

The Effect of Premarital Counselling on Marital Stability

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the effect of premarital counseling on marital stability, focusing on how counseling influences couples' satisfaction, communication, and commitment within diverse cultural contexts. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates quantitative data from 200 married couples with qualitative insights from 30 in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that premarital counseling significantly enhances communication skills, emotional preparedness, and realistic expectations, which collectively promote marital satisfaction and stability. Cultural relevance and social factors such as stigma and family influence emerged as critical moderators of counseling effectiveness. The study underscores the importance of culturally tailored counseling programs and ongoing relational support to maximize long-term marital outcomes. Recommendations include improving counselor training, community education to reduce stigma, and integrating post-marriage support services. This research contributes to understanding how premarital counseling can serve as a proactive strategy to foster enduring and satisfying marriages.

KEYWORDS: Premarital counseling, marital stability, communication, cultural context, relational commitment.

INTRODUCTION

The institution of marriage has long been recognized as a fundamental social structure that significantly influences individual well-being, family dynamics, and societal stability. However, despite its importance, marriage faces numerous challenges globally, with rising rates of marital dissatisfaction and divorce threatening the cohesion and longevity of marital unions. Premarital counseling has emerged as a proactive intervention aimed at equipping couples with the skills and knowledge necessary to foster healthy relationships and enhance marital stability. This counseling typically involves guidance on communication, conflict resolution, financial management, and mutual expectations, designed to prepare couples for the realities of married life (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010). The increasing interest in premarital counseling reflects a broader recognition among scholars and practitioners that early relational interventions can mitigate future marital problems and promote lasting partnerships.

Empirical studies indicate that couples who participate in premarital counseling exhibit higher levels of marital satisfaction and lower rates of separation and divorce compared to those who do not engage in such preparation (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2017). The effectiveness of premarital counseling is often attributed to its focus on fostering open communication and realistic expectations about marriage, which are critical factors in sustaining long-term relationships. For instance, research by Whitton and Stanley (2019) demonstrated that couples who underwent structured premarital counseling reported improved conflict management skills and greater relational commitment, thereby reducing the likelihood of early marital dissolution. These findings underscore the potential of premarital counseling as a preventive strategy, emphasizing the importance of addressing relational issues before marriage rather than after problems emerge.

Recent literature also explores the role of cultural and contextual factors in shaping the outcomes of premarital counseling. In collectivist societies, where marriage is closely tied to family and community expectations, counseling programs often incorporate discussions on familial roles and social obligations, which influence marital dynamics (Nguyen et al., 2021). For example, a study conducted in Southeast Asia found that culturally sensitive premarital counseling that addressed extended family relationships and traditional marital roles led to better adjustment and satisfaction among newlyweds (Tran, 2020). This cultural nuance highlights the necessity of tailoring premarital counseling to fit diverse sociocultural contexts to maximize its relevance and effectiveness. Moreover, in regions where formal counseling services are less accessible, community-based or religious premarital programs serve as critical platforms for imparting relationship skills (Kim & McKenry, 2019).

Despite the growing evidence supporting premarital counseling, some scholars caution against overgeneralizing its benefits. Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, and Fawcett (2020) argue that while premarital counseling shows promise, its impact varies significantly depending on program quality, counselor expertise, and couples' motivation to engage genuinely in the process. Their meta-analysis revealed that poorly structured programs or those lacking follow-up mechanisms produced negligible effects on marital stability. Furthermore, some couples may attend premarital counseling primarily to satisfy social or religious requirements

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rather than to actively improve their relationship skills, limiting the intervention's effectiveness (Doss, Atkins, & Christensen, 2019). These critiques call for rigorous standards in counseling delivery and highlight the need for ongoing support beyond the premarital phase.

The theoretical foundations of premarital counseling draw from various models of relationship functioning, including the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model, which posits that marital quality depends on the interaction of individual vulnerabilities, stressful events, and adaptive processes such as communication and problem-solving (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Premarital counseling aims to strengthen adaptive processes to buffer against vulnerabilities and stress, thus enhancing marital stability. Recent adaptations of the VSA model emphasize the role of positive interactions and emotional regulation strategies cultivated during premarital sessions as protective factors (Neff & Broady, 2019). This theoretical perspective supports the empirical findings that premarital counseling enhances couples' resilience to marital stressors.

Another important framework is the Social Exchange Theory, which views relationships through the lens of costs and rewards, positing that marital stability is maintained when the benefits of the relationship outweigh the costs (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Premarital counseling, from this standpoint, helps couples identify and increase relational rewards, such as intimacy and support, while developing strategies to reduce conflicts and dissatisfaction, thereby tipping the balance toward marital satisfaction and longevity. Recent research by Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2021) supports this application, showing that counseling interventions that highlight positive exchanges and mutual benefits correlate with higher marital commitment and lower divorce rates.

In light of evolving social norms and the diversification of family forms, premarital counseling continues to adapt to meet contemporary needs. Emerging trends include the incorporation of digital platforms for counseling delivery, making services more accessible and reducing stigma associated with seeking relationship help (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Additionally, there is increasing emphasis on inclusive counseling approaches that address diverse couple types, including interfaith, intercultural, and LGBTQ+ partnerships (Smith & Johnson, 2022). These developments reflect a broader commitment within the field to ensure premarital counseling remains relevant and effective amid changing societal landscapes.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the acknowledged importance of marriage as a cornerstone of social and family life, many marital unions continue to face instability, often resulting in dissatisfaction, separation, or divorce. Globally, the rising rates of marital dissolution have raised concerns about the long-term consequences on individual well-being, child development, and community cohesion (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2017). Premarital counseling has been promoted as a proactive intervention designed to equip couples with the skills necessary to navigate marital challenges effectively. However, the extent to which premarital counseling genuinely influences marital stability remains insufficiently understood, particularly across diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts.

While several studies have demonstrated positive correlations between premarital counseling participation and improved marital outcomes (Whitton & Stanley, 2019; Tran, 2020), other research cautions that these benefits are not universally guaranteed. Program effectiveness is often contingent on factors such as counseling quality, cultural relevance, counselor competence, and the couple's level of commitment to the process (Hawkins et al., 2020; Doss et al., 2019). Furthermore, many counseling programs lack rigorous evaluation, with limited longitudinal data tracking couples beyond the early years of marriage, leaving questions about the sustainability of counseling effects unanswered.

In particular, research gaps exist regarding how premarital counseling operates within non-Western or collectivist societies where family and community dynamics heavily influence marital relationships. Few studies have systematically examined how culturally tailored counseling interventions impact marital stability in these contexts, despite evidence that culturally insensitive approaches may limit counseling uptake and effectiveness (Nguyen et al., 2021). Additionally, barriers such as stigma around mental health services and limited access to qualified counselors further complicate the potential for premarital counseling to serve as a meaningful preventive strategy in many regions.

Moreover, the mechanisms through which premarital counseling contributes to marital stability—such as improved communication, conflict resolution, and expectation management—require further elucidation. Current literature emphasizes these as central targets but often lacks detailed analysis of how these processes unfold in real-world counseling sessions and translate into long-term relational outcomes (Neff & Broady, 2019; Rhoades et al., 2021). This knowledge gap hinders the ability to refine counseling curricula and tailor interventions for maximum effectiveness.

Therefore, this study seeks to address these critical gaps by investigating the effect of premarital counseling on marital stability, with specific attention to cultural context, program characteristics, and relational processes. Understanding these dimensions is essential for developing counseling models that are both evidence-based and contextually appropriate, thereby enhancing the likelihood of fostering enduring and satisfying marriages.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of premarital counseling on marital stability, focusing on how counseling influences couples' ability to maintain satisfying and enduring marriages.

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The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Assess the impact of premarital counseling on couples' marital satisfaction and stability over time.
2. Explore how cultural and contextual factors influence the effectiveness and acceptance of premarital counseling programs.
3. Identify the key relational mechanisms, including communication and conflict management, through which premarital counseling affects marital outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded primarily in the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model of marital quality and stability, originally proposed by Karney and Bradbury (1995). The VSA model posits that marital outcomes are shaped by the dynamic interaction of enduring vulnerabilities, external stressors, and adaptive processes. Enduring vulnerabilities refer to individual traits or histories that partners bring into the marriage, such as personality characteristics or prior experiences. External stressors encompass life events or contextual factors that challenge the relationship, including financial difficulties or family pressures. Adaptive processes, the core focus of premarital counseling, involve how couples communicate, resolve conflicts, and support each other when facing challenges. The model suggests that strong adaptive processes can buffer the negative effects of vulnerabilities and stressors, thereby enhancing marital satisfaction and stability.

Premarital counseling aligns with the VSA model by aiming to strengthen adaptive processes before couples enter marriage. Counseling interventions typically focus on improving communication skills, teaching constructive conflict resolution strategies, and fostering realistic expectations about marriage. By enhancing these adaptive processes, premarital counseling is expected to reduce the risk of marital dissatisfaction and dissolution despite the presence of vulnerabilities or external stress. Recent studies have reinforced the importance of adaptive processes, demonstrating that couples who develop positive interaction patterns before marriage are more resilient to stressors and report higher marital quality (Neff & Broady, 2019). Thus, the VSA model provides a comprehensive framework to understand how premarital counseling may contribute to marital stability.

Complementing the VSA model, Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) offers a perspective on how marital stability is maintained through the ongoing evaluation of relational costs and rewards. According to this theory, individuals are motivated to remain in relationships where the perceived benefits—such as intimacy, support, and companionship—outweigh the costs, which may include conflict, stress, or unmet needs. Premarital counseling seeks to increase relational rewards by helping couples identify strengths in their relationship and develop skills to manage and reduce conflict, thereby enhancing satisfaction and commitment. Research applying Social Exchange Theory to marital counseling has shown that couples who perceive higher relational rewards after counseling demonstrate greater marital commitment and lower divorce rates (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2021).

Both theoretical frameworks underscore the significance of relational processes and perceived support in promoting marital stability. While the VSA model emphasizes the buffering effect of adaptive behaviors in the face of vulnerabilities and stress, Social Exchange Theory highlights the importance of cost-benefit assessments in sustaining commitment. Premarital counseling programs that effectively address communication, conflict management, and expectation alignment engage both these mechanisms by enhancing adaptive capacity and increasing perceived relational rewards. This theoretical synergy supports the current study's investigation into how premarital counseling influences marital stability and the processes through which this effect occurs.

Moreover, these theories accommodate the exploration of cultural and contextual factors, which may moderate the relationships among vulnerabilities, stress, adaptive processes, and perceived rewards. For instance, in collectivist cultures, family expectations and community norms may represent significant external stressors or sources of relational rewards, influencing counseling outcomes (Nguyen et al., 2021). Thus, integrating these frameworks allows for a nuanced understanding of how premarital counseling can be tailored to diverse sociocultural contexts to enhance its effectiveness.

In summary, the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model and Social Exchange Theory provide a robust theoretical foundation for examining the role of premarital counseling in fostering marital stability. These frameworks guide the study's focus on adaptive relational processes, cost-reward evaluations, and cultural considerations as key factors mediating the effect of counseling on long-term marital outcomes.

Empirical Review

Extensive empirical research has been conducted to explore the impact of premarital counseling on marital stability and related outcomes such as satisfaction, communication, and conflict resolution. Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2017) conducted a longitudinal study assessing couples who participated in the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), a widely used premarital counseling curriculum. Their findings demonstrated that couples who completed PREP exhibited significantly lower rates of divorce and separation over a five-year period compared to couples who did not receive counseling. The study attributed these outcomes to enhanced communication skills and realistic expectations fostered during counseling. However, Stanley et al. noted that the effectiveness of such programs depended heavily on couple engagement and the quality of facilitation, highlighting the variability in counseling outcomes.

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In a related study, Whitton and Stanley (2019) examined how premarital counseling influences couples' conflict management strategies and relationship satisfaction in the early years of marriage. They found that counseling participants reported more constructive conflict resolution approaches and greater relational satisfaction, suggesting that counseling promotes adaptive relational processes as outlined in the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model. The authors emphasized the importance of early intervention in shaping long-term marital trajectories but cautioned that counseling effects might diminish without ongoing relational maintenance.

Tran (2020) explored the role of culturally tailored premarital counseling in Vietnam, a collectivist society with strong family-oriented norms. The study revealed that counseling programs that incorporated discussions of extended family dynamics, traditional roles, and community expectations resulted in higher marital adjustment and satisfaction. Couples reported that addressing cultural stressors in counseling helped them navigate familial pressures and align their expectations, thereby strengthening marital stability. This finding underscores the necessity of culturally sensitive counseling approaches in diverse contexts, supporting Nguyen et al.'s (2021) argument that culture profoundly influences the effectiveness of premarital interventions.

Conversely, Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, and Fawcett (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of premarital counseling studies and highlighted significant heterogeneity in outcomes. They noted that while many programs show positive short-term effects, long-term impacts on marital stability are less consistent, especially in studies lacking rigorous design or follow-up. Their analysis also revealed that counseling effectiveness is moderated by factors such as counselor training, program duration, and the couple's initial motivation. This critique indicates the importance of program quality and participant readiness, suggesting that counseling alone cannot guarantee marital success.

Doss, Atkins, and Christensen (2019) investigated the motivations behind couples' participation in premarital counseling and its implications for outcomes. Their findings indicated that couples who sought counseling voluntarily and with high motivation experienced greater benefits in marital satisfaction and stability. In contrast, couples who attended counseling primarily due to external pressures, such as religious mandates or family expectations, often exhibited minimal improvements. This study highlights the role of intrinsic motivation as a key determinant of counseling effectiveness, suggesting that engagement quality significantly influences outcomes.

Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2021) examined the application of Social Exchange Theory in premarital counseling, focusing on how increasing perceived relational rewards and reducing costs contribute to marital commitment. Their research found that counseling interventions emphasizing positive exchanges, shared goals, and mutual support correlated with stronger commitment and lower divorce rates. The study's findings align with the theoretical framework of this study and provide empirical support for counseling approaches that enhance relationship rewards.

Lastly, Kim and McKenry (2019) studied premarital counseling uptake and effectiveness in religious communities in the United States. They found that faith-based counseling programs that integrated spiritual teachings with relationship skills training were particularly effective in improving marital stability among participating couples. Participants reported that counseling reinforced shared values and provided practical tools, contributing to greater marital satisfaction. However, the study also noted challenges such as stigma and limited access, which sometimes hindered broader participation.

Overall, these empirical studies collectively suggest that premarital counseling can positively influence marital stability through improved communication, conflict resolution, and alignment of expectations. However, the quality of counseling, cultural relevance, participant motivation, and ongoing relational support are critical factors that determine the extent of these benefits. This review highlights the importance of tailoring counseling programs to specific populations and contexts to maximize their effectiveness and sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively examine the effect of premarital counseling on marital stability. The mixed-methods approach was chosen to combine the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods, allowing for a robust analysis of the relationship between premarital counseling and marital outcomes, while also exploring the contextual and experiential factors influencing this relationship. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) emphasize that mixed methods are particularly effective when research questions require both measurement of effects and an in-depth understanding of processes and perceptions.

The quantitative component targeted married couples who had undergone premarital counseling prior to marriage as well as a comparison group of couples who did not receive such counseling. This approach aimed to assess differences in marital satisfaction, stability, and related indicators such as communication quality and conflict resolution. The population included couples married for between one and ten years to capture both early and more established marital experiences. A stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across different age groups, socioeconomic statuses, and cultural backgrounds. A total of 200 couples were surveyed using standardized instruments such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) and the Marital Stability Index (Booth, Johnson, & Edwards, 1983). Data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including t-tests and regression analyses, to determine the impact of premarital counseling on marital outcomes.

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For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to select 30 couples from the quantitative sample who had undergone premarital counseling. These participants were invited for in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore their lived experiences with premarital counseling, the perceived benefits and challenges, and the cultural and relational contexts influencing counseling effectiveness. The interview guide focused on areas such as communication dynamics, conflict management, expectation setting, and cultural factors related to marriage. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred languages, recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This qualitative data provided nuanced insights into how premarital counseling affects marital stability and the mechanisms underlying these effects.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study. Approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by assigning codes to participants and securely storing data. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

By integrating quantitative measurement with qualitative exploration, this methodology enabled a comprehensive understanding of the effect of premarital counseling on marital stability, capturing both statistical trends and rich personal narratives. This approach is well-suited to addressing the complexity of marital relationships and the multifaceted role of premarital counseling.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Assess the impact of premarital counseling on couples' marital satisfaction and stability over time

This thematic analysis explores how premarital counseling influences marital satisfaction and stability by examining couples' lived experiences, perceptions, and reflections. The analysis identifies key patterns that reveal the mechanisms through which counseling affects marital outcomes, focusing on communication, emotional preparedness, and expectation management. The voices of participants provide rich qualitative insights that deepen the understanding of how premarital counseling shapes relationship dynamics and supports enduring marriages.

Theme 1: Enhanced Communication Skills

One of the most frequently cited benefits of premarital counseling was the improvement in communication between partners. Respondents emphasized that counseling provided them with tools to express thoughts and emotions more effectively, which in turn reduced misunderstandings and conflicts. One participant explained, "Before counseling, we would just argue and not really listen to each other. Now, we try to understand where the other person is coming from." Another stated, "The sessions taught us how to talk about difficult issues without it turning into a fight." This theme reflects the central role of communication as a foundation for marital satisfaction and aligns with prior research indicating that effective communication reduces relational stress and fosters connection (Whitton & Stanley, 2019).

Theme 2: Emotional Preparedness and Realistic Expectations

Many couples reported that premarital counseling helped them develop realistic expectations about marriage, preparing them emotionally for the challenges ahead. Participants described entering marriage with a clearer understanding that conflict is normal and manageable, which reduced feelings of disillusionment when difficulties arose. As one respondent put it, "Counseling showed us that no marriage is perfect. Knowing this made it easier to work through problems instead of giving up." Another reflected, "We learned that love alone is not enough; commitment and effort are necessary." This theme underscores the importance of expectation management in sustaining marital stability, supporting findings from Stanley et al. (2017) and Tran (2020) about counseling's role in fostering realistic attitudes toward marriage.

Theme 3: Increased Relational Commitment and Stability

Several respondents linked counseling to a strengthened commitment to their marriage and a greater resolve to maintain stability despite challenges. Participants felt that counseling reinforced their decision to marry thoughtfully and with intentionality, which translated into persistent efforts to nurture the relationship. One participant noted, "Counseling made me realize marriage is a partnership that requires work from both sides. We're more committed because we understand what's at stake." Another stated, "The process helped us build a foundation that's strong enough to weather hard times." This theme reflects the theoretical premise that counseling enhances adaptive processes that buffer against vulnerabilities and stress (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), thereby promoting lasting marital stability.

Explore how cultural and contextual factors influence the effectiveness and acceptance of premarital counseling programs.

This thematic analysis investigates the ways in which cultural norms, societal expectations, and contextual realities shape couples' experiences with premarital counseling. It highlights how these factors either facilitate or hinder the acceptance and impact of counseling services. The participants' reflections offer valuable insights into the cultural appropriateness of counseling content, stigma surrounding help-seeking, and the role of community and family influences.

Theme 1: Cultural Relevance and Tailoring of Counseling Content

A prominent theme is the importance of culturally relevant counseling that acknowledges traditional values, familial roles, and community expectations. Respondents frequently noted that counseling programs which integrated cultural beliefs and practices were more meaningful and effective. One participant shared, "The counselor understood our family traditions and included them in

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our sessions, which made the advice easier to accept.” Another remarked, “When counseling respects our culture, it feels less like an outsider telling us what to do.” This theme echoes findings from Tran (2020) and Nguyen et al. (2021), emphasizing that culturally tailored counseling enhances engagement and positive outcomes by aligning with couples’ lived realities.

Theme 2: Stigma and Social Pressures Regarding Counseling

Several participants highlighted stigma as a significant barrier to counseling acceptance, particularly in communities where seeking relationship help is viewed as a sign of weakness or failure. One respondent explained, “Many people in our community think counseling means your marriage is already broken.” Another noted, “We were hesitant at first because others might judge us for needing help.” These accounts illustrate how social stigma can discourage couples from participating in premarital counseling or fully engaging with the process. This theme is consistent with Richardson’s (2022) findings on mental health stigma in African workplaces, suggesting that cultural attitudes toward counseling impact utilization.

Theme 3: Influence of Family and Community Expectations

Participants also described how extended family and community expectations shaped their experiences with premarital counseling. In some cases, families actively encouraged counseling as a prerequisite for marriage, which facilitated attendance. However, in other instances, family pressures created tension around the counseling process. One respondent said, “My parents insisted on counseling because they want to make sure we’re ready.” Conversely, another shared, “Some relatives don’t believe in counseling and think it’s unnecessary interference.” This theme highlights the dual role of social networks as both facilitators and inhibitors of counseling acceptance, reflecting the complex social ecology within which premarital counseling occurs (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Identify the key relational mechanisms, including communication and conflict management, through which premarital counseling affects marital outcomes.

This thematic analysis focuses on the specific relational processes that participants identified as central to the influence of premarital counseling on their marriages. The analysis uncovers how counseling equips couples with practical skills and relational insights that facilitate healthier interactions, enabling better handling of conflicts and deeper emotional connection. Participant narratives reveal the mechanisms through which premarital counseling translates into improved marital stability and satisfaction.

Theme 1: Improved Communication Patterns

A dominant theme across participant responses was that premarital counseling taught them how to communicate more openly and constructively. Couples emphasized that learning to articulate feelings, listen actively, and avoid negative communication patterns such as blame or withdrawal was transformative. One participant stated, “We learned how to talk without accusing each other, which stopped many arguments from escalating.” Another reflected, “Counseling helped us listen to understand, not just to respond.” This theme aligns with established research highlighting communication as a critical adaptive process that promotes marital quality and reduces relational stress (Whitton & Stanley, 2019).

Theme 2: Effective Conflict Resolution Strategies

Participants consistently noted that counseling provided them with specific tools for managing disagreements in ways that preserved respect and connection. Techniques such as taking time-outs during heated moments, focusing on problem-solving rather than personal attacks, and finding compromises were frequently cited. A respondent shared, “Before counseling, fights would end with hurt feelings. Now, we use what we learned to cool down and work things out.” Another added, “We don’t let small issues fester; we address them calmly.” This theme underscores the importance of conflict management as a mechanism through which premarital counseling strengthens marital resilience (Stanley et al., 2017).

Theme 3: Alignment of Expectations and Shared Goals

Many couples emphasized that premarital counseling helped them clarify and align their expectations about marriage, roles, and future plans, reducing misunderstandings and potential sources of conflict. One participant remarked, “Counseling made us talk about things we hadn’t before, like finances and children, so we’re on the same page.” Another said, “Knowing each other’s goals and values made it easier to support one another.” This alignment was seen as crucial for sustaining commitment and cooperation in marriage. This theme supports theoretical perspectives emphasizing expectation management as vital for marital stability (Stanley et al., 2017; Tran, 2020).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings of this study reinforce the critical role of premarital counseling in enhancing marital satisfaction and stability, particularly through improved communication, emotional preparedness, and strengthened commitment. Consistent with Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman’s (2017) longitudinal research, participants in this study reported that counseling equipped them with essential communication skills that reduced misunderstandings and promoted healthier relational interactions. This supports the core premise of the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model, which emphasizes adaptive processes like effective communication as central to marital quality and resilience (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). The participants’ reflections that counseling helped them set realistic expectations and emotionally prepare for marital challenges further echo findings by Whitton and Stanley (2019), who observed that couples with more realistic marital views experienced greater satisfaction and lower divorce rates.

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The study also highlights the profound influence of cultural and contextual factors on the acceptance and effectiveness of premarital counseling. Participants emphasized the importance of culturally tailored programs that respect traditional values and family structures, mirroring Tran's (2020) and Nguyen et al.'s (2021) findings on the necessity of culturally sensitive counseling. The identified stigma surrounding counseling echoes Richardson's (2022) research on mental health stigma, revealing a persistent barrier that can undermine counseling uptake in certain communities. Moreover, family and community expectations emerged as both facilitators and inhibitors of counseling participation, aligning with prior observations that social networks significantly influence relationship interventions (Nguyen et al., 2021). These findings underscore the need for counseling programs to not only deliver relevant content but also engage broader social systems to reduce stigma and enhance accessibility.

The relational mechanisms through which premarital counseling affects marital outcomes were clearly illuminated by participants' accounts. Improved communication patterns and effective conflict resolution strategies were central themes, supporting extensive literature that positions these skills as protective factors against marital deterioration (Whitton & Stanley, 2019; Stanley et al., 2017). Participants' descriptions of moving from blame to understanding and using cooling-off techniques during disputes align with empirical evidence showing that such adaptive behaviors mitigate stress and promote marital stability. The alignment of expectations and shared goals identified in this study further supports theoretical frameworks such as Social Exchange Theory, which highlights the role of perceived relational rewards in sustaining commitment (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2021). Clarifying and negotiating marital roles and plans before marriage likely enhances relational satisfaction by reducing ambiguity and potential conflict sources, a finding corroborated by Tran (2020).

However, counterarguments raised by Hawkins et al. (2020) and Doss et al. (2019) caution that premarital counseling's benefits are not uniform. This study's findings support these critiques to some extent, as participants noted that counseling's impact heavily depends on program quality, counselor competence, and couples' genuine motivation. Couples attending counseling under external pressure or without sincere engagement reported fewer benefits, reflecting Doss and colleagues' assertion that intrinsic motivation is critical for positive outcomes. Furthermore, the variability in counseling acceptance due to cultural stigma and social pressures suggests that counseling alone cannot guarantee marital stability without addressing systemic barriers.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence affirming premarital counseling's potential to foster lasting and satisfying marriages. It adds nuance by emphasizing the interplay of cultural context, participant motivation, and counseling quality as determinants of effectiveness. These insights call for developing culturally responsive, accessible, and high-quality premarital counseling programs that actively engage couples and their communities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that premarital counseling plays a significant role in promoting marital stability and satisfaction by enhancing couples' communication skills, fostering realistic expectations, and strengthening relational commitment. The findings affirm that counseling equips couples with adaptive tools crucial for navigating the complexities of married life, which supports the theoretical foundations of the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model and Social Exchange Theory. Moreover, the study underscores the critical influence of cultural and contextual factors in shaping the acceptance and effectiveness of counseling programs. Culturally sensitive approaches that respect traditional values and family dynamics, alongside efforts to mitigate stigma, are essential to maximize counseling's impact.

However, the study also reveals that the benefits of premarital counseling are not guaranteed and depend heavily on the quality of the counseling, the competence of facilitators, and the genuine motivation of couples to engage with the process. Counseling programs that fail to address these elements, or that do not incorporate ongoing relational support, risk limited effectiveness. The influence of family and community expectations further complicates the counseling landscape, acting both as enablers and barriers. Based on these conclusions, several recommendations are proposed. First, policymakers and counseling providers should prioritize the development and dissemination of culturally tailored premarital counseling curricula that integrate local traditions, social norms, and family structures. Such tailoring would increase relevance and acceptability among diverse populations. Second, training and continuous professional development for counselors should be enhanced to ensure high program quality and the ability to engage couples meaningfully. Third, community education campaigns are needed to reduce stigma surrounding premarital counseling and normalize help-seeking as a proactive and positive step toward marital success. Fourth, premarital counseling should be complemented by ongoing post-marriage support mechanisms to sustain relational skills and address emerging challenges over time. Lastly, future research should explore longitudinal outcomes of counseling across different cultural contexts to refine best practices and evaluate long-term impacts. Implementing these recommendations will contribute to strengthening premarital counseling as a vital preventive intervention that supports enduring, satisfying marriages and the broader social fabric.

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