

Marital Expectations of Low-Income Married Hispanic Couples with Children: A Qualitative Study

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Background

The Marriage and Family Research Institute

The University of Central Florida Marriage and Family Research Institute (MFRI) was created in 2003 to facilitate the development of research and clinical initiatives to better support couples, marriages, and families. The Institute conducts original research and facilitates and supports scholarly activity of faculty and graduate students interested in marriage, family, and child issues. Additionally, the Institute provides outcome and process evaluation services for other research projects part of and independent of the Institute.

Marital Expectations

Marital expectations were defined as the anticipated assumptions that each partner brought to the relationship related to attributes, characteristics, beliefs, and behaviors, which were based on previous life experiences (e.g., family of origin, concept of ideal partner), and that could evolve over the span of the marriage (Juvva & Bhatti, 2006). Examples of these expectations include acceptance of each other, marital quality, libidinal satisfaction, emotional and financial security, social status, loyalty, and respect.

Purpose

To gain a deeper understanding of marital expectations of low-income, married Hispanic couples with children who are participating in MRE.

Methods

Participants

We recruited 11 low-income, Hispanic married couples with children through local agencies such as Orange County Health Department Women, Infants, and Children program, Central Florida Community Health center, and other differing sites within the greater Orlando area. These couples voluntarily participated in a larger study, *The Together Project*, related to studying the affect of marriage and relationship education on individual distress and marital satisfaction, the MFRI is conducting.

Marital Expectations Questionnaire: Research Questions

We administered the following four open-ended questions to couples at pre-assessment:

1. *What expectations do you have of a marriage partner?*
2. *Describe your perceptions of the marital expectations your parents had for each other.*
3. *Briefly describe the similarities and differences between your relationship/marriage and that of your parents.**
4. *How does meeting the expectations of your spouse promote happiness in your marriage?*

Data Analysis

We implemented the following methods to analyze the qualitative data:

- (a) *The use of content analysis to analyze the transcripts*
- (b) *Reading the data at least twice prior to coding*
- (c) *Open coding and in-vivo coding to identify initial codes*
- (d) *Condensing codes through researcher collaboration*
- (e) *Identifying emerging themes through condensed codes*
- (f) *Concluding analysis after reaching data saturation*

Trustworthiness and Verification

We used verification strategies to ensure trustworthiness of the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). We implemented the following verification strategies:

- (a) *Inter-Coder Agreement: helped ensure various perspectives on the major points being conveyed from the data*
- (b) *Verbatim Transcripts: allowed us to view the participants' answers exactly as they wrote them*
- (c) *Researcher Reflexivity: helped us reflect on potential biases and worldviews we possess that might have influenced how we interpreted participants' answers*
- (d) *Peer Debriefing: provided an opportunity for someone other than the researchers to review the results, and challenged any potential findings. In addition to these verification methods, we used a written interview format.*

Abstract

As a result of the unique stressors facing low-income couples (Dakin & Wampler, 2008), and the increased relationship distress resulting from the status of low-income (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010; Charles, Orthner, Jones, & Mancini, 2006), the federal government allocated millions of dollars through the Administration of Children and Families (ACF) to provide relationship resources aimed at improving the quality of relationships for low-income couples (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Many programs sought to evaluate the effectiveness of MRE on the couples participating because low-income couples have been identified as an understudied population (Hawkins et al., 2008). However, the role that marital expectations play with couples' satisfaction and success in MRE programs may be overlooked. Couples who share similar expectations about marriage are more likely to marry (Waller & McLanahan, 2005). Further, couples who intentionally decide to marry are linked to more positive marital outcomes (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Therefore, understanding the marital expectations of couples participating in MRE interventions could help explain the influence of expectations on couples' successful integration of MRE tools. Thus, we collected qualitative data via the Marital Expectations Questionnaire (MEQ; Ngazimbi, 2009) from 11 low-income, married Hispanic couples in order to gain a deeper understanding of their marital expectations. A focus on Hispanic couples is warranted because they represented 50% of the participants in the MRE program where this study was conducted, and Hispanic participants are actively participating in projects throughout the country (Daire et al., in press). This research will allow counselors and other helping professionals to understand and facilitate services for Hispanic couples effectively.

Demographics

Demographic	Mean (SD)	Range
Combined Monthly Income	\$1997.62 (\$1,066.83)	\$0-\$4,000
Number of Children Under 18 Living at Home	1.95 (1.04)	0-4
Number of Years Married	5.65 (6.39)	.5-23.16
Years of Education	13.68 (1.86)	10-18

Results

Themes & Codes

Theme 1: <i>Shared Values</i>	Theme 2: <i>It Takes Work To Make It Work</i>
Trust and Respect: "I expect support and compensation and that in hard times we can be together, and overcome every obstacle in our life. I expect trust and respect."	Open Communication: "Because I believe that's what keeps the flame and desire in the relationship. Maintains a nice communication."
Marriage is Forever: "Marriage is forever, and while divorce is not an expectation, it happens."	Work as a Team: "Work as a team. I want to work as a team to achieve all our goals and dreams."
Religion: "To go to church, have an education, overall life a good life."	Spend Time Together: "To Love each other, always be there for one another, communicate, spend time together have sex 3 times a week."
Traditional Gender Roles: "Dad brought home money, mom cooked and cleaned, and had everything ready for when dad came home."	Promote Satisfaction: "If either one of us ever meet an expectation it would promote a satisfaction of achievement and make us proud of one another."
Spirituality: "To help me walk and grow closer to God."	If [he/she] is Happy, I'm Happy; the Marriage is Good: "If my spouse is happy it is important to me as it will also make me happy. We will have a better relationship overall."
Together Through Thick and Thin: "To be together through thick and thin. Marriage is very serious and you must be there for each other."	
Time Together: "To have more than enough time for each other."	
Unconditional Love and Support: "Unconditional love, support, inspiration, romance, strength, connection, life partner, dedication, a fighter, passion."	

Discussion & Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain a more in-depth understanding of marital expectations of low-income married Hispanic couples with children. Our overarching research question was: *How does the sample population describe marital expectations?* We found that couples' expectations for marriage surrounded *shared values*, and then expectations that spouses would take specific action steps to *implementing those shared values*. We also found that couples' relationship satisfaction appeared tied to their perception of how much work spouses were doing to meet expectations in the relationship.

Implications

- (a) Couple distress could stem from a partner's perception that the other partner is not doing their part to do what it takes to make it work.
- (b) MRE Implication: Programmatically design MRE workshops of only Hispanic couples with understanding that they may share values, and presenting MRE from angle of 'it takes work to make it work'.
- (c) Couples Counseling Implication: Help couples identify shared values between identifying shared definition of the problem and shared goal (c.f. Integrative Model for Brief Couples Counseling)

Limitations

- (a) Years removed from country of origin is unknown
- (b) Subcultural variances in marital expectations among Hispanic culture
- (c) Variance in response length (i.e., some short, some long).

Future Direction

- (a) MRE program evaluations should include assessing expectations among participants to help understand the connection between expectations and relationship quality.
- (b) Couples counselors should consider expectations between couples as a means to prevent relationship distress. For example, counselors using the Brief Integrative Model for Couples Counseling (Long & Young, 2006) would work with couples to identify a shared statement of the problem, and then develop a shared goal to accomplish together.
- (c) Shared values and expectations could be incorporated into this brief approach to counseling as a means to bridge the presenting problem and the proposed goal.

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