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Marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood: The role of communication and personality

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MARITAL ADJUSTMENT ACROSS THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD: THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION AND PERSONALITY

BY

BRANDON M. LARSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Psychology

Department of Psychology
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December 1996
MARITAL ADJUSTMENT

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ABSTRACT
Past research on the transition to parenthood has consistently found that this life phase results in many changes in a couples' marital relationship, specifically declines in couples' marital adjustment. This study was designed to investigate the relationship between constructive communication, personality traits, and spouses' marital adjustment during the transition to parenthood.

Participants were 70 married couples expecting their first child. Self-report measures were administered to all participants during the third trimester of pregnancy, three months postpartum, and nine months postpartum.

Results showed that marital adjustment significantly declined during the transition to parenthood. Constructive communication consistently correlated significantly with marital adjustment but was not a good predictor of changes in marital adjustment. Husbands' neuroticism, conscientiousness, and agreeableness consistently correlated significantly with both husbands' and wives' marital adjustment, but only agreeableness was a consistent predictor of changes in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. No support was found for the hypothesis that constructive communication mediates the relationship between personality and marital adjustment.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If someone were to ask your parents what the most significant and meaningful experience of their lives has been, chances are your birth would be near the top of their lists. This probably would not come as any big surprise because it is quite common for parents to claim the birth of their child as one of the most important events of their lives. However, it is also likely that your birth may have caused some problem in any number of areas in their marital relationship.

Transition to Parenthood

Since the 1950's there has been a growing body of literature that has focused on the transition to parenthood. Researchers generally consider the time from the third trimester of pregnancy to approximately the second birthday of a couple's first child as the transition-to-parenthood phase.

Along with the joy and fulfillment the birth of a child brings to a couple, there can also be negative impacts on a marital relationship
MARITAL ADJUSTMENT

(Cowan & Cowan, 1988). The majority of research focusing on this transitional period has found that marital adjustment, along with many other aspects of the marital relationship, are affected by the birth of a couple's first child. As Feldman and Nash described, "One of the most dramatic transitions in the family life cycle, experienced by more than 80% of all adults, occurs between the stages of expectancy and parenthood" (1984, p. 62). In all, approximately 4,000,000 babies are born each year in the United States and over 1,000,000 of these babies are born to first-time parents (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1992). These first-time parents experience a state of change in their lives as well as increased responsibility and stress. In fact, in a ranking of 102 stressful life events, a couple's first child ranked as the sixth most stressful live event (Dohrenwend, Krasnoff, Askenasy, & Dohrenwend, 1978). The only events ranked as more stressful were the death of a child, the death of a spouse, serious physical illness, going to jail, and divorce (Dohrenwend, Krasnoff, Askenasy, & Dohrenwend, 1978).

The literature generally indicates that the birth of a child brings about changes in the individuals who are responsible for caring for that child; Hill (1949) went so far as to call this time of transition a "crisis" for couples. Other researchers have supported Hill's position (Dyer, 1963; LeMasters, 1957). LeMasters (1957) found that 83% of the couples he studied reported experiencing a severe crisis within the first year after the birth of their child. LeMasters (1957) based his
parenthood-as-a-crisis position on the following philosophy: "If the family is conceptualized as a small social system, would it not follow that the adding of a new member to the system could force a reorganization of the system as drastic (or nearly so) as does the removal of a member?" (p. 352). He continued, "If the above were correct, would it not follow that the arrival of the first child could be construed as a 'crisis' or critical event?" (p. 352).

Not all researchers have agreed with Hill and LeMasters; some have voiced opposition to calling the transition to parenthood a crisis, arguing that the transition to parenthood may indeed be a somewhat difficult period but is by no means difficult enough to be considered a crisis (Hobbs, 1965, 1968; Hobbs & Cole, 1976; Russell, 1974). Others, such as McHale and Huston, described the transition to parenthood by stating, "The entry of the newborn into the lives of husbands and wives is assumed to produce disequilibrium, the complications of which persist until parents make certain accommodations" (1985, p. 410). Whether or not the transition to parenthood is a crisis, it certainly does involve a "major role upheaval" for both individuals involved (Feldman & Nash, 1984, p. 61). Despite variability in definitions and semantics, there seems to be a general agreement and support throughout the transition-to-parthood research that with the arrival of a new child, a couple experiences significant change in their marital relationship (Belsky et al., 1983).
The reality of relationships is that all couples experience difficult times together, whether or not they have children. In fact, some research indicates that couples with children do not differ from those without children in the direction of change that occurs over a similar time period: they both experience negative changes (Cowan et al., 1985). However, couples do differ in the degree of change experienced. Thus, the changes that occur seem to be accelerated and magnified by the transition to parenthood.

Cowan et al. (1985) describe the changes, difficulties, and adjustments that couples experience during the transition to parenthood, stating, "It seems clear that men and women begin their journeys toward parenthood as if they were on separate trains heading down different tracks, hoping somehow to reach the same destination—the formation of their family" (p. 453).

Changes During the Transition to Parenthood

Transition-to-parenthood research has found a number of changes occurring during this life stage. Among the areas of change during the transition to parenthood that have received research attention are: the division of labor, leisure activities, affectional marital interactions, descriptions of relationship characteristics, sex roles within the home, stress, and marital adjustment which will be covered in a subsequent section.
Division of Labor

Division-of-labor research has emphatically shown that wives take on more of the household responsibilities after the birth of a couple's first child than do husbands (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Hoffman, 1978; Lang & Rovine, 1985; LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981). The work load at home for both husbands and wives tends to increase with the birth of a baby, but the reported increase in work load is considerably greater for wives. One mother compared the difference in expected work load versus the actual increase in work load to "watching a tornado on TV and having one actually blow the roof off your house" (Belsky & Kelly, 1994, p. 33). McHale and Huston (1985) reported that wives experience a change from being responsible for 67% of the household tasks before the baby's birth to being responsible for 79% of the household tasks after the birth of the baby (McHale & Huston, 1985). Belsky and Kelly (1994) reported that the new mother's workload typically increases by 20 percent across the transition to parenthood. Belsky and Kelly (1994) also reported that even for mothers who work full-time, the mother's contribution to taking care of the baby exceeds the husband's by almost 300 percent.

Belsky and Kelly (1994) speculated that the division of labor during the transition to parenthood is difficult for couples because wives measure their husbands' contributions against their own, leading for most wives to a dissatisfaction with her work load and that done
by her husband. However, the husband measures himself against the amount of work his own father did as he was growing up, and thus usually views himself positively. This leads to fathers having difficulties understanding their wives' dissatisfactions with their contributions, resulting in misunderstanding and frustration on the part of both spouses. This still remains a problem even though today's fathers typically contribute more to the child care than their own fathers did, yet it is still significantly less than that of their wives' contribution.

Leisure Activities

Couples' leisure activities also tend to be affected by the transition to parenthood. Research indicates there are significant declines from the third trimester of pregnancy to three-months postpartum in the frequency of joint leisure activities (Belsky et al., 1983; Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Belsky et al., 1985). Belsky and Kelly (1994) reported that couples in their sample experienced a decline of 40 percent in outings to movies, restaurants, and friends' homes in the first year following their child's birth. In fact, over half the couples in Belsky and Kelly's (1994) sample did not go out at all in the first six months unless a close relative stayed with the baby. Transition-to-parenthood couples do not tend to experience declines in the actual amount of time together; in fact, the proportion of joint activities that centers around household tasks increases. What decreases for these couples, is the proportion of the couples' time spent on personal
leisure time and involvement in recreational activities together (McHale & Huston, 1985).

**Affectional Marital Interactions**

The transition to parenthood can also cause changes in affectional marital interactions. Belsky, Spanier, and Rovine (1983) reported a significant decline in the expression of positive marital interactions when not including those focused upon baby-related events. This decline was found for both husbands and wives from the last trimester of pregnancy through nine-months postpartum. Ryder's (1973) longitudinal study found that new mothers, as compared to childless women, were significantly more likely to report that they thought their husbands were not paying enough attention to them. Belsky et al. (1985) found that "spouses became increasingly dissatisfied with the positive behaviors of their partners" (p. 860). They reported that husbands were the least satisfied in this area, wanting more positive attention from their wives. A decline in spousal efforts to work at the relationship has also been found, with wives reportedly putting forth less effort in this area (Belsky et al., 1985). Cowan and Cowan (1992) found that for couples with babies 6- to 18-months old, both wives and husbands report that women do fewer caring things for their husbands than they did one year before. Generally, a significant linear decline from one- to three- to nine-months postpartum was found for overall engagement and the display of positive affection between spouses (Belsky et al., 1985). Belsky
and Kelly (1994) reported that new mothers and fathers were twice as likely to kiss their babies as they were to kiss each other, and that the incidence of sexual intercourse drops 30 to 40 percent in the first year following the child's birth.

**Relationship Characteristics**

Research has also found many changes in how a couple characterizes their marital relationship. Belsky et al. (1983) assessed feelings of romance, friendship, and partnership in couples during the transition to parenthood. Couples' reports of partnership tended to increase, whereas reports of romance showed a linear but non-significant decline across the entire transitional period. This was tested again by Belsky et al. (1985). They found that sense of friendship and sense of romance declined significantly across the transition to parenthood, whereas sense of partnership significantly increased between the third trimester of pregnancy and the third month postpartum. Post hoc analysis found that husbands' sense of romance declined more than that of their wives, whereas the wives' sense of partnership was significantly greater than that of their husbands. Belsky et al. (1985) found significant declines from the third trimester of pregnancy through nine-months postpartum in couples' reported feelings of love, with a more pronounced decline occurring for wives.
Sex Roles

Sex roles within the home also tend to change during the transition to parenthood. McHale and Houston (1985) reported that the transition to parenthood seems to "traditionalize the sex role patterns not so much by reducing the tendency of men and women to take on tasks typically done by members of the opposite sex but rather by an increase in the extent to which women carry out the kinds of tasks that traditionally have been done by women" (p. 422). The same trend in sex role patterns has been found in other transition-to-parenthood research (Belsky et al., 1983; LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981).

Stress Level

The stress levels of both new mothers and fathers can be negatively impacted by the transition to parenthood. Miller and Sollie (1980) found that new mothers experienced significant increases in stress from one- to eight-months postpartum, whereas stress remained relatively stable for husband's over the same period of time. Osofsky and Osofsky (1980) reported high levels of stress during pregnancy for both men and women, and additional increases in stress after the birth of the child.

Additional Changes

Research has found a number of other areas that can change during the transition to parenthood. Women have been found to experience increased emotional difficulties, moodiness, anxiety, depression, distractibility, and dependency, along with shortened
Marital Adjustment During the Transition to Parenthood

As described in the preceding section, a number of aspects in a couple's relationship can be affected by the transition to parenthood. However, the largest body of research dealing with the transition to parenthood focuses on the effect this transition has on the couple's attention spans and prolonged crying episodes (Tomlinson, 1987; Wenner, Cohen, Weigert, Kvarness, Ohaneson, & Frearing, 1969). At the same time, men have been found to experience increasing feelings of neediness, anxiety, depression, and rivalry (Osofsky & Osofsky, 1980; Tomlinson, 1987). Self-esteem has also been found to decrease, especially for women (Bradburn & Caplovitz, 1965; Rossi, 1968; Entwisle & Doering, 1981).

Overall, longitudinal research on the transition to parenthood has lead to two general conclusions:(10,635),(989,987) More negative than positive changes take place in the initial period following the birth of a child; and (2) this transitional period impacts the father, the mother, and their relationship (Cowan & Cowan, 1988). However, even though a number of negatives typically occur, there are positives to having a child as well. Belsky and Kelly (1994) reported that a large number of couples experienced a love deeper than they had ever expected to feel in their lives and that many couples felt a personal growth and maturity occur. Furthermore, many couples reported experiencing a new and stronger sense of family.

Marital Adjustment During the Transition to Parenthood

As described in the preceding section, a number of aspects in a couple's relationship can be affected by the transition to parenthood. However, the largest body of research dealing with the transition to parenthood focuses on the effect this transition has on the couple's
marital adjustment or marital satisfaction. Generally speaking, marital adjustment and marital satisfaction are the same variable often referred to differently depending on the measure used to assess them. Regardless, the two variables measure approximately the same construct, correlating with each other above +.90 (Spanier, 1976).

A small number of researchers have reported increases in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood (Belsky & Kelly, 1994, Meyerowitz & Feldman, 1966; Robinson, Olmsted, Garner, & Gare, 1988), whereas others have reported non-significant declines in marital adjustment (Belsky & Kelly, 1994, Ryder, 1973; Schuchts & Witkin, 1989). However, the majority of transition-to-parthood researchers have found statistically significant declines in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood.

Belsky and Kelly (1994) described their sample of transitioning parents as falling into one of four groups. They found that 19% of their sample were improvers, 30% showed no change, 38% were moderate decliners, and 13% were severe decliners. Thus, in this sample 51% of the couples were worse off on measures of love toward spouse, feelings of ambivalence, conflict, and communication after the birth of their child.

In a longitudinal study covering the third trimester of pregnancy to the ninth month postpartum, Belsky and his colleagues (1983) found that couples' marital adjustment, as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanner, 1976), declined significantly. Multiple-
range tests indicated that dyadic adjustment declined significantly at both three-months postpartum and nine-months postpartum. Belsky et al. (1983) concluded that "wives' marital adjustment is more sensitive to the effects of adding a baby to the family than is husbands' adjustment" (p. 575).

In similar research, Belsky et al. (1985) surveyed couples over several points: at the third trimester of pregnancy, at three months postpartum, and again at nine months postpartum. Once again marital adjustment was found to decline significantly across the transition to parenthood, but in this study no significant differences were found between the adjustment score declines of wives' and husbands'.

Tomlinson (1987) found declines in marital adjustment from three months pre-birth to three months postpartum in 96 couples. Once again, no differences in marital adjustment declines were found between husbands and wives.

Along with the studies mentioned above, many other researchers have documented the same decline in marital adjustment over the transition to parenthood (Cowan & Cowan, 1987a, 1987b, 1988; Kurdek, 1991; McHale and Huston, 1985; Miller & Sollie, 1980; Moss, Bolland, Foxman, & Owen, 1986; Tomlinson & Irvin, 1993). However, despite the replicability of this finding, very few studies have been able to, or even tried to, pinpoint what variables lead to or are related to the decline in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood.
A study by Cowan et al. (1985) attempted to "go beyond a description of a decline in marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood to explain how and why this marital decline occurs" (p. 455). They reported that marital satisfaction declined from pregnancy to six months postpartum in their study of 96 couples, 72 of which were expecting their first child. Their results indicate that this decline in marital satisfaction "extends well into the second year of family making" (p. 468). They reported that the impact of becoming a parent was felt first by the mothers, and only after that did the fathers experience the negative effects of the child on his marital satisfaction. Their research indicated that, for men, a larger drop in marital satisfaction was significantly related to increasing amounts of marital conflict and increasing amounts of authoritarian and controlling childrearing attitudes. For women, the only significant correlate of declining marital satisfaction was increased marital conflict. Thus, the only correlate of declining marital satisfaction for both husbands and wives in this study was marital conflict. In fact, "the more new parents described their problem solving as ineffective when their babies were 6 months old, the less satisfied they were with their marriage one year later" (p. 476). This research indicates that one of the critical variables in marital satisfaction may be marital conflict or the lack of problem-solving skills necessary to resolve these conflicts.

In a similar study, Glenn and McLanahan (1982) tried to specify the conditions surrounding the negative effects of parenthood
on a couples' marital adjustment. They were unsuccessful in specifying the types of men and women who are at risk for suffering poor marital adjustment upon the arrival of a child, but they did conclude that "the negative effects are quite pervasive, very likely outweighing positive effects among spouses in the United States of both sexes and of all races, major religious preferences, educational levels, and employment status" (p. 69).

Levy-Shiff (1994) looked at marital adjustment changes experienced by 102 Israeli first-time parents in a longitudinal study. She found significant declines in marital adjustment from pre-birth to nine months postpartum in both husbands and wives. The most consistent predictor of marital adjustment in this sample was paternal involvement with the baby. The higher the level of paternal involvement, the greater the couples' marital satisfaction. This is a discouraging result due to rather consistent findings that mothers are more involved with the child than are fathers (Oakley, 1980), a situation related to increased marital dissatisfaction.

Some research has specifically looked at the impact of the child's personality and behavior on the decline in marital adjustment. Belsky and Rovine (1990) found that perceived characteristics of the infant, measured by the Infant Characteristics Questionnaire (Bates, Freeland, & Lounsbury, 1979), significantly predicted change in wives' marital adjustment from pregnancy to three years postpartum. Similar results were found by Wright, Henggeler, and Craig (1986).
Men's marital adjustment was not significantly predicted by infant characteristics in either the Belsky and Rovine (1990) study or the Wright et al. (1986) study. Wallace and Gotlib (1990) found no relation between marital adjustment and infant characteristics for either husbands or wives.

At this point it seems clear that the transition to parenthood has many affects on the mother, the father, and their relationship. One of the most consistent and disturbing affects of the transition to parenthood is the change that occurs in couples' marital adjustment. Yet, we do not have a clear understanding of what affects this change nor how to predict it. This is an area now being addressed by transition-to-parenthood research. A large body of research does exist that has examined marital adjustment in general and specifically the role communication plays in marital adjustment. However, less research has addressed personality characteristics and how they relate to marital adjustment. The research that has focused on personality has rarely attempted to demonstrate or explain why particular personality traits may be related to marital adjustment.

The preceding pages have reviewed research that demonstrates the occurrence of significant changes during the transition to parenthood for couples, the most critical of which may be the decline in marital adjustment. In the following pages the research on communication and personality as they pertain to marital adjustment
is reviewed, as well as the reasoning for focusing on these two variables.

Communication

Communication is a central aspect of any relationship. The importance of communication between couples becomes magnified during the transition into parenthood due to the many new demands and challenges first-time parents face. Research is increasingly addressing the importance of communication in marital relationships and specifically the role of communication during the transition to parenthood. Early research reported strong associations between marital satisfaction and quality of communication (Locke, Sabagh, & Thomas, 1956; Navran, 1967). Jacobson and Moore (1981) found communication problems to be better predictors of daily marital dissatisfaction than were any other aspects of a couple's relationship. Gottman and Krokoff (1989) stated that "the most consistent finding in the literature on marital interaction and marital satisfaction [is] the finding that negative interaction is much more common in the interaction of unhappily married couples than happily married couples" (p. 47).

Communication has been conceptualized and studied in a number of ways. A common conceptualization deals with the process of communication between two individuals. The demand/withdraw pattern is a commonly investigated communication interaction pattern.
in which one partner seeks more engagement whereas the other partner attempts to withdraw from the engagement. Christensen and Heavey (1993) found that the wife demand/husband withdraw communication pattern is "strongly related to marital dissatisfaction" (p. 136). In general, research has supported their claim that one of the most destructive communication patterns in relationships is the demand/withdraw pattern. "One of the earliest studies of marriage found that dissatisfied wives complained of their husbands' withdrawal whereas dissatisfied husbands complained of their wives' criticisms, complaints, and emotionality" (Terman, Buttenweiser, Ferguson, Johnson, & Wilson, 1939; as cited in Christensen & Heavey, 1990, p. 73). The demand/withdraw pattern seems to be particularly damaging when the husband withdraws from a discussion, whereas the wife demands engagement (Christensen, 1987a; Christensen, 1988; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Fogarty, 1976; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Noller & White, 1990; Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994; Sullaway & Christensen, 1983; Wile, 1981).

After considering a number of studies, Christensen and Heavey (1993) concluded that "approximately 60% of couples could be classified as woman demand/man withdraw, about 30% could be classified as man demand/woman withdraw, and about 10% are equal on these two variables" (p. 122). It seems evident from the research to

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date that the wife demand/husband withdraw pattern of communication can play a critical role in the satisfaction of couples.

Disclosure, interpretation, and the degree of misunderstanding within communication are three aspects of communication that have also been investigated (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990). The amount of self-disclosure, inequalities in the amount of disclosure between a couple, and the lack of positive disclosure relative to negative disclosure have all been found to be related to low levels of satisfaction within dyadic relationships (Chelune, Waring, Vosk, Sultan, & Ogden, 1984; Davidson, Balswick, & Halverson, 1983; Hendrick, 1981; Jorgensen & Gandy, 1980; Komarvoksy, 1962; Levinger & Senn, 1967; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Tolstedt & Stokes, 1983). Husbands' general willingness to talk about their relationship with their wives has also been found to relate to marital adjustment (Acitelli, 1992). Cowan and Cowan (1988) found that the sheer quantity of communication was significantly related to marital adjustment. Unfortunately, the quantity of communication has been found to decrease after the birth of a baby (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Belsky & Volling, 1987; McHale & Huston, 1985). Couples in marriages that are unhappy also tend to be unaware that they often misunderstand the messages their spouse attempts to send them (Noller, 1980; 1984), and they also tend to interpret their partners' behaviors as negative rather than positive (Gottman, Notarius, Markman, Bank, Yoppi, & Rubin, 1976).
Differences in constructive communication have been found between nondistressed and distressed married couples. Markman (1979, 1981) found that the "positivity" of a couple's communication was the best predictor of relationship satisfaction two and one-half years and five and one-half years after the initial sampling. Markman (1979) also found that couples who became distressed over this time period were characterized by poorer communication during the initial sampling. This was the first research indicating that poor communication preceded the development of relationship dissatisfaction and was not just a by-product of a poor relationship (Markman, 1979). Quinn and Davidson (1986) found communication to be the primary predictor of marital adjustment, supporting the earlier findings of Markman. Christensen and Shenk (1991) found constructive communication skills more often in non-distressed married couples than in distressed married couples. Heavey, Larson, Christensen, & Zumtobel (1996) found constructive communication measured through both observational measures and self-report measures to correlate highly with marital adjustment. Similar findings in relation to constructive or positive communication have been found in a number of similar studies (Boyd & Roach, 1977; Dean & Lucas, 1978; Gill, 1993; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Julien, Markman, & Lindahl, 1989; Kelly, Houston, & Cate, 1985; Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1990).
Cowan et al. (1985) compared changes in conflict between two groups: couples without children and couples about to have a child. They found that compared to childless couples, whose conflict declined over the length of the study, new parents had an increase in marital conflict from pregnancy to 18 months postpartum. In fact, they found that 92 percent of the couples having children in their study reported an increase in both conflict and disagreement in their marriage during the transition to parenthood (Cowan & Cowan, 1987a, 1987b). As previously noted, Cowan and Cowan (1985, 1987a, 1987b) found that both husbands' and wives' declines in marital adjustment were significantly associated with increasing marital conflict.

Overall, the research on communication and its effect on marital adjustment indicates that aspects such as the demand/withdraw pattern of interacting, the amount of self-disclosure and marital conflict, and the constructiveness of communication play significant roles in shaping a couple's marital adjustment. What makes the strong association between communication and marital adjustment so disheartening are reports that indicate that the transition to parenthood results in a drop in the quality of communication for a majority of new parents (Belsky & Kelly, 1994). It is not certain why the transition leads to poor communication between spouses, but Belsky and Kelly (1994) proposed one possibility:
Like other skills, communication skills are subject to the "use it or lose it" rule. The more you use them, the more supple and nuanced they grow; the less you use them, the rustier and more ineffective they become. And because the transition [to parenthood] provides relatively few opportunities for intimate talk, often within a matter of months new parents begin to forget what they used to know about these skills (often without realizing they knew it) (p. 199).

**Personality**

Kelly and Conley concluded that "personality characteristics must be taken into account in a comprehensive analysis of marital interaction" (1987, p. 36). Unfortunately, many researchers may underestimate the importance of personality in studies of marital adjustment, especially during the transition to parenthood. In fact it is "likely that a substantial proportion of adults in this country have values and personality traits which make them ill-suited for parenthood" (Glenn & McLanahan, 1982, p. 71).

Early assessment of personality and its relation to concurrent as well as future marital adjustment focused on personality as a single global trait. For example, Kelly (1939) tried to determine the overall contribution of personality, as a global concept, in shaping the quality of a marriage. Recent research has adjusted its focus from a single global personality factor to more specified personality traits.
Levy-Shiff (1994) focused on the role of three personality traits -- impulsivity, autonomy, and affiliation -- as predictors of marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. For women, two of these personality traits -- autonomy and impulsivity -- were significantly related to change in marital adjustment. High autonomy and low impulse control were related to declines in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. For men, only affiliation was significantly related to marital change. The lower the men's affiliation, the greater their decline in marital adjustment.

Bentler & Newcomb (1978) investigated a number of personality traits and their relation to marital success and failure. Among husbands, they found two traits significantly related to marital success: extroversion and deliberateness. The lower the extroversion and the higher the deliberateness the greater their marital success. Among wives, six traits (ambition, art interest, clothes consciousness, intelligence, objectivity, and stability) were related to marital success and failure. The lower the wives' ambition, art interest, and intelligence, and the higher the wives' clothes consciousness, objectivity, and stability, the greater the marital success.

Bentler and Newcomb (1978) also reported that personality variables were a more powerful predictor of marital success than were background or demographic characteristics of the individual or couple. They found that the four most powerful personality variables accounted for 29% of marital success variance, whereas the four most
powerful demographic variables accounted for only 18% of marital success variance.

As previously mentioned, early personality research focused on personality as a global construct. Present personality research tends to break personality down into a number of personality traits. The "big five" personality traits of extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness (McCrae & Costa, 1985), or similar versions of these personality traits, are among the most common personality traits used in marital adjustment research.

The big-five personality trait that has most consistently been found to correlate significantly with marital adjustment is neuroticism. Neuroticism has generally been found to relate inversely to marital adjustment. For example, Burgess and Wallin (1953) found pre-marriage neuroticism scores correlated negatively with both husbands' and wives' marital adjustment after 3 to 5 years of marriage, and husbands' adjustment after 18 years of marriage. Other researchers have found similar results when including neuroticism as an independent variable (Barry, 1970; Doherty & Jacobson, 1982; Eysenck, 1980; Kelly & Conley, 1987; Lester, Haig, & Monello, 1989; Zaleski & Galkowska, 1982).

In a study of 300 couples from the 1930's to the 1980's, Kelly and Conley (1987) investigated the effects of four personality traits: neuroticism, social extroversion, impulse control and agreeableness. They assessed marital adjustment after approximately five years of
marriage, 25 years of marriage, and 45 years of marriage. Across time, neuroticism consistently correlated negatively with couples' marital adjustment, whereas agreeableness and impulse control had a weaker and less consistent relationship with couples' marital adjustment.

Heavey and Garcia (1995) considered the big-five personality traits as they related to a couple's concurrent marital adjustment. Like a number of researchers before them, they found both husbands' and wives' neuroticism to be negatively related to marital adjustment for both husbands and wives. They also found husbands' agreeableness to correlate with both husbands' and wives' marital adjustment, and both husbands' and wives' conscientiousness to correlate positively with their own marital adjustment.

Eysenck (1980) found, when studying extroversion, that males high on this trait were more likely to get divorced than were males low on this trait. This relationship was only slight for females and in the opposite direction. Lester et al. (1989) found spouses' marital adjustment to be negatively related to their spouses' extroversion. Contrary to these findings, Kumar and Rohatgi (1984) found a positive relationship between extroversion and marital adjustment. Zaleski and Galkowska (1978) found no effects for extroversion on marital adjustment for husbands or wives. When looking at extroversion and its relation to marital adjustment, inconsistency
throughout the literature seems to be the rule rather than the exception.

In summary, research has found that neuroticism is negatively related to marital adjustment. Other personality variables are inconsistently related to marital adjustment. In the stressful environment of a marriage, particularly in those marriages with a new child, it is easy to see why high neuroticism, an over-reactivity to stressful stimuli, could lead to poor marital adjustment. Additional research may be able to explain further the importance of other personality traits on marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood.

This review of the literature has focused on the factors that research has found to have significant impacts on a couple's marital adjustment. The research indicates that communication tends to be one of the most important variables in relation to marital adjustment. The importance of communication is also evident when one looks at the content of marital workshops that focus on communication skills.

The literature review has also addressed research findings in the area of personality and its implications for one's marital adjustment. Although this is an under-examined area, it is largely agreed upon that the personality make-up of individual's largely influences their relations with others and the success they have in these relations.

Communication and personality were the focus of this review because they may be two of the most significant predictors of marital
adjustment. In addition, personality characteristics may not only influence the type of person we are, but also the way we interact with others. Our personality could then dictate how well we communicate with others. Thus, it is speculated that these two variables may relate to one another in predicting marital adjustment. Though most importantly, there is a need in the literature for a better understanding of the influence of communication and personality on marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood.

**Present Study**

The aim of this thesis was to investigate the relationship of the quality of a spouses' communication, spouses' personalities, and marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. Married couples expecting their first child were recruited for a longitudinal study of the transition to parenthood. Couples completed batteries of self-report questionnaires at three times: during their last trimester of pregnancy, three months postpartum, and nine months postpartum. After completing the initial battery of questionnaires, couples were randomly chosen to either be invited to a marital skills training workshop or to serve as part of a control group. This design allowed the examination of a number of issues relevant to how couples change across the transition to parenthood. This thesis will focus only on the relationship between problem-solving communication, personality, and marital adjustment during the transition to parenthood.
During the three assessment periods, couples completed several measures relevant to this study. At the initial assessment, each spouse completed a measure assessing the constructiveness of their problem-solving communication, their marital adjustment, and their personality. Personality was assessed based on the Five-Factor Model of Personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992; John, 1990). These five factors are neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Neuroticism is the tendency to experience anxiety, angry hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsivity, and vulnerability. Extraversion is the tendency to be warm, gregarious, assertive, active, and to seek excitement. Openness is the tendency to be curious, willing to try novel things, and accepting of both positive and negative emotions. Agreeableness is the tendency to be trusting, altruistic, compliant, modest, and straightforward. Conscientiousness is the tendency to be purposeful, strong-willed, determined, and self-disciplined (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

During the second and third assessment periods, each spouse again completed measures of the constructiveness of their problem-solving communication and their marital adjustment. These follow-up assessments took place at three months postpartum and nine months postpartum, respectively.

Because the marital skills training workshop is not a focus of this study, it will be described only briefly. Couples chosen at random were invited to attend the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement
Program workshop (PREP™, Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988). PREP™ is a behaviorally oriented marital skills training workshop. It was developed based on empirical research into the causes of marital distress. The PREP™ workshop includes five primary components: handling destructive conflict, communication skills, commitment, relationship expectations, and maintaining fun in a relationship. Previous research has indicated that PREP™ improves relationship functioning and satisfaction (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993).

**Hypotheses**

The first hypothesis investigated concerned changes in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. Previous research has shown that marital adjustment declines significantly across the transition to parenthood. Thus, the first hypothesis was that marital adjustment will decline significantly across the transition to parenthood for both husbands and wives.

The second hypothesis investigated concerned the relationship between constructive communication and marital adjustment during the transition to parenthood. Research has found that the quality of a couples' communication is associated with their marital adjustment. Thus, the second hypothesis was that constructive communication would correlate significantly with marital adjustment during the transition to parenthood.
The third hypothesis investigated concerned the relationship between personality traits and marital adjustment. Research has found that some personality traits both relate to and can predict future marital adjustment. Thus, the third hypothesis was that personality traits would correlate significantly with marital adjustment during the transition to parenthood.

More specifically, it was hypothesized that 1) Neuroticism would negatively relate to marital adjustment, and 2) extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness would positively relate to marital adjustment. These hypotheses were based on the following reasoning. It was believed neuroticism would be negatively related to marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood because a spouse's reactivity to stress caused by the new baby (e.g., crying, messes, expenses, time demands, etc.) and the inability to handle these stresses would cause problems for both that individual and their spouse. It was believed extroversion would positively relate to marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. Couples need to have a great amount of both enthusiasm and energy to keep pace with their child and to adequately adjust to the many new demands their child places on them. It was believed openness would positively correlate with marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood because parents with the ability to be imaginative and spontaneous would be more successful in satisfying their child, which would ease the initial burden and stresses of parenting. It was
believed agreeableness would positively relate to marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood because couples willing to sacrifice for their child and put their child's needs and wants above their own would be better able to meet the new demands of parenthood. And finally, it was believed conscientiousness would positively relate to marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood because parents who are efficient, optimistic, and most of all tolerant would deal better with the new demands parenthood places on them than would couples who are lazy, pessimistic, and fault-finding in their child and each other.

The fourth hypothesis investigated concerned the mediating effect of constructive communication on the relationship between personality and marital adjustment. Past research has shown that communication is a good predictor of marital adjustment. Research has also shown that marital adjustment is significantly related to personality. Therefore, it may be that personality impacts marital adjustment because of its affect on how couples communicate. Thus, the forth hypothesis was that the relationship between personality and marital adjustment would be mediated by constructive communication.
CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

Couples who were in their first marriage and in the second or third trimester of pregnancy with their first child were recruited through advertisements in local printed media and through announcements made at child birth classes. Seventy such couples participated in this study. Couples were informed that they would be paid between $100 and $175 for completing several sets of questionnaires and that some couples would be invited to a workshop designed to help couples maintain a happy marriage.

Couples had been married an average of 2.9 years (SD = 2.2) and had an average income of $53,063 (SD = $29,927). The average ages of husbands and wives were 28.8 years (SD = 5.2) and 26.5 years (SD = 4.3), respectively. Husbands and wives had both attended school an average of 14.9 years (SD = 2.1 and 2.3, respectively). The sample included 89% Caucasian and 11% minority couples.
Measures

At each assessment point spouses completed a battery of self-report measures. The questionnaire batteries consisted of a number of scales assessing such areas as marital adjustment, sexual satisfaction, personality, relationship closeness, and perceived stress. The following measures are relevant to the present study.

Communication Patterns Questionnaire

The Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984; Christensen, 1987, 1988; see Appendix A) is a self-report questionnaire designed to measure spouse perceptions of their problem-solving communication with their spouse. The CPQ consists of 35 items under 23 content areas (e.g., demand/withdraw, physical aggression, mutual resolution). The Constructive Communication Subscale (Heavey, Larson, Christensen, & Zumtobel, in press) score is obtained by summing an individual’s score on items 2 (mutual discussion), 5 (mutual expression), and 7 (mutual negotiation), minus the responses to items 4 (mutual blame), 6 (mutual threat) and 13 (verbal aggression). The Constructive Communication Subscale alphas for male and female self-reports were .84 and .81, respectively (Heavey, Larson, Christensen, & Zumtobel, in press).
Demographic Inventory
This contained questions concerning subjects age, age of spouse, length of marriage, gender, due date of child, annual income, occupation, religious preference, and family of origin.

Dyadic Adjustment Scale
The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) was used to measure marital adjustment. This scale consists of 32 items assessing various aspects of romantic relationships. The DAS consists of four subscales: dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, and affectional expression. In addition to the four subscale scores, an overall dyadic adjustment score is determined by adding the response scores from each of the 32 items. Overall scores on the DAS can range from 0 to 151. The mean score for married couples is 114.8 (SD = 17.8) (Spanier, 1976). Internal consistency reliability of the DAS was reported at .96 (Spanier, 1976).

NEO-Five Factor Inventory
The NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO; Costa & McCrae, 1985) was used to assess personality. The NEO consists of five subscales each consisting of twelve items that are scored on a five-point Likert-type scale. The five subscales are: 1) Neuroticism (worried vs. calm, insecure vs. secure); 2) Extroversion (sociable vs. retiring, fun-loving vs. sober, affectionate vs. reserved); 3) Openness (imaginative vs. down-to-earth, independent vs. conforming, variety vs. routine); 4) Agreeableness (soft-hearted vs. ruthless, trusting vs. suspicious,
helpful vs. uncooperative); and 5) Conscientiousness (well organized vs. disorganized, careful vs. careless, self-disciplined vs. weak willed) (Berger, 1993). Alpha coefficients for the five subscales of the NEO-Five Factor Inventory are .86, .77, .73, .68, and .81, respectively (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Procedures

Couples who responded to advertisements placed in various local printed media or announcements made at childbirth classes were given a general description of the study. If they chose to participate, they were given or sent the first battery of questionnaires, that included a number of measures including the CPQ, NEO, and the DAS. Couples were instructed to complete the questionnaire batteries independently and return them by mail in the postage-paid return envelope that was provided. Once the initial questionnaire batteries were returned, couples were randomly placed in either the Control Group or the Intervention Group. To ensure a sufficient number of couples for the workshops, random assignment was conducted so that each couple had a 70% chance of being placed in the Intervention Group. Couples in the Control Group were sent a letter notifying them that they had been randomly placed in the Control Group and would be paid $75 for completing the first set of questionnaires. Payments were made approximately two weeks after receiving the couple's questionnaire batteries. Couples in the Intervention Group
were sent a letter inviting them to the next scheduled PREP™
workshop (Markman et al., 1988; Markman, Blumberg, & Stanley,
1993).

For the purposes of the larger longitudinal study the PREP™
workshop was modified from its typical multi-week format to a
shortened one-week format to facilitate couples' attendance. The
workshop was also focused to address issues germane to couples
about to have their first child (e.g., childcare expectations, sexual
relations after childbirth, etc.). Of the 43 couples that were invited to
the PREP™ workshop, 20 attended. The couples who could not
attend gave reasons such as work or pregnancy-related difficulties.
The 23 couples who were invited to the workshop but did not attend
are referred to as the "Refuser Group." The Refuser Group, just as
Intervention couples, was not paid for completing the first set of
questionnaires.

Graduate students, including the author, from the University of
Nevada, Las Vegas Department of Psychology were trained by a
doctoral-level clinical psychologist to serve as consultants. Each
workshop ran from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm on a Saturday, 12:00 pm to
4:00 pm on a Sunday, and 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm on the following
Wednesday.

At approximately three-months after the birth of the couples'
child, all participants were mailed the Time 2 questionnaire battery
along with a postage-paid return envelope. This battery of
questionnaires included the CPQ and the DAS. The couples were asked to complete the Time 2 follow-up questionnaire battery independently and return it as quickly as possible in the postage-paid return envelope. Once both spouses of a couple returned their questionnaire batteries, they were sent a check for $50.

At approximately nine-months following the birth of the couples' child, all participants were again mailed the Time 3 questionnaire battery along with a postage-paid return envelope. The couples were asked to complete the Time 3 follow-up questionnaire battery independently and return it as quickly as possible by mail in the postage-paid return envelope. Once both spouses of a couple returned their questionnaire batteries, they were again sent a check for $50.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Before conducting the primary analyses to evaluate the hypotheses, I conducted a series of analyses to evaluate the possibility of systematic attrition among participants. As can be seen in Table 1, 77% of the sample completed the Time 2 questionnaires and 64% of the sample completed the Time 3 questionnaires. To evaluate the possibility of a biasing of the sample due to attrition, I compared the Time 1 levels of marital adjustment of the participants who did and did not complete the later phases of the study. There were no significant differences in the Time 1 levels of marital adjustment between the "Completes" and "Noncompleters" of Time 2 or Time 3. Thus, there is no indication of systematic bias due to attrition during the later phases of the study.

Table 1 lists the number of spouses in each group that completed the DAS for each of the phases of the study. This can be used as a general guide for the number of participants available for each of the subsequent analyses. However, the number of participants

37
in each analysis may vary slightly from those in Table 1 due to incomplete data.

Table 1.

*Number of participants who completed the DAS for each Group at all three assessment phases.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th>Time 2</th>
<th>Time 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Husband</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuser</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wife</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuser</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Because this study involved multiple groups, the data were analyzed in two ways. The primary analyses were conducted using participants from all three groups combined. This approach was supported by the fact that the three groups did not differ in their levels of marital adjustment at any of the three assessment points; the F-values from the six one-way analysis of variances (ANOVA) ranged from .15 to 1.64, all nonsignificant. Dyadic Adjustment Scale means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2. This approach also affords greater statistical power than would be available if the groups were examined separately.

Secondary analyses were also conducted using only participants from the Control Group. This allowed for an informal comparison between the analyses conducted on the entire sample with those conducted using only the Control Group.
Table 2. 

*Intervention, Control, and Refuser Groups scores on Dyadic Adjustment Scale.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th>Time 2</th>
<th>Time 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>119.8 (8.2)</td>
<td>119.7 (5.2)</td>
<td>118.8 (8.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>120.0 (13.7)</td>
<td>119.9 (13.4)</td>
<td>115.0 (18.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuser</td>
<td>118.0 (16.9)</td>
<td>115.4 (9.5)</td>
<td>105.8 (14.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>119.3 (13.5)</td>
<td>118.7 (10.4)</td>
<td>113.6 (15.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Wife      |    |     |    |     |    |     |    |     |
| Intervention  | 122.6 (10.0) | 121.2 (8.3)  | 115.4 (9.6)  |
| Control    | 118.0 (12.4) | 113.6 (19.9) | 110.8 (23.7) |
| Refuser    | 118.3 (16.6) | 112.4 (16.1) | 115.4 (14.8) |
| Total      | 119.4 (13.3) | 115.8 (16.2) | 113.3 (17.5) |
| Grand Total | 119.3 (11.8) | 116.7 (14.3) | 113.5 (14.3) |

**Change in Marital Adjustment**

The first hypothesis was that marital adjustment would decline across the transition to parenthood. To determine if there was a decline in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood, a
two-way ANOVA for repeated measures was used. The two independent variables were time (Time 1, Time 2, Time 3) and sex (male, female). The dependent variable was DAS scores. The main effect for time within subjects was significant, $F (2,80) = 9.88$, $p < .001$. Tukey’s HSD post hoc test results indicated that marital adjustment did not differ significantly between Time 1 and Time 2, but that it did decline significantly between Time 1 and 3 and Time 2 and 3.

Effect sizes were determined for the decline in marital adjustment between Time 1 and Time 3. To determine the effect size, the difference between Time 1 and Time 3 means was divided by the standard deviation based on the pooled estimate of the variance. This computation was completed separately for both husbands and wives. Moderate effect sizes of .40 were found for both husbands’ and wives' decline in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood.

**Constructive Communication and Marital Adjustment**

The second hypothesis was that constructive communication would correlate with marital adjustment during the transition to parenthood. This hypothesis was evaluated in two different ways. First, zero-order correlations were computed between constructive communication and marital adjustment at all three assessment points. Second, partial correlations were computed to determine the
relationship between constructive communication and changes in marital adjustment from Time 1 to Time 2 and Time 3.

The zero-order correlations between constructive communication and marital adjustment at all three assessment points are presented in Table 3. As can be seen, all but two of the 36 correlations between constructive communication and marital adjustment were significant. The significant correlations ranged from .25 to .69, with an average $r = .44$.

A similar pattern of significant correlations emerged with the Control Group as well. Thus, there was a consistent relationship between the constructiveness of spouses' problem-solving communication and their marital adjustment.
Table 3.
Correlations of Constructive Communication with Marital Adjustment
During the Transition to Parenthood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Adjustment</th>
<th>Husband</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Wife</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>Time 3</td>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>Time 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>.58***</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>.48***</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>.32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3</td>
<td>.50***</td>
<td>.34*</td>
<td>.66***</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>.54***</td>
<td>.43**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.57***</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>.52***</td>
<td>.47***</td>
<td>.60***</td>
<td>.59***</td>
<td>.69***</td>
<td>.66***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>.51***</td>
<td>.49***</td>
<td>.62***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Partial correlations were used to examine the relationship between constructive communication assessed at Time 1 and marital adjustment at the later assessment points while controlling for marital
adjustment at Time 1. Thus, these partial correlations indicate the extent to which constructive communication at Time 1 predicts changes in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. The partial correlation coefficients are presented in Table 4.

Table 4.
Partial Correlations of Constructive Communication with Time 2 and Time 3 Marital Adjustment Controlling for Time 1 Marital Adjustment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Adjustment</th>
<th>Husband</th>
<th>Wife</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>Time 3</td>
<td>Time 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.40**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

As can be seen, the only significant partial correlation was the positive relationship between wives' constructive communication and husbands' change in marital adjustment from Time 1 to Time 3. Thus, there appears to be little relationship between the constructiveness of
couples' problem-solving communication and subsequent changes in spouses' marital adjustment.

The same analyses performed using only the Control Group produced different results. As can be seen in Table 5, Control Group husbands' constructive communication correlated significantly with changes in husbands' marital adjustment from Time 1 to Time 2. Wives' constructive communication also correlated significantly with change in husbands' marital adjustment from Time 1 to Time 2. Neither of these correlations were significant for the overall sample.

Table 5.
Partial Correlations of Constructive Communication with Time 2 and Time 3 Marital Adjustment Controlling for Time 1 Marital Adjustment for the Control Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Marital Adjustment</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Husband</strong></td>
<td><strong>Wife</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>Time 3</td>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>Time 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>.41*</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-.38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.
It appears the relationship between constructive communication and changes in marital adjustment is weak when the overall sample is considered. When only the Control Group is considered, husbands' change in marital adjustment from Time 1 to Time 2 is significantly related to both husbands' and wives' constructive communication.

Overall, these results indicate that there was a consistent relationship between marital adjustment and the constructiveness of spouses' problem-solving communication. However, the constructiveness of spouses' problem-solving communication was not a consistent predictor of the extent to which couples would experience changes in their marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood.

**Personality Traits and Marital Adjustment**

The third hypothesis was that personality traits would correlate with marital adjustment during the transition to parenthood. This hypothesis was evaluated in two different ways. First, zero-order correlations were computed between all five personality traits and marital adjustment at all three assessment points. Second, partial correlations were computed to determine the relationship between the five personality traits and changes in marital adjustment from Time 1 to Time 2 and from Time 1 to Time 3. Specifically, it was hypothesized that neuroticism would negatively correlate with marital
adjustment during the transition to parenthood, whereas extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness would positively correlate with marital adjustment during the transition to parenthood.

The zero-order correlations between personality traits and marital adjustment are presented in Table 6. It appears that husbands' personality traits relate to both husbands' and wives' marital adjustment more so than do wives' personality traits. Neuroticism, conscientiousness, and agreeableness on the part of the husband related to both husbands' and wives' marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. All of these relationships were in the predicted direction. Similar results were found for the Control Group.

Partial correlations between the five personality traits and marital adjustment at all three assessment points were used to evaluate the relationship between personality and changes in marital adjustment. The partial correlation coefficients are presented in Table 7.
Table 6.
Correlations of Personality Traits and Marital Adjustment During the Transition to Parenthood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality Traits</th>
<th>Marital Adjustment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Husband**

- Neuroticism: -0.50***, -0.31*, -0.47***, -0.30*, -0.49***, -0.20
- Extroversion: 0.46***, 0.39**, 0.15, 0.14, 0.21, -0.04
- Openness: 0.24*, 0.38**, 0.04, 0.23, 0.10, 0.19
- Conscientiousness: 0.39***, 0.01, 0.34*, 0.28*, 0.32*, 0.03
- Agreeableness: 0.13, 0.23, 0.32*, 0.28*, 0.45***, 0.29*

**Wife**

- Neuroticism: -0.33**, -0.17, -0.24, 0.04, 0.02, 0.03
- Extroversion: 0.46***, 0.32*, 0.10, 0.09, 0.14, -0.04
- Openness: 0.31*, 0.03, 0.12, 0.21, 0.06, 0.09
- Conscientiousness: 0.18, 0.05, 0.02, 0.12, 0.09, -0.02
- Agreeableness: 0.36**, 0.23, 0.17, 0.26*, 0.16, 0.26

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

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As can be seen, a number of husbands' personality traits were related to changes in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood for both husband's and wives. Of the seven significant partial correlations, five were in the predicted direction. The two significant partial correlations that were not in the predicted direction were the inverse relationship between husbands' conscientiousness and husbands' Time 2 marital adjustment, and the inverse relationship between husbands' extroversion and husbands' Time 3 marital adjustment. There were no significant partial correlations between wives' personality traits and either husbands' or wives' changes in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. For the Control Group a similar pattern of results was also found.

These results indicate that husbands' personality traits were consistently related to both husbands' and wives marital adjustment. Only husbands' agreeableness, and to a lesser extent neuroticism, was a consistent predictor of the extent to which couples would experience changes in their marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood.
Table 7.
Partial Correlations of Personality Traits with Time 2 and Time 3 Marital Adjustment Controlling for Time 1 Marital Adjustment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality Traits</th>
<th>Marital Adjustment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Husband Time 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extroversion</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>-.33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extroversion</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.
Constructive Communication as a Mediator

The fourth hypothesis was that constructive communication would mediate the relationship between personality and marital adjustment. This hypothesis was tested using only Time 1 data. For a variable to mediate the relationship between two other variables, three criteria must be met (Baron & Kenny, 1986). These criteria, as shown in Figure 1, are: 1) Personality must correlate significantly with marital adjustment (path A in Figure 1), 2) personality must correlate significantly with constructive communication (path B in Figure 1), and 3) constructive communication must correlate significantly with marital adjustment (path C in Figure 1).

To evaluate this mediation hypothesis, a composite personality score was created. This new personality composite score was based on the five personality traits used in this study and weighted for each trait to maximize the strength of the association between the personality composite and marital adjustment. Beta weights derived by regressing all five personality traits onto Time 1 marital adjustment were used to compute each personality composite. This process was used to create two personality composite scores, one for husbands and one for wives.

The first step in evaluating the mediation hypothesis was to determine if the three criteria reviewed above were met for husbands and wives, which was indeed the case: Husbands' personality
composite scores were significantly correlated to husbands' marital adjustment, \( r(70) = .65, p < .001 \). Husbands' personality composite scores were significantly related to husbands' constructive communication, \( r(70) = .46, p < .001 \). Wives' personality composite scores were significantly correlated with wives' marital adjustment, \( r(68) = .56, p < .001 \). Wives' personality composite scores were significantly correlated with constructive communication, \( r(68) = .36, p < .01 \). Husbands' constructive communication was significantly correlated with husbands' marital adjustment, \( r(70) = .58, p < .001 \), and wives' constructive communication was significantly correlated with wives' marital adjustment, \( r(70) = .57, p < .001 \).

To test for the presence of a mediating effect partial correlations were used. Specifically, personality was correlated with marital adjustment controlling for the effect of constructive communication. Thus, path A was examined while controlling for paths B and C of Figure 1.
Figure 1.  
The Significant Correlations Making-up the Necessary Criteria in Testing Constructive Communication as a Mediator.

If the significant relationship between personality and marital adjustment (path A in Figure 1) becomes non-significant after controlling for constructive communication (path B & C in Figure 1), then constructive communication would be seen as mediating the relationship between personality and marital adjustment (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Theoretically speaking, a significant reduction in the partial correlation coefficient after controlling for constructive communication would indicate that constructive communication is a mediator, but not necessarily sufficient to explain the relationship between personality and marital adjustment (Baron & Kenny, 1986).
As can be seen in Table 8, after controlling for the effect of constructive communication, the relationship between husbands' and wives' personality composite score and husbands' and wives' marital adjustment remained significant. Fisher's $r$ to $z$ transformations were also used to test for significant reductions in the partial correlation coefficients. No significant reduction were found between the partial correlation coefficients, shown in Table 8, for husbands or wives. Similar results were found for the control group. Thus, there was no support for the hypothesis that constructive communication mediates the relationship between personality and marital adjustment.

Table 8.
Partial Correlations of Time 1 Personality Composite and Time 1 Marital Adjustment During the Transition to Parenthood: Before and After Controlling for Time 1 Constructive Communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>Husband</th>
<th>Wife</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marital Adjustment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before</td>
<td>.65***</td>
<td>.56***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After</td>
<td>.53***</td>
<td>.46***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.
The transition to parenthood as a major life phase has received considerable research attention in recent years. A majority of past research has focused on describing the changes experienced by couples having their first child. However, little is understood about why these changes occur and what factors are related to these changes. Thus, researchers have recently moved their focus from describing the changes that occur during this period to trying to understand the causes of the changes that have been observed.

As past research has well documented, marital adjustment tends to show moderate yet significant declines with the birth of a couple's first child. This result was replicated in the present study. No complete explanation emerged in this study as to why couples experienced a decline in their marital adjustment. However, valuable information was gained as to the role of personality and communication during this transition period.
Past research has demonstrated that communication is an important factor in marital relationships, yet little research has explored communication's relation to marital adjustment during the transition to parenthood. This study found that the constructiveness of couples' problem-solving communication is consistently related to their marital adjustment during the transition to parenthood. However, the constructiveness of couples' problem-solving communication was not a reliable predictor of the changes that occurred in their marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. There are several possible interpretations of these findings.

First, the constructiveness of couples' problem-solving communication may not predict changes in marital adjustment due to the moderate to high stability of both constructive communication and marital adjustment over time ($r$'s between .5 and .8). The moderate stability of both constructive communication and marital adjustment could explain why the zero-order correlations were consistently significant, whereas the partial correlations were not. Second, the fact that the constructiveness of spouses' problem-solving communication did not predict changes in marital adjustment could be due to the fact that this is only one of the many facets of marital communication. The constructiveness of couples' problem-solving communication is also just a small part of everything that new parents are dealing with during this phase. Thus, the constructiveness of couples' problem-
solving communication may not be a large enough factor, considering everything else that is going on, to predict changes in marital adjustment.

The correlational nature of these analyses bring up another issue. Because causality cannot be inferred from correlational analyses, a number of possibilities need to be considered in interpreting these results. The first possibility is that the line of reasoning used in this study was correct, and the constructiveness of couples' problem-solving communication directly impacts a couple's marital adjustment. The second possibility is that couples' marital adjustment impacts the constructiveness of their problem-solving communication. Thus, couples with a happy marriage may be more inclined to communicate constructively with each other. The third possibility is that some third variable impacts both the constructiveness of couples' problem-solving communication and couples' marital adjustment. Finally, it should be noted that these possibilities are not mutually exclusive.

Personality has not received much attention in recent marital adjustment research, and just like communication research, little research has explored personality in relation to marital adjustment during the transition to parenthood. This study found that personality traits, in particular husbands' personality traits, were moderately related to marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. Specifically, husbands' neuroticism, conscientiousness, and
agreeableness tended to correlate significantly with both husbands' and wives' marital adjustment. Wives' personality traits did not appear to relate to either wives' or husbands' marital adjustment, with the exception of wives' personality traits and husbands' Time 1 marital adjustment. Husbands' personality traits also were better predictors of changes in marital adjustment than were those of the wives. However, of the seven significant partial correlations between husbands' personality traits and marital adjustment, two were not in the predicted direction. None of the wives' personality traits were significantly correlated with changes in marital adjustment, whereas husbands' neuroticism and agreeableness consistently predicted changes in wives' marital adjustment. Thus, wives whose husbands were high in agreeableness and/or low in neuroticism tended to adjust better to the transition to parenthood.

It is quite striking how husbands' personality consistently correlated with both husbands' and wives' marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood, whereas wives' personality did not. One possible explanation for this finding may come from previous research on the division-of-labor within marital relationships. This research has found that wives contribute as much as 300% more than husbands to the overall childcare of the couples' child. However, we all know fathers who contribute a lot to raising their child, but rarely do we find mothers who contribute very little to child care. Thus, the amount of work a new father contributes to raising the child appears
to vary considerably between fathers, with some doing a great deal
and others rarely contributing anything at all, when compared to the
contributions of mothers. The possibility of wider variability in
parental input on behalf of the father may be affected by their
personality type. Therefore, it could be that due to husbands' greater
variability in childcare contributions, husbands' personality impacts
both spouses' marital adjustment more than does wives' personality
traits.

The correlational nature of this analysis also requires the same
consideration of plausible alternatives as did the constructive
communication analyses. One possibility is that personality is
impacting marital adjustment. A second possibility is that marital
adjustment is impacting an individual's personality, however, this is
somewhat unlikely due to the relative stability of personality. Finally,
a third variable could be causing the relationship.

The final hypothesis tested in this study was that
constructiveness of problem-solving communication would mediate
the relationship between personality and marital adjustment. This
hypothesis was based on the belief that personality would influence
the ability to communicate effectively with others. The statistical
analysis revealed that indeed both personality and communication
were related to marital adjustment, but their relationships were
independent of one another. Thus, no support was found for the
hypothesis that communication mediates the relationship between personality and marital adjustment.

Overall, this study found a moderate yet significant decline in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. Husbands’ and wives’ constructive communication consistently correlated with marital adjustment as did husbands’ personality traits. Only husbands’ personality traits were able to predict changes in marital adjustment across the transition to parenthood. And finally, constructive communication had no mediating effect on the relationship between personality and marital adjustment.

The findings in this study have interesting implications for PREPTM-type workshops. These findings show support for the importance of constructive communication in marital relationships and endorses a continued focus on communication in PREPTM-type workshops. However, it also points out the importance of personality traits, in particular those of the husbands. However, because personality traits are relatively stable, they may be nearly impossible to modify with a short-term workshop.

Even though valuable information was gained in terms of understanding what influences a couples’ marital adjustment, a number of issues for further research remain. First, it is still unclear what factors, if any, mediate the intricate relationship between personality traits and marital adjustment. Second, it remains unclear what factors predict which couples will suffer declines in their marital
adjustment. Third, it is unclear why wives’ personality traits related less consistently than husbands’ personality traits to marital adjustment? Additional marital adjustment research on the transition to parenthood that address these issues will aid in furthering our understanding of this complex life phase.

This study also had a number of limitations. Despite efforts to recruit a sample representative of the population at large, the sample was above-average in education and 89% Caucasian. Another possible limitation was the use of only self-report questionnaire data. A third possible limitation was the workshop aspect of the overall study. The workshop resulted in the formation of three groups, only one of which, the Control Group, ended up being truly randomly constituted. The randomly assigned Intervention Group broke into two groups, those who attended the workshop and those, the Refuser Group, that did not attend the workshop. Additionally, because the Intervention Group couples attended the workshop, we cannot rule out the possibility that this altered their experience of the transition to parenthood. Finally, perhaps the greatest limitation of the study was time. With only three and nine month follow-ups, the full impact of the transition to parenthood may not yet be evident. With perhaps an 18 or 24 month follow-up, a clearer picture of the relationship between communication, personality, and marital adjustment may have emerged.
The importance of gaining a greater understanding of the transition to parenthood was certainly exemplified within this sample of couples. Of the 70 couples in this study, at least four had already divorced or separated before their child's first birthday. The birth of their child, an event envisioned as a sign of commitment, more than likely contributed in some way to the end of these marriages.
APPENDIX A

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS QUESTIONNAIRE

Directions: We are interested in how you and your partner typically deal with problems in your relationship. Please rate each item on a scale of 1 (very unlikely) to 9 (very likely). We will begin by asking what happens when a problem arises. Then you will be asked what happens when you discuss the problem. Finally, you will be asked what happens after a discussion of a problem.

WHEN SOME PROBLEM IN THE RELATIONSHIP ARISES,

1. **Mutual Avoidance.** Both members avoid discussing the problem.
   
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

2. **Mutual Discussion.** Both members try to discuss the problem.
   
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

3. **Discussion/Avoidance.**
   
   A) Man tries to start a discussion while Woman tries to avoid a discussion.
   
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

   B) Woman tries to start a discussion while Man tries to avoid a discussion.
   
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

DURING A DISCUSSION OF A RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM,

4. **Mutual Blame.** Both members blame, accuse, and criticize each other.
   
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

5. **Mutual Expression.** Both members express their feelings to each other.
   
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

6. **Mutual Threat.** Both members threaten each other with negative consequences.
   
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

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7. **Mutual Negotiation.** Both members suggest possible solutions and compromises.

Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

8. **Demand/Withdraw.**

A) Man nags and demands while Woman withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further.

Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

B) Woman nags and demands while Man withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further.

Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

9. **Criticize/Defend.**

A) Man criticizes while Woman defends herself.

Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

B) Woman criticizes while Man defends himself.

Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

10. **Pressure/Resist.**

A) Man pressures Woman to take some action or stop some action, while Woman resists.

Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

B) Woman pressures Man to take some action or stop some action, while Man resists.

Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

11. **Emotional/Logical.**

A) Man expresses feelings while Woman offers reasons and solutions.

Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

B) Woman expresses feelings while Man offers reasons and solutions.

Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely
12. **Threaten/Back down.**

   A) Man threatens negative consequences and Woman gives in or backs down.
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely
   B) Woman threatens negative consequences and Man gives in or backs down.
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

13. **Verbal Aggression.**

   A) Man calls Woman names, swears at her, or attacks her character.
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely
   B) Woman calls Man names, swears at him, or attacks his character.
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

14. **Physical Aggression.**

   A) Man pushes, shoves, slaps, hits, or kicks Woman.
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely
   B) Woman pushes, shoves, slaps, hits, or kicks Man.
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

**AFTER A DISCUSSION OF A RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM,**

15. **Mutual Understanding.** Both feel each other has understood his/her position.
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

16. **Mutual Withdrawal.** Both withdraw from each other after the discussion.
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

17. **Mutual Resolution.** Both feel that the problem has been solved.
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely

18. **Mutual Withholding.** Neither partner is giving to the other after the discussion.
   Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely
19. **Mutual Reconciliation.** After the discussion, both try to be especially nice to each other.

| Very Unlikely | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Very Likely |

20. **Guilt/Hurt.**

**A)** Man feels guilty for what he said or did while Woman feels hurt.

| Very Unlikely | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Very Likely |

**B)** Woman feels guilty for what she said or did while Man feels hurt.

| Very Unlikely | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Very Likely |

21. **Reconcile/Withdraw.**

**A)** Man tries to be especially nice, acts as if things are back to normal, while Woman acts distant.

| Very Unlikely | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Very Likely |

**B)** Woman tries to be especially nice, acts as if things are back to normal, while Man acts distant.

| Very Unlikely | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Very Likely |

22. **Pressure/Resist.**

**A)** Man pressures Woman to apologize or promise to do better, while Woman resists.

| Very Unlikely | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Very Likely |

**B)** Woman pressures Man to apologize or promise to do better, while Man resists.

| Very Unlikely | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Very Likely |

23. **Support Seeking.**

**A)** Man seeks support from others (parent, friend, children).

| Very Unlikely | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Very Likely |

**B)** Woman seeks support from others (parent, friend, children).

| Very Unlikely | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Very Likely |
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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