The Marriage Covenant: A Model for Premarital Counseling

An Honor’s Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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December, 1999

Date of Graduation: May 6, 2000
Abstract

The purpose of this work is to redefine the concept of covenant and to describe the potential use of this framework as a tool in premarital counseling. First a review of current literature will explore contemporary marital theory and address issues impacting marital satisfaction and stability. A ideological framework for the marriage covenant will be outlined. This will draw on historical and theological uses of covenants, as well as Stephen Covey’s concept of a mission statement model for family relations. Finally, a general sample of a marriage covenant, based on a fictional case study for a couple, will be displayed.
Acknowledgments

Great thanks go to my advisor, Judy Gray. Without her input, patience, and guidance, both personally and educationally, this work would not have come about. Thanks go to the faculty in the Department of Social Work who have instilled in me the desire to study interpersonal forms of social work in addition to my primary interest, social work in larger system change. Additional thanks go to my fiancé, Darnell Compton who is both the inspiration and the beneficiary of this work.
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The Marriage Covenant: A Model for Premarital Counseling

I. Introduction

“There are few societies, if any that expect as much from the marriage relationship as ours does ... The mass media place marriage on a pedestal and bemoan divorce, idolize sex yet refuse to educate for human sexuality, glorify romance yet insist that romance is for the young (Crosby, 1973, p.21).”

Imagine hearing descriptions about an incredible vacation destination that one can reach by car. You hear on the television about the wonderful attractions that exist in this place. You speak with many friends and family who have gone there. These acquaintances describe the destination as the best place they’ve ever been. They explain the benefits of the vacation spot and expect that you will most definitely decide to go there at some point in your life.

Imagine hearing of this exciting, idealized, and accessible location. Now imagine that you are planning a vacation to this place. The one critical piece of information that no one has given you, is the map. You have high expectations, great motivations, and a great deal of superficial information about what this place will look like. With all of this information though, no one has provided you with a map to arrive at this place. Without such a basic tool, you may eventually arrive at this place, but not without great frustration, getting lost, disappointment, and some outside guidance.

Just as it would be difficult to arrive at the final destination without a road map, the goal of achieving a satisfying marriage is much less attainable without a clear sense of how that goal will be achieved. In a society that promotes marriage as the primary source of fulfillment with physical needs, romance needs, economic needs, sexual needs, social needs, and emotional needs, we do little to give young couples a “road map” so to speak, as they begin their lives
In the pages that follow I will propose a potential "road map" for premarital couples to create and follow as they begin their lives together. This model will serve as a preventative measure rather than a remedy to long term marriages that may be strained. The term for this "road map" is the "marriage covenant." The most useful portion of the covenant process is that the couple must seriously examine their relationship and determine it's meaning to them. In examining this, they will imagine what they want out of their life together. The couple will acknowledge their relationship, which, through marriage, takes on a "life of its own." The couple will determine together what they want that organism to become.

The first section of the thesis will review current literature on premarital, marital, and relationship theory. This literature review will cover a brief history of premarital counseling, and background information on the modern typology and theory of premarital counseling. Beyond this, I will briefly discuss some demographics of marriage, such as mean age at first marriage, divorce rates, and remarriage rates. I will also discuss influential factors in marital relationships. Some of these are birth order, family of origin issues, cultural influences, gender roles, and interpersonal communication styles. I will review the work of several marital theorists including, but not limited to, Harville Hendrix, John Gottman, and John Crosby.

Section two of the thesis will discuss the covenant model. In this piece I will discuss the rationale for the terminology of covenant and will compare and contrast the covenant model with the "mission statement" model proposed by Stephen Covey. Marital theory will be integrated in this section as the conceptual framework is laid. This section will conclude with information on the process of "covenant making" and a description of key areas that the couple should explore in this process.
In section three a sample covenant will be shown. This will be based on a brief fictional case study. While the sample premarital couple is fictional, the example will show how the covenant model could be applied in working with an actual couple. I will include a few suggestions for further study or application of the model.

II. Literature Review

With the current divorce rate is estimated as somewhere between “fifty percent and a startling sixty-seven percent (Gottman, 1994, p. 2).” scholars, religious leaders, and even politicians are scrambling for an answer to the apparent dissolution of the primarily unit in society. Before explaining one potential framework for preventing divorce, I will review the current literature on marital interaction.

In the following pages, I will cover a brief overview of contemporary marital theory. First I will discuss the historical and theoretical framework for premarital counseling. Then I will discuss statistical data, birth order influences, individual motivations, psychological needs, marital processes, interpersonal communication, and conflict resolution. Much of this theory draws heavily from earlier theory, such as Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, and Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs.” A key point here is that these theories will be framed within the context of the premarital and newlywed couple. Some of this discussion will include predictors of marital happiness in the long term. These predictors will be included because these issues may be relevant to explore as a preventative measure with young couples using the covenant model.

Premarital Counseling Theory

Stahmann and Hiebert have explored the helping professional’s role in premarital counseling and remarital counseling in great depth. While often premarital theory is based on relationship and marital theory, the amount of published material on specifically premarital
couples and therapeutic techniques is somewhat limited. For this reason, information on premarital counseling specifically will come primarily from those two authors.

Historically, there have been three predominant groups that have provided premarital counseling: clergy, mental health workers, and physicians. Clergy have performed the majority of premarital counseling. Premarital work with mental health professionals is less common and most often utilized by individuals who have been divorced and are planning to remarry. The final category, physicians, generally meet once with individuals who are getting married. This “counseling” is limited to giving “contraceptive and sexual information (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1997, p.5).”

Before the 1920s there was little or no documented type of premarital counseling. At this time the first college course was taught at Boston College preparing students for “family life.” Until the 1950s, the majority of the literature on premarital counseling related to the physicians’ premarital examination.

The primary dividing point in the history of this type of counseling appears during World War II. “From 1900 until the beginning of World War II, psychology as a discipline and profession was coming into its own (p.6).” Freud and other scholars were the primary sources of understanding regarding the “human personality.” While there was a great deal of doubt in the validity of these theories, psychological thought was heavily influenced by the medical model. The orientation in this field was to treat of maladies, not prevent them. Also prior to the 1950s the focus of psychology primarily related to the individual’s condition. “At that time, any problem in the marital relationship was seen as a by-product of a problem within an individual ... If a marriage had not commenced, there could hardly be a problem; the marriage would need to have commenced in order for the problem to have developed (p.7).”
While the Christian church was involved with premarital couples for some time prior to mental health professionals, this involvement was not what we might consider premarital counseling today. Just as the church developed educational and initiation processes for baptism and first communion, they developed a process for couples before marriage. This consisted primarily of the nature of Christian marriage, the importance of religion in the home, and rehearsal of the ceremony itself.

Following World War II, there was a fundamental shift in the field of psychology. While the focus on individual pathology and treatment remained the primary focus, concerns for the parent-child relationship and other interrelation issues emerged. Eventually in the 1960s and 1970s the field of marriage and family therapy became a key component of mental health care. Still at this time marital problems tended to be seen as the problem of one individual in the relationship. The concept of premarital counseling, as discussed in this thesis has not been a regular part of professional clinical practice until relatively recent times.

Within the church, Stahmann and Hiebert postulate that...

"With the development of the pastoral counseling movement came the clergy’s shift in attitude toward ministry in general, but specifically toward situations that had a counseling context. The shift was away from the educational, informational stance and toward a search for pathology (p. 11)."

Thus the role of premarital counselor for ministers has become significantly more common since the 1950s, so much so that several key denominations today require premarital counseling for couples who intend to be married.

It is important at this point to explain exactly what premarital counseling means here. The purpose of premarital counseling is to enrich and enhance growing relationships that are
generally healthy. A secondary goal is to treat unhealthy relationships. So the emphasis here is much more on prevention of marital strain rather than treating pathologies.

There are certain assumptions inherent in this type of counseling model. One of the primary points is that “those who benefit most from premarital counseling must voluntarily seek it rather than be forced into it (p. 17).” Also, counseling of this type is not a screening process, but a developmental process to assist the couple in growing together. Persons undergoing premarital counseling should expect to learn about themselves, but primarily will learn about their relationship and one another. When looking at premarital counseling within these contexts, it places a more realistic expectation on the outcome of the process. The premarital counseling process can enhance, build, and challenge healthy relationships and may even prevent some unhealthy relationships. It cannot however, repair, rebuild, or cure pathological relationships or individuals.

With this framework in mind, individuals engaged in premarital counseling are called to a more proactive than reactive stance. This provides the counselor as well as the couple a unique opportunity to explore and grow together in their understanding of marital relationships. The therapeutic framework is quite a bit different than other traditional forms of counseling and therapy in that it provides a framework for preventing emotional baggage, rather than treating those maladies after the damage is already done.

There are two typical models in which premarital counseling has been designed: conjoint, and group. The conjoint model typically involves the couple and a clergy or human services professional. Another form of conjoint premarital counseling involves the couple, and a team of others including a clergy or therapist, and a healthy married couple who plays a mentor role for the young couple. Group premarital counseling is an alternative to conjoint counseling. The
role of the counselor in this model is that of a facilitator.

In group counseling, the ideal group size, according to Stahmann and Hiebert is four to six couples. There are several advantages to using this model. Cost is the most obvious of these advantages. More importantly however, influence by peers in the group, direct education by watching other couples, and not feeling alone are all factors that prove beneficial for some couples. Central to the success of group premarital therapy is the screening process the facilitator uses in selecting group members (p. 155).

Stahmann and Hiebert propose a model called the dynamic relationship history in their book *Premarital and Remarital Counseling*. This model is very similar to a social history that is commonly used throughout social service settings. Questions asked in this interview take place in a chronological fashion, going from the couple’s first impressions of one another, to the process of planning the wedding. Areas that the authors focus on are personality issues, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relations, and relations to family and friends. Family of origin issues should be addressed in this process as well. When exploring family of origin issues, the facilitator should focus on the individuals’ “parental models for marriage.” This piece is important because the model for premarital counseling I am using focuses on assisting couples in proactively improving their relationship. More in-depth family of origin issues should be explored outside of the context of premarital counseling (p.87).” This piece may involve referral to individual psychotherapy if extensive individual issues emerge.

Premarital counseling today is a widely accepted practice throughout the United States. In certain religious denominations it is mandated before the wedding can take place. More often though, the choice to participate in this counseling is voluntary. According to Stahmann and
Hiebert, “most married people- young and old- say that some form of premarital counseling or education would have been valuable to them if it had been offered to them (p.4).”

Demographics

With this framework in place, I will explore some demographics related to marital trends and the likelyhood of divorce and remarriage. In 1970 the median age at first marriage was twenty-one for women and twenty-three for men. Today that same measure is twenty-four for women and about twenty-six for men.

While in recent years, the divorce rate has seemed to “level off,” it is still true that at least half of all marriages end in divorce (p. 5). Despite all of the pain and loss associated with divorce, remarriage is a very common practice. “For every hundred weddings, fifty four are first marriages for both partners and forty six are marriages in which at least one partner has been married previously (p.3).” “The divorce rate for second marriages is projected to be ten percent higher than for first marriage (Gottman, 1994, p.2).”

There are several areas that influence the choice that the majority of adults make in getting married. There are numerous motivations, both positive and negative, to get married in the first place. Also, there are factors that influence the degree to which partners will be satisfied in their relationships. In the following sections of the literature review, I will discuss some of these issues within the context of marital theory.

Birth Order

The individual’s family of origin experience affects marriage relationships in numerous ways. One area that is often overlooked in the context of marriage is birth order. According to Kevin Leman (1992), birth order “affects your personality, whom you marry, your children, your occupational choice, and even how well you get along with God (Leman, 1992, p. 3).”
Birth order, as mentioned above, often affects all aspects of individual’s lives. For the purposes of this thesis, I will discuss only a few areas particularly focusing on birth order in marriage. Leman suggests that often couples that tend to have a high degree of conflict or “locking horns” are both the first born, or only child in the family. “The major problem is perfectionism. They’re both perfectionists in their own way, but each can do very “imperfect” things to the other and it’s like striking a match around gasoline (p. 123).”

While high levels of conflict occur in other types of relationships as well, the structure and rigidity common for the first-born in families can become problematic when both partners possess these qualities. Since first-born individuals tend to desire power and control, power struggles in these marriages is common. Leman states that the largest task with these couples is helping them become less rigid and controlling of one another (p. 120-127).

As with first-born people, two middle children or two youngest children in a marriage can be problematic. While the personality tendencies with middle children are less rigid than other birth order roles, there is a great tendency to mediate, negotiate, and avoid conflict. The concern here is that conflict avoidance may be a common dysfunctional pattern in middle children’s relationships. “If they do not communicate, it is because of their urge to avoid conflict and make the oceans of life smoother wins out over their natural tendency to be mediators and negotiators (p. 130).”

Leman’s discussion of last-born couples revolves primary around issues of irresponsibility. He explains that while couples who are both the youngest may have a great deal of fun together, they may also have significant financial troubles if one spouse does not develop responsible spending patterns. “Lack of order and stability are often weak links in the makeup of last borns (p. 132).”
It is stressed in Leman's book that birth order does not determine the success or failure of a marriage. It may however bring up some issues that could be particularly relevant to many couples. As a general rule, he states that first-born and last-born relationships seem to work best in marriage. The structured nature of the eldest child provides a foundation for the stability in the marriage. Likewise, the fun-loving nature of the last-born partner provides humor and fun to complement the other partner's structure and rigidity.

Psychoanalytic Model

One of the oldest schools of thought in the field of psychology is the psychoanalytic model. While Sigmund Freud who looked at individual pathology initially developed it, it has been adapted by several contemporary scholars to look at the individual in the context of a marital relationship. Most of this theory addresses one of the key pieces affecting marital satisfaction, that being family of origin issues.

In Harville Hendrix' book, *Getting the Love you Want*, he uses a neurological model of the human brain to describe the id, ego, and superego. Hendrix discusses the "old brain" as the id. That being the portion of the brain that controls natural "drives." Similarly, the book describes the "new brain" as being the portion of the brain controlling rational thought. The old brain, or Freud's id, in this theory is what causes many of the feelings associated with romantic love.

Many scholars of marital theory have noted that the human mate selection process is anything but random. Hendrix suggests that the process of looking for the perfect mate is highly complex and selective. Further, he explains that the characteristics that humans subconsciously seek are those of the family of origin.

Since the id, or old brain has no concept of individual identity or the passage of time,
Hendrix states that the strong emotional attraction associated with romantic love occurs when an individual finds a partner who resembles their parents in some way. While this is highly subconscious, the id is searching for someone to make up for the "psychological and emotional damage experienced in childhood (Hendrix, 1988, p.12)." This phrase is not necessarily referring to abuse or maltreatment on the part of the caretaker, however.

Children are born as what Freud called "insatiable beings." Despite the most loving and devoted parents, all babies and children at some time do not have all of their many needs met. While adults are largely unaware of these experiences in childhood, they do affect each individual's psychological needs that carry into their relationships.

Hendrix hypothesizes that the state of the fetus in the mother's womb is what can be called the "original wholeness (p. 14)." This term is used because the fetus has all of its biological needs met, and that it lives in a "tranquil, floating, effortless existence (p.14)." It is this state of wholeness that individuals are seeking as they traverse through their lives.

From the time of birth on, the human individual has constant needs, some of which will go unmet. The state of wholeness is never fully achieved again. As the child develops through various developmental stages, he learns that he is indeed a separate entity from his mother. Each of the other developmental stages that follow will provide new challenges, and new opportunities for the individual to have unmet needs.

As an adult these needs are brought to marriage. The feeling of extreme joy and wholeness experienced by many, in Hendrix theory, results from the id expecting that finally "my needs will be fully met," and finally wholeness will return. Within the context of marriage, many individuals expect that their marriage will meet their needs in the same way. Subconsciously, we believe that marriage will provide healing from the wounds of childhood.
"Many people have a hard time accepting the idea that they have searched for partners who resembled their caretakers. On a conscious level, they were looking for people with only positive traits-- people who were among other things, kind, loving, good-looking, intelligent, and creative. But no matter what their conscious intentions, most people are attracted to mates who have their caretakers’ positive and negative traits, and typically, the negative traits are more influential (p. 29)."

In addition to making up for childhood needs, individuals have an unconscious drive to make up for the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that were suppressed in childhood- often via socialization. This is Hendrix’s explanation for the reality that many individuals tend to choose partners with complimentary traits to their own. For example in a relationship one person is outgoing and humorous, the other may be introverted and serious.

The compilation of all of these factors in mate selection becomes what is called the imago. Hendrix defines this as “a composite picture of the people who influenced you most strongly at an early age...this included all of your impressions of them, and all of your significant interactions with them (p. 31).” This “template” remains in the individual subconscious, and the degree to which potential mates measure up to the imago effect the feelings of romantic love.

There are several phenomenons that occur in the experience of romantic love that point to this psychoanalytic perspective. The “phenomenon of recognition” occurs in relationships as the couple feels as if they have known each other for years. Another significant exchange of information occurs later in the relationship. Hendrix calls this the “phenomenon of timelessness.” A couple may state for example, “Even though we’ve only been seeing one another for a short time, it seems like we’ve always been together.” At some later point in a
relationship, lovers often state to one another that being together "seems to provide a feeling of completion." This is termed the "phenomenon of reunification." A final common utterance in relationships is that the individuals feel that they love one another so much that they need one another. This is called the "phenomenon of necessity (p. 43)."

Hendrix states that this process is a sort of "instinctual bonding process that mimics the way mothers bond with their newborn infants (p. 43)." This process is largely driven by the unconscious mind seeking to have its needs met by another. The feeling of need that develops within love relationships results from a fear that the end of the relationship would signal the end of the feeling of wholeness. These phenomena which commonly occur in romantic relationships are all part of the process of seeking our original "wholeness" through psychological reunification with a perceived "replica" of our childhood caretakers.

After some period of time, most couples move out of the initial romantic and intense phases of the relationship. According to Hendrix, the initial state of a relationship involves a great deal of "role playing." He states that individuals in a new relationship work very hard to portray the sort of image that is desirable to their mate. For example individuals may pretend to have no emotional hang-ups or issues. A common behavior for both men and women is to devote a great deal more attention to one's personal appearance than before the relationship. These are just a few examples of ways in which individuals attempt to portray a desired image for the benefit of their partner at the outset of a relationship.

As the romantic relationship continues, perhaps into marriage, the nature of the relationship often changes dramatically. If the individuals in the relationship are not aware of the subconscious processes driving many parts of their behavior, they may have significant difficulties in their relationship. As the relationship dynamics change, the couple is forced to
cope and hopefully grow through one another’s needs.

**Crosby’s Theory**

In John Crosby’s classic book *Dillusion and Illusion: the Self in Love and Marriage*, he explains that after the premarital “charades” end, the individual needs that present themselves can be categorized as legitimate and illegitimate needs. One highly unrealistic expectation that many bring to marriage is that the relationship will satisfy all of their emotional, physical, sexual, and social needs. While many of these needs are a natural part of human existence and can be fulfilled by a healthy marital relationship, others can not.

“Marriage is the relationship that most adults find conducive to attaining satisfaction from life, but marriage in itself does not create happiness ... Marriage can add to one’s feeling of self-worth if one enters it feeling worth loving in the first place. But the love of a husband or wife cannot make up for the love one failed to get as a child (Crosby, 1973, p. 24).”

Crosby defines legitimate needs as those needs that a healthy and happy person will expect from their spouse. These needs are ongoing “being” needs that have a basis in rational thought. The meeting of these needs is necessary to maintain an ongoing state of happiness (p. 25).

Illegitimate needs are those that come from emotional scars from childhood and adolescence. In a sense, the individual with illegitimate needs brings to the relationship a “love deficit.” For a time, a spouse may be able to meet these needs, but eventually that spouse inevitably fails. Illegitimate needs are driven by the id and based on emotional scars that cannot be healed by anyone but the wounded individual.

These two types of needs can be illustrated in sentences describing the nature of love. “I
love you because I need you; accurately describes the state of illegitimate need fulfillment (p. 25).” Many relationships exist based on mutual illegitimate needs. This type of a relationship is referred to as a symbiosis. “Because both partners experience satisfaction in meeting the illegitimate needs of the other and in turn receive gratification of their own illegitimate needs, they have a basis for an enduring relationship, however immature and neurotic it may be (p.26).” In other words while the relationship may endure, it may be highly emotionally dissatisfying. Another damaging effect of symbiotic relationships is that neither partner is encouraged to confront their emotional baggage, and thus may carry it through their life.

In contrast, “I need you because I love you,” describes a more interdependent model in relationships. “Genuine interdependency is based on a mutual meeting of legitimate needs (p. 26).” This type of a relationship will likely encourage the growth, freedom, and fulfillment of the spouse (p. 31). While interdependence requires a great deal of effort on the part of the couple, it is often highly emotionally satisfying. In contrast to symbiosis, interdependence demands that the individuals confront their emotional baggage.

In reality, most marital relationships involve a combination of illegitimate and legitimate needs. It is imperative to a healthy marital relationship that each individual’s illegitimate needs are addressed individually (i.e. without projection onto the partner). This is one area that is particularly helpful to explore at the premarital stage of a relationship. Such a proactive measure may prevent significant pain and conflict throughout the life of the marriage.

Crosby’s conceptualization of needs is very similar to Abraham Maslow’s theory associated with B-needs (being needs) and D-needs (deficiency needs). Deficiency needs are similar to illegitimate needs in that they are based in a lack of fulfillment of an elementary need.

Among Maslow’s D-needs are physical needs, psychological and physical safety needs, love
needs, and the need for esteem. In Maslow’s perspective all D-needs must be met, to some degree before an individual can move to B-needs. Maslow’s B-needs can be described as self-actualization, or the tendency for an individual to reach their full potential. Neither the marriage nor the individual will be able to reach actual potential without resolving the D-needs (p. 30).

While a discussion on the nature of individual needs is an important topic in and of itself, it is integrally tied to other challenges that married couples commonly face. Illegitimate or D-needs are a direct result of the perceived sense of emotional deprivation or injury inflicted at an earlier stage of human development. Those emotional scars, if not faced can lead to a wide variety of dysfunctional patterns in the context of the marital relationship.

**Marital Scripts and Anger**

David Shaddock discusses several common unhealthy “marital scripts” that evolve as a couple experiences a strained relationship. He also offers some suggestions that couples can use to recreate the script. These issues are discussed here to lay a broad foundation for intervention strategies that allow couples to prevent polarization into “long term scripts.”

**Anger is an inherent aspect of human existence, which must be dealt with in marriage.** Shaddock uses a model first proposed by Heinz Kohut to conceptualize different types of anger.

“He divided anger into two categories: mature aggression and narcissistic rage. In mature aggression anger functions as part of the real self ... it attempts to communicate about emotional injury or to eliminate an obstacle that prevents us from getting what we want. Narcissistic rage is different. When we feel so injur...
The expression of anger in marriage is a controversial topic in counseling professions and it is understandable to see why. Many agree with Kohut, that expression of anger can be healthy. This theory also explains that anger expressed as narcissistic rage results from the necessity to defend oneself from intolerable feelings.

Freud has a much different perspective on the value of anger. Taking a more biological perspective, his theorized that “integrating this basic drive into the ego” was inherently negative for the individual and for human relationships (p.74). While the damaging effects of anger in relationships are well documented, many therapists and scholars believe that a relationship that allows for healthy expression of anger is in some ways ideal.

Shaddock states that individuals display anger often when their emotional needs are not being met. Anger provides a way in which the harmed individual can gain a sense of power. “Many adults are particularly prone to rage when they don’t have their mirroring needs met. For example, a wife turns icily dismissive of her husband when he fails to follow her conversation, a husband says hurtful things about his wife’s sexual responsiveness (p. 75).”

Unfortunately dysfunctional expressions of anger are generally a self-defeating task. Individuals who express rage when their partner has not met a particular need are likely to place more distance in the relationship. This only reinforces that partner’s feelings of hurt, abandonment and shame (p. 76). Most often, couples who present problems with anger are more deeply affected by other emotions such as sadness and vulnerability.

Shaddock refers to a repetitive pattern of anger within marriage as the “anger script.” While the fights themselves may revolve around daily minutia such as household tasks, the real problem behind the fighting is much deeper. “They are fighting for survival. They feel that they will not survive being abandoned by their partner, or having their privacy intruded on, or being
exposed to ridicule or shame (p. 77).” For this reason many angry relationships persist for some time.

In the act of arguing the individual is likely disguising a much more complex issue. Unfortunately, many couples seek marital counseling to deal with anger much too late. Anger is a very powerful emotion that if left uncontrolled can polarize partners. Once again I suggest that examining the “anger script” is much more helpful and positive as a proactive measure prior to marriage. Beyond avoiding polarization later, a premarital couple may start to develop tools that allow for healthy expression of anger in their relationship.

Another common issue in marriage is related to pursuit and avoidance. Shaddock describes individuals in relationships as “mergers and distancers (p.93)” Mergers are those who place an extremely high priority on emotional connectedness. This is usually related to an abandonment experienced earlier in life. Unfortunately mergers can set themselves up for disappointment in that their partner cannot possibly meet their illegitimate needs. Often mergers in relationships will experience emotional dissatisfaction. Distancers, on the other hand, push others away to avoid the threat of interpersonal intimacy. “They do not want anyone to see their neediness because they fear that it is an invitation to be intruded on (p. 94).”

Often marital relationships contain both a merger and a distancer. This corresponds to the theory discussed earlier about the individual's pursuit of a partner who “makes up” for their personal deficiencies. As with anger, pursuit and avoidance scripts can be very harmful to marriages. Often, but not always, the roles of merger and distancer correspond to gender. Women, who are generally socialized to express and communicate more emotion, tend to be the merger. Men on the other hand, who are often taught to deny emotions, tend to distance themselves.
The primary tool used to combat this script is active communication, which will be discussed, in subsequent pages. With all interpersonal issues, it is critical that the individuals develop an understanding of the root cause of their merging or distancing tendencies. Without an honest assessment of the psychological issues behind the marital script, communication skills will be much less effective.

One final common dysfunctional pattern discussed by Shaddock is related to the degree of emotional distance in marriage.

"Unlike pursuit/avoidance scripts, which involve a lot of tension, life for the disengaged and pseudomutual couples in emotionally flat, these couples fear emotional overload: they fear that if they allow their real selves to meet, they will be overwhelmed (p. 112)."

Emotional distance is closely related to boundaries, or the distinction from one person to another. Disengaged couples have highly rigid boundaries that prevent any experience of genuine emotional intimacy. Pseudomutual couples have the opposite dilemma, the boundaries are so unclear that understanding of the individual’s “inner world” cannot be separated from that of the partner’s. Shaddock believes that traumatic life experiences, childhood wounds, and fear of failure are all causes of this particular script (p. 114-116). Part of the treatment process for either disengaged or pseudomutual couples must involve the ability to tolerate conflict. Often dysfunctional emotional distance is used to avoid conflict, which may be very threatening to some individuals.

Cultural Influences

Some marital conflict and strain is not caused by individual pathology, but by differences in culture and socialization patterns. These differences could be related to race, ethnicity, gender,
locality, spirituality, or a number of other factors. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss an overview of the implications of culture in the context of the marital relationship. I will focus in particular on mate selection, social norms, and gender roles.

On a very general level, the degree of cultural differences between marital partners can potentially affect the degree of difficulty within marriage. This is not to say that intercultural relationships cannot succeed. Statistically however, couples who have similar ethnicity, race, religion, socio-economic status, education, and intelligence have somewhat better chances of maintaining a successful marriage (Landis, 1973, p. 161-181). As a side note, it is important to note that statistically individuals choose to marry partners who are very similar to themselves in terms of the areas mentioned above. While the numbers of diverse families are increasing, they are still a comparatively small group.

“Some problems in mixed (generic for any cultural difference) marriages arise from the nature of the family of origin. Ethnocentrism is a strong force in families...Families value their own ideas, traditions, and life-styles and they hope to perpetuate these patterns in the lives of their children (p. 161).”

This conflict with family can occur both in the families of origin, and the processes used in raising children.

Fortunately many misunderstandings based on culture can be remedies by improved communication skills. For example, a couple may disagree on the involvement of the extended family in their daily lives. Inherent in this type of argument is the lack of understanding with regards to the cultural influences on this issue. While individuals will not suddenly agree on every issue, understanding the background and perceptions surrounding the issue is a great deal of the struggle.
One cultural implication that affects a great number of marriages is the different enculturation (i.e., socialization) patterns for males and females. These differences play a role in almost every part of the premarital and marital relationship. From attitudes and expectations on what a husband or wife "should be", to communication style and relative meaning, to the balance of power and control, gender differences are apparent to some degree in most heterosexual relationships.

Gender Issues

According to Janice Steil in her book *Marital Equality*, desirable traits in mate selection depend largely upon gender.

"Within general class and cultural background, women have been socialized to marry men they can look up to, both literally and figuratively. Women seek to marry men who are taller, better educated, and whom they expect to be more successful than themselves. Men, in contrast, marry "down," that is, to women who are shorter, younger, and in less-lucrative occupations (Steil, 1997, p. 7)."

In the not so distant past, women were traditionally socialized to be the homemaker and primary caretaker of the children. Men on the other hand were socialized to be the "breadwinner" for the family. While this cultural value still is deeply imbedded in American culture, things have changed some. "Today the demographics have changed and the majority of wives are no longer full-time homemakers. Indeed, what was once viewed as traditional- a fully employed husband, a full-time housewife, and two children, no longer represents the typical family situation (p. 9)."

Because this value system is largely in transition, many areas of roles and responsibilities vary depending upon the values of the couple. Discrepancies in these values are important to
clarify prior to marriage as partners may not feel they married "the type of spouse" they had expected.

Power and control issues exist in all human relationships, but none as strongly as is possible within marriage. Some individuals have a desire to have a sense of power over their spouse. This can be related to psychological pathology in the individual or cultural beliefs determining whom the dominant partner in marriage should be.

Steil did research on the relationship between marital equality and marital satisfaction and found some interesting results. Married women who had children rated themselves as having less decision making power in the marital relationship, and less overall marital satisfaction. Women who had careers reported a greater degree of decision making power in their marriage. Additionally, men who reported having a greater degree of involvement in domestic tasks and a more egalitarian power structure, reported a higher level of marital satisfaction (p. 24-33).

While there is much discussion about the benefits of egalitarian relationships in marriage, egalitarian does not necessarily mean equal. Most adults, to some degree or another comply with their socialized values. These values are deeply ingrained because they have been taught since early childhood.

Steil explains that marriages based on rigid separate gender roles cannot be equal.

"Separate gender roles undermine men’s and women’s ability to achieve an equal relationship in several mutually reinforcing ways. Separate roles limit wives’ access to universally valued resources, give different meanings to the resources that husbands and wives contribute, and prescribe differences in men’s and women’s sense of entitlement (p. 45)."

While some of these socialized beliefs are inherent results of enculturation and will be
passed on, it is important for the married couple to examine differences and avoid or change the “scripts” that develop as a result of these values.

It is important to state as well, that many couples in more traditional roles develop highly functional marriages. The most critical piece is the presence or lack of discrepancies between the way that each of the partners views marital roles. Highly traditional relationships may work very well for some couples, so long as their roles are complimentary and acceptable to both partners.

Sexuality

Sexual relations within marital partnerships are greatly affected by each partners perspective on sexuality and intimacy. Hendrix ties socialization into his thoughts on sexuality in marriage. He explains that from infancy, humans are sexual beings. Western culture however discourages the reality that children are sexual. “At a very young age, we were taught to cover our bodies in gender-specific ways and not to talk about or touch our genitals. These prohibitions are so universal that we tend to notice them only when they are broken (Hendrix, 1988, p. 21).” Through childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, these sexual beliefs are internalized and often create the open exploration of sexuality difficult for adults in marital relationships.

As quoted from Crosby in the introduction to the thesis, American culture in many ways glamorizes sexuality. Unfortunately the glamorization takes place at the same time as sexual taboos are enforced. Very little accurate information on sex is taught to young people in the midst of vast media depictions of unrealistic sexuality.

Shaddock stated that...

“When couples turn to books or magazines for advice, they are likely to find information about the physical aspects of sex. Try a new position, these books
advise, or go on a romantic vacation. The greatest beneficiaries of such advice are likely to be chiropractors and travel agents, because, for the majority of sexually troubled couples, the problem has more to do with psychological issues of intimacy (Shaddock, 1998, p. 127).

The traditional Freudian perspective on sexuality is that intimacy involves a kind of "return to childhood." "Sex involves surrender to another. This surrender resembles a child’s relationship with the parent … Freud saw in our longing for sexual union a yearning to return to the perfect sense of oneness we once felt with our mother (p. 128)." When sexuality is an open process and experienced as a union, it can provide a feeling of connectedness or oneness.

Unfortunately though, the risk in seeking this type of union is that it can return the individual to painful memories of intrusion, abandonment, or shame. Sexual arousal is a highly emotionally and physically charged event.

"When we look to our partner to respond to this expansive feeling, we are replaying the childhood longing for mirroring and idealizing. We want our partner to be right there with us in our bliss (mirroring), and we want him to know what we want without our having to say it (idealizing) (p. 128)."

Since such expectations create a situation where the partner will unlikely ever completely succeed in satisfying the other sexually, feelings of shame, intrusion, and abandonment often occur. Because open communication about sexuality is not common and is considered taboo and uncomfortable, many couples choose to start a fight, or shy away from true intimacy in their marriage. Many of the marital scripts that were discussed earlier can play out in the sexual experiences of the couple. At times, sex can be used as an expression of power, withdrawal, shame, and anger. Fortunately, with work on the core issues surrounding sexual relations in
marriage, many couples can learn to find great pleasure in their experience of intimacy. Once again, such issues are better dealt with prior to, or in the beginning of the marital relationship as opposed to years later, when much pain and difficulty could have been avoided.

John Crosby (1973) took a much different perspective on sexuality and romance in marriage. He saw modern expressions and glamorization’s of sexuality as being fundamentally tied to society and the individual’s search for meaning in human existence, what he calls, “the existential vacuum.” Crosby quotes Karen Horney who said that “all is not sexuality that looks like it, sex is very often an expression of the desire for reassurance and is regarded as more a sedative than as genuine sexual enjoyment or happiness (Crosby, 1973, p. 36-40).”

“Eric Fromm makes a similar point: An insecure person who has an intense need to prove his worth to himself, or to dominate others, will easily feel intense sexual desires, and a painful tension if the desires are not satisfied (p. 38).” The argument is that these desires are not genuine physical needs but are substitutes for other psychological deficiencies.

A contributing factor to the lack of healthy sexuality in relationships, according to Crosby, is the continuation of “Victorian” and “puritanical” perspectives on sexuality. He states that those values, when combined with the modern glorification of “hedonistic sex” create a great deal of anxiety about sex. Intimacy in marital relationships is more possible though if the couple’s sexual relations are congruent with other core values. “A configuration of value is formed which is extrinsic to the sexual relationship itself but serves thereby to enrich the sexual relationship so that it can be both intrinsically and extrinsically meaningful (p. 47).”

Sexuality and Love

Crosby also discusses the role of romanticism as it relates to sexuality and marriage. He states that the English language and Western culture have not provided adequate vocabulary, to
express the range and complexity of feelings of love in relationships. Crosby relates to three ancient Greek words used to describe love.

"Philos referred to friendship, the kind of love between equals or brotherly love. Eros describes the physical love between a man and a woman. It is the desire to create, procreate, to communicate to another person in the most intimate way possible. Agape is the prototype of the unconditional, pure kind of love, which, in its theological form, represents love of a deity for man. Agape is unearned, unmerited, unconditional, and undeserved (p. 61)."

The expression of the different types of feelings of love, with romanticism in sexually intimate marriage can ideally produce what Crosby calls a "configuration which forms an intimate growing relationship that bestows higher meaning to the marital relationship. (p. 64)." This concept of integrating sexuality into the whole of the marriage provides an insight uncommon to contemporary understandings of sexual intimacy. Crosby does an excellent job of discussing marriage, as a complex whole that takes on a life of its own, functioning as a related, but separate organism from the individual partners. This individual organism called marriage can exist in both in highly functional and highly dysfunctional ways.

**Interpersonal Communication**

While often deep psychological issues are at the root of marital challenges, the ability or inability to display open communication between partners can intensify and exacerbate marital strain. According to Beebe and Masterson (1988) 86.6 percent of couples experiencing marital difficulty stated that communication was a major problem for them. As with many other factors in marriage, the families of origin affect the communication styles of each of the partners. Individuals who have not witnessed healthy and open communication in their families of origin,
will not automatically understand how to create it in their own relationships.

“As couples move toward the decision to marry, communication between them is perhaps as important as it ever will be, and yet this is often a time when heads are not clear, and each cannot really see the other as she or he really is. There is a problem here for many couples who naively believe that “we’re in love, and as long as we have each other, we’ll be all right.” (Beebe and Masterson, 1986, p.44).”

There are several critical areas to be discussed prior to marriage. Among them are decisions about children, employment, finances, parents and in-laws, sexual needs and expectations. Unfortunately many couples do not explore these issues in depth, and then recognize after marriage, that their spouse is not the “person” that they thought he or she was. “For couples who have not prepared themselves adequately, the reality (of marriage) can be disappointing, frustrating, and potentially destructive (p. 45).”

Role expectations such as those discussed earlier in the thesis (with regard the culture and gender roles), play a large part in conflict in marriage. A common fallacy about marriage is the assumption that one spouse automatically understands what the other spouse needs and expects without that discussion taking place. “Research has shown that couples who talk about their relationship are more likely to be happy with their marriages than those who do not (p. 95).” While each partner brings a different set of expectations to marriage, positive adjustment to the new union can result from communication and negotiation of those expectations.

One key factor in the growth and development of marital relationships is that of self-disclosure. Altman and Taylor have identified the two major components of this process as breadth and depth. “Breadth refers to the number of categories, or topics we are willing to
disclose to another person ... Depth refers to the range of our disclosure within a category from deeply personal to superficial (p. 111).”

Beebe and Masterson describe what they term, “the dyadic effect of self disclosure (p.112).” This theory states that mutual self-disclosure takes place over time and involves varying degrees of risk and trust. Some theorists advocate for complete and unrestrained self-disclosure in marriage. “They suggest that as self-disclosure increases, marital satisfaction increases (p. 113).”

Many studies have indicated however that the importance is not just on what is shared in the marital partnership, but in what manner the information is shared. In one study, it was found that unhappily married people were much more likely to respond affirmatively to the question, “Does your spouse have a tendency to say things that would be better left unsaid? (p. 113).” The relative positiveness or negativeness of the shared information greatly affects the partners’ perception of the communication process.

“For couples to reach ever higher levels of self-disclosure and intimacy, they must possess high levels of self-esteem, a deep commitment to the relationship, and a dedication to its continued improvement, and reciprocal confirmation, allowing affective responses of acceptance and confirmation in it’s deepest form, of not only the disclosures but of the person making them (p. 114).”

So while completely open communication may benefit some relationships, it is important that the couple feels adequately comfortable and secure in disclosing freely to one another.

**Conflict Resolution**

Communication can either help or harm couples as they face an unavoidable difficulty in intimate relationships: conflict. Beebe and Masterson sight several misunderstandings on the
nature of conflict. It is their perspective that conflict is natural and can be highly productive. They disagree with the assumption that conflict occurs entirely because a poor interpersonal relationship. Finally they suggest that conflict cannot always be completely resolved.

Crosby (1973) suggests that conflict in marriage is often on the surface related to “little inconsequential things that may serve as decoys for the actual source of conflict. Much of the pent-up hostility of marital partners is expressed in passive ways or is displaced to inappropriate objects (Crosby, 1973, p. 73).” Also Crosby discussed that social norms that place a taboo on the open expression of conflict do little service to individuals in society. Like it or not, conflict is inherent in all close relationships. He suggests that open discussion and resolution of conflict is the most appropriate response.

Much of our feelings of discomfort are expressing anger and conflict is related to childhood socialization. According to Hendrix (1988), anger as well as other difficult emotions are typically minimized and discouraged by parents.

“When you were young, there were probably many times when you were angry at your caretaker. More than likely it was a sentiment that got little support. Your angry feelings and a host of other antisocial thoughts and feelings were pushed deep inside of you (Hendrix, 1988, p. 24).”

In this scholar’s opinion, socialization plays a vital role in how couples cope with or avoid conflict in marriage.

From a social learning and system’s theory approach to conflict, it is believed that conflict can have beneficial as well as damaging outcomes.

“Although some conflicts tear apart a relationship, others have integrative or reparative functions. The earmark of destructive conflict is an explanation and
escalation of the conflict so that it becomes independent of the original issues. Such arguments may go beyond the point of no return in that the relationship is never again quite the same (McMahon and Peters, 1988, p.194).”

This is another example of the importance of addressing issues of communication early in marriage or before marriage. Often, if a couple seeks counseling after years of repetitive conflict, they have become so polarized that there is little help in bringing them “back together.”

**Gottman’s Theory / Predictors of Divorce**

John Gottman discusses several related issues in his book, *What Predicts Divorce?* In his research he chose to explore not so much the psychological roots of marital difficulty, but the relationship between marital interactions and marital success. Within this discussion he created typologies for dysfunctional and functional marriages as well as a research framework for examining conflict engaging and avoiding behavior.

Gottman discusses five different types of couples that have consistently appeared in his and other’s marital research. Three of the typologies appear to be relatively stable, by this I am referring to couples who are not “on the path to divorce (Gottman, 1994, p. 136).” In his research, Gottman has not explored marital satisfaction as much as marital stability. He classifies unstable marriages as those that are on the path to divorce. While he does pay attention to the concept of marital happiness, the focus of his work is primarily geared toward predictors of marital success (a relative term) and dissolution.

Couples who avoid conflict make up one type of stable couple. They are described as somewhat distant and disengaged from one another. Another type is just the opposite. The levels of intimacy and autonomy in their marriage are very high. They seem to thrive on conflict, and they try to influence one another about most everything. They have a wide range of
emotional expression and are very passionate. The third type of couple uses “influence attempts” sparingly, and only after they have heard one another’s feelings about the issues under discussion. They are emotionally close, and a sense of “we-ness” seems to be critical to them, but their level of emotional expression is also fairly low and generally more moderate than that of the second type of couple.

Gottman also describes two typologies for unstable marriages.

“The nature of conflict in these two types of couples is very different than in the three stable types. Of particular importance are three patterns of interaction: contempt, defensiveness, and withdrawal. The conflict in these two types of unstable marriage is very different than conflict in the three stable types (p. 137).”

“Hostile couples” are the first type of unstable marriages. These relationships are characterized by large amounts of conflict and defensiveness. Active listening processes are rare and manipulative or blaming themes are very common. Secondly, “hostile/detached” couples have conflict which is more in a “hit and run” fashion. They are highly emotionally distant the majority of the time. Conflict that does occur in these relationships is often very emotionally volatile and attacking.

Within the framework of these five relationship typologies, Gottman places functional and dysfunctional in two general categories. These categories are regulated (functional) marriages and nonregulated (dysfunctional) marriages. Since his area of study is interactional processes, these terms describe the “ratio of positive to negative problem solving or positive to negative purely affective behaviors (p. 189).” What is “regulated” in stable marriages is this ratio. “It appears that there are only three distinct possible adaptations to regulating this ratio: one by using a lot of negative and positive affect, another by using a moderate amount of positive
and negative affect, and the other by using a small amount of positive and negative affect (p. 189).” These three interactional styles correspond to the three typologies of stable relationships. Gottman explains that they key piece of his theory is that “something very precise is regulated in regulated marriages. Regulated marriage is like an ecology, in which behaviors between species, rather than species are in balance (p. 190).”

Several aspects of marital interaction and conflict appear to be particularly relevant to marital success. These themes, while discussed from the perspective of John Gottman’s work, have been discussed throughout other authors such as Hendrix, Crosby, Shaddock and Leman. Conflict avoidance versus conflict engagement is a key piece in the interaction of married couples. Gottman discusses that the significance of these types of behaviors within marital conflict is determined by their symbolic value. Small and seemingly mediocre issues become inflated and highly emotional if there is symbolic meaning behind the argument. Also, avoidant behavior may be interpreted as rejection by the conflict engager. This behavior may take on a value that is highly symbolic therefore becoming interpreted as a negative response or rejection when in fact the purpose is to reduce the volatility in a situation.

In his research, Gottman has found interesting data related to gender, marriage, and conflict.

“In the face of strong negative affect, men tend to withdraw from interaction, whereas women tend to engage. Second, women can function within the context of strong negative affect much more competently than can men. Third, men are more reconciling in conflictual interactions to manage the level of conflict and to keep it from escalating (p. 243).”

One other way of categorizing marital interaction is related to volatile and validating
behavior, two typical types of conflict engagers. Volatile marriages are intensely emotional, they have big fights and great times making up. Jealousy is relatively high, along with great deal of protectiveness and love. Validating couples, on the other hand, have conflict that is characterized by both partners hearing and voicing their understanding of the other's perspective on a particular issue. Attempts to influence one another occurs in both of these types of conflict engaging relationships.

The two examples listed above tend to be more functional or regulated relationships. These patterns of avoiding versus engaging relationships and volatile versus validating relationships can become dysfunctional when the ratio of negative to positive affect and behaviors shifts. If this process results in disengagement, efforts to correct interactional patterns may be less successful. Gottman describes this process toward divorce as the "cascade model."

This model begins with a "decline in marital satisfaction, which leads to consideration of separation or divorce, which leads to separation, which leads to divorce (p. 88)." This model is used because it is believed that many strained marriages follow this cascade effect, resulting in divorce. Gottman describes a list of processes that tend to "predict" marital success or failure. When distance and feelings of isolation is high in relationships, the marriage is much less likely to be successful. Those factors when assessed along with "loneliness, parallel (as opposed to shared) lives, severity of problems, feelings of being flooded by partner's negative affect, and the degree to which one works out problems alone (p.88)," can determine, according to Gottman, whether a couple will divorce or stay together.

Crosby discusses several factors that increase the chances of divorce as well. He terms these, tips for how to destroy a marriage. These are "strict sex division of marital roles,
nonnegotiable, nonamendable marriage contract, traditional marital patterns only, always take partner for granted, no creativity and imagination, and perfection and uninterrupted harmony (Crosby, 1973, p. 111).”

In contrast, both of these authors describe processes that increase chances of marital satisfaction. As mentioned earlier, Gottman’s theory of regulated or balanced marriage is the ideal for marital interaction. That is that the amount or interpretation of negative affect and behavior is considerably less than the amount or interpretation of positive affect and behavior between marital partners.

Crosby takes a more holistic perspective on the goal of reaching fulfillment in marriage. As I discuss the concept of a covenant model in working with premarital couples, it will be with many of these factors in mind.

“The quest for fulfillment comes at a price, both for the individual and the marital relationship. The price is paid in the form of pain and discomfort, the slow process of learning new patterns, the break with security mechanisms, or the parting with games and strategies calculated to manipulate or dominate the other. The growth toward maturity, toward self-acceptance, toward learning to deal with conflict and unlearning standards of perfection are four specific areas of growth which exact a toll upon those who would build on the residual in their quest for marital fulfillment within a monogamous relationship. The maturity required to make it together reveals itself most forcefully in the ability to see through the illusions of romantic, societal, and parental expectations of marriage ... Marital fulfillment requires, probably above all other qualities, the grace of self-
III. The Covenant Framework

As I have discussed contemporary theories on marital interaction and functioning, I have taken care to describe areas that are particularly relevant to the framework I am introducing for work with premarital couples. To review, I am discussing premarital counseling as it relates to Stahmann and Hiebert's "assumptions about counseling (Stahmann and Hiebert, 1997, p. 17)." This type of work with couples will be most beneficial for those who voluntarily seek premarital counseling. Also this work is to be done conjointly and serves as a developmental and relationship enhancing process. While use of the covenant model in premarital counseling may reveal some strains on the relationship, the goal is to first to strengthen functional relationships and secondarily to identify pathological ones (p. 17).

The term covenant has been used in a variety of manners, across several religions, cultures, governments, and professions. For this reason it is important to define at the outset of the framework what is meant by a covenant. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a covenant is defined as "a mutual agreement between two or more persons to do or refrain from doing certain acts: the undertaking of either party in such an agreement (Fins, 1999, p. 47)."

The marriage covenant framework that I am proposing is created by the premarital couple, with guidance and facilitation where needed by the counselor. This document is similar to the idea of a "family mission statement" that Stephen Covey suggests in his (1997) book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*. He suggests developing such a statement as a family in order to create a shared sense of vision or purpose. Covey states that a "sense of destination allows us to better understand our present situation and to realize that the end and means are
inseparable; in other words, the destination and the manner of traveling are interwoven (Covey, 1997, p. 77-79).

The differences between the family mission statement and the marriage covenant have many dimensions. The marriage covenant is oriented towards couples, not families with children. In moving this concept from a “mission statement” to a covenant, the ideas of sacredness and faithfulness to the union become quite profound. Such a contract, agreed upon prior to the marriage itself, can add depth and meaning to the vows that the couple recites during the wedding ceremony. A personalized covenant, in the same way as the marriage vows, can be seen as commitment not only to “each other” but also as a commitment to the union of the marital relationship itself.

Several scholars have discussed the distinction between a mission statement or contract and a covenant quite eloquently. While a contract or statement of purpose spells out obligations and participants in a fairly cut and dry fashion,

“A covenant presupposes faithfulness... The essence of covenant is to be found in a particular kind of relationship between persons. Mutual obligations characterize that kind of relationship. Thus a covenant relationship is not merely a mutual acquaintance but a commitment to responsibility and action. A key word in Scripture to describe that commitment is “faithfulness” acted out in a context of abiding friendship (Fins, 1999, p. 48).”

Pamela Miller discussed a “covenant model for social work practice” in contrast to the “contract model.” While the context is different, the notion of the differentiation between these two types of agreements is similar.
“The key element of the covenant relationship is the professional’s promise to be faithful to the gift that has been given to him or her in becoming a professional by giving it to the client...Noting that the Hebrew Scripture’s meaning of covenant entails a notion of faithfulness or loyalty, Ramsey described covenant as an ethic of keeping promises. A contract model of the relationship...though designed to protect both parties, has the potential for encouraging a minimalist approach to the relationship (Miller, 1990, p. 121-123).”

According to Max Stackhouse (1997),

“A covenant shifts the terms of relationships. It is not cut (created) casually, for it entails not only celebration and sacrifice but also the incorporation of new shared duties and rights that nourish life with other meanings, and thus a sense that these duties and rights are based on an enduring law and purpose as established by a higher authority (Stackhouse, 1997, p. 142).”

Covenant terminology suggests the potential for the integration of spirituality into the “marital pact.” The word covenant has been used often in religious writings to describe a person’s covenant with a deity. The idea of a marriage covenant that is made public through the wedding is highly traditional in Christian tradition.

“The covenant is to take place ... as discerned and made manifest in the mutual pledges of enduring faithfulness under God between a man and a woman and as confirmed by the community of witnesses to be in accord with the first principles of righteousness and the well-being of society. The wedding thus is a public declaration before God and the people ... of a valid covenant, which will actually
have been made privately in pledges of love (Stackhouse, 1997, p. 26).”

While I referred to Christian tradition here, most religions have a formal time of commitment or blessing of a new marriage. The covenant framework I am suggesting does not require, but certainly may include a spiritual dimension. Following up on the above quote, the exercise of creating a covenant and agreeing to it, may be a formal process for the couple to make their “private pledges of love” prior to the public ceremony.

With clarity in the definition of what the covenant framework means, I will discuss the purpose and value intended in the process of creating a marriage covenant. Certainly a great deal of work goes into the process of forging such a document, particularly as a premarital couple. As I will describe in the pages that follow, the marriage covenant has the potential to be one of the greatest relationship development tools a couple will have as they transition through their lives together. Beyond this, is it not appropriate that an intimate relationship such as marriage take place in the context of a covenant?

“Sexuality, the formation of households and homes, the nurture of children, and the development of ways to aid those in need ought to take place in covenanted relationships, and we can know, with some degree of reliability what some marks of such relationships are ... A covenantal view at its best is one that includes both elements of voluntary consent and careful analysis of the actual conditions under which we offer consent (Stackhouse, 1997, p. 4).”

One primary purpose of the covenant exercise is to what both Stackhouse(1997) and Covey (1997) referred to as “constitutionalizing the relationship.” Making an official document, which states the origin, motivation, key values, and goals for the marriage, makes that
information more concrete and tangible. This constitutionalized nature of the covenant encourages the couple to hold themselves accountable and helps them to determine if the relationship may have strayed from its original purpose.

The idea of having goals and visions of the relationship indicates that the married couple will inevitably be in the process of reaching those goals. Through the challenges inherent in marriage, the covenant can be a concrete and visual reminder of the original goal or vision. It can act as a tool to evaluate the level of progress achieved in the relationship. Just as important, it can serve as an indicator of when the couple has gotten “off track” and needs to “reroute” themselves. The importance here, which should be stressed by the counselor, is in the process of working toward that goal. In the “working” on the goal, the couple should hopefully experience greater intimacy and satisfaction in their marriage. In this way the covenant model, both in composition of the document and in following through on the promises therein, is more about process than final outcome.

In Covey’s “mission statement model,” he states that the marriage process is analogous to the route of an airplane. The statement gives the family a “destination and a compass (Covey, 1997, p. 77-80).” In the same way a marriage covenant provides the couple with a clear and shared vision of the destination or goal. The importance of having a vision can be summed up in a quote from Covey, “All things are created twice. First comes the idea, or the mental creation; then comes the reality, or the physical creation (p. 72).”

While most individuals enter marriage with a desire to have a satisfying relationship, this is difficult to achieve, particularly when individuals don’t have prior experiences, which teach them what it takes to have a successful marriage. Just as creating a building without blueprints
would be difficult if not impossible, creating a happy marriage without a clear picture of what a happy marriage “looks like” is very difficult. While the covenant model is not a complete answer to this dilemma, it does have the potential to help the couple to create a vision of what they would like to have in their marriage, before the marriage actually occurs.

Covey argues the use of a “mission statement” in families among other reasons, to create a pattern of proactivity in the family. He describes the habit of proactivity as crucial to the development of highly satisfying relationships. By actively setting standards and goals at the outset of the marriage, a covenant reduces the likelihood of stagnation in the relationship. The covenant model begins a pattern of addressing challenges, motivations, and concerns early in the relationship, when fewer deep-seated emotional issues have materialized.

As noted by Beebe and Masterson in the literature review, communication is a common challenge in marriage. While marital strain is often related to more complex emotional issues, inadequate communication skills exacerbate the situation by giving each of the partners a feeling of not being understood. Unfortunately many couples do not discuss their unique visions of what marriage “should look like” prior to marriage.

Another benefit of the covenant approach is that it lends itself to the most open and honest discussion of the individual’s perception of marriage, and specifically their vision of their own marriage. Most partners may assume that they automatically have a similar understanding of what marriage means. It is all too common for individuals to marry, then experience unexpected challenges related to different perspectives on what it means to be married. The covenant allows the couple to discuss their personal values and visions, then find a common ground that will define their life together.
All people have differing expectations on the roles that should occur in marriage. As discussed in the literature review, role expectations are closely related to what has been experienced in the family of origin. Many couples make the mistake of assuming that every family had roles similar to those they experienced as children. Often the topic of role expectations does not surface on its own prior to marriage.

This is another place where the covenant process encourages participants to define, communicate, and reach an agreement on what types of role expectations they hold for the relationship. Recognition of extreme incompatibility in this area may prompt some individuals to break the engagement prior to marriage. While this is not necessarily a goal of the covenant process, it may be helpful in preventing a potentially dysfunctional marriage.

As a therapeutic process, the covenant model is valuable because it requires the couple to evaluate a number of areas that are critical to the success of the marriage. One area that should be addressed as a natural part of the “covenant making” process is family of origin issues. While the depth of this exploration may vary depending upon the self-awareness of the participants and the relevance of the familial experience, it is critical to a complete marriage covenant. At the very least, the participants should define what patterns from their families of origin they want to continue, and which ones they don’t wish to perpetuate. This can relate to a range of issues from communication patterns, to child rearing, to religious preferences, or to family traditions. All of this is highly dependent of what is important to the couple and their level of self-awareness.

One of the most difficult yet important sections of the covenant is related to individual’s motivation for the relationship. While many couples will have difficulty finding words to express this, it is important that they formulate a statement of their reason for their relationship,
their love, and their marriage. It is critical that premarital couples have some self-awareness regarding their motivations for being in the relationship and for getting married.

As with many other issues, couples may enter marriage blindly without an honest assessment of their motivations for the relationship. As discussed in the literature review, people are motivated to marry by all different kinds of emotional needs. Some of those motivations are very healthy, while others may not be. The process of discussing the "reasons for being together" may contribute to a greater sense of awareness, understanding, and a common purpose in the relationship. Putting these ideas to paper creates a tangible statement on these motivations. This may also serve as an affirming statement or reminder to each of the partner's as to "why they are loved".

Covey described a similar issue when he talked about how a mission statement, or in this case, the covenant, explains what love really means in the relationship.

"To me the family mission statement gives a practical, concrete, and doable aspect to what love really is. Love is certainly the roses and the dinners out and the romantic vacations. But it's also the hugs and the bathrobes and getting the morning paper for each other or making the coffee or feeding the guinea pigs. It's in the details as well as the symphony. I think the mission statement is a way of making that commitment real. And I think the process of doing it can be as valuable as the ultimate product, because it's the working together to create that vision and make it real that defines and refines and grows love (Covey, 1997, p. 98)."

One key ideal that is inherent in the covenant model is the importance of "creating" the
meaning in marriage. Rather than blindly following tradition, family patterns, different role expectations, or differing emotional needs, a covenant infuses the marriage with the idea of “shared and mutually created” meaning. While much of the above tendencies may be incorporated into the covenant, the ideal is that the couple may choose to replicate certain traditions and patterns rather than unknowingly “passing down their demons.” The covenant model gives the couple freedom to incorporate or reject what they have learned about the nature of love and marriage in a way that makes sense for their relationship.

As mentioned above, the process of creating a covenant is just as important as the finished product itself. Many of the world’s religions have historically referred to the process of making a covenant as “cutting and binding” a covenant. While this was related to sacrificial practices of the time, this metaphor is still useful in referring to the premarital covenant.

“It is significant that cutting and binding are the principal elements in the terminology and early practice of covenant-making since a covenant both divides and binds, that is to say, it clarifies and institutionalizes both the distinction between or separate identities of the partners and their linkage ... Through covenants, humans and their institutions are enabled to enter into dialogue while maintaining their respective integrities within a shared framework (Stackhouse, 1997, p. 142).”

Within the context of premarital counseling, implementation of the covenant exercise should involve primarily the couple with only facilitation and guidance from the premarital counselor. Use of active listening skills to clarify patterns of the messages the partners are sending is critical to assist the premarital couple in formulating the main points within their
covenant. It is suggested that the counselor assist the couple by taking notes of their ideas on a shared notepad that can be used to extract information for the covenant.

While couples may become “hung up” on the “correct wording” for the covenant, the counselor can assist by emphasizing the meaning rather than the eloquence of the marriage covenant. This exercise is only useful if it fits the couple who is composing it. Anything from quotes, to lists of values, to metaphors may be used so long as the couple is in agreement on the meaning inherent in these.

“Homework assignments” for the couple are useful because they further emphasize the ongoing process and encourage mutual vestedness in the covenant process. It is critical that the counselor working with the premarital couple assist in creating an open environment in which each partner’s perspective is valued. Below I have listed a number of topic areas to be addressed within the marriage covenant. These are only rough guidelines as each couple will have a unique set of experiences, values, motivations, and goals.

• Primary shared values.

• Shared priorities for the individuals and the marriage relationship.

• Motivations for the formation and continuation of the relationship.

• Primary reasons/attributes of the partner which brought about attraction and feelings of love.

• Partner’s shared plan for resolution of conflict in the relationship.

• Couple’s vision of their life together five, ten, twenty years in the future.
• What each partner expects of the other in terms of marital roles.

• Any specific behavioral expectations related to those roles.

• Couple’s vision of the role of each family of origin in their lives.

• Acknowledgment of any critical positive or negative family of origin issues and how those issues will be dealt with in the marriage.

• What are each of the partner’s desired ways of receiving constructive feedback from their spouse?

• Major current patterns and goals for future patterns in communication.

• Goals for the future together (children, career, travel, etc.).

• What type of “home environment” do they wish to create together?

• What legacy, if any, does this couple want to leave?

Ideally, a follow up process with the counselor and the premarital couple would take place. This meeting would serve several purposes. One of the main purposes here is to explore the degree to which the couple has invested into the covenant model. The covenant exercise is not likely to be useful if it is not utilized after the actual wedding occurs. A follow up visit with the counselor would also be an ideal time for the couple’s feedback on the covenant process as a whole.

While ideas for implementation of the covenant are too varied and numerous to discuss here, there are a few basic practices that may prove useful. Displaying the marriage covenant in a
prominent place in the home may serve as a visual reminder and a message about the couple to others who enter the home. In Covey's (1997) book, he says that,

“The actual writing of a mission statement is only the beginning. The richest fruits come as you translate that mission into the very fabric of your family life, into the moments of your day-to-day living. And to do that you must keep it constantly before you, reflect upon it, and use it as the literal constitution of your family life. You might want to print it up and give everyone a copy, keep a copy in your purse or wallet, or frame it and put it on the wall (Covey, 1997, p. 106).”

One other suggestion is that the premarital counselor should discuss with the couple their plans for following through on the covenant statement. For example, a couple may decide to set aside specific time for them to discuss the “progress” and status of their relationship. Setting up these types of proactive measures early in the marriage may lay a beautiful foundation for the “life” of a fulfilling marital partnership. Also this time for reflection can serve as one-on-one time that will become central to the maintenance of a healthy relationship as couple encounters the challenges inherent in life.

IV. Sample Covenant

In this segment of the thesis I will provide one example of what a marriage covenant might “look like” for an average couple. Prior to the covenant sample I will give a brief case study so that the reader might have some context from which to evaluate the covenant itself. While the couple I am discussing is fictional, this exercise could be done with many different types of couples within the context of preparation for marriage.
Fictional Case Study: Jennifer Shields- Caucasian female, age 23

Matthew Brown- Caucasian male, age 26

Jennifer and Matthew first while they were both students at Ohio State University in August of 1995. They met through involvement in their residence hall activities board. They lived in the same housing complex and met through planning meetings and social events in the residence hall association. Initially their relationship was platonic though close.

Matthew graduated in May of 1996 and went on to graduate school to receive his Masters in Business administration at OSU. Jennifer graduated from OSU in December of 1997 with an undergraduate degree in computer science. She has since worked as a systems analyst with a large firm based out of Cincinnati, OH.

After the two graduated they maintained their friendship as they pursued their lives post-undergraduate education. In May of 1998, Matthew graduated from his MBA program and took a middle management position with a corporation based out of Cincinnati. At this time Matthew and Jennifer became reacquainted and began seeing more of one another.

Their relationship quickly changed from platonic to a serious romantic relationship. Over the past year and a half the couple has been exclusive and highly committed to one another. In October of 1999, the Matthew proposed to Jennifer in a traditional fashion, and she immediately accepted. They plan to be married in August of 2000.

Individual Background Information:

Jennifer Shields:
Jennifer was born in Dayton, Ohio where she lived with her middle class family until the age of 18. Her parents were divorced when Jennifer was 10 years old. Jennifer states that her parents told her that they had “fallen out of love.” Her parents both had careers and individual interests outside of the family life. Jennifer explained that while both of her parents expressed interest in her life and their relationship, there were few family traditions that united them.

After her parents divorce, Jennifer lived with her mother and her younger brother. She reports that she has had a close relationship with her mother who has remained unmarried. Jennifer describes her mother as a great influence in her life because of her success in both pursuing her career as a pharmacist and in being highly supportive of her children. Miss Shields remains very close to her younger brother who she has provided much emotional support for through family difficulties. Jennifer has minimal contact with her father who has remarried and moved to a different community several hours away. While she still sees her father on some holidays and special occasions, she reports a distant relationship.

Jennifer reported that she had very close relationships with several of her “sorority sisters” from Ohio State. She says that three friends in particular were her primary source of friendship, social life, and emotional intimacy throughout college. Since her move, and the growth of her relationship with Matthew, she has missed her closeness with these friends, but has chosen to invest the majority of her time into her premarital relationship.

Jennifer reported that she has several primary goals for her life. First she desires to be happy in her upcoming marriage to Matthew. Secondly she desires to have several children and stay at home during their formative years. Thirdly, Jennifer wants to eventually work as a consultant in computer system’s analysis for several different organizations. She hopes that this
will allow her more personal freedom, financial stability, and the opportunity to determine her hours of work.

Matthew Brown:

Matthew was born in the small community of Washington Courthouse, OH where he lived with his family until the age of 19. Matthew lived for all of these years with both of his biological parents and his two younger sisters. His father has been the superintendent for the Washington Courthouse school system for 25 years. Matthew's mother, though she has an undergraduate degree, opted to be a "stay at home" wife and mother for all of Matthew's life.

Matthew reported that involvement in church, and his family's Methodist roots, has always been very important in his family. Both parents, as well as Matthew and his siblings, have fulfilled service and leadership roles in their local church. Matthew also continued this involvement with the Weslyan Student Association at OSU.

Mr. Brown states that his parent's marriage was always stable, but there was never a great deal of expression of emotion or intimacy between his parents. While his parents were highly involved in the day to day events in his life, he reports a relatively emotionally distant relationship with both parents. Matthew explains that in college, he started learning to develop closer relationships with friends and girlfriend, than what he experienced in his family of origin.

Matthew's has several primary goals and values for his life as well. He hopes to be a good provider and a supportive husband to his future wife, and hopefully eventually to his children. He also wants to be highly involved as a leader in his community and church. In terms of career goals, Matthew hopes to get an upper business management position with a national
organization based out of either Cincinnati or Columbus, Ohio. It is important to Matthew that he remain in the same state as his family of origin and maintain frequent contact with both his parents and his younger siblings.

Continued Information on the Couple:

Matthew and Jennifer met with the minister in Matthew’s church as a first step toward wedding plans. The minister there advised the couple to participate in a premarital counseling service provided through the parish that is required for all couples desiring to be wed in that congregation. Through the premarital counseling process, the couple created the initial draft of their marriage covenant. It is suggested that the couple continue to revise, edit, and make additions to the covenant as necessary in the period of time leading up to the wedding. Ideally, the covenant would be signed and formalized prior to the wedding itself.

A Sample Covenant:

**Shields and Brown Marriage Covenant**

We, Mr. Matthew Brown and Miss Jennifer Shields enter into this marriage covenant as an exercise of our love and a concrete artifact of the life we are choosing together in marriage. This document was initially created on December of 1999. It will be an ongoing project, to be finished, signed, and formalized prior to the wedding in August of 2000.

The purpose of our marriage covenant is to give specific meaning to the commitment we are making in marriage. Also this will be displayed in our home as a reminder of our original goals, dreams, priorities, and expectations for our life together. In creating our covenant we hope to set standards for ourselves, so that we may achieve the type of long term satisfying family life
Matthew’s commitment to Jennifer:

“I fell in love with her because of her strong commitment to develop intimacy through understanding, compassion, and faithfulness to close friends and family. She is very talented in her career, but has a firm belief in placing loved ones as a priority above work. I value this tremendously as I desire a spouse who is intelligent and educated, yet focused on the importance of the family in life.”

Jennifer’s commitment to Matthew:

“I am choosing to marry Matthew because of his humble style of leading and serving those around him. His commitment to his community, his faith, and his family display a tremendous amount of love. As his spouse I hope to be a recipient of that love and to help create the family that we both desire. Matthew’s commitment to others through good and bad times, is his most important and attractive gift.”

Priorities as a couple: Our first priority as a couple is to the institution of our marriage and the family we create. Secondarily, we place the church and involvement in it, as a very high priority. Our careers, defined as both work in the home, and outside of it, are a third priority. Involvement in the community that surrounds us is our next priority. We seek to “root” ourselves in a community and develop a network of friends, and involvements there.

Mutual Expectations in Marriage: Matthew’s primary role in the relationships will be to
be the family leader and the primary provider. He will not dominate the marriage through control, but maintain the stability and continuity of the relationship through time. Matthew will challenge himself to develop ever-increasing intimacy with Jennifer as they grow and change together through life. Jennifer, while she will have a career, will be the primary nurturer in the interpersonal relationships between she and Matthew, and eventually between the couple and their children. She has chosen to fulfill the role of primary caretaker of the couple’s children. The birth of children, and the growth of the family is an exciting vision for both Matthew and Jennifer. Matthew and Jennifer both affirm and expect to consciously work on the growth of their relationship through weekly one-on-one time, and during brief get-aways and vacations occurring at least once a year.

Jennifer’s Acknowledgment of her Family of Origin:

“Through my experiences with my family of origin, I have learned about what to seek out, and what to avoid in my own life. In my own marriage, I am committed to working on maintaining a close and intimate relationship with Matthew. I recognize that boundaries are healthy and desired for our life together. Through communicating my realistic needs for intimacy to my spouse, I will work to create our shared vision of a happy, committed, and enduring marriage. I envision passing down the valuable lessons I learned from my mother to motivate and express love for my own children.”

Matthew’s Acknowledgment of his Family of Origin:

“This covenant affirms the importance of committedness that I learned from my parents. In writing this I also affirm that I can transcend mere commitment, to a
spiritually and intimately binding agreement with my future spouse. I have been blessed by the tradition of leading and serving others, and will add to that tradition by challenging myself to engage in close and open relationships with the family I am creating. My parent’s commitment to the institution of marriage, coupled with my understanding of the human need for closeness in relationships, will allow me to be the husband that Jennifer deserves in marriage.”

The Goals for Interaction and Communication: We, Jennifer and Matthew have a goal of always striving to understand one another’s perceptions, emotions, values, and experiences. While we are committed to negotiating and compromising together, we know that it is not possible to always agree with one another. A goal that we have related to communication, is to develop an comfortable and healthy way of living with differences in opinions that will inevitably occur in our relationship. Due to past experiences, both of us tend to avoid difficult or conflict-laden areas. In our commitment to one another, we promise to continually work on this area, so that we may be honest, open, and sincere in our interactions.

Our Vision of our Life Together: We envision a home that is the foundation for the expression of love, committedness, and leadership, to all of those around us, from our children and grandchildren, to our neighbors, coworkers, and the community as a whole. We hope to create a family environment that is unconditionally loving but holds high standards for the behavior of those therein. While we know that along this path we will make mistakes and experience challenges, we envision that we will use those experiences as opportunities for growth in our marriage and family.

We plan to create this family environment by setting a positive example, providing praise
and appreciation of one another's gifts and blessings, and by challenging ourselves to strengthen the bonds of family and community. While this creation will be always "in the process of becoming," our ultimate goal is to pass these healthy traditions and patterns on to our own children, who will share them with our grandchildren. We long to create a beautiful "family culture" that will be passed on through the generations.

V. Conclusions

As mentioned throughout the thesis, the marriage covenant process provides an opportunity for intense reflection and observable, recordable expression of the meaning and vision for a life-long commitment. The covenant is a tailor-made road map that may provide a newly married couple with a sense of direction, an idea of norms and expectations, and most importantly an affirmation of why they are loved.

It is true that even with the best preparation, achieving a satisfying and enduring marriage requires a great deal of effort, coupled with humility and a desire to find joy in meeting the legitimate needs of the partner. The potential utility of a premarital covenant is that it establishes, early on, that the marital relationship has a "life of its own." That "organism" needs nurturance, understanding, and devotion.

Covey stated this well when he said that,

"All things need watching, working at, caring for, and marriage is not an exception. Marriage is not something to be treated indifferently or abused, or something that simply takes care of itself. Nothing neglected will remain as it was or is, or will fail to deteriorate. All things need attention, care, and concern, and
especially so in this most sensitive of all relationships of life (Covey, 1997, p. 277)."

In the review of the literature I discussed Hendrix’ version of the psychoanalytic perspective on romantic relationships. The main idea was that in marriage, we are seeking a person who can heal our wounds from all of our past childhood and life experiences. Hendrix advocates that,

“Relationships pave the way for us to recapture our wholeness by correcting the distortions of care-taking and socialization that distanced us from our original selves. It is in unconditionally loving our partner, making it safe for them to open to love, letting that love sink in over time so that trust can build, that allows their fullness to come back into being, so that they can feel their oneness and their totality (Hendrix, 1992, p.46-47).”

The establishment of a marriage covenant, at it’s best, allows that fulfilling this needed existential healing within the context of healthy relationship may be more achievable for more couples. The “cutting” of a covenant prior to marriage may help premarital couples to establish the path for a marriage that, in time, may lead to such fulfillment and healing.

“Wherever the possibilities of healing occur, fidelity, trust, forgiveness, mutual edification, and acceptance are both necessary ethical principals and means for that healing, and at least some of the subjective effects of covenantal living become manifest. The very graciousness of such living takes us out of ourselves and makes alive in us a consciousness of the mystery of another realm of being, which we come to know in love (Stackhouse, 1997, p. 160).”
References


