A Research Report on The Effectiveness of the Couple LINKS Relationship Education Program at the Elizabeth New Life Center in Dayton, Ohio

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Relationships have normal and inevitable challenges that impact the closeness that couples experience. In a review of marriage research from the 1990's to 2005, Everett Worthington concluded that "beneath these (research) findings, we discover the buried treasure. The *emotional bond between couples is the golden thread* that holds partners together (Worthington, 2005). 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). Couples who frequently strengthen the bond of their relationship minimize vulnerabilities and maximize resilience in their marriage.

THE COUPLE LINKS PROGRAM

The Couple LINKS program was developed by Dr. John Van Epp in 1999 and it has been widely used, since it's inception, by community based marriage coalitions, prisons, domestic violence shelters, religious organizations, and the military in the United States, South America, Germany, South Korea, and Singapore. The LINKS program consists of 5 sessions that range from 90-120 minutes that can be taught in a variety of formats (i.e. retreat, day-long workshop, weekly meetings, etc.). The program is taught by certified instructors that either attended a live training by Dr. Van Epp or completed the at home instructor certification program and online examination. Instructors who teach the LINKS program are able to incorporate a variety of teaching methods such as lecture, group activities, video presentations, and role-plays.

The Couple LINKS program sessions are structured around the Relationship Attachment Model (RAM, Figure 1), which proposes that relationships consist of five specific dynamic bonds, or connections that interact to create all relationships. These bonds are: know, trust, rely, commit, and touch. The RAM is a visual, interactive model that can easily depict both the degree of closeness in a relationship as well as vulnerabilities in that relationship (Van Epp, 1997). Each session of the LINKS course teaches participants how to assess, manage, and strengthen each of the five dynamic bonds. The sessions are outlined in Table 1.

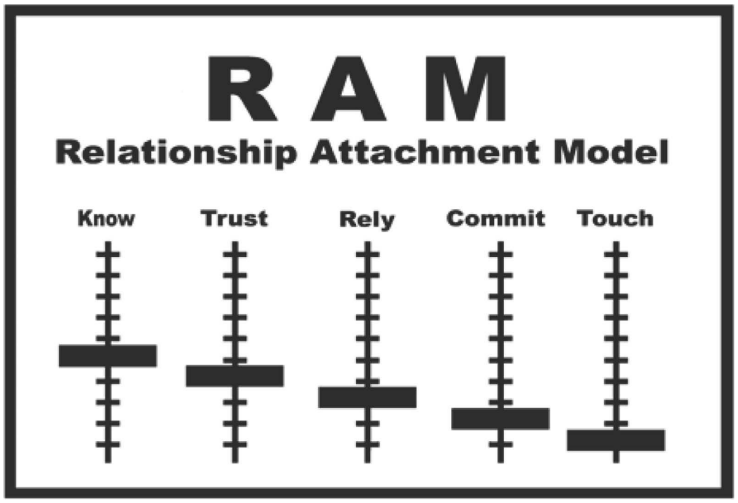
Table 1: Description of Couple LINKS Sessions

Session	*Description*
One: Relentlessly Pursuing Intimacy	Explores ways to keep up with deeply knowing your partner
Two: Respectfully Cultivating Trust	Explains how to cultivate and maintain a positive belief and clean up a negative opinion of your partner. This session also explores how to heal breaches in trust.

Three: Reciprocally Meeting Needs	Discusses how to learn about and meet the specific needs of your partner.
Four: Resiliently Charting Your Course	This session develops a resiliency model of commitment to help couples cope during times of change and crises.
Five: Romantically Renewing Your Union	Learn about romance, sexual drive, and keeping love making alive.

The core of the Couple LINKS course is to teach couples how to intentionally "run their relationship" by 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. This is important 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) and has 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 provides couples a simple yet comprehensive method of assessing and maintaining their feelings of love through the management of the five dynamic bonds. A description of each of the five dynamic bonds of the RAM and the research and theory that supports those areas are delineated below, along with the skills taught in the LINKS course that strengthen and maintain these relationship bonds.

Figure 1: The Relationship Attachment Model (RAM)



KNOW

To know another and to be known is bonding and produces feelings of closeness. The concept of knowing has been implicit in many theories of close relationships and most researchers have considered intimacy to be synonymous with self-disclosure (Berscheid, et a., 1989; Derlega & Chaikin, 1975; McAdams, 1988; Sternberg, 1986

Being known and getting to know another enhances the relational bond (Van Epp, 1997). This was also stated by past theorists who described the very feeling of intimacy and love as self-revelation, mutual self-disclosure, and sharing what is most private with another (Berscheid, et al, 1989; McAdams, 1988; Reiss, 1960). However, Van Epp (1997) argues that getting to know another and becoming known extends beyond just mutual self-disclosure. Knowing is a process that does require talking with one another, but also includes diverse shared experiences, and the accumulation of these interactions and experiences over time (Van Epp).

Mutual self-disclosure has been primarily discussed in the literature in the framework of romantic relationships (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Reis & Shaver, 1988). However, self-disclosure, even when it is one sided, contributes to a bond in all types of relationships. This is evident in the therapeutic relationship when client disclosure leads to a deepening bond with the therapist, despite the therapist's minimal disclosure.

Knowing and feeling known enhances the relational bond not solely through self-disclosure but also through various shared activities and situations. Harvey and Omarzu (1997) stated, "each and every person represents an intricate set of experiences, personal qualities, dispositions, hopes, plans and potential reactions to environmental stimuli" (p. 234). Because getting to know someone is multidimensional, it is crucial to get to know him or her in many settings. People change in different situations; thus, the more experiences individuals share and the more diverse their interactions, the more opportunities they will have to get to know each other and the closer they will become.

While getting to know someone and feeling known is an interaction that produces closeness through mutual disclosure and diverse shared activities, time is another crucial impetus to the development of this dynamic bond. Time is an essential ingredient to both mutual self-disclosure and various shared activities. Time ensures a testing method of the knowledge obtained through the getting to know process with an individual. Sophisticated forms of human behavior are only learned and understood over a significant period of shared experience. In order to become fully aware of an individual's repertoire, the knowing process requires time. Both Whyte (1984) and Grover, et al. (1985) found that longer premarital courtships were correlated with greater stability in marriage. They argued that the underlying principle was that the greater the opportunities for couples to know each other prior to deciding to marry, the greater their chance to experience some of the ordinary problems, irritations and frustrations; thus, the more informed they were when choosing a marital partner.

Staying in the know with another is incredibly important to maintaining a close, bonded relationship, whether it be a marital relationship or close friendship. In a study based on data collected from a 17-year longitudinal study of marital instability (Booth, Amato, & Johnson, 1988), 2,033 married individuals were asked an open-ended question, "what do you think caused your divorce?" (Amato & Previti, 2003). Eighteen categories were created from the analysis of responses and four of the eighteen were directly related to the know dynamic in a relationship with several others being indirectly related. For example, the fourth most common reason was that the couple was "incompatible" in that they had little in common anymore. The fifth most

common reason was that the couple "grew apart" and that their interests and priorities changed. The seventh most common reason was stated as a "communication problem" and described as the couple not talking anymore. Finally, the ninth most common reason for divorce was "personal growth" in that one partner had a life changing event and re-evaluated their life. All of these reasons for divorce relate to the bonding dynamic of getting to know another and being known. Those who felt "incompatible" did not engage in consistent talking and time together to preserve and or develop the compatibilities they had when they entered into their marriage. Those who "grew apart" did not stay in the know with their partner. Helping couples learn and practice the skills of communication and also set priorities to regularly engage in intimate communication will facilitate this essential bond in marriage.

The idea of growing apart is a common reason for divorce throughout the research (Amato & Previti; Gigy & Kelly, 1992; Kitson, 1992; Levinger, 1966). Knowing another and being known enhances the relational bond and contributes to the feeling of closeness in a relationship. Conversely, if the dynamic bond know is disrupted and chronically ill-maintained then the other dynamic bonds (i.e. trust, reliance, commitment, and touch) will be adversely affected, diminishing the feeling of closeness and love in a romantic relationship.

TRUST

Trusting another and being trusted contributes closeness to the overall relational bond (Van Epp, 1997). The construct of trust has long been considered to be an important aspect in close relationships; however trust's explicit mention in relationship theories is virtually nonexistent (Couch & Jones, 1997; Fehr, 1988, 2006, Harvey & Omarzu, 1997). Trust is typically an underlying theme or an implicit prerequisite for feeling comfortable self-disclosing, relying on another, or entering into and maintaining a commitment (Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Maxwell, 1985). The RAM overtly presents trust as an integral dynamic bond, central to the formation and maintenance of close relationships.

Overall, there is little research that has been done on the bonding aspects of trust, but the importance of trust in close relationships has been echoed in numerous research articles (Fehr, 1988, 2006; Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Maxwell, 1985; Feeney, 2005; Larzelere & Huston, 1988). One example is demonstrated through the research on marital infidelities. Zitzman and Butler (2009) found that when wives learned that their husbands viewed pornography, their lowered trust generalized into a global mistrust toward their husbands and a breakdown in their overall bond to their husbands. This study demonstrated how trust contributed to the relational bond, and how a broken trust resulted in a decrease of closeness. This study also differentiated between the bond of knowing and trusting. When the wives' knowledge of their husbands increased by learning of their involvement in porn, their trust actually decreased. Although knowing another is one of the dynamic bonds that contributes to closeness, the content of what is known is filtered by what a person believes and how they configure that knowledge into their mental representation. Simply stated, it is possible to know someone really well but trust them very little. This is one example of how identifying and differentiating between the dynamic

bonds of the RAM, and understanding the ways they interact will greatly help to clarify the mixed feelings experienced in a relationship.

Trust is not just important in romantic relationships. Fehr and Sprecher (2009) conducted a prototype analysis of compassionate love over six studies in both the United States and Canada and concluded that some features of compassionate love were mentioned consistently across all six studies, one being trust. Rotenberg and Boulton (2013) found that children who demonstrated trustworthiness to others had higher quality peer relationships. Even in today's ever increasing online relationships, trust has been put forth as in important indicator of one's willingness to self-disclose more information and invest commitment in online friendships (Henderson & Gilding, 2004). Trust has also been highlighted as a key variable to consider in the quality and amount of conflict in sibling relationships (Gamble, Yu, & Kuehn, 2011). Research has found that trust is a critical element to feelings of connectedness in patient-provider relationships (Phillps-Salimi, Haase, & Kooken, 2011). Bachelor (2013) also found that in the therapeutic relationship a sense of trust in the therapist was the strongest source of bond a client felt toward a therapist.Trust,then remains an integral source of closeness in all relationships.

According to Van Epp, trust is defined as the feeling of confidence one has in another based on the mental representation or opinion held of that person; it is the degree of positive cognitive and affective attributions persons hold in their mental representation or working model of another (Couch & Jones, 1997; Rempel, et al., 1985; Van Epp). As a person gets to know another, a mental representation is constructed of that person. Initially, stereotypes, associations and ideals are used to "fill in the gaps" of what is assumed to be true about the person (Van Epp). As time allows for more interactions and experiences, this mental representation is often adjusted to reflect a more accurate knowledge gained about the other person. This ongoing process of investing and testing out one's belief in another contributes the feelings of trust to the relational bond in close relationships. Trust has long been viewed as in integral aspect to romantic relationships and has been related to feelings of love and the intimacy of self-disclosures among married partners (Larzelere & Huston, 1980).

Miller and Rempel (2004) conducted an investigation that provided evidence that "people's feelings of trust in an intimate partner can act as a ballast that helps to preserve relationships in the face of overt conflict and negativity." Their study also provided evidence that feelings of trust can and do change over time. More important, these changes can be explained, not so much on the basis of the behavioral outcomes that people experience in conflict situations with their partner, but on how those events are interpreted through the filter of a mental representation that attributes particular underlying motives to their partner's actions. The more positive the mental representation and projected motives, the more resilient one's trust. They conclude that it "appears that attributional processes may be particularly important for understanding the evolution of trust in close relationships" (p. 704).

Therefore, maintaining trust in a relationship involves both couple skills like conflict management, apologies, and problem solving as well as individual cognitive skills necessary for maintaining a positive mental representation of another in the face of challenges. The LINKS

course teaches these specific skills as a practical means to keeping trust vibrant in a marriage relationship. Researchers have found that marital distress through can be prevented by developing positive communication and skills in conflict management (Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992; Gottman, 1994; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, and Storaasli, 1988; Markman, 1981; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, and Clements, 1993; Olson & Fowers, 1993).

In addition, keeping a positive attitude toward a partner requires the individual cognitive skills of dismissing negative thoughts while focusing on positive attributions of a partner (Murray, S. & Holmes, J. 1997; Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001). Murray Holmes and Griffin (1996) 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. The LINKS course facilitates the understanding and practice of the skills of reframing as a way of empowering couples in their understanding of the necessary individual responsibilities of maintaining a positive image or representation of one's partner (what Fowers, et. al. calls the *positive illusion of one's partner*) in order to keep a strong trust in the marriage.

When trust is broken the ability of couples to apologize, forgive and rebuild trust determines the resilience of their bond (Worthington, 2003). These skills can be developed and practiced in marriage relationships, and have been shown to be essential in the ability to maintain hope. In addition, there is an emphasis in the LINKS course on cultivating a *willingness* to forgive which has been shown to aid in the maintenance of healthy marriage and family relationships (Hoyt, Fincham, McCullough, & Maio, 2005).

RELY

The RAM presents rely as the third dynamic bond that contributes to the relational bond in close relationships. Reliance is defined as meeting another's needs, being dependable, and being able to depend upon others. This third dynamic bond is most clearly explained as mutual need fulfillment and is consistent with Reiss's (1960) personality need fulfillment component and Moss and Schwebel's (2003) notion of mutuality, both of which are characterized as elements that precipitate intimacy between partners. Le and Agnew (2001) argued that within the context of close interpersonal relationships, some of the most important outcomes are those related to need fulfillment and that need fulfillment is closely linked to emotional experiences within the relationship.

The relational bond grows as specific needs are met. The reciprocity of need fulfillment results in a deeper experience of intimacy than unidirectional need fulfillment. A study by Utne, Hatfield, Traupmann and Greenbeger (1984) on equity within relationships and marital satisfaction, found that when individuals participated in inequitable relationships, they became more distressed. The more inequitable the relationship, the more distress they felt. Another study found that when examining four different types of relationships: friend, romantic partner, boss, and employee that dependability was found to be one of the most important and valued characteristics (Cann, 2004).

Only the dynamic bond of *know* with the books and programs on communication skills comes close to rivaling the dynamic bond of *reliance* with the amount of practical applications and publications. The concept that relationships bond when people are meeting each other's unique needs has spawned numerous lay books about reciprocity for couples, parent-child relationships, work relationships, and friendships (e.g. Men Are From Mars, and Women Are From Venus; His Needs, Her Needs; Love and Respect; Love Languages, and the many applied Organizational Psychology books for business management to just name a few). However, when this dynamic bond of reliance is considered in conjunction with the other four represented in the RAM, then one's understanding of relationships is expanded even more, and these applications of reliance can be more logically integrated with the other practical works on communication, positive attitudes, trust, forgiveness, reconciliation, commitment, affection and sex.

Wamboldt and Reiss (1989) expanded the study of communication and conflict resolution to include the processes through which couples reach agreement and build a consensus. They found that couples who had developed a shared view of their relationship ground rules and agreed on each other's family-of-origin atmosphere had high relationship quality. The LINKS course helps couples to reach consensus on their roles and responsibilities, as well as to identify their most important needs and what they are doing together to meet those needs. The course provides examples of needs in relationships which include: communication and being understood, mental stimulation, affection, nurturance, sex, recreation, entertainment, emotional connections, social activities, companionship, support, and spiritual interests (Van Epp).

COMMITMENT

Committing to another and having that commitment reciprocated also enhances the relational bond (Van Epp, 1997). The construct of commitment is commonly associated with theories and conceptualizations of love (Fehr, 1988, 2006; Sternberg, 1997); however the explicit mention of commitment is almost absent from theories of close relationships and attachment. The power of commitment is critical to understanding close relationships and remaining in a relationship even when it proves difficult (Adams & Jones, 1997; Johnson, 1973). Therefore commitment is the fourth dynamic bond in the RAM. According to Van Epp, commitment is defined as the personal investment in and obligation/dedication to another, associated with a sense of belonging and union that surpass time and space, and a determination to preserve the relationship.

Including the dynamic bond of commitment as a major construct of relationships is consistent with Sternberg's commitment/decision making component (Van Epp, 2007). Relationship researchers agree that commitment is a central component of relationships (Duemmler & Kobak, 2001). It has been argued that three types of commitment exist: personal commitment or the sense of wanting to stay in a relationship; moral commitment or feeling morally obligated to stay; and structural commitment or feeling constrained to stay regardless of personal or moral commitment (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). These three types of

commitment or motivations to stay committed were supported by the findings of Fennell (1987) who asked couples married over 20 years to describe their reasons as to why they are still married.

The concept of commitment has been examined in other numerous studies. Beverly Fehr (1999) examined laypeople's conceptions of commitment using a prototype analysis and generated 419 different types of commitment and 182 were idiosyncratic. She also found that participants who held a relational conception of commitment had more positive relationship outcomes. Also, in relationship-driven commitments, commitment evolved smoothly and with few reversals (Surra & Hughes, 1997). In addition, shifting into more committed relationships has been shown to be followed by improvements in subjective well-being (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). According to Harvey and Omarzu (1997), bonding is defined by a public commitment or an act which serves as an indication that individuals have formed a close relationship. In a study on the level of commitment in relationships and the tendency to express complaints, Roloff and Solomon (2002) found that relational commitment is positively related to willingness to confront a partner, which is indicative of the desire to work through minor to major issues within the relationship. Some researchers even define love and commitment as one and the same (Money, 1980; Forgas & Dobosz, 1980). It has also been demonstrated that a person feels and thinks more positively toward another once a decision to commit is made (Brehm & Cohen, 1962). Beach and Tesser (1988) found that the more commitment a person feels toward another, the more he/she will focus cognitive and affective attention toward that individual.

Commitment is an aspect in all relationships, not just love relationships. A more recent study looked at friends with benefits relationships and found that commitment was rated lower by those who sought to continue with the friends with benefits relationship than those who sought a friendship or romantic relationship (VanderDrift, Lehmiller, & Kelly, 2012). Furthermore those who wanted no relationship at all rated commitment the lowest. This study demonstrated the presence and variations of commitment in different types of relationships. A longitudinal study of early and middle adolescents found that commitment mediated satisfaction among best friendships (Branje, Frijns, Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2007). The importance of commitment in the therapeutic relationship was highlighted by Bachelor (2013) who found that higher client commitment and therapist-perceived client commitment was related to more positive therapeutic outcomes. Therefore, all relationships have some level of commitment that contributes to the relational bond, with higher levels of commitment resulting in greater feelings of investment, obligation, dedication and belonging.

The LINKS course teaches the value of commitment and practical ways to enhance one's commitment in marriage. In addition, couples share times that their commitment helped them through challenging experiences, and the positive outcomes in their marriage that resulted from their perseverance and resilience. This longstanding therapeutic approach of storytelling used commonly in Adlerian family therapy has been shown to facilitate positive cognitive and behavioral changes (Bitter & Byrd, 2011).

TOUCH/SEX

Physical touch and sexual expressions are the last dynamic bond included in the RAM that contributes feelings of connection and closeness to the relational bond (Van Epp, 1997. Physical expression is a common construct in relationship theories. For example, passion was a major component in Sternberg's (1986) theory of love, physical intimacy was a subscale in the PAIR (Schaefer & Olson, 1981), and a criticism of attachment theory was its lack of integration with sexual behavior (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). All ranges of physical expression are considered aspects of this dynamic bond of touch. Even in casual friendships, touch may be present in the form of a handshake or an affectionate hug. And in romantic relationships, touch may represent more intimate behaviors such as kissing or intercourse.

Sexual interactions are an attachment provoking dynamic that intensifies the feeling of closeness between individuals. "Physical contact is the most direct form of closeness. Lovers usually enjoy physical contact and it, in turn, intensifies their experience of closeness" (Birtchnell, 1993). Intimacy is often equated with sexual involvement in the literature—the greater the sexual involvement, the more intimacy. In an attempt to define intimacy, Moss and Schwebel (1993) proposed five components, one being physical intimacy. Physical intimacy refers to the extent of shared physical encounters as well as to the physiological arousal state experience toward the partner at each level of the physical encounter. The sexual aspect of this dynamic bond includes everything from extended gazing to uninhibited sexual intercourse.

"Sexuality is woven into the fabric of close relationships" (Christopher & Sprecher, 2001, pg. 218). For instance Baxter and Bullis (1986) reported that first intercourse with a partner was perceived as an experience that increased commitment to a partner. No matter what is the degree or intensity, sexual intimacy is an interaction that produces feelings of closeness and will have a powerful effect on the relationship.

Sexual touch in romantic relationships is critical to overall satisfaction. Research has consistently found that the frequency of sex in romantic relationships is positively correlated to sexual satisfaction and overall relationships quality (Sprecher & Cate, 2004). However, the sexual relationship does not exist in isolation. Nonsexual aspects of a relationship also influence sexual satisfaction and the frequency of sex in relationships. For example, the quality of communication, the amount of self-disclosure, perceived empathy provided by a partner, feeling loved, feeling emotionally close, and being overall satisfied with the relationship are all related to higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Davidson & Darling, 1988; MacNeil & Byers, 1997; Sprecher & McKinney, 1993; Young, Denny, Young, & Luquis, 2000). The interaction of touch with other relationship dimensions demonstrates the interplay touch has with other dynamic bonds represented in the RAM.

Although humans are sexual beings and touch activates the sexual system, not all touch is experienced as sexual. This is evidenced by the bonding effects of touch in other types of relationships. In the therapeutic literature, touch that is expressed within appropriate boundaries and perceived as congruent and fitting has been shown to be positively experienced by the client,

fostering trust and healing (Horton, Clance, Sterk-Elifson, & Emshoff, 1995). Additionally, this study found that appropriate touch facilitated communication on a deeper level in the therapeutic relationship, "more than two thirds of the respondents *writing* that touch communicated or reinforced a sense that their therapist genuinely cared, and that the safety created by this bond helped them open up, go deeper, and take risks" (Horton, et al., pg. 454). This finding demonstrated again the interplay of the different RAM dynamic bonds. When touch is viewed as appropriate by the client, it enhanced the *know* dynamic and deepened overall intimacy. This finding was echoed in a qualitative study of mental health service recipients. One participant stated, "I try to shake hands with as many people as I can because I believe that once you touch that person, you're making a commitment that goes on as they touch you…you have a connection" (Shattell, Starr, & Thomas, 2007, p. 250). However, all touch has the potential of activating the sexual system, and in cases where touch became sexual between the therapist and the client, the effects on the client were almost always destructive (Brown, 1988; Pope, 1990; Feldman-Summers & Jones, 1984).

Expressions of touch and affection may vary across contexts and relationship types. Touch is expressed as affections in non-sexual ways in non-romantic relationships like friendships. A recent study found that expressions of affection were even present and common among college students using Facebook (Mansson & Myers, 2011). In this study the researchers identified over 51 expressions of affection through Facebook (Mansson & Myers). Another study looked at levels of oxytocin released after engaging in touch and subsequent trust and cooperative behavior among strangers (Morhenn, Park, Piper, & Zak, 2008). Overall, this study found that touch increased sacrificial behavior by 243% relative to a comparison group, which highlights the bonding aspect of touch and how it interacts with other dynamics such as trust and commitment to others.

The LINKS course helps couples to enhance their sexual relationship by first exploring similarities and differences in their sexual drives. Books like "The Sex-Starved Marriage," "Rekindling Desire: A Step-by-Step Program to Help Low-Sex and No-Sex Marriages" and "Resurrecting Sex" are just a few of the books written over the last decade about difficulties couples have with their sexual relationship. However, estimates suggest that 15% to 20% of married Americans have sex with their spouse less than once per month (Deveny, 2003). Communication is one factor associated with sexual and relational (dis)satisfaction (Byers, 2005; Litzinger & Gordon, 2005), and experts believe that married individuals are often less than fully effective in their communication about sex. So the LINKS course provides a navigational set of questions that couples use in breakout sessions to talk in their marital dyad about their sexual drives, the sexual and non-sexual things that create interest and arousal in their relationship, and what steps they would like to take to improve their sexual relationship.

Although it is commonly reported that men have stronger sexual drives (on average) than females, women, on the other hand, tend to score higher than do men on measures tapping desire for romance (Hill, 2007). Therefore, the LINKS course prompts couples to interact about romantic experiences while also setting relational goals for romantic activities. Integrating the

sexual relationship with the romantic aspects of the relationship accomplishes both the common male and female agendas (Hill, 2007).

SUMMARY

In conclusion, all five dynamic bonds represented in the RAM—the extent that one knows, trusts, relies, commits and touches another contribute and interact to develop the relational bond in close relationships (Cutlip, 2013). All five dynamic bonds have been independently and extensively researched in the literature, although, to date they have never been theoretically assembled to create a holistic representation of the major bonding connections that comprise relationships.

Helping couples to understand the bonds of their relationships and then developing skills that enhance these constructs has been shown to improve satisfaction in marriage (Worthington, 2005). The RAM is used not just as the framework of the entire LINKS course, but it also provides a simple interactive assessment for couples at home to look at their relationship, and set practical goals in each of the five bonds described above.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

This report summarizes the results of a pre and post-assessment of the effectiveness of the Couple LINKS program. The LINKS program was offered through the Elizabeth New Life Center in Dayton, Ohio which provides marriage education courses through Marriage Works Ohio, a grant funded program by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. These results are from participants who completed the Couple LINKS program as well as the pre and post-test assessments for the grant year 2008.

METHODS

The Couple LINKS program was taught to participants by certified instructors working for the Elizabeth New Life Center in Dayton, Ohio. All the instructors who taught the LINKS program were certified, in person, by Dr. Van Epp. In total, thirteen different certified LINKS instructors taught the program to participants. The instructor certification allows for some flexibility in teaching style; however the course was always taught in weekly 1.5-hour sessions for 6 weeks.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants for the Couple LINKS program were recruited using several advertising methods such as: flyers, website, newspaper, radio, and television ads, billboards, and information booths at community fairs. All participants volunteered to attend the Couple LINKS program and the classes were offered at no cost through the Marriage Works Ohio grant funded program. In total, 138 completed all six sessions of the Couple LINKS course and pre and post-

test and 285 comprised the comparison group. The comparison group was made up of participants who attended one Couple LINKS class but did not attend again.

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%; $\mathbf{X}^2 = 9.77$; $p < .05$). Additionally, a higher proportion of those earning $39,999 or less came from the comparison group ($\mathbf{X}^2 = 34.79$; $p < .001$). There were no significant differences in age, level of education or gender. The demographic characteristics of the sample are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics

	Overall N = 423	*Comparison n = 285*	*Program n=138*
Current age	35.0 (10.16)	34.65 (10.32)	35.71 (9.80)
Gender (% male)	45.1	44.8	45.7
Yearly income (%)			
$0-$9,999	15.8	15.5	13.1
$10,000-$19,999	14.1	15.5	11.2
$20,000-$29,999	12.2	13.1	10.5
$30,000-$39,999	14.3	17.2	8.4
$40,000-$49,999	11.3	9.7	14.7
$50,000-$59,999	7.6	6.6	9.8
$60,000-$69,000	6.7	5.2	9.8
$70,000 or more	10.2	7.6	15.4
Ethnicity (%)			
Caucasian	45.4	42.9	50.4
African American	48.6	53.0	40.0
Hispanic	2.7	1.5	5.2
American Indian	2.0	1.5	3.0
Asian	1.2	1.1	1.0
Level of Education (%)			
Less than HS	4.2	5.5	2.5
HS grad/GED	25.4	26.8	22.6
Some college	36.0	37.1	33.8
College grad	19.0	16.2	24.8
Vocational school	6.2	6.6	5.3
Graduate school	9.1	7.7	12.0

MEASURES AND RESULTS

The participants of the LINKS program completed a pre and post assessment and the comparison group completed just the pre assessment. The pre and post assessment measured: demographic characteristics, relationship satisfaction, and use of healthy communication and conflict resolution skills.

Relationship Satisfaction

The measure of relationship satisfaction was 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 Elizabeth New Life center 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 Couple LINKS program.

There were no significant differences between the program and comparison group on pre-test scores. Multivariate analyses, however, revealed a significant class instructor effect F (17, 170) = 1.33 ($p < .01$; partial = η^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. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Relationship satisfaction scores for the comparison and program group

How satisfied are you with…	*Comparison Group (n = 248)*	*Program group (n = 143)*		
Item		**Before**	**After**	**t-value**
Your overall relationship	4.03 (1.32)	4.22 (1.22)	4.83 (0.94)	6.09*
How much time you spend with your partner	3.98 (1.41)	3.91 (1.16)	4.38 (1.14)	4.34*
How you and your partner discuss your disagreements	2.99 (1.33)	3.03 (1.32)	4.02 (1.21)	7.49*
Your physical relationship with your partner	4.15 (1.56)	4.03 (1.50)	4.46 (1.12)	4.06*
The amount of conflict in your relationship	3.08 (1.37)	3.15 (1.39)	3.94 (1.22)	6.26*
The communication in your	3.21 (1.46)	3.22 (1.34)	4.29 (1.02)	9.01*

relationship				
The way your partner shows affection	4.00 (1.52)	4.09 (1.54)	4.58 (1.09)	4.38*
How comfortable you feel being yourself in the relationship	4.54 (1.45)	4.64 (1.30)	4.96 (1.07)	2.65
How your partner meets your needs	4.07 (1.31)	4.17 (1.31)	4.59 (1.01)	4.18*
The level of trust you have for your partner	4.02 (1.74)	4.47 (1.58)	4.75 (1.26)	2.77
The level of trust your partner has for you	3.97 (1.53)	4.31 (1.51)	4.62 (1.21)	2.95
How your partner treats you	4.25 (1.44)	4.25 (1.37)	4.74 (1.05)	4.57*
The equity or fairness in your relationship	3.85 (1.31)	4.08 (1.28)	4.51 (1.07)	4.30*
The chemistry in your relationship	4.37 (1.35)	4.34 (1.37)	4.81 (0.91)	4.27*
How much you and your partner have in common	4.31 (1.20)	4.35 (1.30)	4.73 (1.05)	3.58*
How well your partner "gets" you	3.88 (1.44)	4.05 (1.21)	4.44 (1.11)	3.87*
Your sexual relationship	4.28 (1.59)	4.10 (1.55)	4.44 (1.25)	2.88

Note: items significant at the p< .001 level all other items were significant at the p<.01 level. Items were scored as 1 = very dissatisfied to 6 = very satisfied. All t-scores were in the negative direction.*

Communication & Conflict Resolution

Communication and conflict resolution skills were assessed using a 10-item scale that asked the participants to rate 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 at the Elizabeth New Life center in collaboration with the developer of the Couple 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. The individual item mean scores for the results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Conflict management and communication scores for the comparison and program group

How often do you…	*Comparison Group (n = 248)*	*Program group (n = 143)*			
Item		**Retrospective Before**	**Before**	**After**	**t-value**
Understand each other's needs	3.00 (0.83)	2.96 (0.76)	3.39 (0.84)	3.98 (0.71)	7.42
Work through an issue together	3.00 (1.00)	2.86 (0.82)	3.34 (0.94)	3.91 (0.86)	6.35
Do you empathize with one another	3.18 (1.08)	3.07 (0.81)	3.32 (0.96)	3.94 (0.78)	7.41
And your partner understand each other's concerns about the relationship	2.82 (0.75)	2.98 (0.82)	3.48 (1.00)	3.99 (0.79)	5.78
And your partner compromise to settle an argument	2.73 (0.91)	2.78 (0.82)	3.15 (0.96)	3.78 (0.80)	7.92
Feel confident that you will be able to effectively solve problems with your partner	2.45 (0.82)	2.90 (0.82)	3.30 (0.99)	4.06 (0.82)	9.25
Let go of upset feelings you have for your partner	2.64 (1.12)	3.01 (1.02)	3.53 (0.92)	3.96 (0.88)	5.13
And your partner effectively resolve a misunderstanding	2.90 (0.99)	2.86 (0.86)	3.28 (0.92)	3.92 (0.79)	7.01
And your partner fix a conflict with only sex*	1.91 (1.22)	2.14 (1.10)	1.83 (1.00)	1.81 (0.93)	0.17*
Listen to each other when discussing an argument	2.45 (1.21)	2.84 (0.99)	3.34 (0.89)	3.97 (0.75)	7.24

Note: item is reverse scored; all items except * are significant at the p< .001 level. Items were scored as 1 = very dissatisfied to 6 = very satisfied. All t-scores were in the negative direction. The t-scores presented are on the pre and post-test assessments, not the retrospective pre-test.*

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the Couple LINKS program for the grant funded Marriage Works coalition. Couple LINKS is a relationship education program for committed couples that teaches them how to manage the bonding aspects of their relationship so that vulnerabilities are minimized and feelings of love and closeness are maximized. When comparing program participants to comparison group participants results showed that the comparison group and the program group varied in ethnicity and that, on average, a higher proportion of the comparison group came from a household with a yearly income of $39,999 or

less. It is likely that those who had a lower household income had more barriers to participating in six LINKS sessions than those with higher incomes. These participants may have had childcare, transportation, work, and/or family responsibilities that were of higher priority. Although these differences are important to note, there were relatively few demographic differences between the comparison and program group. Additionally, this finding can help to inform Marriage Works and other organizations, that offer relationship education, that additional incentives or services may help support attendance of low-income participants.

This report found that participants of the Couple LINKS program demonstrated increased relationship satisfaction and more frequent use of healthy communication and conflict resolution skills following participation in the program. Even though a significant instructor effect was found for relationship satisfaction, this overall finding is noteworthy considering 13 different instructors taught the LINKS program. This finding lends credence to how well the skills and concepts of the LINKS program translate, regardless of instructor. Also, it demonstrates how well the certification program for instructors conveys the notions that should be taught and equips instructors with the tools necessary to effectively deliver the program.

In terms of the significant instructor effect, it is unclear as to why the measure of satisfaction would show an impact and not the measure of conflict management and healthy communication skills. Two possible reasons are that the instructors that made a lesser impact on relationship satisfaction had classes with participants with more challenging relationship concerns. A second possibility is that because there was a wide range (range 4-35) of how many times instructors taught the course, some instructors may have mastered the ability to teach healthy communication and conflict resolution skills faster than they mastered the ability to impact relationship satisfaction. It is important to note that the effect size for this particular finding was small.

Another interesting finding was that when individual pre-test and retrospective pre-test scores were examined on the measure of healthy communication and conflict resolution, 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. This finding suggested that the participants might have overestimated their use of healthy communication and conflict resolution skills prior to taking the program. This finding substantiates the argument for using retrospective pre-post designs, specifically the retrospective design is said to be a more accurate assessment of what participants really know about a particular subject because participants tend to overestimate their knowledge base (Pratt, McGuigan, & Kratzev, 2000). Taking part in the LINKS program may have shown them that they actually used healthy relationship skills much less than they reported in the pretest, which is known as response shift bias (Howard & Dailey, 1979).

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings of this report suggested that the LINKS program made a positive impact on the participants that attended. The findings have implications for other marriage and relationship coalitions who seek to use a program to improve relationship skills and satisfaction. The findings also suggest that coalitions who seek to specifically serve low-income populations may want to consider creative solutions to help these participants be able to attend the program to its completion. Additionally, further research is needed to explore the instructor effect on the measure of relationship satisfaction.

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