

SOLUTION-FOCUSED PREMARITAL COUNSELING: HELPING COUPLES BUILD A VISION FOR THEIR MARRIAGE

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Abstract:

This article outlines a solution-focused approach to premarital counseling. Solution-focused premarital counseling is a strength-based approach that focuses on a couple's resources to develop a shared vision for the marriage. Background information about premarital counseling and solution-focused therapy provide the framework for the development of intervention strategies that are grounded in the solution-focused approach. Solution-oriented interventions include solution-oriented questions, providing feedback, and the Couple's Resource Map, an original intervention that is described in this article.

Article:

Numerous empirical studies have examined the effectiveness of premarital counseling (Carroll & Dougherty, 2003), and several manuals exist to guide practitioners in facilitating programs (e.g., Douglas, Ferrer, Humphries, Peacock, & Taylor, 2001). Although the research and practice of premarital counseling have been established, further attention to theoretical frameworks to guide premarital counseling is needed (Silliman & Schumm, 2000). In general, theoretical grounding provides a "framework for action" (May, 2001, p. 37), and theory helps to guide research and organize existing practical information (Rogers, 2001). Thus, increased theoretical support can enhance standards of practice and research in premarital counseling. We propose the solution-focused approach as a useful theory to inform the practice of premarital counseling. The solution-focused approach aims to help clients build solutions that will produce a more positive quality of life (DeJong & Berg, 1998; O'Connell, 1998). In premarital counseling, solution-focused interventions aim to help couples build stable, satisfying marriages. The purpose of this article is (a) to outline a solution-oriented theoretical framework for conducting premarital counseling, (b) to provide specific premarital counseling interventions based on a solution-focused framework, and (c) to explore the benefits and limitations of using a solution-focused approach in premarital counseling. Prior to outlining the solution-focused framework for premarital counseling, we describe premarital counseling and provide background information about the theoretical assumptions of solution-focused therapy (SFT).

PREMARITAL COUNSELING

Premarital counseling and/or education is a therapeutic couple intervention that occurs with couples who plans to marry. Premarital education is "a skills training procedure which aims at providing couples with information on ways to improve their relationship once they are married" (Senediak, 1990, p. 26). Typically, couples who participate in premarital counseling demonstrate overall positive psychological health (Stahmann, 2000) and do not have serious relationship problems (Senediak, 1990). Premarital counseling occurs in a wide range of settings and is provided by practitioners from a number of different professions (e.g., clergy, professional and lay counselors, community agency workers; Stahmann & Hiebert, 1997). Premarital counseling is a brief intervention, with programs averaging about 4 hours of contact time with each couple (Silliman & Schumm,

1999). Premarital interventions include counseling and education, and we use these terms interchangeably throughout this paper.

Early intervention with couples is beneficial because the risk of divorce is highest in the early years of marriage (Kreider & Fields, 2001). As Hoopes and Fisher (1984) explain, couples receive no formal training for marriage and family life. As such, interdisciplinary premarital educational and counseling programs that help to facilitate change prepare couples for an aspect of family life about which they may have limited knowledge and experience. The goals of premarital counseling generally include the following; (a) To teach couples information about married life, (b) to enhance couple communication skills, (c) to encourage couples to develop conflict resolution skills, and (d) to allow the couple to speak about certain sensitive topics, such as sex and money (Senediak, 1990; Stahmann & Hiebert, 1997). Overall, Stahmann and Hiebert (1,980) report that "the goal of premarital counseling is to enhance the premarital relationship so that it might develop into a satisfactory and stable marital relationship" (p. 11).

In general, there is a lack of theoretical support for premarital education (Senediak, 1990, and programs are often not grounded in a single theory (Silliman & Schumm, 2000). However, some premarital counseling programs are based on multiple theoretical frameworks, such as family systems theory (Gihnour, 1995; Silliman & Schumm, 2000; Stahmann, 2000), Adlerian theory (Bishop, 1993), and cognitive—behavioral theories (Silliman & Schumm, 2000), and some incorporate influences from both psychology and religion (Silliman & Schumm, 2000). In this article, we add the solution-focused approach to this list. The solution-focused approach, as a brief, constructivist framework (O'Connell, 1998), proves useful with premarital couples whose interest is in building a strong foundation for their future marriage. As such, solution-oriented premarital counseling guides couples in developing solutions that will aid them in adjusting to married life and developing a mutually satisfying and enduring marriage.

Clients who enter premarital counseling bring with them a diverse set of needs and preferences for the counseling experience. For example, Silliman and Schumm (1995) found that certain demographic characteristics, such as age and religious background, influence the degree to which young adults hold positive attitudes toward premarital counseling, their willingness to participate in premarital counseling, and their preferences for certain program characteristics, such as the length and provider of the program. Because of the diversity of clients who enter premarital counseling, it is important for practitioners to consider the unique needs of each couple. Similarly, the solution-focused approach focuses on the unique needs and strengths of each client (DeJong & Berg, 1998), rendering it a useful framework for premarital counseling.

ASSUMPTIONS OF SOLUTION-FOCUSED THERAPY

Solution-focused therapy is a brief therapy approach that emphasizes clients' strengths and attempts to produce desirable solutions to clients' presenting problems. Solution-focused therapy originated in the early 1980s at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee through the work of Steve de Shazer and his associates (Brief Family Therapy Center, 2003; Friedman & Lipchik, 1999; O'Connell, 1998). The contextual framework for the solution-focused approach is the constructivist, postmodern paradigm (Hoyt & Berg, 1998a). As such, SFT assumes that it is not possible to know one true reality. Thus, knowledge and truth are culturally relative, and the focus is on clients' perceptions of problems rather than on objective facts. The meanings that a client ascribes to situations and events are changeable, and the practitioner helps clients to develop adaptive perceptions of their life experiences (O'Connell, 1998). Following the postmodern paradigm, the solution-focused approach focuses on how individuals construct meanings about their experiences, relationships, and future plans.

In SFT, the client and therapist focus primarily on solutions and not the problem (DeJong & Berg, 1998; O'Connell, 1998). Solution-focused therapy does not emphasize the past, except in relation to present and future solutions (Friedman & Lipchik, 1999). In addition, the solution-focused approach validates the resourcefulness of clients (Walter & Peller, 1992). Hoyt and Berg (1998a) summarize the basic rules of SFT as, "1. If it ain't broke, don't fix it; 2. Once you know what works, do more of it; and 3. If something doesn't

work, don't do it again; do something different" (p, 204), Thus, SFT encourages simple, adaptive solutions. Solution-focused theory is based on the assumption that small changes produce larger changes (Friedman & Lipchik, 1999; O'Connell, 1998; Walter & Feller, 1992). Change is a major focus of the solution-focused approach, and change occurs when clients focus on solutions and competencies (Walter & Peller, 1992). Although change can occur at any time (Walter & Peller, 1992), the solutions that lead to change may not be directly or, obviously related to problems (O'Connell, 1998). In the most basic terms, change occurs when the client "does something different" (Quick, 1996, p. 7). In general, a solution-focused framework holds change as a central component.

SOLUTION-FOCUSED PREMARITAL COUNSELING

Because it is a brief, resource-based approach, solution-focused theory is a useful framework to use in premarital counseling. The solution-focused framework for premarital counseling helps engaged couples to develop together a vision for their future marriage. Upon developing this vision, couples develop strategies to make changes that will lead them toward their vision. The premarital counselor or educator can use various strategies to aid couples in the development of and progression towards the shared vision for the marriage. The practitioner can adapt the solution-focused framework to a wide range of topics that are often addressed in premarital counseling, such as communication and conflict resolution skills (Bodenmann, 1997; Douglas et al., 2001; Parish, 1992; Silliman & Schumm, 1999; Stahmann & Salts, 1993), finances (Douglas et al., 2001; Parish, 1992; Silliman & Schumm, 1999), parenting (Douglas et al., 2001; Russell & Lyster, 1992; Williams & Riley, 1999), and extended family relationships (Parish, 1992). Thus, the solution-oriented framework does not mandate a fixed prescription for premarital counseling, but rather it can be used to enhance any premarital counseling program.

A solution-focused approach to premarital counseling should aim to help couples activate the skills and resources they already possess (Hoyt & Berg, 1998b) so that they can move toward their shared vision of their future (Friedman & Lipchik, 1999). In addition, the practitioner's main function is to help link each partner's individual vision to facilitate the development of a shared vision (Hoyt & Berg, 1998a). In using solution-focused approach for premarital counseling, practitioners must respect each couple's kind each partner's unique resources and strengths. The premarital counselor should maintain a future orientation and should focus on the clients' goals and objectives in preparing for the marriage (Friedman, 1993). When appropriate, the practitioner may incorporate skills training into solution-focused premarital counseling sessions (Hoyt & Berg, 1998b). Thus, existing methods of instruction in communication skills and conflict-resolution skills, for example, are compatible with solution-focused premarital counseling. Along with the general orientation toward solutions, practitioners may incorporate specific interventions that are rooted in solution-focused theory, including (a) the Couple's Resource Map, (b) solution-oriented questions, and (c) providing feedback. These interventions are described in detail below, including examples of how to apply each intervention.

The Couple's Resource Map

The first author developed the Couple's Resource Map for use in premarital counseling (see Figure 1). This map follows the solution-oriented assumption that individuals can draw on existing resources to aid them in building solutions to manage problems (DeJong & Berg, 1998). The purpose of the Couple's Resource Map is to help the couple identify basic resources to draw on for support in developing solutions when they face problems in the future. In premarital counseling, it is not possible for couples to predict all of the problems they will face in their marriage. Therefore, helpful practitioners assist couples in identifying general sources of support that could be relevant to a wide range of marital issues that may arise. The Couple's Resource Map is a tool that facilitates this process. Essentially, the Couple's Resource Map is a pictorial scale that assesses couples' perceived support in three areas of life: (a) Individual resources, (b) relationship resources, and (c) contextual resources.

Premarital counselors can use the Couple's Resource Map as both an intervention and an assessment tool throughout the course of treatment. (For more information on the use of qualitative clinical assessments see Franklin and Jordan, 1995, and Gilbert and Franklin, 2003.) As an assessment tool, the Couple's Resource Map

allows the practitioner to assess the current level of support and resources available to the couple. As an intervention tool, the map provides valuable feedback for the couple when the partners share and compare their individual maps. Therefore, the Couple's Resource Map serves as a learning tool for each to gain valuable information about him- or herself, the partner, and the couple's vision for the relationship. The joint use of the Couple's Resource Map as both an assessment and intervention tool is consistent with the solution-focused assumption that assessment and intervention are continual, concurrent aspects of treatment (O'Connell, 1998).

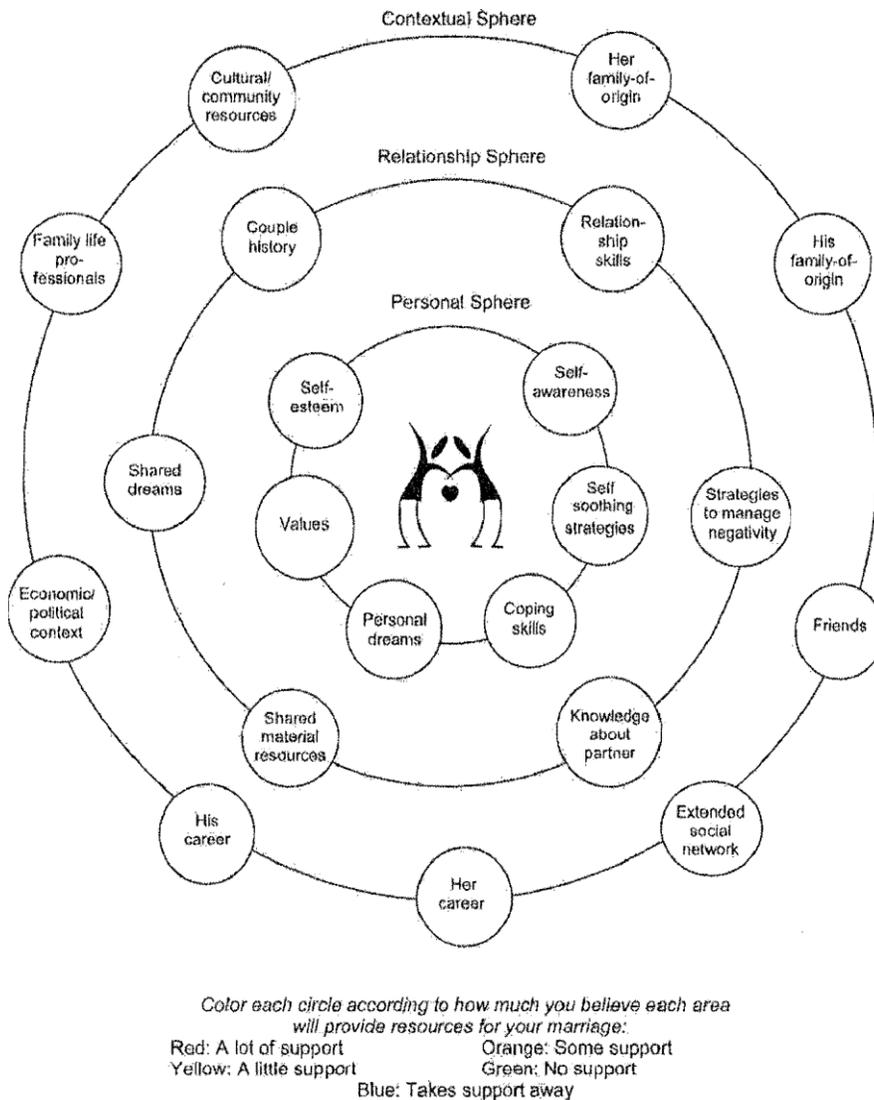


Figure 1. Couple's Resource Map. A reproducible handout version of the Couple's Resource Map is available in Microsoft Publisher format from the author at cborasky@hotmail.com. Please include "Couple's Resource Map" in the subject line.

In presenting the map to couples, the practitioner explains the importance of identifying resources to assist them when facing problems in the future. Practitioners provide couples with crayons, markers, or colored pencils with which to color in their map according to the instructions listed at the bottom of the handout. Initially, each partner completes his or her own version of the map. Couples can complete a joint map once the individual maps have been discussed. While the couple completes the Couple's Resource Map, the counselor may describe each resource area and provide examples of specific resources that are in each category. These descriptions may incorporate the following information about each category.

Personal sphere. "Self-esteem" relates to how the individual views himself or herself. This includes positive and/or negative feelings about oneself, "Values" describe what each person believes is important. Examples may include family togetherness, happiness, or security. "Personal dreams" include the hopes and dreams each

person has for his or her future (Gottman, 1999). Examples could include having a successful career or being a good parent. "Coping skills" include problem-solving skills and beliefs about how effectively a person feels he or she can solve problems. "Self-soothing strategies" describe abilities or strategies the individual can use to calm down or relax in the face of stress and frustration (Gottman, 1999), "Self-awareness" describes knowledge a person has about himself or herself, including the understanding the individual has about why he or she acts and thinks in certain ways.

Relationship sphere. "Couple history" involves information related to the development of the couple's relationship (Gottman, 1999). Examples include the length of the relationship and the types of experiences the couple has shared. "Shared dreams" describe the couple's dreams and hopes they share for their relationship (Gottman, 1999). Examples include a wish to reach their fiftieth anniversary or a desire to raise successful children. "Shared material resources" include any resources the couple will share when married, such as a house, cars, incomes, and investment accounts, "Knowledge about partner" consists of knowledge a person has about his or, her partner, including understanding of why the partner may act or think the way he or she does (Gottman, 1999). "Strategies to manage negativity" include the couple's abilities to manage and/or reduce negative interactions or feelings when they arise (Gottman, 1999). Examples include taking time to calm down or empathetic listening skills (Gottman, 1994, 1999). "Relationship skills" are skills that help to enhance the positive aspects of the couple's relationship, including communication skills, negotiation, and compromise.

Contextual sphere. "Cultural/community resources" include cultural and community supports for the marriage. Examples include religious communities, marriage promotion campaigns, or cultural norms supporting marriage. "Family life professionals" include family life educators, marriage and family counselors, clergy, and so on. Couples should consider their willingness to use the services of such professionals. "Economic/political context" describes economic trends and public policies that influence marriage. Examples may include a strong economy with low rates of unemployment, promarriage tax cuts, and family friendly government policies. "His career" and "Her career" relate to sources of support within each partner's career path. Examples may include flexible work schedules, family leave time, and favorable working conditions. "Extended social network" includes social contacts who may provide indirect or direct support for the couple, including acquaintances, neighbors, and professional colleagues. The "Friends" category describes close friends of each individual or the couple who may be available to provide physical, emotion, or other forms of support as needed. "His family-of-origin" and "Her family-of-origin" includes immediate and extended family members who may provide physical, emotional, or other forms of support as needed.

Processing the Couple's Resource Map. Once each partner completes the Couple's Resource Map, the practitioner facilitates an exploration of each partner's perceptions of resources available for the impending marriage. The premarital counselor can gain a large amount of information about the couple through the Couple's Resource Map. The counselor assists partners in comparing and contrasting their maps with one another, maintaining awareness that each partner may perceive support for the relationship very differently. Once each partner has shared his or her individual map, the counselor facilitates the creation of a shared map. The practitioner focuses primarily on those areas in which both partners perceive a high level of support. If couples identify many sources of high levels of support, the counselor assists them in differentiating which sources of support are most useful for creating specific types of solutions. In contrast, when couples identify very few sources of support, the counselor assists the couple in developing strategies to increase the amount of support in different areas. In this situation, the counselor validates the existing support, even if it is minimal.

An additional application of the Couple's Resource Map is to ask the couple to create jointly a "real" and "ideal" version of the map. As couples describe their map, the practitioner helps the couple to discover clues that may suggest strategies for using resources in one area to strengthen resource in other areas. In addition, couples who are able to define an ideal version of the Couple's Resource Map have the opportunity to further solidify a shared, jointly constructed vision for their future marriage. Overall, the Couple's Resource Map is a simple, quick assessment of each couple's perceptions of resources 'available to support the marriage.

Solution-oriented Questions

Questions in solution-focused premarital counseling focus on solutions rather than problems. For example, instead of asking a couple, "What are the biggest problems in your relationship so far?", a solution-oriented practitioner might ask, "If problems didn't exist, what would your relationship look like?" (O'Connell, 1998). Practitioners must be particularly attentive to the language they use to address couples in premarital counseling, as the language used by the practitioner and the couples can orient the therapeutic conversation towards either problems or solutions (Friedman, 1993). A list of additional solution-oriented questions can be found in the Appendix. In addition to general solution-oriented questions, practitioners can employ three specific types of questions: (1) The miracle question, (2) scaling questions, and (3) exception questions.

The miracle question. When used in therapy, the miracle question asks clients what their experiences would be like if a miracle were to occur that resolved their problems (O'Connell, 1998). In solution-focused premarital counseling, an application of the miracle question might be, "If a miracle were to happen, and your marriage were exactly how you would want it to be, what would be the first thing you would notice?" The miracle question helps to elicit information about each partner's vision for the marriage. The practitioner should follow the miracle question with a detailed exploration of the miracle, being particularly careful to use the client's language (Quick, 1996). The miracle question can aid couples in developing a clear picture of their vision for marriage (O'Connell, 1998), particularly when the miracle is explored fully (Walter Peller, 1992). As the miracle question can be used to elicit each partner's optimal vision of the marriage, an unlimited number of possibilities for the marriage may develop (DeJong & Berg, 1998). The miracle question can help to provide engaged couples with clues for how to move closer toward their vision of an optimal marriage.

Scaling questions. Scaling questions can be used throughout premarital counseling to help couples identify their position in relation to their goals for premarital counseling (O'Connell, 1998). A general example of a scaling question that can be used in premarital counseling is, "On a scale from one to ten, how confident do you feel that your marriage will be satisfying?" A specific application of scaling questions to communication skills is, "On a scale from one to ten, how comfortable do you feel in telling your partner your feelings?" If the client's answer were seven, a follow-up question could be, "What would need to be different in order for you to answer with an eight?" Scaling questions can provide the practitioner with baseline information related to each couple's unique needs (Quick, 1996). The use of scales can help to clarify what couples can do to produce small changes in their relationship, and couples can see change over time when scaling questions are revisited in subsequent sessions (O'Connell, 1998). Thus, scaling questions can help highlight a couple's progress towards their goals (Hoyt & Berg, 1998a). Because they are flexible and provide a great deal of information to couples and practitioners, scaling questions are useful in premarital counseling.

Exception questions. Premarital counselors can ask questions that help couples identify times when problems they experience are not present (DeJong & Berg, 1998). Exceptions are highlighted to help the couple become aware of spontaneous and/or purposeful times when problems do not exist (Clark-Stager, 1999). An example of an exception question that may be used in premarital counseling is, "Can you tell me about a time when you did not feel nervous about getting married to your fiancé. Because clients may experience exceptions spontaneously or deliberately, it is important that the practitioner explore fully the exceptions that are discovered (DeJong & Berg, 1998; Quick, 1996; Walter, & Peller, 1992). In premarital counseling, exception questions can help couples identify strategies for developing solutions in their relationship.

Providing Feedback

In SFT, the therapist provides the client with a form of feedback toward the end of the session. This feedback focuses primarily on the client's strength and progress. In addition, this feedback includes a task for the client to complete that is designed to help the client to move towards positive change (De Jong & Berg, 1998; O'Connell, 1998; Walter & Peller, 1992). This type of feedback can be adapted for use in premarital counseling. Hoyt and Berg (1998a) suggest that, prior to presenting the feedback, the practitioner should leave the consulting room to take a brief break to facilitate the most useful response. In addition, Hoyt and Berg (1998a) suggest that

feedback should incorporate three components: (a) Validation of each person's perceptions and emotions, (b) a transitional statement, and (c) a suggestion that may help the couple move towards their goals.

Following this format, an example of feedback that may be used in premarital counseling is:

Throughout this session, I have been particularly impressed by your commitment to each other and your willingness to consider areas in your relationship that may be less strong than others. These characteristics seem to be valuable in helping you move toward your goal of improving communication in your relationship. Over the course of the next week before our next session, I would like for you to notice times in your relationship when you feel you are communicating exceptionally well. Then, make either a mental or written note of what else is happening during these times. Plan to talk about those times when we meet next week.

Generally, the feedback presented to the couple at the end of the premarital counseling session helps the couple to consolidate the new information they have learned about themselves and develop strategies to continue progress toward their goals.

Becoming a Solution-Focused Premarital Counselor

As mentioned earlier, premarital counseling providers work in a wide range of contexts. With consideration to the contextual factors that are relevant to their settings, premarital counselors who wish to adopt a solution-focused approach will benefit from consideration of the following issues. Practitioners who operate from a solution-focused theoretical orientation develop collaborative relationships with their clients (Friedman & Lipchik, 1999). The practitioner adopts a stance of "not knowing" (O'Connell, 1998, p. 15), which positions the client as the expert (DeJong & Berg, 1998; Walter & Peller, 1992). Thus, solution-oriented premarital counselors must be comfortable with sharing responsibility for the process of premarital counseling with the couple.

In addition, the practitioner uses care to use solution-focused language and moves away from traditional problem-focused language (O'Connell, 1998). Solution-focused premarital counselors help couples explore problems and relationships without getting caught up in problem-focused language (DeJong & Berg, 1998). Thus, one of the most important, yet challenging, steps in becoming a solution-focused premarital counselor is to become comfortable in using the language of solutions. Within the guiding framework of solution-oriented language, the practitioner implements such skills as listening, identifying the client's key language, asking open-ended questions, complimenting the client, affirming the client's perceptions, and amplifying solution talk (DeJong & Berg, 1998). Through the solution-oriented framework and skills, the practitioner and couple co-construct the premarital counseling experience (Walter & Peller, 1992).

BENEFIT'S AND LIMITATIONS OF USING A SOLUTION-FOCUSED APPROACH IN PREMARITAL COUNSELING

For many reasons, solution-focused theory provides a useful framework for premarital counseling. Generally, solution-focused premarital counseling is a supportive, respectful approach to use in counseling couples. Proponents of the solution-focused approach assert that focusing on solutions rather than problems allows for clients to develop their personal strengths (Clark-Stager, 1999). In addition, solution-focused premarital counseling presents a flexible, positive context for practitioners to work with couples. Solution-focused premarital counseling invites couples to actively construct a shared vision of a mutually satisfying marriage and to develop strategies to achieve the shared vision.

An additional benefit of a solution-oriented approach is that it is a brief intervention in which couples receive the minimal amount of services' needed (O'Connell, 1998). Empirical research tends to support the effectiveness of solution-focused counseling as a brief therapy approach (DeJong & Berg, 1998; Friedman & Lipchik, 1999; O'Connell, 1998), Nelson and Kelley (2001) researched the effectiveness of solution-focused counseling with a couples group. The researchers used a single-case research design with continuing assessment so participants

served as their own controls, which the researchers claim was appropriate because of the novelty of the treatment approach. A treatment manual was used to standardize treatment. Throughout the group, the couples experienced many typical SFT interventions, including goal setting, homework tasks, and amplifying exceptions. The results showed that, generally, couples who participated in the group demonstrated increased marital satisfaction following the intervention, progress in the area of their individual goals, and progress in the area of their couple goals. The limitations of this study include major threats to internal validity and the exclusive use of self-report measures. However, the researchers argue that the use of the group modality enhances the emphasis on strengths and help couples identify their resources more readily. Thus, preliminary research suggests that the solution-focused approach is useful with couples.

Another important benefit of adopting a solution-oriented approach is that the theory is adaptable for use with diverse populations. The solution-oriented approach values the diversity and uniqueness of all human beings and relationships (Friedman & Lipchik, 1999). Because solution-focused premarital counseling positions the client as the expert in his or her own life, a solution-focused framework emphasizes the unique cultural resources of all clients (Hoyt & Berg, 1998a; O'Connell, 1998). A need exists for premarital counseling programs that are useful with couples from diverse cultural backgrounds (Sayers, Kohn, & Heavey, 1998). Solution-focused premarital counseling respects and honors the unique cultural backgrounds of all couples, thus providing a context for programs that are appropriate for diverse client populations.

The major criticisms of solution-focused theory have included its overly simplistic approach, the potential for minimizing the client's problems, and the possibility that some clients may not possess the skills or resources to solve their problems (Clark-Stager, 1999). Despite the benefits of adopting solution-focused theory in premarital counseling, solution-oriented premarital counseling may not be appropriate for all couples. For example, couples in which violence is present may not be suitable candidates for solution-focused premarital counseling. These couples would benefit from participation in specialized programs that treat domestic violence (Busby & Killian, 1996). Generally, when couples exhibit serious levels of distress, the practitioner should consider carefully the use of solution-focused premarital counseling. Solution-focused theory assumes a relatively high level of functioning in clients (Clark-Stager, 1999). Therefore, the premarital counselor must consider the unique needs of each couple to determine the appropriateness of solution-focused premarital counseling.

Increased theoretical refinement and methodologically sound research is needed to explore the use of the solution-focused framework and interventions in premarital counseling. Researchers must examine the effectiveness of the approach with premarital couples. In addition, practitioners can develop new programs that are based on the solution-focused framework, and existing programs can be modified to incorporate an orientation toward solutions. The solution-oriented theoretical framework provides a foundation for expanding the delivery of premarital counseling programs to engaged couples.

CONCLUSION

In general, a theoretical framework enhances the delivery of therapeutic services. Solution-focused theory provides a practical framework for premarital counseling. In orienting the counseling experience toward solutions, premarital counselors assist couples in identifying and activating resources that will help them to build a satisfying marriage. Practitioners can incorporate theory-grounded interventions—including the Couple's Resource Map, solution-oriented questions, and providing feedback—to help couples build a jointly constructed vision for their marriage. Overall, solution-focused premarital counseling, a practical, theory-grounded approach, is a useful development in the theory, research, and practice of premarital counseling.

APPENDIX

Solution-Focused Questions to Use in Premarital Counseling

- What is right about your relationship?
- In 5 years (or 10 years, 20 years, 30 years, 2 months, 2 weeks), what would you like your relationship to be like?
- What small change could you [make] that would have the most positive impact on your relationship?
- Most engaged couples have a vision of what they would like their marriage to be like. Tell me what your vision is. What are you doing now that could help you to make that vision happen?
- What is the most helpful thing your partner does when you experience problems in your relationship?
- What is the most helpful thing you do when you experience problems in your relationship?
 - If you could develop a "recipe" for what will make your marriage a satisfying one, what would you include?
- What has allowed you to pull through difficult times in your relationship in the past?
- What has been the most challenging aspect of your relationship so far? What resources have you used to manage that?
- What do you value the most in your relationship?
- If there were no problems in your relationship, what would your communication style look like? (Substitute conflict management skills, money management, parenting skills, etc.)
- What positive change could you make to help your partner feel more satisfied with your relationship?

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