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Resilient Families, Thriving Communities

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COUN 6785: Social Change in Action:

Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

Social Change Portfolio

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Contents

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OVERVIEW

Keywords: Marriage Education, Marriage Counseling, Prevention, Divorce, Resilience, Relationship Health, Thriving Communities, Gottman Couples Therapy, Thatcher, Arizona

Resilient Families, Thriving Communities

Goal Statement: My goal as a future marriage counselor is to reduce the number of marriages that end in divorce in my community. I aim to achieve this through preventative measures designed to increase relationship resilience and promote the overall well-being of families and the community.

Significant Findings: This paper explores the rising divorce rates in Thatcher, Arizona, and highlights preventative measures to strengthen marriages in order to reduce marital dissolution. Key findings suggest that proactive interventions, such as marriage education programs and the passing of pro-marriage public policies, are more cost-effective than addressing the consequences of divorce (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2019). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is used to identify risk and protective factors at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels while the Primary Prevention Model and Health Belief Model (HBM) guide the development and social awareness of the preventative measures. Gottman's Seven Principles Couple Enhancement Program is used as an example of a successful evidence-based program shown to improve relationship satisfaction and resilience (Zahl-Olsen et al., 2024). Diversity and ethical considerations are recommended for the Hispanic and Latino subpopulation who face unique cultural stressors (Maru et al., 2023) Using the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies' framework, the paper presents barriers and advocacy

actions at the institutional, community, and public policy levels that should be considered for the success of this prevention program (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014).

Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps: The goal is to reduce divorce rates in Thatcher, Arizona, by strengthening protective factors and reducing risk factors in marital relationships through preventative measures. Key strategies include implementing evidence-based programs, such as the Gottman Seven Principles Couple Enhancment Program, to teach and enhance protective factors. Adapting a program that meets the cultural needs of the Hispanic and Latino subpopulation, using bilingual counselors and offering workshops in Spanish. Raising community awareness of the social, emotional, and financial consequences of divorce through media campaigns. Collaboration with churches and community centers to offer relationship skill-building workshops, including pre-marital education and date nights that involve couple connection activities. Lastly, advocating and promoting pro-marriage public policies, such as required marriage counseling before filing for divorce.

INTRODUCTION

Resilient Families, Thriving Communities

I live in the small town of Thatcher, Arizona. It is known for being a family-centered community with many wonderful families. However, marriages struggle in our small town just like everywhere else. In my opinion, as a future marriage counselor, there are more marriages ending in divorce than should be. This has had an impact on children, the extended family, and our community. My focus is on preventing marriages from breaking up so that families can be strong and resilient, and our community can thrive.

PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES

Resilient Families, Thriving Communities

The U.S. National Library of Medicine (2019) explains that poor health conditions often develop from certain risk factors, or what is also known as correlates. For example, the correlates for diabetes are unhealthy eating habits and/or not exercising. Replacing the risk factors with preventative actions, such as eating healthier and exercising, would actually cost less for individuals and society than treating the poor health condition when it develops (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2019).

This same type of reasoning can be applied to marriages. As a future marriage counselor, I look at failing marriages or divorce much like a poor health condition. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2023), in 2023, the number of people in Arizona who got a divorce was 0.20% (CDC, 2023). In the whole United States, the number of people who got divorced that same year was 0.24% (CDC, 2023). Arizona and the national average are close to the same. If married couples replaced risk factors with preventative actions, it could prevent this poor health condition from developing. It would also cost less for individuals and society as a whole.

Divorce has a negative impact on both families and communities. Gholami Rad and Veysipour (2023) discussed different divorce statistics. For example, the article found that for mainly women, divorce often results in financial hardship. Men often experience depression and drug addiction. Children often face anxiety and behavioral problems (Gholami Rad & Veysipour, 2023). All of these things require more mental health resources, and the interventions for these problems take more time and money than preventative measures.

The national divorce rate has actually decreased over the last few years. This is a societal trend and does not mean the quality of marriages has improved. What it means is there are now

fewer marriages, more delayed marriages, and an increase in cohabitation (Cohen, 2019). These trends have resulted in more single-parent and cohabitating households, which, in both the short and long run, put a strain on community resources (Cohen, 2019). For example, with fewer people getting married, fewer people are having children. This adds to the current decline in population growth, which has an impact on the community's long-term sustainability. Overall, in order to stop these societal trends, communities just like mine must redefine the value of marriage and encourage proactive, intentional relationship building.

A marriage counselor in my community once told me that couples usually seek counseling too late. His words have stayed with me and have shaped my vision as a future counselor. Echoing the words of Dr. Steven Tucker, we need to embark on a "proactive wellness-based" approach to marriages (Tucker, 2015). That is why my goal as a future marriage counselor is to reduce the number of marriages that end in divorce in my community through a preventative lens.

PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

Resilient Families, Thriving Communities

One way to understand why marriages either thrive or die is by looking at the different risk factors and protective factors. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, a marriage, just like an individual's development, "is shaped by interconnected environmental systems" (Guy-Evans, 2020, para. 1). There are four systems or levels that I will address: individual, relationships, community, and societal.

Individual Level

At an individual level, examples of risk factors for a marriage would be marrying too young, not knowing how to communicate effectively, and if one of the two people involved has

an untreated mental health issue (Mojtabai et al., 2017). Someone with a mental health issue in a marriage can cause emotional turmoil. It can lead to tension, confusion, and mistrust within the relationship. But on the other hand, examples of protective factors would be if one or both individuals have a very high commitment level and are focused on making their marriage work, and if one or both individuals are resilient people when faced with life challenges (Bradley & Hojjat, 2017).

Relationship Level

At the relationship level, examples of risk factors for a marriage would be cohabitating before marriage and not agreeing over money. Studies have shown that if a couple lives together before getting engaged, they have a higher chance of marital dissatisfaction or divorce (Stanley et al., 2010). Disagreeing over money causes anxiety and high levels of stress in a marriage. A study was done where they compared money disagreements with other marital disagreements, and it was the money disagreements that lasted longer and reoccurred more often (Papp et al., 2009). Examples of protective factors would be making time for each other a priority, good communication skills, and shared religious beliefs. A study was conducted that found that married couples who shared religious beliefs had higher marital satisfaction than couples who did not (Jafari et al., 2015). Part of the reason is that religious beliefs hold a set of moral values that promote forgiveness and commitment.

Community Level

At the community level, risk factors for a married couple might include poverty, unemployment, and no supportive family or friends. Just as disagreeing over money can be a risk factor, so can having little to no money be a risk factor. Communities without job opportunities affect marriages. Another major risk factor is having to navigate your marriage alone. A

protective factor would be to have supportive family and friends. Marriage is hard, and you need outside support to guide you through it, no matter how old you are. It is very therapeutic for a married couple to have family and friends to socialize with as a couple. It helps to strengthen a marriage. They can see how other couples work out their problems or receive marriage advice from relatives who have had long, successful marriages. Family and friends can also offer emotional support and give assistance. There was a study done with older married couples, and it showed greater marital satisfaction if the couple had supportive family and friends, people they could confide in (Zhaoyang & Martire, 2021). Younger couples could use the support when it comes to things like babysitting, so the couple can have a much-needed date night out. Another protective factor would be family-focused community resources, such as activities and things to do as a family within the community. Family time spent together is important.

Societal Level

At the societal level, an example of a risk factor would be divorce being normalized. The more that divorce is accepted by society and considered just a part of life, the less value people put on marriage. A protective factor would be passing legislation that promotes or supports marriages. An example of this would be the H.R.320 bill called the Make Marriage Great Again Act of 2025 (Make Marriage Great Again Act of 2025, 2025). If passed, this bill would take away what's known as the "marriage penalty," which causes some couples to pay more in taxes than single people. As a future marriage counselor, I feel it would be a protective factor to pass divorce laws that require marriage counseling before a couple can file for divorce. This gives the couple a chance to work out their differences with a professional helping them.

As you can see, there are several risk factors but also protective factors at play when it comes to marriages and determining if they will thrive or die. As a marriage counselor, I hope to

teach and promote the protective factors regarding marriage. When a couple has protective factors in place, their marriage is more likely to thrive.

PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION

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There are two theories that could be used to guide my efforts in strengthening marriages within my community to prevent them from failing. The Primary Prevention Model and the Health Belief Model (HBM). The Primary Prevention Model emphasizes my goal of preventing something before it happens. The HBM would help convince my community how important it is that they take the necessary steps to prevent this problem from happening.

Primary Prevention Model

The Primary Prevention Model identifies a potential problem and creates strategies to prevent it from happening. It targets a healthy population, such as the healthy marriages in my community, and builds up their protective factors while limiting their risk factors (Kisling & Das, 2023). An example of this model in action is Rogge et al.'s (2013) randomized controlled trial, where engaged and newlywed couples were given one of two marital education courses and were compared to couples with no marital education courses. The researchers followed these couples for three years. In three years, 24% of the couples that had no marital education courses ended their relationship. Of those who did have marital education courses, 11% ended their relationship, which presents a significant difference (Rogge et al., 2013). Examples of marital educational courses for my community could be in the form of date night classes, communication building workshops, and pre-marital marriage classes. All of which fit into the Primary Prevention Model.

Health Belief Model (HBM)

As mentioned earlier, a family counselor once told me that in his experience, by the time couples in my community see him for counseling, it is too late. One or both of them have already given up on the relationship. This suggests the importance of raising awareness in my community so couples will participate in preventive measures before they consider separation or divorce. The HBM outlines what people must believe before they will find preventative measures important enough to take action (National Cancer Institute, 2005). The following is taken from a similar list from the National Cancer Institute (2005) and applied to this scenario to illustrate how I could apply the HBM model.

1. Believe their marriage could possibly end in divorce
2. Believe divorce would have serious consequences for them
3. Believe that doing the work to prevent divorce will actually reduce the risk
4. Believe that no matter what obstacles they face, it's better than divorce
5. Are compelled to take action
6. Feel capable of doing the work to prevent divorce

Gottman Couple Therapy

The Gottman Couple Therapy is an evidence-based program created by Drs. John and Julie Gottman, who have observed couples for decades (The Gottman Institute, n.d.). Their goal is to build up protective factors within a relationship. According to a study by Zahl-Olsen et al. (2024), the Gottman's Seven Principles Couple Enhancement Program does, in fact, improve couple relationships and has long-lasting effects. The Seven Principles Couple Enhance Program goes perfectly with my prevention goal of building up couples' protective factors. The program includes teaching skills such as how to show admiration towards one another, how to problem-

solve together, and how to create bonding moments (Zahl-Olsen et al., 2024). Zahl-Olsen et al.'s (2024) study not only showed improvement in relationships, but they also did a follow-up with the participants six months after the program, and there was still improvement in the relationships, indicating long-lasting results. The Gottman program could be made available to my community both online and in person. In person, it can be held at meeting places such as churches and the community center.

PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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According to the Census Bureau, 30.3% of the population in my county is Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). This is the largest subgroup within my community's population. Many of them have ties to or come from Mexico which boarders my state of Arizona. This subgroup is affected by some of the same risk and protective factors as previously mentioned, but due to culture differences, there are additional risk and protective factors that only pertain to them. For instance, their culture has a strong commitment to families, which can be a protective factor (Maru et al., 2023). But it is also not uncommon for this subpopulation to have the added stress of immigration status, financial security, and/or dealing with language barriers within the community (Arbona et al., 2010).

As taught by Ernesto Sirolli (2012), the best way to help local community members is by listening to them. With this in mind, one way to increase cultural relevance in my prevention program would be to ask the Hispanic and Latino population what would help them in strengthening marriages. Even better would be to co-create a preventative program with them.

This entails learning from them to identify their relationship-related stresses and struggles and implement resources and tools that address their particular risk factors. In order to do this, we could invite members from prominent Hispanic and Latino churches and organizations within my community and collaborate in creating a program that meets their needs. Hispanic and Latino cultures are rich and complex, and other people not of their culture may not fully understand them (Castro et al., 2023). Therefore, collaboration is essential if we are to have a positive impact. By working together, we can better understand their needs, build trust, and encourage participation (Sirolli, 2012).

Cultural adaptations within my preventative program must be a high priority if we want to effectively reach this subgroup. Reese and Vera (2007) describe two ways to culturally adapt a program. Surface structure modifications include practical changes, such as offering classes and workshops in Spanish and having Hispanic or Latino counselors teach them. This allows participants to communicate in the language they are most comfortable with and with leaders who understand their culture because they have lived it. Deep structure modifications involve adapting the program to include the participant's lived experiences and challenges unique to them (Reese & Vera, 2007). For example, participants could talk openly about their relationship stress related to immigration status while also incorporating the value of families and cultural family traditions. Making these changes within the program, help participants feel seen and heard.

An example of how these types of adaptations work for the Hispanic and Latino population is a preventative program that was tailored to parents of Mexican origin that had troubled adolescents (Parra-Cardona et al., 2019). This parent training program was successful, and its success was attributed to the culturally specific adaptations made for this subpopulation.

The program considered their language, culture traditions, meaning, and values. By doing so, the program was able to have a positive impact on the participants involved (Parra-Cardona et al., 2019).

When working with this subpopulation, it is my ethical duty as a counselor to ensure they understand their rights and responsibilities within our professional relationship, as well as my own responsibilities as their counselor. This is part of the informed consent process that all counselors should review with their clients (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). For members of this subgroup, it is especially important to provide this information in a way that they can fully understand, such as in Spanish or with the assistance of a translator.

Confidentiality is also important, especially in my small community. As a counselor, it is my ethical duty not to share any information about my clients, including those within this subgroup. I must also clearly explain to all clients the limits of confidentiality, such as situations where safety is a concern.

I am also ethically obligated not to impose my beliefs or values onto my clients. This means showing respect for cultural differences and honoring my clients' views and definition of marriage, even if it differs from mine. It is imperative that I respect my client's beliefs and autonomy (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). This also applies when working with stakeholders as we come up with a meaningful and impactful program. It would be unethical to force my beliefs onto them.

PART 5: ADVOCACY

Resilient Families, Thriving Communities

Counseling is more than just talking with clients in counseling sessions. Counselors look outside the counseling session to find ways that they can help create a positive change within

society that will benefit their clients' growth and well-being (Toporek et al., 2009). They advocate for lasting change that will impact all of society for generations to come. Using the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies' framework, I will present barriers but also advocacy actions at the institutional, community, and public policy levels that should be considered in order for my strengthening marriages prevention program to be successful (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014).

Barriers that Strong Marriages Face

Institutional Level

Living in such a small community, one of our greatest barriers at the institutional level is not having enough counseling programs, much less ones that focus on strengthening marriages. The counseling clinics in my community do not have enough staff to handle the amount of work they already have. They are always looking to hire more staff members. Nor does my community have a sufficient number of bilingual counselors to help the subpopulation of Hispanics and Latinos. Churches and other organizations within my community simply do not have the funds or they tend to focus more on crisis rather than preventative measures. Every once in a while, a church will hold a marriage workshop, but they are only offered every few years.

Community Level

It is not uncommon for couples to not seek counseling due to the stigma around counselors. This is especially true in small communities. In a small community where everybody seems to know what everybody else is doing, the gossip mill never running dry, couples have a hard time coming to counseling due to the fear of being judged (Weigel & Baker, 2002). Even if it's for preventative measures, they feel that others will think less of them because they are seeing a counselor.

Public Policy Level

One study was done that showed how one of the top reasons couples did not go to counseling, even if they wanted to, was due to a lack of funds (Williamson et al., 2019). Those in politics need to realize the positive impact that strong marriages have within a community and work at promoting pro-marriage initiatives and acquiring funds so that free or affordable programs can be available. Unfortunately, we have not had enough leaders or public interest to push for better legislation towards marriage and families. The last time it was tried in Arizona was back in 2002 and 2008. In 2002, a bill was proposed to promote the societal benefits of marriage through a media campaign, but unfortunately, it failed (The Lewin Group, 2002). In 2008, Arizona shot down federal funding to promote abstinence until marriage and instead passed funds for a comprehensive sex education curriculum (SIECUS, 2008).

Advocacy Actions to Help Strengthen Marriages

Institutional Level

As a counselor, I could bring together other counselors within the community along with church leaders and other community members who care about strengthening marriages and start a small coalition. Together our focus would be to provide on-going workshops and other programs that promote healthy marriages and strong families. All programs would be evidence-based such as the Gottman's Seven Principles Couple Enhancement Program. The goal would be to eventually grow big enough that we could become a nonprofit organization and be eligible for grants and funding.

Community Level

My focus would be to go around the community to churches, schools, and organizations promoting the societal benefits of healthy marriages within our community. I would do

everything I could to normalize marriage counseling and frame it more as protecting a loving relationship rather than fixing a failed one. I could recruit trusted, well-known, community members to help me in hopes of encouraging participation and reducing the stigma.

Public Policy Level

As a counselor and concerned citizen, I could write to my state representatives and share evidence-based arguments of what a positive impact that strong marriages and families can have on a community (Bir, 2012). I can include statistics and peer-review research. I could advocate for funding preventative programs rather than putting resources towards addressing the consequences of divorce and unmarried households. I could also join organizations within my state that promote healthy families and work together to pass legislation that supports marriage education and relationship counseling (Bir, 2012).

As you can see there are barriers at every level yet at the same time there are positive advocacy actions that can happen to overcome these barriers. It will take work and perseverance on the part of all who are involved, but as with every worthy cause, it would be worth it in the end. My community would reap the rewards that come from having strong healthy families.

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