

ADOLESCENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS COUNSELING BY DEMOGRAPHIC
GROUP: BEFORE AND AFTER A YOUTH RELATIONSHIP
EDUCATION CURRICULUM

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Although marriage relationship education and counseling programs have been shown to be effective in promoting healthy relationships, participants are typically not from diverse backgrounds. Adolescent attitudes towards these programs and services were examined both before and after participation in a youth relationship education curriculum, *Relationship Smarts Plus (RS+)*. Sample consisted of 304 adolescents aged 11-18, 46.4% Caucasian, 53.6% African American, 53% female, 47% male, from diverse economic levels and family structures. Attitudes did not differ significantly among demographic groups at Time 1; adolescents all held similarly neutral attitudes. After *RS+*, attitudes significantly improved, on average, for all participants (t -score = -2.89; $p < .01$), but especially Caucasian females (t -score = -3.82; $p < .001$).

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of healthy relationships for individual, family, and community well-being is well documented (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Carroll & Doherty, 2003). The difficulties embodied in relationships, the negative effects of unhealthy relationships for individuals, families, and communities (Amato, 2000, 2005; Goldberg, 1993), and the high rate of divorce (Clark, 1995) and relationship dissolution are also well documented. Marriage preparation and enrichment programs, and premarital and marital counseling are some of the means by which family professionals attempt to prevent or mitigate the challenges that often lead to the failure of relationships. A multitude of research has been undertaken in the area of program efficacy to evaluate the short-term and long-term outcomes of such programs in adult samples. State and nationwide programs strive to promote and initiate these programs for the betterment of relationships across the country. However, most of this research has been carried out with highly-motivated, low-risk, adult populations who typically utilize the programs.

This study sought to take a closer look at attitudes towards such programs held by adolescents representing the higher-risk, more diverse populations that are not the typical consumers of these programs. Specifically, this study examined how participation in a relationship education program for youth affected attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment, in an attempt to examine how youth education might impact adolescents of diverse demographic backgrounds

differently in their attitudes towards counseling. The attitudes held by adolescents towards marriage preparation and enrichment programs, and premarital and marital counseling are crucial considering that favorable attitudes may lead to future use of the intervention programs and healthier relationships. Knowledge about how adolescents' attitudes may differ by demographic factors is vital for educators, therapists, and facilitators of premarital and marital education and counseling to continue to develop and deliver appropriate, relevant information and/or services to all available audiences.

Relationship Education and Counseling

Although the risks of unhealthy relationships are many, researchers and clinicians have begun to focus on a variety of avenues to attenuate these risks. Increasing knowledge and building skills through relationship education are important ways of combating marital dissatisfaction and the risks of unhealthy relationships. Marriage preparation and enrichment programs, premarital counseling, and other preventative methods may be helpful in building strong marriages and limiting marital distress (Lesage-Higgins, 1999). Evaluations show that many of the available premarital programs significantly improve relationship functioning (Carroll & Doherty, 2003), and that premarital education is generally effective (Hahlweg & Markman, 1988; Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Sayers, Kohn, & Heavey, 1998; Silliman, Stanley, Coffin, Markman, & Jordan, 2001). Benefits of premarital education include greater ability to manage conflict, more positive interactions in marriage, and a potentially lower risk for divorce (Stanley, 2001). Marriage or relationship counseling can be an important intervention for marriages and relationships on the brink (Bray & Jouriles, 1995). Importantly, research has shown that counseling is at its most effective when used early,

before the relationship reaches severe levels of distress (Jacobson & Addis, 1993). Unfortunately, most couples consider marriage counseling only as an intervention for extremely severe relationship problems and not as a preventative or enriching method (Bringle & Byers, 1997).

Relationship Education for Youth

Because adolescence is the time when people typically begin romantic relationships, it seems like a particularly important time to impact attitudes towards beneficial relationship education and counseling programs. Adolescence is an ideal time to promote healthy relationship behaviors and choices regarding relationships and marriage. Research has shown that teenagers have a clear interest in relationships and also relationship education (Silliman & Schumm, 2004). The majority of adolescents plan to marry one day (Johnston, Bachman, & O'Malley, 2001), but many report an overall sentiment of being ill-equipped for marriage (Martin, Specter, Martin, & Martin, 2003). One study utilizing the Marriage and Family Life Survey (Martin & Martin, 1981) found that about half of adolescents (47.3%) had a desire to learn more about the expectations of marriage (Martin, et al., 2003). This suggests that adolescents are eager to improve their chances for healthy future relationships and marriages.

Existing research offers empirical evidence for the positive effects of school-based relationship education programs for youth (Adler-Bader, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paulk, 2007; Gardner, 2001; Gardner, Giese, and Parrott, 2004). However, at least two assumptions are made in the area of education-based interventions. First is the assumption of rationality, which states that given correct information, a person will make rational choices. The second is the assumption that individuals will reflect

upon their own lives and apply what they learn. Unfortunately, adolescents may be particularly susceptible to failing to meet these assumptions due to their stage of development. There are a few examples that demonstrate the ability of adolescents to overcome these issues and apply their education in various areas. Social competence programs for young adolescents have been shown to produce long-term improvements in problem-solving skills, pro-social values, teacher-rated peer relations, and behavioral conduct (Weissberg, Barton, & Shriver, 1997). Danish (1997) found that a program focused on goal-setting led to adolescents setting and attaining goals, increasing school attendance, and decreasing delinquent behaviors. Adolescents in the experimental group significantly improved in the areas of self-control, problem-solving, and interpersonal sensitivity. Adolescents were shown to maintain these skills through middle school and high school (Elias, et al., 1986; Elias, Gara, Schuyler, Branden-Muller, & Sayette, 1991). School-based prevention programs for children and adolescents have generally been found to be effective across a variety of education topics (Durlak, 1995). This suggests that if relationship education for youth is able to increase adolescents' positive attitudes towards marriage preparation, counseling, and enrichment, it may actually lead to later attendance of such programs. In this way, relationship education for youth is important as a place to develop not only constructive relationship skills, but also positive attitudes towards marriage and marriage preparation.

The Current Study

Research shows that the benefits of relationship education reach across demographic subgroups (Stanley, 2001; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006; Adler-Baeder, et al., 2007), however involvement in these programs often does not reach

all interested or potentially benefited parties (Silliman & Schumm, 2004). It is theorized that more positive attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital counseling, marriage enrichment, and marriage counseling would lead to a better chance of preventing or successfully intervening in distressed romantic relationships including marriages, as well as promoting healthy relationships. Thus, knowledge of attitudes held towards these programs at the early age of adolescence might yield important information for those marketing and developing the programs. Prior research with adolescent populations has not examined differing attitudes towards these programs among diverse demographic groups. It is essential to determine who is interested in participating in marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment, who is already participating, as well as who benefits from these interventions. It is important to know the target audience as well as the potential audience, so that the programs and services can be developed and marketed as effectively as possible in order to reach the maximum number of individuals and couples at the earliest opportunity.

Evaluations of youth relationship education curricula have yielded evidence of increases in positive attitudes towards marriage preparation, counseling, and enrichment (Gardner, 2001; Gardner, et al., 2004). However, prior evaluations of youth relationship education programs have not examined differing effects among diverse demographic subgroups. It is important to know how diverse populations are affected by youth relationship education, so that these programs can be developed and marketed in a way that benefits all adolescents.

The current study examined adolescents' attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment, and how these attitudes

differ among demographic subgroups before and after participation in an empirically supported youth relationship education curriculum, *Relationship Smarts Plus (RS+)*. This study utilized a diverse sample across sex, race, parental education level, and family structure, which make the results more generalizable to high-risk populations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a significant increase, among professionals/researchers and the public, in efforts to increase the effectiveness of helping couples attain the ever-elusive happy and healthy marriage, especially while divorce rates have remained high. Thus, it is important to understand whether these efforts, in the form of marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment are actually effective. It is also important to examine who does and does not partake in these programs, and also who is most benefited. The following review will first summarize literature focusing on the effectiveness of relationship enhancement programs for the general population. Then, literature on the characteristics of participants and non-participants will be examined. Next, theories used to explain the connection between attitudes, intentions, and involvement in the area of relationship enhancement will be examined. Following that, the existing research on adolescents' attitudes towards relationship enhancement programs will be summarized. Lastly, the literature involving the attitudes towards, and the effectiveness of, such programs among each of the demographic subgroups involved in the current study will be reviewed.

Program Efficacy

Researchers continue to add to the evidence that relationship education and marriage preparation positively affect marital outcomes (Halford, Moore, Wilson, Dyer,

& Farrugia, 2004). Carroll and Doherty (2003) conducted a meta-analytic review of marriage preparation program efficacy. They reviewed 26 studies spanning from 1965 to 2001. Sixteen of these studies revealed significant improvements in interpersonal skills such as communication, problem-solving, and empathy for marriage preparation participants. In eleven of those studies, the scores of participants were significantly better than the control groups on outcome measures. An additional five studies reported that couples found the experience of marriage preparation to be helpful. Carroll and Doherty (2003) concluded that, on average, individuals participating in marriage preparation were better off after the program than 79% of individuals who did not participate in marriage preparation. They also stated that marriage preparation programs are generally effective in producing short-term positive effects in the areas of communication, conflict management, and overall relationship quality, and that these effects seem to be sustained from six months to three years (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Marriage counseling has also been found to positively affect marital outcomes. In a retrospective study examining the effectiveness of counseling, researchers found that for recently married soldiers, premarital counseling and marriage counseling were both significantly effective in increasing marital satisfaction. For the spouses of soldiers, only the combination of premarital and marital counseling was significantly effective in increasing marital satisfaction (Schumm, Silliman, & Bell, 2000).

Overall, relationship education and counseling programs have been shown to promote marital quality and stability by improving relationship quality and couple commitment, increasing self-disclosure, acceptance of partner, and use of positive solutions, improving communication and problem-solving skills, and decreasing

disagreements, negative emotions, and divorce (Buckner & Salts, 1985; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993; Olsen, 1983; Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992).

Scope of Program Efficacy

Research has suggested that the couples most in need of premarital education are the least likely to attend (Halford, O'Donnell, Lizzio, & Wilson, 2006). Sullivan and Bradbury (1997) sought to find out whether premarital prevention programs actually reached couples most at risk for marital dysfunction. They gathered information from participants on nine risk factors, which they chose from previous literature reviews on marriage. These risk factors were: lower age, lower income, lower education, parental divorce, higher neuroticism, lower marital satisfaction, higher stress (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), physical aggression (O'Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994), and impulsivity (Kelly & Conley, 1987). The authors found that couples who participated in premarital education programs were not shown to be at greater risk for marital difficulties based on the listed risk factors. Actually, husbands involved in marriage education tend to be older, more educated, and score higher on marital satisfaction measures and lower on marital aggression scores (Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997), factors which are associated with better marital outcomes anyway. These findings suggest that premarital education programs are not reaching couples most in need of the education.

Stanley and colleagues (2006) also sought to examine who tends to participate in premarital education. These authors found that within their Midwestern United States sample, having a religious wedding and higher levels of education were associated with a higher likelihood of having participated in premarital education. Being African-American

and ever having received public assistance were both associated with a lower likelihood of having participated in premarital education (Stanley, et al., 2006). It is important to note, however, that lower levels of involvement in premarital education among minorities may not mean a corresponding lack of interest. It may instead reflect a lack of access to such programs (Markman, 2000). In one study, younger, lower income, and African-American individuals were actually more likely to report interest in relationship education than other, low-risk populations (Johnson, et al., 2002).

Although some studies show that the positive effects of premarital education are short-term or lacking altogether, there is evidence that the simple act of participating in premarital education may lead to positive effects down the road. In a study with Army personnel, individuals participating in premarital counseling had no greater marital satisfaction than those who did not participate in premarital counseling. However, those who had experience with premarital counseling were more likely to seek marriage counseling later on – when they experienced clinical or non-clinical levels of marital distress (Schumm, et al., 2000). This suggests that premarital counseling leads to a higher likelihood of considering and using marriage counseling in later years, when difficult times inevitably arise. Couples with premarital counseling experience may seek marital therapy more quickly (Schumm & Denton, 1979), before their problems reach a critical level. This higher likelihood to seek marriage counseling if exposed to premarital education may be due to a notable rapport between the couple and the premarital therapist (Bader & Sinclair, 1983), or to an increased awareness of the challenges of early marriage and the warning signs of marital distress (Arond & Pauker, 1987). Regardless of the root cause, this is a crucial point, because oftentimes couples seek marriage

counseling as a last resort. In Bringle and Byers' (1997) study, although intentions to seek marriage counseling were high, participants rated only two problems worthy of seeking professional help: contemplating divorce and domestic abuse. The relative seriousness of these problems indicates a reluctance to seek marriage counseling for anything less than essentially the end of the marriage. Based on existing research, marriage counseling is in fact much more effective the earlier it is used (Jacobson & Addis, 1993).

Prior research has shown that personal experience with marriage counseling is one of the most important factors in whether or not couples seek counseling services (Bowen & Richman, 1991). Bringle and Byers (1997) found that 83% of the participants who had already had some form of marriage counseling reported intentions to seek marriage counseling in the event of a marital problem. Still, 72% of those without prior experience with a marriage counselor indicated they would also seek marriage counseling for a marital problem (Bringle & Byers, 1997). Interestingly, these researchers also noted that among the participants without prior marriage counseling, subjective norms (beliefs about whether seeking professional help would be approved by friends and family) became a significant factor in whether or not the participant had intentions to seek marriage counseling. This suggests that subjective norms play a role in people's attitudes towards counseling only until they have personal experience. Therefore, exposing individuals to the idea of relationship education and counseling early – during adolescence – may serve to dispute socialization and subjective norms. In the same way that exposure to premarital education has been shown to lead to use of marital counseling (Schumm, et al., 2000), early relationship education may lead to later use of premarital

education and marital counseling and enrichment. It is theorized that exposing adolescents to relationship education early will increase favorable attitudes towards premarital and marital counseling, thereby improving the likelihood that these individuals will seek counseling later in life if and when it can be beneficial to their relationships.

Theoretical Framework

Fishbein & Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action (1980) suggests that the best predictor of whether or not someone behaves in a certain way is the intention to behave in that way. They also identified that both attitudes towards performing the behavior and subjective norms associated with the behavior determine a person's intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Measuring participants' attitudes towards counseling, and therefore their intentions, is one predictor of whether or not they will actually seek marriage counseling or preparation courses.

Julian Rotter (1954) introduced the concept of locus of control as a part of individual personality. Locus of control is whether or not an individual believes that he or she has the personal resources to cope with a problem. In this context, an individual's internal or external locus of control would be relevant to their belief in their ability to make changes in their relationship. A person with an internal locus of control would most likely be more inclined to participate in relationship education or counseling because of the belief that something could be done. A person with an external locus of control may believe there is nothing he or she can do to improve the relationship – it simply is what it is. This person may be less likely to attend a relationship class. Fischer and Turner (1970) found that individuals with an internal locus of control had more favorable attitudes towards seeking professional help. More recently, among college students, individuals

with an internal locus of control were again shown to have more positive attitudes towards counseling (Davis, 1996).

Married individuals with an internal locus of control were shown to take a more active, direct, and effective approach to problem solving, communicating, and achieving couple goals (Miller, Lefcourt, Holmes, Ware, & Saleh, 1986). This suggests that locus of control is closely related to self-efficacy, the belief that one is capable of achieving certain outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy has been framed as both a predictor and a product of a given environment or achievement (Buchanan & Selmon, 2008). For example, having high self-efficacy may lead to believing one can achieve a happy, healthy relationship based on skill. Further, experiencing a happier, healthier relationship due to one's skill in the areas of communication and conflict management may in turn lead to higher self-efficacy. An internal locus of control and high self-efficacy may be related to more favorable attitudes towards counseling, due to the belief that working on the relationship would lead to positive outcomes. Locus of control and self-efficacy are presented here because some of the following literature links them to certain demographic factors, which in turn may affect attitudes towards counseling.

Another theoretical framework potentially helpful in understanding the current study is Holman and Associates' (2001) Ecosystemic Developmental perspective, built upon Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. This model identifies several contexts as important for couple relationships. These include the individual context (age, gender, kindness, personal beliefs about gender roles, the importance of marriage, etc.), the couple context (interactional patterns, communication, conflict management, etc.), the family background context (quality of parents' marriage, parent-child relationship, etc.),

and the sociocultural context (social support, race, socioeconomic status, etc.) (Holman and Associates, 2001). A large study with over 14,000 participants used data from RELATE, a twofold evaluation tool that both helps couples understand more about their relationship, and also serves as an information gathering tool for researchers. The researchers gathered immense information from couples on each level of ecosystemic context, following Holman and Associates' theory, in hopes of determining which characteristics would distinguish between participants of premarital education and non-participants (Duncan, Holman, & Yang, 2007). Notably, even though the sample size in this study was very large, most of the participants were Caucasian (over 85%). Interestingly, only four of the numerous variables were significant in predicting attendance of premarital education: the importance placed on marriage, relationship problems, partner's kindness, and maturity level of the participant (Duncan, et al., 2007). The current study seeks to examine how individual (age, gender, grade level), family (family structure), and social (race, parental education level) contextual factors may distinguish between adolescents who intend to seek premarital or marital education classes or counseling, and those adolescents who have no such intentions.

Adolescents' Views

Many attitudes and behavior patterns regarding relationships develop during childhood and adolescence – long before engagement or marriage. As Developmental Theory posits, adolescence is a period of major growth – physically, cognitively, and socially. This is a time of identity development and often marks the first experiences with romantic intimacy (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). It seems that a more effective approach to preventing unhealthy relationships and promoting healthy ones would begin early,

intervening in adolescents' lives before serious intimate relationships are formed. Simple exposure to relationship education at an early age – such as during middle school and high school - might increase awareness of ways in which relationships can become unhealthy, might eliminate common misconceptions or negative stereotypes about premarital or marital counseling, and might increase awareness and understanding of such programs.

A 2003 survey of adolescents' attitudes towards marriage and premarital counseling, utilized the Marriage and Family Life Survey (Martin & Martin, 1981), which covers topics such as sex, cohabitation, role of religion, marriage status of parents, and likelihood of seeking professional help concerning relationships. This study consisted of 145 randomly selected high school students from urban, suburban, and rural areas of Texas. The participants' average age was 16, and 66.9% were female. Forty-eight percent were Caucasian, 28.4% were African Americans, 7.4% were Hispanic, 4.1% were Native Americans, and the remaining 12.2% fell into the "other" race category. This study also gathered data on family structure: 44.6% of the adolescents reported they resided with their married, biological parents, 12.2% reported separated parents, 14.2% reported divorced parents, and 25.7% reported their parents were remarried. Researchers found that the great majority (70.9%) of adolescents had favorable or neutral attitudes towards counseling and other psychoeducational interventions. Additionally, 41.2% of the adolescents agreed that counseling is not for distressed couples only (Martin, et al., 2003). This study suggests adolescents are open to the idea of seeking marriage and relationship counseling or enrichment services, and agree that preparing for marriage is important. Given the diverse and representative sample, these findings are relatively

generalizable across ethnic groups and various family structures, though these researchers did not consider demographic subgroups in testing differing attitudes.

Silliman and Schumm (2004) sought to examine adolescents' perceptions of marriage and premarital couples' education. They surveyed 159 high school students (84.3% Caucasian), with an average age of 15.8 years. Sixty-six percent of the students reporting gender identified themselves as female. Students were enrolled in Family and Consumer Science classes in two rural high schools and two urban high schools. The breakdown of family structure was as follows: married (54.5%), separated (2.2%), divorced (8.2%), remarried (27.7%), and other (7.5%). This study utilized instruments that measured adolescents' intentions to attend marriage preparation courses, their understanding of what the programs entailed, and also their perception of the importance of preparing for marriage. The students' attitudes towards and expectations of marriage were also assessed. Although internal consistency was relatively low for these measures, factor analysis was used to maximize the validity of the findings. Results show that although high school students are less familiar with marriage preparation programs than previously studied college students (Silliman, Schumm, & Jurich, 1992), they were just as likely to agree that preparing for marriage was important. Forty-one percent of the adolescents reported intentions to partake in premarital education. Interestingly, these authors also examined the relationship between perceptions of marriage education, attitudes and expectations of marriage, and static variables such as sex, dating status, or at-risk status. At-risk status was defined as having experienced family abuse, dating abuse, or drug use within the family. Perceptions of marriage education, and attitudes towards marriage did not differ by sex, dating status, or at-risk status (Silliman &

Schumm, 2004). In this study, adolescent attitudes towards marriage education and counseling seem stable across different subgroups.

Unlike the previous two studies, which were one-time surveys, limited research has been conducted on the effect relationship education curricula for youth has on adolescent attitudes towards marriage and marriage preparation. One such curricula is entitled *Connections: Relationships and Marriage*, and is a series of 15 one-hour lessons meant for high school students. Topics of lessons include self-concept and goal setting, relationship expectations and mate selection, recovering from a break-up, compromise and listening skills, family of origin influences, and principles for successful marriages (Gardner, et al., 2004). *Connections* has been evaluated three times: once with a sample of mostly rural Caucasian participants (Gardner, 2001), once with a more diverse urban sample (Gardner, et al., 2004), and lastly in a four year follow-up study (Gardner & Boellaard, 2007). In the 2001 study, students enrolled in Family and Consumer Science classes in 22 rural Midwestern high schools participated in the study. Out of the 213 students, 132 were exposed to the curriculum and 81 were used as a control group. The sample was 88% Caucasian and 10% Native American. Ages ranged from 13 to 19 years old, with an average of 16.4 years of age. Sixty-two percent of the students were female, most likely representative of the higher percentage of females enrolled in Family and Consumer Science classes. From pre-test to post-test, compared to the control group, students exposed to the *Connections* curriculum were statistically shown to have significantly less favorable attitudes towards divorce. Students in the test group showed a significant increase in favorable attitudes towards marriage preparation and enhancement programs using scores from the Attitudes towards Counseling scale (Gardner, 2001).

In an effort to improve upon the limitations of the 2001 study, Gardner and colleagues evaluated *Connections* again in 2004. In the second study, the participants were students from 6 public high schools in California. Four-hundred and ten students were part of the study, 263 in the group exposed to *Connections* and 147 in the control group. The sample was ethnically diverse at 38.4% Caucasian, 30.1% Hispanic, 10.3% Asian, 4.9% African American, 1.7% Native American, and 14.7% “Other,” including those students identifying themselves as multi-racial. The students’ ages ranged from 14 to 19 years, with an average of 16.5 years of age. As in the 2001 study, female participants far outnumbered male participants at 79%. Family incomes ranged from \$10,000 to \$80,000, with a median of \$30,000-\$40,000. *Connections* was again shown to significantly increase favorable attitudes towards marriage preparation and enhancement programs in post-program evaluations using the Attitudes towards Counseling scale (Gardner, et al., 2004). It seems that adolescent attitudes towards counseling can be favorably increased via youth relationship education.

In the 2007 study, the samples from the previous two studies were combined to test for longitudinal effects of *Connections* at one year and four years after participation in the program. After attrition, and reduction of the sample in preliminary analysis, 72 participants remained. Of these, 70.8% were Caucasian, 13.9% were Hispanic, 8.3% were Asian American, 1.4% were African American, and the remaining 5.6% marked ‘Other’ or indicated they were multiracial. Four years after participation in the *Connections* program, participants were on average 20.69 years old. Slightly over 80% were female. The median family income was reported to be between \$40,000 and \$60,000, and 9% of the families fell below poverty line. The participants’ intentions to participate in marriage

preparation, counseling, and enrichment were again evaluated using the Attitudes towards Counseling scale. No statistically significant differences were found between the control group and the test group on Attitudes towards Counseling scores (Gardner & Boellaard, 2007). This suggests that the improvements in attitudes towards counseling, due to the relationship education curriculum *Connections*, are not sustained at the one- and four-year follow up marks. Based on Gardner's earlier findings, it was expected within the current study that the youth relationship curriculum, *Relationship Smarts Plus*, would lead to more favorable attitudes towards counseling as evaluated at post-test.

Except for Silliman and Schumm (2004), the findings mentioned up to this point apply to the general populations sampled, without separating out the effects of relationship education and counseling by important demographic subgroups. The following sections review the literature applicable to each of the demographic variables considered in the present study: age, sex, race, economic status, and family structure.

Age

A 1984 Australian survey intended to gather information on the general populations' knowledge and understanding of, and attitudes towards, marriage counselors. The authors surveyed 658 participants – occupationally and geographically diverse, the average age was 37 ($SD = 12.3$; range 16-79), marital status varied, although most were married (68.8%), followed by single (15.5%). Over half (57%) indicated they would go to a marriage counselor. The authors found no significant differences in responses due to age (Sharpley, Rogers, & Evans, 1984).

Marriage preparation programs are understandably focused towards young adults in serious relationships, and those engaged to be married (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Consequently, the majority of prior research in the areas of premarital counseling and marriage counseling has been conducted with adults (those who are married or planning to be married). Therefore, the existing data from young adults and adolescents is relatively sparse.

In prior research, adolescents expressed a much lower need for marriage education (47.3%) than college students (65%) (Martin, et al., 2003; Silliman, et al., 1992; respectively). This finding is not surprising considering developmental factors and practical factors such as college students' higher likelihood of being in a serious relationship apt to lead to marriage. This explains that although adolescents are just as interested in relationship education (Silliman & Schumm, 2004), they have less of an urgent need for it. Due to developmental stage, adolescents might also lack understanding of the difficulty and/or importance of relationships. Within the current study, it was expected that the high school students would have more favorable attitudes towards counseling than the middle school students due to the higher likelihood that they are in serious relationships, and to the fact that they are essentially chronologically closer to the actual event of marriage and use of couples' marriage preparation courses.

Sex

Females have been shown to be more willing to seek help in general – from any professional, from medical doctors, and for psychiatric symptoms (McMullen & Gross, 1983). Females are more willing to recognize a personal need for help, more willing to share their problems with others, and more willing to tolerate the stigma associated with help-seeking (Johnson, 2001).

In Carroll and Doherty's 2003 meta-analysis of premarital program effectiveness, they reported on four studies that separated out analyses by sex. All apparently reported that men and women respond equally well to premarital education programs (Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001; Markman, et al., 1993; Stanley, et al., 2001). Despite comparable benefits to both sexes, females are more likely to consider going to therapy than males (Butcher, Rouse, & Perry, 1998). In a study examining factors associated with intentions to seek marriage counseling, researchers found that female participants and those with prior experience with marriage counseling had greater intentions to seek marriage counseling. This sample included 222 married volunteers from an urban, commuter university freshman class and the surrounding urban community. Ages ranged from 18 to 59 ($M = 32.2$, $SD = 8.5$), time married ranged from 1 month to 36 years ($M = 91.6$ months, $SD = 96.7$). Of the participants reporting gender, there were 92 females and 129 males. In this study, males reported less favorable attitudes towards counseling and a lower intent to seek marriage counseling than did females (Bringle & Byers, 1997).

The most widely given reason for men's reluctance when it comes to marital therapy is socialization – men in almost all cultures are culturally conditioned to solve individual and family problems on their own. Marital and relationship problems – although acknowledged - may be seen as a 'private matter' by the traditional male (Moynihan & Adams, 2007). Another explanation revolves around men's assumed "unawareness" of relationship problems (Levant & Pollack, 1995). Although largely based on a stereotype, and not widely supported by literature, some authors state that men have difficulty being aware of their own emotions and of how their relationship seems to

be going. Researchers have found that women tend to be the “emotional barometers” of relationships (Doss, Atkins, & Christensen, 2003). In one study, females were 67-73% more likely to be the one to initiate therapy (Doss, et al., 2003).

Moynehan and Adams (2007) intended to examine the idea that men’s lack of awareness of relationship problems lead to their reluctance to seek marriage counseling. The sample consisted of 92 couples at an on-campus therapy clinic. The median age for males was 33, and 31 for females. The authors report that the sample was predominately high-school educated, Caucasian, with low-to-moderate income levels. Eighty-nine percent of the couples were married, and the average length of the relationship was six years (Moyneham & Adams, 2007). The authors found no differential gender effects pre-therapy. Males in this study equaled females in their awareness of and willingness to report relationship problems. However, the Moyneham and Adams study does seem to confirm previous findings that men are more reluctant than women to actually seek treatment, as the female partner initiated therapy in 63% of the cases.

Males have been shown to believe they have less control over marital problems and that effort and skill play less of a role in a marriage’s outcome (Bringle & Byers, 1997). This may be related to males’ tendency to be less favorable towards marriage counseling – “it won’t help.” This can be explained with the theories of Locus of Control and Self-Efficacy – if men have less self-efficacy when it comes to relationship skills (possibly due to the stereotype that men are not good at relationships), or an external locus of control, they may be less likely to seek out education or intervention for their relationship skills.

The previously mentioned 1984 Australian survey, which intended to gather information on the general populations' knowledge and understanding of, and attitudes towards, marriage counselors, sampled 658 participants – about half (N = 333) were female. Over half (57%) indicated they would go to a marriage counselor. The authors found no significant differences in responses due to sex. They did, however, find a slight sex trend – more women than men indicated that they knew a marriage counselor and would pay to see a marriage counselor – there were no sex differences in willingness to go to a counselor (Sharpley, et al., 1984). Silliman and Schumm (2004), in their study of high school students, found no effect for sex on the adolescents' perceptions of marital and premarital couples' education.

In a study intending to measure the effects of race and gender on perceptions of premarital education programs, authors used a sample of 310 college students, ranging in age from 18 to 27 ($M = 20.8$, $SD = 1.53$). Sixty-two percent of the sample was female, 58% were Caucasian, and 42% were African-American (Duncan, Box, & Silliman, 1996). Duncan and colleagues also gathered information on the participants' family structure and parental education level and income. Seventy-four percent of the students were from two-parent biological families, 13% were from single parent families, 11% were from stepfamilies, and 3% had adoptive parents or lived with other relatives. The majority of participants reported that their parents' education level was college level or beyond. Most parents also had incomes over \$48,000. This extensive demographic data was used to test for differences between gender and race groups, as those were the main demographic variables of the study. Conscious preparation for marriage was considered very important for 93% of the participants. Fifty-eight percent reported a high need for

information regarding how to prepare for marriage. However, only 32% of participants reported an intention to actually attend a marriage preparation program. The authors found no main or interaction effects for gender regarding perceptions of premarital education programs. A main effect was found regarding intentions to attend marriage preparation programs – females were more likely than males to report an intention to attend (Duncan, et al., 1996).

Additionally, Duncan and colleagues were able to assess gender differences in reasons for not intending to attend marriage preparation programs. Females were more likely to report lack of time as a barrier to attendance, while males were more likely to report a lack of interest or skepticism in the effectiveness of marriage preparation programs. Duncan and colleagues make a special note that the differences between males and females were slight, and that shifting gender roles may be leading men to be just as concerned with relationships and interested in programs (Duncan, et al., 1996).

In the study using RELATE data and following Holman and Associates' (2001) theory, the presence of relationship problems was almost equally predictive of attendance for males and females (18% and 17%, respectively). The best predictor of a couple attending premarital education was the importance females placed on marriage. Results revealed that the importance the male partner placed on marriage was only half as likely (19%) to predict premarital education attendance as the importance the female partner placed on marriage (34%) (Duncan, et al., 2007). This adds to prior research suggesting that the female tends to be the “relationship keeper,” so to speak.

In general, females tend to have a more positive attitude towards counseling, marriage counseling, and towards seeking marriage counseling than males. This has held

true in samples of adults, college students, and racially and ethnically diverse populations. Even still, there are a few studies that found no significant gender differences in attitudes towards seeking marriage counseling (Sharply, et al., 1984; Silliman & Schumm, 2004), and some that are able to distinguish between attitudes towards counseling, intentions to attend, and actual attendance (Duncan, et al., 1996). Consistent with the current literature, it was expected that within the current sample, females would report more favorable attitudes towards counseling, although the gender differences were not expected to be vast.

Race

In the Stanley and colleagues (2006) study designed to examine the effectiveness of premarital education, a large, diverse sample was employed. Researchers were able to examine racial and ethnic differences regarding program participation and efficacy. African-Americans were less likely than Caucasians to participate in premarital education. Authors also found that Latinos were more likely than Caucasians to participate in premarital education. This is most likely due to the high rate of Catholicism among Latinos, which is oftentimes associated with required religious premarital counseling or education (Stanley, et al., 2006). Notably, Stanley and colleagues (2006) found no evidence that the benefits of premarital education obtained by racial and ethnic minorities were any less advantageous than those obtained by Caucasians.

Duncan and colleagues (1996) noted several differences between Caucasians and African-Americans in their college-aged sample. In general, African-American participants were more likely than Caucasians to come from a single parent home, have fathers with less than a college education, and report a lower parental income. These

differences were controlled for in the analyses. As mentioned, 93% of the total participants reported that conscious preparation for marriage is very important. Fifty-eight percent reported a high need for information regarding how to prepare for marriage. African-Americans reported a significantly greater need for information than Caucasians. In contrast to the rather high reports regarding the importance of preparing for marriage, only 32% of the participants reported an intention to attend marriage preparation programs. Caucasians were more likely to report an intention to attend than African-Americans (Duncan, et al., 1996). The inconsistency with African-Americans' reported greater need for information, yet lesser interest in attending marriage preparation programs may be explained by the tendency of African Americans to hold traditional kinship and community ties (African-Americans would rather get marriage information from friends and family), or may be better explained by contextual barriers (lower resources, more difficulty getting to and paying for marriage preparation classes), rather than personal preferences (Gary, Beatty, & Berry, 1983).

In contrast to other research, none of the sociocultural context factors detailed by Holman and Associates (2001), including race, predicted attendance of premarital education (Duncan, et al., 2007). Most of the evidence suggests that although African-Americans are less likely to participate in premarital and marital education programs, they are no less likely to be interested in the value of the programs. For this reason, within the current study, it was expected that no differences in attitudes towards counseling would be found between participants due to race.

Economic Status

The inclusion of low-income, minority participants is particularly important because of the higher likelihood of experiencing unhealthy patterns of interaction and instability (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). For African-American youth in particular, the threat of unhealthy relationships is increased by the risks of the unlikelihood of marriage and the high likelihood of divorce or out of wedlock childbirth (Teachman, Tedrow, and Crowder, 2000), all associated with disadvantages to individual, family, and community well-being. Moreover, poverty brings enormous stress to relationships in many areas including debt, illiteracy, unemployment, incarceration, substance abuse, domestic violence, and unsafe neighborhoods (Ooms, 2002).

The income level or education level of participants is often used as an indicator of economic status because average annual earnings increase with educational attainment (OECD, 1995). Education level has been related to premarital education participation. Stanley and colleagues noted that with each year of education, the odds of participating in premarital education increased by 28%. An interaction effect was also discovered between participation in premarital education, the resulting odds of divorce, and level of academic education. There was a negative linear relationship, meaning that as level of academic education increased (from no high school diploma, to high school graduation, to some college, to college graduation), the odds of divorce for those who participated in premarital education steadily and significantly fell (Stanley, et al., 2006). But for those with low levels of education, the odds of divorce remained high. This suggests that the benefits of premarital education do not prevail over the risks of poverty when it comes to divorce. However, levels of marital conflict, marital satisfaction, and commitment were not significant in relation to level of education (Stanley, et al., 2006). Therefore, aside

from a lower risk of divorce, the benefits of premarital education seem to hold across academic education level. In addition, a study with an Army sample revealed no differences in the effects of marital education on the basis of economic level (Stanley et al., 2005).

One study used the event of ever receiving public assistance as an indicator of economic status. Results show that this was associated with less likelihood of participating in premarital education (Stanley, et al., 2006). Contrastingly, economic status was not shown to predict premarital education attendance in the large study based on RELATE data (Duncan, et al., 2007). Although perhaps less likely to participate in premarital education, economically disadvantaged individuals appear to derive just as many benefits as anyone else when they do participate (Stanley, et al., 2006). In the current study, it was expected that no differences in attitudes towards counseling would be found between participants due to economic status.

Family Structure

Research is limited on the subject of differences among various family structures when it comes to attitudes towards counseling. Related findings can help form a basis for the proposal of hypotheses for the current study. Adults from divorced families of origin have less idealized beliefs about marriage and tend to be more accepting of nontraditional family structures (Amato, 1988; Cunningham & Thornton, 2007). This may translate into more open views towards counseling, due to a weakened social norm barrier against seeking professional help. Children of divorced parents are more likely to divorce themselves, less optimistic about the prospect of a life-long marriage, more likely to cohabit, more favorable towards relationship alternatives to marriage, and consider

divorce to be less of a negative option compared to other adults (Amato & De Boer, 2001; Cunningham & Thornton, 2007; Dronkers, 1997; Van der Meer, Spruijt, & Brinkgreve, 1994). These individuals also tend to experience more problems in their couple relationships, perhaps because they are more critical towards relationships (Van der Meer, et al., 1994). Overall, adult children of divorce seem to have less belief in stable and long-lasting couple relationships. This may lead to more favorable attitudes towards counseling for adolescents who experienced divorce and subsequent new family structures, due to a greater awareness of the problems that can transpire in relationships, and possibly a conscious intention to have more satisfactory adult relationships. Alternatively, this could lead to less favorable attitudes towards counseling due to more favorable attitudes towards divorce (i.e. no point in working on this relationship, just end it), or negative experiences with counseling within their family of origin (i.e. their parents went to therapy and got divorced anyway). Due to the lack of conclusive literature, within the current study, the expectation for differences in attitudes towards counseling among various family structures remained a research question.

Interaction Effects

Within social science, a single factor is rarely the cause of any given outcome. Well-being and satisfaction are complex concepts best explained by a broad range of interacting factors. It is important to consider interaction effects among variables for this reason. In a study with a sample of 107 African-American college students, authors sought to determine if there were differences in attitudes towards counseling as a function of the students' scores on a racial identity scale (Ponterotto, Anderson, & Grieger, 1986). The sample was 64% female. This study was focused on attitudes towards counseling in

general, not couples counseling. Results showed no main effects for sex or racial identity. However, there was a significant interaction effect, meaning that differences in attitudes towards counseling are insignificant until interaction effects between demographic subgroups are considered. Interestingly, females with a more internalized racial identity had the most favorable attitudes towards counseling (Ponterotto, et al., 1986). This suggests that as females become more accepting of and satisfied with their African American identity, they become more socially flexible and comfortable partaking in traditionally “white” programs like counseling (Carter, 1995).

In a study using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, authors found differences among African-American and Caucasian youth based on their family and community environments. For African-Americans, family structure was not a factor in youth well-being, but community context was. Contrastingly, for Caucasian youth, single parenthood and cohabitation were associated with poorer youth outcomes (Kowaleski-Jones & Dunifon, 2006). These results point to the importance of considering all interaction possibilities among variables.

Rationale for Current Study

The current study sought to examine the effects of various demographic factors on adolescents’ attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital counseling, marriage counseling, and marriage enrichment. The current findings help to fill the gaps in existing research concerning non-representative samples across sex, race, income levels, and family structure types. It is essential to include participants from more diverse backgrounds and analyze demographic categories separately because this has not been done with previous samples. In light of the research showing that relationship education

and counseling programs impact diverse populations no less beneficially than more traditional populations, it is important to note how attitudes towards these beneficial relationship programs may differ by demographic subgroup. If the attitudes of potential target audiences from diverse backgrounds can be determined, marketing and program development efforts can be improved upon in order to have a wider impact.

Individuals from single-parent families and stepfamilies have been shown to have lower quality, less stable intimate relationships (Van der Meer, et al., 1994). Likewise, racial and ethnic minorities are less likely to marry and more likely to experience divorce or out of wedlock childbirth (Teachman, et al., 2000). Economic minorities face much higher risks for relationship distress due to debt, illiteracy, unemployment, incarceration, substance abuse, domestic violence, and unsafe neighborhoods (Ooms, 2002). Given this literature, there may be an amplified importance of relationship education and counseling for low-income, minority individuals (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). It is therefore even more important to discover how the attitudes of these demographic subgroups may differ towards relationship education and counseling. The current study utilizes data from a sample equally representative of Caucasians and African-Americans. The sample is also representatively diverse across family structure types and parental education levels. The sample is also set up to distinguish between adolescents in middle school and high school. Furthermore, whereas previous research was conducted on a sample of mostly female adolescents, the current study utilizes data from a sample more equally distributed by sex. This is important for the purpose of examining how conventional gender differences regarding relationship education might differ in an adolescent population.

Additionally, whereas Silliman and Schumm (2004) conducted a one-time survey of adolescents' perceptions of marriage education and their attitudes towards seeking premarital counseling, the current study built upon Gardner and colleagues' (2001; 2004) findings and used a pre/post test design to determine if the actual experience of youth relationship education is associated with an increase in favorable behavioral intentions for seeking counseling and/or education for later marital relationships. It was expected that completion of the *Relationship Smarts Plus* curriculum would have a positive impact on attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment, which will theoretically encourage healthier relationships. Any incongruities between demographic subgroups in attitudes, compared to baseline findings, were also examined after completion of the post-test. It was theorized that males, middle-schoolers, and those from non-traditional family structures might have greater room for improvement in their attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment. African-Americans and individuals of lower economic status were not expected to have a greater possibility for improvement in positive attitudes. Specifically, the following hypotheses were made, and the following research questions were addressed:

Hypotheses

- I. Adolescent females will have statistically significantly more favorable attitudes towards counseling than males at Time 1.
- II. Adolescent attitudes towards counseling will not differ in a statistically significant manner between Caucasians and African-Americans at Time 1.

- III. High school-aged adolescents will have statistically significantly more favorable attitudes towards counseling than middle school-aged adolescents at Time 1.
- IV. Adolescent attitudes towards counseling will not differ in a statistically significant manner between economic levels as indicated by parent education levels at Time 1.
- V. Completion of *RS+* will have a statistically significant, positive impact on attitudes towards counseling, on average for all adolescents, measured as the difference in scores between Time 1 and Time 2.

Research Questions

- I. In what way, if any, will attitudes towards counseling differ across family structure types and adolescent age groups at Time 1?
- II. In what way, if any, will attitudes towards counseling differ across the various demographic subgroups at Time 2?
- III. In what way, if any, will the various demographic variables interact, with one another and with time, to affect attitudes towards counseling?

METHODS

This study aims to explore adolescent's attitudes towards counseling across various demographic groups, both before and after participation in a youth relationship education program.

Participants

The participants in this study were drawn from adolescents participating in the Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative (ACHMI) project. Eight counties were chosen for the implementation of the program. Three of those counties are considered rural (Chambers, Escambia, and Talladega), while the others are considered urban (Etowah, Houston, Montgomery, Morgan, and Tuscaloosa). Each county was responsible for recruiting individuals to participate in relationship education classes from the *Relationship Smarts Plus* curriculum. This study uses secondary data from the much larger evaluation of the *RS+* curriculum. The initial inclusion criteria for the current study required that the adolescents complete both a pre-test and a post-test, and that they answered all the pertinent questions. Allison (2002) suggests deletion as an appropriate method of addressing missing values in most analysis situations. All included participants and their parent or guardian completed an informed consent. Those who reported receiving less than six hours of the curriculum were excluded. A very small number of participants identified themselves as a race other than Caucasian or African American, or as being in the 5th grade, having a GED, or residing with adoptive or foster parents. These

participants were excluded in order to increase the validity of the findings and clarify to whom the findings generalize. Of the original 538 participants, 304 met these criteria. Analyses were completed to assess for systematic differences between excluded and included participants in attitudes towards counseling as well as on demographical information. Cross-tabulations were conducted, and if the Pearson Chi-Square value was deemed significant (p -value $< .05$), the standardized residuals of each demographic category were examined. A standardized residual greater than $|2|$ indicated significant differences between groups. No statistically significant differences were found among any variables except for race, grade level, and family structure. These differences are due to the purposeful exclusion of participants who were not Caucasian or African American, in grades 6-12, or residing in a first family, single-parent family, or stepfamily.

Demographic categories considered included age, grade level, sex, race, parental education level, and family structure. The participants were, on average, 14.34 years of age (range 11-18 years, $SD = 1.69$). Only participants in grades 6-12 were included. The participants were grouped into grade levels: 45.4% in middle school (grades 6-8) and 54.6% in high school (grades 9-12). Sex is nearly evenly divided, with 47% male and 53% female. About half the participants identified themselves as African American (53.6%). An additional 46.4% of the participants identified themselves as Caucasian. Parental education level was used as an indicator of socioeconomic status. Of participants' fathers, over 60% had a high school education or below. Of participants' mothers, 45.7% had a high school education or below. An additional 21.7% had completed some college. The majority of parents had not attained college degrees, suggesting a relatively low-income population, as average annual earnings are positively

affected by educational attainment (OECD, 1995). Family structure was diverse with 42.1% of students residing with both biological parents, 39.8% residing in single parent homes, and 18.1% residing in step-families (See Table 1 for a more specific breakdown).

Table 1. *Demographic Information of Participants*

		N = 304
Age		$M = 14.34$
		$SD = 1.69$
	11 years	4.6%
	12 years	10.2%
	13 years	19.1%
	14 years	17.4%
	15 years	22.7%
	16 years	16.1%
	17 years	7.2%
	18 years	2.6%
Sex		
	Male	47%
	Female	53%
Race		
	African-American	53.6%
	Caucasian	46.4%

Grade level

Middle-school (6 th -8 th)	45.4%
High-school (9 th -12 th)	54.6%

Mother's highest level of education

Less than high school	14.1%
Completed high school	31.6%
Some college	21.7%
2 year college/Technical school degree	12.2%
4 year college degree	11.8%
Post college degree	8.6%

Father's highest level of education

Less than high school	18.4%
Completed high school	42.4%
Some college	13.8%
2 year college/Technical school degree	10.2%
4 year college degree	9.5%
Post college degree	5.6%

Family Structure

First family	42.1%
Single parent	39.8%
Stepfamily	18.1%

Procedure

This study utilized secondary data from the Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative. The original data were collected in Year One of the project, from April 2007 to October 2007. The participants were part of a larger study in which Marriage Educators at Family Resource Centers across the state of Alabama provided relationship education to adults and adolescents. The adolescents were exposed to the relationship education curriculum entitled *Relationship Smarts Plus (RS+)*. *RS+* is empirically based and highly interactive, including several hands-on and group activities, as well as movie, story, and song clips. A more detailed description of the curriculum content is presented in Table 2. Information is from the self-report questionnaires completed before the first *Relationship Smarts Plus* class and after the last class. Many of the classes were taught in middle or high schools, but some were administered at churches, after school programs, or summer camps. Participants received a minimum dosage of six hours of curriculum, with lessons 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, and 12 mandated. Prior to participation in the study, adolescents and their guardians were informed of the purposes of the questionnaires, and each signed informed consent forms indicating their agreement to participate and releasing information for research purposes.

Table 2. *Curriculum Description for Relationship Smarts Plus*

Unit	Lessons	Content Description
1	1-4	Exploring the social, emotional, and mental dimensions of maturity, reflecting on values and determining the ones that are personally important, gaining knowledge about the nature of infatuation, and exploring the dimensions of mature love.
2	5-7	Guidelines for “dating smart,” learning low-risk dating strategies, and gaining knowledge related to what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like.
3	8-9	Identification and discussion of behaviors that demonstrate abuse, recognizing the different types and warning signs of abuse, and learning when and how to end a dating relationship and move on.
4	10-12	Understanding the practices associated with healthy stable marriages, understanding the importance of commitment and positive communication skills, learning to manage conflict and understanding the role of forgiveness in relationships, and determining values associated with financial management.

Note. From “The impact of relationship education on adolescents of diverse backgrounds,” by F. Adler-Baeder, J. Kerpelman, D. G. Schramm, B. Higginbotham, and A. Paulk, 2007, *Family Relations*, 56, p. 293. Copyright 2007 by the National Council on Family Relations.

Measures

Attitudes towards Counseling (See Appendix A). Participants completed the Attitudes towards Counseling scale (Gardner, 2001). This measure is used to assess attitudes toward premarital counseling, marital counseling, and marriage enrichment

programs. It consists of four items on a 4-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (4). The items are as follows: “I will take a marriage preparation course with my fiancé before I get married.”; “I will go to premarital counseling with my fiancé before I get married.”; “After I’m married, I will attend a marriage enrichment class with my spouse.”; and “After I’m married, if we are having trouble in our marriage, we will go to counseling.” According to Gardner (2001, 2004, 2007), the Attitudes towards Counseling scale has a good internal consistency, with reported Cronbach alpha coefficients ranging from .78 to .84. In the current study, the Cronbach alpha coefficients ranged from .80 to .89. Additionally, in the current study, this measure is on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). This change from a 4-point scale to a 5-point scale was made in the process of making the evaluation surveys in the original ACHMI study more uniform across all measures for participants (A. Bradford, personal communication, October 9, 2008). The sum of the scores was used for analysis, thus scores could range from 4 to 20.

Demographic Variables (See Appendix B). Participants each filled out a report asking for basic demographic information. Adolescents were asked to separately circle the options that described their age, gender, ethnic background, and grade level. Educational level of both the participants’ mother and father was obtained in order to assess for economic status. Adolescents were asked to circle one of the following in regard to their parents’ education level: less than high school, completed high school, some college, 2 year college/Technical school degree, 4 year college degree, or post-college degree (e.g., Master’s, Ph.D., M.D., Ed.D.). In order to assess family structure, adolescents were asked the question, “Who do you live with all or most of the time?”

Adolescents were to place a check mark by the applicable options: mother, father, stepmother, stepfather, sister, brother, and other. If participants marked either stepmother or stepfather, they were categorized as living in a stepfamily. If participants marked only mother or father, they were categorized as living in a single-parent home. If participants marked both mother and father, they were categorized as living in a first family.

Data Analysis

Hypotheses I through IV addressed whether attitudes towards counseling differed significantly across sex, race, grade level, and parent education level at Time 1, before participation in *RS+*. It was expected that females (hypothesis I), and high-school students (hypothesis III) would have statistically significantly more favorable attitudes towards counseling. It was also expected that there would be no statistically significant differences in attitudes towards counseling across race (hypothesis II) or parent education levels (hypothesis IV). Whether attitudes towards counseling differed significantly across age group or family structure at Time 1 was addressed by research question I. In order to address hypotheses I, II, III, and IV, and research question I, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to determine the significance of sex, race, age, grade level, parent education level, and family structure on attitudes towards counseling, using scores from the pre-test. The variance in attitudes towards counseling at Time 1 was separately analyzed for significant effects of each of the 6 independent variables mentioned.

It was expected that participation in *RS+* would be related to significantly more favorable attitudes towards counseling for all adolescents on average (hypothesis V). A repeated measures mixed between/within analysis of variance (RMANOVA) was used

with Time as the repeated measure to test for main effects for time. In addition, paired sample t-tests were used to determine overall program impact.

Research question II addressed whether and how Attitudes towards Counseling would differ among demographic subgroups after participation in *RS+*. A separate RMANOVA was used for each independent variable, with Time as the repeated measure. Interaction effects for time and any demographic variable would indicate a significant difference between demographic subgroups, leading to change over time.

Research question III addressed whether the various demographic variables might interact, with one another and with time, in their effects on attitudes towards counseling. For independent variables showing significant effects on Attitudes towards Counseling at Time 2, controlling for Time 1, RMANOVAs were again utilized in order to evaluate interaction effects while controlling for the other significant variables.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics were conducted to derive the mean, standard deviation, and range of the Attitudes towards Counseling variable. The overall mean score on the Attitudes towards Counseling scale at Time 1, before participation in *RS+*, was 12.07 (*SD* = 3.37). This roughly corresponds to “Neutral/Mixed” attitudes towards counseling. The sum of scores ranged from 4 to 20, meaning participants’ opinions on whether they would use premarital and marital counseling and enrichment programs ranged from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” Higher scores on the Attitudes towards Counseling scale indicate more favorable attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marital enrichment programs. Descriptive statistics for Attitudes towards Counseling for each demographic subgroup at Time 1 are presented in Table 3. Frequencies revealed that at Time 1, 68% of participants had favorable or neutral attitudes towards counseling.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics of Attitudes towards Counseling Scores at Time 1*

Demographic	N	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sex					
Males	143	4	20	11.95	3.34
Females	161	4	20	12.17	3.41

Demographic	N	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Race					
Caucasian	141	4	20	11.84	3.32
African-American	163	4	20	12.26	3.42
Grade level					
Middle school (6 th -8 th)	138	4	20	11.94	3.35
High school (9 th -12 th)	166	4	20	12.17	3.40
Age					
11	14	8	19	13.14	3.25
12	31	4	18	11.32	3.21
13	58	4	20	12.55	3.72
14	53	4	18	11.85	2.85
15	69	4	20	12.03	3.57
16	49	7	20	12.53	2.92
17	22	4	18	10.77	3.95
18	8	4	17	12.00	3.63
Age group					
Early adolescence (10-12)	45	4	19	11.89	3.30
Middle adolescence (13-15)	180	4	20	12.14	3.42
Later adolescence (16-18)	79	4	20	11.99	3.35

Demographic	N	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Parent education level					
Without college degree	178	4	20	11.78	3.51
With college degree	126	4	20	12.48	3.13
Family Structure					
First family	128	4	20	12.23	3.23
Single parent	121	4	20	12.02	3.59
Stepfamily	55	5	20	11.80	3.25

Because the chosen statistical analysis procedure is analysis of variance, all independent variables must be categorical. Therefore age groups (10-12, 13-15, and 16-18) were created to make the only continuous independent variable (age) categorical. This also assists in generalizing the findings into early adolescence (ages 10-12), middle adolescence (ages 13-15), and later adolescence (ages 16-18). One other adjustment was made to the dataset. The education level of the most educated parent was used to indicate economic status, and the education level subgroups were collapsed into two categories: those with a college degree, and those without a college degree.

Differences among demographic categories at Time 1

The descriptive statistics in Table 3 reveal that there are differences among subgroups on mean scores of Attitudes towards Counseling. To determine if any of these differences were significant, and not due to chance, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted on each demographic variable at Time 1. Statistical

significance for this study was set at a p -value of less than .05. The Levene test for homogeneity yielded no significant scores, indicating that the sample meets the assumption of homogeneity. No significant differences were found in Attitudes towards Counseling scores at Time 1 among any of the demographic subgroups (See Table 4).

Consistent with the expectation of hypothesis II, no significant differences were found between Caucasian adolescents and African American adolescents. Consistent with the expectation of hypothesis IV, no significant differences were found between adolescents whose parents had a college degree and those who did not. Hypotheses I and III were not supported, as there were no significant differences between males and females or high-school students and middle-school students. To address research question 1, there were no significant differences between age groups or family structure types.

Table 4. *ANOVA – Attitudes towards Counseling at Time 1*

Demographic	N	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	df	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Sex				1	0.31	.58
Males	143	11.95	3.34			
Females	161	12.17	3.41			
Race				1	1.21	.27
Caucasian	141	11.84	3.32			
African American	163	12.26	3.42			
Grade level				1	0.34	.56
Middle school (6th-8th)	138	11.94	3.35			
High school (9 th -12 th)	166	12.17	3.40			

Demographic		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	df	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Age group				2	0.13	.88
Early adolescence (10-12)	45	11.89	3.30			
Middle adolescence (13-15)	180	12.14	3.42			
Later adolescence (16-18)	79	11.99	3.35			
Parent education level				1	3.21	.07
Without college degree	178	11.78	3.51			
With college degree	126	12.48	3.13			
Family Structure				2	0.33	.72
First Family	128	12.23	3.23			
Single-parent	121	12.02	3.59			
Stepfamily	55	11.80	3.25			

Attitudes towards Counseling after RS+

In order to examine how attitudes towards counseling for each demographic group would change after completion of *RS+*, repeated measures mixed between/within analyses of variance (RMANOVAs) were used, with Time as the repeated measure (See Table 8). There was a significant main effect for time within each demographic category, although all were weak effects (Cohen, 1988). Among each demographic, on average, post-test scores were significantly higher than pre-test scores. This indicates that participation in *RS+* is related to significantly improved Attitudes towards Counseling scores for all participants, on average, regardless of demographic background, which

supports hypothesis V. To confirm this finding, a paired sample t-test was conducted to examine differences between average scores on the Attitudes towards Counseling scale. There was an overall statistically significant (t -score = -2.889; $p < .01$) improvement in average Attitudes towards Counseling scores from pre-test to post-test (See Table 5). At Time 2, after completion of *RS+*, the overall mean score increased to 12.65 ($SD = 3.86$), which roughly corresponds to “Neutral/Mixed” approaching “Agree” on the Attitudes towards Counseling scale. Frequencies reveal an increase in participants reporting neutral or favorable attitudes towards counseling from 68% at Time 1, to 74.9% at Time 2.

Table 5. *Paired Sample t-test for Overall Attitudes towards Counseling Scores*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> -score	<i>p</i> -value
Time 1	12.07	3.37	-2.89	.00**
Time 2	12.65	3.86		

** p -value < .01

Interaction effects

These results show significant change in Attitudes towards Counseling scores for the full sample, but may mask possible differences among demographic categories. In order to address research question II and determine whether there were significant differences among the demographic groups regarding participation in *RS+*, interaction effects among the demographic variables and time were examined next (See Table 6).

Table 6. *RMANOVA –Attitudes towards Counseling across Time*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	Partial η^2	<i>p</i>
Sex	1	3.54	.012	.06
Time	1	7.68	.025	.01**
Time x sex	1	5.23	.017	.02*
Race	1	0.00	.000	.98
Time	1	9.27	.030	.00**
Time x race	1	4.20	.014	.04*
Age group	2	0.09	.001	.92
Time	1	7.84	.025	.01**
Time x age group	2	0.58	.004	.56
Grade level	1	2.12	.007	.15
Time	1	7.55	.024	.01**
Time x grade level	1	2.16	.007	.14
Parent education level	1	3.80	.012	.05
Time	1	8.14	.026	.01**
Time x parent education level	1	0.00	.000	.95
Family Structure	2	0.31	.002	.73
Time	1	8.31	.027	.00**
Time x family structure	2	0.21	.001	.81

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Two significant interaction effects were discovered, although both are considered to be weak effects (Cohen, 1988). There was a statistically significant effect for time x sex ($F = 5.23, p < .05$). Paired sample t-tests indicate that although there was a significant increase in female adolescents' scores from pre-test to post-test, *RS+* did not produce significant change in males (see Table 7 and Figure 1). The main effect for time might be due to females' change. Participation in *RS+* seems to be more effective for females in improving Attitudes towards Counseling.

The other significant interaction effect was time x race ($F = 4.20, p = < .05$). Paired sample t-tests indicate that although there was a significant increase in Caucasian adolescents' scores from pre-test to post-test, *RS+* did not produce significant change in African Americans (see Table 7 and Figure 2). The main effect for time might be due to Caucasians' change. Participation in *RS+* seems to be more effective for Caucasians in improving Attitudes towards Counseling.

Table 7. Paired Sample t-tests for Attitudes towards Counseling scores of Significant Variables

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> -score	<i>p</i> -value
Males	Time 1	11.95	3.34	-0.32	.75
	Time 2	12.05	3.71		
Females	Time 1	12.17	3.41	-3.79	.00***
	Time 2	13.19	3.92		
Caucasians	Time 1	11.84	3.32	-3.69	.00***
	Time 2	12.87	3.90		
African Americans	Time 1	12.26	3.42	-0.70	.49
	Time 2	12.47	3.82		

*** $p < .001$

Figure 1. *Estimated Marginal Means of Attitudes towards Counseling by Sex across Time*

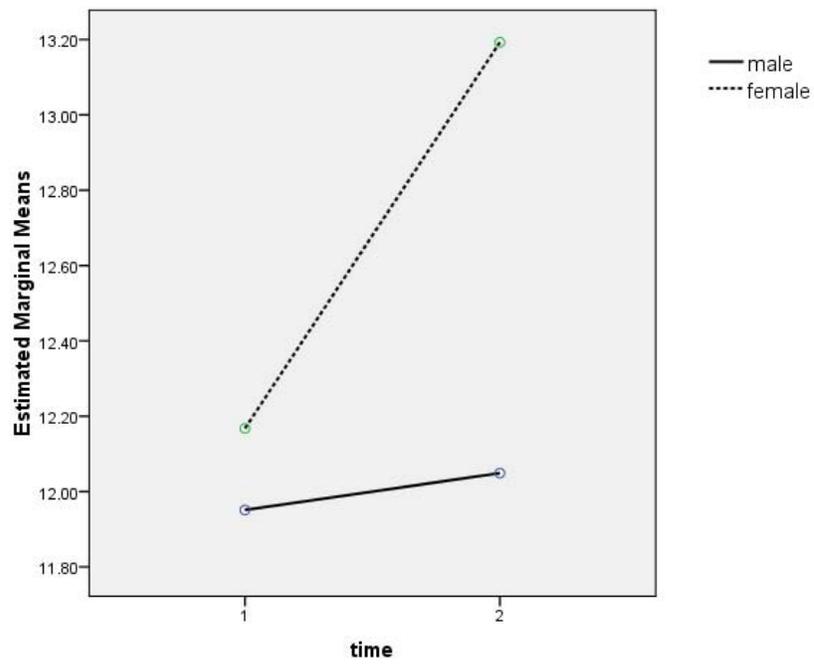
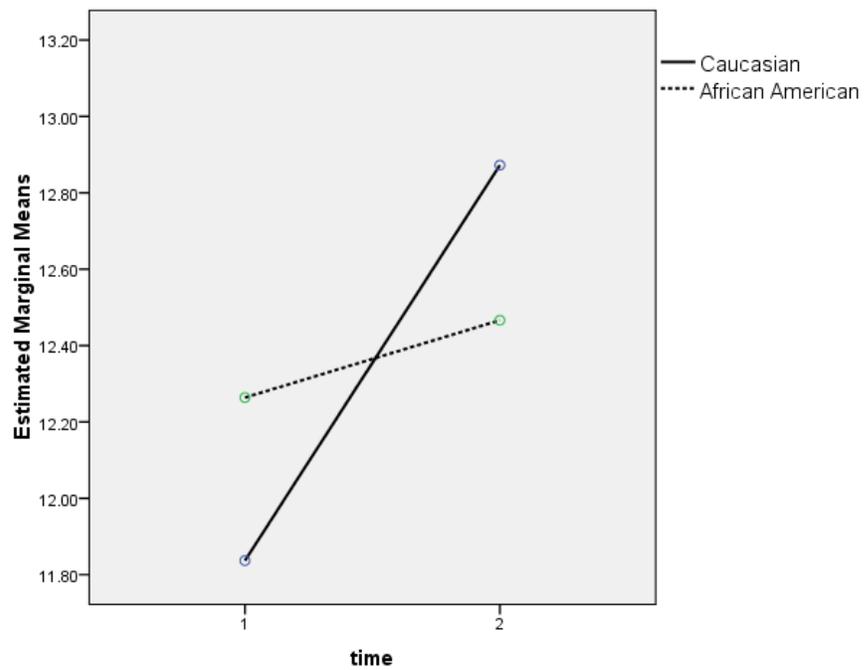


Figure 2. *Estimated Marginal Means of Attitudes towards Counseling by Race across Time*



Given the findings of significant effects for sex and race on Attitudes towards Counseling scores, interaction effects were examined between these two variables. RMANOVAs were completed once more controlling for sex and race (See Table 8). It was possible that only Caucasian female adolescents were responsible for the statistically significant improvements in attitudes towards counseling. Sex, controlling for race, still shows an interaction effect with time. The main effect for sex remains non-significant, and the main effect for time remains significant. This suggests that race apparently does not influence the effect sex has on attitudes towards counseling across time.

When controlling for sex, a statistically significant interaction effect still exists for race and time—Caucasians still improve significantly more than African Americans after *RS+*. In addition, the main effect for race remains non-significant. However, there is no longer a significant main effect for race across time, indicating that race alone does not account for the change across time. *RS+* does not improve scores for Caucasian adolescents when controlling for the effect of sex. Sex must be considered when looking at the differences between Caucasians and African Americans. These results reveal that the sex effect is essentially stronger than the race effect.

Table 8. *RMANOVA – Interaction Effects among Significant Variables*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	Partial η^2	<i>p</i>
Time (controlling for Race)	1	7.92	.026	.01**
Time (controlling for Sex)	1	0.20	.001	.66
Time x Race	1	4.22	.014	.04*
Time x Sex	1	5.24	.017	.02*
Within-subjects Error	301	(6.16)		
Race	1	0.00	.000	.97
Sex	1	3.54	.012	.06
Between-subjects Error	301	(19.84)		

Note. Values enclosed in parentheses represent mean square errors.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

To further test this finding, paired sample t-tests were conducted to examine the significance of change over time for females of each race (see Table 9). Results indicate that whereas African American females do not change significantly over time, Caucasian females do. This suggests that the significant improvement in Attitudes towards Counseling scores across time originally thought to be due to all females, are actually due to the significant improvements in scores of only Caucasian females.

Table 9. *Paired Sample t-tests for Attitudes towards Counseling scores of Females of each Race*

		N	M	SD	t-score	p-value
Caucasian females	Time 1	75	11.92	3.23	-3.82	.00***
	Time 2		13.32	3.76		
African American females	Time 1	86	12.38	3.56	-1.79	.078
	Time 2		13.08	4.06		

*** $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore adolescent's attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, as well as marriage enrichment courses. Specifically, this study addressed how attitudes towards these programs and services might differ across various demographic groups. A sample diverse across sex, age, grade level, economic status, and family structure was employed. The change in adolescents' attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment (measured by the *Attitudes towards Counseling* scale) following participation in the youth relationship education program, *Relationship Smarts Plus*, were examined, specifically looking at differences among demographic groups.

No significant differences were found in Attitudes towards Counseling among any of the demographic subgroups at Time 1. Adolescents from among each of the demographic subgroups seem to have similar, neutral attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment. This supports hypotheses II, which states that no significant differences in Attitudes towards Counseling were expected between Caucasians and African Americans. Hypothesis IV is also supported, as there were no significant differences between adolescents whose parents had a college degree and those who did not. Hypotheses I and III were not supported, as no significant differences were found between males and females, or high-school students and middle-school students. Findings also address research question I, as

no significant differences were found between age groups or family structure types. While no statistically significant results were found at Time 1, the importance of these findings should not be minimized. Sixty-eight percent of the adolescents surveyed reported favorable or neutral attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment at Time 1. This indicates that adolescents are relatively open to the idea of attending programs and/or utilizing counseling. The absence of significant differences in these attitudes among various demographic subgroups suggests that these programs are capable of impacting individuals from diverse backgrounds. Together with prior findings that various demographic subgroups were equally benefited by relationship education (Adler-Baeder, et al., 2007; Stanley, et al., 2006), a conclusion can be drawn that diverse populations of adolescents are equally open to attending.

The fact that this sample consists of adolescents is also an important quality of the current study. These findings corroborate those of previous studies (Gardner, 2001; Gardner, et al., 2004; Martin, et al., 2003; Silliman & Schumm, 2004), in that adolescents seem to have a notable interest in relationship education and counseling. This is important for those working to promote healthy relationships and marriages because it means that early intervention is not only possible, but ideal. The youth relationship education curriculum, *RS+*, was found to be related to significantly more favorable attitudes towards relationship education and counseling (supporting hypothesis V). After completion of the curriculum, 74.9% of adolescents reported favorable or neutral attitudes towards counseling, compared to 68% at Time 1. This is an increase from roughly two-thirds to three-fourths of adolescents; however there may have been a

ceiling effect at play. Adolescents are inherently interested in relationships, they are eager to have healthy relationships, and participation in *RS+* has now been related to an increase in favorable attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment. Because these programs have been shown to be effective tools for prevention and intervention on behalf of healthy relationships, this is a promising finding.

Research question II addressed how attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment differed among individual demographic subgroups after participation in *RS+*. Significant interaction effects were found among time and the categories of sex and race. At Time 2, on average, females reported significantly more favorable Attitudes towards Counseling than males. Female adolescents seem to have more favorable attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment after participation in *RS+* than adolescent males. This may be due to the propensity of females to think about relationships more than men do (Acitelli, 1992), thereby enjoying the relationship education class better and gaining more from it.

Caucasian adolescents were also found to have significantly more favorable Attitudes towards Counseling, on average, than African American participants after completion of *RS+*. This finding is puzzling because the overall positive effects of *RS+* have previously been shown to reach across diverse populations (Adler-Baeder, et al., 2007). Caucasian adolescents and African American adolescents did not differ in their Attitudes toward Counseling at Time 1, so it is unlikely that the significant difference at Time 2 is due to stereotypical beliefs that marriage preparation and counseling programs

are only for mainstream, middle-class, Caucasian participants. Notably, the effects of these significant differences were small. Only 1.7% of the variance in Attitudes towards Counseling at Time 2 can be explained by sex, and only 1.4% can be explained by race.

It was possible that the significant changes across time were due only to improvements among Caucasian females. Analyses were conducted to test for any possible interaction effects between the statistically significant variables of sex and race, which addresses research question III. Controlling for race, the difference in Attitudes towards Counseling between males and females after completion of *RS+* remained significant. Race did not change the effect sex had on Attitudes towards Counseling after participation in *RS+*. Controlling for sex, the difference in Attitudes towards Counseling between Caucasians and African Americans after completion of *RS+* lost significance. Caucasian adolescents were still significantly more likely than African American adolescents to hold favorable attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment, but the main effect for race across time disappeared when controlling for sex. This suggests that being female predicts a stronger relationship between participation in *RS+* and favorable attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment than being Caucasian. However, further analyses revealed that the significant change across time is in fact due to only Caucasian females, and not all females.

This highlights that whereas participation in *RS+* is related to a significant increase in favorable attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment for all adolescents on average, some adolescents are not benefited as well as others. An examination of the barriers involved in preventing

these adolescents from experiencing the same advantages of participation in RS+ is needed. This may be related to the sex or race of the program facilitators and may call for more focused recruitment of diverse facilitators. This may be due to the capability of the facilitator and/or curriculum to hold the interest of these adolescents, and may call for better training in engagement techniques, or a change in the curriculum.

Contribution to the Literature

These findings contribute to the literature in several important ways. First, this sample is diverse across the demographic subgroups considered, making the findings more generalizable to the general population. This sample includes almost equal numbers of males and females, a major improvement to prior research with adolescents that used samples of mostly female participants (Adler-Baeder, et al., 2007; Gardner, 2001; Gardner, et al., 2004; Martin, et al., 2003; Silliman & Schumm, 2004). Secondly, the current study tested for significant differences between demographic subgroups on Attitudes towards Counseling. No other study reviewed, except for Silliman and Schumm (2004) examined attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment in relation to diverse demographic groups. This is the only known study that specifically separates out the differences in Attitudes towards Counseling after participation in a youth relationship education by demographic groups.

Perhaps most importantly, this study found that adolescents from diverse backgrounds and demographic categories are equally interested in marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment. This means that in adolescence, perhaps the most impressionable stage of the life span, individuals are open to relationship education and counseling, and hold, at least neutral moving toward-

favorable attitudes towards attending such programs and/or seeking counseling later in life. Fishbein & Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action states that the best predictor of whether or not someone behaves in a certain way is the intention to behave in that way, and that attitudes toward performing the behavior determine a person's intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). This suggests that openness towards premarital and marital education and counseling during adolescence might translate to actual attendance of these programs in the future, although the current study does not assess the probability of this possibility.

Holman and Associates' (2001) Ecosystemic Developmental perspective identifies several contexts as important for couple relationships. These include the individual context, the couple context, the family background context, and the sociocultural context (Holman and Associates, 2001). This study was able to identify that the individual contexts of age, grade level, and sex, the family background context of family structure type, and the sociocultural context of economic status, were not significant in predicting Attitudes towards Counseling among this sample. This suggests that these demographic variables, at least among this sample, would not affect the couple relationship in regard to whether or not individuals are inclined to use marriage preparation and enrichment programs and/or seek counseling.

Findings from this study are promising because they suggest that in adolescence, perhaps before experience and social norms "lock in" attitudes towards seeking professional help, individuals from diverse backgrounds are predominately interested in marriage preparation, premarital counseling, marriage counseling, and marriage enrichment. If interest and favorable attitudes towards these programs and services translates into attendance, which is theorized but unknown at this time, these findings

could be very beneficial for the promotion of healthy relationships in our communities. Marriage preparation and enrichment programs, and relationship counseling, have been shown to be effective in promoting healthy behaviors and choices and preventing and/or intervening in unhealthy behaviors and choices in regard to intimate relationships (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). If we can build upon adolescents' neutral to favorable attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment, we can help ensure that these attitudes translate to later participation in beneficial programs and services. Findings from this study do not point to a need to tailor marketing initiatives to specific demographics, as all adolescents, regardless of demographic background, held similar attitudes towards the programs and services.

In addition, this study shows that participation in youth relationship education curricula is related to an increase in favorable attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment, on average for most adolescents. This supports the use of relationship education curricula among adolescents for the purpose of promoting healthy relationship attitudes and behaviors, and strengthens the argument for early intervention. However, Caucasian female adolescents were shown to gain the most from participation in *RS+*, suggesting that *RS+* is lacking in its ability to reach males and African American females effectively. This promotes further investigation of how *RS+* can be equally effective for all adolescents.

Limitations

The racial diversity of this sample is limited – only Caucasians and African Americans were included. This limits the generalizability of the findings to different races. In addition, this study uses only one measure of attitudes towards counseling,

consisting of only four questions. The measure has acceptable reliability; however more in-depth findings could result from more in-depth measures. This study is also limited in its follow-up. Analyses were conducted on secondary data gathered at two time points, both before and after completion of the youth relationship education curriculum, *RS+*. There was no follow-up across time past the immediate post-intervention evaluation. Therefore, there is no way of knowing if these changes in attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment will be maintained long enough to be put into action. Also, no comparison group was used, meaning that the increase in favorable Attitudes towards Counseling cannot be definitively credited to *RS+*.

Future Research

As with all research, this study could be improved upon in several ways. The most important improvement that could come from future research probably lies in longitudinal studies. This study measures adolescents' attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment at two time points long before they will get the chance to actually participate in such programs and/or services. There is no way to actually predict attendance of these programs from the current study. Fishbein & Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action suggests that attitudes lead to intentions, which in turn lead to action, however, this is not always the case. Gardner and Boellaard's (2007) follow-up study on the effects of the youth relationship education curriculum, *Connections*, indicated that the positive impact the curriculum had on attitudes towards counseling had disappeared four years post-intervention. This

foreshadows that the positive relationship between participation in *RS+* and Attitudes towards Counseling might also fade with time.

In order to properly test the effect of *RS+* on attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment, a control group would also need to be utilized. It would also be interesting to examine the reasons behind Caucasian females' significant improvement after participation in *RS+* adolescents, and the relative lack of improvement for males and African American females. In order for youth relationship education to be maximally effective, it must be engaging all participants. In addition, future researchers might supplement the Attitudes towards Counseling scale with additional ways of measuring attitudes and intentions towards counseling. It would also be helpful to study how adolescents' attitudes might differ if presented with various formats and interpretations of relationship education and counseling.

Having found that adolescents from diverse backgrounds hold comparatively neutral to favorable attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment, it is important to now bridge the gap between interest during adolescence and actual attendance in adulthood. Relationship education and counseling has been described as notorious for its underwhelming participation (Silliman & Schumm, 2000). This is inconsistent with the apparent widespread, although modestly favorable attitudes towards such programs. Future researchers in this area should focus on what is causing the individuals with favorable attitudes towards these programs and services to choose not to partake in them. The lack of significant differences between demographic subgroups at Time 1 seems to endorse the argument

that the groups least likely to attend beneficial relationship programs are broader, more complicated, and more inclusive than the demographic “high-risk” categories like racial minorities, low income populations, low educated populations, and populations experiencing parental divorce (Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997).

Given the proven benefits of healthy relationships for individuals, children, and communities, and the growing evidence that relationship education and counseling programs contribute to the health of relationships for diverse populations, it is important to examine what leads to individuals making the choice to partake in such programs and services. This study contributes the finding that adolescents representing various demographic subgroups hold neutral to favorable attitudes towards marriage preparation, premarital and marital counseling, and marriage enrichment, and that youth relationship education curricula like *RS+* increases these favorable attitudes for some.

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APPENDIX A

ATTITUDES TOWARDS COUNSELING SCALE (GARDNER, 2001)

Please indicate the degree to which you agree/disagree with the following statements:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed/Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I will take a marriage preparation course with my fiancé before I get married.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I will go to premarital counseling with my fiancé before I get married.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
After I'm married, I will attend a marriage enrichment class with my spouse.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
After I'm married, if we are having trouble in our marriage, we will go to counseling.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Please tell us a little bit about yourself.

A. Age (circle 1): 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

B. Gender (circle 1): Male Female

C. What is your ethnic background? (circle 1)

Caucasian/White

African American/Black

Hispanic/Latino

Asian American

Native American

Bi-racial

Other: _____

D. What grade are you in? If you are taking this class in the summer, please indicate your *upcoming* grade level. (circle 1)

5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 _____
Other

E. What is your mother/mother-figure's highest level of education? (circle 1)

Less than high school

completed high school

some college

2-year college/Technical school degree

4-year college degree

Post-college degree (e.g., Master's, Ph.D., M.D., Ed.D)

F. What is your father/father-figure's highest level of education? (circle 1)

Less than high school

Completed high school

Some college

2-year college/Technical school degree

4-year college degree

Post-college degree (e.g., Master's, Ph.D., M.D., Ed.D)

G. Who do you live with all or most of the time? Check all that apply.

Mother _____

Father _____

Stepfather _____

Stepmother _____

Sister(s) _____ (if more than one, indicate how many _____)

Brother(s) _____ (if more than one, indicate how many _____)

Other: _____