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## Developing the Art of Becoming a Couple: A Grounded Theory Study of the Positive Influence of Married and Loving It! ®

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## Developing the Art of Becoming a Couple: A Grounded Theory Study of the Positive Influence of Married and Loving It!®

### Abstract

Couples can improve their marriages by implementing relationship building skills they learn while participating in a marriage education program. This study addresses how marriages improved as a result of participating in the marriage education program, Married and Loving It!® and what specific components of the learning experience facilitated the change. Using grounded theory methodology, the data collected from 12 participants, six married couples through in depth semi-structured interviews, revealed how participating in Married and Loving It!® can assist couples in improving their relationships by guiding them through a developmental process. It is through skill development and a greater understanding of themselves and their spouse; couples are able to make positive changes in their behaviors and attitudes which influence their marriages.

### Keywords

Marriage Education, Marriage Enrichment, Couples Education, Adult Learning, Grounded Theory, Program Evaluation

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# **Developing the Art of Becoming a Couple: A Grounded Theory Study of the Positive Influence of *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup>**

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*Couples can improve their marriages by implementing relationship building skills they learn while participating in a marriage education program. This study addresses how marriages improved as a result of participating in the marriage education program, Married and Loving It!<sup>®</sup> and what specific components of the learning experience facilitated the change. Using grounded theory methodology, the data collected from 12 participants, six married couples through in depth semi-structured interviews, revealed how participating in Married and Loving It!<sup>®</sup> can assist couples in improving their relationships by guiding them through a developmental process. It is through skill development and a greater understanding of themselves and their spouse; couples are able to make positive changes in their behaviors and attitudes which influence their marriages. Key Words: Marriage Education, Marriage Enrichment, Couples Education, Adult Learning, Grounded Theory, and Program Evaluation*

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## **Introduction**

Couples choose marriage for themselves hoping to build a future with one special person. According to the National Marriage Resource Center (2009, para. 5), “eighty two percent of young adults aged 18-30 plan to get married and stay married for life. However, approximately 40% of first marriages end in divorce.”

Marriage education programs, also known as marriage enrichment programs, have emerged as opportunities to assist couples in the development of a healthy marriage relationship. A review of marriage education showed marital education programs consistently lead to an improvement of communication skills and relationship satisfaction (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). A meta-analytic review of 117 studies found Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) to produce significant, moderate effect sizes on the outcomes of relationship quality and communication skills (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008), and a meta-analysis review of outcome research of premarital prevention programs revealed these programs to be effective in gains in interpersonal skills and overall relationship quality (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Although comprehensive literature reviews indicate marriage enrichment programs are effective in improving relationship skills and marital satisfaction (Silliman, Stanley, Coffin, Markman, & Jordan, 2001), there is a lack of information about the effectiveness of specific programs (Bowling, Hill, & Jencius, 2005; Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004) and the process of change facilitating the improved marriage relationship (Wilson & Halford, 2008).

While quantitative research has been the primary methodology used for the majority of studies conducted on marriage, qualitative research can complement that work by helping to understand the marriage education experience of individuals and couples in the process of change and how the marriage education experience specifically assists couples in improving marital relationships. Results from a previous study of *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> participants, a research-based marriage education program which has been in use since 2000, indicate overall marital satisfaction increased after participating in the program (Petty, 2003). The present qualitative study was designed to gain further understanding of the positive changes in the marriage through participating in *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> and what specific components of the learning experience facilitated the change.

### **Program Overview**

As an Extension Educator with the University of Idaho, I provide family life education to county residents in response to identified needs. After receiving a request for marriage education and not finding a program to fit our educational setting, my husband and I developed *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> Over 400 people in Idaho have participated in the program and the curriculum has been distributed to over 45 states and seven foreign countries. Evaluations completed during the last class of the program have resulted in simple statements addressing the participant's satisfaction with the program, knowledge gain and initial changes in behavior. However there is a lack of in-depth scholarly research to gain additional knowledge as to the impact of the marriage education experience on the marriage relationship and the teaching components of the learning experience facilitating the change of an improved marriage. Adult educators are most effective when they know what specific aspects of the educational experience have the greatest impact for the participants.

*Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> is a marriage education program designed to strengthen marriage relationships by presenting research-based information about successful and happy couples and by teaching relationship enhancement skills through a series of five classes. Classes are offered one night a week for two hours for five consecutive weeks or over a weekend. Activities for small groups or individual couples reinforce the material presented, and participants are assigned homework to complete before returning to the next class. Content for the five lessons are:

- 1) *Communication.* During the initial class participants become aware of the influence of their ability to communicate in all areas of their married life. They learn skills to implement when discussing difficult issues and how to communicate their love for each other using their spouses love language. Opportunity is given for each spouse to share with each other meaningful ways their love has been expressed to them by their spouse.
- 2) *Finances: Freedom or Fiasco?* In this session participants have a guided opportunity to evaluate their finances and learn tools to implement in reaching their financial dreams. Couples participate in a group activity designed to teach the skill of setting up a spending

plan. Discussions with other participants enhance the development of a network of friendships within the class. The blending of different money personalities into a marriage relationship are discussed along with unique financial issues encountered by married couples.

- 3) *Madly in Love.* Participants learn the appropriate purpose and function of anger and how to identify the sources of anger in their own anger response. They are encouraged to recognize the many faces of anger in themselves and their spouses. An illustration of a tree is used to visually depict the root cause of anger and its role when the anger response is triggered.
- 4) *Conflict: For Better or For Worse?* In building a healthy marriage couples learn how to positively manage anger in a way that is not harmful to the relationship, resolve conflict, re-establish boundaries and confront issues with confidence. In this class participants are introduced to ways to say no when confronted with conflicting issues.
- 5) *Marriage... A Daily Affair.* The final session focuses on the daily decisions and activities that either strengthen a marriage relationship or tear it down. The class discussions focus on the decision-making process, the distribution of time, household tasks, and the influence of in-laws. Couples evaluate decisions to be made in their relationship, identifying which partner has the most expertise and determine who has the greatest influence in the decision.

### **Methodology**

The qualitative inquiry tradition of grounded theory of Strauss and Corbin (1998) was used in this study to reveal a substantive theory from and grounded in the collected data of the phenomenon of participating in *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> Participants respond to the phenomenon by engaging in the process, interacting, and taking action. Minor variations to include constructivist grounded theory espoused by Chamaz (2000) were used as the researcher was well positioned in the phenomenon as one of the co-authors and presenters of the program. The researcher also brings to this study the bias of being in a marriage for over 30 years.

### **Participants**

The dual focus of the study was on the influence of participating in *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> and what specific components of the educational experience led to positive change in the relationship. Only couples who benefited from the program were purposefully selected according to the study inclusion criteria which included participating in *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> at least six months prior to the interview and self-declaring their marriages had improved as a result of participating in the program. The researcher was acquainted with the participants through class participation. Future studies will include participants who remained the same or realized a negative change from their marriage education experience. The participants consisted of 12 people, six married couples who self-declared their marriage had improved as a result of

participating in *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> The participants were identified by a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. The participants in this study represented various ages, races and ethnicities, and were at different stages of married life. The couple's length of marriage ranged from engaged to married 22 years. One couple was starting their second marriage after being in first marriages for nearly 20 years. When participating in the program, the youngest were 21 and the oldest were in their 50s. The length of time between participating in the program and when the interviews were conducted ranged from six months to five and one-half years. One of the couples who had participated five and a half years before also repeated the program 18 months prior to the interviews.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

After receiving approval for the Internal Review Board of the University of Idaho, data were collected through semi-structured couple interviews following the interview protocol. The interviews took place in a setting selected by the participants making them most comfortable to facilitate honest responses. Two couples selected a work place, another was interviewed in a church and the others chose homes. Both spouses were present during the interviews and answered the questions using a conversational style. The open ended questions were divided into two sections. The first section explored the participant's perception of the change that had taken place in their relationship and the process of change. Sample questions included: "In what ways is your marriage different since participating in *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup>?" and "What skills did you learn from *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> that you have implemented in your marriage?" The second section focused on their experience during the classes and the specific components of the learning experience motivating the change in their marriage. Sample questions include: "What was the influence of the activities (bean game, water bucket activity, communication blocks, love languages, yes-no activity) on your learning process?" and "What was the influence of the PowerPoint presentations on your learning process?" The researcher recorded the interviews via audio and video.

After conducting the first interview, the researcher transcribed the interview verbatim and also coded it. During the transcribing of the interviews memos were written with attention being directed toward actions, events, observations and questions, while starting the theory development. After conducting the second interview, transcribing and coding the data, the analysis began by using the constant comparison approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). By the researcher constantly comparing the data from each interview during this open coding process it was easier to identify the similarities and differences between codes and to recognize when saturation occurred.

After conceptual ordering, 52 categories emerged as a result of an effort to organize and reassemble the data. To assist with the process of further reducing the data, the categories were grouped according to the ecology of the phenomenon, reducing the number of categories to 13.

Axial coding uncovers relationship among the categories while contextualizing the phenomenon by answering questions "such as why or how come, where, when, how, and with what results" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 127). To assist with contextualizing the phenomenon the researcher used a Conditional Relationship Guide (McCaslin & Scott, 2003) which is a matrix used to answer what, when, where, why, how, and with

what consequence for each category (McCaslin & Scott). The Conditional Relationship Guide was helpful in adding depth and structure to each category as the researcher coded “around the axis” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 142).

The next analysis process involved moving into selective coding by integrating and refining the categories into a theory explaining the phenomenon being studied (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the initial step in selective coding, the Reflective Coding Matrix (McCaslin & Scott, 2003; Scott, 2004) was implemented to assist with identifying a core category representing the main theme of the research while reflecting all of the data (Strauss & Corbin). The Reflective Coding Matrix is a relational hierarchy consisting of the core category with descriptive subcategories of properties, processes, dimensions, context or ecology and the modes for understanding the consequences of the core category (McCaslin & Scott; Scott). According to McCaslin and Scott, the consequences most frequently identified “on the conditional relationship guide either is or is a direct indicator of the core category” (p. 29). In constructing a Reflective Coding Matrix, the researcher examined the consequences from the Conditional Relationship Guide identifying the ones repeating and representing a process or action/interaction. After completing this process, the researcher completed the matrix identifying properties or characteristics of the category, dimensions, contexts and modes of understanding. To address the second part of the study, processes and dimensions of marriage education were added to the matrix. After identifying the core category, the reflective matrix was completed with constant comparison and confirmation the core category represented the phenomenon. The findings were compared with the literature (Carroll, & Doherty, 2003; Duncan, Holman, & Yang, 2007; Hawkins et al., 2008; Olson & Olson, 2000), with processes, dimensions, contexts, consequences, and the processes and dimensions of marriage education.

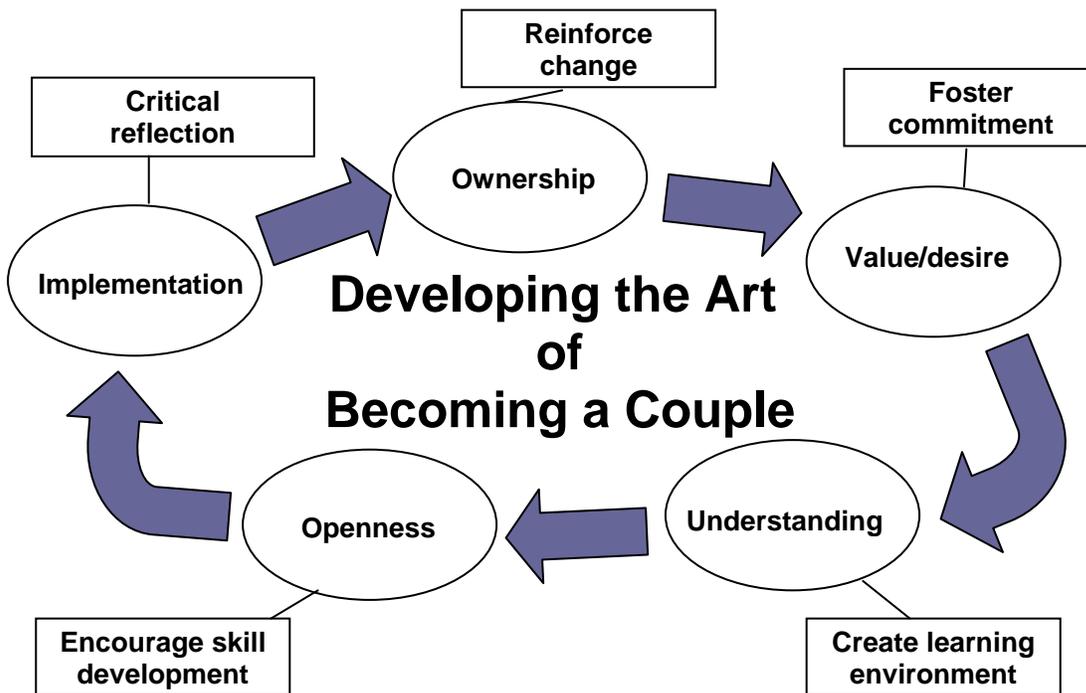
Creswell (1998) recommends that qualitative researchers utilize at least two verification procedures for their studies to ensure accuracy and to develop trustworthiness and credibility. For this study the researcher used several verification procedures to also address ethical concerns. The researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim and compared the transcript to the original tape. Following the analysis, the researcher compared the findings with other studies to verify the findings or to present information in contrast to the findings. Member checks were utilized when the researcher returned to the participants to verify the findings accurately represented what they intended to share. This procedure ensured an accurate reflection of the real lived experience of the participants. To minimize researcher bias, an external audit was conducted by a peer reviewer (Creswell, 2007). This study left an extensive audit trail so if the reader determines it to be transferable to their work, the procedures can be repeated. The secondary purpose of this study, discovering what specific components of the program facilitated the improved marriage also serves as a verification procedure. Discovering how marriages improved as a result of attending marriage education programs is of great benefit to the development of the theory, but finding out what actually facilitated the improvement deepens or thickens the theory.

### Results

In studying the lived experiences of the phenomenon of participating in Married and Loving It!<sup>®</sup>, the core category which emerged from the data was developing the art of becoming a healthy couple. This category represents an explanation of the phenomenon and is an overarching theoretical scheme reflected in the data. The art of becoming a healthy couple in the realm of marriage as defined in this study is the process of merging two lives, one male and one female, into one unit of relationship with the purpose of mutually supporting individual growth and development, as well as the development of the union known as the marriage.

In the following Conditional Matrix, the theory “Developing the Art of Becoming a Couple” is visually depicted. The ovals signify the developmental process a couple goes through in improving their marriage. Beginning with value/desire, the couple then moves to the next stages of understanding, openness, implementation and ownership. The boxes reflect the ways in which marriage education can assist in facilitating this developmental process. Through fostering commitment, the couple increases their value or desire for a marriage relationship. By creating a learning environment the couple gains understanding of themselves, their spouse, and their marriage relationship. With encouraging skill development, the couple is open to change, and through critical reflection the couple implements their new knowledge and skills into their relationship. The marriage education program nurtures ownership by reinforcing change. The arrows signify the continuous circular progression of the developmental process as the cycle begins and renews itself.

Figure 1. *Developing the Art of Becoming a Couple: Guiding a Couple’s Development through Marriage Education*



## Valuing/Desiring a Marriage Relationship

The first step in developing the art of becoming a couple and a major theme which emerged from the data was valuing or desiring a marriage relationship. Highly valuing a marriage relationship is a characteristic of couples who are more likely to attend marriage preparation courses (Duncan et al., 2007). The participants of this study indicated valuing a marriage relationship and desiring for it to grow and develop over the course of their lifetime as necessary steps for them to choose to participate in marriage education.

The desire for a healthy marriage can come from many different sources. For Mrs. Hanson, the desire came out of being single for the first 29 years of her life. She expressed her desire for a marriage relationship best when she said, “I wanted to be married for so long and wasn’t, that I knew that when I finally got married, I was getting married one time and it was going to work whatever I had to do or whatever it took, it was going to work.” Mr. and Mrs. Lewis clearly value their marriage relationship, and their desire for it to continue was birthed in their commitment to the marriage. Even though it was difficult, they just “battled through it. That was it. Neither one of us, nobody was giving up,” explained Mrs. Lewis. Mr. Lewis agreed, “Nobody was giving up, so we were going to make it work.”

Within the participants of this study several dimensions influencing their success in a continued desire of a healthy marriage relationship and the contributions of the marriage education program in cultivating that desire were discovered. The participants linked a willingness to learn, the influence of past experiences, a realization that change was needed, and a perception that the material presented would be helpful to their relationship as dimensions of their desire.

During the process of desiring a healthy marriage relationship, couples work toward the goal by possessing a willingness or readiness to learn, an assumption of andragogy (Knowles, 1980). Mr. Lewis identified a willingness to learn, “You have to be willing and that’s the biggest thing.” Mrs. Miller added, “Anything that could help us; it was something that we wanted to do.”

Previous experiences, both successes and failures influence the process of desiring a healthy marriage and the receptivity to marriage education. Divorce and conflict in the family of origin adversely influences marital outcomes (Jacquet & Surra, 2001). Mr. Hanson recognized the vulnerabilities he brings to the marriage from his childhood (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) and previous marriage and is willing to learn new adaptive processes to implement when stressful events occur in their marriage.

I saw young that my parents did not have a perfect relationship, so in high school I took a class called Marriage and Family Relations, so when she told me about this [marriage education program] I was like, “okay,” ...this was already something I wanted to do.

Couples identify change is needed in their relationship as they develop the art of becoming a couple. Mrs. Carson recognized change was needed in the way they resolved conflicts when she stated, “We also figured it could help especially with our arguments.” Prior to participating in *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> Mr. and Mrs. Carson participated in

negative interactions toward each other, a characteristic of distressed couples (Burleson & Denton, 1997). They resolved their conflict by “screaming, yelling, slamming doors, someone taking off and leaving in the car,” recalled Mrs. Carson. When negative interactions continue escalating out of control, people go from “wanting to be heard to wanting to hurt” (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001, p. 47). After *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> Mr. Carson says, “We work out the fights better.” Mrs. Carson added, “Yeah, we don’t scream at each other anymore.”

Without marriage education Mr. and Mrs. Miller were on their way to becoming one of the statistics representing between 80% and 90% of couples divorcing who do not consult with a therapist for help in solving their marital issues (Halford et al., 2003). They were aware change was desperately needed; however, they were unaware as to how to go about making marriage saving changes. Mrs. Miller explains:

I don’t know if we would be married the way things were going. If I wouldn’t have at least learned because I would have just thought this is the way it is and nobody was there to tell me or educate me any better.

Mr. Miller continues:

We were both at the point in our relationship before we took the class where we were both changing quite a bit, and without the class I believe we probably would have both gone our separate way, quite a few different ways.

In desiring to improve their marriage through participating in marriage education, the participants perceived the materials being presented as being helpful or relevant to their situation (Knowles, 1980). Mr. Miller indicated, “The stuff we learned with *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> was relevant.” Mrs. Miller added, “We didn’t really have a clue what marriage was about at all, so it just gave us a good foundation to start building upon.”

As couples value their marriage and desire to learn how to continue to develop the art of becoming a healthy couple, they are motivated to move to the next development step.

### **Gaining an Understanding**

During the second step in the process of developing the art of becoming a healthy couple, couples gain an understanding of how they can develop their own healthy marriages through learning about themselves, their spouses, and how they each contribute to the marriage both positively and negatively. Multiple times during the interviews, couples made reference to learning about each other and how that knowledge has assisted them in improving their marriage. Mrs. Hanson shares how completing an activity assisted her in gaining more knowledge about her spouse:

When we filled out a lot of those things and then shared, and then the yes and the no and those kinds of activities, I really feel like we were on the same page; that just affirmed to me this is the person I should spend my life with.

The greatest gift a person can receive is the joy that comes from feeling that your spouse knows and understands you (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> program included love languages which nurtures fondness and admiration in a relationship by implementing styles of affection so the partner will perceive they are loved (Chapman, 1995).

Several times throughout the data, the couples referred to love languages and how they have learned to use each other's love language to communicate their feelings. Mr. Carson says, "We learned how to make the other person happy with the love languages." According to Mr. Hanson "It's good that we learned not only what ours is but what our partner's is, and how to show them that we love them and to let them know so they understand, 'Oh this means that she loves me.'" According to a survey conducted by David Olson and Amy Olson (2000), 82% of couples having problems wished their partners were more willing to share their feelings.

Another dimension of gaining understanding is self-awareness and a new knowledge of one's contribution to the marriage. Marital success is dependent upon one's knowledge of his or her "hopes, wishes, fears, and sensitive issues concerning relationships, your gender role expectations, and characteristic defense mechanisms" (Nielsen, Pinosof, Rampage, Solomon, & Goldstein, 2004, p. 487). Mrs. Hanson states "I learned why I get upset so I can identify it easier, and I sometimes can tell him, 'I guess the reason that upset me was because I feel like you didn't really listen to what I said.'" Mrs. Lewis confesses, "I think I learned that I was pretty possessive and pretty demanding and that maybe that wasn't where I needed to be." Mr. Lewis continues, "And I learned to be a heck of a lot more giving, less controlling, trying to involve her more in things."

## **Openness**

In the third step in developing the art of becoming a healthy couple, openness is revealed through the process of interacting with the materials presented in class. Through involvement with each other, couples discover new ways to improve their communication, create a sound financial situation, understand the role, influence, and root cause of anger, resolve conflict in a healthy manner, and foster commitment through living daily life in a manner which enhances their marriage relationship. In Williams', Riley's, Risch's, and Van Dyke's (1999) study, topics rated as the highest included communication, commitment, conflict resolution, children, and church.

Mrs. Lewis claims, "Communication is huge." Mrs. Miller echoes, "Communication is huge." The participants of this study have identified the significant role communication plays in a marriage relationship. Results of the Olson and Olson (2000) study indicated "the most important area distinguishing happy and unhappy couples is communication" (p. 10). The participants in this study overwhelmingly identified communication training strategies they learned and implemented in their

relationship to be relevant and beneficial. “This is what I heard you say, is that what you meant?” was a *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> communication strategy remembered and implemented by several of the couples. Mr. Carson recalls, “One of my favorite things is, ‘Okay this is what I hear what did you mean?’” Mr. Lewis says he asks, “Did you hear what I said or what I meant to say?” However, Mrs. Parker identified, “But when you are angry you don’t really think about ‘Am I saying the right thing in the right way?’” She identified why it is important to use a simple strategy that can be remembered by the couples to bring clarification before the situation escalates into an emotionally charged anger situation.

“Marriage plays a powerful role in both the attainment of wealth and the plunge into poverty” (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). With planning, careful expenditures, accumulating savings, and by pooling their resources, couples can enjoy the accumulation of wealth. Differences over finances are one of the key issues inciting conflict within the marriage (Bryant, Taylor, Lincoln, Chatters, & Jackson, 2008). Marital disagreement over financial issues are more likely to escalate than other conflicting issues (Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2009) necessitating the development of an understanding and practice of management skills involving both spouses. Olson and Olson (2000) discovered even happy couples disagree more about finances than any other topic. As a result of participating in *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> the Millers have changed their approach to their finances. Mrs. Miller shares, “Before the class, I was doing most of the bookkeeping and a lot of the financial decisions and now as a result of the class it is joint.” Mrs. Fuller shares, “I didn’t understand it, and this class helped me to understand this is for bills, this for groceries, this is for dining out, this is for clothes or whatever, and it helped me to understand him when he tells me about the budget.”

Another area of marriage in which the participants displayed openness was in recognizing the role of anger, how anger negatively affects the marriage when it is not handled properly and how to work with their own anger toward a healthy resolve in their marriage. Mrs. Miller stated, “When anger is not handled correctly, it is hurtful and then when feelings get hurt it’s harder to communicate, and to want to hang out.” Unleashed anger becomes a destructive force leaving a path of hurt and failed relationships.

The participants of this study learned the skill of recognizing when they are angry, and now step back to determine the source of the anger response. Mrs. Millers reveals, “The teaching on why you are angry, figuring out why you are angry, helps me figure out like why am I angry. Why? Is this a big deal or not? Cause sometimes before, everything was a big deal.”

The couples also learned how to recognize situations that elicit an anger response in their spouses, helping them to understand each other and decrease the intensity when in conflict. Through learning to recognize anger as a symptom of some other issue that needs addressed in the marriage, couples have corralled its potential to intensify conflict (Olson & Olson, 2000).

Conflict is inevitable in a marriage relationship. All couples will have problems and will need to resolve conflict in a manner that is healthy and not harmful to the relationship. The extent to which a couple resolves their conflicts is identified as the most important determinant of marital satisfaction (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). Schneewind and Gerhard (2002) posit that the development of conflict resolution

skills is necessary for the development and maintenance of the relationship quality. When resolving conflict the participants of this study identified learning how to clarify issues as the most helpful in turning harmful conflict into a healthy resolution. The newly acquired skill of asking, “This is what I heard you say, is that what you meant?” was useful to them in resolving their conflicts. Mr. and Mrs. Miller learned the value of making an appointment with each other to specifically resolve issues while avoiding decision-making when the driving force was emotions. She states, “We just have to drop it for at least a day and think about it and then go with it when neither one of us are upset and it feels like a safe time when you are not emotionally involved.”

Openness is essential as couple’s live married life on a daily basis. It is through the daily routines over the years where commitment is strengthened. The participants reported improvement in their marriage by increased involvement of both husband and wife in the decision-making process. Mrs. Carson stated, “We consult each other more now.” In the area of household tasks, Mr. Miller revealed a mature attitude when he stated, “I don’t want to do this stuff, but when you start getting use to doing it... what it comes down to [is] you are doing stuff for each other.” Mr. Miller has implemented one of the dimensions of the *Marriage and Couple Education Model* proposed by Goddard and Olsen (2004), to serve. During the process of becoming a healthy couple, the needs of the spouse, not personal desires, become the primary concern, and happiness is derived from serving each other (Loveless, 2000).

While interacting with each other with openness through daily life, the participants developed a trust in the processes of resolving conflict, managing their money, working with their anger, and communicating to each other with clarity. Marriage education programs assist couples by teaching them communication and problem solving skills (Bowling et al., 2005) but the couples must place their trust in what they have been taught to actually apply it to their lives.

## Implementation

The fourth major theme emerging from the data was implementation. In the context of an improving relationship, couples apply the skills they learned through marriage education, resulting in a reconstructed marriage. After any education program there always remains the haunting question, “What did the participants actually apply to their lives?” Mrs. Lewis answers with, “We actually put a lot of what we have learned in to practice.”

Over and over, the participants reported behavior changes through skills they have implemented in their lives. The way in which they communicate with each other reflects their *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> experience. Mr. Fuller stated, “After *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> I found myself coming to Mary and telling her, ‘You know, I really appreciate you. I really appreciate what you do for me.’” The couples learned how to communicate their love for each other using love languages. For some it was a change from their previous way of showing their love. Mr. Carson confesses, “I thought I was doing good with ‘I love you’s’ stuff like that and cleaning the house and mowing the lawn, and to find out that’s not her love language, she likes gifts, she likes spending time together.”

Mrs. Lewis now approaches Mr. Lewis in a manner that does not elicit a defensive response from him. When she goes to the shop and requests “me time” he does

not automatically assume he has done something wrong or needs to fix her issues. Mr. Lewis states, "I had to learn to listen because before I would listen but always thought that she wanted me to help fix the situation." Mrs. Lewis added, "I don't want you to fix it; just listen."

In the area of financial management, Mrs. Fuller's understanding of financial management has allowed her to become more involved with the budget. Instead of purchasing whatever she feels is necessary, she asks how much she can spend. Mr. and Mrs. Hanson have improved their financial position by choosing to pay off bills rather than taking a cruise. Mr. and Mrs. Carson still have their credit cards in the freezer and have only used them once for a medical emergency. Mrs. Carson declares with enthusiasm, "The credit cards are still frozen."

Through implementing the skills learned in *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup>, the couples realized a decrease in destructive anger and conflict. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis have learned how to resolve their differences before they escalate to an anger situation. Mr. Lewis stated, "Usually when I am mad everybody knows I am mad ... so I mean it just has helped tremendously; I can't even remember the last time we had heated madness." Mr. Fuller compares anger and conflict in their marriage before participating in the program and since: "We do have conflicts now and then, but even when we have them we resolve them in a different way than before so we get less angry." When Mrs. Hanson uses the key word to communicate she is irritated with him, Mr. Hanson knows, "She did not appreciate what I did, or that for some reason I have caused disappointment, frustration upset in some way and I need to seriously look at what I am doing."

The data present strong evidence in revealing the implementation of relationship enhancement skills learned through participating in *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup>. By applying relationship building skills the participants have reconstructed their marriages by making positive changes.

## **Ownership**

The final category to be examined is ownership. Without taking ownership, couples will not sustain the reconstructed marriage and the effects of the marriage education program will fade. In the Williams et al. (1999) study, the perceived value of the marriage preparation declined with the length of the marriage.

During the process of taking ownership, the couples interact in a manner that develops their friendships. During times of conflict and stress, couples who have made deposits in their emotional banks use more appropriate, less destructive communication strategies (Futris, Adler-Baeder, Dean, & McFadyen, 2005).

At the time of the interviews it became evident the participants of this study have taken ownership of their marriages by developing and enhancing their friendships. They are still using the information and skills they learned through participating in *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup>. Mr. and Mrs. Hanson occasionally review their class handouts, the one tangible item they took home with them from the program. Mr. and Mrs. Parker are still going on dates at least one night a week. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis have not only applied the materials to their lives, they are now sharing them with other couples who are coming to them for help.

Couples continue to nurture their developing relationships with the changes they have made from increasing their knowledge about themselves and each other. Mr. Hanson reminds Mrs. Hanson when it is time to pay the bills. Mrs. Lewis recognizes Mr. Lewis needs his love bucket filled when he is filling hers more frequently. Mrs. Fuller has learned which of Mr. Fuller's "buttons" not to push and is pleased with the change in the dynamics in their relationship.

Mr. and Mrs. Parker are redefining *time together* since she is going to school. Mr. and Mrs. Carson are retreating to different rooms of their home, instead of totally leaving when they encounter conflict.

With increased knowledge, it is through ownership the participants take personal responsibility for their marriages. Relationship satisfaction is associated with the extent to which partners make individual efforts to sustain their relationships (Halford et al., 2003). The participants demonstrated assuming of their personal responsibility by actively participating in a marriage education program, applying the concepts and skills taught to their lives while reconstructing the meaning of their marriages. Mrs. Hanson explained it best when she stated, "We try to take the skills that we have learned and mold them into our relationship so it works for us." Through participating in *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> there has been a shift in the paradigm of their marriage. Mr. Lewis acknowledged, "It's changed in five years; yeah, I think it gets better all the time." The processes of marriage education

For each stage of developing the art of becoming a couple, the marriage education program contributes to the growth and development of the improved relationship. The processes of the marriage education program facilitating developing the art of becoming a couple are: fostering commitment, creating a learning environment, encouraging skill development, critical reflection, and reinforcing change.

### **Fostering commitment**

When the participants expressed their value and desire for a healthy marriage relationship, they were reflecting their commitment. In the growing body of research on marriage, commitment is being identified as crucial to a healthy, stable marriage (Amato & Rogers, 1999; Mace, 1975; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004).

The marriage education program fosters the desire and commitment for a healthy marriage by presenting the benefits of marriage, clarifying expectations, and teaching relationship enhancement skills while providing opportunities for couples to interact with other couples. Adult learners bring with them a wealth of experiences which add substance and credibility to the information being presented (Backes, 2006). Mrs. Fuller explains, "I learned from the other couples, other grownups. I listened to them, and I think that's one of the things that helped me to learn. "That's the way to do it.""

A range of ages contributed to the benefit of the context of being exposed to other marriages. *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> classes include a diverse range of ages in the participants from engaged couples as high school students, up to being married 52 years, all participating in the same class. Mr. Miller stated, "With the younger ones it made me think, 'I'm so glad I'm not there.'" Mrs. Hanson adds:

I think it helped us to see maybe what was in our future. We had one couple in one of our groups who, they were empty nesters and they were more concerned about retirement, having enough money... It's good to learn from other people.

The opportunity to interact with other couples and exposure to characteristics of successful marriages produced the outcome of this category, the motivation to learn. Mrs. Hanson was motivated to do everything she could to develop a healthy marriage. Mrs. Hanson explains. "It helped me to see what I don't want to be. There were a lot of struggling couples in our class ... I just thought, 'I don't want to be there.'"

According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998), the adult learner must know *why* something must be learned before they will undertake the process to learn. Mr. Hanson shared *why* it was important for him to attend:

I think everybody's different, and the relationship that my parents had is good for them, and I needed to go through a class, a learning environment with my wife to understand who she is and to learn the tools that helped us to have a good relationship for us.

For Mr. Carson the answer to *why* was found in his situation of being engaged and preparing for marriage. He wanted to "get a heads up on what we were getting into."

The marriage education program responds to the couples need to know *why* they are learning something and for it to be relevant to their lives by selecting curriculum focusing on building healthy marriage relationships by encouraging positive involvement and decreasing negative interactions (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004). In addition to teaching couples how to avoid dangers or pitfalls to the development of the relationship, the inclusion of tools and skill development on how to build a strong marriage is paramount.

### **Create a Learning Environment**

For couples to move to the second step in the developmental process, gain an understanding as to how they can improve their marriage relationship, it is essential the marriage education program creates a learning environment. For the process of learning to take place, the dimensions of a meaningful educational experience are produced by a (a) comfortable learning environment, (b) confidence in the instructor and materials being presented, and (c) engagement in the process resulting from the material being presenting with a variety of teaching methods addressing multiple learning styles.

A meaningful educational experience occurs in a comfortable learning environment. The climate of the classroom should cause "adults to feel accepted, respected and supported" (Knowles, 1980, p. 47). The goal of an educator is "to provide an environment in which learners feel safe to experiment, voice their concerns, identify their lack of knowledge, and stretch their limits" (Hutchinson, Cantillon, & Wood, 2003, p. 811). For participants to have the courage to try to learn, they must feel safe, both physically and emotionally (Backes, 2006). The physical aspects of the meaningful educational experience includes lighting, temperature, and chairs and tables designed for

adults. With the increase in obesity among Americans, chairs without arms are the best choice for the adult learner. Participants need to know they are safe emotionally. Every participant has value and should be encouraged to participate in class discussion and be allowed to sit wherever they choose (Backes). The feeling of being in a safe environment fosters within the participants the courage to try to learn. Mrs. Carson expressed how initially she was uncomfortable with being in a group: “My thing was I was so shy and the group thing, I was very shy but hey I broke out of it. It did help me to break out of it and now I don’t be quiet ever.”

Unless adults find the educational experience meaningful, they are not likely to engage in the process of learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Mr. Parker said it well when he stated, “We actually looked forward to it. It was kind of that fun thing that once a week that we looked forward to going. It wasn’t like something we had to do it. We wanted to do it.” Mrs. Lewis declared, “We had a ball. It was a lot of fun and it spurred a lot of conversation.”

To accept the information presented and to recognize it as being helpful to their marriages, the participants indicated the need to perceive the presenters as having expertise in marriage relationships either through personal experience or through professional development. Presenters increase their credibility when they are familiar with particular issues participants face (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). Presenters are identified as the leaders of the classroom and participants are observing them, scrutinizing for their demonstration of a cooperative attitude, desired behavior, appropriate dress, and loyalty to the company or educational institution (Backes, 2006). In this study Mrs. Miller identified the value of a male and female teaching the program when she stated, “I think it was good to do the male/female because it is a male/female thing.” According to Hawkins et al. (2004), if a program delivery method includes a male-female team, some men are more responsive than when just a woman is the presenter.

The participants of this study clearly indicated the personal experiences of the presenters and their perceived expertise established the credibility needed for the participants to be willing to learn and to try to apply what they learned to their relationships. “Marriage education programs will likely be most effective if they are delivered by trusted and integrated members of the community who can relate to and adapt the program for their target population” (Stanley, Allen, Markman, Saiz, Bloomstron, Thomas, et al., 2005, p. 188). Williams et al. (1999) indicated participants rated clergy as the most helpful providers, followed by lay couples, church staff, counselors, and financial planners.

Marriage education programs present relationship building information in a manner in which the participants can learn by incorporating into the design of the program a variety of teaching methods addressing different learning styles. Hawkins et al. (2004) discovered the design of most marriage education programs are built around a variety of methods, addressing different learning styles by including didactic presentations of information, showing examples (e.g., in a video), and role-playing. Programs which incorporate a variety of teaching or facilitation methods while moving beyond raising awareness of potential problems by promoting strength building strategies and skills while involving the participants are more likely to positively affect the outcomes (Hughes, 1994).

“Adults learn best when teaching strategies combine visual, auditory, and kinesthetic approaches” (Russell, 2006, p. 352). Most people will identify themselves as visual, auditory or kinesthetic learners (Russell). Mr. Parker states, “I’m a visual person. If I can see it then I can understand it better.” Mr. Miller describes his learning style, “I can sit down and read something, but when I sit down to write something about what I have read then I can remember it a lot better.”

A variety of teaching methods assisted the participants in becoming engaged in the learning experience. While the *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> program is didactic in nature, it goes beyond to include a variety of teaching methods promoting interaction. Mrs. Lewis describes how the combination of PowerPoint<sup>®</sup> and note pages helped her to stay engaged, “It’s nice to have the graphics. I really liked the worksheets because I liked figuring them out, before, trying to guess it before it was on the PowerPoint<sup>®</sup>.” Note-taking assists with the retention of information (Backes, 2006). Mr. Carson identified, “It helped us stay more focused. It was almost like I have a blank coming up. I’ve got to pay more attention.”

The adult educator needs to be cognizant of the speed at which the participants are learning new information. As we age, the ability to examine a problem and respond to a situation slows down (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), however, the pace has to be fast enough to keep the attention of the younger participants. When working with adults it is important to vary teaching techniques and to keep the class moving (Backes, 2006). Mrs. Hanson recalls:

I think the best thing about the class is the different learning styles. With the combination you didn’t have time to get bored with just one learning style because we had one way and then we moved to something else and then to something else, and then we watched a video and then we would go back to this, and if it would have been all PowerPoint<sup>®</sup> I probably would have been snoozing.

In the process of learning, marriage education programs provide opportunities for spouses to learn about each other. Mr. Parker realized, “It’s just learning each other as much as anything... so I think I’ve learned a lot.” Mr. Fuller also shared, “I have been trying to get to know her better.” Mr. Miller learned more about Mrs. Miller:

For me the big thing was learning that each other had different feelings. Even though we had been married for years, I didn’t really think about her feelings as much as I did after taking the class, and that was the big thing for me just knowing she actually had feelings.

The most helpful components of marital preparation programs are discussion times with partners followed by lecture by presenters and written material for study (Williams et al., 1999). Couples need class time to talk about their relationship and learn about each other.

## **Encourage Skill Development**

To facilitate the developmental step of openness, the marriage education program encourages skill development. Simple homework assignments were given to reinforce the concepts, create discussion between spouses, encourage skill development, and to give the couple the opportunity to take control of their own learning, an assumption of andragogy (Knowles, 1980). The couples responded in different ways to this educational opportunity. Mrs. Miller recalled, "I did them. They just solidified or reinforced what we had learned so we could think about it through the week." Mrs. Hanson stated, "We did every homework assignment we were supposed to do. I thought that was kind of fun." Mr. Carson explained the discussion created from the homework assignments. "In fact when we took it we were living in an apartment across town, and we would go home every night and do dishes together and discuss it again after class. 'What did you pick up from the class?'"

## **Critical Reflection**

The marriage education program assists the couple in the implementing new knowledge and skills by presenting opportunities for critical reflection. In critical reflection the focus is on our assumptions which provide meaning and purpose as to who we are and what we do (Brookfield, 1995). Through critical reflection we identify the facts as we know them to be true, what we think should happen in a particular situation, how things work and the conditions under which they can be changed (Brookfield). The participants of this study clearly indicated the value of the presence of other couples in the marriage education program which provided opportunities for a phase of critical reflection, recognizing others have gone through a similar process (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Critical reflection is a necessary step for couples to implement if they are going to improve their marriages.

When the participants of this study recognized changes were needed, they were moving through the cognitive process of transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000). They were taking their meaning perspectives and making them more inclusive by being open to change. Mr. and Mrs. Miller were looking for what O'Sullivan, Morrell, and O'Conner, (2002) would identify as "a dramatic and permanent altering of their way of being" (p. 11).

The goal of the marriage education program in this stage of the process of developing the art of becoming a couple is to guide the participants in a paradigm shift through transformational learning. It is at this stage the participants determine whether this new way of living married life is better than their former way. If they determine the skills they have learned really do work for them, these skills will become a part of their existence leading to a change in attitude and beliefs about their marriage relationships. If they discover their lives have not improved, they will continue to search for new ways to reconstruct their marriage.

## Reinforce Change

The marriage education program assists the couples in taking ownership of their marriage through reinforcing the changes that were necessary for an improved relationship. Mr. and Mrs. Miller received tremendous benefit to their marriage the first time they participated leading them to attend again bringing with them their oldest daughter and her fiancée. “We got something out of it the first time, so we thought we could get a lot more out of it the second time.” The Millers are examples of how refresher or booster courses can be helpful in sustaining the implementation of the skills learned through marriage education (Giblin, Sprenkle, & Sheehan, 1985).

Marriage education programs can reinforce change by hosting class reunions 6 months to one year after the conclusion of the program. Newsletters sent periodically remind the couples of the skills they learned while participating in marriage education.

## Conclusions and Implications

Developing the Art of Becoming a Couple theory states to improve their marriage relationships, couples learn about themselves, each other and the meaning derived from their interactions as they progress through a developmental process of valuing/desiring, gaining understanding, being open, implementing new knowledge and skills, and taking ownership of their marriage relationships. Marriage education facilitates this change by fostering commitment, creating a fertile learning environment, encouraging skill development, providing opportunities for critical reflection and reinforcing change.

When couples enter into marriage relationships they have chosen a path requiring many adjustments to their previous life. Successful navigation of these life changes can be facilitated by participating in marriage education programs. This study examined how couples made positive changes in their marriages by participating in the marriage education program *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup>. By examining the real lived experience of the participants, it was discovered that marriage education programs can assist couples in improving their marriages by increasing their knowledge about themselves, their spouses and the meaning derived from their interactions. Couples learn communication strategies, how to resolve their differences in a healthy manner, and reinforce their commitment to their marriage by learning how to make choices on a daily basis that strengthens their relationship. By learning how to implement positive interaction skills while decreasing negative interaction couples learn new ways to reconstruct their marriages through participating in marriage education.

The limitations of this study are recognized in the participants all being married couples without the inclusion of same-sex relationships or cohabiting couples. The participants are all from the same geographical location and all were taught by the researcher and her husband. The *Married and Loving It!*<sup>®</sup> experience as presented by other educators is not represented in this study. In addition, as the co-author of the program the researcher’s personal lens influences the interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2003). Experiences from other marriage education programs are not represented in the discovery of the theory.

The results of this study inform the development and implementation of marriage education programs. For maximum learner outcome it is recommended the marriage

education programs be delivered by a male and female who has personal experience in a healthy marriage relationship. The program delivery method includes a variety of teaching methods to address different learning styles that will be represented in the non-homogenous group. In addition to learning from other participants in the class, it is imperative the program delivery includes opportunities for couples to critically reflect as an individual couple and as a spouse. This study reinforces the contribution of marriage education in assisting couples in developing a healthy marriage relationship.

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