

MAINTAINING A SATISFYING MARRIAGE:
A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS, STORIES, AND
MEANINGS IN MARRIAGE EDUCATION

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the
Valenti School of Communication
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Twyla Coy
December, 2010

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ABSTRACT

In this study I explore how FamilyLife, a Christian organization committed to marriage education, stories marriage and the communicative behaviors that are emphasized. I completed a review of the current communication literature to allow for an understanding of scholarly framework for the communication behaviors that are specific for building and maintaining satisfying marital relationships as well as the value of marriage education programs. I utilized a thematic narrative analysis to examine 85 articles (Marriage Memos) in order to determine the marriage and communication values that emerged throughout FamilyLife's narrative of marriage.

Similarities found in the Marriage Memos were identified and categorized into twelve primary categories. The primary themes for marriage values were: blueprint for marriage, faith, commitment, family, investment, selflessness, and companionship. The primary categories for the communication values were: listening, power of tongue, cooperation, genuineness, and conflict management. The stories throughout the Marriage Memos maintained strong narrative fidelity, allowing these values to be accepted and utilized by the reader; FamilyLife communicates to the readers the communication skills and behaviors it finds valuable to maintaining a satisfying marriage, while reflecting the need to foremost uphold its own and others' spiritual values.

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I would like to thank Dr. Jill Yamasaki who inspired me to use my story to encourage others in their quest for marital bliss. I am grateful for her advice, support, and words of encouragement along my journey. Anytime I had questions or concerns about my thesis, Dr. Yamasaki was willing to listen, provide insight, and point me in the right direction. I would also like to thank Dr. Martha Haun and Dr. Penny Addison Otey for their support and enthusiasm for my research. I am honored to have you championing me through this project.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I – Introduction.....	1
Understanding.....	2
Openness.....	3
Empathy.....	4
Adaptability.....	6
Cooperation.....	7
Summary and Overview of Chapters to Come.....	9
Chapter II – Literature Review	11
Communication Skills vs. Communicative Behaviors	11
Communication Skills Training.....	14
Marriage Education Programs	15
Narrative Theory.....	18
Research Questions.....	21
Chapter III – Methodology	23
Participant Observation.....	24
Data Collection and Analysis.....	25
Chapter IV – Results – Marriage	28
Blueprint for Marriage	30
Faith	39
Commitment	43
Family	48

Investment.....	50
Selflessness	53
Companionship	56
Chapter V – Results – Communication	60
Listening	61
Power of Tongue.....	64
Cooperation.....	67
Genuineness	69
Conflict Management.....	73
Chapter VI – Discussion	78
Narrative Fidelity	80
Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research	84
Conclusion	85
References.....	86

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 – Rational World vs. Narrative Paradigm.....	20
Table 2 – Coding Scheme for Marriage Values.....	30
Table 3 – Coding Scheme for Communication Values	60

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Marriage comprises one of the most important interpersonal relationships that most adults will experience. According to Kelly, Fincham, and Beach (2003), approximately “80% of the population profess an intention to marry at some point in their lives” (p. 723). Unfortunately, statistics suggest that 40% or more of new marriages will eventually end in divorce (Stanley, 2001). Even before divorce, “evidence suggests that marital distress negatively affects physical health, mental well being, and work productivity,” (Stanley, 2001, p. 272). Indeed, Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach (2000) claim that while half of all first marriages are projected to end in permanent separation or divorce, the level of satisfaction in those marriages that stay together has consistently declined since the 1970s (see also Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002; Dion, 2005).

Scholars have long emphasized the importance of quality communication as a “determinant of marital adjustment, happiness and satisfaction, and mental and emotional dysfunction” (Montgomery, 1981, p. 21). Given high divorce rates and the profound impact marital satisfaction can have on multiple levels, communication within the marriage is one of the most researched areas in family and relational communication scholarship (see, for example, Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004; Kelly et al., 2003; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 2004). Many popular press books stress the importance of communication in marital relationships, as well. Indeed, a recent Amazon search on “marriage communication” yielded 1,963 hits.

The relationship between marital satisfaction and quality communication is complex and dynamic (Burleson & Denton, 1997; see also Bradbury et al, 2000; Gottman & Notarius, 2000). Scholars have identified a number of specific communicative behaviors for building and maintaining satisfying marital relationships. A number of communication behaviors have emerged consistently in communication literature that merit discussion, including understanding (Indvik & Fitzpatrick, 1982; Long, Angera, Carter, Nakamoto, & Kalso, 1999), openness (Eggerichs, 2004; Yelsma & Marrow, 2003), empathy (Long et al., 1999), adaptability (deTurck & Miller, 1986; Gottman & Notarius, 2000), and the willingness of both partners to work cooperatively through problems (Tallman & Hsiao, 2004; Weigel, 2003). The goal of quality communication is the achievement and maintenance of interpersonal understanding, and these relational maintenance strategies help to shape the ways a couple may define marital satisfaction (Ragsdale & Brandau-Brown, 2005; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2001). Each of these communicative behaviors is described in further detail throughout this chapter, followed by an overview of my thesis and the chapters to come.

Understanding

According to Indvik and Fitzpatrick (1982), understanding is a significant construct in the study of marital interaction as one indicator of how effective the communication between partners has been in the past (p. 43). When two partners actively attempt to understand each other, they are working toward a common goal, thereby creating quality communication behaviors. Understanding implies that a perceiver has effectively comprehended a spouse's interaction cues (Indvik & Fitzpatrick, 1982, p. 44). When one partner receives the intended message and decodes it in the way that the other

partner intended, a successful communication interaction – and therefore understanding – occurs.

Connections between marital partners are realized through communication. Only accurate communication of thoughts, opinions, and feelings on significant issues is likely to allow a couple to assess change in one another and in the relational system over time (Indvik & Fitzpatrick, 1982). Without understanding, there is no relational growth, causing the couple to become distressed and dissatisfied. In Burleson and Denton's (1997) study, for example, couples most frequently cite communication problems in response to relationship struggles (p. 884), even though "communication problems may be better viewed as a symptom than a diagnosis of marital difficulties" (p. 899).

One of the key components of communication problems is the impact of gender differences in message production, message reception, and understanding. Indeed, hundreds of popular press books and articles explore the differences between men and women in their communication styles. In general terms, Gamble and Gamble (2003) identify the ways in which men and women listen, noting that women listen to build rapport and listen for emotion and details, while men listen for structure and organization (p. 125). When listening to the same message, men and women often have very different interpretations of the message, which influences understanding in a marital relationship (e.g., Carli, 1989; Gamble & Gamble, 2003; Pasupathi, Carstensen, Levenson, & Gottman, 1999).

Openness

In addition to understanding, openness is a communicative behavior necessary to maintain a high level of marital satisfaction. Direct and indirect references to openness –

including self-disclosure, genuineness, transparency, awareness, and disclosure style – abound in the literature of communication, marriage, and marital counseling (e.g., Finkenauer, Engels, Branje, & Meeus, 2004; Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004; Yelsma & Marrow, 2003). Openness involves discussing the relationship and sharing thoughts and feelings (Canary et al., 2002). According to Montgomery (1981), openness is a “communication behavior that allows a person to be perceived by others as he/she knows him/herself to be. Openness occurs whenever personal, private information is communicated or received” (p. 22). More recently, Yelsma and Marrow (2003) discuss the importance of openness by examining what they call emotional communication; “it is through emotional communication that the personal relationships are created and cemented” (p. 42). Openness can be described as sharing what you know, what you think, what you feel, and who you are (FamilyLife, 2007).

Eggerichs (2004) claims openness is one of the strategies that will most dramatically influence satisfaction within a marriage. Specifically, “a woman is expressive responsive” and wants to talk about things that are on her mind openly with her husband (Eggerichs, 2004, p. 135). In many cases, men compartmentalize things and often withdraw during any sort of confrontational interaction. Often the phrase “nothing is wrong” is a way to close the communication. To maintain a satisfied relationship, both partners should strive for openness in the relationship.

Empathy

Empathy is another communication behavior evident in couples classified as nondistressed or happy. Long and colleagues (1999) define empathy as “the ability to understand what the other is thinking, put oneself in the other’s place, and intellectually

understand another's condition without vicariously experiencing their emotions" (p. 235). This line of research indicates that empathy – understanding the point of view of one's partner – is an important predictor of marital adjustment and a propensity to divorce for both husbands and wives (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Long, 1993; Long et al., 1999; Markman et al., 2004).

Empathy expresses genuine concern for the partner, and individuals are more likely to have stable, well-adjusted relationships if they have partners who are capable of expressing empathy (Davis & Oathout, 1987; Long et al., 1999). Some marriage therapists have argued for the need of empathy training for couples in romantic relationships (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008; Long et al., 1999), believing that empathy can be taught or refined as a skill. For example, Long and colleagues (1999) state that "empathy can indeed be learned. Even within the context of intimate relationships, people can learn to express greater empathy towards their partners" (p. 240).

Empathy is especially important when couples experience difficult life stages. In all relationships, there is a point when a crisis can either strengthen or dissipate a relationship, including the loss of a family member, a change in employment status (loss of a job or the wife going back into the workplace), or a spousal transgression. During this time, listening with empathy can increase marital satisfaction in a relationship (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2001). Interestingly, when observing a distressed couple, there is much less empathetic listening than in a happy stable couple. According to Long and colleagues (1999), "the change in empathetic expression with a partner was positively related to relationship satisfaction" (p. 240). Empathy can lead to enrichment

in the marriage and is therefore a trait of happy couples that can be examined to improve the marital satisfaction of all couples.

One of the difficulties with empathy training is that being empathetic is sometimes difficult for nondistressed couples, not to mention distressed couples. The act of empathy involves stepping away from one's own thoughts and feelings and fully listening and understanding what the partner is feeling. According to Cole and Cole (1999), "the use of 'I' statements, being empathetic, remaining non-defensive, and paraphrasing are not only rarely practiced by normal happy couples in routine discussions but might be impossible and unrealistic in conflict solutions" (p. 274). Most marital programs "promote active listening and validation of each spouses' position" (Cornelius, Alessi, & Shorey, 2007). With the impact that empathy can have on marital satisfaction, it is important to use empathy in everyday interactions to enhance the skills that the partners have so that in times of conflict, which all couples have, there is a repertoire of schemas from which to pull.

Adaptability

In all interpersonal relationships, some degree of change occurs as the relationship grows and matures. The same applies within the marital dyad. Without growth and change, the relationship will grow stagnate and dissolve. Several studies indicate that adaptability is one of the key factors in maintaining a relationship. According to deTurck and Miller (1986), one of the most important factors influencing the quality of marital relationships is "husbands' and wives' ability to adapt to each other, their relationship, and evolving domestic contingencies" (p. 717). More recently, Canary and colleagues (2002) found that "one characteristic of enduring marriages is the ability to change with

life course events” (p. 405). As the partners change and the relationship evolves into a new dynamic dyad, the communication behaviors of the partners should also change in order to keep pace with the relationship (Bradbury et al., 2000). When one looks back at the way in which s/he self-discloses, saves face, and negotiates the relationship while dating, it would seem obvious that as the relationship grows into a marriage and through the next life stages, that the type of communication changes.

deTurck and Miller (1986) note that many distressed couples fail to adjust to “permutations in themselves, each other, and other innovations in their domestic environment,” and it is vital for this adaptability to take place to transition to a healthy, happy relationship (p. 717). Additionally, Gottman (2000) found that compared to nondistressed couples, distressed couples’ marital communication were much more “rigid and inflexible” (p. 716). The rigid, inflexible patterns of communication observed in distressed couples may be due to the reliance on stimulus generalization as their information processing style. Eggerichs (2004) describes the inability to change in his Crazy Cycle, which is defined as a negative reciprocated cycle in which many couples get caught. Many researchers identify the difficulties that distressed couples have with escaping a negative cycle, which strengthens the argument that adaptability is a key communication behavior that should be practiced in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Fincham, 2004; Bradbury et al., 2000).

Cooperation

All relationships will encounter conflicts that require both members of the relationship to provide input on how best to resolve them. Some scholars argue that some relationships have more problems but use less problem-solving strategies than others

(Gottman & Levenson, 2000; see also Tallman & Hsiao, 2004). These relationships may be characterized as distressed based on the fact that the partners are not actively engaged in solving the problems together. Tallman and Hsiao (2004) suggest that certain types of conflict, including those related to communication, are common to all married couples and that certain behavioral strategies, especially those related to communication, can lead to effective resolutions (p. 172).

Cooperation is more than just solving problems together. Relational maintenance strategies, for example, include cooperation in the roles and responsibilities of a couple's daily chores. Canary and colleagues (2002) examine the value of sharing tasks, which refers to "engaging in household chores as well as any tasks that may constitute the responsibilities of the couple" (p. 396). Compliance-gaining strategies and negotiations are an important facet of cooperation. The couple must work cooperatively to define his and her roles and responsibilities. Strom (2003) characterizes some of these daily responsibilities in the form of industry, or "the willingness and ability to engage in useful labor" (p. 25). Furthermore, Badr and Acitelli (2008) claim that "satisfaction with the division of housework is positively related to closeness and negatively related to conflict for both older and newly married couples" (p.313). To have satisfaction with the division of labor and the responsibilities of each member of the couple, the couple must cooperatively self-construct these rules. In working cooperatively to define tasks, many conflicts can be avoided.

When problems arise, couples who desire a common goal may choose to work with each other to accomplish that common goal. Cooperation is one of the most successful ways in which a couple can achieve the shared goal; cooperative problem-

solving efforts will increase their chances of resolving interpersonal problems (Tallman & Hsiao, 2004). Cooperation is a vital concept to accomplishing a goal in any interpersonal relationship, and involves both partners being fully vested in the relationship and willing to work together in order to solve a problem, reach a goal, or negotiate a compromise. According to Tallman and Hsiao (2004), “marital satisfaction and mutual trust will contribute to a cooperative climate in which accommodating initiatives are more likely to be offered and accepted, even when couples face serious disagreements” (p. 174). Many studies show that when communicative skills are enhanced through routines and marital enrichment exercises or therapy, couples can use those problem-solving skills to cooperatively reach a solution that will be satisfactory for all parties involved (e.g., Bradbury et al., 2000; Burleson & Denton, 1997; Cole & Cole, 1999; DeMaria, 2005).

Summary and Overview of Chapters to Come

In summary, communication scholars have identified and studied a variety of communicative behaviors, including understanding, openness, empathy, adaptability, and cooperation, that influence marital satisfaction in a number of ways. Still, scholars differentiate between the knowledge of such quality communicative behaviors and the availability of quality communicative skills – or acquired abilities for employing those behaviors (see Burleson & Denton, 1997; Fincham, 2004; Kelly et al., 2003). With heightened attention paid to the importance of quality communication behaviors for sustaining or weakening relationships (Gottman & Notarius, 2000), scholars have focused increased attention on the effectiveness of marriage education programs for improving communication skills. According to Dion (2005), “more than 100 marriage education

curriculums exist today... [and] most address communication, such as listening and expressing oneself effectively” (p. 141). Studies have also demonstrated that couples who participate in marriage education programs rank communication skills as the most helpful feature of their training (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2004; Roberts & Morris, 1998; Stanley et al., 2001). Few studies, however, have specifically examined the meanings of marriage constructed within these programs as well as the ways in which such meanings influence the importance, presence, or absence of particular communicative behaviors and skills.

In the next chapter, I explore the differences between communication behaviors and communication skills, discuss the importance of marital education, including communication skills training, and highlight the significance of narrative theory for understanding the communicative behaviors emphasized in and shaped by the narrative of marriage storied by FamilyLife, a religious-based marriage education program. Then, in Chapter III, I detail my methodology and analysis, followed by a presentation of my results in Chapters IV and V. In the final chapter, I discuss practical and theoretical implications of those findings, identify key limitations, and offer suggestions for future research.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

As discussed in Chapter I, family and communication scholars have long studied the communicative behaviors of married couples, including understanding, openness, empathy, adaptability, and cooperation. Research demonstrates, however, that an immense difference exists between communicative behaviors and communication skills. I explore this difference below, followed by an examination of current and longstanding calls for communication skills training and marriage education programs. Guided by narrative theory, I then conclude the chapter with two overarching research questions for this study.

Communication Skills vs. Communicative Behaviors

The terms communication skills and communicative behaviors are often used interchangeably, but there is a vast difference between the two. Burleson and Denton (1997) define communication behavior as “the verbal and nonverbal actions that the speaker actually emits and that are observable by others. Observed behavior is the product of the individual’s motivation or intentions in a particular situation and the skills the individual has available to assist in pursuing those intentions” (p. 887). These researchers discuss motivation (either positive or negative) as the person’s intentions and goals with respect to the other person.

Communication skills are much different than the portrayal of certain communicative behaviors. Communication skill is “the ability or capacity to realize the communicative goals during the course of an interaction” (Fincham, 2004, p. 90).

Communication skills are acquired abilities that involve using various interpretive and symbolic resources in the effort to achieve certain social outcomes. As a capacity or an ability of the individual, communication skill cannot be observed directly but must be inferred from observed behavior (Fincham, 2004). A skill is a trait that can be learned, refined, and in some cases manipulated.

One of the difficulties in determining the communicative skills of a person or couple is based on the complexity of the definition. A person may use his/her communicative skills to intentionally manipulate the behaviors so that the person may appear to have less skills when, in reality, s/he has excellent skills. According to Kelly and colleagues in their 2003 study, “communicative behavior observed during such discussions may not be a reliable or valid indicator of communicative skill... [there is a] need for developing careful distinctions between the constructs of communication skill and communication behavior” (Kelly et al., 2003, p. 725). As such, there is a great need to distinguish between motivations, skills, and behaviors when examining the influence of these concepts on marital satisfaction.

Communication quality and relationship quality interact and affect each other in a reciprocal spiral (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). As spouses apply their communication skills in their interaction, their relationship improves. As their relationship improves, they are motivated to apply more quality communication skills (Montgomery, 1981, p. 28; see also Eggerichs, 2004). However, investigations of distressed and nondistressed couples demonstrate that the level of communicative skill is not always correlated with the level of marital satisfaction. In one study, “skills and satisfaction were positively associated among nondistressed couples, but were negatively associated among distressed couples”

(Burleson & Denton, 1997, p. 884). Moreover, it is not uncommon to have a couple with one or both partners who have high levels of communicative skill and very low levels of marital satisfaction. Burleson and Denton (1997), for example note that “in circumstances where both spouses are skilled and positively motivated toward each other, we would expect to find positive associations between assessments of communication skills and marital satisfaction. However, when both spouses are highly skilled and ill motivated, the marital relationship may become a living hell” (p. 888).

Despite the complex relationship between communication skill and marital satisfaction, significant value exists in studying the ways in which individuals can improve communication skills. Perhaps more importantly, researchers should examine ways to use communication skills to encourage positive communicative behaviors in all interpersonal relationships, especially marriage. Indeed, research indicates that communication issues are the major source of interpersonal difficulties (e.g., Bradbury et al., 2000; Cole & Cole, 1999; Cornelius et al., 2007; DeMaria, 2005; Hawkins et al., 2008). For example, many marital and family problems stem from misunderstanding and from ineffective communication, resulting in frustration and anger when implicit expectations and desires are not fulfilled. Additionally, a major problem of those who seek professional help is their inability to recognize and communicate their problems or concerns (Heatherington, Escudero, & Friedlander, 2005). With all the study on communicative behaviors and skills, many understand the value of evaluating interpersonal actions before and during the interactions (for a review, see Fincham & Beach, 2010). In so doing, partners can become aware of the actions that may lead them toward a negative reciprocated cycle often experienced by distressed couples.

After studying the difference between communication behaviors and communication skills, it is important to examine the importance of a communication skills training program. As a graduate student of communication, I value the resources I have learned about my own interactions and the way others may perceive my communicative behaviors. Many times the knowledge that one possesses can help to shape the way in which one acts, but this is not always the case.

Communication Skills Training

Communication training, as an “attempt to remediate problematic communication, has become an important component in many approaches to marital therapy” (O’Donohue & Crouch, 1996, p. 87). The skills deficits model maintains that once initiated, conflicts may be managed more or less successfully. Couples who manage their conflicts unskillfully are expected to be less satisfied with their interactions as well as with their relationship (Burlison & Denton, 1997, p. 885). According to Cole and Cole (1999), “marriage and family practitioners need to develop skill-based prevention programs and interventions based on systematic research” (p. 273). Although a simple correlation between communication skills and marital satisfaction does not exist, it is nonetheless advantageous to possess the communication skills needed in order to communicate effectively in interpersonal relationships.

Skills training comes in many forms. Communication classes, relational how-to books, premarital counseling, marital enrichment seminars, and marriage education programs are all avenues for improving communicative skills and awareness of communicative behaviors. Cole and Cole (1999) note how a “program as short as five weeks can teach skills that improve levels of empathy practices by couples that last for at

least six months after the training and also improve relationship satisfaction” (p. 275).

The amount of information about communication skills is not as important as the desire of a couple to utilize the concepts that they have learned.

One of the prominent calls within the marriage movement is for couples to undergo premarital education (Stanley, 2001; Stanley et al., 2001). Although these calls have historically been answered by religious organizations, various state governments and community-based initiatives have also worked to develop programs aimed at decreasing marital distress and divorce (Dion, 2005; Fincham & Beach, 2010; Stanley, 2001). In the field of marital communication, it seems logical that marriage education programs, also known as marriage enrichment programs, marriage-training programs, or marital distress prevention programs (e.g., Jakubowski et al., 2004; Markman et al., 2004; Nielsen, Pinsof, Rampage, Soloman, & Goldstein, 2004), serve as the catalyst for communication skills training.

Marriage Education Programs

Marriage education programs have existed for more than 40 years and, although the purpose has remained constant, society’s enthusiasm for such programs has followed the swing of a pendulum. The 1970s marked the initial flourishing of marriage programs featuring couple-to-couple support as an alternative to counseling; one of the first marriage programs, and by far the largest in the nonprofessional movement was Marriage Encounter (Regula, 1975; Doherty & Anderson, 2004). Regula (1975) described Marriage Encounter as “not a religious retreat, nor is it designed to serve as a vehicle for marriage counseling...its primary concern is to allow married couples to experience genuine interpersonal communication with their spouses” (p. 153). This program was one

example of the societal excitement for marriage programs in the 1970s. Schauble and Hill (1976) shared the excitement for marriage programs, as well: “Whereas counseling or therapy may carry a stigma, ‘skills training’ has more of an educational/enrichment connotation which could be beneficial for any couple” (p. 284). Roberts and Morris (1998) define marriage enrichment as something “intended to be primarily an educational experience to bring change and growth to a couple’s marriage” (p. 37).

By the 1980s, the “mass market for marriage enrichment went flat. Marriage Encounter weekends dwindled, and faith communities seemed to turn their attention elsewhere” (Doherty & Anderson, 2004, p. 425). During the decade, political and social events shaped the communities’ view of marriage, such as the feminist critique of marriage and the “ambivalence about marriage” from religious leaders (Doherty & Carroll, 2002). But as the pendulum swings from one side to the other, so did the enthusiasm and prevalence of marriage education. By the end of the 1980s, divorce rates continued to increase and there seemed to be a turning point toward marriage enrichment. According to Stacey (1990), there was a “growing awareness among professionals and academics that unstable marriage was a reality to be dealt with” (p. 426).

During the 1990s, the growth for marriage enrichment continued, but it was Diane Sollee, who in 1995 “coined the term ‘marriage education’ as a replacement for the marital enrichment or psychotherapy” that sparked the marriage education movement once more (Doherty & Anderson, 2004, p. 426). The goal of marriage education is to give individuals and couples the knowledge and skills needed to build and sustain a healthy marriage (DeMaria, 2005; Hawkins et al., 2004; Hawkins et al., 2008). By 1995, a “revived marriage education movement began to coalesce, this time with closer

collaboration between professionals and lay people in communities” (Doherty & Anderson, 2004, p. 426). Interest grew to collaborate among religious leaders, family and marriage counselors, community leaders, and government officials to prevent divorce and salvage marriage.

In the most recent years, the push has been to surpass the limitations of the traditional marriage education programs, which limited their scope to participants that are “predominantly Caucasian, middle-class, and religiously affiliated” (DeMaria, 2005, p. 244). This target expansion has come in the form of support from federal and state governments initiating support for premarital education, covenant marriage, relationship education in high school and college, and community health marriage initiatives with a special focus on low-income couples (Dion & Hawkins, 2008; Fincham & Beach, 2010). According to Dion & Hawkins (2008):

US federal policy makers recently have supported marriage and relationship education as a way to help couples – especially low-income couples – form and sustain healthy marriages as an additional tool to reduce poverty and increase children’s well being... In 2006, federal legislation allocated \$500 million over 5 years to support promising marriage and relationship education programs and initiatives targeted primarily at lower-income couples. (Dion & Hawkins, p. 412)

The breadth of couples impacted by this size and type of initiative is exciting to communication scholars such as myself, because within the marriage education programs, these couples will be taught essential, fundamental communication skills that nurture and shape the marital relationship.

Much research has examined the content of marriage education programs, and a generation of good research points to the importance of interactional processes, communication patterns, and problem-solving behaviors that sustain or weaken marriages (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). According to Dion (2005), “more than 100 marriage education curriculums exist today... [and] most address communication, such as listening and expressing oneself effectively” (p. 141). Studies have also shown that couples who undergo communication skills training in the form of marriage education programs rank the communication skills as the most helpful feature of their training (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2004; Roberts & Morris, 1998; Stanley et al., 2001).

Narrative Theory

Marriage education is about improving relationships by improving communication within relationships. When I reflect back on the progression of my relationship with my husband, I can't help but think about all the events and memories that have shaped our relationship. We've been through marriage education programs, such as the Weekend to Remember Conference sponsored by FamilyLife, where we have heard the stories of couples who have surpassed the world's expectation of marriage. These stories have helped us to understand the values and truths that shape FamilyLife as an organization and as a curriculum.

Stories are a powerful learning tool and narrative theory helps us analyze these stories. According to Fisher (1984), individuals are *homo narrans*, or storytelling animals. His “narrative paradigm promotes the belief that humans are storytellers and that values, emotions and aesthetic considerations ground our beliefs and behaviors” (West & Turner, 2004, p. 346; see Fisher, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1989). A narrative is essentially a

story, yet also refers to “the way in which we construct disparate facts in our own words and weave them together cognitively in order to make sense of our own reality”

(Patterson & Monroe, 1998; see Bruner, 1990). According to Elkins (2001):

We use stories in virtually every aspect of our lives – to pass the time, convey information, to let someone know who we are (or at least who we want to be), to locate ourselves in a place, family, and community. We turn to stories to both survive and to imagine, as well as for a host of instrumental purposes, for pleasure, and because we must. Stories are a part of our human inheritance. (p. 1)

Fisher (1989) states that “all forms of human communication can be seen fundamentally as stories, as interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character” (p. 57). Humans are distinguished by their ability and predisposition to tell stories; stories help us to recount people and events of significance and to account for motives, causes, and reasons. Fisher sees the narrative paradigm as a “very general means of understanding the ways in which humans encounter and behave within their social world” (Miller, 2005, p. 94).

Bruner (1990) argues that all stories seem to be designed to give the exceptional behavior meaning; the function of the story is “to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern” (p. 49). Fisher (1987) believes that one purpose of narrative theory is the analysis of text by narrative rationality. According to the table below (Miller, 2005, p. 94; see Fisher, 1987), distinct differences exist between the rational world paradigm and the narrative paradigm; however, Fisher argues for the importance of the narrative without denigrating

logic and reason and “attempts to bridge the gap between logos (rational argument) and mythos (narrative)” (West & Turner, 2004, p. 348).

Table 1: Rational World vs. Narrative Paradigm

The Rational World Paradigm	The Narrative Paradigm
People are essentially rational.	People are essentially storytellers.
People make decisions based on arguments.	People make decisions based on good reasons.
The communicative situation determines the course of our argument.	History, biography, culture, and character determine what we consider good reasons.
Rationality is determined by how much we know and how well we argue.	Narrative rationality is determined by the coherence and fidelity of our stories.
The world is a set of logical puzzles that we can solve through rational analysis.	The world is a set of stories from which we choose, and constantly re-create, our lives.

Narrative rationality is determined by narrative coherence and narrative fidelity (Fisher, 1985). Narrative coherence deals with the integrity of the story’s structure and whether or not the story hangs together (Fisher, 1985,1987). Furthermore, coherence considers issues such as “the extent to which (a) the plotline is consistent, (b) there is enough detail to understand the story, (c) characters behave in a reliable manner, and (d) there are not unrealistic surprises or other plausible interpretations left out by the narrator” (Miller, 2005, p. 95). We can judge narrative coherency because stories are an integral part of our lives, and we have heard stories for so long that we have developed our own standards for what makes sense in a story.

Narrative fidelity deals less with the internal structure of the story and more with the underlying truthfulness of the story. Fisher (1985) states that “narrative fidelity concerns the truth qualities of the story, the degree to which is accords with the logic of

good reasons: the soundness of its reasoning and the value of its values” (p. 349). He expands this definition by detailing the five dimensions of fidelity: questions of fact, questions of relevance, questions of consequences, questions of consistency, and questions of transcendence (Fisher, 1985, 1987). When we judge the stories that we encounter in our lives, we must ask ourselves about the narrative rationality, both coherence and fidelity, in order to determine whether a good or bad story has been told. Clearly, since not all of us share the same values, not everyone will hold the same opinion about various stories; “judgments of fidelity (like judgments of coherence) are incumbent on the one who is doing the judging” (Miller, 2005, p. 95). People examine values not only in the stories of individuals, but also in public narratives, or narratives of institutions or social formations (Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Indeed, the narratives of an organization can be used to further understand the values of the organization.

Research Questions

With this study, I hope to understand how FamilyLife, a Christian organization, constructs marriage as an organization and characterizes the value of communication for maintaining a satisfying marriage within its online and conference discourse. According to its website (www.familylife.com), FamilyLife is “committed to helping people know and apply the biblical blueprints for maintaining a God-honoring marriage and raising children to become responsible adults.” FamilyLife believes the family is the backbone of the Christian church and of society as a whole, and they strive to “uphold, strengthen, and continue to build upon the biblical institutions of marriage and family” (*Family Manifesto*, www.familylife.com).

FamilyLife teaches that God created man and woman with equal worth, but differing roles and responsibilities in marriage: the husband as the head of the family and the wife as the husband's helper. The husband is taught not to dominate his wife, but rather to love, protect, and help provide for her physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Meanwhile, the wife is taught that she is of equal value with her husband before God. She should not just passively defer to the dominance of her husband, but she should instead willingly and intelligently affirm, respect, and submit to her husband as the leader in the relationship (*Family Manifesto*, www.familylife.com).

Marriage education is one of FamilyLife's primary goals. FamilyLife sponsors weekend-long marriage conferences, hosts radio talk shows, and posts articles and blogs about marriage and family issues from a biblical perspective. FamilyLife believes that "the education of a married couple does not end after the wedding ceremony is over, but continues through life" (*Family Manifesto*, www.familylife.com). They are committed to providing the "teaching and training necessary to equip married couples to live a lifetime together as one" (*Family Manifesto*, www.familylife.com).

Given (a) the importance of quality communication behaviors for sustaining or weakening marital relationships and (b) the effectiveness of marriage education programs for improving communication skills that enhance marital satisfaction, and considering that (c) people make good decisions based on the coherence and fidelity of good stories, I posit the following research questions:

RQ1: How does FamilyLife story marriage?

RQ2: What communicative behaviors and skills are emphasized in and shaped by FamilyLife's narrative of marriage?

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

As we stepped off the airplane and into the tiny airport of Brownsville, Texas, we were filled with energy, excitement and intrigue to get the weekend started. Fred and I have been married 5 years, after a 5-year courtship, and this was a very special weekend for us. This was the first weekend that we had been together, away, alone, since our little boy was born 15 months ago. Wesley is a treasure to be around, but we both feel that it is vital to invest some time in our marriage by making time for just the two of us. I can see why it would be difficult for some couples to make such a commitment. Between finding childcare for Wesley for 3 days, paying for the plane ticket, hotel, conference, and all the expenses for a weekend away, this weekend was going to cost us about \$1000, but like I said, we saw this as an investment.

Fred and I believe it is so important to take weekends like these, where you get away and do nothing but spend time together, learning tips and tricks to keep your marriage healthy and vibrant. We love listening to the stories of people who have been married, staying steadfast through the trials and tribulations that come with the struggles of marriages, and are willing to let other people see that they are not perfect. That is something that is important for couples to hear. So often, when you grow up in the church like Fred and I did, the struggles aren't addressed, and all you see are seemingly perfectly happy couples. You do not necessarily know to whom to turn if and when you have troubles in your marriage, because people don't like to air their dirty laundry. This particular retreat – FamilyLife's Weekend to Remember Conference – gives the attendees

real people to relate to, with real stories of success in marriage. That gives so many people hope.

I consider myself very blessed to have a husband who is so receptive to doing retreats like this one with me. We have both experienced the pain of divorce firsthand through each of our parents' divorces, and we know that couples whose parents have divorced are more likely to divorce themselves. When we decided to get married, we made the commitment that once married, we didn't believe divorce was an option to even consider. We knew that we would face struggles; conflicts are pervasive in all relationships. We also knew that people didn't go into marriage thinking they would someday divorce; they just gradually grow apart. For Fred's parents, they grew apart over 25 years of marriage. As we have learned in our studies, couples are constantly growing apart or together; we choose to grow together.

To best answer my research questions, I conducted a narrative analysis that examines aspects of narrative fidelity (Fisher, 1987) within the FamilyLife program. According to Sparkes & Smith (2008), narrativity exists along three interconnected dimensions: personal narratives, public narratives, and metanarratives. My analysis considers my own stories of experience (personal narratives), stories published by FamilyLife (public narratives), and master societal narratives (metanarratives) championed or revised within these collective stories. Specifically, as detailed within this chapter, I analyzed stories collected from participant observation and Web-based content.

Participant Observation

In developing my personal narrative, I attended and fully participated in a Weekend to Remember Conference on October 15-17, 2010. The Weekend to Remember

Conference is one of FamilyLife's primary modes for marriage education and enrichment. According to its website, this conference is "not a large counseling session... rather you will receive marriage changing principles that you can take home and apply to your daily lives that will strengthen your marriage" (FamilyLife.com). As a complete participant in the Weekend to Remember Conference, I became a fully functioning member of the scene, but I was not be known by others to be acting as a researcher (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In my role as a complete participant, I was an ethnographer. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), ethnography involves "a holistic description of cultural membership [and]... tries to describe all (or at least most) relevant aspects of a culture's material existence and meaning systems" (p. 16).

In my role as an ethnographer, I was able to further understand the values that shape FamilyLife while collecting thick, rich description of the organization's definition of marriage, view of roles within marriage, and narratives of the hosts' experiences within their own marriages as described through a marriage education lens. The Weekend to Remember Conference offered a holistic background of the organization as I began my narrative analysis of the Marriage Memos.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each week, FamilyLife publishes a Marriage Memo. These articles are featured on its website (www.familylife.com/marriagememo) and distributed via listserv. In general, each Memo focuses on a specific topic in a problem-solution format. As of September 8, 2010, FamilyLife had archived 135 articles (276 pages) on the website. After a cursory review of these Memos' titles and content, I included 85 articles (179 pages) in my analysis. I filtered the articles by relevance to marriage and communication.

Since this study is qualitative in nature, and because I did not produce data that “can be subjected to statistical procedures that allow generalization to a population,” I was able to limit my sample to a purposeful sample (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 122). The rationale for this type of sampling is that “sites or cases are chosen because there may be good reason to believe that what goes on there is critical to understanding some process or concept” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 128). I had no reason to code and analyze articles that did not relate to, or only tangentially related to, marriage and marital communication. For example, articles that were not related to marriage, such as *My Cure for Easter Apathy*, *Our Most Meaningful Christmas Gift*, and *Christmas Films to Enjoy with Your Family*, were not included. I also excluded articles that focused on pre-marriage or single relationships, such as *Combating Cohabitation with a Free Wedding* and *Single Life – Those Who Say ‘No’ to Marriage*. Furthermore, I decided to exclude reader response compilations, such as *Readers Respond: Ideas for Vacations* and *Readers Respond: What You Wish You’d Known before Marriage*. Excluding these Memos from my research enabled me to focus specifically on the values and communication behaviors highlighted within the marriage relationship.

Once I purposefully selected articles of relevance, I first examined each article separately (without referring to the other articles) for overt and covert values, questions of relevance, and questions of consequences contained within (see Miller, 2005). Then, I conducted a thematic analysis from the values I identified. To do so, I moved back and forth among the articles to look for commonalities, differences, and emergent themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Unlike grounded theory, which proposes a similar method of constant comparison but expects the researcher to approach the text with no

preconceptions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Riessman (2008) differentiates thematic narrative analysis from grounded theory in four ways. First, prior theory typically guides the inquiry of narrative scholars. Second, while grounded theorists may code line by line or incident by incident, narrative scholars attempt to preserve each story's sequence for interpretive purposes. Third, narrative scholars attend to the time and place of narration in addition to the narrative content. Finally, narrative scholars generally focus on case-centered analysis rather than theorizing across multiple cases.

I identified communication skills, communication behaviors, and marital values throughout the Marriage Memos. Coding continued until I collapsed the various codes into categories – or themes – that best described the patterns and contradictions I saw in the data. My analysis of the 85 Marriage Memos generated 190 codes, which I then collapsed into 12 categories. Ultimately, I interpreted the results from my emergent categories for a better understanding of the communication skills emphasized, promoted, and valued by the FamilyLife program in relation to the organization's characterizations of marriage. Next, in Chapters IV and V, I discuss in detail the seven categories that comprise marital values and then the five categories that comprise communication values. A coding scheme and extended examples from the Memos accompany both discussions.

Chapter IV

RESULTS – MARRIAGE

The first research question asked how FamilyLife stories marriage. In this chapter, I examine the marital values espoused by FamilyLife to understand how the organization stories marriage through its definition of marriage, prescribed roles of husband and wife in a marriage relationship, and various characterizations of a healthy marriage. The writers of the Marriage Memos share their own personal stories, as well as examples of people they have encountered, in an effort to teach and equip couples to live a lifetime together as one. Notably, the Marriage Memos contain several overarching themes. FamilyLife is a Christian organization, and the religiosity of the writers is overt. Two primary ideals serve as metanarratives: a) a marriage is defined as a covenant between one man and one woman, and b) upholding Christian values, such as maintaining a relationship with God, is imperative for achieving the highest level of happiness in a marriage relationship.

As mentioned in Chapter III and shown in Table 2, I collapsed 190 emergent codes into 12 categories, seven of which comprise marital values: *blueprint for marriage*, *faith*, *commitment*, *family*, *investment*, *selflessness*, and *companionship*. None of these themes, however, is mutually exclusive. Examples for *commitment*, for example, may also be categorized under *selflessness*, as illustrated by *The Amazing Story of John and Donna Bishop*, a married couple who, after 24 years of marriage, had to basically start over when a case of aseptic meningitis wiped away all of John's memory:

And so begins one of the more amazing stories I've ever heard. . .For John, it's the story of a man who has had the ultimate second chance – the opportunity to start everything all over. “All I remember is from 1995 to this day,” John says in the interview. "I remember nothing before that. Everything that happened in my life beforehand is what I've been told. When I woke up from meningitis, I did not know her. I did not know me, my name. I didn't know anything.” And for Donna, it's the story of a wife who basically lost her first husband, and had to decide what to do with this grown man who, at first, had to be cared for and taught as though he were an infant. She kept thinking John's memory would return, but it never did. She had to teach him how to eat again, starting with baby food. It took two years for him to walk well. He learned to speak by reading lips and matching the words he heard with the way a person's mouth moved.

In this example, Donna exemplifies an unselfish attitude while maintaining her unfaltering commitment to her marriage, just as the traditional wedding vows depict, for better, for worse, in sickness and in health. Exemplars of the following seven themes and their corresponding subcategories offer similar glimmers into the values that shape FamilyLife's story of marriage.

Table 2: Coding Scheme for Marriage Values

Primary Theme	Subcategory
Blueprint for Marriage	Worldly definition of marriage FamilyLife's definition of marriage Purpose of marriage
Faith	Relationship with God Prayer Scripture
Commitment	Devotion to spouse Dedication to marriage Faithfulness
Family	Spousal relationship Children Extended family
Investment	Weekend to Remember Conference Intervention
Selflessness	Service-oriented Self-sacrifice Futility of 50/50 plan
Companionship	Friendship Intimacy

Blueprint for Marriage

The Marriage Memos are composed by writers who share a common blueprint for marriage. As described in the following excerpt from *God's Purposes for Marriage*, married people need to compare their expectations and purposes for marriage before they enter the marriage covenant.

While in Southern California on a business trip, I stopped for a red light early one morning. Waiting at the intersection, I noticed a construction crew already busy renovating an old restaurant. Like ants, the carpenters and other workers were scrambling through the building, and almost every one of them possessed the same thing: blueprints. I saw blueprints carried under arms, rolled out on window ledges, and pointed at excitedly.

The light turned green and I sped away, but the scene lingered in my memory, reminding me of a simple truth: You don't build or renovate a structure without blueprints. Or if you do, how will that building turn out?

Unfortunately, too many couples have not compared notes on their blueprints for marriage. Like those construction workers, every husband and every wife has a set of prints, but I've seen too many relationships where his and hers don't match—their expectations and purposes differ. If you think this might be true in your marriage, how do you get on the same page in your relationship and build your "house" from identical plans?

As demonstrated, one should enter a marriage relationship with a master plan in place and a clear expectation of the goals and outcomes. The blueprint that FamilyLife provides for marriages is based on a foundation of various definitions of marriage, including the worldly (i.e., secular) view of marriage, FamilyLife's definition of marriage, and the purpose of marriage. First, the Marriage Memos explain how the worldly view of marriage is insufficient and inadequate to sustaining a marriage.

Worldly Definition of Marriage

According to the Marriage Memos, society's definition of marriage does not exemplify a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman. The articles reference the climbing divorce rate, even among Christians, the proposals of gay and lesbian marriages in legislation, and the growing trend of cohabitation instead of marriage. If marriage is "simply an institution that has the capacity to increase the pleasure of the adults who enter into it," as some in secular society define it, then it is naturally destined for failure (*Is There Hope for American Marriage?*). FamilyLife believes that many people enter into a marriage relationship without comparing blueprints and with the wrong motives or, having seen the prevalence and impact of divorce, decide not to marry in the first place.

Is Marriage Just a Piece of Paper? explains:

Bonnie Eslinger wrote that marriage is not necessary to demonstrate the love and commitment she feels for her partner, Jeff. "I am a 42-year-old woman who has lived life mostly on my own terms. I have never sought a husband and have still experienced intense, affirming love." She went on to say that Jeff had proposed to her, but she wanted to remain single. She listed a number of the common arguments for her position: We are committed to spending our future together, pursuing our dreams and facing life's challenges in partnership. Yet I do not need a piece of paper from the state to strengthen my commitment to Jeff. I do not believe in a religion that says romantic, committed love is moral only if couples pledge joint allegiance to God. I don't need a white dress to feel pretty, and I have no desire to pretend I'm virginal. I don't need to have Jeff propose to me as if he's chosen me. I don't need a ring as a daily reminder to myself or others that I am

loved. And I don't need Jeff to say publicly that he loves me, because he says it privately, not just in words but in daily actions. I am Jeff's partner, his friend and his lover, and he is mine. The terms "husband" and "wife" wouldn't even begin to describe our relationship.

Later in the same article, the author describes people's fear of marriage:

"Marriage has become a negative term in this culture and society. We no longer look at marriage with anticipation, but with fear. Fear drives so many people in this country. People are scared that if they get married then there is the possibility of getting divorced." The Marriage Memos are designed to help people grow, strengthen, or repair married relationships; they go on to say that while the act of marriage for many will not guarantee a lifelong relationship, although it was designed to be one, the only reason it is not is because we have made it that way. *As Is Marriage Just a Piece of Paper?* explains, "We too often look for any easy way out. If we feel unhappy, then just leave. If you feel unfulfilled, then leave. If your husband makes you mad, you can just leave." This last statement shows the attitude that people have as they enter into marriage with the world's perception of marriage. These negative examples are provided to illustrate the difference between the world's view of marriage and FamilyLife's view of marriage.

FamilyLife's Definition of Marriage

FamilyLife holds differing ideals about the value of marriage, the importance of God in the center of the marriage relationship, and the roles of husband and wife in a marriage. In the article, *Marriage Is Now a Central Question for Our Civilization*, Dennis Rainey, the founder of FamilyLife, defines marriage as follows:

We believe that marriage is a central gift of God to His human creatures. It is God's gift for the flourishing of his human creatures. The conjugal union of one man and one woman is essential. It points beyond itself, but it can never be reduced smaller than itself. It is not a human invention; it's not just a sociological adaptation; it's not just the process of some kind of cultural evolution. . .No, marriage as an institution is given to us by our Creator. It is a demonstration of God's fatherly love for His human creatures. It is not a prison of patriarchy, it is a gift wherein we find human joy and health and human flourishing.

As demonstrated, marriage was designed by God and is a vital component in society as a whole. It is seen as important not only for each individual couple, but for all of the relationships built around the family, of which marriage is the central relationship. In this definition, a covenant marriage exists between one man and one woman; the man is the leader and the woman is the helper. This relationship between husband and wife can be further understood through the following story. In *Dancing with the Stars, Not Exactly*, a couple receives professional dance lessons from their adult children for Christmas. The wife reflects on the parallels between dancing and marriage:

For example, in dancing the man has to learn to lead and the woman has to learn to follow his lead. (Emphasis on the word learn for both partners.) I must admit that I have realized I am not naturally gifted in following! I went into these lessons thinking it would be easy for me. It was my husband who needed the instruction, not me. Wrong. As I understood that I was not a good follower in dancing, I left the lessons several times pondering how to be a better follower in our relationship. . .The woman has to pay close attention to the man's movements

so she knows to follow when he is changing directions; otherwise she'll get her toes stepped on. It's called maintaining connection. Even when he makes a misstep, a good follower will go along with the misstep knowing he will correct it on the next step or two. If she does this no one knows a mistake was made. Our instructor even had the women close their eyes and practice feeling the tension changes in his hand on her back and his other hand holding hers. The application for marriage was obvious: Keeping a close connection takes focus.

This story offers a great representation of the role of husband as leader and wife as helper in a marriage relationship. This story also demonstrates that although the husband is called to lead, he is not superior over his wife. The roles are clearly defined, and neither spouse is able to perform at his/her best without the support of the other. In other words, a woman is not inferior to her husband, but instead is simply called to fulfill a different, yet equally important role. The Marriage Memos often refer to scripture to define the roles. In *Who Does the Housework (Part 1)*, for example, the scripture is presented within the narrative:

The Bible does provide some general guidance in its passages about the roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives. Husbands, for example, are called to be “head of the wife, as Christ also is head of the church” and to “love your wives just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:23, 25). They are to manage their households well (1 Timothy 3:4) and provide for their families (1 Timothy 5:8). Responsibilities for wives include being “subject to their husbands, as to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22), and being “workers at home” (Titus 2:3-5), and maintaining a proper focus on the needs of her household

(Proverbs 31:27). Within those spheres of responsibility, however, is a lot of room for flexibility. Sometimes I wonder if those who set hard-nosed rules about what represents “men’s work” and “women’s work” are influenced by habit and by cultural tradition more than they are by honest application of scriptural principles.

I will address the cooperation in negotiating household tasks in the next chapter, but this explanation of roles in marriage provides an important framework for understanding much of the content and motive for the stories within the Marriage Memos.

Additionally, FamilyLife holds to the fact that we need to keep God at the center of the marriage relationship. To expand on the dance story from earlier, God is described as the teacher in the following excerpt:

Another marriage lesson is that my husband needs to learn from the master Teacher. It's not my job to try and teach him what I think he doesn't know yet. He doesn't respond as well to my suggestions as he does to the teacher's. I'm so prone to "help" him and to want to show him the right way to do the dance, and I've realized how true that is of me in daily life. When I do that in dancing and in life he feels it as criticism and mothering. Ouch.

Some Marriage Memos exemplify what happens when God is not at the center of the relationship. As I mentioned before, stories about faith, religion, and personal relationships with God highlight an overarching metanarrative throughout the Memos. FamilyLife holds true the absolute need for a personal relationship with God, and, without that established relationship, other relationships will fail, as seen in the following story:

Matt and Laurie both came from broken homes. Both went careening off into drugs, alcohol, and promiscuity early in their teens as their families were ripped apart. And, like far too many couples today, neither had any idea how to “do marriage.”

Early in their marriage, the fissures began to multiply. Matt quickly identified the things that he thought would make him complete. . . money, prestige, drugs, and alcohol. He set out on a no-holds-barred pursuit of these four idols, all the while destroying his marriage, his family, his life. In a desperate attempt to be noticed and valued, Laurie focused on losing weight. If she could only look more attractive, she thought, things would change.

They didn't. And there was no peace for Matt and Laurie. Life was spinning out of control—fast. After years of reckless behavior, empty promises, and failed attempts at rehab, Laurie threw Matt out of the house. He wasn't just an addict; he was a danger to her and their children.

Later in the story, the writer presupposes that when they let God into their relationship, they will begin to build the bridge to reconciliation, thereby demonstrating that one of the most important components in the blueprint for marriage is the inclusion of God in the relationship. By accepting the blueprint created by the “Master Architect,” the couple embraces God's purposes for marriage.

Purpose of Marriage

Throughout the Marriage Memos, three biblical purposes of marriage consistently emerge: a) mirror God's image by achieving oneness, b) mutually complete one another to experience companionship, and c) multiply a Godly legacy. In my Weekend to

Remember retreat with my husband, we were led through these purposes for an entire session. The speakers held to the fact that when you are clear of the purposes of marriage, you are more capable of fulfilling those purposes, which in turn yields a more satisfying relationship. Of these three purposes, the one theme that each speaker emphasized was the goal of experiencing oneness with your spouse. The following excerpt from *Defeating Selfishness in Your Marriage*, provides an excellent illustration of oneness:

A well-known story catches the pain of the human dilemma when it compares relating to each other to the predicament of two porcupines freezing in the winter cold. Shivering in the frigid air, the two porcupines move closer together to share body heat and warmth. But then their sharp spines and quills prick each other painfully and they move apart, victims once more of the bitter cold around them. Soon they feel they must come together once more, or freeze to death. But their quills cause too much pain and they have to part again. Many marriages are just like that. We can't stand the cold (isolation from each other), but we desperately need to learn how to live with the sharp barbs and quills that are part of coming together in oneness.

Isolation is the antonym of oneness, and the parable of the porcupines illustrates that although getting to the place where you can experience oneness with your spouse may be painful at times – as I will address further under *genuineness* in the next chapter – oneness itself is a worthy purpose of marriage.

All of the previous aspects together form a biblical blueprint for marriage, which is the paradigm that I used to understand the other values of marriage. FamilyLife's definition of marriage, roles within marriage, and purpose of marriage, as depicted within

the Marriage Memos, comprise the first theme that overtly or covertly intertwines with all the other themes, categories, and narratives.

Faith

The Marriage Memos exemplify the next theme, living a life of Christian faith, in both positive and negative ways. FamilyLife defines faith as a personal relationship with God, the importance of daily prayer, and reference to biblical scripture. I discuss each of these subcategories below.

Relationship with God

As discussed in FamilyLife's definition of marriage, God has a priority placement within the marriage. The Memo *Building a Spiritual Foundation for Your Marriage* emphasizes the act of growing spiritually:

Early in marriage, you and your spouse need to ask, "How are we going to grow spiritually?" Because God created marriage, it is not merely two people in a relationship, but three – a husband, a wife, and God. Failing to address this question can almost guarantee that your marriage will not achieve the intimacy and oneness that God designed. Three key ingredients of a dynamic Christian life have significance when applied to the oneness you are trying to achieve as a married couple. I'll state these in the form of questions: Are you and your spouse a part of the family of God? Are both of you allowing Christ to control your entire lives? Are both of you allowing the Holy Spirit to guide and empower your lives? Unless you answer yes to all three questions, you will lack the power to build your home with the oneness God intends.

This Memo describes FamilyLife's view of the importance of growing your relationship with God before you can wholeheartedly focus on the relationship with your spouse.

FamilyLife believes the relationship with God is above the relationship with the spouse. Indeed, in many stories, such as the one below from the same article, God must maintain a position of control in one's life in order to nourish other relationships.

During our first Christmas as newlyweds, we sat down separately and wrote "Title Deeds to Our Lives." Coming honestly before God, each of us listed our treasured dreams, plans, and possessions that we wanted to "sign over" to God. Then we folded our sheets and sealed them in an envelope addressed "To God Our Father." We put the letters in our safety deposit box with other important items.

Eighteen years later we retrieved that envelope and reviewed what we had deeded to the Lord. Among other things, Barbara had listed "to be settled and stable; children – at least one boy and one girl; and Dennis." Dennis had mentioned "security; a healthy, big family – several boys; and Barbara." We realized how over the years God had continuously weaned us from perishable, unimportant things and increasingly attached us to what really counts: people and His Word.

We also noted, with thanksgiving, how much more God had given us than we had given up for Him.

According to FamilyLife, other relationships will be complete when individuals put God as the priority relationship in their life and strengthen their personal relationship with Him. Without Him, an ingredient is missing in all other relationships.

Prayer

Another demonstration of faith is the act of prayer. Prayer depicts an intimate relationship with God. The Marriage Memos also emphasize the importance of praying with your spouse: “When you pray together, you multiply your joys, divide your sorrows, add to your experiences with God together, and help subtract your haunting past from your life.” Prayer can also take away the desire to get even and replace it with a willingness to resolve issues. In this excerpt, from *The Secret to a Lasting Marriage*, a couple describes their dedication to the act of praying together regularly:

Since early in our marriage, we have prayed together each night before we go to bed. But that night, I didn’t want to pray with her. In my conscience, however, Jesus Christ was asking me, Are you going to pray with her?

I don’t like her tonight, Lord, I replied.

I know you don’t, He said. But you’re the one who tells people that you pray with your wife all the time.

Slowly, the Lord turned me over, and I said, “Sweetheart, will you forgive me?”

And Barbara and I talked and prayed.

I thank God for that tradition of prayer He helped us build early in our marriage. I am not exaggerating when I say that Barbara and I might not still be married had it not been for daily prayer.

In another story, a man reflects on advice he received as a newlywed:

When I was still a newlywed in 1972, I asked my boss and mentor, Carl Wilson, for his single best piece of marital advice. He and his wife had been married 25

years and had four children. “Denny, that’s easy,” he said. “Pray daily together. Every night for 25 years we have prayed together as a couple.”

According to FamilyLife, prayer is a powerful deterrent against succumbing to the struggles in the daily life of relationships. Through prayer, individuals strengthen their relationship with God, and by praying with their spouse, they center their marriage around Him, while keeping open and honest communication flowing. I will discuss communication in detail in the next chapter.

Scripture

Of the 85 Marriage Memos I analyzed, scripture is referenced 101 times in 49 of the articles (57%). Some biblical scriptures were referenced but not transcribed, with the expectation that the reader was already familiar with them. For the most part, however, scriptures were included in the text of the story. I believe that making these a part of the narrative itself showed the value the storytellers place on scripture. With the prevalence of scriptures in the Marriage Memos, I chose to include just one example of the many that could have been presented:

I plowed through days of agony before finally falling to my knees before God in surrender. One definition of relinquishment is “giving up title, releasing possession or control and yielding power.” How could I do otherwise? I had been a Christian for 16 years. My body was not my own. I had been bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20), so it was no longer my will that counted but His (Luke 22:42). I confessed to God that I felt nothing for my husband, but that vows are not made to be broken. I would rather be unhappy the rest of my life than bring reproach to God’s name, embarrass my children, or break up my family or anyone

else's. As the Holy Spirit strengthened me, I heard the words in my heart that Jesus spoke to Peter over and over (John 21:15-17): "Do you love Me?"

FamilyLife describes scripture as the playbook for life, the instruction guide to relationships, and a necessary component to nourishing one's relationship with God.

Commitment

Commitment emerged as another theme comprising the marital values of FamilyLife. Three subcategories define commitment: devotion to spouse, dedication to marriage, and faithfulness. These categories demonstrate, each in a slightly different way, the importance of commitment, which FamilyLife deems vital to a biblical design for marriage.

Devotion to Spouse

Stories within the Marriage Memos depict a deep level of commitment, deeper than I would consider a typical devotion to one's spouse. They demonstrate to the reader that a marriage with unwavering devotion can survive tremendous obstacles. In the following example from *Astonished at Radical Obedience*, June refuses to give up on her marriage relationship, even though her husband hasn't spoken to her for three years.

If your spouse wouldn't talk to you for a day or two, you'd probably find it difficult. But what if your spouse refused to speak for three years? That was the situation June Sims faced after 34 years of marriage to her husband, Lamar.

Lamar turned his back on God and eventually wanted a divorce. June refused, and Lamar stopped talking to her. For the next three years they continued living in the same house, but they communicated only through notes left on the refrigerator.

June took the road of radical obedience, of following what she was convinced God wanted her to do. . .She lived out the words of 1 Peter 3:1-2, which tell us, “In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.”

June continued to wash Lamar’s clothes, cut the yard, and serve him in other ways to prevent herself from becoming bitter. . .She knew she had to please God and believed He wanted her to remain in the marriage. . .After the three years of silence, God honored June for her faith, and her relationship with Lamar was restored. They enjoyed several more years together before he died in 2007.

Through the years, June's faith has astonished and inspired many others, including her own children.

Although I believe this is type of radical devotion is an exception, and not the rule, this story might give readers a sense of hope for their own marriage. If June can remain devoted to her husband without any reciprocity of love, other situations might not seem as unbearable.

Dedication to Marriage

FamilyLife defines marriage as a lifelong covenant, and with the authors of the Marriage Memos sharing the same values, it seems obvious that one of the emergent themes would be dedication to marriage. I differentiate this subcategory from devotion to spouse because individuals must make concerted efforts to respect the institution of marriage. As aforementioned, society as a whole does not value the institution of marriage in the way that FamilyLife recommends. The concept that “divorce is not an

option” is overtly and covertly stated throughout the Marriage Memos. In one story, marriage is likened to a good job that you want to keep: “You have to work at it every day.” Articles include stories from couples who have been married more than 50 years and couples who have survived the transgressions of adultery, apathy, and anger. For the most part, these stories are success stories. When the noticeably few Memos do show a marriage ending in divorce, the narrative is very somber, as in the following:

I’ve always thought committed Christian couples understood the importance of staying married. . . Imagine my surprise when I heard that one of the couples from the Bible Study group was getting a divorce. Just like that, the wife walked out one day. Why? They argued, it was hard, she felt her needs weren’t being met, they grew apart. Most couples could pick a reason, dwell on it and conjure up enough reason to quit. Does the reason really matter? Not if they are committed, not if they understand the need to take their covenant seriously. This couple has two children and a legacy to think about as well. What would it do to their children if they just quit? What happened to persevering, working through the problems and the pain? They can’t give up just because it’s hard – they know what to do. God expects them to push through, honor their commitment, and allow the experience to make them more Christlike. My heart aches, I grieve...they quit, before the victory of the finish line.

In the above excerpt, the reality of divorce, even in the Christian home, is storied with disbelief, pain, and inappropriateness. Although divorce occurs at an alarming rate in our society, it represents the exception in the Marriage Memos. More often than not,

the stories are dedicated to staying married through “the good, the bad, and the ugly,” as the following story explains:

Elisha knows first-hand the dangers of weak commitment in marriage. After she and her husband were married nearly four years, they were considering divorce. They talked with their pastor, and he said they needed to throw out the words “separate” and “divorce.” “If you don't have those things as an option then you are forced to work things out. What an extraordinary thought. . .we actually have to work through our issues.”

Our country is a fast-food country. We want things easy and we want it now. No way do we want to do anything that requires effort. We go into marriage thinking that we will have the perfect little marriage and the perfect little family in the cookie-cutter house and we will never argue. Wrong! We need to know what we are actually agreeing to. We are agreeing to stay with our spouse when things are the worst they have ever been. When they make you angry and call you names and hurt your feelings. Marriage is not a continuous date. You now get to see the good, the bad, and the ugly.

While a couple will undoubtedly experience conflict and pain, FamilyLife depicts the journey as much easier when couples firmly believe that divorce is not an option. There will be hardship and it will not be easy, but a couple is likely to succeed in the lifelong covenant of marriage if they take divorce as an option off the table.

Faithfulness

Faithfulness is the final subcategory comprising the theme of commitment. An extension of fidelity, faithfulness encompasses more than refraining from extramarital

relationships. While fidelity can be defined as sexual faithfulness, faithfulness is an unwavering belief in and a consistent loyalty to one's spouse. The Marriage Memos strongly admonish adultery and detail the consequences of such actions. In the following excerpt, the author tries to understand the rationale behind sexual infidelity:

One article I read last week used the Tiger incident as the platform to ask, "Why do men cheat?" It didn't offer many answers, speaking vaguely about how men – and women – stray when they feel their needs for intimacy are not being met. I've seen other articles point to boredom, narcissism, and other causes for adultery. One blogger theorized that "public life leads some people to become desensitized to the consequences of their behavior." Of course, as a Christian my primary explanation would be that people commit adultery because they are sinners in need of a Savior.

One of the points made throughout the Marriage Memos that I found interesting is the belief that infidelity is not an excuse for divorce, although it is accepted as such in most of society. FamilyLife values commitment and forgiveness, and holds the truth that all of us are sinners and are in need of grace. I will explain the theme of forgiveness in the next chapter. Also interesting is the fact that faithfulness includes being faithful in your heart. One story, for example, examines the act of an emotional affair, which is also considered an infidelity.

Commitment encompasses devotion to one's spouse, dedication to marriage, and faithfulness in action and thought. By committing to the marital relationship, individuals embrace the attitude that "your spouse is not your enemy." With a committed married relationship, they are able to fulfill God's purposes for their marriage.

Family

Family is an ever-present marital value in the Marriage Memos. A family can consist of just the married couple itself or the couple and their children, as well as extended family. A family is formed and a family is joined when two people marry. The Marriage Memos describe the proper prioritization of relationships within the family.

Spousal Relationship

The spousal relationship is the most important in the family. After one's personal relationship with God, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the relationship that one has with his/her spouse should be nurtured above all others. Examples include investing in your relationship with your spouse, growing it through dedicated time together, and not letting other relationships, even within the family, take priority over the relationship with your spouse. I know that sometimes this can be difficult with other relationships demanding time and energy.

Children

When I had Wesley, I saw how easy it would be to let my life, our lives, become revolved around him. Without intentional time set aside for just the husband and the wife, that relationship can become stale, and grow toward isolation. The following example shows how a spousal relationship can become second to a parent-child relationship even in the seemingly innocent custom of co-sleeping:

This is what 3 a.m. looks like at the Costello house: On the second floor, Harrison, age 5, is splayed, sideways and snoring, across his parents' king-size, four-poster, having muscled his mother out completely and pushed his father, Paul, to the extreme edge of the bed. Sara is upstairs in her 3-year-old daughter

Carolina's bed. . . "I used to get hysterical and wonder, what is this new life of stumbling around in the middle of the night?" Mrs. Costello said. "Now it's just so oddly part of the routine. Paul and I wonder, will we ever sleep together again?"

The article goes on to explain the problems with allowing children to overtake the priority relationship in the family. During the Weekend to Remember Conference, we were reminded that we are to be one with our spouse, not with our children. In order to maintain a happy, healthy marriage, the spousal relationship must come before the relationship with the child(ren).

Extended Family

In addition to the spousal and parent-child relationships, one must also consider the extended family. According to one of the Marriage Memos, "you form a family and you join a family," an important dynamic to remember. FamilyLife notes that when you evaluate the influence your in-laws have had on the person your spouse has grown to be, for better or worse, you are able to know your spouse on a much deeper level.

Relationships with extended family fall beneath the priority relationship with the spouse. The Memos describe siding with one's parents over one's spouse as a negative action that leads away from oneness. But, in addition to keeping the spousal relationship first, the articles spend a lot of time expressing how to accept and embrace the differences that come with the varied backgrounds. The following excerpt shows the differences that couples bring to their relationships, often unbeknownst to each other until they are already married:

When I first began dating my husband, our differences did not seem very significant. I was attracted to his outgoing personality and self-confidence. He was attracted to my friendliness and spontaneity. We attended the same church and had several mutual friends. Even our families seemed quite similar. Our moms were full-time homemakers. Our dads were hard-working breadwinners. It took Rich some time to adjust to the fact that my family is very demonstrative. We hug at the door when you come into the house. We hug when we say good-bye. We hug when we make a new acquaintance.

This was quite a contrast to what I experienced when I visited Rich's family. I was welcomed, but no one reached out to give me a hug. I noticed that their conversations around the table were different from mine. They talked a lot about the latest news story, particularly the political climate and who was up for re-election. I remember how they would go on and on about what they would change about this or that, especially taxes. Meals around the table at my home were also a bit different. At our gatherings, we put out a huge spread. As everyone ate, the food was passed around constantly and you were often asked, "Would you like some more?"

This excerpt may seem like a trivial example of the possible differences in extended families, but it nonetheless demonstrates that in every family, formed or joined, there are differences. The value learned through these Marriage Memos is that family is important, and maintaining all the relationships within a family is vital to the maintenance of a marriage itself.

Investment

Time and time again, the act of investing in one's marriage is mentioned.

Investing in a marriage is defined through the Marriage Memos as contributing effort and energy to the relationship. This theme is most frequently described as investing in a relationship as routine maintenance, such as the Weekend to Remember Conference; however, it also refers to utilizing interventions when the relationship gets to a point where outside supports are needed.

Weekend to Remember Conference

The Weekend to Remember Conference is one of the most overtly mentioned activities throughout the Marriage Memos with 20 specifically mentioning the conference. Several of the articles are devoted completely to the impact these events have on our society, such as the following excerpt:

So many stories of God working to change lives. One man told me his wife gave him her wedding ring this past Christmas, asking him for a divorce. She asked for it back as the conference concluded. . . We talked with one couple, Tazwell and Bonita Thornton, who are true warriors as they work in Baltimore to help couples build strong marriages. They said they had taken 1,584 people through FamilyLife's Preparing for Marriage course in the last 15 years, as well as more than 5,000 folks through small groups using the HomeBuilders Couples Series®. We met another couple who said they were divorced with three children. He had just been released from prison after five years. . . By the end of the Weekend to Remember getaway they had decided to get remarried and join a HomeBuilders group.

This excerpt offers some of the stories from just that single weekend getaway, but these stories are evident in each and every Weekend to Remember Conference. Investing in your relationship by attending a Weekend to Remember Conference is not admitting that there is a problem in your marriage. Rather, the Marriage Memos and speakers at the conference note that most people who attend do so to enrich their already healthy relationships, as explained in *Building a Marriage on Biblical Blueprints*:

There is a misconception among some people that you don't need to attend a marriage conference unless your relationship is in trouble. The truth is that most couples who come to a Weekend to Remember® are just looking to make a strong marriage even stronger. Ana Olivarez of Edinburg, Texas, wrote: "My husband and I have been blessed with a wonderful marriage. In fact, we don't even know what it is to fight or argue. At first I was not interested. . .we really did not want to spend money we didn't really have on a retreat we did not need. . .However, this e-mail and my limited vocabulary cannot express what both my husband and I experienced. All I can say is Wow! As it turns out, this retreat was much more than about failed marriages; it was about God's gift to mankind. . .I am not getting paid to advertise here. I just want to share with everyone this wonderful experience."

My husband, Fred, and I had the opportunity to volunteer at the registration table at our second Weekend to Remember Conference, and as part of the thank you letter we received for volunteering, the coordinator included some statistics from our own Weekend to Remember retreat: 416 attended, and of those who submitted a survey, five couples were in the process of divorce but after this weekend are choosing to stay

together. Furthermore, 19 individuals decided for the first time to receive Christ as their Lord and Savior, 107 prayed to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and 128 others made decisions recommitting their lives and families to Christ. Just as the Weekend to Remember Conference has had an impact on hundreds of thousands of couples in the past, it has influenced my relationship with my husband, as well. I share our story in Chapter VI.

Intervention

Although the Weekend to Remember Conference is strongly recommended as an investment in every couple's marriage, the Marriage Memos address the fact that, at times, additional interventions may be necessary. When a couple experiences difficulties they are unable or unwilling to work through by themselves, it is important to find outside supports. These interventions can be pastors, friends (although it is advised against confiding in a person of the opposite sex without your spouse), or counselors. All of these supports should encourage individuals to keep their marriage covenant and point them away from divorce. As Dennis Rainey writes, "Find a pastor, a counselor, or another godly man in whom you can confide. Do it for the sake of your marriage and family. Step out of the shadows of isolation and into the healing from the One who gives 'every good and perfect gift' (James 1:17)." FamilyLife claims it is important for couples to invest in some form in their marriage relationship, and the organization therefore offers several opportunities to do so.

Selflessness

Selflessness is another one of the core values of a successful marriage. Selflessness includes three subcategories: service-oriented, self-sacrifice, and futility of

the 50/50 plan. The Marriage Memos consistently cast selfishness in a negative light as a characteristic that detracts from the ultimate goal of oneness. The following excerpt depicts selfishness:

I have a confession to make. I act like a spoiled baby when I'm sick. I whine and moan. I park myself in front of the television and expect my wife, Merry, to wait on me hand and foot. Never mind what plans she has for the evening – when I'm sick, her job is to take care of me. But what happens when the roles are reversed, and she's stuck in bed with nausea, or vertigo, or a sinus infection? I act like a spoiled baby. I whine and pout. How dare she get sick? Doesn't she realize the pressure she's placing on me? At some point during the evening, God convicts me of my selfishness, and I realize that I need to make a choice: Am I going to see Merry as my enemy? Or will I recognize again that God has given her to me as a gift . . .and stop moaning just because that gift has a fever and can't cook dinner?

Service-oriented

After realizing his natural selfish tendencies, the writer of the excerpt above focuses on how he should be service-oriented instead of selfish. Recall the story of John and Donna Bishop and her service-oriented outlook on her marriage. She believed it was her duty as a wife to serve her husband, and to a lesser extent the writer in the above article saw the need to serve his wife. Service orientation is not exclusive to the wife's role as a helper. Both partners in the marriage relationship should strive to serve their spouse in order to fulfill their responsibilities.

Self-sacrifice

In addition to simply serving one another, Marriage Memos suggest self-sacrifice is beneficial to maintaining or strengthening a marriage relationship. Just as before, self-sacrifice is not synonymous with the womanly role of biblical submission; instead, self-sacrifice is for both men and women. The example below shows the love that is expressed through self-sacrifice:

And when my pride protests, I'm going to remember the example of my father at age 90. He and Mom were sitting in their apartment on a warm summer day, living the still life of agedness. Out of the blue Mom said, "Oh, how I'd love to eat a Buster Bar." This specialty from Dairy Queen was Mom's favorite indulgence. Later, Dad, with gnarled, numb feet and a rickety walker said, "I'm going for a walk." Time passed. Mom wondered what was taking so long. But Dad came home, with a melting puddle of ice cream contained in a Buster Bar wrapper.

According to FamilyLife, although our personal pride sometime encourages us to embrace our own selfish, sometimes lazy, desires, self-sacrifice is going above and beyond for our spouse.

Futility of the 50/50 Plan

Also under the umbrella of selflessness is the ideal of the futility of the 50/50 plan. Marriage Memos define the 50/50 plan as the world's performance-based standard. This is a way of keeping score; if he does this, then I will do this. If she doesn't do this, then I'm not going to do this. This type of meeting each other halfway is the opposite of selflessness. These articles suggest that in the 50/50 plan neither partner will even win

because neither partner is perfect. Your spouse will never be able to live up to your requirements for them to be perfect, and neither will you. The excerpt below details why the 50/50 plan will not work:

On the surface, the 50/50 plan sounds reasonable – why shouldn't both spouses pledge to do their part? But in the end, it won't work, for a number of reasons: You can never meet all of your spouse's expectations. Inevitably you focus on your spouse's weaknesses and failures and lose sight of your own. It's impossible to know when your spouse has met you halfway.

An example of the 50/50 plan follows:

They were frazzled and frustrated. Each wanted to relax and let the other person take care of a cranky baby and a pile of carry-on items. . .As they walked down the ramp to the plane, the wife received a phone call. She wanted her husband to hold the baby while she talked, and he exploded. “I've been taking care of her all day long!” he complained (loudly). “You're always on the phone.” “You've hardly helped at all,” she replied. “And you're never on the phone yourself?” It went on from there, all the way down the ramp. I wondered how they treated each other behind closed doors if they acted like this in public.

In this story, the husband and wife are dealing with conflict as a result of the futility of the 50/50 plan. Marriage Memos recommend the adoption of the 100/100 plan, where each spouse contributes 100% effort, even if the other partner doesn't deserve it. Recall the earlier story about the wife who continued to cook and clean up after her husband even though he didn't speak to her for three years as an example of the 100/100 plan.

Companionship

Companionship is the final theme comprising FamilyLife's marriage values. I have broadly defined this term to include friendship and intimacy.

Friendship

Friendship is an important aspect in a marriage; on many occasions, a spouse is described as the best friend. Friendship is often the first description of your relationship, in the courtship process and into early marriage. Once married, the friendship must be maintained. Marriage Memos recommend doing so by participating in activities that you both like together, and investing time into your relationship. In the Marriage Memo, *The Latest Buzz on Marriage*, doing something as small as attending a baseball game with your spouse can be helpful: "A study from the University of Denver Center for Marital and Family Studies revealed that cities with new major league baseball teams saw significant declines in the divorce rate. One researcher mentioned 'the importance of fun and friendship in a healthy marriage. Going to baseball games is one way couples can have fun together and talk as friends.'" This example is just one of many illustrating the value of friendship within a marital relationship.

Intimacy

Another component of companionship is intimacy, or romance. Enough data on romance and intimacy in a marriage existed to conduct an entire study on this topic, but I have chosen to include it under the title of companionship, as I believe it is just one aspect of the companionship relationship. The Marriage Memos regularly encourage spouses to make time for regular date nights to reconnect with one another. For example:

Hubby and I have attempted to make most Friday nights our “date nights” from the time our children were toddlers. They have always been “at home” dates, for early on we found this was more relaxing for us and more enjoyable for our children.

Historically, a date night goes something like this: Friday afternoon I get a call from Hubby and he asks me what I’m in the mood to eat. To which I always reply, “I don’t care—you just pick something up!” The only hint I ever give him is “something nice” or “something simple.” That gives him an indication of whether to order take out from a nice restaurant or a fun restaurant, or whether to stop at the grocery and grab a few ready-made things. The joy for me: I don’t have to decide or make anything.

On the home front, the children always get to enjoy pizza and a movie, “all by their big selves” as my son used to say! I’ve always built it up as something really special for Mommy and Daddy – a night where we are going to stare into each others’ eyes, get all mushy, and say love words to each other. To which my toddlers used to giggle, my emerging teens used to declare, “Gross,” and my teens now. . .well, they just roll their eyes and work hard not to think about what the end of the evening might include. (And wrongly assume that at least it’s only one day a week!)

For Hubby and me it’s a treat to know that, even if things are a bit crazy during the week and we don’t enjoy enough quality long lasting relational time, there’s always Friday. Friday we take extra time for great conversation, great food, and great. . .well, never mind!

This excerpt is just one of many examples that demonstrate the importance of establishing and maintaining intimacy with your spouse through date nights, sexual intimacy, and connection. Your spouse is your friend, but the intimacy you share with him/her is exclusive to any other relationship.

Although not exhaustive, these seven themes and respective subcategories represent FamilyLife's definition of marriage and the marital values depicted within the Marriage Memos. In the next chapter, I identify the values specific to communication to understand the communication behaviors and skills that are emphasized in and shaped by FamilyLife's narrative of marriage.

Chapter V

RESULTS – COMMUNICATION

In Chapter IV, I detailed the marital values storied by FamilyLife within the Marriage Memos. In this chapter and in response to the second research question, I examine the communicative behaviors and skills emphasized in and shaped by FamilyLife’s narrative of marriage. Of the previously mentioned 190 emergent codes that I collapsed into 12 categories, five comprise communication values: listening, power of tongue, cooperation, genuineness, and conflict management. Table 3 illustrates each theme and its corresponding subcategories, which I detail throughout this chapter using excerpts from the Marriage Memos.

Table 3: Coding Scheme for Communication Values

Primary Theme	Subcategory
Listening	Focused attention Empathy
Power of Tongue	Building up Tearing down
Cooperation	Accommodation / Adaptability Teamwork
Genuineness	Openness Transparency Intimacy / Exclusivity
Conflict Management	Inevitability of conflict Forgiveness Reconciliation

Listening

Listening is a vital component in the communication process and one of the most thoroughly described communication behaviors in the Marriage Memos. Spouses should listen with focused attention, empathy, and compassion. Couples experience listening problems for a variety of reasons, some of which include the themes mentioned in the previous chapter, including selfishness. Articles such as *Are You Listening?* give examples of some listening problems that may not look like such on the first glance:

Case Study #1: You are watching television, and the score is tied late in a crucial game. . .or a terrorist bomb is about to explode on "24". . .or you're about to learn what profit the home renovators made on "Flip This House." Your spouse arrives home, walks in and starts talking about some financial concerns. A dark cloud of annoyance emerges from every pore of your skin, but somehow your spouse doesn't notice.

Case Study #2: Your wife returns home from work, and she is upset about a conflict she is facing with her boss. After a few minutes, you realize that the answer to her problem is obvious – and you'd love to reveal your wisdom if only she would stop talking.

Case Study #3: You are cooking your normal Saturday morning breakfast for your family – eggs, hash browns, toast, fruit. Your spouse walks in and begins making comments and suggestions: "Do you think you could put a little less onion in those hash browns?" . . ."Is there a way to make sure the toast is not cold when we sit down to eat?" . . .Finally you've had enough, and with raised voice you exclaim, "If you want it done your way, why don't you do the cooking yourself?"

Can you see the common thread that runs through each of these stories? In each Case Study, the subject has a listening problem. He's distracted, or too eager to offer advice. . .or too proud to discern the underlying reasons for the cooking suggestions.

This article demonstrates that listening, or the lack thereof, can be the root of numerous other problems and conflicts. Listening is not simply audibly hearing what your spouse is saying. It is heeding what s/he says and taking that into account when acting. In the following example, a husband hears, but doesn't listen:

When I was young and single and stupid, I didn't like making hotel reservations when I was leaving on a long road trip. Why reserve a specific hotel in a specific city, I reasoned, when I didn't know how far I would drive that day? At that time I was living in Southern California. Driving up to Oregon to visit my family usually took about 18 hours, and I tried to knock off as many of those hours as I could on the first day. When my eyes began drooping late at night, I would look for a hotel. Hey, it was part of the adventure!

And then along came Merry. As we prepared for our first long drive to Oregon, she suggested we make hotel arrangements. Unfortunately, I didn't listen.

When we began looking for a hotel room late that night, we discovered no vacancies along the freeway. Not until 3 a.m. did we finally find a room.

This example is a simple illustration of the often uncomfortable consequences that may result from not giving your spouse focused attention. As such, many Marriage Memos offer instruction on how to listen effectively. Each of these subcategories is expanded in detail below.

Focused Attention

According to FamilyLife, listening is one of the most passionate things an individual can do. The Marriage Memos offer numerous examples of giving focused attention to your spouse. Below is an excerpt of a story from a couple who gave focused attention priority in their relationship:

Recently my husband, Dennis, and I went away to do some planning for the year. As empty nesters it seemed odd to leave our now-quiet home to go find a place of quiet. We actually contemplated for a short time not going away, but we both knew from experience that the quiet of our home would be easily interrupted by the telephone, the television, the laundry, the kitchen, and the Christmas decorations that had not been put away. . . We stayed in a bed and breakfast that was nice but not as comfortable as home. But we did find what we needed by getting away – time together without distractions to think and talk. And it was delightful.

Focused energy can be setting aside time to talk, like in *Connecting with Your Spouse*, where the couple sets aside “chat time” each week. During this chat time, they do not succumb to any distractions, and they simply give each other their undivided attention. This concept is also defined by the practical suggestions of turning off the television while talking to one another and paying attention to what the other person is trying to say.

Empathy

While FamilyLife advocates focused attention as the first step in listening effectively, listening with empathy is another key component emphasized in the Marriage Memos. Listening through an empathetic ear means trying to understand your spouse’s

point of view without allowing your own prejudices to influence what you are hearing.

The following excerpt describes the biblical background for empathetic listening:

James 1:19 tells us, “everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” But as Dennis and Barbara Rainey say in their book, *Staying Close*, “Unfortunately, usually we are slow to listen, quick to speak, and even quicker to become angry. Most of us don't need hearing aids – we just need aid in hearing.”

The acts of being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger are not natural tendencies. FamilyLife notes we like to have our voices heard before and above all others and typically only like to listen to something that mirrors our own thoughts and ideals.

The Marriage Memos repeatedly exemplify conflicts that arise when a spouse is unwilling to lend an empathetic listening ear. Indeed, when a spouse isn't interested in truly understanding where their spouse is coming from, a gap exists in the effective listening process. An attempt at understanding is vital when it comes to empathy and listening. Without understanding, a couple has a difficult time coming together to achieve oneness, which is, as described throughout the Marriage Memos, one of the primary goals within a Christ-centered marriage.

Power of Tongue

Just as listening is vital to understanding one's spouse, speaking is a behavior that allows people to express their thoughts, feelings, hopes, and expectations to their spouse. Listening and speaking occupy two ends of a spectrum; however, without effectiveness in both areas, many problems can arise. The following excerpt demonstrates the biblical principle of the power of the tongue:

So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. James 3:5

According to FamilyLife and based on scripture, the tongue is an analogy for the spoken word, and as such, has unbridled power to build up or to tear down.

Building Up

Speaking words of encouragement, love, respect, and appreciation fall into the category of building up one's spouse. The Marriage Memos often exemplify ways to build up your spouse through words, such as a simple call to ask how their day is or a note to express appreciation for a small, mundane task. In *The Power of Words*, words are likened to seeds:

Once planted in your mate's life, your words will bring forth flowers or weeds, health or disease, healing or poison. You carry a great responsibility for their use. As Proverbs 18:21 warns: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." Your words have the power to contaminate a positive self-image or to heal the spreading malignancy of a negative one.

Building up one's spouse is something that can be done in everyday ways. Indeed, FamilyLife emphasizes that people need not be loud or overly dramatic when speaking positively to and about their spouse. One possibility for strengthening your mate's self-esteem is to speak his or her praises to another person, especially when your spouse is in earshot.

Tearing Down

The power of the tongue can be used in positive or negative ways, but it takes many more positive words to overcome one negative comment. In the following example, a husband has used his words in an extremely hurtful way:

We know of one husband, for example, who feels his wife needs to become more organized. She is people-oriented, known for her compassionate spirit, but she is not a natural housekeeper. In addition, she has her hands full taking care of their four children. The husband writes up lists of tasks for her to complete and calls her several times a day to check on her progress and also to add to her list. If she falls behind, he hits her with a barrage of withering criticism. He often loses his temper when she fails to complete her tasks. Worse, when they visit friends' homes, he asks, "Why can't you keep our place as clean as this?"

What do you think has happened to this woman's self-esteem over a decade of marriage? The person she loves most will not accept her for what she does best. She is loved by her friends, and could have a wonderful ministry helping others in need – if only her husband would set her free. His words of criticism and control have left deep wounds that may take years to heal.

Instead of using his words to encourage and uplift his wife, this man causes great pain with the power of his tongue. FamilyLife warns against this type of behavior, as it leads to unnecessary pain and isolation. In addition to the concepts of listening and speaking, the act of cooperation is imperative to maintaining a satisfying marriage.

Cooperation

The communicative skill of cooperation is honed through the negotiation of daily items. Cooperation can be subdivided into adaptability, accommodation, and teamwork. Many of the examples in this section show the act of cooperation, but it is important to note that in order to adapt to or accommodate a spouse's preferences, one must first communicate those preferences and negotiate a solution.

Accommodation / Adaptability

Accommodation is a skill that can be improved through practice. Many couples adapt without much effort or attention, but it is a missing skill in many unhappy relationships. Adaptation occurs in the beginning of a relationship when both spouses are learning the nuances of their new family. For example, in the following excerpt, a husband is encouraged to adapt to the customs of his extended family:

Then we began to spend more and more time with each other's families. I realized we had significant differences when Rich asked me, "Does your grandmother have to kiss me on the lips every time she sees me?" Thus began the adjustments that come when a Scandinavian boy falls in love with a girl from a Greek family. It took Rich some time to adjust to the fact that my family is very demonstrative. If you are greeted in the traditional Greek style, you will receive a kiss on each side of your face. And if you are a Greek, you will return the kiss in the same

way. It took some explaining to help Rich understand this – that this is what my grandmother was attempting. Finally I convinced him to just hold his face still.

Then she wouldn't get the corner of his mouth like she had been doing.

“Just get used to it,” I told him. “She's Greek.”

Adaptation means making a change to fit the new environment. This concept is an extension of accommodation, as accommodation is described as the willingness to adapt. Accommodating can be shown as a negotiation, as well. Couples accommodate each other's wishes, desires, and strengths in negotiating responsibilities within the relationship. In the following example, a wife describes how she and her husband determined household duties:

My husband and I divided up our domestic chores based on who was better at doing them. For example, typically women do the laundry, but when we got married, we found out he was better at it than I was so laundry became his chore. But he generally doesn't have the “sit still long enough” to fold the clothes, so I tackle that chore. I cook, but he cleans the kitchen afterwards. He loads the dishwasher, but I empty it (this is also helpful to keep dear husband from putting things in the “wrong” place). As the leader of our household, he sets the goals and vision for the family while I manage the budget to support it. We have a tandem approach at tackling chores focused on our strengths and tolerance levels.

We also divide chores based on consideration and love for each other. When I went back to work outside the home, it was increasingly difficult for me to come home after battling traffic, cook from scratch every night, and still find time to

exercise and relax. So my dear husband as a good and loving leader, decided a couple nights a week either he would cook or pick something up.

In this example, as in many others throughout the Marriage Memos, working together cooperatively to accommodate strengths and weaknesses is a communication behavior used in satisfying marriages.

Teamwork

In addition to working cooperatively to adapt and accommodate each spouse's needs, cooperation also alludes to teamwork. Indeed, FamilyLife frequently refers to the marriage relationship as a team. As a team, spouses work together on the conflicts that are inevitable in every marriage, and, as a team, they work through these conflicts on the same side. FamilyLife reiterates a motto throughout the Weekend to Remember conference and Marriage Memos: "my mate is not my enemy." The premise is that as you and your mate are on a team, whose goal is to win at marriage, and in order to do so, you must talk to each other about your game plan. FamilyLife likens this philosophy to sports: How difficult is it to play a winning football game if you don't know where the quarterback is going to throw the ball? According to FamilyLife, communication is vital in any team, especially in your marriage.

Genuineness

The ability to be genuine with your spouse is important to growing your relationship and deepening your intimacy with your spouse. Genuineness includes openness, transparency, and exclusive intimacy.

Openness

In order to maintain a satisfying relationship, FamilyLife believes that you need to have an open, honest relationship with your spouse, and there are many reasons to communicate openly with your spouse. Openness comes with a cost; when you are open with someone, you become vulnerable and must have a high level of trust. But, throughout the Marriage Memos, this type of communication behavior is encouraged. The idea is that without risk, you will not reap the reward. On the most basic level of openness, couples share with each other what they know and what they think. In the following example, a couple is openly communicating some of the traits they like about each other:

While we ate our dinner, we decided to take turns telling each other things we love about one another and continued doing so over the next few weeks until we came up with 40 each. Some were silly and some serious: I love the way John sometimes winks at me. He mentioned that he loves the way I jump on the riding mower and mow without being asked!

Being open to your spouse is about being real and sharing your thoughts and feelings. On a deeper level, you find transparency.

Transparency

Continuing down the spectrum of genuineness, beyond openness is transparency. While openness is depicted as sharing with each other, transparency is knowing each other at the core level. It is communicating not only what you want your spouse to know about how you think or feel, it is as if you are allowing him/her to see into your soul. According to FamilyLife, “transparent conversation where both of you risks revealing

your deepest thoughts, ideas, fears, hopes and dreams creates the strong foundation of a lasting marriage.” No secrets exist when a couple is transparent, as shown in the following excerpt:

I didn't think I would have to tell my husband. We changed churches for other reasons and, frankly, I was afraid to confess. Meanwhile our new church had a positive effect on both of us and our relationship was slowly improving. We spent more time together and our intimacy returned. Finally, when I felt comfortable and with the prompting of the Holy Spirit, we sat down together one evening and I confessed. I didn't want any secrets between us.

Although it was incredibly uncomfortable for this wife to disclose her emotional affair to her husband, this type of transparency is encouraged throughout the Marriage Memos. I believe that one of the reasons transparency and honesty are so important is the pain that can be caused from untruth. It is similar to the attestation recited in the courtroom: “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” Transparency is difficult for many of us to accomplish, as we each have sin in our lives, but it is important to achieving the deepest level of satisfaction within your marriage.

Intimacy / Exclusivity

Just as important as openness and transparency is within the marriage relationship, so is exclusivity to the marital relationship. Several stories depict how sharing one's deepest thoughts and feelings to someone outside the marriage can be detrimental to the growth of the marriage relationship itself. Marriage Memos, such as *My Emotional Affair* and *Just Tell Me What I Want to Hear*, advise against being transparent with someone of the opposite sex:

Feeling lonely and rejected, I confided my misery to a friend who had called about an upcoming ministry project. My friend was kind and understanding. Unfortunately, no one had ever told me to guard my conversations with the opposite sex. The friend was a man and a very good-looking one at that. We began talking more frequently. I thought the conversations were innocent, even though they now included discussions about the struggles in his marriage. Gradually, our phone relationship escalated to flirting, and his calls were the highlight of my week. Neither of us told our spouses.

The act of being intimate in conversation with someone of the opposite sex, especially about your husband or wife, can be the first step to an affair. As I mentioned earlier, Marriage Memos describe listening as one of the most intimate things you can do. This example shows the innocent beginnings of openness and transparency, while at the same time showing the seriousness of this type of behavior.

Warnings against openness and transparency also extend to include examples of mass mediated openness. Memos such as *Nobody's Happy about Jon and Kate* and *Moment of Truth*, further demonstrate the consequences of not abiding to exclusive intimacy:

As the show progressed, I found myself arguing mentally with Jon and Kate. When they spoke of their terrible communication, I thought, You won't talk to each other, but you'll talk to the camera and reveal your thoughts and feelings to millions of Americans? Sure, the contestants stand to gain a lot of money, and the networks even more, since the questions make for good television. But the questions make for horrible marriage and family relations. The only possible

purpose for asking a contestant if he keeps a spreadsheet of the number of women he's had relations with (yes, this really happened) is that it makes good television. This man's horrified girlfriend certainly didn't appreciate learning this truth at the same time as the millions of others who were watching them both suffer on national TV. The real truth is that nearly every question on the show should never be uttered outside the confines of the contestant's immediate family. When a trust is breached, a lie is told, or an indiscretion is committed, the person who committed it should seek to make it right with those who have been directly affected by the offense. No one else. Period.

The type of genuine, open, transparent communication encouraged within the marriage relationship is also strongly admonished outside of the marriage. FamilyLife describes this type of communication as one reserved exclusively for your spouse.

Conflict Management

Conflict management is a communication skill that can be improved with energy and effort, but avoiding or ignoring the items that cause conflict in your relationship is not recommended. Marriage Memos such as *My Mate Is Not My Enemy* and *The Secret to a Lasting Marriage* further elaborate some of the subcategories of conflict management.

Inevitability of Conflict

Conflict is inevitable in all relationships. The Marriage Memos rationalize that we are all selfish, sinners, and will hurt each other, thus resulting in conflict. Fortunately, FamilyLife strives to teach us how to overcome the obstacles that we face in relationships. The Marriage Memos illustrate differing types of conflicts, from trivial conflicts such as not booking a hotel room to dramatic conflicts where the husband and

wife explode at each other. These examples have been examined in the previous chapter, for conflict is embedded in the issues that arise from not fulfilling the other values within the marriage relationship. Since conflict will occur, the Marriage Memos address the importance of handling it, as shown in the following excerpt:

We were able to see each other differently. . . We were able to recommit our lives together to God. We were able to address a long-time unresolved, silent, stuffed conflict with the hope of continued work on forgiveness and growth in our marriage together. I learned that my mate is not my enemy.

The amount of time devoted to the presence of conflict in all relationships shines light on the fact that some couples, especially newlywed couples, are likely unaware that they will experience conflict. In the Weekend to Remember Conference, an entire session is devoted to “fighting fairly” and emphasizes the fact that learning how to deal with conflict is important so that when, not if, you experience conflict, you will know how to manage it.

Forgiveness

One of the important differentiations I noticed when thinking about the way that communication scholars depict conflict management and the way that FamilyLife depicts conflict management is the aspect of forgiveness. Asking for forgiveness and granting forgiveness are communication behaviors that are expressed repeatedly in the Marriage Memos. In the following example, the author demonstrates how to forgive:

What can you do today to bring grace into your husband’s life? Are there any words of encouragement that he needs to hear from you? Do you need to work on areas of ending bitterness and extending forgiveness? If you’re having trouble

giving grace and forgiveness to your husband, try making a list of all your own faults, and consider how God has forgiven you. Then learn to extend that same grace to your spouse. As you do, your marriage will become less focused on faults and more focused on love.

By focusing on the grace that you have received, and using that same amount of grace for the forgiveness of your spouse, this Marriage Memo teaches us how to forgive. I believe it is important to note that there is nothing, in the view of the Marriage Memos, that is unforgiveable: adultery, abuse, addiction, and apathy. Each of these behaviors can and should be forgiven, and in doing so, the relationship can grow to the next level, as demonstrated from the Marriage Memo, *The Freedom of Forgiveness*:

Without the cleansing power of forgiveness, at best marriage will be very hard duty. At worst it will be disaster. No matter how much two people try to love and please each other, they will fail. With failure comes hurt. And the only ultimate relief for hurt is the soothing salve of forgiveness. One of the keys to maintaining an open, intimate, and happy marriage is to ask for and grant forgiveness quickly.

And the ability to do that is tied to each individual's relationship with God.

Because we are "broken imperfect human beings, we will fail our spouses repeatedly. We will focus on flaws, cease to communicate, and offend each other without even trying." All of these human attributes demand a steady supply of forgiveness. According to FamilyLife, forgiveness is an important aspect of conflict management, as is reconciliation.

Reconciliation

Since conflict is inevitable and forgiveness should be granted graciously, reconciliation is FamilyLife's next step in conflict management. Reconciliation is, by definition, the end of a conflict and the renewal of the relationship. After the power of forgiveness, time is needed for couples to mend wounds and work together toward a stronger relationship. It is important to note that the Marriage Memos do not suggest that all feelings are mended and better once forgiveness is granted. Instead, they emphasize the fact that couples can begin to manage the hurt and pain that was caused and work together toward a common goal of oneness. Reconciliation is a theme emphasized repeatedly through the Marriage Memos, often as a result of a couple attending a Weekend to Remember Conference, as in the following example:

I cried and was very sad and depressed – I couldn't believe how bad our marriage actually was and started thinking, How did we stay together so long? The next couple of days were hard – very emotional. I found out some things I didn't want to know about my spouse. The honesty was brutal, but necessary. With God's grace I got through the pain, sadness, and disappointments and had to face the truth. By the time it was time to check out, I was able to forgive my husband for the past, accept him for the gift of God that he was, and start over. I feel like we have a clean slate and just got married all over again.

The Marriage Memos teach couples how to manage the inevitable difficulties of conflict through forgiveness and reconciliation. This task does not come easy to many, and it is not a quick fix, but through the “cleansing power of forgiveness” a relationship that once teetered on the struggles of sin can grow to be a strong marriage.

Although not exhaustive, the themes and categories presented in Chapter IV and Chapter V illustrate the communicative behaviors and skills emphasized in and shaped by FamilyLife's story of marriage. In the following chapter, I will further discuss these results, as well as the theoretical and practical implications of the study. Limitations and suggestions for future research are also examined.

Chapter VI

DISCUSSION

Fred and I attended our first Weekend to Remember Conference in May 2008 for my 25th birthday. At the time, we had been married three short years, and I was so excited to go. I will never forget the expressions and somber looks people gave us when we told them we were going to a marriage conference. I experienced firsthand the stigma that accompanies marriage conferences and marriage education programs. Fred's boss was one of the few who was bold enough to express her concerns, as he put "Marriage Conference" on his request-for-leave form. People assumed we were having trouble. Much to the contrary, we were gearing up for the next stage in our relationship. We knew that as we began to grow our family and have children, we would need a new set of tools to combat the new conflicts that we would experience. And, boy, am I glad we went!

The next month we found out we were pregnant, with twins! Unfortunately, I had complications in early pregnancy, and we lost one, then the other to miscarriage. My OB/GYN reiterated what we had learned just a few months earlier: couples will inevitably experience difficulties, and they will either grow closer together, or farther apart. We decided we were going to lean on each other through this difficult time, and our relationship grew stronger than we ever knew it could. Fortunately, we were able to get pregnant again and have our beautiful little boy, Wesley. Our relationship has grown tremendously since then, but we know that we have a lot still to learn.

The stigma that we seemed to experience among our friends and coworkers didn't exist at the conference. In fact, the first speaker even addressed the fact that most people

who attend these conferences are not the ones struggling in their relationships, but also acknowledged that some people came to the conference as a last-ditch effort to salvage a relationship on the rocks. One of FamilyLife's goals is to teach and equip married couples to live a lifetime together as one. Divorce is not taught as an option, no matter the reason; instead, they believe in forgiveness and reconciliation, and they teach couples to practically apply the things they hear over the weekend.

Much of what we heard Friday evening was about communication. In fact, two of the ten sessions that weekend were completely devoted to communication, while communication skills and behaviors were addressed throughout the whole weekend. The second session of the evening was entitled "Can We Talk" and addressed the differing communication styles as well as some of the problems that accompany having partners with varying styles. I was amazed at the ability of the speakers to engage couples and have them actually discuss their communication styles, strengths and weaknesses. We answered questions, such as "The things my spouse does best as a communicator are..." and "What tips for listening well will you try to work on this weekend?" I'm not sure how a stranger can ask questions that then compel us to be open, honest and transparent in our discussion with our spouse. If I were to ask the same questions at home, I would be answered with a roll of the eyes. I suppose it's all just a part of the experience.

The weekend's sessions were filled with rich, descriptive stories and practical examples of how to enrich, maintain, or reconcile your relationship. It was awe-inspiring to see more than 400 people investing in their relationships. At the end of the conference, we all clutched our bright orange notebooks close to our bodies, as if to not let our secrets get too far away from us, held hands with our spouses, and seemed to smile just a

little brighter. We are equipped to survive all the twists and turns, ups and downs of our relationships, and we walked away with a few new stories of people who have been there and made it! I know that Fred and I will refer to our Weekend to Remember notes as we encounter our next struggles in life. We know how easy it is to succumb to our society's acceptance of separation, as a couple in our small group bible study has just succumbed to the thralls of divorce after less than 5 years of marriage. Perhaps with the tools we have at our fingertips, we can not only continue to strengthen our relationship, but use what we have learned to help others strengthen their relationships as well.

FamilyLife, like scholarly communication literature (Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Burleson & Denton, 1997; Fincham & Beach, 2010), values the use of communication skills training to encourage positive communication behaviors within the marriage relationship. Communication behaviors are important, but without communication skills training, these positive communication behaviors may not be used. I have examined the fidelity of FamilyLife's stories, because narrative fidelity translates to people using the behaviors they have learned (West & Turner, 2004; see Fisher, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1989).

Narrative Fidelity

The primary goals of this thesis are to understand how FamilyLife stories marriage and the communicative behaviors that are emphasized, using a narrative analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Riessman, 2008) of Marriage Memos. I examined the Marriage Memos by examining aspects of narrative fidelity through my personal narrative, public narratives, and metanarratives (Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Narrative fidelity asks questions of fact, relevance, consequences, consistency, and transcendence (Miller, 2005; see Fisher, 1987) and throughout this chapter I will discuss how each of

these questions are answered and conclude that the narratives of FamilyLife as seen through the Marriage Memos represent stories of strong narrative fidelity.

Questions of Fact

With the prevalence of marital values and communication values throughout each of the Marriage Memos, I divided the values embedded within the story into two separate chapters. Chapter IV discussed and gave examples of the marital values that emerged: *blueprint for marriage, faith, commitment, family, investment, selflessness, and companionship*. Chapter V laid out the emergent communicative values: *listening, power of tongue, cooperation, genuineness, and conflict management*. In differentiating these values, I was able to acknowledge the expanse and importance of religiosity in FamilyLife's story of marriage.

As mentioned in Chapter I, a number of communication behaviors have emerged consistently in communication literature, including understanding (Indvik & Fitzpatrick, 1982; Long et al., 1999), openness (Eggerichs, 2004; Yelsma & Marrow, 2003), empathy (Long et al., 1999), adaptability (deTurck & Miller, 1986; Gottman & Notarius, 2000), and the willingness of both partners to work cooperatively through problems (Tallman & Hsiao, 2004; Weigel, 2003). FamilyLife values many of these communication behaviors, as demonstrated by *in vivo* codes such as empathy, cooperation, openness, and conflict management. Before beginning this study, I expected an undertone of faith throughout the stories, but I didn't fully understand the depth a Christian background may have on the marital values espoused. FamilyLife's marital values filtered into its highlighted communication values because they were at the core of everything. For instance, within the communication value of conflict management, the Marriage Memos offered several

practical implementation strategies for forgiveness not included, at least not to this extent, in secular studies on conflict management (e.g., Bradbury et al., 2000; Burleson & Denton, 1997; Cole & Cole, 1999; DeMaria, 2005). While stories of cooperation within the Marriage Memos included many of the same aspects of cooperation from communication literature (Tallman & Hsiao, 2004; Weigel, 2003), the reflection of spirituality added an additional component of scriptural guidelines of roles within the home and the expectation to follow the 100/100 rule.

Questions of Relevance

When examining the aspect of relevance, I examined the emergent values and the stories told within the Marriage Memos and concluded strong fidelity exists between the values and the stories. FamilyLife deems essential many of the same communication behaviors identified elsewhere for maintaining a satisfying marriage; however, they reflect religiosity in their practical applications. As such, the Marriage Memos contained stories that depict both the marital values and communication values espoused by FamilyLife. Most of these narratives offered positive examples, but an effectively targeted number of stories depicted the opposite of the espoused value with negative results and consequences. For example, FamilyLife's value of commitment encompasses the idea that divorce is not an option. One particular story of a divorce that had occurred was told in a somber voice with preventative tips for readers. Similar cautionary tales represented FamilyLife's values and therefore rang true.

Questions of Consequence

The Marriage Memos consistently laid out consequences, often explicitly, for the readers; one article, in particular, was named *40 Consequences of Adultery*. These

consequences throughout represent both positive and negative outcomes (e.g., “a couple that prays together, stays together” or “without investing in your marriage, a couple naturally grows towards isolation”). FamilyLife also states consequences for implementing, or not implementing, the communication behaviors illustrated in the Marriage Memos; however, they don’t expect readers to figure out the practical ways to manage their relationships on their own. Instead, FamilyLife provides specific examples, and sometimes step-by-step instructions, for improving communication skills and implementing certain behaviors. For example, in the beginning of the Weekend to Remember Conference, a “how to guide” illustrates how to communicate effectively. The guide provides specific steps for listening well: a) give focused attention, b) listen with acceptance and understanding, c) ask clarifying questions, and d) focus on what is being said, not the way it is being said. In addition to such clear guidelines on how to listen effectively, conference speakers and Marriage Memo authors share stories of times when these techniques were effectively used and times when the techniques were ineffectively used – with stated consequences for each. With the fidelity of the stories within the realm of reasonable consequences, readers are then likely to make decisions based on good stories (Miller, 2005: see Fisher, 1985, 1987).

Questions of Consistency

In the area of consistency, I believe the Marriage Memos are generally valid, with some limitations. As mentioned in Chapter II, “judgments of fidelity (like judgments of coherence) are incumbent on the one who is doing the judging” (Miller, 2005); therefore, questions of consistency between the values illustrated in the narrative and the held values of the audience depends primarily on the values on the readers. The Marriage

Memos are delivered through a listserv, so the reader who receives these messages would generally subscribe to the same metanarrative of Christianity. If someone without the same religious beliefs read the articles, however, a question of fidelity would likely exist.

Some of the examples in the Marriage Memos are so dramatic (for instance, the wife who continued to care for her husband even though he wouldn't speak to her for three years) that even Christian readers may have a difficult time relating if they do not claim the same values as FamilyLife. As an ethnographer, I know that my own stories and perceptions are as equally valid as those of other Marriage Memo readers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002); for me, personally, the consistency of the stories rings true. Indeed, the personal narratives I offered at the beginning of Chapter III and this chapter reflect my own thoughts of the narrative fidelity of the Marriage Memos. Furthermore, while perusing the comments posted by readers at the end of each Marriage Memo, I found most readers validate this question of consistency as well.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Some limitations to the study should be considered when interpreting the findings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The goal of this study was to understand a single organization's definition of marriage and to understand how those values shape the communication behaviors and skills emphasized for maintaining a satisfying marriage. With more than 100 marriage curriculums (Dion, 2005), I examined only part of FamilyLife's curriculum. I believe that the size of the organization, the service area, and the number of people who utilize FamilyLife's tools and resources make my findings valuable, but limited to faith-based marriage education programs, in general, and this particular program, in particular.

Future research might examine the effectiveness of the communication skills that are taught by FamilyLife through its Weekend to Remember Conference, as noted by the participants' perceptions of marital satisfaction and communicative competence, desire, and efficacy. Additionally, future researchers could conduct a narrative analysis of a larger sample of marriage education programs to determine whether additional themes emerge, especially when combining the curriculum of faith-based organizations with those of secular organizations.

Conclusion

Scholarly research has consistently stated that marriage education programs are effective in giving couples the knowledge and skills needed to build and sustain a healthy marriage (DeMaria, 2005; Hawkins et al., 2004; Hawkins et al., 2008). The communicative behaviors emphasized in and shaped by the narrative of marriage storied by FamilyLife, a religious-based marriage education program, mirror many of the same behaviors identified by communication and relational scholars. Still, it is refreshing to see an organization committed to marriage education develop a curriculum of communication skills training around the Christian values of marriage. One of the most useful implications of this study is seeing how FamilyLife's framework for building its mission to teach and train mirrors the spiritual values it holds. The organization, through its Marriage Memos, communicates to readers the communication skills and behaviors FamilyLife finds valuable to maintaining a satisfying marriage, while reflecting the need to foremost uphold its own and others' spiritual values.

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