

Evidence-based Approaches to Relationship and Marriage Education

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ROUTLEDGE



- Frax, M. J., DeVries, J., Bodenmann, G., & Den Ouden, B. J. (2014). Dyadic coping and relationship functioning in couples coping with cancer: A systematic review. *British Journal of Health Psychology*. doi:10.1111/bjhp.12094
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15

RELATIONSHIP ATTACHMENT MODEL (RAM) PROGRAMS

Pick and Links

John Van Epp and Morgan Van Epp Cutlip

LEARNING GOALS

- Gain an overview of the five interactive dynamic bonds of the Relationship Attachment Model (RAM) and how the RAM provides a picture of both relationship development for new relationships and relationship maintenance for established relationships.
- Learn the two major aspects of the PICK program for singles during relationship development: the five key areas to explore in a dating relationship that foreshadow what a partner will be like in a committed or marriage relationship, and an application of the RAM for building a relationship in a healthy and safe way (“safe zone”).
- Understand the guiding principle in the LINKS program for couples that ensures successful relationship maintenance: couples regularly assessing their relationship with the RAM and setting practical goals to strengthen and balance the deficits in each of the five dynamic bonds represented by the RAM.
- Learn the rationale for the PICK program for singles and the LINKS program for couples.
- Learn the four objectives of the PICK program, and the four objectives of the LINKS program.
- Explore the cultural implications of the RAM and the two programs based on the RAM, PICK and LINKS.
- Understand the empirical support of the objectives of the PICK and LINKS programs.
- Learn the steps for becoming a certified instructor in both the PICK and LINKS programs.

Introduction

One of the most essential human needs is forming and maintaining close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Worthington, 2005). The presence or absence of close relationships has been found to have serious consequences for one's happiness, mental health, mortality, suicidality, and overall life experience (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goldsmith, 2007; McAdams & Bryant, 1987; Qualter & Munn, 2002). And when one spans the myriad of human relationships, the most influential relationship, arguably is the marital relationship. Research has found that this relationship has similar and consistent, if not even more benefits than other close relationships. For instance, being married has been shown to serve as a protective factor against stress, depression, alcohol consumption, and overall psychological and somatic health problems and illnesses (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988).

The protective effect of marriage is not guaranteed by status alone, however. Rather the *quality* of one's relationship bond contributes beneficial or harmful effects beyond those gained from just the marital status (Brown & DiMeo, 2007; DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988; Waite, Luo, & Lewin, 2008). In a review of marriage research from the 1990s to 2005, Worthington (2005) concluded that "beneath these (research) findings, we discover the buried treasure. The *emotional bond between couples is the golden thread* that holds partners together. Marital success is not most importantly about how partners behave with each other. It is more about the emotional bond between them and about healing threats to that bond" (p. 261, italics added).

Worthington's conclusion suggested that to focus only on couples' *behaviors* (e.g., interactional skills) was akin to missing the forest for the trees. In other words, the *skills-deficiency emphasis*—couples just needing to develop behavioral skills in interpersonal communication and conflict management—was itself deficient. Although there is definite value in helping couples sharpen these skills, the broader concepts of relationship bonds seem to remain abstract and undefined. Clients often know relationship terms like *love, trust, commitment, mutuality, reciprocity, forgiveness, support*, and so on but lack concrete conceptualizations of what these terms looked like in real life. In addition, a couple's mastery of specific communication skills does not automatically translate into a successful management of their overall relationship.

Theoretical Foundations and History

So in 1986, based on my clinical experiences and a review of the literature and theories of love, intimacy, and attachment, I (i.e., John Van Epp) developed an interactive, visual representation of the major constructs that seemed to constitute all relationships (Van Epp, 1997, 2006; Van Epp Cutlip, Futris, Van Epp, & Campbell, 2008). The **Relationship Attachment Model (RAM)**, see Figure 15.1)

looks like the face of an equalizer with up-down sliders and suggests that relationships comprise five major constructs referred to as dynamic bonds: know, trust, rely, commit, and touch.

These five constructs independently exist, with their ranges providing unique contributions to the experience of connection in relationships. The interactions of these five constructs create various feelings, experiences of vulnerability and resilience, closeness and distance, and relationship states. Additionally, each construct or dynamic bond represented by the RAM has a reciprocal nature within relationships. There is an extent to which one knows another and is also known by that person; there is an extent that one trusts another and is trusted; relies on someone and is relied upon, and so on. Therefore, the RAM can measure individuals' evaluation of self (how I know you, trust you, rely on you, etc.), other (how I believe you know me, trust me, rely on me, etc.), and the overall relationship (the degree we know each other, trust each other, rely on each other, etc.).

A primary strength of the RAM is its outward simplicity. Although the RAM is a conceptual model that integrates major psychological theories and extensive social and psychological research, to a layperson the model can be understood with little to no explanation beyond the presentation of a picture. Thus, the RAM has intuitive meaning "as is" without much explanation and can be personalized to reflect the strengths and weaknesses of a specific relationship because the five dynamic bonds can be moved into constellations that represent different

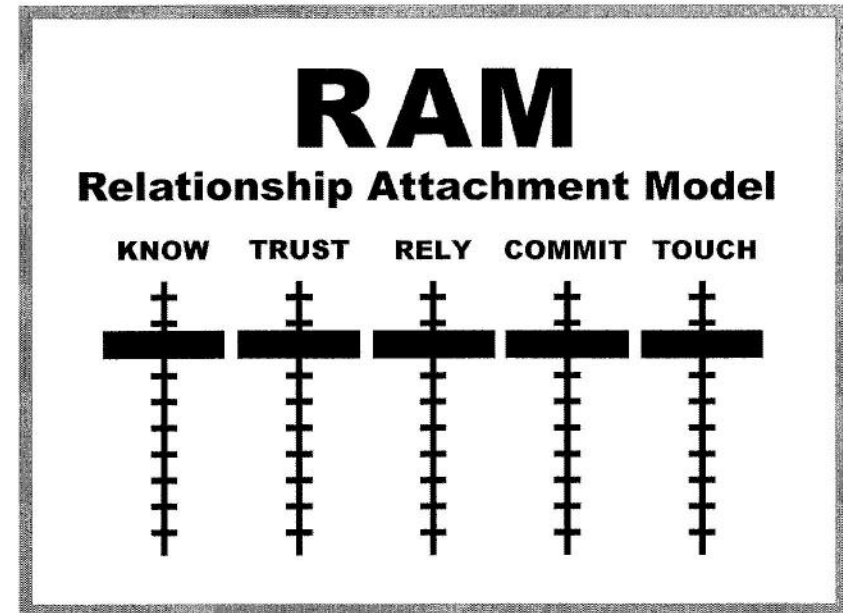


FIGURE 15.1 Relationship Attachment Model (RAM)

relationship experiences. Since its original design, the RAM has been evaluated in both qualitative and quantitative studies, validating the five independent constructs and their interactive power to describe relationship types and experiences (Cutlip, 2013).

The RAM provides the framework for the two relationship education programs: **PICK** (a Partner (Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge) and Couple **LINKS** (Lasting Intimacy through Nurturing, Knowledge and Skills). The former, also known by the title, *How to Avoid Falling for a Jerk or Jerkette*, used the RAM to understand relationship development and partner selection. The latter applied the RAM to relationship maintenance, providing couples with an interactive pictorial representation of the various fluctuations that occur in their relationships and the skills needed to successfully navigate through these relationship experiences. In many ways, these two programs are two halves of close relationships with PICK providing a plan for the selection of a partner and the building of a new relationship (part one), and LINKS describing a plan for the sustainment and ongoing resiliency of an already developed relationship (part two).

PICK was developed in 1996 when I was teaching marriage and family assessment at Ashland Theological Seminary in addition to my full-time private practice. I remember thinking that the extensive research about premarital predictors of marital outcomes needed to be organized and translated into the language of my clients. And so I categorized several hundred articles into five categories that best predicted what a potential partner would be like in marriage. These five categories became the crucial areas to get to know and explore about someone you are dating:

- a. Family dynamics that predict future marriage patterns.
- b. Attitudes and actions of someone's conscience.
- c. Compatibility potential between you and the person you are dating.
- d. Examples of how a person acts in his/her other relationships.
- e. Skills a person has in communication and conflict resolution.

I then placed these five areas (FACES) into the RAM as a dropdown box from the *know* construct, indicating that it is important to get to know the different "faces" of a partner. The PICK program has a guiding principle for developing a new relationship *safely* while exploring the faces of a partner, referred to as the "safe zone" (see Figure 15.2). This principle explains the interactions of the five independent constructs of the RAM. Simply stated, relationships grow more safely when they are developed from left to right as depicted on the RAM. As one grows to *know* a partner through mutual self-disclosure and diverse experiences shared together over time, this knowledge, rather than from assumptions and projections, should be used to more accurately shape what one *trusts* about that partner. Trust and reliance should interact and grow together, with the degree

of trust setting the ceiling for the ways one chooses to *rely* on another, and the ways that a partner proves to be reliable reinforcing or revising one's trust. As these three grow together, there is a greater security and lower vulnerability in giving oneself in *commitment* and sexual *touch* to that partner. Or, to state the "safe zone" another way: It is risky to go farther in sexual touch than the level of what you know or trust about someone; and there are clear vulnerabilities to forming a commitment beyond the ways the other person has proven reliable, or to look to the other person to meet your needs beyond your proven trust, or to trust a partner significantly more than what you know about that partner. Therefore, the PICK program packages key areas to get to know about a partner and the relationship skills that can build a safe and healthy relationship all in this one visual model, the RAM. In practical language, this program can help singles follow their hearts without losing their minds.

Shortly after writing PICK, the RAM was used as the framework for the LINKS curriculum but with a different guiding principle focused on relationship maintenance. Life will inevitably impact relationships causing changes in the levels of the five bonding dynamics portrayed in the RAM. Relationship experiences represented by these fluctuations or imbalances on the RAM often have inherent vulnerabilities; however, the real danger is not becoming imbalanced, but *staying* imbalanced. Therefore, the sessions in LINKS unpack each of the five dynamic

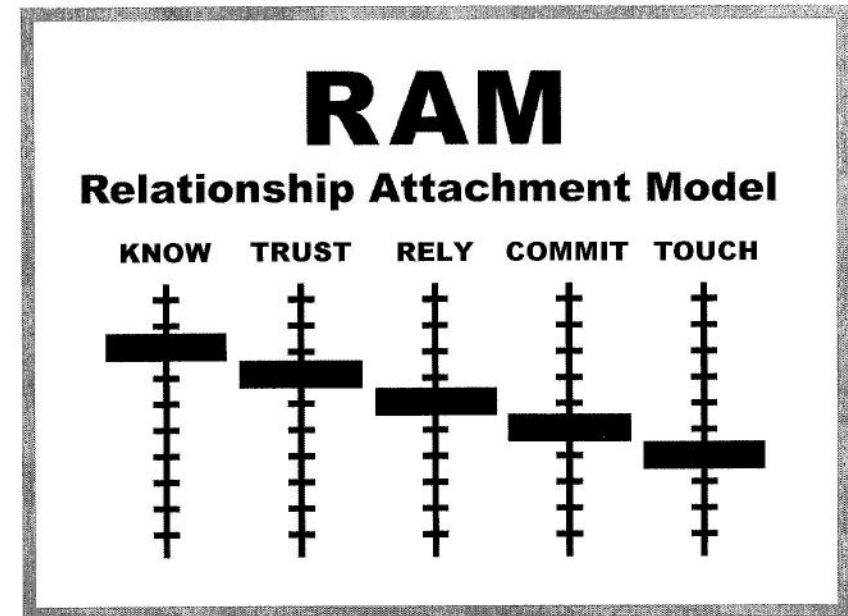


FIGURE 15.2 Safe Relationship Development

constructs of the RAM and their respective skills, and then provide a couple with a plan (called “huddles”) to regularly meet together and assess where they are out of balance in their RAM profile and then to set small goals to strengthen their relationship in those specific areas.

Needs Assessment and Target Audience

Programs for couples have been the primary area of emphasis throughout most of the adult relationship education movement. Couples do need help in their relationships in preparation for marriage. However, it makes sense to provide materials for singles *long before* they become engaged. This was the rationale for the development of PICK.

Almost 15 years ago, Glenn and Marquardt (2001) wrote *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right*, a report in the Institute for American Values. This report was based on telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,000 college women, and in-depth conversations with 62 women on 11 campuses over 18 months. They found that women were confused about the dating-mating game on campus. There were few remaining rituals that let women know where they stand. Traditional dating had been replaced by “hanging out.” Only 50 percent of senior women had been asked out on six or more dates in their four years at college. And yet, 63 percent of the college women expected to meet their future husband on campus. The two most common practices were casual sex with no emotional involvement or constant togetherness, which the study referred to as “joined at the hip.” Commitment seemed to come in only two doses—too little or too much. Neither approach was very successful because the couples in both types usually did not last.

Since this report, numerous studies and books have been written about women and men that indicate less interest in dating or finding a mate on campus, later ages at first marriage but younger ages at first cohabitation, increased numbers of casual sex on into late twenties, and greater confusion concerning the trajectory from singlehood to marriage (Freitas, 2008, 2013; Williams, 2013). These social shifts have created a tremendous need for education and intervention for both single women and men.

It was this unanswered need that fueled the development of PICK and makes it even more relevant today. The PICK program has been widely used with different populations including military members, youth, parents of youth, never-been-marrieds, single-again adults, incarcerated youth and adults, low-income populations; and in settings such as healthy relationship coalitions, educational settings, domestic violence shelters, sexual assault centers, churches, and faith-based organizations (www.lovethinks.com).

Although there were many skill-based relationship courses for couples, there was a need to provide couples with a better understanding of the specific bonds in their relationship and a plan for managing these relational bonds through the

natural ups and downs of life. In this approach, relationship skills are viewed as a means to the end goal of strengthening the dynamic bonds of a couple’s relationship. By defining the relational bonds with the RAM, couples better understand the purpose of working on specific skills, and are more empowered to intentionally manage their relationship.

Therefore, the core of the LINKS course is to teach couples how to intentionally “run their relationship” by regularly assessing their current strengths and vulnerabilities with the Relationship Attachment Model and then set short-range relational goals in the five dynamic bonds represented in the RAM. When the levels of these dynamic bonds are high, feelings of love and closeness are maximized. Empowering couples to manage the bonds of their relationship is vital because maximizing feelings of love and closeness is central for the health and longevity of close relationships (Bachand & Caron, 2001; Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004; Ponzetti, 2005). In addition, strong love feelings have been shown to be the first and foremost predictor for whether a couple belonged to a high or low well-being group with higher well-being associated with greater love (Riehl-Emede, Thomas, & Willi, 2003). The RAM framework then provides couples a simple yet comprehensive method of assessing and maintaining their feelings of love through the management of the five dynamic bonds of their relationship.

The LINKS program has been widely used with populations similar to the PICK course including civilian couples, military members, incarcerated individuals, and low-income populations; and in settings such as healthy relationship coalitions, domestic violence shelters, churches, and faith-based organizations.

Each program has over 10,000 certified instructors with more than 500,000 participants having completed the respective course throughout the United States, Singapore, South America, Europe, and South Korea. The instructor and participant materials are available in English, Spanish, and Mandarin.

Program Goals and Objectives

The PICK program has four major objectives. First, it is designed to increase a participant’s confidence and knowledge about the dating and partner selection process. Gardner, Giese, and Parrott (2004) argued that many relationship attitudes and behavior patterns are developed well before adulthood and engagement, when most couples attend premarital prevention programs.

Second, the PICK program is intended to increase one’s judgment and discernment of a dating partner and what needs to be explored in order to better understand the character of a person. Long-standing research has supported that couples which are better acquainted before marriage have significantly higher rates of marital quality (Birtchnell & Kennard, 1984; Grover, Russell, Schumm, & Paff-Bergen, 1985; Kurdek, 1991, 1993), and experience fewer problems when they face the inevitable difficulties of marriage (Grover et al., 1985).

The third objective of the PICK program is to increase intentionality in pacing a new, developing relationship. This includes slowing down the speed of sexual involvement which has been associated with lower rates of cohabitation and higher marital quality outcomes.

The fourth and final objective of the PICK program is to increase intentionality about setting boundaries in trust-building, dependencies, and sexual touch. Stanley (2003) argued that one of the primary reasons premarital education has value is because it slows couples down and fosters greater deliberation. Singles seem to do better with a plan in order to have a conscious, intentional approach to dating and mate selection.

The LINKS program also has four major objectives. The first objective is to increase communication skills and positive communication experiences. Staying in the know with another is incredibly important to maintaining a close, bonded relationship, whether it be a marital relationship or close friendship (Amato & Previti, 2009).

The second objective is to increase feelings of satisfaction and love within the relationship. Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) and Fowers, Lyons, Montel, and Shaked (2001) found that satisfaction in marriage was related to maintaining an idealistic rather than a realistic perception of one's spouse. Overall, individuals were happier in their relationships when they idealized their partners and their partners idealized them. In addition, strong feelings of love and closeness is strongly predictive of relationship health and longevity (Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004; Ponzetti, 2005).

Third, the LINKS program is designed to increase confidence for positively resolving conflicts. Long-standing research has found that marital distress can be prevented by developing positive communication and skills in conflict management (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993).

The fourth objective is to increase the understanding and behaviors of relationship maintenance. While communication skills are important in marriage, many couples who divorce state reasons other than communication problems. Among studies on why couples divorce, Amato and Previti (2009) found that "growing apart" was the fourth most common reason for divorce. Similarly, Bodenmann et al. (2006) found that "loss of love" was the most significant contributor to both men's and women's decision to divorce. The LINKS course has the primary objective of empowering couples with a plan to manage their love by assessing their relationship in each of the five dynamic bonds of the RAM and then setting goals for enhancing their relational experience in each of the five areas.

Curriculum and Other Program Issues

One of the unique features of the PICK and the LINKS curricula is that the content of both courses is *chunked* in the RAM. The word "**chunking**" comes from a

landmark 1956 study by George A. Miller, in which he integrated information processing theory with learning theory to describe how a collection of elements having strong associations with one another become packaged or chunked as a single item, resulting in greater recall. I found that most singles and couples who attended other relationship classes recalled and practiced only one or two significant components from the curriculum just 3–6 months later. One explanation for this may be due to the fact that the sessions of most courses are topical without any clear association or connection between them—in other words, the curriculum expects the *participant* to chunk the content together in a meaningful and memorable whole.

However, in the first session of both PICK and LINKS, the participants learn the RAM as a single unit, quickly memorizing the five "sliders" representing the dynamic bonds in a relationship. As a result, each subsequent session simply unpacks the details of a chunked concept that they have already memorized and associated with familiar, concrete experiences. In fact, PICK program participants memorize both the RAM and the FACES in session 1 because the content of the FACES is chunked within the RAM. This packaged structure increases learning and retention, enabling participants to remember and therefore use what they gained from their classes.

In addition, because most couples only seemed to follow through on one activity from an entire course, the LINKS course pinpoints just one primary takeaway all participants are encouraged to practice on a weekly or biweekly basis. However, this one takeaway, called *huddles*, captures all of the content of the course because it is a RAM-based format for couples to use in a 20-minute meeting to assess how they are doing in their communication and talk times (know); their attitudes toward, apologies to, and appreciations of each other (trust); the ways they work together and support each other, and mutually meet each other's needs/wants in the 10 areas of intimacy (rely and touch). The conclusion of this huddle is for couples to set some simple and practical goals to achieve before their next huddle (commit), thus strengthening all of the major bonds in their relationship on a regular basis and improving the overall trajectory of their relationship.

The PICK and LINKS programs also have similarity in the facilitation of the respective course material and the balance between the course content and practical, interactive activities. Although there are some portions that are lecture, the primary style of facilitation is to guide participants in discussions by using questions from the participant workbooks that are explained and expanded in the instructor lesson plans. In addition, there are many activities which participants do within small groups. For instance, in the LINKS course, 3–4 couples sit at each table with couples taking turns engaging in an interactive exercise or practicing a relationship skill in front of their table group. Benefits of this approach include mutual accountability, comradery, role modeling, and positive feedback from peers. Afterwards, the instructor processes most of these table activities by asking for a volunteer to stand, introduce a partner from their table, and share what he or she really liked about what that partner had said/did in the activity. This approach

to processing activities generates a positive environment, provides encouraging feedback to couples that can increase a sense of pride in their relationship, and helps the volunteers to practice restatements, a basic communication skill.

The PICK program also utilizes many table group activities (with 5–9 individuals at each table). A few of the many activities include discussing questions assigned from the participant workbooks, making a family tree of what participants would like to repeat, not repeat, and revise in their future marriage from their own family of origin, making posters of the specific personality characteristics, values, and lifestyle preferences that should be explored in a dating relationship with indications of what would be considered deal-breakers or non-negotiables, and writing out individual goals for improving one's dating relationships and emotional management. The instructor often facilitates processing of the group activities by having volunteers from groups explain to the rest of the class what they generated in their group interaction. This creates an opportunity for participants to teach and learn from each other, increasing the ownership of the material.

Both PICK and LINKS have numerous workbooks for specific populations with only minor alterations to the content of the overall courses. The various workbooks of the PICK course include the basic adult 5-lesson, the young adult 5- or 10-lesson, the military 5-lesson, the faith-based 10-lesson, and the domestic violence 5-lesson. The workbooks for the LINKS course include the basic 5-lesson, the military 5-lesson, and the faith-based 10-lesson. Program materials for both PICK and LINKS come in English, Spanish, and Chinese languages.

The concepts of *relationship development* and partner selection are elucidated from the RAM in the five sessions of the PICK program outlined in *Table 15.1*. The first session provides an overview of the RAM; the second and third sessions expand what one needs to get to know and explore about a partner (FACES); the fourth and fifth sessions continue to move through the RAM with the former explaining trust and rely, and the latter exploring commitment and touch.

TABLE 15.1 PICK a Partner Program Session Descriptions

Session	Title and Description	RAM Dynamic
1	<p>A bird's eye view of dating Participants learn to identify the characteristics of difficult partners in dating relationships, review the major social shifts affecting dating practices, cultivate a belief in the need for partner-selection education, develop an understanding of what makes a relationship safe, gain a formula for getting to know a dating partner, and differentiate between healthy and unhealthy relationships by using the RAM.</p>	Know

Session	Title and Description	RAM Dynamic
2	<p>You can't marry Jethro without gettin' the Clampetts Participants discover how falling in love can create tunnel vision and the factors that reinforce this common experience; they define and describe the necessary ingredients for effectively changing negative or unhealthy past personal patterns; they learn the first two of the five areas they need to know about a dating partner: first, the understanding of a dating partner's Family background is developed by exploring the ways participants have been shaped by past family experiences; second, the importance of the conscience for positive marital outcomes is explained, with a practical plan for examining during the dating process the Attitudes and actions that reflect one's conscience.</p>	Know
3	<p>The ingredients for a lasting relationship Participants continue to explore the last three areas to get to know about a prospective partner: first, they discuss the importance of Compatibility in three key areas: personality, values, and lifestyles; second, they generate Examples of the relationship patterns with others that are vital to examine in a dating partner; and finally, they learn and practice the Skills of healthy communication and conflict resolution.</p>	Know
4	<p>Why is it that expectations lead to disappointments? Participants learn a practical definition of trust and how trust can be developed in safe ways, and what it means to rely on another; they deepen their understanding and self-reflection of three common causes of unhealthy relationship patterns; they generate examples of eight characteristics of a trustworthy/reliable person; and develop a practical approach for determining the pace of investing trust and reliance on a prospective partner.</p>	Trust/Rely
5	<p>Put the horse before the cart Participants generate the qualities of ideal commitment, the risks of staying committed too long in an unhealthy dating relationship, and the differences in the commitment to marry versus cohabit; they examine some of the potential risks of cohabitation; they learn about the emotional and physical bonding effects of sexual chemistry and touch; and they examine some of the ways that sexual practices before marriage impact marital outcomes.</p>	Commit/ Touch

The LINKS program also teaches the RAM, but applies it to couples in committed relationships with an emphasis on *relationship maintenance*. Each of the five sessions develop the concepts, skills, and practical activities of one of the dynamic bonds of the RAM. Couples practice using the RAM as a format for assessing their relationship and setting goals in regular meetings called “huddles.” The five sessions of the LINKS program are described in Table 15.2.

TABLE 15.2 LINKS Session Descriptions

Session	Title and Description	RAM Dynamic
1	<p>Relentlessly pursuing intimacy Couples learn the RAM and how it helps to visualize the bonds of closeness and intimacy in their relationships; they cultivate an understanding and desire to become <i>relationship managers</i> who put continued effort in building and <i>running</i> the closeness and intimacy in their relationships; they develop an understanding of what makes a relationship safe and how a relationship develops vulnerabilities; they discuss their talk times and the need to “stay in the know” in their relationship; and they learn and practice the components of healthy communication.</p>	Know
2	<p>Respectfully cultivating trust Couples discuss the meaning of trust; they learn what it means to live with a partner in the home and a partner in one’s head (how to keep a good attitude toward a partner); they generate the ways that a negative attitude toward a partner can develop into deep resentments, and practical plans of reframing and solution-oriented approaches for getting out of a resentment and back to a positive attitude; they develop a plan and visual picture for how to successfully handle conflicts; they explore causes of a broken trust, its impact, and the processes of forgiving and rebuilding trust.</p>	Trust
3	<p>Reciprocally meeting needs Couples develop the belief that mutual need fulfillment will strengthen the bond of marriage and deepen the character of each partner; they discuss the ways they rely on each other and work toward an agreement on the roles and division of responsibilities in their marriage and family; they establish a regular plan for handling their finances in mutually agreeable ways; they learn the 10 top activities that foster intimacy in the togetherness of a relationship; and they conduct a relationship meeting called a huddle</p>	Rely

Session	Title and Description	RAM Dynamic
	<p>in which they use the RAM to evaluate their communication (<i>know</i>), attitudes toward, appreciations of, and apologies to each other (<i>trust</i>), support of each other and mutually fulfilling activities with the top 10 list (<i>rely</i> and <i>touch</i>), and set some practical goals to achieve before their next huddle (<i>commit</i>).</p>	
4	<p>Resiliently charting your course Couples discuss ideal commitment in marriage, and the ways that they carry each other in their hearts; they learn a practical definition of commitment and the ways that it increases resiliency in a marriage relationship; they learn a model of resiliency and then use it to discuss times that they successfully worked through challenges in resilient ways.</p>	Commit
5	<p>Romantically renewing your union Couples gain working definitions of the sex drive and sexual arousal; they generate a list of causes of change in the sexual drive or sexual arousal; they explore differences between their sex drives and what creates arousal, and set practical goals for growing in their sexual relationship; they discuss their affectionate touch, romantic times, and set goals for new adventures; they identify six topics to discuss about their sexual relationship.</p>	Touch

Cultural Implications

There is very little research on the marriages of ethnically diverse populations, or how they understand the concepts of love, trust, reliance, commitment, and intimacy (Madathil & Benshoff, 2008). So it is possible that the way the RAM and the constructs that constitute the RAM are perceived may vary among individuals of different cultures. However, the RAM has resonated with all cultures that have been exposed to it in the PICK and LINKS programs. For instance, both relationship education programs have been translated into Spanish and Mandarin and have been used extensively among Spanish- and Chinese-speaking individuals and couples. Additionally, both programs have been funded and promoted by the government in Singapore, a predominantly Chinese population (see www.lovethinks.com).

However, it is possible that someone of a different cultural background may use different terms for the constructs in the RAM and/or place varying levels of importance on them. For example, the importance placed on “chemistry” or

"intimacy" was discussed by unmarried 22- to 29-year-olds in India who are set to have either arranged or self-selected marriages. These individuals placed importance on intimacy and chemistry but felt that in arranged marriages the progression and development of intimacy would occur after commitment (Netting, 2010). While this finding is not completely different from what the PICK course asserts, the understanding of the constructs of *touch* and *commitment* may be defined and valued differently.

PICK is designed to address numerous issues in dating and mate selection that have occurred with the rise of individualism predominately from the influence of Western culture. Therefore, cultures that continue to practice arranged marriages would most likely believe that parents are responsible for some of what the PICK attributes to the agenda of singles. Another example is that the role of sex among collectivist cultures seems to be prioritized differently than among individualistic cultures. Specifically, collectivist cultures view the primary function of sex as an existential responsibility toward the preservation of the human species. The second function is connected to pleasure and the third function of sex is relational (Smith & Montilla, 2010).

However, the apparent universality of the five constructs of the RAM provide potential cultural applications of the PICK and LINKS programs in which cultural nuances can actually be depicted on the RAM. An example of this was a PICK training I conducted in Singapore which included a number of professional marriage matchmakers. Their culture did not practice strict arranged marriages, but it did have a tradition of singles seeking guidance and accountability with a professional matchmaker. They modified some of the material in the course to be used in their consultations with singles, but found the RAM to be an excellent visual that had the potential of depicting what they would consider healthy and unhealthy relationship development. So their guiding principles for the RAM were a little different than what was in the PICK course, but the same constructs or dynamic bonds described in the RAM also occurred in their relationships.

The lack of research on love, marriage, and its related constructs among ethnically diverse populations warrants significant further study. Additionally, future research on the PICK and LINKS courses should explore the applicability of those courses and the RAM with ethnically diverse populations.

Evidence-based Research and Evaluation

The PICK program has been evaluated among several different populations, including single Army soldiers, youth, singles-again, and low-income populations. The findings of these evaluations have demonstrated that the PICK program increases confidence and knowledge about the dating and partner selection process, increases judgment and discernment of a dating partner, increases intentionality in pacing a new relationship, and increases boundary setting in new relationships.

The PICK program has been used in military settings and specifically within the Army's Strong Bonds Program since 2001. Van Epp et al. (2008) conducted a quasi-experimental study among single Army soldiers to evaluate the effectiveness of PICK using a retrospective pre-post design and control group. The study included 272 single Army soldiers at Fort Jackson and the Defense Language Institute; 123 participants voluntarily completed the PICK program and questionnaire and 149 completed the control group questionnaire. Findings demonstrated that the participants of the PICK program espoused healthier beliefs about marriage following completion of the course. The program participants also reported that they felt more knowledgeable about how to choose a healthy partner and more confident about how to develop a relationship in a safe way. Finally these participants reported an increase in their relationship development skills and knowledge.

A retreat format of the PICK program was also evaluated among 86 4-H youth from urban and rural counties (Brower, MacArthur, Bradford, Albrecht, & Bunnell, 2012). The participants were, on average, 16.6 ($SD = 1.24$) years old and predominantly female (71%). A retrospective pre-post test design was used and the results indicated that the participants demonstrated a significant increase in their relationship development skills, a positive and significant increase in listening and conflict resolution skills, and an increase in relationship problem-solving skills.

Finally, ongoing evaluation efforts of the PICK program are being conducted for the Atlanta, Georgia, offices of Bethany Christian Services, an international adoption agency with adoption and family services in 15 countries (Bethany Christian Services, 2014). To date, over 228 participants have been taught the PICK program in the Atlanta region. Of these participants, 89% are African American and 58% had an income less than 5,000 per year. The evaluation efforts include a true pre-post test design with 3-month follow-up. The results have found that the program participants have shown a significant increase in placing importance on the key areas to get to know about a future partner, a significant increase in relationship development skills, and an increase in positive beliefs about marriage. At the 3-month follow-up, participants reported significant and continuing effects of the PICK program as well as positive behavioral changes such as ending harmful relationships, making an effort to get to know their partners more deeply, enforcing sexual boundaries, enforcing boundaries in how much they trust their partner, limiting how much they rely on a partner early in the relationship, talking with friends about the PICK course, increasing awareness of things they want to improve in their relationships, and making positive changes in their relationships.

The LINKS course is part of an ongoing examination by Marriage Works! Ohio, a grant-funded coalition of diverse organizations united to help build healthy families throughout the Miami Valley of Ohio by providing marriage and relationship education for couples (Marriage Works! Ohio, 2014). The participants of the LINKS program completed a pre-test in addition to a retrospective

pre- and post-test evaluation and the comparison group only completed the pre-test. A total of 138 participants were in the program group and 285 were in the comparison group. A comparison between the comparison and program group revealed significant differences in ethnicity and yearly income. Specifically, there was a higher proportion of African Americans (72% vs. 27%) and Caucasians (63% vs. 37%) in the comparison group and a higher proportion of Hispanics in the program group (36% vs. 64%; $\chi^2 = 9.77; p < .05$). Additionally, a higher proportion of those earning \$39,999 or less came from the comparison group ($\chi^2 = 34.79; p < .001$). There were no significant differences in age, level of education, or gender.

The latest results of the LINKS evaluation suggested that participants reported a significant positive increase in relationship skills and relationship satisfaction. Relationship skills were assessed using a 10-item scale that asked the participants how frequently they used various communication and conflict resolution skills on a Likert-type scale ranging from *almost never* to *very frequently* ($\alpha = 0.89$). This scale was developed specifically to assess the effectiveness of the LINKS program with Marriage Works! Ohio in collaboration with the developer of the LINKS program. The comparison group completed the same measure and the program group completed a pre-test in addition to a retrospective pre-post assessment.

Results indicated that there was no significant difference between the comparison group scores and the program group pre-test scores. There also was no significant instructor effect found, which suggests that results were consistent regardless of who taught the course. Furthermore when looking at the composite scores, there was not a significant difference between the program group's pre-test scores and their retrospective pre-scores (pre-test $M = 28.51$ $SD = 5.85$; retrospective pre-test $M = 28.30$ $SD = 5.95$, $t(124) = -0.43, p = 0.67$). However, when the individual pre-test and retrospective pre-test scores were examined, each of the scores was significant in that participants rated that they used healthy communication and conflict resolution skills more often on the pre-test than they did on the retrospective pre-test.

When comparing the program group's pre-test scores to the post-test scores, the results found a significant program effect, indicating more frequent use of healthy communication and conflict resolution skills following the delivery of the LINKS program (pre-test $M = 28.19$ $SD = 6.00$; post-test $M = 37.28$ $SD = 5.80$, $t(130) = -16.46, p < .0001$). Furthermore, all but one item ("*do you and your partner fix a conflict with only sex*") showed statistically significant improvement in the expected direction following the delivery of the LINKS program. If the results had been presented using the retrospective pre- and post-test scores, all items would have been significant in the expected direction. The retrospective pre-test score and true pre-test score on the item "*how often do you and your partner fix a conflict with only sex*" suggest that participants underestimated how often they use sex to fix a conflict prior to taking the LINKS course.

Relationship satisfaction was measured using a 17-item scale on which participants rated their level of satisfaction with various areas of their relationship on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from *very dissatisfied* to *very satisfied* ($\alpha = 0.95$). This scale was developed specifically for use at the coalition in Dayton in collaboration with the developer of the LINKS program. The comparison group completed the same scale. The scale assessed specific areas of the relationship and the participant's level of satisfaction with those areas, for example, overall relationship satisfaction, how much time the couple spends together, trust in the partner, how affection is shown, the sexual relationship, and equity in the relationship. These areas were measured because they are specific areas that are discussed in the LINKS program.

There were no significant differences between the program and comparison group on pre-test scores. Multivariate analyses, however, revealed a significant program instructor effect $F(17, 170) = 1.33$ ($p < .01$; partial $\eta^2 = .16$). While this is not surprising given that 13 different instructors taught the LINKS program, the effect size would be classified as small (Cohen, 1977).

Overall, there was a significant program effect on the pre- and post-test scores, indicating more relationship satisfaction following the delivery of the LINKS program (pre-test $M = 68.73$ $SD = 17.04$; post-test $M = 77.34$ $SD = 13.50$, $t(131) = -6.09, p < .0001$). Furthermore, each item showed statistically significant improvement in the expected direction following the delivery of the LINKS program.

To date, the evaluations of the PICK and LINKS programs have been positive. Overall, the PICK program has demonstrated that it increases participants' knowledge and confidence about the dating and partner selection process, increases judgment and discernment of a partner and what needs to be explored when getting to know a partner, increases intentionality when pacing a relationship, and increases boundary setting in a developing relationship. The LINKS course has been shown to increase positive relationship behaviors such as healthy communication, conflict resolution skills, and the behaviors of relationship maintenance. Furthermore, the LINKS course has been shown to increase participants' overall relationship satisfaction as well as satisfaction with specific areas of the relationship.

Professional Preparation and Training Issues

Both the PICK and LINKS programs have two methods of instructor certification: live training and out of the box training. For *Live training*, each participant must purchase the course Instructor Certification Packet (ICP) in addition to attending the live training by Dr. Van Epp or a Master Instructor. And for *Out of the box training*, each participant must purchase an Instructor Certification Packet, watch the instructor certification DVD course, and complete an online test. The Instructor Certification Packet (ICP) for PICK and LINKS contains the same

arrangement of materials, but for the respective courses. The only exception is that the PICK ICP includes a copy of the book, *How to Avoid Falling in Love with a Jerk*. An ICP includes a:

1. DVD instructor certification course by Dr. Van Epp
2. DVD course of Dr. Van Epp teaching the program to participants
3. Instructor lesson plans
4. PowerPoint presentation that is synchronized with the lesson plans
5. Sample workbook
6. Relationship Attachment Model trifold board (2' x 3') to use when facilitating a class.

Once certified, instructors receive discounts on workbook orders and gain access to a password-protected section of the website, www.lovethinks.com. Each program has its own "instructor section" that includes numerous free downloads for instructors to use when teaching the course. Some of the free materials include supplemental lessons on specific topics, additional lesson plans for specific versions (i.e., faith-based lesson plans, Spanish lesson plans, abbreviated lesson plans), additional PowerPoints for different versions (i.e., military, faith-based, youth), suggestions to supplement each session, delivery format possibilities, additional group activities, and promotional posters and brochures.

Conclusion

PICK and LINKS are two relationship education programs that utilize the Relationship Attachment Model (RAM) as a framework for their sessions because all of the content in these programs is chunked within the five constructs of the model (know, trust, rely, commit, and touch). PICK applies the RAM to *relationship development* and partner selection, embedding the five areas to explore in a relationship (FACES) in the "know" construct. The safe zone, a guiding principle about the interaction of the five constructs in the RAM, is used to explain the way to build a new relationship with minimal vulnerability.

The LINKS program is like a sequel to PICK because it applies the RAM to *relationship maintenance*. Maintaining a relationship is essential because life will naturally impact one's relationship, resulting in fluctuations of closeness. However, the guiding principle for couples to successfully maintain closeness in their relationship is to regularly assess these fluctuations by creating a profile with the five constructs in the RAM, and then set small goals to strengthen the dynamic bonds which are deficit. Each session of the LINKS program unpacks one of the five dynamic bonds of the RAM, explaining the concepts and practicing the skills that strengthen that bond in a close relationship. The primary takeaway of LINKS is a regular meeting (*huddles*) in which couples use the RAM to assess their relationship and set goals to keep strengthening their bonds of closeness.

Key Points

- The five interactive dynamic bonds of the Relationship Attachment Model (RAM) provide a picture of both relationship development for new relationships and relationship maintenance for established relationships.
- The PICK program for singles describes two major aspects of romantic relationship development: the five key areas to explore in a dating relationship that foreshadow what a partner will be like in a committed or marriage relationship, and an application of the RAM for building a relationship in a healthy and safe way ("safe zone").
- The guiding principle for successful relationship maintenance in the LINKS program is for couples to regularly assess their relationship with the RAM and to set practical goals to strengthen and balance the deficits in each of the five dynamic bonds represented by the RAM.
- The rationale for providing a plan for partner selection in the PICK program is based on several major social shifts.
- The PICK program has been empirically shown to increase confidence in dating and partner selection, understanding of the necessary areas to explore in a potential partner, intentionality in pacing a new relationship, and boundary setting in key areas of relationship development.
- The LINKS program has been empirically shown to increase communication skills, feelings of satisfaction and love, confidence for positively resolving conflicts, and the understanding and behaviors of successful relationship maintenance.
- All of the content of both the PICK and LINKS programs are chunked in the RAM which enhances the participants' memorization and application of the content of the programs.
- The instructor facilitation techniques for both PICK and LINKS includes small group exercises and discussion, activities, class discussions, and brief lectures.
- The RAM has been positively received by several ethnically diverse populations which has provided a culturally relevant framework for the content of the PICK and LINKS programs.
- The steps for becoming a certified instructor can be accomplished by attending a live training or distant learning at home.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Worthington mean by the golden thread that holds partners together?
2. How does the RAM portray relationship bonds?
3. What is the unique core of the LINKS course and how can this help couples with their relationship?
4. What are two objectives of the PICK course?
5. What are two objectives of the LINKS course?

6. What is the concept of chunking and how does it apply to the PICK and LINKS programs utilizing the RAM as a framework for categorizing the content of the courses?
7. What are the benefits of how the LINKS course engages couples in small table group activities, and how does the instructor process those activities?
8. What are some ways that the RAM can be used to help explain cultural differences when using PICK or LINKS in diverse settings?
9. What are eight positive outcomes of participants of the PICK program?

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