describe how you worked on these skills?
 - a. What exercises did your counselor guide you through?
 - b. Can you please describe them in detail?
7. Of the skills learned during premarital counseling, do you apply any of these skills currently in your marriage?
 - a. If yes, can you please describe how you apply these skills?
 - b. Maybe give me a specific example for each skill?

8. Of the skills learned during premarital counseling, which skills do you not apply in your marriage?
 - a. Can you describe why you do not utilize these skills?
9. How do you define a well-functioning marriage?
 - a. Can you give me a specific example of a time when your marriage functioned well according to your definition?
10. Has there ever been a time in your marriage you did not function consistently with your definition?
 - a. Can you describe how this changes your answer on how you would define a well-functioning marriage?
11. Did premarital counseling contribute to your view of a well-functioning marriage?
12. How do you define marital satisfaction?
 - a. According to your definition, can you give me a specific example of a time when your marriage was/is happy?
13. Please describe a time when your marriage did not conform to your definition of happiness.
 - a. Does this change your answer on how you would define a happy marriage?
14. How would you define a successful marriage?
 - a. According to your definition, can you give me a specific example of a time when your marriage was/is satisfying?
15. Please describe a time when your marriage did not conform to your definition of marital satisfaction.
 - a. Does this change your answer on how you would define marital satisfaction?
16. Please describe what individual and collective skills you think are necessary to maintain marital satisfaction.
17. Which of the skills that you named are possessed by each partner?
 - a. Can you please describe it?
18. How do you think communication factors into marital satisfaction?

19. How would you say premarital counseling contributed to the overall happiness of your marriage?

a. Please describe it in detail.

20. How would you say premarital counseling contributed to your level of marital satisfaction?

a. Please describe it in detail.

Question 1 opened the discussions on premarital counseling, allowing the participants to describe the nature and experience of their premarital counseling and their comfort level. Participants were also prompted to describe the skills they worked on during counseling. These questions directly addressed research question one (RQ1). They allowed participants to directly tell the researcher what their experience with premarital counseling was, and it allowed the researcher to gauge whether the skills addressed were used in the marriage and how those skills related to the participant's experiences regarding marital satisfaction.

Questions 5-8 established the participants' definition of marital functionality, satisfaction, and success. It also allowed them to expand on times when their marriage did or did not conform to their definition, which helped the researcher determine whether the participants felt their lived marital experience was happy, functional, and/or satisfying. These questions also set a framework for discussing premarital counseling by establishing the current state of the couple's marriage. These questions elucidated qualities that may prevent the dissolution of marriage, which is directly related to Gottman's cascade model of marital dissolution (Gottman, 1994). The questions were precursor information required to address research question two (RQ2). Question 4 asked what skills participants think were necessary to maintain a satisfying marriage, which contributed to answering RQ2, allowing the participants to define what they believed are

necessary skills for marital success. These were contrasted with the skills taught in premarital counseling, which addressed RQ2.

Questions 9-10 asked participants if premarital counseling influenced their marriage's happiness, satisfaction, and/or functionality. These questions addressed RQ2, as it allowed participants to define the skills that they learned during counseling and how they applied them to their marriage. These answers were compared to Questions 1-3, allowing the researcher to assess whether skills learned in premarital counseling contributed to the success of the participants' marriage. All interview questions and their relation to the theoretical foundation and research questions are shown in Appendix E.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the gathered data for this proposed study. According to Padilla-Diaz (2015), in phenomenology, data analysis is characterized by identifying common meanings and essences through textual and structural analysis of what is expressed by the participants. According to Dey (1993), qualitative data analysis develops the narrative, categorization, and interconnectedness of phenomena with the investigator's ideas. Hence, qualitative data analysis intends to explain a phenomenon in certain or better detail, compare cases, and construct a concept of the lived experience under investigation from the analysis of observable data. (Flick, 2013).

After data collection was complete and the researcher had acquired data saturation, the data was subjected to member checking and was organized and cleaned

prior to analysis. Transcripts were sent to the participants for interviewee transcript review, a form of member checking that increases the trustworthiness of study findings (Rowlands, 2021). The following participants responded to the transcript review email that no changes to the transcript were required: Couple 3, Couple 5, Couple 6, Couple 7, Couple 10, Couple 12, and Couple 13. The remaining participants did not respond to the transcript review email. Following data preparation, The researcher performed a textual and structural thematic content analysis of the qualitative data via hand-coding using the thematic analysis techniques as outlined by Van Manen et al. (2016).

Step 1: Turning to the Nature of the Lived Experience

This study addressed how premarital counseling influences the lived experience of the relationships of married couples, including couples from various demographic backgrounds. This research study was guided by two research questions to explore how couples experience premarital counseling and how they interpret their premarital experience in terms of the skills they may have learned to secure marital satisfaction and avoid the dissolution of their marriage. In the first step, the researcher took the phenomenon they wanted to study from the perspective of participants' lived experiences and formulated a research question.

The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: How do couples experience premarital counseling?

RQ2: How do couples interpret learning the skills in premarital counseling to avoid the dissolution of their marriage?

Step 2: Investigating Experience as We Live It

Van Manen (1997) postulates that the researcher needs to investigate the participants' lived experiences and not simply record their lived experiences. To this end, the researcher investigated the lived experiences via in-depth, open-ended semi-structured interviews. This form of questioning allowed the researcher to enter the participants' world, albeit for a short period, and participate in, but not influence, their lived experiences.

Step 3: Reflection: Essential Themes that Characterize of Phenomenon

The researcher did at least three critical readings of the data interview transcripts. The first reading gave the researcher a holistic perspective of the entire dataset. The second reading was line-by-line, allowing the researcher to understand the entire experience described by the participant. In the third reading, the researcher searched for emerging themes that pertain to the study's theoretical framework, using inductive hand coding to manually identify recurring ideas using human judgment to evaluate and categorize common themes.

The researcher chose inductive coding as deductive coding involves the application of preexisting categories or concepts to the data being evaluated whereas inductive coding includes detecting themes or patterns in the data without using established categories (Williams & Moser, 2019). Additionally, open-axial coding is a more adaptable method that includes both deductive and inductive coding, which is not fit for this study as the researcher will only detect themes or patterns in the data without using established categories (Williams & Moser, 2019). The researcher recognized

repetitive themes to ensure a thick description of the experiences (Van Manen et al., 2016).

Step 4: Describing the Phenomenon in Art: Writing and Rewriting

In writing up the data, the researcher helps visualize the participants' feelings, thoughts, and attitudes and then convert that visualization into a narrative that captures the participants' lived experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). In this step, the researcher did another skillful reading of the interview transcripts, reflecting on how the participants' words and experiences relate to the themes chosen. Step 4 was also related to the theoretical framework through the discussion of the data.

Step 5: Maintaining Strong and Orientated Relation of Phenomenon

The researcher must strive to remain focused on the research question at hand. Because phenomenological research provides rich data, the researcher's focus can be diverted away from the research questions (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Additionally, the researcher could easily take on a narrow, fixed mindset that precludes consideration of ideas outside those that they have already been considered. To protect against this, the researcher engaged in critical self-reflection, transparently acknowledging their role in the study. Data richness is a positive feature in hermeneutic phenomenology. However, it jeopardizes the identification of themes and can lead to superficial analysis. Textual analysis helps uphold the research's main concepts and ensures a connection between the researcher, the context, and the interpretation (Al-Raisi et al., 2020; Van Manen, 1997).

Step 6: Balancing: Research Context by Considering Parts and Whole

The researcher should always take care to relate the study's design and context to the overall structure of the phenomenon. To ensure that this has been done appropriately, the researcher must conduct a constant retrospective check throughout the study, referring back to the text and context to ensure that each part of the study contributes to the whole (Al-Raisi et al., 2020; Van Manen, 1997). The researcher used MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software, for support with documentation, transcription, retrieval, coding, theory alignment, paraphrasing, commentary, value weighting, visual representations for Chapter Four, and data synthesis. First, the interview recordings were imported to MAXQDA, and transcripts were prepared. The transcripts were sent to their respective study participants for member checking. Next, the transcripts were reloaded in MAXQDA, and a coding sequence was established: because the interviewees will remain confidential, each transcript was labeled as C1, C2, ... C12. The second set of initial codes was used in lowercase letters, each in parentheses.

Initially, coded content was further grouped, color-coded, and developed according to positive or negative expressions and other content worthy of paraphrasing and using as examples of findings to represent all couples in the final analysis. Next, the findings were read for coding outcomes and additional variables, accompanied by memoing, as the researcher identified relevant connections that answer the study research questions. The memo notes contributed to the search for connections, patterns, and interrelated constructs that, in turn, led to a third set of categorizations. These coded, categorized, annotated themes were then be turned into a narrative that summarizes, synthesizes, and provides interpreted conclusions about the data according to Gottman's

(1994) cascade model of marital dissolution and the findings from the review of the research literature.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of a study refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods the researcher uses to ensure the quality of a study (Connelly, 2016). Trustworthiness is vital for ensuring that others have confidence in the study's results. As Yin (2016) explained, the trustworthiness of qualitative research requires addressing and making efforts to ensure the appropriateness of the instruments, procedures, and data and determining if the design is consistent and repeatable. Further, researchers must ensure that the population selection and data collection are appropriate and that research questions and data analysis procedures are aligned. Achieving trustworthiness in this qualitative study will require maintaining the credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the findings (Leung, 2015; Morse, 2015). Establishing trustworthiness regarding the concepts of validity and reliability is a crucial concern in ensuring the quality of qualitative research (Ang et al., 2016). To ensure the quality of research findings, a researcher establishes the reliability and validity of the study, the goal of which is to reduce biases (Yin, 2014). To enhance the study's trustworthiness, the researcher applied criteria for measuring the quality of qualitative research methods in addition to specific criteria for each method (Zhong, 2018).

Credibility

The credibility, or internal validity of the research (Morse, 2015), is characterized by the accuracy of inferences and connections made by the researcher. Put another way, the study's credibility is confidence in the truth of the study and, thus, the findings;

therefore, credibility is the most important criterion (Connelly, 2016). To ensure the credibility of this study, the researcher : (a) adopted a well-established data collection plan; (b) conducted the research in natural settings where the participating couples are relevant to the phenomenon under study; (c) gave sufficient time to listen, document, and achieve saturation of data; (d) performed member checking to ensure narrative truth; and (e) paid attention to researcher reflexivity, which reminded the researcher to maintain awareness about how the research results unfold and document emerging patterns (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Palaganas et al., 2017).

The researcher endeavored to deliver a thick description of data collection. In the thick description, Guba and Lincoln (1998) propose incorporating an audit trail to guarantee legibility so that others can follow the analytical development of the study. The researcher also avoided bias by using reflexive journaling through all phases of the research. Hence, to ensure credibility, the measures and methods must be offered as meticulously and clearly as possible (Sundler et al., 2019).

Dependability and Confirmability

Corrections are necessary to ensure the reliability and validity of the data collected (Zhong, 2018). Also known as reliability, dependability is characterized as the consistency or repeatability of the study (Leung, 2015; Morse, 2015; Yin, 2016). The researcher reported and documented the methodology, procedures, and processes in collecting and analyzing the data to achieve dependability. Therefore, the researcher checked whether the analysis process was congruent with the accepted standards for the research design. As suggested by Korstjens and Moser (2018), The researcher used the strategy of an audit trail and documented the inquiry process. The researcher provided a

complete set of notes on decisions made during the research process, reflective thoughts, sampling, research instruments, the emergence of the findings, and information about data management. Adopting an audit trail enables the auditor to study the transparency of the research path (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Confirmability aims to safeguard that the outcomes are independent of the researcher's biases. Consequently, as part of the reflexive analysis, The researcher attempts to record all data gathered (Singh et al., 2021) truthfully. In other words, the researcher will demonstrate that the findings are based directly on the participants' interview responses and not the researcher's preconceptions or biases by providing transparent, in-depth descriptions of how the data were collected and analyzed, also reporting her own opinions that could shape the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Leung, 2015). Another way the qualitative researcher develops confirmability is through rival explanations and negative cases. Negative cases regularly deliver a strategy to distinguish the norm and are critical to recognizing the complete experience (Morse, 2015). During the qualitative data compilation and transcription phases, it is important to consider common pitfalls such as equipment failure, environmental hazards, and transcription errors to ensure trustworthiness and methodological certainty (Easton et al., 2000). Nonetheless, in determining the trustworthiness of research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), these potential inaccuracies could impact the dependability and confirmability of the study.

Transferability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability is one of the four principles of research trustworthiness. Transferability is the external validity of the

research and findings in qualitative analysis and is a critical factor of qualitative inquiry. The researcher achieved transferability by relying on supplied evidence from participant responses, with the findings including direct quotes (Cope, 2014). The burden of proof for transferability lies less on the innovative researcher than on the individual looking to make a request elsewhere. However, the researcher must provide sufficient descriptive information for transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Furthermore, rich, thick description assists in research transferability. Guba and Lincoln (1998) stressed that the audience could liken findings to other contexts and settings. The recommendation is that data about the framework, fact-finding, and decisions should be appropriately described so that other investigators can feel self-reliant (Moustakas, 1994) about any transference they might reasonably consider (Creswell, 2012; Guba & Lincoln, 1998).

This study has many implications past the level of the participants. This study may inform the lived experiences of couples that have undergone premarital counseling, which could provide premarital counselors insight into these lived experiences. Moreover, this study could lead to premarital counselors' evaluating how couples define and perceive marriage functionality, happiness, and satisfaction, allowing premarital counselors to alter their practices to suit their client's needs better.

Ethical Considerations

In the context of international research norms and practices, the 1979 Belmont Report remains critical (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The Belmont Report protocol outlines the basic ethical principles for researchers to follow when conducting research involving

human subjects (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The three principles mentioned in the Belmont Report are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The first principle asserts that people should be treated with respect because all individuals are autonomous agents, and those with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The second principle states that researchers should minimize the risk of harm and maximize the potential benefits. Thirdly, as it relates to justice, people should be treated fairly. These principles ensure that a researcher meets the participant's right to privacy and the treatment of the participants with dignity (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

As required by the Belmont Report, a researcher must ensure justice through attention to the significance of the study's purpose and through careful choices in the research design that generates rigorous findings without unduly burdening subjects (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The researcher followed the ethical guidelines of the interview protocol. To this end, the researcher referred to each site as a city, church, or counseling center to ensure the confidentiality of the selected locations, the practitioners, and any participants that visit these facilities. The couples similarly received pseudonyms to ensure their confidentiality.

Since the researcher acts as the instrumentation in this phenomenological study, The researcher must be ethically mindful not to cause harm to the research participants. Researchers encounter ethical challenges in all phases of the study, from planning to

reporting the findings. The researcher must ethically operate to safeguard participants, preserve the integrity of the study, and protect against misconduct (Creswell, 2014; Sanjari et al., 2014).

When emotional encounters between a researcher and the participants occur, the researcher must continuously navigate any inherent ethical tensions (Harvey, 2017). The researcher secured institutional approval per the requirement of the IRB. After IRB approval, the researcher informed the participants of the possible risks and potential consequences of participating in the study, the extent to which the results are confidential, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point, which the researcher addressed through an informed consent form. A study relating to human beings must embrace sufficient requirements to preserve the confidentiality of research data. Preserving confidentiality necessitates protecting the data that an individual has revealed and anticipation that it will remain confidential unless participants provide written consent granting the researcher the right to share their information and data.

Each interviewee signed the informed consent document to signify that they agree to participate and understand how the research will be used. The participants' data, including contact information, were secured in an encrypted file on the researcher's computer hard drive for a minimum of three to six years and then destroyed (Daniel, 2016). The researcher's doctoral committee and Liberty University were the only entities with access to the data, including transcripts and recordings of the study. However, the researcher does not anticipate any ethical issues in the study.

Summary

Premarital counseling is a therapy that helps prepare couples for future challenges and expectations in marriage (Al-Qahtani et al., 2019; Carlson et al., 2020; Moeti et al., 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018). Most premarital counseling services cover common issues such as medical screening, beliefs and values, expectations, partner knowledge, roles and duties, sex, parenthood, financial management, communication, and conflicts (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020). However, traditional premarital counseling is no longer as respected or conducted as in-depth as before and hence does not appear to benefit couples as expected, negatively impacting the establishment of marriages now (Moeti et al., 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to seek to explore the lived experience of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland.

Chapter Three outlined the research methods used for this study to answer the study's two research questions. The research design for the study was a qualitative interpretive phenomenological design. A qualitative methodology provides the means and process to explore how and why questions without manipulating the subjects and the context involved in the study (Busetto et al., 2020).

This interpretive phenomenological study involved face-to-face semi-structured interviews with married couples from diverse backgrounds in a city in Maryland. The general population for this phenomenological research was married couples in the United States. The target population was married couples of varying demographic backgrounds from a city in Maryland, recruited from a local church and a secular counseling practice. From the pool of those who meet the inclusion criteria, the researcher selected

participants sufficient for reaching data saturation; approximately 19 couples. An interview protocol was followed. The interview protocol consisted of the following sections: (a) Participant Invitation Process, (b) Interview Setup and Location, (c) Materials, (d) Interviewer, (e) Interview Overview, and (f) Process for the Interview.

The researcher conducted an expert panel and field test to help develop guidelines for the interview sessions and validate the interview questions (Fernández-Gómez et al., 2020; Howie & Bagnall, 2017). To improve the quality of the research findings, The researcher established the credibility and dependability of the study. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the data using hand-coding and assistive software MAXQDA. In Chapter Three, the researcher also detailed the data collection and analysis procedures and discussed the ethical considerations. Chapter Four will describe the data analysis procedures and present the study's findings. The findings will be organized by research question and theme. An interpretation and discussion of the results will be elucidated in Chapter Five.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

Premarital counseling can help couples increase the longevity of their marriages by identifying potential challenges, working on current relationship issues, and facilitating a better understanding of each other (Clyde et al., 2020). The purpose of the current study was to explore the lived experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland. By focusing on the lived experiences of couples engaged in marriage counseling, this study provided valuable insight into the potential benefits of premarital counseling. In this study, 19 couples who engaged in premarital counseling were interviewed to elucidate their perspectives on how premarital counseling influenced their marital satisfaction and success.

There were no changes to the methodology detailed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 will be organized into four sections. First, the participants who completed the semi-structured interviews will be described. Next, there will be a discussion of the study's data analysis and how the study's themes were developed. The results and findings of the study will next be presented for the five themes extracted from the participants' interviews. The chapter will conclude with a summary and transition to Chapter 5.

Participants

This study explored the lived experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland. By understanding the lived experiences of couples engaged in marriage counseling, the researcher anticipated obtaining data that can speak to a myriad of marital concerns

premarital counseling addresses. To adequately explore and understand this phenomenon, the researcher started the collection of data by identifying married couples who had experienced marital counseling. Potential participants were recruited using a flyer posted at the church and secular counseling practice on both organizations' social media pages. The researcher also conducted recruitment by approaching possible participants, in in-person at the church.

Once potential participants voiced interest, a purposive sampling technique was used to select those who met the inclusion criteria, which included being married for at least one year and having attended premarital counseling before they were married. The recruitment approach garnered a final sample of 19 married couples (38 participants) who met the inclusion criteria and volunteered to participate in this study. After receiving IRB approval on July 10, 2023, the recruitment process immediately began and spanned July 11, 2023, until September 20, 2023. The interviews started on July 18, 2023, and ended on September 12, 2023.

Nineteen couples participated in the study. Seventeen couples were traditional couples comprised of a husband and a wife. For confidentiality, the couples were identified using alphanumeric characters C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6, C7, C9, C10, C11, C12, C13, C14, C15, C16, C17, C18, and C19. Pseudonyms for each individual were further assigned to protect the participants' confidentiality. For example, for Couple 1 (C1), participants C1-H and C1-W were husband and wife, respectively. Each traditional couple was similarly assigned pseudonyms. Couple 18 was a non-traditional couple comprised of two women. Their pseudonyms were assigned as C18-1 and C18-2. Couple 8 was interviewed, but the audio recording was of poor quality and prevented accurate

transcription. Consequently, Couple 8's data was not included in the data set. This section contains brief descriptions of each couple in the study. Demographic characteristics of the entire sample are provided in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, the sample represented a wide range of couples in terms of age and length of marriage. Two couples (Couples 13 and 19) were ages 23-25 and were married for less than two years. In contrast, Couple 7 was aged 64-65 and had been married for 36 years. The other participants fell between these extremes in terms of age and length of time being married. The participants also had varied experiences with premarital counseling, although most participants completed four to six premarital counseling sessions. Couple 19 had completed the least number of premarital counseling (two sessions) while couples 1, 2, and 13 had completed three premarital counseling sessions each. The duration of counseling varied from 1 month to 1 year. Three couples did not share the duration of premarital counseling.

Table 2*Demographic Characteristics of the Participants*

Participants	Ages	Years Married	Number of sessions	Duration of counseling
Couple 1	38 (W), 42 (H)	19	3	N/A
Couple 2	32 (W), 54 (H)	25	3	N/A
Couple 3	45 (W), 46 (H)	29	6	3 months
Couple 4	58 (W), 64 (H)	35	4	2 months
Couple 5	54 (W), 59 (H)	2	6	6 months
Couple 6	34 (W), 36 (H)	15	Numerous	1 year
Couple 7	64 (W), 65 (H)	36	4	6 months
Couple 9	50 (W), 47 (H)	9	6	2 months
Couple 10	41 (W), 44 (H)	18	6	N/A
Couple 11	52 (W), 54 (H)	30	6	3 months
Couple 12	34 (W), 35 (H)	6	4	3 months
Couple 13	23 (W), 24 (H)	1.5	3	2 months
Couple 14	49 (W), 47 (H)	22	5	1 year
Couple 15	47 (W), 44 (H)	17	6	1 month
Couple 16	33 (W), 35 (H)	5	4	8 months
Couple 17	39 (W), 42 (H)	11	6	2 months
Couple 18	34, 42	10	6	2 months
Couple 19	23 (W), 25 (H)	1.5	2	1 month

Note: (W) denotes the wife and (H) denotes the husband. Couple C18 was a non-traditional couple comprised of two women. Participant C18-1 was 34 years old, and C18-2 was 42.

Couple 1

The couple is aged between 38 and 42 years, with a marital experience of 19 years. They attended three premarital counseling sessions. During the interview, C1-H was very engaged in the interview and was upbeat, answering most of the questions. Couple 1-W was very shy and mostly answered when her husband asked for her acknowledgment. Overall, the couple was pleasant in sharing their story. However, C1-W was unhappy when her husband shared that she had left him for another individual.

Couple 2

Couple 2 is an interracial marriage whose age ranges between 32 and 54 years. Specifically, C2-W, a Caucasian female in her mid-40s, is married to an African

American male (C2-H) who is about 20 years her senior. The couple attended three premarital counseling sessions and their marriage has lasted for 25 years. Although the couple has children outside their marriage, they do not have children in common. During the interview, the husband was very open, and at times, he expressed his humor. Couple 2-W showed her gratitude to her husband in how she spoke about him and almost appeared to view him as a father figure. At one point, C2-W stated, "I always jokingly get on him because he's always putting my needs ahead of his." The couple was very down to earth and corroborated each other's comments by validating that what each other said was true.

Couple 3

The couple is aged between 45 and 46 years and have been married together for the past 29 years. They attended 6 premarital counseling sessions before their marriage. These counseling sessions took a total of three months. Couple 3-W is a professional working mother who is very direct in sharing her information. During the interviews, C3-H, who is also a father and a pastor, seemed to be the dominant individual in their household; they based their relationship on being Christian and modeling good parenting for their three girls. The couple acknowledged that the education they received in counseling was very helpful in maintaining a satisfying marriage.

Couple 4

Couple 4 is aged between 58 and 64 years and has been married for 35 years. They received four counseling sessions before their marriage. The couple received these counseling sessions for a total of two months. Couple 4-W answered most of the interview questions. However, her husband did validate her answers by acknowledging,

either through nodding his head or verbalizing, that he concurred or agreed with the statement she had made. The couple appears to be firm in their faith, as they also suggested that they based their marriage on the principles in the Bible.

Couple 5

Couple 5 is aged between 54 and 59 years, with a marriage experience of two years. The couple received six counseling sessions for six months before their marriage. Couple 5-W began the interview, but before she actually started, she asked her husband if it was okay for her to go ahead. His response was yes, but it was very humorous as he tried to make little jokes as the interview continued. This couple both shared that their relationship is based on their faith, and it helps them keep the marriage strong.

Couple 6

Couple 6 is aged between 34 and 36 years, with a marriage experience of 15 years. The couple received numerous counseling sessions before their marriage. These counseling sessions took one year in total. Couple 6-W expressed that she had recently earned a doctoral degree and was very happy being the mother of one little boy. Her husband was also a professional and said that he enjoys being the father to their son. The couple seemed very knowledgeable of all the tools that were shared or imparted to them during their counseling. They also expressed that being Christian, being long-standing church members, and developing a good relationship with the individual who counseled them made their marriage more successful.

Couple 7

Couple 7 is aged between 64 and 65 years and has been married for 36 years. They received four counseling sessions before their marriage, which spanned for six

months. The couple offered the study information from a different cultural view and expressed that counseling was something new for them because they were from a developing country, where premarital counseling had not existed for a long time. Couple 7-W was more engaged and answered most of the questions. However, C7-H would acknowledge her answers by nodding off the head or giving a thumbs-up sign.

Couple 9

Couple 9 is aged between 47 and 50 years, with 9 years of experience in marriage. They received six counseling sessions before their marriage, which spanned for two months. During the interview, couple 9-H appeared shy, and did not respond to many of the questions. His wife dominated most of the interview time. The couple seemed to be at odds with each other, as there was not much eye contact made between them during the interview.

Couple 10

Couple 10 is aged between 41 and 44 years and has been married for 18 years. They received six counseling sessions before their marriage. During the interview, couple 10 seemed to misunderstand one of the comments. Couple 10-W spoke mainly about things she wanted to do, which was surprising. On the other hand, C10-H said there were times in their relationship when he wanted to spend his money on his desires. However, after premarital counseling, C10-H recognized the necessity of teamwork. The couple was very honest in speaking about marital satisfaction.

Couple 11

Couple 11 is aged between 52 and 54 years and has been married for 30 years. They received six counseling sessions before their marriage, which spanned for three

months. During the interview, couple 11-W was very transparent in sharing her story, and C11-H was very detailed in his accounts of premarital counseling. The couple made jokes during the interview process, and it seemed like they were very comfortable being with each other and sharing their lived experiences.

Couple 12

Couple 12 is aged between 34 and 35 years and has been married for 6 years. They received four counseling sessions before their marriage. The couple received these counseling sessions for a total of three months. Couple 12-H and C12-W are both professionals in the school community. During the interview, the wife shared that she had a prior relationship and thought a counselor was necessary to help them start a healthy marital relationship. They value working together and sharing responsibilities.

Couple 13

Couple 13 is aged between 23 and 24 years and has been married for one and a half years. They received three counseling sessions before their marriage. The couple received these counseling sessions for a total of two months. This young couple had their first anniversary a few months before the interview. Having spent only one and half years together, couple 13 did not have enough marriage experience to share. However, they used the skills they learned in premarital counseling. They were very transparent with the information given.

Couple 14

Couple 14 is aged between 47 and 49 years and has been married for 22 years. They received five counseling sessions before their marriage, which spanned for one year. Couple 14-H and C14-W have known each other since they were children. During

the interview, both husband and wife were nervous about sharing information, and had some rifts in trust between them evidenced by a statement made during the interview.

Couple 15

Couple 15 is aged between 44 and 47 years and has been married for 17 years. They received six counseling sessions before their marriage, which spanned for a total of one month. During the interview, couple 15-W was more communicative than the spouse. However, C15-H validated his wife's information either by nodding his head with a smile or by verbalizing that he concurred and agreed with her. The couple both shared that they were Christian, and that communication is an ongoing process. The couple also shared that they tried to settle their disagreements before they got worse than what they already were. They viewed spirituality as a driving factor in their lives.

Couple 16

Couple 16 is aged between 33 and 35 years. They have been married for the last five years and have a young child. The couple received four counseling sessions before their marriage, which spanned for eight months. Both husband and wife are professionals who work in the school system. During the interview, couple 16-W started answering the first question. However, at times, her husband seemed so anxious that he cut into her conversation and expressed that she had said enough. Couple 16-H was very detailed and shared his lived experiences.

Couple 17

Couple 4 is aged between 39 and 42 years and has been married for 11 years. They received six counseling sessions before their marriage, which spanned for two months. Couple 17-W was slightly nervous during the interview based on her body

language. Couple 17-H seemed knowledgeable about the skills learned in premarital counseling to help their relationship thrive. At times, it seemed like the wife was guarded and would state the basics. During this interview, it seemed like the couple was protecting their privacy.

Couple 18

Couple 18 is aged between 34 and 42 years, with 10 years of experience in marriage. They received six counseling sessions before their marriage, which spanned for two months. This couple was non-traditional and was very transparent. The couple collaborated when sharing their stories. Couple 18-1, at times, helped C18-2 answer the questions in a shared perspective. They shared the personal loss of a child in their lives as a couple.

Couple 19

Couple 19 is aged between 23 and 25 years and has been married for one and a half years. They received two counseling sessions before their marriage, which spanned for one month. During the interview, couple 19-W was excited to share the joy of being pregnant. Her husband was very soft-spoken. One of my observations was that the wife seemed to be the dominant one in the relationship, as she reported that she needed to know where her husband was at all times and would have a GPS on him. The couple described doing marital counseling in addition to premarital counseling.

Descriptive Interview Data

The qualitative data were collected using open-ended, face-to-face semi-structured dyadic interviews, where the researcher acted as the research instrument and sole interviewer. As shown in Table 3, the dyadic interviews with 18 couples (36

participants) produced 721 minutes of audio and visual recordings, resulting in a mean length of interviewing of 40 minutes. The combined transcribed interviews generated 221 single-spaced, Times New Roman pages. The average number of pages per transcript was 12.3.

Table 3

Descriptive Interview Data

Interview	Duration (minutes)	Transcript Pages (Font Size 10, Single Spaced)
Couple 1	48	13
Couple 2	55	12
Couple 3	27	12
Couple 4	42	12
Couple 5	46	12
Couple 6	54	17
Couple 7	34	10
Couple 9	25	7
Couple 10	25	9
Couple 11	56	19
Couple 12	54	19
Couple 13	56	15
Couple 14	20	7
Couple 15	37	10
Couple 16	24	10
Couple 17	48	13
Couple 18	44	14
Couple 19	26	10
Total Data Collection	Total Interview Time = 721 Average = 40 minutes	Total Transcript Pages = 221 Average = 12.3 transcript pages

Note. This table shows the length of each couple's interview, portraying an average interview time of 40 minutes and approximately 221 pages of data.

Theme Development

To code the data, descriptive codes were generated corresponding to the participants' significant thoughts and ideas. Researchers use coding to assign abstract meaning to textual data without losing meaning (Saldaña, 2021). The codes, shown in Table 4, were designed to be short phrases that were descriptive of the participants' thoughts. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the data using assistive

software MAXQDA and hand-coding. MAXQDA was used for transcription and generation of initial codes.

The data was then hand-coded and organized using Microsoft Word. First, the interview recordings were imported to MAXQDA, and transcripts were prepared. The transcripts were sent to their respective study participants for member checking. Next, the transcripts were reloaded in MAXQDA, and a coding sequence was established: because the interviewees remained confidential, the transcripts were labeled using the alphanumeric characters assigned to the couples (C1-C19). After initial codes had been generated in MAXQDA, similar codes were grouped using pattern recognition to form axial categories.

Axial categories can be created by abstracting an existing code or developing a new concept based on a grouping of several codes (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Axial categories represent small patterns in the data that, when combined, are components of larger patterns or themes (Kelle, 2007). The codes and axial categories used in this study are shown in Table 4 which can be found in Appendix L as the table exceeds a page in length.

After the codes had been grouped, the axial categories were combined to form themes. Themes represent overall patterns in the data (Kelle, 2007). The five themes extracted from the participants' interviews are shown in Table 5.

Table 4*Themes Formed from Axial Categories*

Theme No.	Theme name	Categories	Participants
1	Secular and religious premarital counselors were knowledgeable and created inviting, warm counseling environments.	C1, C2	All participants
2	The participants found value in premarital counseling	C3, C4	All participants
3	The premarital counselors used exercises aimed at communication, partnership, and daily life.	C5, C6	All participants except C9 and C12
4	Premarital counseling influences marital functioning and success	C7, C8, C9	All participants
5	Premarital counseling influences marital satisfaction	C10, C11	

Note. An illustration of the five themes developed during data analysis, axial categories conforming to each theme, and participants involved in each theme and category.

Once the themes had been formed, the next phase in the analysis involved making a thematic map that showed the relationships between codes, categories, and themes. The map was examined to understand whether any new themes had emerged or whether there were redundant themes. There were no redundant themes, and no new themes developed from the data. Table 4 shows evidence of data saturation, as each theme represented 16 of the 18 participants.

The themes were then assigned to the research questions. Themes 1, 2, and 3 were assigned to RQ1. Themes 4 and 5 were assigned to RQ2. In this phase, the interview data was compiled for member checking. The member-checking document was organized according to each theme, and the researcher's interpretations of each participant's analyzed data were summarized.

The member-checking document was emailed to the participants for their review. Participants were invited to confirm or discuss whether the researcher's interpretations of

the conversation were accurate. Seven couples responded, confirming that the interview transcripts and their corresponding interpretations were accurate. After receiving these responses, the researcher edited the transcripts accordingly. Two of the seven couples that responded to the member checking emails returned edited interview transcripts, making it easier for the researcher to update those transcripts. The other 11 interview transcripts were considered accurate due to no response from the participants. Once the data was prepared, thematic analysis was performed using Van Manen et al.'s (2016) six-step methodological approach as a guide. These thematic steps are described in the following section.

Step 1: Turning to the Nature of the Lived Experience

The first step of Van Manen et al.'s (2016) six-step methodological framework is turning to the nature of the lived experience. The researcher turned to the phenomenon of interest, which comprised the lived experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland. By understanding the lived experiences of couples engaged in marriage counseling, The researcher expected to obtain data that would speak to a myriad of marital concerns premarital counseling addresses.

Step 2: Investigating Experience as We Live It

The second step involved investigating experience as lived by married couples. Van Manen (1997) postulates that the researcher needs to investigate the participants' lived experiences and not simply record their lived experiences. To this end, the researcher investigated the lived experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling via in-depth, open-

ended semi-structured interviews. This form of questioning allowed the researcher to enter the participants' world, albeit for a short period, and participate in, but not influence, their lived experiences.

Step 3: Reflecting: Essential Themes That Characterize Phenomenon

The third step involved reflecting on the essential themes, which characterized premarital counseling. The researcher reflected on the essential themes that characterized premarital counseling by conducting at least three critical, line-by-line readings of the data interview transcripts. The first reading gave the researcher a holistic perspective of the entire dataset. The second reading was line-by-line, allowing the researcher to understand the entire experience described by the participant. In the third reading, the researcher searched for emerging themes that pertain to the study's theoretical framework, using inductive hand coding to manually identify recurring ideas using human judgment to evaluate and categorize common themes. The researcher chose inductive coding as deductive coding involves the application of preexisting categories or concepts to the data being evaluated whereas inductive coding includes detecting themes or patterns in the data without using established categories (Williams & Moser, 2019). Additionally, open-axial coding is a more adaptable method that includes both deductive and inductive coding, which is not fit for this study as the researcher will only detect themes or patterns in the data without using established categories (Williams & Moser, 2019). The researcher recognized repetitive themes to ensure a thick description of the experiences, aligning with Van Manen et al.'s (2016) guidelines. After reflecting on each interview transcript, the researcher developed five themes of premarital counseling experiences.

These five themes are illustrated in Table 5 and discussed extensively in the subsequent sections.

Step 4: Describing the Phenomenon in Art of Writing and Rewriting

The fourth step, describing premarital counseling in the art of writing and rewriting, enabled the researcher to transition from the internal to the external as well as to develop a concise description. In writing up the data, the researcher helps visualize the participants' feelings, thoughts, and attitudes and then convert that visualization into a narrative that captures the participants' lived experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). For this study, the researcher did another skillful reading of the interview transcripts, reflecting on how the participants' words and experiences relate to the themes chosen. Step 4 was also related to the theoretical framework through the discussion of the data.

Step 5: Maintaining: Strong and Orientated Relation to the Phenomenon

The fifth step involved maintaining a strong and oriented relation to premarital counseling. The researcher must strive to remain focused on the research question at hand. Because phenomenological research provides rich data, the researcher's focus can be diverted away from the research questions (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Furthermore, the researcher could easily take on a narrow, fixed mindset that precludes consideration of ideas outside those that they have already been considered. To void such a scenario in this study, the researcher engaged in critical self-reflection, transparently acknowledging their role in the study. Data richness is a positive feature in hermeneutic phenomenology. However, it jeopardizes the identification of themes and can lead to superficial analysis. Textual analysis helps uphold the research's main concepts and

ensures a connection between the researcher, the context, and the interpretation (Al-Raisi et al., 2020; Van Manen, 1997). It is also at this step of thematic analysis that the researcher focused strongly on the two research questions. The researcher achieved this by always referring to the two research questions when listening to the recorded interviews, appraising transcripts, and reflecting upon the five themes that were developed during data analysis.

Step 6: Balancing: Research Context by Considering the Parts and Whole

The last step involved balancing the research context by considering the parts and whole. The researcher took care to relate the study's design and context to the overall structure of premarital counseling. To ensure that this has been done appropriately, the researcher must conduct a constant retrospective check throughout the study, referring back to the text and context to ensure that each part of the study contributes to the whole (Al-Raisi et al., 2020; Van Manen, 1997). The researcher used MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis tool, for support with documentation, transcription, retrieval, coding, theory alignment, paraphrasing, commentary, value weighting, visual representations for Chapter Four, and data synthesis. First, the interview recordings were imported to MAXQDA, and transcripts were prepared. The transcripts were sent to their respective study participants for member checking. Next, the transcripts were reloaded in MAXQDA, and a coding sequence was established. To guarantee that the interviewees remained confidential, the transcripts were labeled based on couples' pseudonyms, C1-C19. The second set of initial codes was used in lowercase letters, each in parentheses.

Coded content was further grouped, color-coded, and developed according to positive or negative expressions and other content worthy of paraphrasing and using as

examples of excerpts from the interview data to represent all couples in the final analysis. The findings were then read for coding outcomes and additional variables, accompanied by memoing, as the researcher identified relevant connections that answer the study research questions. The memo notes contributed to the search for connections, patterns, and interrelated constructs that, in turn, led to a third set of categorizations. These coded, categorized, annotated themes were then be turned into a narrative that summarizes, synthesizes, and provides interpreted conclusions about the data according to Gottman's (1994) cascade model of marital dissolution and the findings from the review of the research literature.

Results and Findings

In this section, are the findings from this qualitative phenomenological study are presented. The findings elucidate how couples experience premarital counseling (RQ1) and how couples interpreted learning the skills in premarital counseling to avoid the dissolution of their marriage (RQ2). In this section, the thematic findings are organized according to each research question.

RQ1: How Do Couples Experience Premarital Counseling?

Many religions require premarital counseling, as religious leaders believe premarital counseling can influence the longevity of a marriage (Peart, 2023). For religious couples, premarital counseling is considered necessary because it guarantees longevity of their marriage (Peart, 2023). Other couples seeking premarital counseling often wish to learn the skills required for a long and successful marriage (Reed-Fitzke et al., 2020). Mental health professionals and religious leaders facilitating premarital counseling must have a fundamental understanding of how couples perceive and

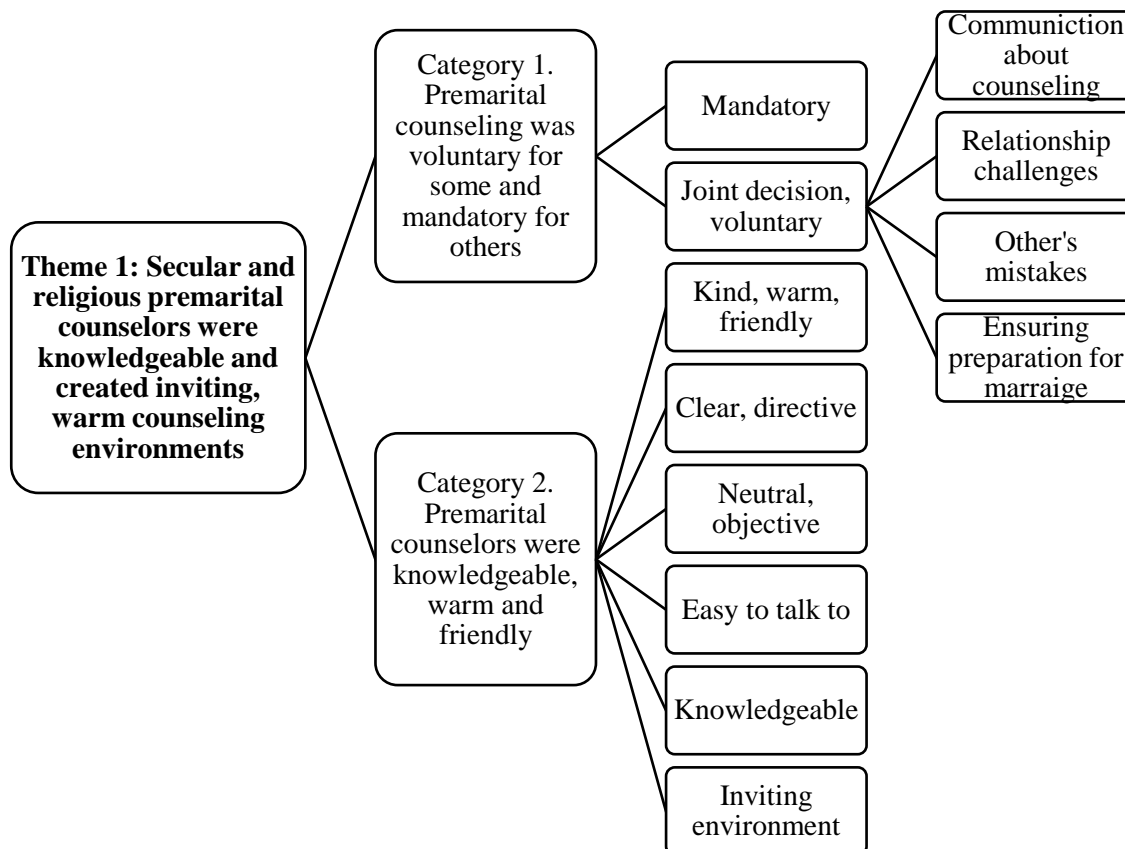
experience premarital counseling. Therefore, RQ1 was designed to explore how couples experienced premarital counseling. Three themes were extracted from the participants' interviews to address RQ1. In Theme 1, Secular and religious premarital counselors were knowledgeable and created inviting, warm counseling environments, the participants described their secular and religious premarital counselors as knowledgeable and who created inviting, warm counseling environments. Theme 2, the participants found value in premarital counseling, describes how the participants found value in premarital counseling. Theme 3, the premarital counselors used exercises aimed at communication, partnership, and daily life, explores the exercises the participants' premarital counselors used to facilitate partnership, communication, and daily life.

Theme 1: Secular and Religious Premarital Counselors were Knowledgeable and Created Inviting, Warm Counseling Environments

Theme 1 explores the lived experiences of couples engaging with premarital counseling regarding the counseling environment and their counselors' demeanors. Two categories contributed to the development of Theme 1. Category 1 describes the reasons why the couples sought premarital counseling, whereas Category 2 describes the participants' premarital counselors and their respective counseling environments. The codes and categories used to develop Theme 1 are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Codes and Categories Used to Develop Theme 1



Note. This figure illustrates the axial categories and codes used to develop Theme 1. Two categories (Category 1 and Category 2), 8 codes, and 4 subcodes were involved in the development of this theme.

Category 1: Premarital Counseling Was Voluntary for Some and Mandatory

for Others. In Category 1, the pretenses surrounding the participants' engagement in premarital counseling are described. Two codes contributed were grouped into Category 1: *mandatory*, *joint decision*, and *voluntary*. For some of the participants (C4, C7, C9, C11, C13, C17) recruited in this study, premarital counseling was mandated by their respective religions and was required before engaging in matrimony within the Church.

These couples described premarital counseling as either mandatory or considered a requirement for marriage. Participant C4-W explained:

Part of our Christian rules is that if you were going to be married, then you would need to actually have some kind of counseling. The pastor would need to talk to you to make sure that you understand what you're getting into and help you with things that you need to understand to make sure that your marriage will thrive in a healthy way.

Couple 4-W explained the function of premarital counseling in the Church as a means of ensuring that marriages would thrive. Church pastors are typically responsible for counseling individuals preparing for marriage (Marbun, 2021). Couple 7 further explained, "It was a requirement because, you know, they needed to know where you are mentally and spiritually." Couple 7-W indicated that their pastor needed to ensure the couple was mentally and spiritually prepared for marriage. For these participants, premarital counseling was mandated by their respective Churches and was facilitated by a pastor.

While counseling was mandated for some couples, most participants chose to participate in premarital counseling voluntarily and described the decision as shared between the two spouses. Four subcodes about why the participants chose to undergo counseling were used to organize the data for this category: *relationship challenges*, *other's mistakes*, *personal challenges*, and *ensuring preparation for marriage*. An additional code (*communication about counseling*) was used to understand how communication influenced the decision to complete premarital counseling.

Communication About Counseling. Some couples may be reluctant to pursue premarital counseling (Roberts, 2023). Most of the participants described communication as being essential for the decision to engage in premarital counseling. To give equal weight to each participant's thoughts, the remainder of the participants' thoughts citing communication as essential are shown in Table 6.

Table 5

Most Participants Cited Strong Communication with Decision to Pursue Counseling

Couple	Participant	Excerpt from interview
Couple 1	C1-H	"I think it was just we both knew we wanted to have premarital counseling. Something that we had discussions [about] while we were, I guess you could say courting. It was something that we always wanted to do, so no one prompted us to do it."
Couple 2	C2-W	"I think we both wanted the relationship to work out, you know and so, before we took that big step, you know, it was just a joint decision."
Couple 2	C2-H	"We both decided to do it. It was a joint thing. at that time."
Couple 4	C4-W	"So first and foremost, we both had to agree that we needed to meet with our pastor or to talk about how we would embark upon this lifelong journey."
Couple 6	C6-W	"It's kind of an automatic, but [my husband] and I both thought that premarital counseling was a good idea. We communicated about it and decided together it was a good idea."
Couple 12	C12-W	"Yes, it was, it was mainly both of us making the decision to actually do the counseling. So, once you brought it to my attention, I agreed with it."
Couple 14	C14-W	"We wanted to improve it and make sure that we were trying to solve their problem versus going at each other."
Couple 15	C15-W	"First and foremost, we both had to talk about it so we could understand that, okay, we're going to be in this together. It's a joint effort. So, communication did play a role by us coming together talking about it, and agreeing that, yes, it is necessary to get this premarital counseling"
Couple 17	C17-W	"I think it played a big role. Because obviously, if we both were willing to do it, I don't think it would have been something that we would have done or probably would have gotten much out of it. But it was something that we talked about we both agreed that okay, now that's something that we're going to do."
Couple 18	C18-2	"Communication was huge. We didn't know what to expect."

Note. This is a breakdown of the participants, and interview excerpts showing that most couples cited strong communication in the decision to pursue premarital counseling.

As shown in Table 5, most participants cited strong communication regarding the decision to pursue premarital counseling. For instance, C1-H said, "One hundred percent,

we talked about counseling, and we both agreed that's what we wanted." Couple 1-H described counseling as a voluntary and joint decision between the two spouses. Couple 7-W also described their communication with C7-H about counseling, saying, "Oh, it's huge. We decided to go to counseling together, and it's still a big point today." Couple 7 also made a joint choice to attend counseling together, citing communication as a large factor influencing their decision. For this couple and the remainder of the participants highlighted in Table 5, communication about premarital counseling was an essential step of the process.

One couple indicated that communication about counseling was not necessary for them. Couple 13-H said, "I would say communication, or the lack thereof didn't play much of a role because we knew each other from childhood. So, we always had premium communication. Communicating about counseling wasn't necessary. We just did it." For Couple 13, communication about premarital counseling wasn't necessary because the spouses were already aligned in their desires to pursue counseling. Couple 13-H explained that communication on the topic was implicit rather than explicit, which represented a discrepant case in the data set, as Couple 13 was the only couple expressing this thought.

Relationship Challenges. Having established that communication about counseling was critical to the participants, the reasons why participants chose to pursue premarital counseling were next examined. Some participants were having relationship challenges that they wanted to address before getting married. For instance, C19-W said, "We were new partners, but we kind of had problems arguing a lot. It just seemed like things weren't going in the right direction all the way. So, someone recommended

premarital counseling.” Couple 19 experienced challenges with arguing before getting married and pursued premarital counseling to work on this issue. Couple 10 also used to argue before they attended counseling. Couple 10-H described, “I used to say, ‘Well, it is my money, and I work for it. I should be able to spend the way I want to.’ We used to argue about it all the time until we went to counseling.” Couple 10, like Couple 19, would have consistent arguments over marriage-related problems, such as finances. These couples used premarital counseling to help address these issues.

The relationship challenges encountered by some participants extended beyond premarital arguments. Couple 2 shared that they experienced challenges with trust before attending premarital counseling. Couple 2-H said:

She developed trust issues. Before I wanted to have that ring on her finger, we needed to look at some issues before we took that step. I used to mess with this female, and she couldn't let me go and things of that nature. She just kept being a nuisance and every time she would see me, she would have something to say to my wife.

Couple 2 pursued marital counseling due to trust challenges regarding a prior relationship between C2-H and his child's mother; the couple was able to surpass these challenges with the aid of their premarital counselor. Couple 18 also had challenges with other people. When asked what issues prompted them to seek premarital counseling, C18-2 said, “I had a cheating problem.” At the time of the interview, C18-1 and C18-2 had been married for ten years and had a very healthy marriage, indicating they had solved their challenges in premarital counseling.

Related to relationship challenges is the notion of roles and responsibilities. Some participants pursued premarital counseling to ensure they correctly understood what each individual's role would be during the marriage. In particular, C12-W said, "Once we were engaged, then it became that we needed to discuss how we see each other as married. So that was, to me, one of the main reasons why I wanted to participate in premarital counseling." Couple 12 wanted to ensure that each spouse viewed their roles and responsibilities similarly within the marriage, a goal that led them to seek premarital counseling.

Other's Mistakes. Some participants spoke about how others' marriages influenced their decision to pursue premarital counseling. For instance, C3-W explained, "What made me want to do it is because I watched my parents get divorced when I was young. The researcher thought maybe it would help because so many marriages I've seen do not last." Similarly, C3-H also experienced divorce as a child. He added, "My parents have divorced also. So, we thought it would be a good idea to do it." Couple 3-W and C3-H both experienced their parents' divorces as young children, which made lasting impressions on them.

Consequently, they did not want to repeat their parents' mistakes. Couple 1 expressed similar thoughts to Couple 3. Couple 1-W said, "And we also saw some not-so-positive examples as far as marriages and just how things were, and we didn't want to repeat some of those things." Couple 1-W did not specify whose marriages they saw fail but did indicate they witnessed some marriages with less than positive outcomes. Couples 1 and 3 pursued counseling because they wanted their marriages to be healthy and have longevity, wishing to avoid mistakes that others had made.

Ensuring Preparation for Marriage. While some participants spoke about not wanting to repeat others' mistakes, other participants chose to pursue premarital counseling because they wanted to ensure they would be prepared for marriage. For instance, C6-W explained:

Just being a young couple and Seventh Day Adventists, we wanted to make sure that we were making the right decisions and prepared for marriage. Sometimes, you're emotionally involved and attached, but then you're being led solely by your emotions and not following the spirit.

Couple 6 pursued marriage counseling in order to ensure they were making the right decision to marry at the time and to ensure they were adequately prepared for marriage. These participants did not mention that counseling was mandatory for them from a religious standpoint; instead, they expressed wanting to prepare for marriage. Similar thoughts were reiterated by Couples 14 and C15. Couple 14 said, "We just wanted to make sure that we were prepared, not necessarily for each other, but how to have a successful marriage." Like Couple 6, Couple 14 expressed a desire to be prepared for the challenges of marriage. Couple 15, like Couples 6 and 14, sought guidance on how to be prepared for marriage, noting that they desired someone to guide them with the process of merging two different types of families. Thus, some participants pursued premarital counseling because they wanted to ensure their readiness for marriage.

Couple 15-W also said:

We discussed that it was important for us to talk to someone to try to understand a little bit more about the lives of two people coming from two different family

dynamics and how that was going to play out. Of course, we know that we don't know everything. So, we needed someone to kind of help to guide us along.

Category 2: The Premarital Counselors Were Knowledgeable, Warm, and Friendly. In Category 1, the reasons why the participants pursued premarital counseling were described. In Category 2, the participants discussed their premarital counselors and the counseling environment. Six codes contributed to this category, including *kind, warm, friendly, clear, directive, neutral, objective, easy to talk to, knowledgeable, and inviting environment*. The participants used each of these descriptors to describe their premarital counselors or the counseling environment, giving a holistic appreciation of their experiences with premarital counseling.

Kind, Warm, Friendly. Some participants described their premarital counselors as kind, warm, friendly, and supportive, which put the participants at ease. For example, C2-W said, “She made us feel comfortable. She made me feel like she wanted to help us, not just [as a] part of her job. She felt like she wanted to help us out. She expressed interest and concern.” Couple 2-W described their premarital counselor as supportive and expressing a genuine interest in the couple’s well-being. Couple 4’s premarital counselor, a pastor, was also kind and warm. Couple 4-W said, “My experience was with the pastor, who was a pastor at a huge church, and he was very kind and friendly. I think it was a great experience.” Couple 4-H confirmed his wife’s thoughts saying, “He was a very warm, warm person.” Couple 15’s counselor was also warm and friendly. Couple 15-W expressed, “This person was very warm. He showed a lot of care and sensitivity towards us.” These participants appreciated the warmth and friendliness of their premarital

counselors. Thus, one characteristic appreciated by some individuals seeking premarital counseling is the kindness, warmth, and friendliness of the premarital counselor.

Clear, Directive. The participants also described their counselors as being clear and directive during the counseling sessions. For Couple 5, the directive nature of the counselor facilitated communication and made the counseling sessions productive. Couple 5-W said, “From having certain assignments and then coming back to the table and being respectful, the person who led the sessions was very communicative and clear in expectations. The respect between us made communication easy.” Couple 5-W found that communication was facilitated by the counselor being professional, direct, and clear. Couple 3 spoke about how their counselor would challenge the couple to ask questions and work through issues together. Couple 3-H said, “She didn't let us get over on her if we had an issue or if we had questions; she wouldn't let you slide. She's pretty much straightforward.” The straightforward nature of the counselor allowed for issues to be explored in a supportive and open environment where the participants could explore challenges together.

Neutral, Objective. Many participants described their counselors as neutral, objective, and unbiased. When the counselors acted in an unbiased manner, they created an environment conducive for the participants to explore their feelings about marriage. Couple 5-W explained:

I just liked the fact that the gentleman was neutral, totally non-biased, and from a Christian perspective, which I really liked. While he made suggestions, it was up to us. He didn't influence us one way or the other. He and I liked how we utilized

decisional balancing. Ultimately, it was our decision about what was going to be best for us.

Couple 5's counselor was reportedly unbiased, which helped the couple participate in the counseling sessions. Other participants also spoke about their counselors as non-biased, as described in Table 7.

Table 6

The Participants' Counselors Were Neutral, Objective and Unbiased

Couple	Participant	Excerpt from interview
Couple 4	C4-H	"There was a no, no judgment space that we were in. And we could tell he was genuinely desirous of us having a successful marriage that put us at ease."
Couple 5	C5-H	"He was pretty neutral [and] gave us an honest standpoint about things we didn't think about on our own and led us to some confirmations as well."
Couple 12	C12-W	"Overall, he brought a lot of things to the table to consider. I think at the time, what he brought was like: this is an option, you can take it or leave it. He has a non-biased approach to putting the content out there"
Couple 12	C12-H	"He was very unbiased and that was something that I appreciated during the counseling session."
Couple 15	C15-H	"He was very patient. He gave us time to think about what he had said to us and gave us time to respond."
Couple 16	C16-W	"She would just wait for us to talk, and she was non-judgmental."
Couple 18	C18-2	"They were very open-minded and spiritual and had a very great connection with us from day one; they wanted to understand that it was a judge-free zone."

Note. This table demonstrates that the participants viewed their premarital counselors as neutral, objective, and unbiased.

Easy to Talk to, Relatable. The participants described their premarital counselors as easy to talk to and relatable. This characteristic made the premarital counselors approachable, which lightened the counseling environment. Couple 4-H described, "We felt comfortable knowing that it was someone who was down to earth. We didn't have to feel any anxiety talking to him because he made the atmosphere very relaxing." The down-to-earth nature of Couple 4's counselor made the counseling experience and atmosphere pleasant for them. Couple 5 also found it easy to speak with their counselor.

Couple 5-H reported, “Easy to talk to even though he was giving advice, he allowed us to speak a lot.” For Couple 5, the ease of conversation facilitated by the counselor allowed the couple to actively participate in the session instead of being passive recipients.

Couple 12 also reported that their counselor presented information in a relatable way.

Couple 12-W said, “We were pretty open to the advice that was given, and it was presented to us in a way that was palatable.” For this couple, the presentation of the material in a palatable way facilitated the session. Couple 18 also spoke about how the counselor spoke plainly and created a relaxing environment in which to receive advice.

Couple 18-1 said:

The person who counseled with [us], the atmosphere was great. I felt like I could speak to them about anything or ask them any questions. So, with that, they tell the truth, they show the passion of a real person, they were real themselves. It was real; they were selfless, really, in what they were doing.

By being genuine people, the counselors were better able to relate to the couples, which facilitated communication between all parties present, creating a peaceful and relaxing counseling environment.

Knowledgeable. The participants’ counselors were knowledgeable about their subject matter, which the participants valued. For instance, C2-H said, “She gave it to us in a way from her experiences, and a lot of things that she spoke about were from her experience.” Couple 2’s counselor was knowledgeable and spoke about marriage from experience. Couple 14 also described their counselor as knowledgeable and supportive. Couple 14-H said, “Honest, they were knowledgeable on the topic of marriage [and] supportive.” For Couple 14, knowledge of counseling and support were coupled with

their premarital counselor. The thoughts of other participants regarding their counselors' knowledge are shown in Table 8.

Table 7

The Participants' Counselors Were Knowledgeable

Couple	Participant	Excerpt from interview
Couple 7	C7-W	"He had a whole lot of experience because, he has always been in the Church, and he was married over 50 years."
Couple 10	C10-W	"She helped explain it to me better. She was more inclined to understand where we were both coming from. So, she was able to show me how to deal with talking, listening and hearing what he was saying and let him hear what I'm saying. She just really good."
Couple 12	C12-W	"The information was great, and we would leave still discussing what we've learned or a new approach that we picked it up. I would say he was very prepared with material and things he wanted to talk about."
Couple 15	C15-W	"It's someone that was recommended to us by other couples that we know, very experienced, very dedicated. This individual has been doing counseling with families for quite an extended timeframe."
Couple 17	C17-W	"She had experience in marriage. I don't know how long she was married, but she was married, and during that marriage she also had children. So, she was someone to look up to you."
Couple 19	C19-W	"Constantly she was really informative and that helped us out because it was someone that was really just getting down to the core of what was going on with us."

Note. This table shows that the participants considered their premarital counselors as knowledgeable.

As shown in Table 7, the participants indicated that the counselors were knowledgeable about their chosen profession and were skilled at mediating marriage counseling. The premarital counselors also had extensive knowledge of marriage, as many of them had been counseling long, stable marriages. The perception that premarital counselors are knowledgeable is exemplified in Table 7 by Couples 7 and 17. In another instance, C9-H said, "Our premarital counselor was a person that has been doing this for a while and has been married for a long, long time. Over 30 years." Couple 9-H implied that his counselor's long, successful marriage implied knowledge of marriage that superseded theoretical knowledge.

Inviting Environment. Some participants described their experiences with premarital counseling as being in a warm, inviting environment. For instance, C15-W described the setting of their premarital counseling sessions, saying:

So, the setup, nice chairs, the ambience was good, and the lighting was good. So, after he gave his first little spiel to us, we introduced ourselves, and we started to feel very comfortable because it didn't feel intimidating.

Couple 15-H added to his wife's description. He said, "Okay, it was in a professional office where the ambience was great. There were pictures of families and books related to marriage and family." Couple 15's premarital counselor paid attention to detail and ensured that their office was inviting and warm, allowing the participants to feel at ease during the sessions. Couple 17's counselor invited the couple into her home and made them feel comfortable talking about challenges. The participants' experiences with an inviting counseling environment facilitated their ability to open up to their counselors. Couple 17 had a similar experience to Couple 15. Couple 17-W said:

She was a woman, and she opened up those lines of communication. She opened her home to us. She just made the environment comfortable, where we could talk well, and I could talk to her about anything. I guess she would give me her view from her experience as a woman. So, for me, it was comfortable.

Summary of Theme 1. Theme 1 explores the lived experiences of couples engaging with premarital counseling regarding the counseling environment and their counselors' demeanors. Two categories contributed to the development of Theme 1. Category 1 describes the reasons why the couples sought premarital counseling. Some participants pursued counseling because it was a mandatory religious requirement for

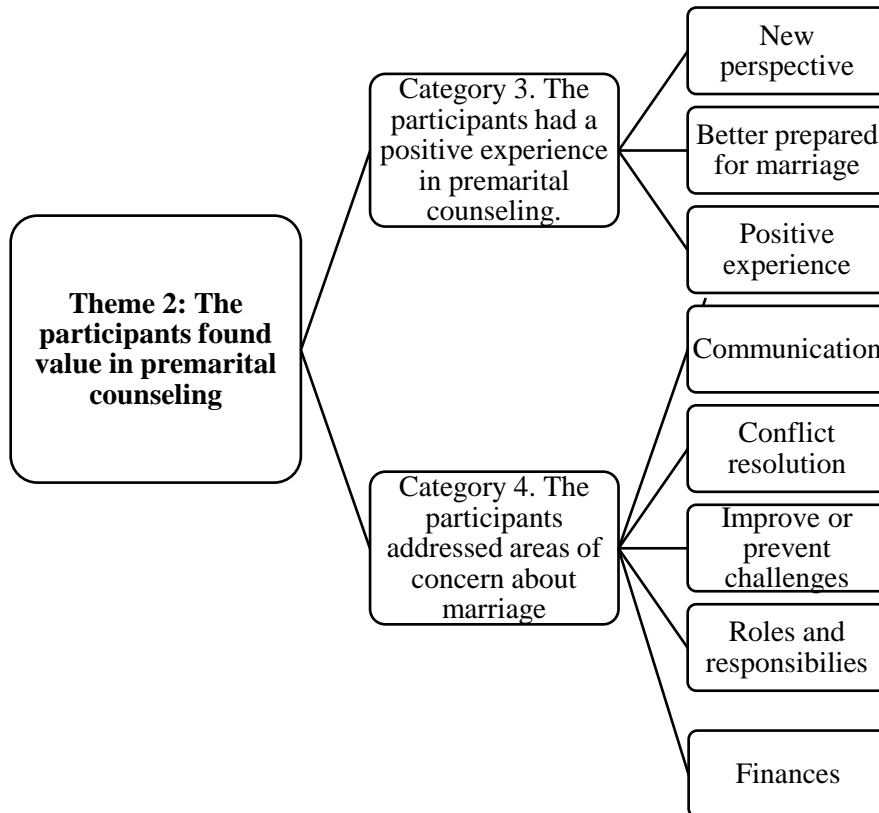
marriage, whereas other participants pursued counseling voluntarily. Of the ones who chose to attend counseling for secular reasons, the participants reported pursuing counseling for multiple reasons. Some wanted to address current relationship challenges, whereas others wanted to ensure they were prepared for successful marriages. Category 2 described the participants' premarital counselors and their respective counseling environments. The participants reported their counselors as kind, warm, friendly, clear, directive, supportive, and unbiased. These qualities facilitated the participants' abilities to communicate through challenging topics and address emergent issues. Knowledge, strong marriages, and an inviting environment further supported the counselors' abilities to help the participants.

Theme 2: The Participants Found Value in Premarital Counseling

In Theme 1, the participants described their experiences with their premarital counselors and the context of premarital counseling. In Theme 2, the participants explain the value they found in premarital counseling. Two categories contributed to the development of Theme 2. In Category 3, the participants' positive experiences with premarital counseling are described. In Category 4, the participants discussed areas of concern they wanted to address in premarital counseling. The codes and categories contributing to the development of Theme 2 are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Codes and Categories Contributing to the Development of Theme 2



Note. This figure illustrates the axial categories and codes used to develop Theme 2. Two categories (Category 3 and Category 4) and eight codes were involved in the development of this theme.

Category 3: The Participants Had a Positive Experience in Premarital

Counseling. The participants generally had positive experiences with premarital counseling. Three codes were used to develop this category: *new perspective*, *better prepared for marriage*, and *positive experience*. These descriptors identify the type of positive experience the participants identified regarding premarital counseling.

New Perspective. Some participants believed they gained a new perspective on marriage as a result of premarital counseling. Couple 17-H spoke about how premarital counseling allowed him to view marriage from his wife's perspective. Couple 17-H said:

I think for me, it was beneficial in a way because it was from a woman's perspective, so to speak. That's just all I want to add. It was a woman; if there was a man and a woman performing the marriage counseling, I think we could have gotten perspective from both sides.

Couple 17-H gained an additional perspective on marriage because his counselor was a woman. However, he believed the couple would have gained a broader and more robust perspective on marriage had there been both male and female counselors. Nonetheless, C17-H reported a positive experience with premarital counseling, considering the additional perspective gained. Couple 18-1 also believed that premarital counseling allowed them to understand each other more robustly. Couple 18-1 said, "It's helped us understand each other on a more emotional level. So, I feel like that's what he's really helped us with." Couple 18-1 was better able to connect with her partner emotionally after completing premarital counseling.

Similarly, C14-H believed he understood his wife's point of view about marriage after counseling. C14-H said, "It was more informative not only just getting to know more about [my wife], it [was] getting to know more about myself and the way that she views me. So definitely informative for me." According to C14-H, Couple 14 was better able to understand each other's motivations and intentions about marriage after engaging in premarital counseling. Other participants shared the ideas of Couples 14, 17, and 18. To appropriately give equal weight to all participants' viewpoints, other participants' ideas regarding a new perspective on marriage are shown in Table 8.

Table 8*The Participants Gained a New Perspective on Marriage*

Couple	Participant	Excerpt from interview
Couple 1	C1-W	“Overall, the experience was pretty good. I think we thoroughly enjoyed it. It opened up our eyes to a lot of things”
Couple 7	C7-W	“But the counseling was good, once you got into it. You're finding out more things about each other, and certain things come up. I think it's a great thing, actually.”
Couple 10	C10-W	“It opened my eyes to a lot of things that I didn't hear. He was saying things, but I wasn't hearing him. So, it gave me a better understanding of what I had to do as far as being in a relationship, not just thinking about myself.”
Couple 10	C10-H	“For me, I got to really learn about her and got to really know her at the time. I knew her but on the surface. I got deep into her. So, I knew everything about her, how she felt and how she dealt with certain things.”

Note. This table demonstrates that participants C1-W, C7-W, C10-W, and C10-H gained a new perspective of marriage after receiving premarital counseling.

As shown in Table 8, the participants gained various new perspectives on marriage and their partners after counseling. For Couple 10, both partners were able to understand each other on a deeper level. Based on these findings, some individuals who undergo premarital counseling gain new perspectives on each other and marriage.

Better Prepared for Marriage. Many participants indicated that the premarital counseling allowed them to become better prepared for marriage. For these participants, benefits included enhanced communication and more realistic expectations, both of marriage and each other. For example, C15-H said, “First and foremost, it's helped us to set the groundwork on building a healthy and solid foundation ahead of the long-term commitment of marriage.” Couple 15-H believed that premarital counseling provided a strong foundation on which to build their marriage. Couple 6-H also spoke about premarital counseling as being foundational for their marriage. Couple 6-H said, “It was all about building a strong foundation, which is the key to anything.” For these

participants, premarital counseling allowed them to build a strong foundation for their marriages.

Some participants spoke about how premarital counseling deepened their understanding of each person's roles and responsibilities in marriage. For instance, C12-W said:

Some stories were told when we were asked how he looked at certain things about a relationship. We were asked questions about the expectations and outcomes of marriage. It allowed us to talk further about how we expected marriage to be.

Couple 12's experience allowed the couple to explore their roles as husband and wife, allowing them to understand their expectations of marriage. Couple 17 also became better prepared for the intricacies of marriage. Couple 17-W said, "Obviously, going into marriage and not sure what marriage is about. The counselors helped prepare us for I think it's one of those things where you don't necessarily get prepared until you [are] actually in it." Couple 17-W acknowledged that counseling helped prepare them for marriage in a way that would not necessarily be possible until after they were married. Therefore, based on the participants in this study, premarital counseling can help couples become better prepared for marriage.

Positive Experience. With a few exceptions, the participants overwhelmingly reported having a positive experience with premarital counseling. The participants described their counseling experiences as positive, often citing counseling as a good experience. This code described many participants' thoughts. Therefore, to give appropriate weight to each participant's experiences, Table 10 contains descriptions of the participants' thoughts regarding a positive premarital counseling experience. After a

brief discussion of the participants' positive experiences, discrepant cases will also be discussed.

Table 8

The Participants Had a Positive Experience in Premarital Counseling

Couple	Participant	Excerpt from interview
Couple 1	C1-W	"Knowing that I knew that her intentions to me were good. I knew that she was there to support us. So that was the best part of things."
Couple 2	C2-W	"It was a positive experience for me."
Couple 3	C3-W	"I think some therapists or counselors may kind of intimidate people, maybe just our personalities, so I felt like she was easy to talk to and her personality wasn't overbearing. So, it was easy to talk to her. It was cool to be around her, I thought."
Couple 4	C4-W	"Just the fact that it was a no-judgment zone and also the fact that we could tell he was genuine. That made us really, really comfortable."
Couple 5	C5-H	"He allowed us to open up and just feel comfortable in just being honest."
Couple 9	C9-W	"It was a good experience. I mean, they gave us some good advice."
Couple 10	C10-W	"It was definitely a good experience."
Couple 11	C11-H	"I mean, it's been a good experience, though. Just counseling, it really helps."
Couple 13	C13-H	"It was a good one. She was our pastor. She was easy to talk to, easy to relate to let's put it that way."
Couple 16	C16-W	"It was just a positive. Overall, I just remembered being positive and helpful towards the stress establishing a strong foundation."
Couple 19	C19-W	"My experience was pretty good. It pretty much got like, you know, understanding of, you know how to attitude each other being married and responsibilities that come with being married."

Note. This table illustrates that some of the participants reported that they had a positive experience in premarital counseling.

Many of the couples in this study reported that premarital counseling was a good experience for them, as shown in Table 9. However, there was one discrepant case where a participant reported not feeling comfortable discussing some topics with their counselors. For example, Couple 18-1 said:

I felt uncomfortable because I did not want people to be in our personal business.

I wanted to keep what happens in the house in the house, but my wife felt the

same before we got married. We need to understand the spiritual, physical, and emotional connection of marriage.

Couple 18 was initially reluctant to engage in premarital counseling because they were afraid the counselor would intrude into personal affairs. However, the couple was able to move past those challenges and understand their connection spiritually, physically, and emotionally due to premarital counseling. Couple 18 encounter was the only discrepant case regarding the positive experience of premarital counseling. The other couples had positive experiences regarding premarital counseling.

Category 4: The Participants Addressed Areas of Concern About Marriage.

Having examined the general experiences of participants with premarital counseling in Category 3, Category 4 now examines more specific experiences of the participants. Specifically, the participants addressed areas of concern about their marriages. Five codes contributed to the development of this category: *Communication, conflict resolution, improve or prevent challenges, roles and responsibilities, and finances*. The participants' experiences with these skills or areas of concern are discussed in turn.

Communication. The participants were asked what skills they addressed through counseling, with many participants citing communication as one such skill. For example, C3-H explained that they worked on communication actively during their premarital counseling. Couple 3-H said, “[We] worked on communication because I'm good at communicating my feelings and stuff and she's not.” Couple 3 worked on communication because one partner was proficient at communication while the other was not. Couple 9 also worked on communication skills because, according to C9-W, “Both partners have to want the same thing.” Other couples, like Couple 14, simply acknowledged that they

worked on communication during their session. Communication was a prominent theme spoken about during the participants' interviews.

Conflict Resolution Skills. The participants also desired to learn conflict resolution skills, an essential skill for marriage. Couple 10 spoke about the importance of learning conflict resolution skills, saying:

Let's listen to each other and eventually don't know how to deal with things. We have disagreements and we have to sit down and talk about it instead of yelling and screaming at each other because when yelling and screaming at each other, I can't hear her. She can't hear me. We weren't listening or talking because we got upset with each other. We wouldn't talk to each other for a day or two. Something had to change.

Couple 10 spoke about how they needed to learn both communication and conflict resolution skills, understanding that proper communication is necessary for conflict resolution. Couple 10 was able to work on their communication during premarital counseling to help them resolve conflicts effectively. Couple 17 also spoke about wanting to work on conflict resolution. Couple 17-H said, "You have to learn to live together and get along and resolve conflicts is a good one." Couple 17-W jokingly replied to C17-H by saying, "Sure, just not to kill each other while we're married." Thus, for some couples, premarital counseling was useful in learning how to resolve conflicts.

Improve or Prevent Challenges. For some participants, premarital counseling was a strategy preemptive against challenges and other marital problems. Couple 9 wanted to learn about marriage and potentially prevent unnecessary challenges. Couple 9-W said, "We talked about it and then figured that maybe they could give us some advice

on something that we don't know. Or just give us at least some input into what marriage should be in our responsibilities.” Couple 9 approached premarital counseling preemptively to learn about challenges of which they were not cognizant. They believed that knowledge of problems could alert them to potential problems later. Couple 15 took the same approach to their marriage, opting to seek advice about challenges they had not yet encountered. Couple 15-W explained:

This was our first time tying the knot. So, we were young, understanding skills and tools and things that we need for this lifetime journey. So, of course, we went in with a mutual party, someone that we had not spoken to before, someone that we knew; if they were telling us something, then that would be necessary for us to utilize during the years of marriage. So that was one of the reasons why we decided that we really needed to talk to someone.

Couple 15 desired premarital counseling so that they could get advice about marriage from an impartial source. Couple 17 concurred with Couples 9 and 15. Couple 17-W said that she wanted “to learn some of the do's and don'ts, some of the pitfalls that can sort of lead to divorce and try to avoid some of those things.” For these couples, learning about potential obstacles and preventing them was an area of concern they addressed in premarital counseling.

Roles and Responsibilities. The participants also used premarital counseling to address their changing roles and responsibilities. For instance, C3-W had children before marrying C3-H, and C3-H was concerned about his new role as a stepfather. He explained, “I was going to be stepdad automatically when we got married. So, I wanted to make sure that I was doing the right things.” Couple 3-H wanted to ensure that he was

adequately filling his role as a stepfather, a topic that was addressed in counseling.

Couple 5 had not lived together before getting married and needed to adjust to relocating and living together. Couple 5-W explained, “If one of us relocated, how can we still have our family, church, and community environment and keep connectedness? One person is adapting the nuances of new life and roles.” Like Couple 3, Couple 5 had to take on new roles and responsibilities as they lived together for the first time.

Couple 13 also spoke about changes in roles and responsibilities but from a different perspective. Both husband and wife in Couple 13 were immigrants to the United States, which carried inherent role changes. Couple 13-H recognized that even though he and his wife were from the same country, the couple had spent significant time in different societies; these cultural differences could challenge a marriage (Breger & Hill, 2021). Couple 13 addressed these changes in roles and responsibilities in premarital counseling. Couple 13-H explained:

Well, the fact that we're living in two different societies, [my wife] lived here in the States for quite a while before I had just migrated here from Jamaica. So, even though we grew up in the same community at that stage of our lives, we were actually from two different societies. So, there were a whole lot of cultural differences, if I may say, things that needed to be tweaked, more so for me coming into a different society than for her.

Finances. Three participants explicitly delineated that they pursued premarital counseling to help address the financial changes that come with marriage. Couple 13 was one such couple. Couple 13-W explained, “We basically talk about our finances and putting it together to make it one.” Couple 13 contained two individuals who immigrated

to the United States. Couple 13-W had been living in the United States for several years longer than her husband. The United States is considerably more progressive regarding women's rights than Couple 13-H's home country of Jamaica (McKenzie, 2019); this could have caused strain between C13-H and C13-W. Consequently, the financial aspects of marriage were discussed in counseling.

One other couple spoke about using premarital counseling to address financial concerns. Couple 12 acknowledged that they were inexperienced regarding finances. Couple 12-H said, "One of the things that I've really wanted to address in premarital counseling was actually finances. At the time, we were both younger and inexperienced in regard to things." Couple 12 had the foresight to understand that their youth might influence practical concerns like finances. While other participants did not explicitly mention finances as their motivation for pursuing premarital counseling, additional participants spoke about financial exercises in subsequent themes.

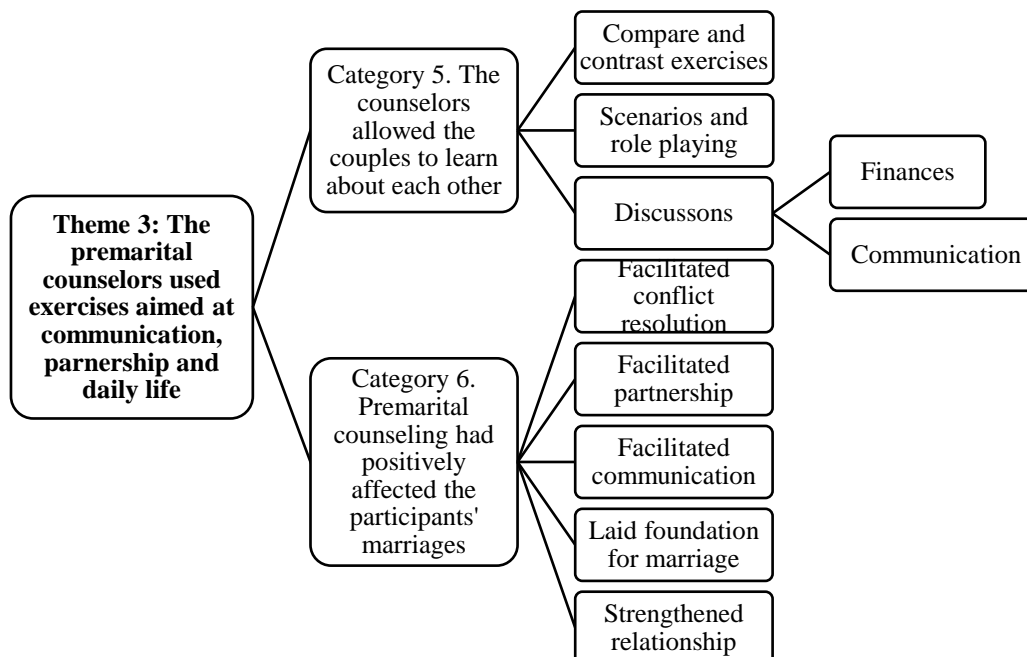
Summary of Theme 2. In Theme 2, the participants explain the value they found in premarital counseling. Two categories contributed to the development of Theme 2. In Category 3, the participants' positive experiences with premarital counseling were described. The participants spoke about how premarital counseling allowed them to gain a new perspective on marriage, better preparing them for marriage. In Category 4, the participants discussed areas of concern they wanted to address in premarital counseling. Some of these areas included communication, conflict resolution, changing roles and responsibilities, and finances. Collectively, the participants described having positive experiences with premarital counseling.

Theme 3: Counselors Used Exercises Aimed at Partnership, Communication, and Daily Life

In Category 4, the participants described how they wanted to address specific concerns regarding marriage in premarital counseling. Theme 3 discusses the approaches that their premarital counselors used to address these concerns from the couples' perspectives. Two categories contributed to the development of Theme 3. In Category 5, the methods used by the counselors to allow the couples to learn about each other are discussed. In Category 6, the effect of premarital counseling on the participants' marriages is described. The codes and categories contributing to the development of Theme 3 are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Codes and Categories Contributing to the Development of Theme 3



Note. This figure illustrates the axial categories and codes used to develop Theme 3. Two categories (Category 5 and Category 6), 10 codes, and 2 subcodes were involved in the development of this theme.

Category 5: The Counselors Allowed the Couples to Learn About Each

Other. This category addresses the types of exercises that counselors used to help the participants. The three codes contributing to this category were: *compare and contrast exercises, scenarios and role-playing, and discussions*. Within the participants' discussions, prominent topics included finances and communication.

Compare and Contrast Exercises. Five of the couples described using compare and contrast exercises where the couples completed an assignment or a worksheet separately and came together with their counselor to compare answers and discuss.

Couple 1-H explained:

I think that that was big because we saw things. We agreed on quite a few things. We also saw that there are some things we didn't think about, like when it came to, the trash being taken out. Who's responsible to do the dishes? Who's expected to pretty much cook every day?

Couple 1's premarital counselor used a compare and contrast exercise to help the participants understand their expectations of each individual's roles and responsibilities within the marriage. Couple 5's premarital counselor took a similar approach. Couple 5-W described, "This is how we're going to plan out certain things. Like a map, because we did have quality exercises and even some worksheets that we were supposed to write our vision, and just make sure we're aligned." Couple 5's counselor taught the couple to plan their vision separately and then collectively to ensure alignment. Misalignment of vision can prompt further discussion to allow the couple to compromise on large decisions.

Other couples' counselors used compare and contrast exercises to help the couple learn more about themselves. Couple 11's counselor gave the couple an exercise to test

their knowledge of each other. Couple 11 said, “You gave us the personality activity, and that was pretty much just to see how much we really knew about each other.” This personality activity tested the couple on fundamental aspects of each other’s personalities, allowing them to learn about each other and understand what aspects of their relationship needed more discussion and exploration. Couple 18’s counselor also facilitated a personality-type test where the couple learned about each other. Couple 18-1 indicated, “We were supposed to find out what each other likes, foods, places, and dislikes, and learn about each other.” The couples’ counselors helped the participants learn more about themselves through these exercises.

Scenarios and Role Playing. Some counselors used role-playing and posed scenarios to help couples understand each other and provide feedback on their reactions. Couple 2-W discussed this exercise, saying, “She had us play this role in a situation where we had to have a disagreement on stuff and play it out. If she saw room for improvement, she'd help with her professionalism, guide us, and tell us what we could have done better.” Couple 2’s counselor helped the couple simulate a disagreement and provided feedback on how to communicate best to resolve conflict. Couple 3’s counselor also used this technique to help the couple learn conflict resolution skills. Couple 3-H described:

She did throw out situations that, in a marriage, like money problems, would cause a little conflict, maybe an argument. She saw how we would work through those. It gave us examples. Okay, this happens, and then you give me an example of how you would work through that.

Couple 3's counselor facilitated an exercise where the couple worked through conflict by role-playing different scenarios, which gave the couple examples of good responses and less optimal responses. Couple 6's counselor used a variation of this exercise, asking the couple to trade places. Couple 6-H explained, "We did one exercise [which was] how you respond to things as your partner. Basically, putting yourself in your partner's shoes when it comes to certain discomfort or uncomfortable topics." During this exercise, the couple role-played a scenario but as each other, allowing them to think about how each other would respond. Through these exercises, the couples learned communication and conflict-resolution skills.

Discussions. Some participants described their counselors as helping them through discussions rather than completing compare-and-contrast exercises or role-playing scenarios. The participants discussed finances, communication, and conflict resolution with their counselors. Couple 9 discussed finances. Couple 9-W explained, "We worked out issues, financial issues, like how to come together and pay bills, how to put both incomes together, and how you know to put away savings at the same time." Couple 9's counselor helped the couple work through the process of paying bills and saving. Couple 5's counselor had a similar approach. Couple 5-W described, "Well, not only that, budget and finances as well and how to see things from the big picture, itemize, and have a realistic approach to finances." Couple 5's counselors also prioritized finances as an important discussion point during premarital counseling.

Communication was another topic of discussion between the couples and premarital counselors. For instance, Couple 14-H explained:

He gave us one where if we want[ed] to talk about something serious, rather than just springing it on the other person, we give fair notice. Like, we say we want to talk and give them a heads up.

Couple 14's counselor helped the couple find a method of communication that works for them, which includes giving the other partner notice when one wants to discuss serious things. Couple 4's counselor also approached communication with the couple. Couple 4-W explained, "He showed us the words of God and how we can, whether it be that you're going to write a letter or talk about it, sometimes one person has to be still and allow the other person to talk." Couple 4's counselor advised the couple to practice active listening and understanding when communicating about conflict. Thus, communication was an important discussion mediated by the participants' counselors.

Category 6: Premarital Counseling Positively Affected the Participants'

Marriages. In Category 5, the participants described the exercises and discussions that their counselors used to work on prominent skills, including finances, communication, and conflict resolution. The second category contributing to Theme 3, Category 6, illustrates the outcomes of the participants' premarital counseling, namely that premarital counseling positively affected the participants' marriages. Five codes contributed to the development of this theme. Premarital counseling *facilitated partnership, facilitated conflict resolution, facilitated communication, laid the foundation for marriage, and strengthened the relationship*. According to the participants, these were the five main benefits of premarital counseling. The following discussion presents representative ideas for two or three couples in each category. After discussing each type of benefit, a table containing excerpts from the remainder of the participants' interviews is presented for

completeness. This section concludes with a discussion of discrepant cases; three participants believed that counseling did not impact their marriage.

Facilitated Partnership. One of the benefits of premarital counseling was increased partnership among the couples. For instance, C2-H explained, “I felt like premarital counseling helped in a way because she helped me to realize it's not always about me. We're a team where it's both of us, [and] we're going in this together.” Couple 2-H believed that premarital counseling helped him understand the team dynamic of marriage, thereby fostering partnership between the couple. Couple 5 also found that their partnership was strengthened after premarital counseling. Couple 5-W said, “I would say the one is a lot more diligent. We will help each other, and I believe being in a relationship, especially in a marriage, we have to know how to complement each other.” For Couple 5, premarital counseling allowed them to understand how to help and complement each other. Thus, for some participants, premarital counseling facilitated partnership.

Facilitated Conflict Resolution. A second benefit of premarital counseling was that the couples learned conflict resolution skills. Couple 6 spoke about conflict resolution skills gained during counseling. Couple 6-W said:

I think one of the number one things that I learned was no matter what you and your spouse have gone through that day, you don't go to bed upset with each other. You hash it out before you go to sleep.

The notion of not going to bed angry was a common theme throughout the interviews; Couple 6's comment represented this idea. The couple learned to address daily challenges with each other before going to sleep so that conflicts didn't take days or

weeks to resolve. Couple 4 also spoke about how counseling helped them resolve conflict. Couple 4-H said, ‘We learned how to listen and how to resolve our conflicts and don't let them just stay there and drag on and on.’ Couple 4 also believed they learned essential conflict resolution skills in premarital counseling. Based on these participants’ experiences, some individuals pursuing premarital counseling learn skills that facilitate conflict resolution.

Facilitated Communication. A third benefit was enhanced communication between the couples. For instance, C1-H believed that premarital counseling helped him learn active listening skills. He said, “I allowed myself to be able to hear her. It made me realize that I [have] to be more receptive to understand my wife.” Active listening is a fundamental component of good communication (Jahromi et al., 2016). Couple 1 learned how to listen to each other before responding. Couple 3 also reported indicated that premarital counseling enhanced their ability to communicate with each other. Couple 3-H said, “It wasn't like we couldn't talk to each other. My wife's not good at sharing her feelings, even with me. So, she taught us some skills on how she can work on that because I tend to share my feelings too much. So, she kind of helped me.” Couple 3’s counselor helped both of them tailor their communication to each other. Couple 6’s counselor also helped them learn essential communication skills. Couple 6-W said, “Some of the skills from that is just making sure that we have an open line of communication, even if it is via text, that we are sharing information that there's no try to limit the cross wires.” Couple 6 learned the importance of consistent communication to ensure they were aligned. Based on these participants’ experiences, some individuals pursuing premarital counseling learn skills that facilitate communication.

Laid Foundation for Marriage. The couples also believed that premarital counseling helped lay the foundation for a strong, healthy marriage. Couple 1-H believed that premarital counseling helped them gain a more realistic view of marriage. Couple 1-H explained, “I think it did in that we didn't go in blind. We're naïve, and I think we had a more realistic view of marriage living together [because] we didn't live together before.” Couple 1-H believed that premarital counseling helped them understand fundamental concepts, like how to live together peacefully. Couple 6 also spoke to the foundation gained in counseling. Couple 6 learned the importance of working on their relationship in counseling, which impacted the early years of their marriage. Couple 6 said:

I mean, it had its impact because that actually led us to uncover different situations during our early years in marriage. We sought out going together and going to these family life conferences and things like that. It led us to go out and take that time for us to work on what we needed to work on.

Couple 6 believed that counseling helped lay a foundation for a healthy marriage in which the couple worked on challenges actively to enhance their relationship. In this way, Couple 6 believed that counseling laid the foundation for their marriage. Based on these participants' experiences, some individuals pursuing premarital counseling learn skills that lay a strong foundation for marriage.

Strengthened Relationship. The couples believed that premarital counseling helped strengthen their relationship. Couple 5 believed their relationship grew stronger through premarital counseling. Couple 5-W said:

I think it made it stronger. I don't know what the difference would have been if we didn't have it, but I can say that from the conversations and the exercises, we got

to know each other even more, even better. So, I believe it helped us to unite even closer and to look at it with foresight.

Couple 5-H agreed with his wife and added, “It was how it brought me and my wife closer to each other.” This couple believed that premarital counseling helped them grow as a couple, uniting them in their marriage. Couple 11 also spoke about how counseling strengthened their relationship. Couple 11-W said, “It made it stronger and more stable. It stabilized because, don't get me wrong, every marriage has its downs. So, he was letting us know to be there for each other regardless.” Couple 11 believed that their marriage was strengthened through premarital counseling because they learned how to support each other. Based on these participants’ experiences, some individuals pursuing premarital counseling learn skills that facilitate conflict resolution.

While the report contains examples of each type of benefit identified by some of the participants, other excerpts are contained in Table 11. The excerpts in Table 11 are meant to provide a well-rounded presentation of the participants responses not presented in this section specifically. See Appendix M for Table 11 excerpts as Table 11 exceeds a page in length.

Discrepant Cases. Two participants believed that premarital counseling did not impact their marriage. These participants focused on the idea that each marriage is different. For instance, Couple 9-H said, “There wasn’t much of an impact because everybody had their own story. The advice was good, but everybody has their own story.” Couple 9 indicated that premarital counseling didn’t impact their marriage because “everybody has their own story,” perhaps indicating that their counselor worked

on some skills and facilitated discussions that did not apply to their marriage. Couple 12 spoke to this possibility directly, saying:

I don't think the sessions in themselves helped us a lot, but what I do appreciate and think we can give to it is the fact that it opened us up to have conversations about where we were going and the next steps that allowed us to realize the step we were making, and how different it would be through the conversations we would have beyond the sessions. There were some sessions where we said, “Yeah, not none of that applies to how we want to live.”

Summary of Theme 3. Theme 3 discusses the approaches that their premarital counselors used to address the couple’s concerns about marriage and the participants’ perceived impact of premarital counseling. Two categories contributed to the development of Theme 3. In Category 5, the methods used by the counselors to allow the couples to learn about each other were discussed. The couples discussed three general types of exercises: compare and contrast exercises, role-playing and scenarios, and discussions about finances and communications. In Category 6, the impact of premarital counseling on the participants’ marriages was discussed. All but two couples indicated that premarital counseling had a positive impact on their marriage. Reported benefits included enhanced partnership, conflict resolution, and communication. Other participants believed that counseling laid a foundation for healthy marriage and strengthened their relationships.

Summary of RQ1

Research question one was designed to explore how couples experience premarital counseling. Three themes were extracted from the participants’ interviews to

address RQ1. In Theme 1, the participants describe their secular and religious premarital counselors as knowledgeable and creating inviting, warm counseling environments. Some participants pursued counseling because it was a mandatory religious requirement for marriage, whereas other participants pursued counseling voluntarily. Of the ones who chose to attend counseling for secular reasons, the participants reported pursuing counseling for multiple reasons. Some wanted to address current relationship challenges, whereas others wanted to ensure they were prepared for successful marriages. The participants reported their counselors as kind, warm, friendly, clear, directive, supportive, and unbiased. These qualities facilitated the participants' abilities to communicate through challenging topics and address emergent issues. Knowledge, strong marriages, and an inviting environment further supported the counselors' abilities to help the participants.

Theme 2 described how the participants found value in premarital counseling. The participants reported that they had positive experiences. The participants spoke about how premarital counseling allowed them to gain a new perspective on marriage, better preparing them for marriage. The participants also discussed areas of concern they wanted to address in premarital counseling. Some of these areas included communication, conflict resolution, changing roles and responsibilities, and finances. Addressing these concerns allowed the participants to move forward with their marriages positively.

Theme 3 explored the exercises the participants' premarital counselors used to facilitate partnership, communication, and daily life. The methods used by the counselors to allow the couples to learn about each other were discussed. The couples described

three general types of exercises: compare and contrast exercises, role-playing and scenarios, and discussions about finances and communications. The compare and contrast exercises allowed the couples to understand each other more deeply, whereas role-playing, scenarios, and discussions allowed the participants to learn about communication and conflict resolution. The impact of premarital counseling on the participants' marriages was also discussed. Two couples were discrepant cases and indicated that premarital counseling did not largely impact their marriage. However, the other 16 couples described premarital counseling as having a positive impact on their marriage. Reported benefits included enhanced partnership, conflict resolution, and communication. Other participants believed that counseling laid a foundation for healthy marriage and strengthened their relationships.

RQ2: Couples Interpretations of Skills Learned in Premarital Counseling to Avoid the Dissolution of Marriage

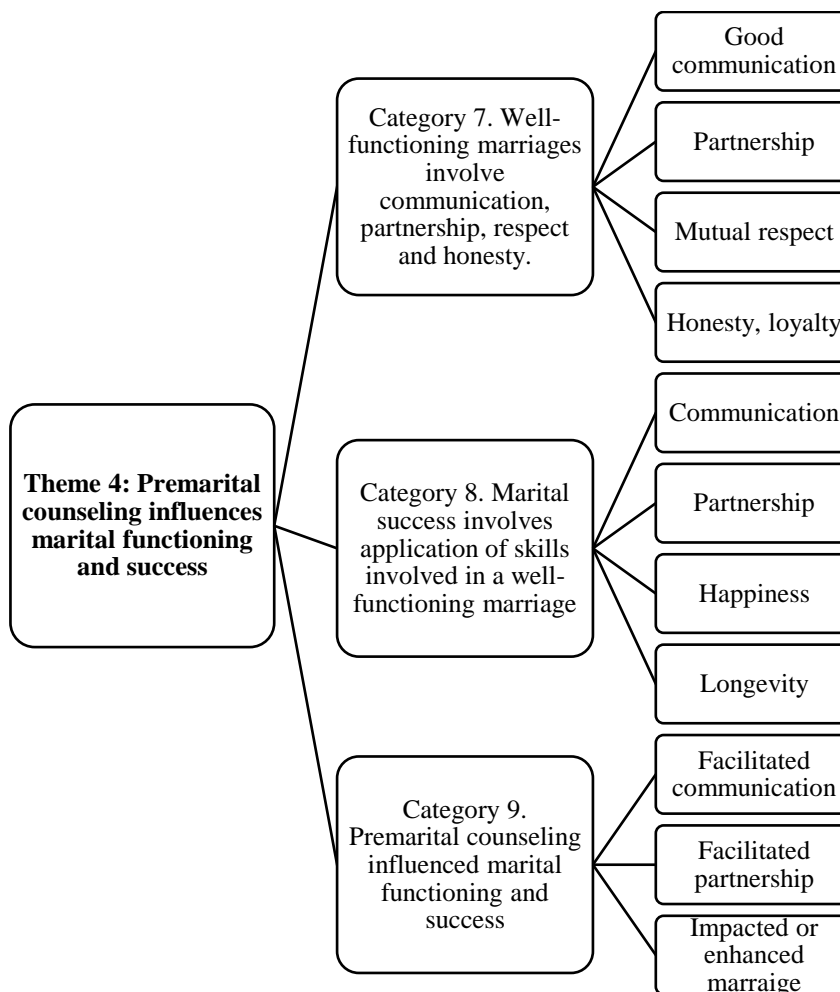
Gottman (1993) proposed that marital dissolution is a process involving the breakdown of marital satisfaction. In turn, marital satisfaction dissolves due to a breakdown of conflict resolution and communication skills (Gottman, 1994). In RQ2, the effect of premarital counseling on preventing the dissolution of marriage was investigated by examining how participants interpreted the role of premarital counseling in facilitating well-functioning and successful marriages and marital satisfaction. Two themes were extracted from the participants' interviews to address RQ2. Theme 4 examines how premarital counseling influences marital functioning and success. Theme 5 describes how premarital counseling influenced the participants' marital satisfaction.

Theme 4: Premarital Counseling Influences Marital Functioning and Success

Theme 4 explored how premarital counseling influences the participants' marital functioning and success. Three categories contributed to the development of Theme 4. Category 7 describes the participants' definitions of well-functioning marriages. Category 8 describes how marital success involves applying skills in a well-functioning marriage, and Category 9 describes participants' descriptions of premarital counseling that influenced marital functioning and success. The codes and categories used to develop Theme 4 are shown in Figure 5, which has been moved to the next page due to the size of the figure.

Figure 5

Codes and Categories Contributing to the Development of Theme 4



Note. This figure illustrates the axial categories and codes used to develop Theme 4. Three categories (Category 7, Category 8, and Category 9) and 11 codes were involved in the development of this theme.

Category 7: Well-Functioning Marriages Involve Communication,

Partnership, Respect, and Loyalty. The participants were asked to define a well-

functioning marriage. Their responses indicated definitions involving *good*

communication, partnership, mutual respect, honesty, and loyalty. These descriptors were

the codes used to describe the participants' definitions of a well-functioning marriage.

Within each category, excerpts from two or three participants are analyzed. The

remainder of the participants' thoughts are shown in a table at the end of the section. Discrepant cases will also be addressed.

Good Communication. Many participants believed that well-functioning marriages were defined by good communication. For instance, C6-H explained, "I'm going to say a well-functioning marriage is being able to adapt to the changes and communicating and being transparent with each other." Couple 6-W added to her husband's definition, saying, "It's just being transparent and extending grace. So I still think that just like adjusting to changes [and] being transparent." For Couple 6, communication is a major component of a well-functioning marriage in that communication allows for adaptation to the challenges associated with marriage. Couple 7 concurred with Couple 6. Couple 7-W explained her definition of a well-functioning marriage, saying:

You have the good times, but the good thing is that you don't let bad [times] drive you apart. You communicate and say how you feel and what we could have done better to make that not happen, and from there on out, what you do to make sure that doesn't happen again.

For Couple 7, a well-functioning marriage involves superior communication about challenges, especially when it comes to ensuring that similar challenges are not encountered and mistakes are not repeated. Couple 9 also spoke about the necessity of communication. Couple 9 indicated that superior communication is also important for their marriage and is a constant skill they seek to improve. Based on these participants' responses, communication is an important component of well-functioning marriages.

Couple 9-H said:

A well-functioning marriage is one that communication is key for me.

Communicate everything, don't keep anything to yourself. Communication, communicate because that can cause issues in marriages. So that's one of the key and that's what we're always working on.

Partnership. Other participants believed that well-functioning marriages were defined by partnership. Couple 1-W believed that a well-functioning marriage is one in which one partner can compensate for the other when there are challenges. Thus, for this couple, a well-functioning marriage contains a solid partnership. For instance, Couple 1-W said:

I think well-functioning is where when one lacks, the other one can kind of pick up that part that is lacking. Well-functioning is where it's pretty much like a well-oiled fine-tuned machine, where, regardless of what's going on, that marriage can keep going, sunshine, rain, kids, finances, jobs, church, all the different things that happen, from the outside looking in, someone may say, 'Well, you guys do a lot.'

Teamwork was also highlighted by Couple 3. Couple 3-W explained, "I think one where you work as a team. We've worked together twice; we've had two different jobs where we worked together in a restaurant, and we worked well together." Couple C3 explained that they have been able to exhibit teamwork and partnership when working together outside and inside the home, which has facilitated their marriage to function well. Couple 5 used a metaphor to describe the partnership necessary for a well-functioning marriage. Couple 5-H explained:

It is one that gets through this stormy weather by two people staying in the same boat and they have big oars in their hands and say we're going to get through this

together. It's always stormy, we're going to maneuver and get through to calm waters. Don't jump out of the ship when it's stormy.

For Couple C5, the partnership involves both teammates working together to navigate challenging times. This partnership contributes to a well-functioning marriage. Couple 5 also spoke about how partnership involves role delineation in the marriage. Couple 5W said, "Making sure, as you said, that we were careful what we bring into the relationship and all realizing where we both stand and the role we play and prioritize accordingly." For Couple 5, partnership was the major factor influencing well-functioning marriages. Thus, for some individuals, well-functioning marriages are defined in terms of partnership.

Mutual Respect. Mutual respect was a third definition of well-functioning marriages. Mutual respect was defined in numerous ways by the participants, for Couple 7, mutual respect involved appreciating each other. Couple 7-W said, "For us, I think it is more appreciating each other. Just appreciating each other and doing our best for and with each other, not looking for a return." For Couple 7, mutual respect manifested as appreciating each other and their partnership and being selfless regarding each other. Couple 11 also spoke about mutual respect and friendship. Couple 11-W said, "He's my best friend, my best man. My biggest thing is to let the man or woman be who they are. Don't try to change that person." Couple 11 believed that well-functioning marriages involve respecting each other's identities and not trying to change each other. For Couple 12, "a well-functioning marriage is two people working together, being able to achieve goals together, and being able to walk through life with love and respect and honoring one another." Couple 12 defined a well-functioning marriage in terms of mutual respect.

Thus, based on the participants' responses, a well-functioning marriage involves mutual respect among couples.

Honesty and Loyalty. The participants also believed that well-functioning marriages were defined by honesty and loyalty. For instance, C2-W explained that a well-functioning marriage involves "Honesty, open line of communication, respective line of communication, loyalty, [and] being faithful to one another." Couple 4 agreed with Couple 2. Couple 4-W explained that "a well-functioning marriage is one in which two people can be open and honest with each other." For these participants, honesty and loyalty to each other facilitated the communication necessary for a well-functioning marriage. Couple 15 used honesty in their definition of a well-functioning marriage. Couple 15-W said, "My perspective of that is a union of two people who can be open and honest with each other." For Couple 15, openness and honesty are important qualities of a well-functioning marriage. Based on the participants' responses, some individuals define well-functioning marriages in terms of honesty and loyalty.

Participants' Definitions of a Well-Functioning Marriage. The preceding section presented the participants' thoughts regarding definitions of well-functioning marriages. The participants defined well-functioning marriages as those with good communication, partnership, mutual respect, honesty, and loyalty. To give appropriate weight to all participants' thoughts, Table 12 contains excerpts from the remainder of the participants' interviews.

Table 9*Participants' Perceived Benefits of Premarital Counseling*

Couple	Definition	Excerpt from interview
Couple 1 (C1-W)	Good communication	"I think a well-functioning marriage is one with great communication."
Couple 1 (C1-H)	Mutual respect	"it's just one that there's a level of understanding there's mutual respect and understanding." "Well, I think a well-functioning market is one where you communicate, you try not to have fights, and you emerge. That's why you communicate. You don't throw fists at each other with bad words. We need to listen before we speak sometimes and minimize anything that would cause a big issue."
Couple 4 (C4-H)	Good communication	"And just extending grace to yourself and each other, I think are key components to maintain a solid marriage or relationship." "A well-functioning marriage is one that has foremost friendship established, and right along with that are right behind would be respect. Without those two pillars, I can tell anyone that a marriage won't function, it's friendship and respect."
Couple 6 (C6-W)	Mutual respect	"I think one where we both are handling duties and our rules, not only to like each other, but for ourselves, of handling our duties and our roles as husband and wife, and then as individuals as well."
Couple 13 (C13-H)	Mutual respect	"I gotta go back to communication. It helps to make your marriage function in a positive way."
Couple 14 (C14-H)	Partnership	"Communication, not necessarily having to talk about everything, but being able to communicate what your needs are in the moment. I think that makes for a strong marriage."
Couple 15 (C15-W)	Good communication	"Being open and honest about how you're feeling and what's on your mind. I think the few times we've run into issues it's because one of us isn't fully sharing what the truth of something is. And so, I think we're strongest when we're openly sharing and can work through things or help each other process different situations."
Couple 16 (C16-H)	Good communication	"The lines of communications are open, there's understanding, there's patience, there is division of labor and clearly defined roles, as far as what each person's role of responsibility is."
Couple 16 (C16-W)	Respect, partnership	"I would define a well-functioning marriage is a marriage that has honesty, respect, trust and true love. I think that's a real function. I think that if you have those four ingredients in a marriage, a marriage shall survive."
Couple 17 (C17-H)	Partnership	"Good communication. Don't lie to you know, argue with each other. Just work on the unit."

Note. This table illustrates other perceived benefits of premarital counseling, including good communication, mutual respect, partnership, honesty, and loyalty.

Discrepant Cases: Inability to Define a Well-Functioning Marriage. Some

participants found it difficult to define a well-functioning marriage or believed that it was not possible to define a well-functioning marriage. For instance, Couple 9-H explained,

"I don't think everybody knows the answer to a well-functioning marriage. Everybody is

different, and what is functional for one person might not be functional for me.” While Couple 9 defined a well-functioning marriage in terms of communication, Couple 9-H acknowledged that the concept of a well-functioning marriage may be elusive for some couples. Consistent with this idea, Couple 10 could not define a well-functioning marriage. Couple 10-H said:

You cannot define a well-functioning marriage because every marriage is different. So, if that marriage has worked for them, it might not work for you. So whatever works for you, it might be well functioning for you. But it might not, and what works for us might not be well functioning for you. You can't define a well-functioning marriage.

Consistent with C9-H's interpretation, C10-H was unable to define a well-functioning marriage due to the variable nature of couples' marriages. Couple 10-W built on her husband's statement, saying, “I don't think it's such a thing as a well-functioning marriage. This is my opinion.” For these participants, the definition of a well-functioning marriage was elusive.

Category 8: Marital Success Involves Application of Skills Involved in a Well-Functioning Marriage. The participants were also asked to define marital success. In this category, the participants' thoughts regarding a successful marriage are presented. The participants identified successful marriages as having *open communication*, *partnership*, *happiness*, and *longevity*. Each of these codes was used to describe marital success from the participants' perspectives.

Open Communication. The participants believed that successful marriages involved open communication. Couple 3 indicated that communication was paramount

for a successful marriage. Couple 3-W explained, “I think communication. You can't have a successful marriage without communication, that's for sure.” Couple 3 believed that lack of communication negated the possibility of having a successful marriage. Couple 4 also indicated that successful marriages involve communication. Couple 4-W said, “A successful marriage is one that we cooperate with each other, there's unification, [and] we communicate with each other.” For C4-W, a successful marriage involves both partnership and communication to facilitate that partnership. Couple 11 also indicated that communication is a cornerstone of successful marriages. Couple 11-W said:

A successful marriage is one [where] they're honest with each other and upfront. There might be times when you disagree, but as long as you know that you talk it over, you get on the same page, and you try to work through it, even if you don't like it.

Couple 11 highlighted the idea that communication in times of disagreement is essential for marital success. Thus, the participants believed that communication is critical for marital success. In this way, a skill identified as important for a well-functioning marriage is also critical for marital success.

Partnership. The participants believed that successful marriages involved partnership. Couple C2 believed that partnership is critical for marital success. Couple 2-H said, “A successful marriage to me is realizing that it takes both of us. You've reached that point of success for growth in marriage when that occurs.” For Couple 2, partnership and realizing that both individuals must cooperate to promote a successful marriage. Couple 4 indicated that successful marriages involve cooperation and unselfish partnership. Couple 4-H said, “So when we look at success, we didn't go in it to gain

riches from the other person; we didn't go in with selfish motives. So having a successful marriage for us again is unselfish.” For Couple 4, a partnership involves ensuring the other partner is involved in the marriage, which is consistent with unselfish motives. Couple 6 further elucidated, “Even when you don't like each other, you know that you still love each other, and you work through those differences” (C6-W). Couple 6 believed that partnership in marriage is essential, even in the face of disagreements. Partnership, like communication, was identified as critical for a well-functioning marriage in Category 7. Since partnership was also identified as a critical component of marital success, marital success involves components of well-functioning marriages.

Happiness. The participants believed that successful marriages are ones in which both individuals are happy. Couple 6 indicated that happiness is a cornerstone of a successful marriage. Couple 6-W said, “I also think that it goes back to a happy marriage. I feel like a happy marriage is also a successful marriage.” Couple 6 believed that happiness is indicative of a successful marriage. Couple 7 indicated that happiness is important. Couple 7-W said:

It just really depends on whatever each person wants out of the marriage. For me, success may be as long as we are comfortable, we can take care of each other, and take care of the grandkids. That, to me, is successful.

For Couple 7, a successful marriage involves ensuring that each other is happy and that their family is happy. Couple 10 also believed that a successful marriage involves happiness. Couple 10-H said, “Successful people still being together are happy.” Couple 10-W built on her husband's thoughts, saying, “You're still in love with each other and you still just think that person is your world. You can't live without that

person.” For Couple 10, happiness is critical for marital success. Based on the participants’ responses, some individuals. Based on the participants’ responses, happiness is a critical component of marital success.

Longevity. The participants believed that successful marriages have longevity.

For instance, Couple 1-W said:

I think a successful marriage is one where we stay together and still have the same mindset we had when we got married. I mean, mindsets change as you get older; I think a successful marriage is a marriage that can result in both their minds being together as one, regardless of ups and downs.

Couple 1 believed that successful marriages involve longevity, particularly longevity of the convergence of couples’ mindsets. Couple 3 also spoke about longevity. Couple 3-W said, “A successful marriage is one that is forever because you say till death do us part. So, I’ve always believed that means forever.” Couple 3 defined a successful marriage as a long marriage, indicating that marital longevity is what defines success. Couple 5 concurred with Couples 1 and 3, saying, “I see it as two imperfect people making a perfect situation together.” Couple 5 indicated that marital success involves longevity, with individuals growing together to make their situations more perfect. Couple 9 also indicated that marital success involves longevity. Couple 9-W said, “A successful marriage, to me, is a marriage that loves. If it lasts five years, 10 years, 20 years, as long as during that time we are in love.” For Couple 9, a successful marriage involves longevity, cooperation, and remaining in love. Based on the participants’ responses, longevity is a critical component of marital success.

Category 9: Premarital Counseling Influenced Marital Functioning and

Success. The participants also indicated that premarital counseling influenced marital functioning and success. Many participants indicated that premarital counseling impacted their marriage but did not elaborate on how. For the participants who did elaborate, they spoke about how premarital counseling helped facilitate communication and partnership and impacted or enhanced their marriages.

Facilitated Communication. Two participants (C4 and C15) indicated that premarital counseling helped facilitate communication. Couple 4-W explained that premarital counseling influenced the couple's communication. She said, "I would say yes, absolutely, it helped. In premarital counseling, we discussed how we should listen to each other and be honest at all times with our communication. So yes, that's how it has contributed." Couple 4 believed that premarital counseling influenced the way they listen and communicate with each other. Couple 15 also indicated that counseling enhanced their communication. Couple 15-H said, "We're looking at a well-functioning marriage as one in which two people can be open and honest with each other. Each person can be genuinely in communication, you know, and that's including disagreement. We learned that in counseling." Like Couple 4, Couple 15 also learned how to communicate with each other, which enhanced the well-functioning and success of their marriage.

Facilitated Partnership. Other participants indicated that premarital counseling helped facilitate the couples' partnerships. For instance, Couple 17 indicated that their premarital pastor enhanced their partnership. Couple 17-W said:

One thing I remember is that because she's a pastor, she put that emphasis on praying together and staying together on all things. We learned to pray to help us support each other. That's the one that we do as a family: we are in the church.

For Couple 17, they learned to pray to enhance their partnership, which involved “staying together on all things.” Thus, for Couple 17, premarital counseling helped facilitate their partnership. Couple 7 learned to appreciate each other, an essential form of partnership. Couple 7-H said, “I think it is more appreciating each other. Just appreciating each other, and just doing our best for and with each other. You know, I'm doing it, not looking for a return. We learned that in counseling.” Couple 7 learned to appreciate each other and work hard to ensure the other person is satisfied. Couple 18 agreed with Couples 17 and 7. For these couples, their partnerships were enhanced through premarital counseling, as the couples learned to come together to make important decisions and navigate challenges. Couple 18-1 elucidated:

With premarital counseling, it encouraged us that we're going to have bad days, we're going to have a rough time, but it's how we carry ourselves that will make it better for us. We got through it. We got through it together.

Facilitated or Enhanced Marriage. Many of the couples indicated that counseling facilitated or enhanced their marriages. Some couples believed that counseling enhanced their marriages by confirming their view of marriage. Couple 16-H said, “I would say it reestablished that our view was correct. Our emphasis on communication that we thought of before the counseling was selected. So, yes, in some ways, it helped solidify what we believed to be true.” Couple 16 believed that

communication was critical for marriage before they engaged in premarital counseling; counseling confirmed the importance.

Some participants indicated that counseling enhanced the quality of their marriages. For instance, C15-W explained, “We were given all the tools to be successful. It all comes down to how well we apply those tools.” Couple 15 believed that premarital counseling helped lay a solid foundation for marriage by providing them with the tools required for a successful marriage; some of those tools included communication and partnership. Couple 13 believed that premarital counseling provided an opportunity to understand the challenges associated with marriage. Couple 13-H said, “We knew each other from childhood as much as I thought I knew her. What I didn't know were the obstacles that would have come within the marriage and some of those obstacles were pointed out by the counselor.” Couple 13 acknowledged that they were naïve regarding marriage, and their counselor facilitated an understanding of potential challenges they may encounter. Couple 6 also indicated that their marriage counselor facilitated an understanding of challenges. Couple 6-H said, “Absolutely. We knew going in like it's not going to be perfect, right. And again, with Pastor [Redacted], he gave it to us raw. He told us exactly what to expect in certain situations.” Thus, premarital counseling enhanced these participants’ marriages by ensuring they were prepared for challenges and new situations.

Summary of Theme 4. Theme 4 explored how premarital counseling influences the participants’ marital functioning and success. Three categories contributed to the development of Theme 4. Category 7 described the participants’ definitions of well-functioning marriages. Well-functioning marriages were defined as having good

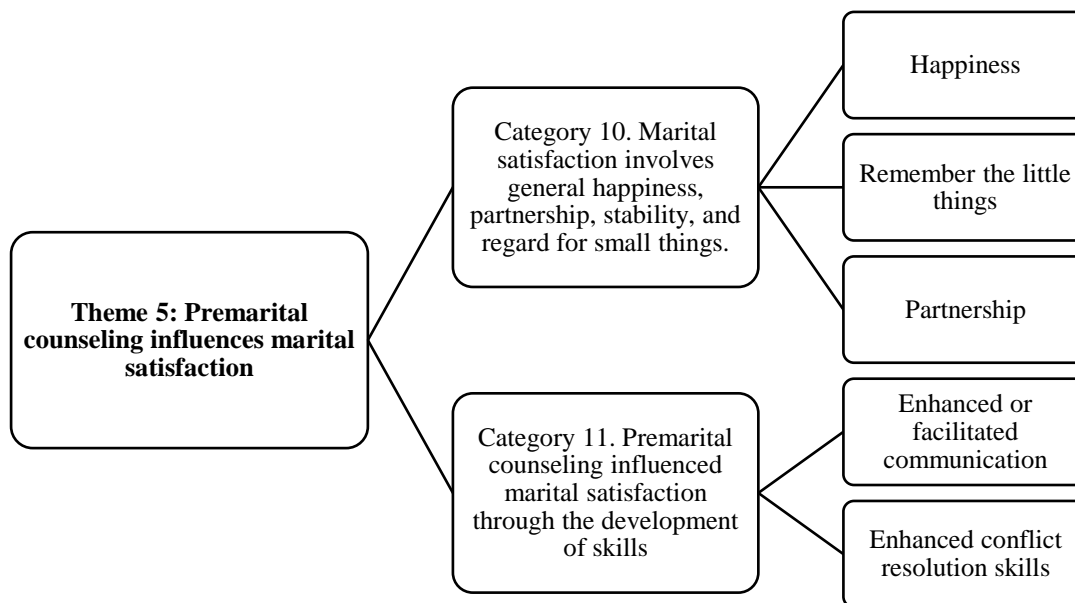
communication, partnership, honesty, loyalty, and respect. Category 8 described how marital success involves applying skills in a well-functioning marriage. The participants described good communication and partnership as essential for marital success. Other participants indicated that marital success involved happiness and longevity. Notably, these characteristics were linked to the participants' definitions of a well-functioning marriage. Finally, Category 9 describes participants' descriptions of premarital counseling that influenced marital functioning and success. The participants indicated that premarital counseling enhanced their communication and partnership. Premarital counseling also enhanced the participants' marriages by alerting them to the challenges and obstacles they would face during marriage.

Theme 5: Premarital Counseling Influences Marital Satisfaction

In Theme 4, the participants explored how premarital counseling influenced marital functioning and success. In Theme 5, how premarital counseling influenced the participants' marital satisfaction is explored. Two categories contributed to the development of Theme 5. In Category 10, the participants' descriptions of premarital satisfaction are presented. In Category 11, the influence of premarital counseling on marital satisfaction is described from the participants' perspectives. The codes and categories contributing to the development of Theme 5 are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Codes and Categories Contributing to the Development of Theme 5



Note. This figure portrays the axial categories and codes used to develop Theme 5. Two categories (Category 10 and Category 11) and five codes were involved in the development of this theme.

Category 10. Marital Satisfaction Involves General Happiness, Partnership, Stability, and Regard for Small Things. The participants were asked their definitions of marital satisfaction. In this category, the participants identified four main definitions of marital satisfaction: happiness, remembering the little things, and partnership. The following section will detail each definition.

Happiness. The participants believed that marital satisfaction involved happiness within their marriages. For instance, C5-H explained, “It is one with happiness, where there's more happiness. If you're more unhappy, I've got to go back to the drawing board. But if you're happier, it's a good marriage.” Couple 5 indicated that marital satisfaction can be measured based on the couple’s happiness.

Couple 6 also believed that happiness and marital satisfaction were related. Couple 6-W said, "I also think that it goes back to a happy marriage. I feel like a happy marriage is also a successful and satisfied marriage." Couple 6 believed that happy marriages were also satisfied marriages. Couple 10 indicated they were satisfied when each other was happy. Couple 10-H said, "Just being pleased when she's happy. That makes me happy. When she's not happy, I'm going to be unhappy." He believed that his happiness and satisfaction were dependent on those of his wife.

Couple 13-H further believed that marital satisfaction involves the partners' happiness, both individually and collectively. Based on the participants' responses, marital satisfaction can be understood as happiness in the relationship. Couple 13 also believed that happiness was important for marital satisfaction. Couple 13-H said:

The ultimate thing for mankind is happiness. We are always in the pursuit of happiness and if you find that happiness with a partner, with a wife, on the other side, the wife plans it with a husband, that's the ultimate goal being achieved right there.

Remember the Little Things. The participants spoke about satisfaction in terms of remembering small things that impacted happiness. Couple 3 indicated that sometimes small things are more important than larger things. Couple 3-W said, "I think it's little things in a marriage that mean the most. It's not always the big things you get. After being together for so long, you got to remember the little things. The little things mean more than some of the big things." For Couple 3, satisfaction was less about monetary things or possessions than smaller things.

Couple 6 also discussed celebrating small victories. Couple 6 works actively to celebrate each other selflessly, which contributes to their marital satisfaction. Thus, based on some participants' ideas, marital satisfaction involves celebrating small victories and making each partner happy. Couple 6-W said:

I think it's little victories. Like when [my husband] got a new job, and it was something that he was truly excited about. I was like, 'Man, I'm so excited for you.' Just being able to not be selfish but being selfless in the moment. If my partner is happy, then that truly makes me happy.

Partnership. Most participants believed that marital satisfaction involved partnership. For instance, C1-H said, "I think just that being able to work together as a team, in that partnership, collectively, is important." For Couple 1, marital satisfaction involves partnership. Couple 4-W elucidated:

Marital satisfaction is if you're satisfied and if your marriage is a marriage where you're honest with each other. We're not looking for anything other than honesty and open communication, being able to sit down and work through our differences. I feel that is satisfying enough when we can work through our conflicts and resolve them, and, at the end of the day, we're still the same team. We're not each other's enemy.

Couple 4 believed that partnership was critical for marital satisfaction. Couple 5 also indicated that partners should be of the same mindset. Couple 5-H said, "I think well, the number one thing is just being well aligned." Couple 5 believed their partnership and satisfaction involved a convergence of mindsets. Couple 9 further explained, "Marital satisfaction as long as the two people can agree. We, too, can agree on most everything,

but difficult different issues come up. As long as we can agree on what we want to change.” For these couples, partnership was a cornerstone of marital satisfaction.

Category 11. Premarital Counseling Influenced Marital Satisfaction Through the Development of Skills. The participants reported that premarital counseling helped them develop important skills required for marriage. The participants believed that premarital counseling enhanced communication and conflict-resolution skills and provided tools required for happiness. The following sections will detail each section in the Category.

Enhanced Communication. The participants believed that premarital counseling enhanced their communication skills. Couple 2 spoke about how counseling helped the couple’s communication skills. Couple 2-H said, “It contributed in such a big positive way by helping us realize a lot of things. You have to utilize the tools, like communication.” Couple 2 referenced counseling to facilitate the couple’s communication. Couple 2-W elucidated that these skills learned in premarital counseling are actively integrated into the couple’s marriage. She shared that, “We take everything from the premarital counselor’s advice, and we use it one tool or another. When we need to use it, we use it, and it has done enough to make the relationship better and happier.” Couple 2 actively integrated communication skills they learned in premarital counseling, which impacted their marital satisfaction. Couple 4 believed that communication is essential for premarital satisfaction. Couple 4-W said, “I would say communication plays into marital fact satisfaction. It is one of the most, or I would say, important criteria or elements that's necessary for a marriage to thrive satisfyingly.” According to C4-W, communication is important for premarital satisfaction.

Other couples spoke about how communication influenced their levels of marital satisfaction. For instance, C6-H said:

It's about communication. It's about everything. So, at the end of the day, it's just what you actually take that into, and what you actually what you actually listen to when you're in there, and what you bring into your marriage. And it defeats the purpose of going to if you don't truly bring it into your relationship.

Couple 6 believed that the active listening skills learned in premarital counseling helped satisfaction, provided those skills were implemented. Table 13 describes the other participants' thoughts on how premarital counseling enhanced their communication skills.

Table 10

Premarital Counseling Impacted Marital Satisfaction Through Communication Skills

Couple	Participant	Excerpt from interview
Couple 5	C5-W	"I think some key points like always remember to put God first. Always remember to listen to each other."
Couple 7	C7-H	"[It] contributed in a good way to let us communicate."
Couple 10	C10-H	"Like I said, he helped me, showed me. It taught me who she really is and how to communicate about certain things. Like I say, so when she speaks, listen, because it's important to her at the time. It might not be important to me, but it's important to her, so I need to listen to her and listen to her feelings."
Couple 10	C10-W	"I think it taught us better to communicate and that we needed communication first of all. I mean, listening, stopping, and thinking about each other. Understanding each other or at least, you know, listening to each other."
Couple 11	C10-H	"If you're going through some obstacles, where you can't communicate and you got too many bumps in the road and it's rocky, I would say a counselor really works."
Couple 12	C12-W	"It worked in reverse because even though the content that was discussed during the sessions wasn't applicable to our desired marriage, it did start conversations that led to us understanding what we were getting into."
Couple 13	C13-H	"But the only thing that we were told as lovers to hold on to is to face and communicate. Even if we're going to have disagreements, we're going to agree, where we're going to is not going to be a happy trail all day long."
Couple 15	C15-W	"I can reiterate that premarital counseling helps us to develop certain scale, then we have communication as one of the top things that he does, you know, and we also talked about a couple other things like love for each other, you know, commitment, compassion, or spirituality"

Note. This is a breakdown of the couples, participants, and interview excerpts that were used to develop Category 11, Premarital Counseling Impacted Marital Satisfaction through Communication Skills.

Couple 3 also reported enhanced communication regarding how counseling impacted their satisfaction. Couple 3-H said:

I think it helped us with as far as her telling me how she feels because it's not that she doesn't communicate with me. It's not like she doesn't trust me or something. It's just she's just not good at [communicating]. So, I think the counseling kind of helped that. It taught her how to communicate with me better, but it also gave us different ideas for when certain problems come up.

For these participants, communication was enhanced through counseling in a way that impacted marital satisfaction. As C3-H alluded, this also included enhanced conflict resolution.

Enhanced Conflict Resolution Skills. The participants believed that premarital counseling enhanced their conflict-resolution skills. For example, C7-W said:

It is so much easier just to throw up your hands and say not to bother or not to resolve the conflict. As I said, we did not get that detail constantly. When you go to counseling sessions, now you have a workbook, and you have assignments, and you have these things that you had to do and you learn how to manage issues. That's how it impacted satisfaction.

Couple 7-W indicated that counseling helped the couple learn how to manage conflict, which, in turn, impacted satisfaction. Couple 15 also reported enhanced conflict resolution skills. Couple 15 indicated that their counselor taught them conflict resolution skills in learning not to criticize each other. In these ways, the participants reported that counseling helped their satisfaction by enhancing their conflict resolution skills.

Couple 15-W said:

That will help a marriage to thrive in a healthy way without any of the partners criticizing or putting each other down. So, yes, marital counseling has a kind of fertilization that that ground so that we can mature, and all these other skills or attributes will be or fruits in and, you know, help us along this journey. We learned how to talk to each other rather than criticize and learn how to cooperate.

Provided Tools for Happiness. The participants believed that premarital counseling provided the tools necessary for happiness. Couple 1 believed that premarital counseling allowed the couple to have a more realistic view of marriage. Specifically, premarital counseling helped them set proper expectations. For instance, C1-W said:

I think overall, it was a great contribution from the start, simply because we were realistic going into the marriage. Because we did the counseling, our expectations changed, and we had a good understanding of what to expect in a marriage, just the roles of a wife and female and what the Bible says about marriage. Just how to navigate through the uncertainties and have a level of patience with each other.

Couple 4 indicated that counseling enhanced their happiness. Couple 4-W said, “Truthfully speaking, the premarital counseling contributed to our overall happiness. The level of marital satisfaction has grown over time.” Couple 4 believed their premarital counselor gave them “a blueprint, a guideline” (C4-H) that helped them achieve marital satisfaction. Couple 15 also indicated that counseling provided tools required for happiness. Couple 15-W said:

Alright so earlier we talked about in the beginning of our conversation, we talked about that premarital counseling is the roadmap to a healthy marriage, it boosts the strengths that we already have, and provide us with tools in the areas of

weaknesses and give us room to communicate. So, it's one of the vital ingredients in a happy healthy marriage.

Couple 15 believed that premarital counseling enhanced the quality of their marriage by giving them a guide and a “roadmap” to a healthy marriage that includes marital satisfaction and happiness. Based on the participants’ ideas, premarital counseling enhances marital satisfaction by providing tools for happiness.

Summary of Theme 5. In Theme 5, how premarital counseling influenced the participants’ marital satisfaction was explored. Two categories contributed to the development of Theme 5. In Category 10, the participants’ descriptions of premarital satisfaction are presented. The participants spoke about how happiness, partnership, and remembering the small things contributed to marital satisfaction. In Category 11, the influence of premarital counseling on marital satisfaction is described from the participants’ perspectives. The participants indicated that premarital counseling enhanced the participants’ communication and conflict resolution skills and provided tools required for happiness in marriage. The conflict resolution and communication skills enhanced through counseling directly apply to Gottman’s (1993) proposed pathway for marital dissolution; this concept will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Summary of RQ2. Gottman (1993) proposed that marital dissolution is a process involving the breakdown of marital satisfaction. In turn, marital satisfaction dissolves due to a breakdown of conflict resolution and communication skills (Gottman, 1994). In RQ2, the effect of premarital counseling on preventing the dissolution of marriage was investigated by examining how participants interpreted the role of premarital counseling in facilitating well-functioning and successful marriages and marital satisfaction. Two

themes were extracted from the participants' interviews to address RQ2. Theme 4 examined how premarital counseling influences marital functioning and success. The participants defined well-functioning marriages as having good communication, partnership, honesty, loyalty, and respect. The participants next described how marital success involves applying skills in a well-functioning marriage. They spoke about how good communication and partnership are essential for marital success. Other participants indicated that marital success involved happiness and longevity. Notably, these characteristics were linked to the participants' definitions of a well-functioning marriage. Finally, the last component of Theme 4 evaluated the participants' descriptions of premarital counseling that influenced marital functioning and success. The participants indicated that premarital counseling enhanced their communication and partnership. Premarital counseling also facilitated the participants' marriages by alerting them to the challenges and obstacles they would face during the marriage.

Theme 5 describes how premarital counseling influenced the participants' marital satisfaction. In Theme 5, the participants spoke about how happiness, partnership, and remembering the small things contributed to marital satisfaction. The participants also indicated that premarital counseling enhanced the participants' communication and conflict-resolution skills and provided tools required for happiness in marriage. In these ways, premarital counseling facilitates marital satisfaction, which, in turn, can mitigate marital dissolution (Gottman, 1993).

Summary

In this study, 19 couples completed semi structured interviews, answering questions related to how they experienced premarital counseling. The participants also answered questions about how premarital counseling impacted their marital functioning, success, and satisfaction. Two research questions were addressed in this qualitative phenomenological study. RQ1 aimed to explore how couples experience premarital counseling. Three themes were extracted from the participants' interviews to address RQ1. In Theme 1, the participants describe their secular and religious premarital counselors as knowledgeable and creating inviting, warm counseling environments. The participants reported their counselors as kind, warm, friendly, clear, directive, supportive, and unbiased. These qualities facilitated the participants' abilities to communicate through challenging topics and address emergent issues. Theme 2 described how the participants found value in premarital counseling. The participants reported that they had had positive experiences. Theme 3 explored the exercises the participants' premarital counselors used to facilitate partnership, communication, and daily life. Reported benefits included enhanced partnership, conflict resolution, and communication. Other participants believed that counseling laid a foundation for healthy marriage and strengthened their relationships.

In RQ2, the effect of premarital counseling on preventing the dissolution of marriage was investigated by examining how participants interpreted the role of premarital counseling in facilitating well-functioning and successful marriages and marital satisfaction. Two themes were extracted from the participants' interviews to address RQ2. Theme 4 examined how premarital counseling influences marital

functioning and success. The participants described how premarital counseling influenced marital functioning and success. They indicated that premarital counseling enhanced their communication and partnership and prepared them for challenges associated with marriage. Theme 5 describes how premarital counseling influenced the participants' marital satisfaction. The participants described how premarital counseling enhanced the participants' communication and conflict-resolution skills and provided tools required for happiness in marriage. In these ways, premarital counseling facilitates marital satisfaction, which can impact marital dissolution.

In Chapter 5, an interpretation of the study's findings is presented. The study's findings are interpreted in the context of the academic literature and the study's conceptual framework. The subsequent section discusses theoretical, empirical, and practical implications as well as the strengths and weaknesses of this study. These discussions are organized around each research question distinctively. Following the implications is a section of study delimitations and limitations. The next section presents the recommendations for future research and practice. The chapter closes with a concise conclusion, summarizing the study, the problem addressed, and the significance of this study.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Overview

The purpose of the current study was to explore the lived experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland. By understanding the lived experiences of couples engaged in marriage counseling, the researcher anticipated obtaining data that can speak to a myriad of marital concerns premarital counseling addresses. Furthermore, this study addressed a gap in the present literature pointed out by Hart (2018), Scott et al. (2018), and Afdal et al. (2019) concerning how marital satisfaction and relationship longevity can be impacted by premarital counseling. This chapter serves as a scholarly exploration of couples' premarital counseling experiences, encompassing six distinct sections.

Beginning with a comprehensive summary of findings, Chapter 5 discusses the multifaceted aspects of couples' motivations, perceived value, counseling methodologies, and subsequent impacts on marital dynamics. A scholarly discussion intricately weaves empirical observations with theoretical underpinnings, emphasizing the positive influence of counseling, challenging prevailing efficacy concerns, and advocating for the inclusion of diverse demographic considerations. Methodological and practical implications underscore the relevance of the cascade model, proposing tailored approaches, proactive integration of positive patterns, and sustained support mechanisms. This chapter also reviews the study's limitations and delimitation, delineating avenues for future research and contributing to the scholarly discourse on premarital counseling.

Summary of Findings

This section provides a summary of this study's findings regarding couples' experiences in premarital counseling, unraveling the diverse motivations, perceived value, methodologies employed by counselors, and the subsequent impact on marital functioning and satisfaction. This section is important for understanding how findings fit within the context of academic and professional literature and the theoretical underpinnings of the study as seen in Gottman's (1994) cascade model of marital dissolution. Each theme and category aligns with the research questions, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of couples' lived experiences in premarital counseling.

Summary of Theme 1

In response to RQ1, which sought to understand how couples experience premarital counseling, Theme 1 delves into the nuanced aspects of the counseling environment and the demeanor of premarital counselors, both secular and religious. Theme 1 encompasses the lived experiences of couples engaged in premarital counseling, focusing on two pivotal categories. Category 1 elucidated the reasons prompting couples to seek premarital counseling, and Category 2 detailed the attributes of premarital counselors and the atmospheres they cultivated.

Within Category 1, participants articulated diverse motivations for pursuing premarital counseling. Some couples attended counseling as a mandatory religious prerequisite for marriage, underlining the significance of faith in shaping their decision. In contrast, other participants voluntarily sought counseling for secular reasons. The latter group's motivations ranged from addressing existing relationship challenges to ensuring preparedness for a successful marriage. This divergence in motivations underscores the

varied nature of couples' needs and expectations when entering premarital counseling.

Category 2 elucidated participants' perceptions of their premarital counselors and the environments in which counseling sessions unfolded. Participants consistently described their counselors as possessing kindness, warmth, friendliness, clarity, directiveness, supportiveness, and unbiased professionalism. These attributes collectively contributed to an atmosphere conducive to effective communication, enabling couples to navigate challenging topics and address emergent issues. The counselors' wealth of knowledge, coupled with the creation of an inviting environment, further bolstered their efficacy in assisting participants on their journey toward successful marriages.

Summary of Theme 2

Theme 2 delved into participants' perceived value derived from premarital counseling engagement. This theme was crucial in addressing RQ1, which seeks to understand how couples experience premarital counseling. Category 3 encapsulated the positive aspects of participants' experiences in premarital counseling. Participants expressed how engaging in premarital counseling gave them a fresh perspective on marriage, contributing to their better preparedness for the marital journey. The theme highlights that premarital counseling serves as a transformative process, allowing couples to gain insights, skills, and perspectives that enhance their understanding of marriage and its complexities.

In Category 4, participants shared specific areas of concern that they sought to address through premarital counseling. These concerns encompassed pivotal aspects of marital life, including communication, conflict resolution, changing roles and responsibilities, and financial matters. The participants recognized premarital counseling

as a valuable platform for proactively addressing potential challenges and equipping themselves with the tools necessary to navigate these complexities, thereby contributing to the overall success of their future marriages.

Summary of Theme 3

Addressing the intricacies of how couples experience premarital counseling, Theme 3 focuses on the methodologies employed by premarital counselors to address the concerns raised by the participants. This theme provided valuable insights into the specific approaches contributing to the participants' perceptions of premarital counseling, aligning with the overarching RQ1. Category 5 examined the strategies employed by premarital counselors to facilitate couples' learning more about each other. Participants highlighted three general exercises employed during counseling sessions: compare exercises, role-playing and scenarios, and discussions on finances and communication. These exercises aimed to deepen the understanding between partners, fostering a stronger connection and a more comprehensive comprehension of each other's perspectives and expectations regarding crucial aspects of marriage.

Category 6 explored the perceived impact of premarital counseling on the participants' marriages. The overwhelming majority of participants, with only two exceptions, reported a positive impact stemming from their engagement in premarital counseling. The reported benefits encompass enhanced partnership, improved conflict resolution skills, and more effective communication. Furthermore, participants expressed the belief that premarital counseling laid a foundational structure for a healthy marriage, ultimately contributing to the strengthening of their relationships.

Summary of Theme 4

Directly addressing RQ2, which investigates couples' interpretations of skills learned in premarital counseling to avoid the dissolution of marriage, Theme 4 explored how premarital counseling influences the participants' marital functioning and success. Category 7 elucidated the participants' perspectives on what constitutes a well-functioning marriage. The participants defined well-functioning marriages as good communication, partnership, honesty, loyalty, and respect. This foundational understanding of a well-functioning marriage is a benchmark against which the impact of premarital counseling on marital functioning and success can be evaluated.

Category 8 explored the participants' views on applying skills for achieving marital success. Key components identified by participants included good communication and partnership, which were considered essential for marital success. Additionally, some participants associated marital success with happiness and longevity, with a noteworthy connection to the characteristics outlined in their definitions of well-functioning marriages. This category underscores the participants' recognition of specific skills as integral to the success and longevity of their marriages.

In Category 9, the participants provided insights into how premarital counseling influenced their marital functioning and success. Premarital counseling was identified as enhancing communication and partnership, two crucial elements linked to the participants' definitions of well-functioning marriages. Moreover, participants expressed that premarital counseling played a pivotal role in alerting them to the challenges and obstacles they would face during marriage, thereby contributing to their preparedness for potential difficulties.

Summary of Theme 5

Theme 5 explored how the participants perceive the influence of counseling on their marital satisfaction, directly addressing RQ2 concerning couples' interpretations of skills learned in premarital counseling to avoid the dissolution of marriage. Category 10 examined the participants' descriptions of what contributes to premarital satisfaction. Participants articulated that happiness, partnership, and the acknowledgment of small gestures played integral roles in shaping marital satisfaction. Understanding the factors that participants themselves identify as crucial to satisfaction provides a foundation for evaluating the impact of premarital counseling on these elements. Category 11 explored the participants' perspectives on how premarital counseling influenced their marital satisfaction. Participants highlighted that premarital counseling enhanced their communication and conflict-resolution skills, providing them with the tools necessary for achieving happiness in marriage.

Discussion

In this section, the findings on the lived experiences of married couples in premarital counseling in Maryland are discussed. A discussion of empirical and theoretical literature will now be discussed in turn. The findings are also discussed in the context of the study's theoretical framework.

Discussion of Empirical Literature

Exploring the lived experiences of married couples engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland provides valuable insights that confirm and extend the existing literature on the effectiveness and challenges of premarital counseling. The findings of this study align with prior research acknowledging the potential benefits of premarital

counseling. Consistent with the literature by Osei-Tutu et al. (2020), the participants in this study reported enhanced communication and partnership skills, emphasizing the positive impact of premarital counseling on addressing common marital challenges. The confirmation that premarital counseling contributes to improved communication, parenting quality, and overall relationship satisfaction resonates with the research of Carlson et al. (2020), supporting the notion that such programs positively influence couples. Additionally, the study confirms the relevance of premarital counseling in addressing specific concerns raised by couples, such as communication, conflict resolution, changing roles, and finances. The parallels between Parhizgar et al. (2017) and Moeti et al. (2017) reinforce the idea that couples actively seek counseling to navigate these critical aspects of their relationships. The study concurs with Barton et al. (2018) by demonstrating that even strong couples can benefit from premarital counseling, challenging the notion that only troubled marriages require intervention.

The literature by Moeti et al. (2017) and Scott et al. (2018) indicated that there is a diminishing interest in premarital counseling, however this study reveals that participants perceived their counselors positively, describing them as kind, warm, and supportive. Though not necessarily a contradiction to the literature, the findings indicated that the sample overall had a good experience with premarital counseling regardless if whether it was voluntary or mandatory. Moreover, the study extends the existing literature by capturing the diverse demographic backgrounds of couples engaged in premarital counseling. In contrast to the emphasis on mixed-gender couples in previous research (Scott et al., 2018), this study intentionally includes same-gender couples and couples from low-income and marginalized backgrounds. The findings highlight the

importance of considering diverse relationship dynamics in the evaluation of premarital counseling efficacy.

Discussion of Theoretical Literature and Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this study relies on Gottman's cascade model of marital dissolution, which posits that specific factors contribute to marital dissatisfaction, potentially leading to separation or divorce (1999). The study findings provide insights into how lived experiences of individuals engaged in premarital counseling align with or diverge from Gottman's theoretical framework. The study findings resonate with Gottman's emphasis on the importance of communication and conflict resolution skills in predicting marital satisfaction and potential dissolution.

Participants in premarital counseling reported enhancements in communication, partnership, and conflict resolution, aligning with the factors emphasized by Gottman (1999). The positive changes observed in couples' interactions support Gottman's assertion that effective communication contributes to relationship satisfaction and resilience. Furthermore, the study's alignment with Gottman and Levenson's (1992) research on regulated and nonregulated couples reinforces the relevance of assessing communication patterns.

The participants who perceived positive changes in communication and conflict resolution skills echoed the characteristics of regulated couples—those with more positive than negative interactions. This concordance supports Gottman's contention that regulated couples tend to exhibit higher marital satisfaction. The study's integration of the cascade model aligns with Rajaei et al.'s (2019) work, showcasing how the Gottman method, grounded in the cascade model, can reduce emotional divorce and enhance

communication skills. The findings underscore the applicability of the cascade model in understanding and improving relationship dynamics, emphasizing the role of premarital counseling in preventing the deterioration of marital satisfaction.

While the study aligns with Gottman's focus on communication and conflict resolution, it also sheds light on additional factors influencing marital satisfaction. For instance, the participants highlighted the importance of well-defined roles, mutual support, and addressing challenges in premarital counseling. These nuanced findings suggest that factors beyond communication, such as partnership and addressing potential obstacles, contribute significantly to the overall satisfaction of couples. The study's divergence from Gottman's model is notable in its emphasis on the positive experiences of couples engaged in premarital counseling.

Unlike Gottman's focus on predicting divorce, the study explores the positive impact of counseling on marital satisfaction. This extension of the cascade model challenges the notion that the model is solely predictive of negative outcomes, suggesting its relevance in understanding positive relationship changes. Moreover, while Gottman and Levenson (2000) highlighted negative affect during conflict as a predictor of early divorcing, this study reveals that positive changes in communication can also be influential, challenging the notion that only negative factors drive marital outcomes. The participants' experiences indicate that the cascade model can be applied not only to predict dissolution but also to understand factors contributing to marital success.

Implications

In research, implications are used to explain what the study results mean to scholars as well as to particular populations or subgroups beyond the fundamental data and interpretation of findings (Drisko, 2005). Young and Waddell (2016) add that implications inform how the findings might be significant for and influence theory, subsequent research, policy, and practice. Implications can be theoretical, practical, or for future research. Theoretical implications comprise new additions to current theories or establish a basis for new theories (Arndt, 2012). Practical implications show how a research study can potentially influence real-world problems by activating changes in policy and practice (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010). Implications for future research constitute the influence a study makes in the applicable empirical area. These implications detail the findings of a study and are vital to validate further exploration of the chosen research topic (Drisko, 2005). The current study provided findings that have theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. These implications are detailed in the subsequent section. The section further presents a discussion of a Christian worldview as well as the strengths and weaknesses of this study.

Theoretical Implications

The current study has made substantial contributions to John Gottman's (1999) cascade model of marital dissolution, which is the theoretical framework that guided this research. The theoretical implications drawn from this study, grounded in John Gottman's (1999) cascade model of marital dissolution, offer significant contributions to understanding relationship dynamics and premarital counseling. The cascade model provides a structured lens through which researchers and theorists can delve into the

complexities of marital dissatisfaction (Gottman, 1999). Applying the cascade model in the context of premarital counseling demonstrates its empirical utility in understanding the lived experiences of couples. The findings illustrate how Gottman's (1999) cascade model of marital dissolution helps in understanding how premarital counseling can contribute to the longevity of marriage by deterring potential marital problems such as a lack of positive communication, as well as the presence of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. The model helps in understanding the core benefits of premarital counseling, including good communication, mutual respect, partnership, honesty, loyalty, firm relationships, laying the foundation for marriage, and facilitating conflict resolution.

Practical Implications

Practically, the implications of this study extend to professionals, practitioners engaged in premarital counseling, policymakers in churches, ministers, and administrators. Premarital counselors can integrate the cascade model into their therapeutic frameworks, utilizing its stages to guide targeted interventions. Practical implications also extend to the development of premarital counseling programs, emphasizing the importance of addressing negative interaction patterns early in counseling. The findings of the study suggest that fostering positive communication mitigating criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling can contribute to more successful premarital counseling outcomes. Premarital counselors can tailor their approaches based on the unique challenges presented by each stage of the cascade model. As applies to policymakers in churches, there should be increased support for premarital counseling with church guidelines, encouraging individuals, couples, and members who

aspire to marry in the future, to first pursue counseling before formalizing their matrimony. The study findings apply to policymakers in churches, ministers, and administrators, who are needed to provide a friendly environment within the church and at home, for the implementation of premarital counseling.

Empirical/Future Research Implications

Empirical implications or implications for future research constitute the impact a study makes in the applicable empirical area. These implications detail the findings of a study and are essential to corroborate further exploration of the selected research topic (Drisko, 2005). The empirical or future research implications of this study reverberate across the realms of psychological research and evidence-based interventions. The problem that was addressed in this study was a lack of understanding of how married couples from various demographic backgrounds have engaged in pre-marital counseling. Previous research studies reveal that there is a paucity of empirical evidence on the experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds in pre-marital counseling (Clyde et al., 2020; Moeti et al., 2017). Insights from this study help to address the aforementioned research problem and hence fill the existing knowledge gap. Specifically, the findings illustrate that married couples from different demographic backgrounds have engaged in pre-marital counseling to enjoy the benefits of premarital counseling, encompassing good communication, mutual respect, partnership, honesty, loyalty, firm relationships, laying the foundation for marriage, and facilitating conflict resolution. The study also shows that couples pursue premarital counseling to evade potential marital problems such as a lack of positive communication, as well as the presence of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Furthermore, this study

paves the way for a more robust empirical understanding of the cascade model's relevance and effectiveness.

Implication for Christian Worldview

From a Christian worldview, the implications of this study underscore the significance of incorporating evidence-based approaches into premarital counseling. Religious leaders, counselors, and individuals within Christian communities can leverage the cascade model to understand and address marital challenges. The study aligns with Christian principles of compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation, emphasizing the importance of preventing the destructive patterns identified in the cascade model. By integrating these findings, individuals guided by Christian values can contribute to the development of healthier, more resilient marriages within the context of their faith. This study reinforces the idea that evidence-based practices and Christian values can harmoniously coexist, providing a comprehensive foundation for supporting enduring and fulfilling marriages.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths

The strengths of this study were based on the results that answered the two research questions and outcomes that provided a solid description and interpretation of the lived experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland. Conducting semistructured interviews with 18 couples and hence 36 participants provided rich and in-depth qualitative data to understand how couples experience marital counseling. This rich and in-depth interview

data gave the researcher an edge in understanding the phenomenon from the participants' points of view.

Additional strength was the use of the qualitative phenomenological method, which offered flexibility to explore the phenomenon in an exploratory way. The researcher gained participants' perspectives, which established the authenticity of the study data and findings. Using this approach, the researcher gained a contextual understanding, uncovering the social and cultural factors influencing premarital counseling among married couples from various demographic backgrounds.

Another noticeable strength is the use of a well-diverse sample of married couples. The sample represented a wide range of couples in terms of age and length of marriage. For instance, two couples (Couples 13 and 19) were aged 23-25 and were married for less than two years. In contrast, Couple 7 was aged 64-65 and had been married for 36 years.

The other participants fell between these extremes in terms of age and length of time being married. The participants further had varied experiences with premarital counseling, although most participants completed four to six premarital counseling sessions. This diversity in the study sample improved the transferability of the results to other settings, populations, and periods. Notably, the study findings have a good transferability to other religions with similar pillars of faith as the local church, which is one of the sites where the participants were recruited.

Weaknesses

Despite having numerous strengths, the study had several weaknesses that must be acknowledged. These weaknesses are embedded in a relatively small sample of 18

couples, comprising 36 participants as well as the recruitment and selection of participants from only two sites, a local church and a secular counseling practice in a city in Maryland. If this study was repeated using a larger sample size and recruiting participants from many premarital counseling sites rather than two local sites in a city in Maryland, outcomes could differ based on geographical location, presence of a wide range of perspectives, and many other factors. While the sample was diverse, it did not necessarily represent the larger population of married couples who have received premarital counseling in Maryland and across the United States. The small sample limited the transferability of the outcomes to the larger population of married couples in Maryland and across the country. It will therefore be challenging for future scholars to replicate this study. Using a qualitative approach implied that this study was subjective, not objective, and was prone to researcher bias. According to Sundler et al. (2019), the researcher's bias diminishes the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study data and findings. Furthermore, the novice researcher found data analysis using Van Manen et al. (2016) six-step thematic approach to be complex as well as resource- and time-consuming.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations are boundaries a researcher imposes on a research study to make the study feasible (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). This study was delimited to couples in Maryland who had been married for at least one year and had engaged in premarital counseling. This delimitation was imposed to make the recruitment of participants feasible. The delimitation of the study to Maryland has implications for the transferability of the study's findings. Since the participants were recruited from a specific geographical

region in Maryland, how the participants experience premarital counseling may be different from how other individuals in different geographical regions of the United States experience it. However, the participants represented various age groups and had been married for various lengths of time, which may increase the transferability of the study's findings.

Limitations are shortcomings in a study that are often outside the control of a researcher (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). A limitation of the study is social desirability bias, in which individuals respond to interview questions with answers they believe are socially desirable (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). In this study, many of the participants could not recall or did not discuss times in which they were unsatisfied or unhappy with their marriage. Most couples experience challenges in marital relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). Social desirability bias may have influenced the participants to recall that they were always happy and satisfied with their marriages.

Another limitation of the study is that many participants had been married for many years (see Table 2 in Chapter 4). Consequently, it had also been many years since the participants had undergone premarital counseling. Recall bias, in which participants recall events incorrectly (Bell et al., 2019), may have been present in the data. For instance, some participants could recall specific exercises or discussions they participated in during premarital counseling.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are numerous recommendations for future research. First, due to the geographical delimitation of the study, the study could be repeated to understand the broader lived experiences of individuals who completed premarital counseling.

Specifically, the study could be repeated using a broader geographical region to gain an understanding of how individuals within the United States experience premarital counseling.

The study could also be repeated with individuals who had been married for less than five years, which could help mitigate potential recall bias. Another value of future research is to explore the lived experiences of individuals currently engaging in premarital counseling. Future research should also prioritize replicating the study with non-traditional couples as the current study only studied one non-traditional couple. Comparative analyses between traditional and non-traditional couples can provide insights into tailored counseling interventions. Additionally, exploring the intersectionality of identities within non-traditional couples can inform culturally sensitive counseling practices, promoting inclusivity and equity in premarital counseling services.

Employing the cascade model in the context of premarital counseling demonstrates its empirical utility in understanding the lived experiences of couples. Researchers can build upon these findings by conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term efficacy of interventions informed by the cascade model. Additionally, empirical investigations could explore potential mediators and moderators that influence the impact of premarital counseling on marital satisfaction. Future research endeavors could explore the nuances of each stage in greater detail, shedding light on potential modifiers or additional factors influencing the progression from criticism to stonewalling. Furthermore, scholars may investigate how the cascade model intersects with diverse

cultural, socioeconomic, and demographic contexts, broadening its applicability and enriching its theoretical foundations.

Recommendation for Practice

Based on the findings and theoretical underpinnings of this study, several practical recommendations emerge for professionals engaged in premarital counseling and those working with couples. These recommendations aim to enhance the effectiveness of premarital counseling interventions and contribute to the overall well-being of couples entering a marriage. The specific recommendations will now be discussed in turn.

Early Identification and Intervention

Counselors play a pivotal role in premarital counseling by prioritizing the early identification of potential negative interaction patterns within couples (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020). Therefore, counselor training programs must underscore the significance of discerning subtle signs of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling during premarital sessions. To avert the escalation of negative patterns, targeted interventions should be implemented at the initial stages of dissatisfaction, contributing significantly to the success of premarital counseling outcomes.

Tailored Counseling Approaches

Recognizing the uniqueness of each couple is paramount, necessitating a tailored approach within the cascade model. Counselors should acknowledge that a one-size-fits-all strategy is inadequate and adapt their counseling techniques based on the couple's communication style, background, and specific needs. Designing counseling programs with modules explicitly addressing each stage of the cascade model equips couples with

effective coping mechanisms for handling criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

Integration of Positive Interaction Patterns

Counselors should integrate strategies that foster positive interaction patterns, emphasizing active listening, empathy, and constructive conflict resolution. Premarital counseling sessions should not only address negativity but also focus on building and strengthening positive aspects of the relationship. Encouraging couples to engage in activities promoting affection, humor, and shared positive experiences creates a proactive foundation of resilience against the detrimental effects of negative interaction patterns.

Ongoing Support and Follow-up

Establishing mechanisms for ongoing support and follow-up post-premarital counseling is crucial. Providing couples with resources, periodic check-ins, or additional counseling sessions helps them navigate challenges post-marriage. Collaborating with community and religious leaders to create a supportive environment fosters a sense of community where couples feel comfortable seeking guidance and support when facing difficulties.

Incorporation of Technology

Exploring the integration of technology, such as virtual counseling platforms and mobile applications, enhances accessibility and engagement in premarital counseling. Technology offers couples convenient and flexible ways to access resources and support. By implementing these recommendations, practitioners contribute to the development of robust and tailored premarital counseling practices, promoting healthier and more satisfying marriages. Continuous evaluation and adaptation of counseling approaches

based on empirical research findings will further advance the field of relationship counseling (Bradbury & Bodenmann, 2020).

Faith-Based Communication and Conflict Resolution

In premarital counseling, emphasizing the importance of faith-based communication strategies rooted in principles of compassion, forgiveness, and humility is a crucial component of fostering a healthy marriage. It is recommended to integrate teachings from scriptures or religious texts that promote peaceful conflict resolution and reconciliation. Additionally, premarital counselors should encourage couples to seek guidance from spiritual leaders or mentors within their faith community when facing challenges.

Community Involvement and Support

Counselors should encourage or facilitate connections with faith-based community resources, such as marriage enrichment programs, support groups, or mentorship opportunities. Furthermore, they should encourage couples to actively participate in religious activities together, fostering a sense of belonging and support within their faith community. Strengthening these communal ties can provide valuable spiritual and emotional support throughout their marital journey.

Summary

This study examined the nuanced experiences of married couples engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland, drawing valuable insights that both align with and extend existing literature. The findings underscored the positive impact of premarital counseling, aligning with previous research on enhanced communication, partnership, and overall relationship satisfaction. Notably, the study challenged concerns about the

diminishing popularity of premarital counseling by revealing participants' positive perceptions of their counselors. The inclusion of diverse demographic backgrounds, such as nontraditional couples and those from low-income and marginalized backgrounds, highlights the importance of considering varied relationship dynamics in evaluating counseling efficacy.

The most significant takeaways from this research emphasize the pivotal role of early identification and intervention in premarital counseling. Counselors must be adept at recognizing subtle signs of negative interaction patterns, and targeted interventions at the initial stages of dissatisfaction significantly enhance counseling outcomes. Tailoring counseling approaches to the uniqueness of each couple within the cascade model is another crucial aspect. Recognizing that no one-size-fits-all approach exists, counselors should adapt strategies based on the couple's communication style, background, and individual needs.

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Appendix A.

Site Authorization: Local Church and Counseling Center



NEW BEGEMNING CHURCH OF GOD 7TH DAY

6409 Windsor Mill Road | Baltimore MD 21207 | eMail: Nbcog7@gmail.com | Phone: (443) 413-9969

June 1, 2022

Donna Carney
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University
School of Behavioral Sciences

Dear Doctoral Candidate

I am so excited that you are seeking permission from New Beginning Church of God 7th Day to conduct a study with married couples. I am pleased to inform you that permission has been granted in respect to your research. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions. I wish you all the best in your research.

Sincerely,





May 28, 2022

Donna Carney
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University
School of Behavioral Sciences

Dear Donna Carney,

It is my understanding that you are requesting permission to conduct a study on "THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PREMARITAL COUNSELING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON MARITAL SATISFACTION". Upon review of your request, my colleagues and I are pleased to inform you that permission has been granted to use our facility for the purpose of recruiting and interviewing the participants. I want to let you know that this organization supports this effort and will provide any necessary assistance for the successful implementation of this study. Please feel free to contact our office by email should you have further questions.

Sincerely,



Appendix B.
IRB Approval Letter

Appendix C.

Informed Consent Form

Title of the Project: The Lived Experiences of Premarital Counseling and Its Influence On Marital Satisfaction

Principal Investigator: Donna Carney, Liberty University, EdD. Candidate

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years old or older, a married person living in a city in Maryland, United States that has been married for at least one year, and you attended premarital counseling prior to marriage. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experience of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who have engaged in pre-marital counseling in Maryland.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a semi-structured, open-ended, individual interview either in person or via Zoom meeting, which may take approximately 60 minutes.
2. Participants will have the opportunity to review their transcripts. This will take approximately 10 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include new learnings for the researchers and scholars in the premarital counseling field, as well as those studying relationships, and happiness and

this research will also help individuals who want to attend premarital counseling sessions in the future.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The potential risks involved in participating in this study are minimal, meaning they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and hard copy data will be stored in a locked cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and hard copy data will be shredded.

- 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.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

the researcher conducting this study is Donna Carney. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Donna Carney at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Bridgette Hester at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste.

2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researcher s and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your 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 with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

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

the researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name _____

Signature & Date _____

Appendix D.
Demographic Questions

Spouse One:

1. What is your age?
2. Please describe your race.
3. Please describe your ethnicity.
4. What is your gender ascribed at birth?
5. What is your gender identity?
6. How long have you been married to your current spouse?
7. Did you attend premarital counseling prior to becoming married to your current spouse?
8. Approximately how many premarital counseling sessions did you attend with your current spouse?
9. Including your current marriage, how many times have you been married?

Spouse Two:

1. What is your age?
2. Please describe your race.
3. Please describe your ethnicity.
4. What is your gender ascribed at birth?
5. What is your gender identity?
6. How long have you been married to your current spouse?

7. Did you attend premarital counseling prior to becoming married to your current spouse?
8. Approximately how many premarital counseling sessions did you attend with your current spouse?
9. Including your current marriage, how many times have you been married?

Appendix E.

Copy of Interview Questions

1. Could you generally describe your experience in premarital counseling?
 1. How many premarital counseling sessions did you attend?
 2. What was the setting of your premarital counseling?
2. Could you please describe the circumstances / experiences that led you to participate in premarital counseling?
 1. Where there any specific issues you were hoping to address in premarital counseling?
 2. What role did communication play in your decision to participate in premarital counseling?
3. How would you describe your experience with your premarital counselor?
 1. How long were you engaged in premarital counseling?
 2. Describe your premarital counselor. Please include any details you think are important or relevant.
 3. Did you feel comfortable with your premarital counselor?
 4. What made you feel comfortable or uncomfortable?
4. What do you remember from your premarital counseling experience?
 1. How, if at all, do you think your premarital counseling impacted your marriage?
 2. Can you please describe how you worked on these skills?
 3. What exercises did your counselor guide you through?
 1. Can you please describe them in detail?
 4. Of the skills learned during premarital counseling, do you apply any of these skills currently in your marriage?
 1. If yes, can you please describe how you apply these skills?
 2. Maybe give me a specific example for each skill?

5. Of the skills learned during premarital counseling, which skills do you not apply in your marriage?
 1. Can you describe why you don't utilize these skills?
5. How do you define a well-functioning marriage?
 1. Can you give me a specific example or a time when your marriage functioned well according to your definition?
 2. Has there ever been a time in your marriage where your marriage didn't function in a manner like your definition?
 3. Does this change your answer on how you would define a well-functioning marriage?
 4. Did premarital counseling contribute to your view of a well-functioning marriage?
6. How do you define marital satisfaction?
 1. Can you give me a specific example or a time when your marriage was/is happy, according to your definition?
 2. Has there ever been a time in your marriage where your marriage didn't conform to your definition of happiness?
 3. Does this change your answer on how you would define a happy marriage?
7. How would define a successful marriage?
 1. Can you give me a specific example or a time when your marriage was/is satisfying, according to your definition?
 2. Has there ever been a time in your marriage where your marriage didn't conform to your definition of marital satisfaction?
 3. Does this change your answer on how you would define marital satisfaction?
8. Please describe what individual and collective skills you think are necessary to maintain marital satisfaction.
 1. Which of the skills that you named are possessed by each partner?
 2. Can you please describe?
 3. How do you think communication factors into marital satisfaction?

9. How would you say premarital counseling contributed to your overall happiness of your marriage?
 1. Please describe in detail.

10. How would you say premarital counseling contributed to your level of marital satisfaction?
 1. Please describe in detail.

Appendix F.

Interview Protocol

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PREMARITAL COUNSELING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON MARITAL SATISFACTION

Before the interview begins:

Ensure the space is comfortable.

Ensure notebook and pen are available for note taking.

Make sure audio recorder is functioning.

The interview begins with:

Introduction of the interviewer

Thank you for your participation for this study and your willingness to complete the interview process. My name is Donna Carney and I'm conducting research on premarital counseling as part of my PhD program.

A reminder of confidentiality

It is important for you to know that all your responses will be kept confidential. All participants will be referred to by use of pseudonyms (numbers, i.e., Couple 1, Couple 2, Couple 3) in the study manuscript to ensure the identity of each participant remains confidential and that confidentiality guidelines are followed.

A review of the consent form

Before we continue, I need to verify that you have signed the consent form and understand the ethical standards for this interview. All personal information will be stored electronically and may only be accessed via a password by I. Raw data, such as field notes, will be kept locked in a file cabinet only accessible to I. When the

information from the interview is published in the final study, participant confidentiality will remain. All transcripts and recordings of the interview will be kept private on a password-protected computer accessible to myself only.

Do you have any questions about the consent form or any of the measures taken to preserve your confidentiality?

A brief overview of the research study

I am conducting interviews as part of a doctoral program at Liberty University to explore the lived experiences of married couples from various demographic backgrounds who have engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland.

As a married couple who has engaged in premarital counseling you are in an ideal position to provide valuable first-hand information about how couples experience premarital counseling and how couples interpret premarital counseling in terms of the skills you may have learned to secure marital satisfaction and avoid the dissolution of your marriage.

Answers to these interview questions can be as short or long as desired. Some responses may be prompted by additional questions asked by myself.

A reminder of participants' right to withdraw from the study

While the interview is taking place, if you want to stop the interview and terminate your participation in the study please do not hesitate to tell me and the interview will be stopped immediately. Your information will be discarded promptly.

A reminder that there are no right or wrong answers

There are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. Please answer as honestly and as thoroughly as you can.

The interview will be recorded digitally, video cameras will be disabled, and I will write notes during the interview to support my understanding of your responses. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes, depending upon your response time for each question.

Thanking the participants in advance

I'd like to thank you in advance for your time and participation in my study.

Offering to answer questions before getting started

Before we get started, do you have any questions?

Conducting the interview:

The interviewer will gain verbal consent for recording and then start the audio recording device.

Do I have your consent to start the recording device?

The interviewer will begin asking questions from the interview question list (Appendix D)

Could you generally describe your experience in premarital counseling?

How many premarital counseling sessions did you attend?

What was the setting of your premarital counseling?

Could you please describe the circumstances/experiences that led you to participate in premarital counseling?

Were there any specific issues you were hoping to address in premarital counseling?

What role did communication play in your decision to participate in premarital counseling?

How would you describe your experience with your premarital counselor?

How long were you engaged in premarital counseling?

Describe your premarital counselor. Please include any details you think are important or relevant.

Did you feel comfortable with your premarital counselor?

What made you feel comfortable or uncomfortable?

What do you remember from your premarital counseling experience?

How, if at all, do they think their premarital counseling impacted your marriage?

Can you please describe how you worked on these skills?

What exercises did your counselor guide you through?

Can you please describe them in detail?

Of the skills learned during premarital counseling, do you apply any of these skills currently in your marriage?

If yes, can you please describe how you apply these skills?

Maybe give me a specific example for each skill?

Of the skills learned during premarital counseling, which skills do you not apply in your marriage?

Can you describe why you do not utilize these skills?

How do you define a well-functioning marriage?

Can you give me a specific example of a time when your marriage functioned well according to your definition?

Has there ever been a time in your marriage you did not function consistently with your definition?

Can you describe how this changes your answer on how you would define a well-functioning marriage?

Did premarital counseling contribute to your view of a well-functioning marriage?

How do you define marital satisfaction?

According to your definition, can you give me a specific example of a time when your marriage was/is happy?

Please describe a time when your marriage did not conform to your definition of happiness.

Does this change your answer on how you would define a happy marriage?

How would you define a successful marriage?

According to your definition, can you give me a specific example of a time when your marriage was/is satisfying?

Please describe a time when your marriage did not conform to your definition of marital satisfaction.

Does this change your answer on how you would define marital satisfaction?

Please describe what individual and collective skills you think are necessary to maintain marital satisfaction.

Which of the skills that you named are possessed by each partner?

Can you please describe it?

How do you think communication factors into marital satisfaction?

How would you say premarital counseling contributed to the overall happiness of your marriage?

Please describe it in detail.

How would you say premarital counseling contributed to your level of marital satisfaction?

Please describe it in detail.

The interviewer will pause and give respondents ample time to answer the questions

The interviewer will answer any questions that come up during the interview

The interviewer will monitor respondents verbal and physical responses for emotional comfort

If emotional discomfort presents, the interviewer will offer to pause or end the session

Closing the interview:

The interviewer will ask participants if they have any questions.

We have reached the end of this interview. Thank you for your participation in this study and sharing your personal experiences with me. I appreciate your transparency and honesty in each of your responses. Do you have any questions about the interview or the research process?

The interviewer will remind participants that the recordings will be transcribed verbatim.

As a reminder, I will take the audio from these recordings and transcribe them verbatim. I will be emailing you a copy of the interview transcript. It would be great if

you can review the transcript and make sure that you're comfortable with all of the responses. If you'd like any changes to be made to the transcript so that it more accurately reflects your thoughts and ideas, please let me know. That's an important part of the research process.

The interviewer will thank participants for their time.

Thank you so much for your time and participation in my study.

The interviewer will dismiss the participants.

I'm going to end the meeting now. Thank you again for your time!

After the interview:

The interviewer will transcribe audio recordings within 24 hours.

The interviewer will provide participants with a copy of the transcription to review for accuracy via secure email

The interviewer will again thank the participant for their time and participation in the study.

Appendix G.**Expert Panel**

Name	Degree	Field of Study
Dr. Geoff Reddick	PhD., LMFT	Community care and counseling
Dr. Melvin Price	PhD., LPC, NCC	Counseling and family studies
Dr. Marlene Reid	DNP., PMHNP	Advance Practice in Nursing

Appendix H.
Recruitment Flyer

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

If you are 18 years of age or older, a married couple who has undergone premarital counseling, and have been married for at least 1 year, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

What the study is about:

The goal of the study is to explore the experiences of married couples from various backgrounds who experienced premarital counseling.

What is required of participants?

The information for the study will be gathered using in-person or virtual, recorded interviews which will last approximately 60 minutes.

Where will the study take place?

The location would be determined if you decide to participate. Location can range from a mutual agreed upon location, the church, or the counseling practice.

Consent

A consent form will be provided in a separate email if you are determined eligible.

If you are interested, please contact Donna Carney at:



Appendix I.

Recruitment Flyer for Social Media

Are you married and have attended premarital counseling? Have you been married for at least 1 year? Contact me if you are interested in participating in a study that is trying to understand the influences of premarital counseling on marriage. If you are found eligible, a consent form will be provided via a separate email. I am asking individuals to participate in an in-person or virtual, recorded interview that may last up to 60 minutes.

This study is being conducted by a doctoral candidate at Liberty University. Please contact Donna Carney at [REDACTED] for more information.



Appendix J.

Participant Invitation Email

Dear (candidate couple names),

I am conducting research as part of a doctoral program at Liberty University to explore the lived experience married couples from various demographic backgrounds who have engaged in premarital counseling in Maryland, and I am writing to invite eligible individuals to participate.

Participants should be 18 years old or older, a married person living in a city in Maryland, United States that has been married for at least one year, and attended premarital counseling prior to marriage.

Participants will be asked to participate in an in-person or virtual, recorded interview which takes around 60 minutes and is very informal. I am simply trying to capture your thoughts and perspectives on premarital counseling. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write-up of findings.

There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to my research, and the findings could lead to aid researchers and academics in premarital counseling, relationships, and happiness studies by continuing to investigate how the efficacy of premarital counseling can be enhanced and involving couples from various backgrounds.

If you are willing to participate, please suggest a day and time that you are available between **DATE** and **DATE**, and I'll do my best to accommodate you. The interview will occur at **(local church)** or **(counseling center)**. Please indicate if you have a preference in your response.

A consent document will be provided to you via a separate email that needs to be completed and signed using DocuSign if you choose to participate. The consent document contains additional information about my research. However, please first complete the demographic questionnaire **HERE**. I will need one informed consent form signed for each of you and demographic information for each of you as well.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Thank You!

Donna Carney
(interviewer)

Appendix K.

Field Test

Researcher 0:00

All right, so the interview we are doing about marriage and premarital counseling. I'm going to ask you guys a few questions. Please answer as honestly as you guys can. Okay. All right, for the first question. Could you generally describe your experience in a premarital counselor?

P1W 0:27

From what we understand about premarital counseling, it is basically the counseling you get prior to getting married to get some first-hand information about how a couple should act ,living together. Yes, it was a good experience.

P1H 0:49

Yes, we did have a great experience especially having a mutual person as the facilitator, it was a great experience.

Researcher 0:52

And how many premarital counseling sessions did you attend?

P1W 0:58

Okay,I would say we did about four to six. It's been a long time. So,I don't remember the exact amount, butI would say between four and six two-hour sessions

Researcher 1:11

Thank you, we'll go to the next question and what was the setting of your premarital counseling?

P1W 1:16

Okay, so ifI can go back and try to paint a vivid picture. We did it in the pastor's office at his church, very small office, which at the time looks like they were doing some renovations so that you know, something that stands out because it was not the greatest environment however, we made it work.

Researcher 1:45

Okay, okay. Thank you for that. Could you please describe the circumstances or experiences that led you to participate in a premarital counseling?

P1H 1:56

It was part of the requirement before that pastor would marry us. And the other reason why we wanted to do that, we wanted to get a different take from a counselor's standpoint as to things that , would enhance our marriage or things we did not need to do. Also, how we could handle some of the encounters we would have in our relationship being a married couple.

Researcher 2:34

Okay, and were there any specific issues you were hoping to address in the premarital counseling?

P1W 2:45

Not necessarily. I mean, we grew up seeing our parents being married and you know, as a Christian, I think that was a good step to take before we took the step into marriage.

P1H 3:01

I would endorse that as well, that growing up in a Christian environment. We had parents that were great role models, so of course, you know, there were no specific issues we were hoping to get as I said, it was part of the requirement before that pastor, or a minister would perform the ceremony.

Researcher 3:24

Okay. And what role did communication play in your decision to participate in the premarital counseling?

P1W 3:33

Alright, we both agreed that this was another part of the steps that we would take to becoming one. So of course, we didn't disagree on that. We knew that that's something that had to be done. And again, if we wanted that minister, to do the ceremony, then we were required to do marriage counseling with him. Yes.

Researcher 4:02

Thank you. Thank you for that. How would you describe your experience with your premarital counselor?

P1H 4:10

It was a great experience. He is a pastor that has been pastoring the church for many years and you know, we read some scriptures and we discuss many different issues. Things that are likely to happen during our marriage. And so, I think it was a great experience.

P1W 4:34

Okay, so also to piggyback on what my husband said about the experience. Yes, it was a great experience. The counselor was very down to earth, used layman term language that we could possibly understand and things that we could apply in our everyday marital life. So, the experience was great.

Researcher 5:00

And how long were you engaged in premarital counseling?

P1W 5:05

Like we said in the one of the original questions was that we had about four to six sessions. So that's how long not to say that we have not had other counseling after that, but for the premarital portion, it was about four to six sessions.

Researcher 5:27

And can you describe your premarital counselor?

P1W 5:31

Okay, again, like we said, this was a minister, someone who was very known in the community for doing ceremony and counseling, whether it be grief counseling, pastoral counseling, or marital counseling. So, you know, he was a well-beloved person in his congregation, very spiritual person, and was also a role model because he himself was married.

Researcher 6:01

Okay, thank you. Did you feel comfortable with your premarital counselor?

P1W 6:06

Yes. It was a nice pastor and very competent.

P1H 6:15

Okay. Yeah, and I would say the same thing that like I said, a lot of times when you're speaking to someone for the first time, especially taking a big step as wanting to be counseled before you say you're I dos, you can be very nervous, but he made us feel comfortable. Again, like I said he was a very down to earth person, and he modeled the behaviors, the same things that he was talking to us about. He modeled those behaviors, so we were very comfortable with them.

Researcher 6:43

And this might be a little repetitive, but can you elaborate more about what made you feel comfortable or uncomfortable with your premarital counselor?

P1W 6:54

Okay, so one, it was exciting. We were in like more of a private space where it was just myself, my husband and him. So of course, if you're nervous, and it's not a whole lot of people, you don't have to be in a large group or in front of a large group of people. It's a little bit more settling. You're not getting overanxious or anything like that. Like I said, he was one of the kind of person who was very down to earth, used very simple language to elaborate what he was doing. So that kind of gave us a little bit of peace of mind and less nerve-racking moments.

Researcher 7:34

What do you remember from your premarital counseling experience?

P1H 7:41

Okay, so, I remember that the pastor even before this session you would pray with

us and after the session he would pray? Yeah, that was awesome.

P1W 7:52

So of course, my husband was talking about him praying before and after. But some of the things that he talked about was using his own life experience, to share with us to let us know that marriage, it's not going to always be easy. We're going to have some rough patches but utilizing the skills that we were discussing during our sessions and growing together and putting God first, then we can have a successful marriage.

Researcher 8:27

And how, if at all, do you think that your premarital counseling has impacted your marriage?

P1W 8:36

I don't want to say 100% but yes, to a certain degree, some of what he said still stands out with us today. But again, because we were born and raised in Christian families, we knew that some expectations were family values, taking into consideration that, you know, we are Christians, first and foremost, and we're governed by scriptures. So, I wouldn't say the counseling process was 100%. But yes, it did reiterate or did remind us of some of the things that we should do to have longevity in our marriage.

Researcher 9:19

Can you elaborate a little bit more about the skills that you worked on within these counseling sessions?

P1H 9:31

One of the tools we used is always to remember that that we will be one whenever we get married and we must compromise decisions at times. Of course, we compromise each time when there's a difficult situation and we come to an amicable agreement. Everything worked out.

P1W 10:01

And also, some of the actually the tools or the skills that we utilize is, you know, of course, commitment, which is the big one. I am not my own he's got his we both are together as one. Next is sexual faithfulness, which is a big part of marital success, making sure that we're not going outside of the marriage and having affairs or things of that nature. Being able to resolve our disagreements, and you know, like the Scripture says, never let the sun go down on your wrath. So, trying to talk or communicate about things that we were not really pleased with, because marriage is not something that is going to be without arguments or conflicts, but we have the tools, you know, given in scriptures and also, the counselor reiterated a lot of these things and reminded us that we have to utilize our biblical background as our foundation to have a good marriage.

Researcher 11:14

What are some of the exercises that your counselor guided you through? Also can you please describe them in details?

P1H 11:35

He thought us about forgiving each other when we have difficult times and how we can sit down and settle our differences. Some of the things I can't remember at this point

Researcher 11:54

are you able to elaborate on some of them or even give an example of one?

P1H 12:01

One, for example, in a relationship sometimes when you are a parent you might give a certain instruction and the child may go to the other parent, not letting the parent know you may have already told them no and that could create a conflict between the parents where our kids are concerned.

P1W 12:37

I'd say elaborating on those skills, being able to resolve conflicts is crucial. So, there are many times when we don't always agree on the same thing. But at the end of the day, we must come together, and somebody must take the lower chair, or the compromised button must be pushed at that point to be on one accord. I'm not always liking everything that my spouse would say. But at the end of the day, we must come together, and we must make some adjustments for the betterment of the relationship

Researcher 13:15

Of the skills to learn during your premarital counseling, do you apply any of these skills currently in your marriage. If so, can you describe how you apply these skills?

P1W 13:28

Okay, absolutely. So, trust is one thing that we view as important. If I don't trust my spouse, then that's the big void there. So of course, you know, if my husband tells me he's going to the supermarket, I trust that he's going to the supermarket and I shouldn't have to worry, I shouldn't have to question Oh, where's he? Did he go see somebody else? Or was he out there doing something that he has no business doing? One of the other skills are forgiveness. If my husband said an unkind word, you know, I must forgive him. Because at the end of the day, this journey is not always going to be a cakewalk. We're going to hurt feelings from time to time and you know, vice versa. I would expect that if I say an unkind word or do something that would cause him to be a little bit upset then of course, I must apologize and hope that he is going to forgive me. Commitment is another big one on this journey, this could be a big problem right there. You must be in it for the long haul in sickness or in health. If my husband gets sick, or if I get sick then somebody decides they're going to walk away because they can't handle the crisis. I personally put these skills at work, because of course they're the right things to keep this marriage going.

Researcher 14:53

Okay. And the skills learned during your pre-marital Counseling, what skills do

you not apply in your marriage? And can you describe why you don't utilize these skills?

P1W 15:10

I can't say there's any again, that I have not used that we were taught during our sessions. All our skills were aligned with our core biblical values. So, with my biblical worldview, of course, I use the scriptures as our foundation for a healthy relationship. First and foremost, I'm accountable to God and then to my husband. So, I cannot think of any skills that we had discussed that were not used.

Researcher 15:40

Okay. How do you define a well-functioning marriage?

P1H 15:51

We must trust each other. We are asked to forgive, and I will say we have been married now for 32 years. I think we have hit the bar where we meet that threshold. So, we trust each other as we are given the command.

Researcher 16:22

Okay. And I would say a well-functioning marriage doesn't mean that you're not going to encounter difficulties, hardships, or you're not going to have conflicts, but it's how you're able to deal with those as they come as you continue to build the relationship

Researcher 16:44

can you give me a specific example or a time when your marriage function well, according to your definition?

P1W 16:52

I would say 99% of the time, because the highlights that we've talked about. We execute those or we utilize those to keep our marriage well-functioning.

Researcher 17:10

And has there ever been a time in your marriage where your marriage didn't function in a manner like your definition?

P1W 17:19

Oh, wow. I'm not sure. Realistically, we enter this covenant knowing that there are going to be times when everything is not going to go like we want it to. There will be disagreements, there will be conflicts, we will have rough patches, you know, there'll be time when feelings are hurt. So I would say you know, according to the definition of well-functioning marriage, it is not limited to only good and happy times. With that been said I don't see where we would see there has to be at a time when our married did not function per our definition.

Researcher 18:07

And does this change your answer on how you would define a well-functioning marriage?

P1W 18:14

No, not at all. Absolutely not. It does not change it because again, like I said, we went into this marital bliss understanding that, well-functioning doesn't mean that you're not going to have issues. It's that you know how to deal with the problems as they come along. You can problem solve, and you can get back up that road to recovery. You know, making sure there's no animosity, there's forgiveness, distrust, and stuff like that. So absolutely. I wouldn't, you know, I wouldn't change my answer.

Researcher 18:56

Did premarital counseling contribute to your view of a well-functioning marriage?

P1H 19:04

No, not necessarily.

Researcher 19:08

Can you give like a little bit more information on that?

P1H 19:27

We have to agree to disagree. Communication again is a great tool in marriage to have it function well.

P1W 19:43

Okay, so the question that you asked was, whether premarital counseling, contribute to the view of well-functioning. I think the definition well functional; everyone would probably look at their relationship in different ways. One, maybe well-functioning for one person may not for the next. So again, if we go back to what was disclosed in those sessions, it seems like yes, it will give us all the tools to look at how a marriage function in the right way. Again, does every marriage function that way? Absolutely not. Can everyone say that they are utilizing all the tools for a well-functioning marriage? Maybe not. But again, I look at this that well-functioning marriage is viewed differently for different couples

Researcher 20:40

and how would how do you define marital satisfaction?

P1W 20:45

Okay, so I would say marital satisfaction this is not without its own share of issues, but you can deal with the issue, solve the problems, work out whatever kinks in the relation, and you both can agree and move forward.

Researcher 21:05

Can you give me a specific example or even a time when your marriage was happy according to your definition?

P1W 21:14

Okay, so I would say 99% of the time, I can align with my marriage being happy according to the definition that we gave, you know, I guess, happiness is within. We're not miserable with our lives. Again, because we based our relationship on the words of God, we use our biblical worldview as the foundation on which our marriage thrives. We look at it as being, satisfactory or being a happy marriage.

Researcher 22:00

Has there ever been a time in your marriage where your marriage didn't conform to your definition of happiness?

Unknown 22:11

Yes and No. I will say their times because we're human if we're going through struggles in our relationship, we may divert from the definition we gave earlier. There are many books out there on marriages, but it's not a one size fit all so there may be times when you become a little bit discouraged or despondent because maybe communication is not going well, or financial issues are not being resolved, or communication is not what you need it to be. So, we can look at those but those are just temporary hiccups, you know, they're not long-lasting stuff. You know, we still must set aside our feelings and work together. We can work it out and resolve the issue and become the persons that were meant to be in this relationship.

Researcher 23:13

Does this change your answer on how you would define a happy marriage?

P1H 23:20

Absolutely not, no changes in my answer.

Researcher 23:26

How would you define a successful marriage?

P1W 23:31

Okay, so, a successful marriage again this definition varies from person to person. For us we would look at the word successful. I would look at the longevity and the satisfaction that we have in our relationship. There are data that says 50% of most marriages ends in a divorce. I've had friends and family who have been married and they have had their relationship if we do. So, I would say that for us, we are having a successful marriage, not on our own, but because of the grace of God and him allowing us to make mistakes and to use our biblical foundation to clean these mess up whatever we have disagreements. We also use the words of God as our guide and talking to other people who are much more seasoned, or those who are older couples who have words of wisdom that can help to guide us along this journey.

P1H 24:55

According to what my wife was said we are enjoying a successful marriage

P1H 25:06

32 years marriage has its sweet moment. Mostly sweet moment but if I could put it that way. The fact that we must respect each other and abide by the guidelines under the laws of God as stated

Researcher 25:46

Can you give me a specific example or a time when your marriage was/is satisfying according to your definition?

P1H 26:04

I cannot give you a definition was not satisfying. I love my wife and I know she loved me as well. And we appreciate each other so despite whatever situation I appreciate her 100% and so I could not find any reason the state's not been satisfied.

P1W 26:34

Okay, and I would endorse the same sentiments my husband shared. Because we have a disagreement doesn't mean that we are not satisfied. Conflict Resolution is a part of any relationship whether it be marital or any relationship in general. So, there was not a specific time or example, when our marriage was, as a matter of fact, I think we switched the question around when it was or a satisfying, so it is always satisfying. Regardless of hiccups or little pitfalls that's in the road. It is always satisfying. Again, what our definition of satisfactory marriages is the longevity having good communication, being able to conflict resolution, being able to commit, being able to trust being able to forgive things of that nature. We package all of that and that for us is a satisfying marriage. So, we can say we are always having a satisfying marriage.

Researcher 27:44

Okay, and does the definition of your marital satisfaction changes depending on how satisfactory your marriage is?

P1W 27:57

Absolutely not. And it doesn't change our answer because we set out what we consider our marriage as satisfying means for us? Again, other people may look at satisfactory marriage as someone having lots of money. Happiness Is from within. Am I going to say we're never had bad times or there hasn't been a few moments when somebody's feelings maybe hurt, but it doesn't change our definition of what a satisfying marriage is.

Researcher 28:36

Could you describe what individual and collective skills you think are necessary to maintain marital satisfaction?

P1W 28:47

So I have disclosed some of those earlier. We can only speak for ourselves because everybody looks at marital satisfaction a bit different. There may be some common themes that comes up in this question for other couples, but for us collective skills that we think are necessary to maintain is communication. Secondly, is problem

solving. Thirdly is love and commitment. I would say many more like forgiveness and sexual faithfulness which is a big one. Many times you've heard of marriages that are not satisfying because one partner has gone out of that relationship and is involved either in another sexual relationship or an emotional relationship. Also, I want to make mention of these additional tools, faithfulness, patience and forgiveness, and humility. If we put all these things collectively together in a nutshell, it says what kind of marriage we are having, which is very satisfying.

P1H 30:02

I'm in total agreement, my wife said it best .

Researcher 30:07

Which of the skills that you named are possessed by each partner?

P1W 30:19

So I would say a little bit of each, we may not be 100% in all of them because some of these skills are still a work in progress. But I am a talker, I like to communicate, I understand that love and commitment is one of the big, biggest driving forces in any relationship.. If we don't love each other, then we're going to do things constantly to hurt each other. If we don't commit to each other, then what's the point of being together because commitment is not just two people living in a household. But I mean, we become one after we get married. It's no longer his stuff. It's our stuff. It's no longer his money. It's our money. It's no longer his house. It's our house. So most of the skills like I named earlier forgiveness. I'm not going to say forgiveness is not always easy. No, because sometimes we have our egos and when that it gets the better of us we have go back to what the words of God and remind ourselves that we should not let the sun go down on our wrath. The Bible tells us how we're supposed to govern ourselves as husband and wife we have a problem. I shouldn't go call my mother or my father and tell them about it. I should be able to communicate that with my husband. Let him know, hey, you something it really hurts my feeling. When we have a problem, we should be able to sit down together and work it out rather than getting everybody else into the mix of what's going on. In our household, of course there are times when maybe things are blown out of proportion. We may need another person just to listen and give us some wise counsel. I think that we are exhibiting a lot of these factors that is enabling us to go forward and to live out a successful or a happy marriage.

Researcher 32:16

How do you think communication factors into the marital satisfaction?

P1H 32:23

Communication is very important. I think we communicated a lot. I'm not talkative but if there's something to do with our marriage, we tried to communicate and resolve any issues if there's an issue, or even if there's not an issue to communicate.

P1W 32:49

I am quite the opposite of my husband, he's very quiet most of the times. I have

engage him in discussions and make him communicate because he's not very big in that and he's come a long way when it comes down to communication. So, ask him a lot of questions if he looks like he's not okay, I want to know that he's okay. And I know sometimes he probably does want to answer if he doesn't want me to know that he's not okay. But it is my responsibility to make sure he's okay if he's feeling sick that I need to know, and we can figure out our plan together. But you know, with communication sometimes it can be more productive if it's the right time and right place. For example, like on a given day, if I come home from work, and I'm overly stressed at work, I probably don't want to start communicating right away. I need to de stress a little bit. And then maybe later when I feel okay, I can really talk about my emotions, then that would be a better time so we kind of must know each other's love language too. To maintain good communicative skills, it's important to understand each other to avoid conflicts. Although conflicts are not always bad, because that open other channels for communication.

Researcher 34:05

How would you say premarital counseling contribute to your overall happiness of your marriage? And if you could please describe that in detail as well.

P1W 34:17

All right, so, like we said, premarital counseling. You know, most of the stuff that we were taught in counseling was stuff that we see happening in our family dynamics. So

Unknown 34:41

how would you say premarital counseling contribute to your overall happiness of your marriage?

P1W 34:46

Right. So, I was trying to say, I wouldn't say it contributed 100%. It reiterated a lot of the stuff that we were taught in our homes in our families. Again, some of the things that we were taught there were nothing new to us because we saw our parents model some of these things, the love the commitment, and forgiveness. Being born and raised in the church we were able to see couple demonstrating these behaviors. Those things were discussed and talk about openly, as far as how families, husband and wife should live. Again, we use the Bible as our foundation on which our marriage thrives. So, I wouldn't say it did reiterate or remind us that these are things that we need to really spend time for our marriage to thrive, but I don't want to say it contributed 100%. It did, serve as a reminder to some extent, but these were stuff that we already had seen. For examples of our parents and older couples that we were around were our role model.

P1H 36:05

That's so true. Literally, everything that she has said is spot on.

Researcher 36:12

Okay, final question here. How would you say premarital counseling contributed to your level of marital satisfaction?

P1W 36:23

So, again, our level of satisfaction has nothing to do with premarital counseling. It mainly having to do with us being level headed, using scriptures as our guide as a family, as a husband ,as the wives, understanding what the words of God dictates to us, how we should live, how we should communicate, how we should love. Like mentioned before, there are other people, couples that we align ourselves with that model these things. SoI wouldn't say that premarital counselor contributed to our level marital satisfaction.I would attribute our level of marital satisfaction to scriptures and the words of God.

P1H 37:19

Yes. As we go each day and getting more mature in our marriage that is also part of what helps us to sustain.

Researcher 37:39

I do want to thank you guys for having this interview with me about premarital counseling.I have learned a lot from you guys. AndI do just want to thank you guys for taking time out just to answer all the questions honestly and completely, giving examples and even go into further details about premarital counseling, how it helped you guys and how it guided your marriage, even before you got married. Do you guys have any questions? Thank you for anything.

P1W 38:14

No questions. Thank you for allowing us to be a part of this.

Researcher 38:21

Thank you, guys. Do you have a great day?

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Appendix L.

Codes and Axial Categories

Table 11

Codes and Axial Categories Used in This Study

Category	Code	Participants
Category 1. Premarital counseling was voluntary for some and mandatory for others	Mandatory	C4, C7, C9, C11, C13, C17
	Joint decision, voluntary	All couples except C9, C11, and C13
	Communication about counseling	C1-C4, C6, C7, C12, C15, C16, C17, C18
	Relationship challenges	C2, C10, C12, C14, C18, C19
	Other's mistakes	C1, C3
	Ensuring preparation for marriage	C5, C6, C14, C15, C16
	Kind, warm, friendly	C2, C4, C15
Category 2. Premarital counselors were knowledgeable, warm, and friendly	Clear, directive	C3, C5, C12
	Neutral, objective	C4, C5, C12, C16, C18
	Easy to talk to or relate to	C3, C5, C6, C10, C12, C15, C18
	Knowledgeable	C2, C7, C10, C11, C12, C14, C17, C19
	Inviting Environment	C10, C15, C17
Category 3. The participants had a positive experience in premarital counseling.	New perspective	C1, C7, C10, C14, C15, C17, C18
	Better prepared for marriage	C6, C12, C17, C18, C19
	Positive experience	C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6, C9, C10, C11, C13, C15, C16, C19
Category 4. The participants addressed areas of concern about marriage.	Communication	C3, C6, C9, C19
	Conflict resolution	C10, C17
	Improve or prevent challenges	C2, C9, C12, C15, C17, C19
	Roles and responsibilities	C3, C5, C9, C13
Category 5. The counselors allowed the couples to learn about each other	Finances	C12, C13
	Compare/Contrast exercises	C1, C5, C11, C14, C18
	Scenarios and role playing	C2, C3, C6, C15, C17
	Discussions	C7, C13, C16
	Facilitated conflict resolution	C2, C4, C15, C19
Category 6. Premarital counseling had a positive effect on the participants' marriages	Facilitated partnership	C2, C5
	Facilitated communication	C1, C2, C3, C5, C6, C16, C18
	Laid foundation for marriage	C6, C7, C13, C15
Category 7. Well-functioning marriages involve communication, partnership, respect and honesty.	Strengthened relationship	C5, C10, C11, C14, C18
	Good communication	C1-C6, C9, C14, C15, C16, C19
	Partnership	C1, C3, C5, C14, C17
	Mutual respect	C1, C6, C7, C11, C12, C13
Category 8. Marital success involves application of skills involved in a well-functioning marriage.	Honesty, loyalty	C2, C4, C11, C15, C16, C18
	Communication	C3, C4, C6, C11, C13, C14
	Partnership	C1, C2, C4, C5, C9, C10-C15, C17, C19
	Happiness	C6, C7, C10, C16

Category 9. Premarital counseling influenced marital functioning and success	Longevity	C1, C3, C5, C9, C15, C16, C18
	Facilitated communication	C4, C15
	Facilitated partnership	C7, C17, C18
	Impacted or enhanced marriage	C1, C5, C6, C9, C13, C15, C16, C19
Category 10. Marital satisfaction involves general happiness, partnership, stability and regard for small things.	Happiness	C2, C5, C6, C10, C13, C15, C17
	Remember the little things	C3, C6, C11
	Partnership	C1, C4, C5, C6, C9, C12, C13, C15
Category 11. Premarital counseling influences marital satisfaction through the development of skills.	Enhanced communication	C2, C3, C5–C7, C10–C13, C15–C18
	Enhanced conflict resolution skills	C1, C7, C15
	Provided tools for happiness	C1, C4, C14, C15, C16

Note. An illustration of all 11 axial categories developed during data analysis, codes aligning to each category, and participants involved in each code.

Appendix M.

Perceived Benefits of Premarital Counseling

Table 11

Participants' Perceived Benefits of Premarital Counseling

Couple	Benefit	Excerpt from interview
Couple 4 (C4-H)	Laid foundation for marriage	"There was nothing that we weren't aware of, but I think he has impacted it very much. He guided us with scriptures, and I think by doing so, it's impacted us very greatly."
Couple 4 (C4-W)	Laid foundation for marriage	"We utilize whatever he told us throughout the years that we've been married. So yes, it did leave a profound impact on our lives."
Couple 5 (C5-H)	Facilitated communication	"One thing he said about patience, that being patient is the principal thing in regard to relocation decisions. He also spoke about not rush it. because if we rush it, we're going to be frustrated, if it's not mapped out properly. We learned to be patient and communicate."
Couple 10 (C10-H)	Facilitated communication	"It made us open up to each other a lot more. And understand each other."
Couple 11 (C11-W)	Strengthened relationship	"I think it made me realize that I need to stop trying to the loving one or how I think he wants to do or how I want to be loved versus how it needs to be."
Couple 13 (C13-W)	Laid foundation for marriage	"It did impact, it laid the groundwork for us to weld a map for us to follow. From her perspective what we knew was a successful marriage, which lasted for over umpteen years, and she used that as a blueprint and had access to even outside of our own comfort zone. Just try to follow the steps of what success is like hers."
Couple 15 (C15-W)	Laid foundation for marriage	"Premarital counseling, is the roadmap to a healthy marriage, basically to boost the strength we already have and to provide tools to be used in the areas of weaknesses."
Couple 15 (C15-W)	Facilitated communication; facilitated conflict resolution	"We wanted to have somebody who could guide us, somebody who could tell us about how we ought to handle situation, how we should communicate, how we should continue to love, how we should continue to be respectful, how we should try to resolve our conflicts when they arise before it turns into something bigger than just a conflict. So, he has impacted, you know, our marriage in the way of the things that he has taught us in counseling."
Couple 16 (C16-W)	Strengthened relationship	"I think it impacted our marriage positively. I think we were already pretty confident in our relationship, but after the counseling, we felt more solid. It felt like [we were] going into marriage on a very clean slate. We really understood each other."
Couple 17 (C17-W)	Facilitated conflict resolution	"There's quite a bit that I think help sort of to navigate marriage."

Couple 18 (C18-W)	Facilitated communication	“I think that it impacted our merge a whole lot of ways in this is the first one. Communication was a big key we had. We did not know how to communicate with each other, and the deacon and the First Lady of the church gave us multiple tools, directions, and a better understanding of how communication works.”
Couple 18 (C18-W)	Strengthened relationship	“it made us both secure in the marriage. So, when we got married, we were very secure on what should and should not happen in the marriage.”
Couple 19 (C19-H)	Facilitated conflict resolution	“It was a positive impact. Because like I said, once we got down to the core, she helped us with our problems. We still have disagreements, and we still argue sometimes, but to a lesser extent.”

Note. This table illustrates that the perceived benefits of premarital counseling include it lays foundation of marriage, facilitates communication, strengthens relationships, and facilitates conflict resolution.