

PREMARITAL RISK VARIABLES

A Statewide Study of Premarital Risk Variables: Implications for Educators and Therapists

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Abstract

This article reports the results of a statewide study to assess the presence and magnitude of selected precursor predictor variables in premarital couples to assist in the process of developing a premarital assessment instrument. The Sound Marital House Theory (SMH), developed by Dr. John Gottman, is the theoretical framework guiding the study. The theory grew out of a number of longitudinal, multi-method research projects over three decades. Using rigorous scientific methods, Gottman and his colleagues produced a scale of precursor events and identified a specific trajectory toward marital dissolution. A survey to assess behaviors, perceptions, and physiology of premarital couples was developed and administered statewide during a specific month. The data obtained from premarital couples reveal that relationship risk variables are present in sufficient magnitudes at the time of marriage to warrant continued efforts to construct a premarital assessment instrument as a basis for education and counseling.

We thank Senator Tom Rossin and Representative Elaine Bloom for their vision in sponsoring the Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act in the Florida legislature. We also thank Dr. John Gottman and Dr. David Olson for their gracious help in the initial construction of the premarital instrument used in the study, and Dr. Ann Mullis for her generous and insightful feedback on earlier drafts.

Introduction

Divorce is costly. There are economic costs and emotional costs. Children as well as adults are victims of these costs. It is estimated that divorce in a large state like Florida involves 50,000 to 60,000 minor children annually (55,124 in 1998) {Florida Vital Statistics Annual Report, 1998}. Researchers have identified a variety of negative outcomes for children of divorce including conduct disorders (Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1993) and the internalization of problems (Houseknecht & Sastry, 1996; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1998). Divorce seems to have led to a generation of children being at risk for poverty, alienation, and anti-social behavior. Children who experience the stress of a parental divorce, according to a 50-year longitudinal study, have their life expectancy shortened by an average of four years (Fincham, et al., 1993).

For adults the costs can produce different but no less negative outcomes. Fifty years of research has convincingly demonstrated that marital distress and dissolution have powerful negative consequences for adults (e.g., Kitson & Morgan, 1990). Researchers have linked marital distress and/or dissolution to a significant number of mental and physical health problems and difficulties (Cherlin & Furstenburg, 1994; Coie, et al., 1993; Fincham et al., 1993), impaired parent-child relationships (Erel & Burman, 1995), decreased work productivity (Forthofer, Markman, Cox, Stanley, & Kessler, 1996), and poverty (Houseknecht & Sastry, 1996). Marital distress can lead to depression and reduces immune system functioning in adults (Emery, 1982; Gottman & Katz, 1989), and adults who experience divorce more than double their risk of early mortality (Cherlin, 1992).

The cost of divorce is not limited to individuals, children, and families. There is a cost to society. To illustrate, in 1999, at the outset of The Marriage Preparation and Preservation Research Project, we engaged in an informal calculation of the cost to the State of Florida of just one aspect of divorce. There were, in that year, 145,000 marriages and 78,416 divorces (Florida Vital Statistics Annual Report, 1999). We assumed that at least one child was involved in each divorce, assumed that

divorce often results in poverty, and assumed that in that year, 4,000 new families entered poverty. These are conservative estimates, yet, in this case, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments alone would be a staggering \$13,406,880.00 for just the new entrants into poverty. These payments are only a small part of the financial burden to the larger system (including taxpayers, state agencies, and social services). The enormity of these problems has gained the interest of researchers, educators, clergy, policy makers, and other elected officials.

As a result of increasing concerns about the magnitude and potential negative impact of divorce on families, and particularly on children, many states have introduced divorce prevention and marriage promotion legislation. For example, some legislation requires the consent of both spouses for most divorces, increases the waiting period for obtaining a marriage license or divorce, provides for covenant marriages, and/or encourages premarital education and counseling.

In 1998 the Florida Legislature enacted the Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act (effective, January 1999). Florida became the first state to endorse the education of its citizens with regard to marriage and created a national model for policymakers struggling to find strategies to cope with the high divorce rate. This landmark legislation marked Florida's commitment to strengthening families and improving the welfare of children.

The statute specifically called for The Center for Marriage and Family at Florida State University to: a) review the pre-marriage education courses currently being offered in Florida to determine their effectiveness; b) design and implement a pilot study testing the effectiveness of a research-based curriculum; and c) design a research-based premarital curriculum to serve as a suggested standard for providers - a course of no less than four hours focusing on relationship social skills (behaviors). The statute also provided for a statewide study to assess precursor predictor variables in premarital couples.

The research team assembled for this project included members of the Florida Inter-University Consortium for Child, Family, and Community Studies, a consortium comprised of seven public and private universities in Florida. This allowed statewide collaboration and access to a broad range of expertise and support. It is this statewide assessment that is the focus of this article.

The aims of this article are to present the design and results of the initial statewide survey of pre-marital couples. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Statewide Survey

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine specific precursor risk variables before marriage that serve as predictors of marital outcomes. Specifically, the process for developing a survey to provide a profile of the skill-level of premarital couples to assist in designing educational programs and personalizing premarital counseling was begun. The proximal aims of the pre-marital survey were to assess: 1) selected demographic variables; 2) the balance between positivity and negativity in premarital couples; 3) the status (i.e., presence and magnitude) of the couples on selected precursor variables; and, 4) the status (i.e., presence and magnitude) of the couples on several other risk variables identified in previous research (e.g., approval of parents and friends, violence and abuse [Booth & Johnson, 1988]).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework chosen to guide the design was The Sound Marital House Theory developed by Dr. John Gottman at the University of Washington. The theory grew out of a number of longitudinal, multi-method research projects over three decades. These projects were guided by the assumption that if it is known how couples “normally go about the business of being married, staying married, and doing so happily, then we will discover a set of principles that could be used to help marriages that are ailing” (Gottman, 1998. p.17). A set of principles was indeed developed and, in turn,

these principles were incorporated into The Sound Marital House Theory, which is a synthesis of behavior, cognition, and physiology.

Using rigorous scientific methods, Gottman and his colleagues produced a scale of precursor events and identified a specific trajectory (cascade/stage) toward marital dissolution (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). The scale is both *dynamic and causal*. Couples who divorce remain unhappily married for a time, seriously consider dissolution, and finally separate and then divorce. This process, “cascade toward divorce,” is drawn from a core triad balance theory of marriage. The theory is based on the interaction of three interrelated domains of variables (perceptual, behavioral, and physiological) each of which has the potential for balance. Gottman’s analysis of their data shows that in each of these domains, the ratio between positive and negative interaction is the best discriminator, leading to the conclusion that successful marriage depends on a balance between positive and negative interaction both in conflict and in day-to-day interaction. The preferred ratio is at least five positives to one negative.

A unique feature of Gottman’s research was an emphasis on both “what works” and “what doesn’t work.” The importance of this emphasis can hardly be overestimated. Up until this time, researchers and educators alike had focused only on eliminating negative behaviors in communication and problem solving training. It now became clear that the balance of positive and negative interactions was crucial and that some negative behaviors had more deleterious impact than others did. Concurrently, Gottman emphasized the previously unrecognized need to increase markedly the positive interaction. Table 1 presents behaviors that work and do not work in marriage.

Table 1

Behavior that Work and Don't Work in Marriage

Behaviors that work in marriage

Friendship

Softened Startup (especially wives)

Accepting Influence vs. Escalation (especially husbands)

Effective Repair Attempts

De-escalation of Negativity – daily and during conflict

Physiological Soothing

Behaviors that don't work in marriage

The Four Horsemen of Apocalypse

Flooding / especially chronic flooding

Harsh Startup (especially wives)

Failure to Accept Influence (especially husbands)

Failed Repair Attempts

Negative Sentiment Override¹ / more negativity than positivity*Note.* Adapted from Gottman, 1994, Gottman, 1999.*Instrument Development*

A survey to assess behaviors, perceptions, and physiology of premarital couples based on The Sound Marital House Theory was developed. The survey instrument was constructed with two sections: Section I - Relationship Information and Section II - Biographical Information. The surveys were in the form of a booklet. The booklets could be separated with one page given to the wife-to-be and one page to the husband-to-be. The surveys were blind coded in order to match couples anonymously.

Given the fact that at the time of marriage it is probable that couples have a solid balance of positive to negative interactions, at least 5:1 (i.e., a strong friendship), items were selected that could potentially measure precursor predictor variables. Therefore, based on the theoretical formulations, the following constructs were selected: *flooding*,² *repair attempts*,³ *distance and isolation*,⁴ *turning toward*,⁵ *gridlock*,⁶ *love maps*,⁷ *harsh startup*,⁸ *the Four Horsemen*,⁹ *compromise*,¹⁰ *fondness and admiration*,¹¹ and *accepting influence*.¹² Gottman defines each of these in straightforward language and provides a series of self-report, true/false questionnaires to measure these constructs. These items had four response choices: “Very much,” “Mostly,” “Somewhat,” and “Not at all.” Some items required reverse scoring.

Gottman’s forced choice, self-report questionnaires provided a measure of content and face validity and a pool of 146 items from which to select. He notes that the self-report questionnaires he designed have had psychometric assessment (Gottman, 1999, p.118); however, we did not have access to those data. For a more detailed description of these concepts and the questionnaires, readers are referred to *The Marriage Clinic* (Gottman, 1999, p. 118-119).

In total, 50 items were selected for the final questionnaire. SPSS 10.1 was used to analyze the data. The statistical analysis of these items suggests high reliability (coefficient $\alpha = .90$). These results indicate that responses can be interpreted with confidence. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the items included in the survey.

In addition to items taken from Gottman's questionnaires, several items were included to assess other variables of interest: 4 items on addiction and/or abuse, 1 item on parental happiness, 1 item on friends’ support of marriage, and 1 item on family support of marriage. These items assess factors that have been demonstrated to be associated with success or failure of marital relationships (Booth & Johnson, 1988). There were two qualitative items included to obtain information about what was good about the couple’s courtship relationship and what was going to be the most difficult thing for them to

do after marriage. “What is the best thing that you do in your relationship?” “What will be the toughest thing for you and your partner to do to make your relationship successful?”

A final item was included from the work of Fowers and Olson who developed the PREPARE instrument (1986). This instrument was designed to measure the degree of agreement on constructs in 11 different areas: marital expectations, personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual expectations, children/parenting, family and friends, role relationships and spiritual beliefs. This item read, “The following items represent areas that couples may disagree about. Please read each one carefully and select the answer that best indicates the EXTENT TO WHICH YOU AND YOUR PARTNER DISAGREE OR AGREE.”

Table 2

Survey Items by Source and Skill

Source	Skill and Item Numbers on Survey					
	Repair Attempt	Harsh Startup	Accepting Influence	Distance & Isolation	Turn Toward	Fondness & Admiration
Gottman	2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 25, 39, 41, 44	4, 14, 15, 29, 38, 40	5, 12, 13, 30	9	17, 28, 36	20, 21, 24, 47, 49
Other	35		45			

Source	Skill and Item Numbers on Survey				
	Gridlock	Flooding	Maps	General	Addiction
Gottman	22	34, 43			
Other	27	8, 18, 19, 23, 26, 33, 37	11	1, 16, 31, 46	32, 42, 48, 50

Procedure

The statewide survey was conducted through the 67 clerks of the county circuit courts at the time of purchases of marriage licenses. There is one circuit court in each of Florida's counties.

The clerks of the 67 county circuit courts were notified that a statewide survey of couples was to be administered. Instructions for administration and collection of the surveys were mailed to the clerks. A telephone call followed to answer any questions and provide clarification. Each clerk received the approximate number of marriage surveys that were needed based on the previous year data on the number of marriages in each county for the month selected.

Couples completed surveys anonymously and voluntarily. The respondents were instructed to complete the survey independently, put it in the envelope, seal it and return it to the clerk who mailed it to the Center for Marriage & Family.

Results

A total of 3,352 surveys were returned. Of these, 3092 were couples (1,546 paired surveys) and 260 were individual responders. Data analyses focused on the paired data. The sample in this study is self-selected and voluntary. Because of some methodological unknowns, e.g., consistency with which the survey was introduced in the counties; the findings must be interpreted with caution.

The Sample

Males in the sample ranged in age from 18 to 78 years; females from 17 to 78 years. Seventy-five percent of the respondents claimed they had excellent physical and emotional health. The breakdown of the ethnic groups is as follows: 73% White, 12% African American, 7% Hispanic and 8% other. According to the U.S. Census 2000 Redistricting Data, the ethnic distribution for the State of Florida was 65.4% White, 14.2% African American, 16.8% Hispanic or Latino, and 2.1% other. With the exception of the Hispanic/Latino groups, the sample is a close representation of the Florida

population. The difference within the Hispanic/Latino group may be due to the fact that the “Hispanic”/”Latino” categories was not sufficiently precise for some respondents.

Approximately 36% of the respondents did not attend premarital counseling before marriage; however roughly 50% reported reading a book on marriage and finding it valuable.

Nearly 72% of the respondents had been living with their partner before their marriage, varying in duration from less than a year to four years or more. Forty-one percent of the respondents had been divorced at least once; and 46% had children from a previous relationship. This percentage translates into at least 1,500 children affected by divorce in our modest sample size of 3092.

Thirty-nine percent of the couples knew each other for at least 4 years prior to their marriage and 27% had known their partner for less than a year. Sixty-one percent grew up in a two-parent household, 19% in single parent households, and 16% in blended families; the rest lived in adoptive or foster families or with relatives. Individual incomes ranged from \$0-10,000 to \$150,000 and above, with the median income in the class interval \$20,000 to 30,000.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed to determine whether precursor predictor variables were present at the time of marriage and, if present, to determine their magnitude. Analysis of the paired data began with the first two relationship items on the survey. These items assessed relationship happiness by the following questions: 1) “On a scale from one (very happy) to ten (very unhappy) please indicate the level of happiness you usually feel in your current relationship;” and 2) “Considering your answer to the above question, what percentage of time do you feel you are at that level of happiness” (on a scale from 10% to 100% in increments of 10). As might be expected, 96% of both men and women reported that they were happy or very happy in their current relationship. Eighty percent reported that they were at that level of happiness most of the time.

Overall, it is clear that these premarital couples report being happy and that the balance of positivity and negativity in their current relationship is probably well above 5:1. It would be easy to label this “romantic idealism” and many people do. Yet, evidence of “reality” is present in a number of ways. First of all, the qualitative question “What will be the toughest thing for you and your partner to do to make your marriage successful?” revealed thoughtful concern about significant aspects of couple relationships. “Learning to solve disagreements without bad conflict.” “To make sure that we listen to each other and make decisions together.” “Spend time together without the children.” “Keep a focus on why we got married in the first place.”

The intent of these two items was to assess relationship happiness not global happiness. It is not known, however, how the respondents interpreted the question. Yet, the responses do suggest that couples are not completely as unrealistic and idealistic about their relationship as is often believed. It must be remembered that for 41% of these couples it is a second (or third) marriage and it might be expected that these couples would be more in touch with the “realities” of married life.

In the analyses of the paired relationship data, chi-square was used to determine if there were significant differences between men and women in their responses to the 50 relationship items in the survey. Table 3 shows the results of the 27 different significant comparisons made using χ^2 . The behaviors are labeled in Table 3 according to the constructs used to select the items. Preliminary factor analyses are in progress.

Table 3

Cross Tabulation – Significant Differences in Responses Between Males and Females

Label	Question # - Item description	Pearson		# of	
		Chi-Square	df	valid cases	Significance (2-tailed)
General Items	1. My parents had a happy marriage	20.261	3	2844	.000

	31. My friends support this marriage	12.515	3	2832	.006
	4. My partner will at times complain about me in a smug or superior way	23.099	3	2829	.000
Startup	14. My partner is often very critical of me	62.537	3	2840	.000
	29. Arguments seem to come out of nowhere	11.362	3	2841	.010
	40. My partner's feelings are too easily hurt	144.222	3	2859	.000
Accepting Influence	5. My opinion is unimportant in our decisions	9.092	3	2787	.028
	12. My partner is too emotional	218.614	3	2859	.000
	6. When I apologize, my partner accepts it	33.913	3	2841	.000
Repair Attempt	7. I am good at calming myself down	71.937	3	2830	.000
	35. Even when there are big disagreements between us we can discuss them	8.369	3	2855	.039
	44. My partner initiates kissing and making up	27.022	3	2831	.000
Flooding	8. My heart races when my partner and I argue	37.935	3	2834	.000
	18. My partner makes small issues into big ones	71.155	3	2840	.000
	19. I want to scream when my partner and I are arguing	47.933	3	2841	.000
	26. My stomach hurts when we argue	34.511	3	2840	.000
	33. I "see red" when we are arguing	13.513	3	2850	.004
	34. My partner yells unnecessarily	19.428	3	2851	.000

	37. I feel like exploding when we argue	19.015	3	2846	.000
	43. My partner has a long list of unreasonable demands	16.148	3	2851	.001
Love Map	11. I know my partner's good side and bad side	24.657	3	2845	.000
Turning Toward	17. We have a lot to say to each other	15.211	3	2834	.002
Abuse/Addiction	32. More than one person has suggested I might have a drinking problem	34.380	3	2870	.000
	42. My partner threatens me physically	9.282	3	2861	.026
	48. My partner sometimes hits (slaps) me when in an argument	29.165	3	2856	.000
	50. My partner has a drinking problem	19.763	3	2871	.000
Areas of Disagreement	11. Ways of dealing with in-laws	17.976	5	2846	.003

Chi square analysis reveals significant differences between men and women on 26 items (See Table 3). These differences are not large and significance may be an artifact of the size of the sample, but the obtained differences between men and women support Gottman's research on couple interactions. Men and women behave differently in marital relationships. For example, women have a difficult time bringing up issues with a *softened startup* and men face a similar challenge since they tend to walk away from the issue at hand (*stonewall*) in response to flooding.

It is, of course, not surprising that men and women behave differently in marriage – or that these differences offer the potential for marital difficulties. What is interesting, however, is that some of these differences appear in variables that research has identified as important in marital distress.

The number of men and women who reported happy parental marriages and parental support for their marriage were addressed with the items “My parents had a happy marriage.” and “My family supports this marriage.” These two items are drawn from the literature suggesting that growing up in a household where the parent’s marriage was happy tends to be a predictor of satisfaction in the marriage of the children (Glenn & Kramer, 1987; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988).

The presence of a happy parental marriage was true for about two-thirds of both men and women. Yet, a third of the respondents noted that their parents were, at best, only somewhat happy. Family support of the marriage falls in the same category and about 92% reported that their families supported the marriage. Family support appears to be a protective variable in this sample.

In order to determine the magnitude of those behaviors that research has demonstrated to be integral to the processes that are destructive to both the durability and satisfaction in marriage, we calculated the percentages of men and women reporting the presence (or absence) of these behaviors.

For some couple similarities may also pose risks. For example, responses to items such as, “I cannot admit when I am wrong,” (Item 2 - 881 men and 952 women); “I have to deny accusations leveled at me,” (Item 15 – 494 men and 451 women) suggest that a gridlock could easily be the negative outcome of escalating couple conflict. Criticism is toxic and approximately one third of men and women claim they have to deny accusations leveled against them. “I feel dissatisfied and bored a good part of the time” reflects emotional distance and is part of the Distance and Isolation Cascade. According to Gottman, the fundamental dysfunctional unit in distress marriages is the Turning Toward unit. Only 233 men and 249 women reported they had a lot of fun together in everyday life.

Flooding. Diffuse physiological arousal, or flooding, reduces the ability to process information and creates reliance on over-learned behaviors. In other words, couples when flooded often fall back on previously over learned behaviors (such as The Four Horsemen) that can lead to distress and, perhaps ultimately, to dissolution.

Many of the respondents recognized the physiological aspects of flooding. Flooding, key to the regulation of conflict, may be the initial propellant in behaviors that lead to dissolution or divorce. Even though men and women recognize the symptoms of flooding, they may or may not understand its significance or its negative role in interaction. Item 8 “My heart races when my partner and I argue,” (men - 926; women - 1057) is particularly instructive. An increase in heart rate is the initial signal that flooding occurs – the magnitude of the respondents noting this phenomenon suggests that flooding is common for couples. Table 4 presents the flooding items and the number of males and females that reported its presence.

Table 4

Number of Men and Women who Reported Presence of “Flooding” in Themselves or in Their Partners

Item No:	Description (Flooding)	# of		Valid Cases
		Males (%)	Females (%)	
8.	My heart races when my partner and I argue	926 (66.5)	1057 (73.3)	2834
18.	My partner makes small issues into big ones	732 (52.4)	549 (38)	2840
19.	I want to scream when my partner and I are arguing	474 (34.2)	681 (46.8)	2841
26.	My stomach hurts when we argue	479 (34.4)	654 (45.2)	2840
33.	I see “red” when we are arguing	153 (11)	223 (15.3)	2850
34.	My partner yells unnecessarily	304 (21.8)	227 (15.6)	2851
37.	I feel like exploding when we argue	350 (25.2)	472 (32.4)	2846

Gridlock. Gridlock occurs when a couple is locked into the attack/defend or emotionally disengaged mode of negative conflict. As noted in Table 5, approximately one quarter to one third of the respondents reported some tendency toward gridlock present in their relationships.

Table 5

Number of Men and Women who Reported Presence of “Gridlock” in Their Relationship

# of				
Item	Description	Males	Females	Valid
No:	(Gridlock)	(%)	(%)	Cases
22.	We hurt each other when discussing problems	433	419	2865
		(31)	(28.6)	
23.	Our discussions are too heated	380	376	2855
		(27.2)	(25.8)	
27.	My partner acts too stubborn	765	808	2838
		(55.2)	(55.7)	

Repair. Repair attempts occur when one or both partners make efforts to avoid escalation in conflict. For example, calming oneself often derails escalation.

Table 6

Number of Men and Women who Reported Absence of “Repair” in Themselves or in Their Partners

# of				
Item	Description	Males	Females	Valid
No:	(Repair)	(%)	(%)	Cases
3.	We are good listeners even when we have different positions on issues	813	834	2818
		(59)	(57.9)	
6.	When I apologize, it gets accepted by my partner	415	298	2841
		(29.9)	(20.5)	
7.	I am good at calming myself down	706	956	2830

		(51)	(66.2)	
10.	If things get heated we can pull out of it and change things	720	693	2820
		(52.1)	(48.2)	
30.	I communicate respect even during our big disagreements	685	708	2830
		(49.5)	(48.9)	
35.	Even when there are big disagreements between us we can discuss them	464	415	2855
		(33.2)	(28.5)	
39.	Even when arguing we can maintain a sense of humor	885	888	2837
		(63.7)	(61.3)	
41.	We can be affectionate even when arguing	990	1031	2831
		(71.5)	(71.3)	

Accepting Influence. The regulation of conflict depends heavily on each partner accepting influence from the other. It is more important, and less likely to be evident, for men to accept influence from women (Gottman, 1999). Table 7 presents the items that address accepting influence and the number of men and women who reported the absence of this concept in themselves or in their partners.

Table 7

Number of Men and Women who Reported Absence of “Accepting Influence” in Themselves or in Their Partners

Item No:	Description (Accepting Influence)	# of		
		Males (%)	Females (%)	Valid Cases
5.	My opinion is unimportant in our decisions	299 (21.9)	263 (18.5)	2787
12.	My partner is too emotional	986 (70.4)	647 (44.3)	2859

13.	I listen respectfully even when I disagree	821	878	2842
		(58.8)	(59.3)	

Startup. The way that a disagreement starts influences the outcome. Harsh startups frequently lead to negative affect reciprocity. Harsh startups appear to be frequent – occurring in between 30% and 65% of couples. Particularly noteworthy is that 65% (911) reported that their partner’s feelings are too easily hurt. Table 8 presents the items that address startup and the number of men and women who reported the presence of this concept in themselves or in their partners.

Table 8

Number of Men and Women who Reported Presence of “Harsh Startup” in Themselves or in Their Partners

Item	Description	Males	Females	# of Valid Cases
No:	(Start Up)	(%)	(%)	
4.	My partner will complain about me in a smug or superior way	521 (37.6)	330 (29.8)	2829
14.	My partner is often very critical of me	578 (41.5)	404 (27.9)	2840
29.	Arguments seem to come out of nowhere	453 (32.5)	391 (27)	2841
38.	Before I know it we are in a fight	214 (15.3)	203 (14)	2850
40.	My partner’s feelings are too easily hurt	911 (65)	641 (44)	2859

Fondness and Admiration. Reported in Table 9 are those respondents who reported the presence of fondness and admiration. Item 45, for instance, “My partner listens with interest to something I tell,” is positive and nearly 40% of both men and women claimed this to be true. This means, though, that for 60% of both men and women, this is not true. Of interest is the fact that only 221 women and 262 men reported that their partner was glad to see them when they came into the room.

Table 9

Number of Men and Women who Reported Absence of “Fondness & Admiration” in Their Relationship

Item	Description			# of
		Males	Females	Valid
No:	(Fondness & Admiration)	(%)	(%)	Cases
17.	We have a lot to say to each other	456	399	2834
		(32.9)	(27.5)	
45.	My partner listens with interest to something I tell	551	556	2845
		(39.6)	(38.2)	
49.	When I come into the room my partner is glad to see me	262	221	2864
		(18.7)	(15.1)	

Summary and Implications

The aim of this statewide study was to assess the status of couples’ relationship on selected predictive precursor variables to utilize the information in designing a research- and skills-based premarital curriculum. Although, as noted above, the results must be interpreted with caution, the data obtained provide valuable information to guide the planning and implementation of a premarital curriculum and the development of a psychometrically sound instrument.

What we may be seeing here is the statistics being played out even before marriage. The divorce rate still hovers around 50% and the data obtained from premarital couples reveal that

relationship risk variables are alive and well at the time of marriage. This is true in spite of the fact that couples report themselves to be happy or very happy in their relationships. It is not surprising that 50% of marriages end in divorce.

Forty-one percent of the respondents in this survey had been divorced at least once, and 46% had children from previous marriages. It is well documented that second marriages and stepfamilies are more fragile than first marriages (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Martin & Bumpass, 1989). Well documented, also, is the fact that both adults and children suffer deleterious effects from divorce (Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Kurtz, 1994).

Seventy-two percent of the respondents had been living with their partner before marriage. Research suggests that these couples may be more likely to divorce than couples that do not live together prior to marriage (Seltzer, 2000).

Yet, 64% of the respondents had attended premarital counseling though the majority for not more than a month. This suggests that the premarital counseling may have been mandated by their religious denomination and may not reflect any personal desire to invest in their marriages. However, 50% of the respondents had read a book on marriage and reported that it was valuable. Taken together these facts could reflect an interest in learning about marriage and working to promote their own marriage.

Behaviors that “don’t work,” such as The Four Horsemen of Apocalypse, flooding, harsh startup, failure to accept influence, and failed repair attempts were all noted as present in this sample. Each was present in magnitudes varying from one quarter to three-fourths of the respondents. When this is considered in the context of second (or third) marriages, stepfamilies, living together before marriage, it seems apparent that this sample might well be labeled as “high risk.”

We cannot claim that this sample is representative of anybody except themselves. However, it might be concluded that the evidence is strong that these couples could benefit from a curriculum that

emphasized these research- and skills-based behaviors. We don't know from these findings the specific profile of any couple, although we can surmise, that couples have different constellations of variables – both risk and protective. Clearly it would be useful to have an instrument that would provide educators and clinicians with couple profiles to design specific interventions. Data from this study would be useful in pursuing that goal.

Footnotes

¹ Negative Sentiment Override – negative set point – perceives everything as negative – “chip on your shoulder” behavior. Positive Sentiment Override – having such warm, loving, and positive feelings about your partner that you strongly tend to overlook his or her less than charming behaviors.

² Flooding – your body’s alarm system – the virtual tidal wave of emotions that accompany distress.

³ Repair Attempts – efforts to de-escalate negative interaction.

⁴ Distance and Isolation Cascade – flooding, regarding problems as severe, better to work out alone, leading parallel lives, feeling lonely and isolated, and finally divorcing.

⁵ Turning Toward – being mindful and responding with interest and enthusiasm to your partner’s bids for emotional connection.

⁶ Gridlock – stalemate – each partner sticks to his/her position.

⁷ Love Maps – being intimately familiar with your partner’s world; the part of your brain where you store all the relevant information about your partner’s life.

⁸ Harsh Startup – starting an interaction with negative or accusatory statements.

⁹ Four Horsemen of Apocalypse – criticism – a complaint that suggests that there is something defective in the partner’s personality; antidote – make complaint specific and immediate; defensiveness – defending one’s own innocence and warding off a perceived attack with a counterattack; antidote – accepting responsibility for even part of the problem; contempt – any act that puts you on a higher plane than your partner; antidote – create in the relationship a culture of appreciation instead of a culture of criticism and abuse; stonewalling – the listener’s withdrawal from the interaction; antidote – self-soothing, calming down, and staying connected in the interaction.

¹⁰ Compromise – focusing on areas of flexibility rather than the areas of inflexibility.

¹¹ Fondness and Admiration – the antidote for contempt; lots of expressions of love and appreciation on a daily basis.

¹² Accepting Influence – yielding to those parts of your partner’s point of view and argument that seem reasonable to you.

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