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Running head: THE IMPACT OF A RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Impact of the P.I.C.K. a Partner Relationship Educational Program on Single Army Soldiers

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Abstract

Educating singles on how to develop healthy, romantic relationships can be beneficial to their subsequent dating and marital satisfaction, and for Army soldiers, their satisfaction with military life. A new relationship program, the P.I.C.K. program, was delivered to single Army soldiers, and at the conclusion of the program participants demonstrated an increase in their understanding of the crucial areas to explore and discuss in a premarital relationship, gained a better understanding of how to pace their relationship, and exhibited more realistic attitudes and beliefs about marriage and mate selection.

Key words: Army life, Premarital Relationships, Program Evaluation, Relationship Development, Relationship Education, Relationship Beliefs

The Impact of the P.I.C.K. a Partner Relationship Educational Program on Single Army Soldiers

The desire for the perfect marriage is alive and well in America. It is expected that more than 90% of all Americans will marry (Skolnick & Skolnick, 1997), and a survey of 20-29 year olds indicated that over 94% wanted to marry their soul mate (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2000). In fact, Americans marry at higher rates than people in all other parts of the world (Rutter & Schwartz, 2000). Despite the 40-50% divorce rate and a growing pessimism among youth about the chances of success in marriage, there is still an unwavering desire for the perfect marriage (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2002).

While the aspiration for a happy, lifelong marriage has not diminished throughout the years, the dating culture has significantly changed from that of the past (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2000). Americans are marrying at older ages than ever before, with the median age of first marriage for men being 27 years and for women 25 years (Johnson & Dye, 2005). This trend of delaying marriage has lengthened the amount of time spent in premarital relationships and has provided individuals with ample time to select a lifelong partner. However, in our society there is little preparation or guidance when selecting a marriage partner. Singles are now left to their own devices when it comes to dating relationships, which is vastly different from not too long ago when individuals were exposed to highly controlled relationships or even arranged marriages. Silliman (2003) argued,

“Today’s adolescents face personal and social conditions that place them at risk for dating and marital problems and offer little incentive or assistance in developing healthy relationships. Much of the effort is concentrated at marriage preparation, enrichment, and therapeutic divorce preparation and recovery, greater emphasis is needed in building healthy relationships beginning with dating competencies” (p.278).

Singles have been shown to hold unrealistic beliefs and expectations about their relationships (Silliman & Schumm, 2004). It is common for individuals in dating relationships to have positive illusions about their partners, which causes them to minimize partner faults and overemphasize their partner's favorable characteristics (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Single adults also hold romanticized beliefs, thinking that love is the most important basis for choosing a mate, that each person has only one true love, and that marriage will be perfect (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Idealized and romanticized views are common among adults of both genders, but men are more likely than women to hold such beliefs (Montgomery, 2005). These unrealistic expectations, or constraining beliefs, are destructive to intimate relationships because they are associated with decreased relationship satisfaction and stability (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). According to Larson (1992), constraining beliefs about mate selection are characterized as having four qualities: 1) they limit one's choices regarding who or when one marries; 2) they encourage exaggerated or minimal personal effort to find a suitable mate; 3) they inhibit thoughtful consideration of interpersonal strengths and weaknesses and of premarital factors known to have an influence on the success of marriage and; 4) bring about mate selection problems and frustration and restrict options for alternative solutions for problems.

Educating singles, primarily adolescents, young adults, and singles-again on how to develop healthy and sound intimate relationships has positive consequences for their subsequent dating and marital satisfaction (Cobb, Larson, & Watson, 2003; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, Markman, 2006). Gardner, Giese, and Parrott (2004) argued that many relationship attitudes and behavior patterns are developed well before adulthood and marital engagement, which is when most couples attend premarital prevention programs. Studies evaluating the effectiveness of premarital education programs and courses have reported that participation is highly effective

and that couples who participate are typically better off than those who do not (Cole & Cole, 1999). Gardnerr (2001) also found that when high school students participated in a premarital education program they were less likely to see divorce as a good option and were slightly more favorable toward marriage preparation and counseling. Schumm, Silliman, and Bell (2000) found similar results among recently married Army soldiers. Amato and Rogers (1999) argued that these shifts in divorce attitudes are essential because individuals who adopted more favorable attitudes toward divorce tended to experience declines in relationship quality, whereas those who adopted less favorable attitudes toward divorce tended to experience improvements in relationship quality. Individuals who participate in premarital education programs are 31% less likely to divorce and have relationships characterized by greater marital quality and commitment (Stanley et al., 2006). Despite the apparent effectiveness of these programs, little to no research exists to document the benefits of preparing singles for marriage (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Premarital educational programs can benefit singles by teaching them about common predictors of stable and healthy relationships. Larson and Holman (1994) argued that, “couples need to be informed of the potential influences of these factors (that predict marital stability) *before* they marry, so they can make more informed choices, anticipate potential problems, and solve as many problems as possible before they get married” (p. 235). In addition, couples who are better acquainted before marriage have significantly higher marital quality (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Grover, Russell, Schumm & Paff-Bergen, 1985), and experience fewer problems when they face the inevitable difficulties of marriage (Grover et al., 1985). Stanley (2003) argued that one of the primary benefits of premarital education is that it slows couples down and fosters greater deliberation.

Overall, singles need guidance in making conscious, intentional decisions about dating and mate selection. Educating singles about healthy dating and marital choices holds tremendous promise for reducing the risk of future marital problems and divorce. While premarital education programming has been documented to positively impact couples, no research exist on the impact that similar programs would have on single adults. Currently, half of the entire military is comprised of single individuals (Department of Defense, 2003). This study sought to determine if a new program called the P.I.C.K. (Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge) a Partner (Van Epp, 2006) would be useful to them in enhancing their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about marriage and the mate selection process.

Marriage and Family Strengthening Programs in the Military

The United States Army has taken a vested interest in the status of their families. Research has demonstrated that soldier retention rates, overall satisfaction with military life, and healthy coping methods are all affected by the soldier's marital and family life satisfaction (Albano, 1994; Rosen & Durand, 1995; Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 1998). Still, marital conflict in general, and domestic violence specifically, tends to be prevalent in the military. Among a sample of Navy recruits, it was found that 50% reported being involved with intimate partner physical violence, as a victim, perpetrator, or both (White, Merrill, & Koss, 2001). However, marital adjustment and familial support are both associated with lowered incidence and severity of partner violence (Rosen, Kaminiski, Parmley, Knudson & Fancher , 2003).

Since 1999, the Building Strong and Ready Families program has taught soldiers and their spouses skills on how to reduce conflict, strengthen marital ties, and improve confidence in their relationships (Stanley, et al. 2005). While all of these skills are vital to the health of Army families, single or single-again individuals are left, once again, with little guidance.

According to a 2003 report published by the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Military Community and Family Policy), there are approximately 626,777 singles in the Military and 46,998 divorcees, which means that almost half of the entire Military is comprised of single individuals. In addition, service personnel are more likely to marry and more likely to divorce than male civilians and subsidies for married servicepersons may encourage service members to enter into unhealthy marriages (Flueck & Zax, 1995). Therefore it is imperative that Army soldiers are offered preventative educational programs that teach healthy relationship skills in order to prevent unhealthy marriages and help military singles make informed decisions about their marital and family life (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003).

The P.I.C.K. a Partner Program

The P.I.C.K. Program (Van Epp, 2006) presents a practical and comprehensive overview of the crucial areas to explore in a dating relationship. The program is based on a conceptual model of adult attachment, which provides an overarching structure for understanding how to pace growing closeness in a premarital relationship, while exploring the strongest, premarital predictors of post-marital attitudes, behaviors, and satisfaction. The P.I.C.K. Program integrates findings from the extensive body of marriage and relationship research and presents information in a way that is easy to understand.

The goals of this premarital program are twofold. First, this program alerts participants to the major predictors of marital satisfaction by describing aspects of a potential mate that should be considered during the dating relationship. Second, participants are instructed on how to pace a growing attachment by providing a model of the forces which create feelings of closeness and cohesion in a relationship, and by explaining how to balance these forces and enforce boundaries in a relationship. The P.I.C.K. Program covers a vast amount of information about mate choice

and relationship building. Yet, one of the primary strengths of the program is that it organizes this information in a simple format, which addresses cognitive, behavioral, and emotional aspects of relationships. The program organizes these components into two sections, termed the HEAD and the HEART.

The HEAD

The HEAD refers to knowledge acquired about a partner in the dating phase and the processes involved in getting to know a partner deeply and accurately. The processes include mutual self-disclosure, sharing diverse experiences, and engaging in these behaviors over time, which is important in a developing relationship (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997). When developing a close relationship, certain aspects of a prospective partner are telling of what they will be like as a life-long mate and are therefore important to get to know (Van Epp, 2006). According to the P.I.C.K. program, there are five relationship characteristics one should learn about their partner that have been shown throughout research to predict marital success (Hill & Peplau, 1998; Larson & Holman, 1994). These five characteristics are represented by the acronym F.A.C.E.S.: Family background, Attitudes and actions of the conscience, Compatibility potential, Examples of other relationships, and Skills in relationships.

Family Background. Family background highly impacts relationship quality and stability. A longitudinal study by Holman, Larson and Harmer (1994) found that a happy, stable premarital family/home environment was predictive of early marital quality and stability. Family-of-origin conflict negatively impacts subsequent marital quality; and expressiveness in one's family-of-origin has been shown to predict higher marital quality (Whyte, 1990). In addition, when individuals have a working model of their family-of-origin characterized by effective patterns of interaction they do better at managing the ordinary demands of adult

intimate partnerships (Sabetelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003). Those who have the perception of growing up in a less than optimal family, tend to experience more difficulties in their intimate relationships, are more difficult to please, and set unrealistic standards for their relationships (Sabetelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003). Overall, these studies demonstrate the strong connection between family background and one's later adult relationships. The P.I.C.K. program emphasizes the importance of taking into consideration one's past family experiences when getting to know a partner, and how this experience influences who they are as an adult.

The Attitudes and Actions of the Conscience. Van Epp (2006), the founder of the P.I.C.K. Program, emphasizes the importance of getting to know how an individual's conscience operates in close relationships. Research has shown that a healthy conscience is a trait among individuals in more stable marriages (Kurdek, 1993; Gattis, Berns, Simpson & Christensen, 2004) and that perspective taking is predictive of marital adjustment (Long & Andrews, 1990). In addition, people with a healthy conscience tend to be hardworking, responsible, dependable individuals who experience fewer areas of disagreement in their relationships (Friedman et al., 1995). Because research has demonstrated that having a healthy conscience is related to happier, healthier marriages it is important to understand how one's conscience operates in their close relationships.

Compatibility. Research has demonstrated that compatibility among partner's in terms of personality, leisure interests (Houts, Robbins & Huston, 1996), religion (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001) and sense of humor (Priest & Taylor Thein, 2003) influences marital quality and stability. These areas of compatibility are important to explore in a dating relationship. A partner's personality is a pervasive element to a relationship and has the potential, if undesirable in nature, to cause enduring problems and frustrations. Research consistently finds the personality traits of

neuroticism (Gattis, et al., 2004; Donnellan, et al., 2004), conscientiousness (Friedman, et al., 1995; Gattis, et al., 2004) and agreeableness (Gattis, et al.; Donnellan, et al.) to impact the developmental course of relationships. While two individuals may have characteristics that differ from one another; each partner should complement the other (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996). Couples with compatible characteristics experience heightened relationship satisfaction and stability (Gaunt, 2006; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000).

Examples of Other Relationships. The manner in which partners treat others and past partners is indicative of how they will treat future partners (Berk and Anderson, 2000). One way to understand this concept is through schemas and scripts (Surra & Bohman, 1991). Relationship schemas refer to the cognitive stories people form regarding their interactions in close relationships and scripts refer to the expectations of certain events (i.e. expecting flowers on Valentine's Day) in relationships (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997). Schemas and scripts involve using past relationship experiences to form expectations about how one thinks and behaves in current and future relationships (Honeycutt & Cantrill, 2000). Empirical evidence supports the notion that schemas and scripts guide social interactions. Furman, Simon, Shaffer, and Bouchey (2002) found that adolescent relationships with parents, romantic partners, and friends were interrelated in that interactions with friends influenced how adolescents treated parents and romantic partners. Further, Baxter, Dun and Sahlstein (2001) examined the rules of relating in social networks of young adults and found that rules related to loyalty, openness/honesty, and respect were applied not only to friendships but romantic relationships as well.

Relationship Skills. The most commonly addressed topic in premarital and marital programming is the importance of conflict resolution and communication skills (Hawkins, Caroll, & Doherty, 2004). Kelly, Huston and Cate (1985) found that premarital conflict is a

precursor to marital conflict and that it relates to the extent to which couples are satisfied after the first two and a half years of marriage. The way in which couples resolve conflict is equally important. For instance, satisfied couples report less impulsive and more cooperative, supportive, and flexible ways of resolving problems (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996). Low levels of problem-solving skills and lack of effective communication skills are related to rapid rates of relationship distress and deterioration (Cordova, Gee, & Warren, 2005; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). A deficiency of these skills in premarital relationships has been shown to translate into a lack of marital relationship skills (Markman, et al., 1988). After teaching couples to effectively communicate and use problem-solving skills, Kaiser, et al. (1998) found that marital dissolution was less common, rates of relationship satisfaction were higher, and positive communication behavior was more prevalent.

The HEART

The HEART component of the P.I.C.K. Program refers to a growing connection or feeling of love between partners. This connection is represented by the Relationship Attachment Model (R.A.M.; Figure 1), which is comprised of five dynamics: knowledge, trust, reliance, commitment, and sex. In a relationship, these five areas develop in unison meaning that growth in one area should not exceed growth in the others. For instance, under ideal circumstances, partners' trust should not exceed their knowledge of one another. Partners should similarly not be more reliant than trustworthy of one another, and partners should not commit to each other before sufficient knowledge is gained, and trust and reliance are established. Finally, partners should not advance too far in the sexual realm without taking the time to build up the four previous dynamics

Insert Figure 1 About Here

The R.A.M. is characterized by five assumptions (Van Epp, 2006). First, each component is a bonding force, meaning that each of the components produces a feeling of closeness in the relationship and to one's partner. Second, each component has a range, meaning the dynamics can occur with varying degrees of intensity. Third, the components are independent but also interactive such that they develop separately but not without affecting the entire balance of the relationship. Fourth, each component is both personal and reciprocal, meaning that feelings of closeness emerge from the components but the dynamics work both ways. For example, the more you know someone the closer you feel to them, and the more they get to know you, the closer you feel to them. Finally, the components have a logical, hierarchical order and can collectively illustrate healthy versus unhealthy or vulnerable versus less vulnerable relationships based on the level of each component. When an individual and couple paces the development of a relationship so that the levels grow in unison over time, risk is minimized and objective insight into the partner and the relationship is maximized (Van Epp, 2006).

Overall, the objective of the P.I.C.K. Program is to teach singles about the five areas (i.e., F.A.C.E.S.) that are predictive of what a partner may be like in a future marriage. In addition, the P.I.C.K. Program aims to empower single individuals by providing them with an understanding about how to pace their growing relationships in a healthy way. In doing so, it is hoped that singles will not over-attach in a developing relationship and overlook major flaws in a partner which could lead to vulnerability, disillusionment, and relationship termination.

Purpose and Hypotheses

The P.I.C.K. Program was offered as a compliment to existing well-being programs offered in the Army that do not specifically address relationship stability for single soldiers. This evaluation of the P.I.C.K. Program examined changes in participants' knowledge and attitudes

about relationship development and marriage as a result of participation. We hypothesized that participants would develop a heightened understanding of the crucial areas to explore and discuss in a premarital relationship. Also, because beliefs about mate selection influence one's feelings and behavior in a relationship (see Cobb et al, 2003), we hypothesized that participants' attitudes would change such that they would express more positive and realistic expectations about marriage and mate selection. Further, we expected that participants would become more knowledgeable and confident in their ability to form and maintain a healthy relationship and marriage.

Method

Program Delivery Methods

The P.I.C.K. Program was evaluated in two United States Army training centers located at Fort Jackson (South Carolina) and the Defense Language Institute (California). Army Family Life Chaplains agreed to be trained in the program and deliver the program to soldiers at their respective training centers. The Chaplains were trained by the developer of the P.I.C.K. Program in one 8-hour instructor training session. In this session, Chaplains were provided with an in-depth explanation of the program material as well as an opportunity to discuss teaching approaches and address questions with the developer of the program. The P.I.C.K. Program consists of five, 50-minute sessions: (1) overview of the R.A.M.; (2) the predictive power of family background in romantic relationships; (3) the importance of getting to know their partner's conscience, compatibility potential, other relationships, and relationship skills; (4) trust and reliance in developing relationships; and (5) the development of commitment and the importance of enforcing sexual boundaries in romantic relationships. While the program consists of five, 50-minute sessions, instructors may deliver the program in the format they find most

convenient and conducive to their needs. The delivery methods specific to each site used in this particular study are summarized in Table 1 and described below.

At the Fort Jackson location, the instructor offered the program at four points in time between December 2004 and April 2005. The delivery method included two, three-hour sessions spaced one-week apart. Within a large lecture hall, a single instructor taught the P.I.C.K. Program using the lecture method with PowerPoint presentation, group discussion, and a few Hollywood video clips interspersed throughout the presentation. Method two followed the same schedule but used the video presentation of the program (little lecture) with facilitated discussion after each video segment. The last delivery method included one, eight-hour session with lecture, PowerPoint, and the integration of Hollywood video clips.

At the Defense Language Institute, the instructors offered the program at three points in time between December 2004 and May 2005. Each time, the program was delivered in six-sessions and taught by a team of three instructors. Five sessions were structured around the lunch hour on a typical week and taught using lecture format with about 5-10 minutes of class interaction at the end of the hour. The sixth session was delivered on Thursday evening in a 2-hour format, reviewing the first four sessions through discussion, illustration of concepts with movie and TV clips, and interaction exercises to promote insight and understanding of the material covered prior to participating in the final session..

Insert Table 1 About Here

Procedure and Participants

At the conclusion of each program, participants completed a retrospective pre-post questionnaire to document changes in knowledge and attitudes about dating and marital relationships. The retrospective design was chosen because traditional pretest-posttest designs

pose several limitations, one of which is that legitimate changes in knowledge and attitudes may be masked if the participants overestimate what they know or believe on the pretest. This is likely to occur if participants lack a clear understanding of the attitude, behavior, or skill the program is attempting to affect (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000). Taking part in the program may show participants that they actually knew much less or felt differently than they originally reported on the pretest - also referred to as the response shift bias (Howard & Dailey, 1979). Response shift bias can be avoided with retrospective pretest and post-test measures because participants rate themselves with a single frame of reference on both tests; in turn a more accurate assessment of changes in self-reported knowledge and attitudes may be produced with this design (Pratt et al, 2000; Goedhart & Hoogstraten, 1992). In addition, soldiers not participating in the program were recruited and voluntarily completed a similar survey to serve as a comparison to program participants' retrospective pretest responses. The program instructors collected and returned the completed surveys to the research team.

A total of 272 single soldiers from Fort Jackson and the Defense Language Institute completed a survey: 123 program participants and 149 comparison group (non-program). Table 2 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample. A majority of the singles were female (55.9%) and Caucasian (60.9%). Respondents were, on average, 22.3 years old (range 17-45, $SD = 4.9$) at the time of the survey, and 21.0 years old ($SD = 4.1$) when they enlisted in the Army. Nearly all participants (96.7%) had completed high school, and 63.9% had extended their education beyond high school. All of the respondents were currently single, 88.2% reported that they had never been married, and 48% reported that they were currently in a romantic relationship. Analyses comparing the program ($n=123$) and the comparison ($n=149$) groups showed that the program group was more likely to consist of singles who were, on average, older

($M=21.3$ vs. 23.4 ; $F=12.7$, $p=.000$), female (50.3% vs. 62.6%; $X^2=4.1$, $p=.04$), non-white (33.1% vs. 46.3%; $X^2=4.9$, $p=.03$) and previously married (6.1% vs. 18.7%, $X^2=10.3$, $p=.001$).

Insert Table 2 About Here

Measures

The survey assessed demographic variables, dating and relationship experiences, select attitudes regarding relationships and marriage, and participants' knowledge gained and confidence in the curriculum concepts. For the measures described below, program participants ($n = 123$) were asked to first think about how they felt about each item before participating in the program and second, how they felt after completing the program. The comparison group was only asked how they currently felt about each item.

Hypothesis 1. The extent to which participants placed importance on the five areas the program deems crucial to get to know about one's partner (F.A.C.E.S.), was evaluated using a 10-point Likert-scale, ranging from (1) *extremely unimportant* to (10) *extremely important*. The first area, *Family Background*, consisted of 5 items regarding a partner's family history and relationships (e.g., "how affection was shown in my partner's family;"). *Attitudes and Actions of the Conscience* (6 items) reflected a partners' conscientiousness (e.g., "how good my partner is at seeing my perspective"). *Compatibility* (8 items) evaluated the extent to which partners should know about their compatibility (e.g., "what my partner likes to do for fun;"). *Examples of Other Relationships* (3 items) measured the importance of knowing their partner's current and past relationship experiences (e.g., "my partner's 'bad habits' in previous relationships"). Last, *Skills in Relationships* (6 items) assessed the importance of understanding how their partner relates to others (e.g., "how well my partner communicates;"). Mean scores were computed for each area

of F.A.C.E.S., with higher scores implying a higher level of importance on getting to know the following about their partner (alpha reliabilities ranged from .77 to .95).

Hypothesis 2. The attitudes and beliefs held by soldiers concerning mate selection were measured using the 32-item Attitudes about Romance and Mate Selection Scale (Cobb et al, 2003). The instrument employs 28 questions, in addition to 4 distracter items, and is comprised of seven subscales (4-items each) which represent constraining beliefs about mate selection: 1) *One and Only*, e.g. “there is a one and only right person in the world for me to marry;” 2) *Love is Enough*, e.g. “falling in love with someone is sufficient reason for me to marry that person;” 3) *Cohabitation*, e.g. “if my future spouse and I live together before marriage, we will improve our chances of living together;” 4) *Perfect Partner/Idealization*, e.g. “until I find the perfect person to marry I should not get married;” 5) *The Perfect Relationship* e.g. “we must prove our relationship will work before getting married;” 6) *Ease of Effort*, e.g. “finding the right person to marry is more about luck than effort;” and 7) *Opposites Complement*, e.g. “I should choose someone to marry whose personal characteristics are opposite of my own.” The respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a 7-point Likert-scale ranging from (1) *very strongly disagree* to (6) *very strongly agree*. A mean score was computed with higher scores indicating a more intense constraining belief about mate selection in that particular subscale. Alpha coefficients for the subscales ranged from .49 to .94, which are comparable to those obtained by Cobb et al 2003.

Hypothesis 3. Program participants’ knowledge gained from the program and confidence in their abilities to use the skills learned was evaluated via a 15 question scale utilizing a 6-point Likert-scale ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (6) *strongly agree*. Sample items for knowledge included “I can identify the things that are important to get to know about a partner”

and “I understand that going too fast too soon in a relationship can result in overlooking problems in a partner.” Sample items for confidence included “I feel confident in my ability to maintain a balance between the critical bonding dynamics in a relationship” and “I feel confident that I will spend plenty of time figuring out what my partner is really like before becoming too involved.” A mean score was computed for knowledge gained (10-items) with higher scores indicating feeling more knowledgeable about developing a healthy relationship that leads to a healthy marriage (alpha reliability = .86 before and .77 after). Similarly, a mean score was computed for confidence (5-items) with high scores reflecting that they feel more confident in their abilities to use the skills taught in the program to develop a healthy relationship (alpha reliability = .87 before and .82 after).

Perceptions of the program. Program participants were asked to rate their level of agreement, (1) *strongly disagree* to (6) *strongly agree*, with a series of questions regarding their perceptions of the program. Sample items included “I learned new information from this program”, “I plan to use the information I learned from this program,” “Overall, I am very satisfied with the program” and “I would recommend this program to other singles”. In addition, all program and non-program participants were asked an open-ended question at the end of the survey to describe their general thoughts on dating relationship experiences and, for program participant only, their participation in the program.

Analyses

Analyses presented here used multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to compare program participants’ retrospective pretest scores to scores from the comparison group to determine whether program participants had similar attitudes and beliefs regarding dating relationships and marriage prior to participation in the P.I.C.K. program. If the multivariate

analyses yielded statistically significant results, univariate analyses were conducted to identify where those differences existed. In addition, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was run controlling for the demographic differences between groups on age, gender, race and prior marital experience. Because the MANCOVA yielded similar results, only the MANOVA findings are presented below. Next, similar procedures were followed using program participants' retrospective pretest and posttest scores. Repeated measures MANOVA was used to determine whether the program impacted changes in attitudes and knowledge with time (pretest vs. posttest) as the within subjects factor. The practical significance of the findings, or the strength of association between the dependent and independent variables examined (effect size), is reported using the partial eta-squared. As well, analyses were conducted comparing the effects of the program on men versus women (time x gender) and the effects of method of delivery (time x method) to determine whether the number and format of sessions delivered influenced the impact of the program on participants.

Results

Hypothesis 1. Table 3 presents scores on the extent to which participants placed importance on the five major areas of a potential mate that should be considered and explored during the dating relationship (F.A.C.E.S.). On average, respondents pretest ratings of each of the areas ranged from slightly ($M = 6.2$) to fairly ($M = 8.3$) important. Multivariate analyses showed an overall group difference, $F(5, 258) = 2.3$ ($p = .04$; partial $\eta^2 = .04$), and univariate analyses showed only one significant difference between the program and comparison group participants' pretest scores: program participants, on average, placed less importance on getting to know their partner's family background, $F(1, 262) = 4.6$ ($p = .03$; partial $\eta^2 = .02$). Following the conclusion of the program, multivariate analyses showed a significant program impact, $F(5,$

115) = 20.5 ($p = .000$), with an overall effect size of .47. Follow-up analyses revealed that program participants, on average, placed greater importance on getting to know their partner in each of the five areas. No significant time x gender or time x method effects were found.

Insert Table 3 About Here

Hypothesis 2. Regarding their attitudes about romance and mate selection, respondents' pretest scores, on average, ranged from disagreement ($M = 3.3$) to strong agreement ($M = 5.5$) on each of the constraining beliefs (see Table 4). Analyses revealed no significant differences between program and comparison group participants' pretest scores, $F(7, 260) = 1.53$ ($p = .16$). After the program, multivariate analyses showed a significant program impact, $F(7, 113) = 9.22$ ($p = .000$), with an overall effect size of .36. Univariate contrasts showed that program participants, on average, reported less constraining beliefs that love is sufficient reason to marry, that cohabitation can strengthen one's future marriage, that opposites compliment, that choosing a mate should be easy, and that mate selection is a matter of chance or accident. In contrast, program participants, on average, tended to agree more with the belief that one should wait to marry until they find the right/perfect partner and that they must feel completely assured of marital success before getting married. Although it has been argued that persons who hold these last two beliefs of idealization and complete assurance may be constrained from making the decision to marry (Cobb, et al., 2003) we would argue that by participating in the program these soldiers have a stronger understanding of the importance of taking time during the courtship process to get to know their partner and whether their relationship is ready for matrimony.

Insert Table 4 About Here

Additional analyses further revealed that a significant time x gender effect, $F(7, 112) = 2.11$ ($p = .05$). Univariate contrasts showed that after the program, female participants, on

average, tended to agree more with the belief that one should wait to marry until they find the perfect partner than male participants (females: 4.6 to 4.9; males: 4.6 to 4.7), $F(1, 118) = 4.10$ ($p = .05$). Also, female participants agreed less with the belief that love is sufficient reason to marry compared to male participants following the program (females: 4.3 to 3.6; males: 4.6 to 4.4), $F(1, 118) = 6.10$ ($p = .02$; partial $\eta^2 = .04$). No significant time x method effects were found.

Hypothesis 3. Analyses showed statistically significant gains in program participants' retrospective pretest to posttest scores on knowledge gained from the program and confidence in their abilities to use the skills taught. After the program, participants felt more knowledgeable about developing a healthy relationship that leads to a healthy marriage (retrospective pre-test mean = 4.26, $SD = .86$; post-test mean = 5.33, $SD = .50$), $F(1, 116) = 133.59$ ($p = .000$), with an overall effect size of .60. As well, program participants felt more confident in their abilities to use the skills learned to develop a healthy relationship (retrospective pre-test mean = 4.11, $SD = 1.06$; post-test mean = 5.15, $SD = .74$), $F(1, 116) = 126.69$ ($p = .000$), with an overall effect size of .52. No significant time x gender or time x mode effects were found.

Perceptions of the program. After completing the program, participants described their experience as valuable and rewarding. Among the 123 participants, 96.7% agreed they learned new information, 95.0% felt more confident in their dating relationships, 98.3% agreed they planned to use the information learned, 96.7% agreed the program was helpful, 97.5% agreed they would recommend this program to other singles; and 96.7% agreed that overall, they were satisfied with the program. The open-ended, qualitative responses indicated similarly positive attitudes about participation in the program. In the words of one respondent, "I really enjoyed and learned a lot from this program. I highly recommend that this program be given often to

singles.” Another respondent noted “I think this is a good program. It actually opens your eyes to things you may not have thought to see. It has helped me think about things more clearly.”

Discussion

The purpose of our research was to evaluate the P.I.C.K. Program, a relationship education program for singles, that was offered as a compliment to existing well-being programs in the Army. When comparing program participants to the non-program participants, results suggested that program participants were, on average, older, female, non-white, and previously married. Because participation in the program was voluntary, perhaps those who are older may have felt that marriage is more imminent and were therefore more likely to volunteer. Similarly, individuals who had been previously married and suffered a divorce might have been more likely to seek out guidance for selecting a partner the second time around. While these differences are important to note, they offer further support to the idea that single individuals desire guidance in the mate selection process.

This evaluation of the P.I.C.K. Program examined three specific hypotheses. First, it was expected that participants would develop a heightened understanding of the key areas to explore in premarital relationships. The program focused on five key areas that are predictive of marital success: family background, attitudes and actions of the conscience, compatibility potential, examples of other relationships, and skills in relationships. Results suggested that compared to those who did not participate in the P.I.C.K. Program, participants of the program placed significantly greater emphasis on getting to know the key predictors of marital success when dating a potential marriage partner. After completing the program, participants made comments in their open-ended responses, which reinforced these attitudinal shifts. One participant noted that the “program really taught [her] how important family is when it comes to marriage

choices!” Another participant remarked that the program “opens your eyes to things you may not have thought to see. It [helps you] think about things more clearly.” A clear attitudinal change occurred for participants following the program; however the longevity of this attitudinal shift as well as the translation into behavioral changes is still unknown.

Next, we hypothesized that participants' would have more positive and realistic expectations about marriage and mate selection after completing the program. Results indicated that program participants were significantly less likely to adopt the unrealistic, or constraining, beliefs that love is enough, that cohabitation is a good idea before marriage, that opposite personalities are complementary, that choosing a partner should be easy, and that finding the right partner is just a matter of chance. Previous studies found that men and women both are susceptible to these constraining beliefs about romance and mate selection (Cobb et al., 2003; Sprecher & Metts, 1999), but that women are more realistic than men in their views (Montgomery, 2005). Our study similarly found that females agreed more with the belief that one should wait to get married until they have found the perfect partner and are completely sure about their partner. As well, women were less likely than men, following the program, to hold the constraining belief that love is enough reason to marry. Taken together, these findings may be attributed to the P.I.C.K. Program's emphasis on being more deliberate in the mate selection process, which could have influenced respondents' perceptions of the questions regarding these specific constraining beliefs. As one participant described, “I basically knew all the facts but used to toss them aside and ‘follow my heart.’ Now I understand the importance of being rational when entering a relationship.”

For our final hypothesis, the program was found to significantly impact participants' knowledge and confidence in their abilities to use the skills taught in the program. Program

participants felt more knowledgeable about developing a healthy relationship that will lead to a healthy marriage. As well, program participants felt more confident in their abilities to use the skills learned to develop healthy relationships when compared to non-program participants. As one participant noted, “This program has reassured me that I am making a right decision in my engagement because all the steps that should be taken I’ve seen that I have taken them”. The confidence expressed by this participant stands in stark contrast to the uncertainty expressed by a non-program participant regarding her current relationship and decision to marry: “My boyfriend and I have been dating for a year, but it has not gotten serious until about 4 months ago when we moved in together. Now I am pregnant, I think we moved too fast but on the other hand maybe we should get married just to make it right and easier. But I really don’t know what to do”.

Nielsen, et al. (2004) argued that singles, “lack a map for dealing with the highly predictable difficulties that are associated with future marriages” (p. 487). Thus, educating singles on how to develop healthy, romantic relationships can be beneficial to their later dating and marital satisfaction, and for Army soldiers, their satisfaction with military life. Notably, there is limited research that specifically explores the effectiveness of relationship educational programming on youth and singles entering romantic relationships. Our findings demonstrate that educating singles on how to develop healthy, romantic relationships is advantageous.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the long-term effects of the P.I.C.K. Program cannot be determined from this study, the short-term attitudinal shifts are apparent. Our research demonstrated that program participants were more likely than non-program participants to place more importance on getting to know the five key areas about a prospective partner the program emphasizes, less likely to adopt constraining beliefs about romance and mate selection, and were more knowledgeable and

confident in their abilities to select a marital partner. One limitation of this study is that the data were based on self-report questionnaires. Although self-report methods generally provide accurate assessments of participant attitudes, responses based on social desirability may be of concern. By including behavioral assessments in future studies, researchers will better understand whether reported attitudes are reflective of actual behaviors. Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether the short-term attitudinal shifts are predictive of long-term behavioral changes in premarital relationships.

A second limitation is related to the homogenous sample of U. S. Army soldiers. Although the participants were varied in terms of age, race, and other demographic characteristics, the results are reflective of a select group of people and may not be generalizable to all singles. Soldiers spend much of their time immersed in an environment consisting of other soldiers. Individuals who belong to a less homogenous group may be different from soldiers who share a similar lifestyle. It is recommended that future researchers evaluate the P.I.C.K. Program in non-soldier populations of single individuals.

Conclusion

This study provides initial support for the effectiveness of educating young adult singles on how to develop healthy relationships in preparation for marriage. Our research showed that program participants were more likely to place importance on getting to know the five key areas of a prospective partner, less likely to adopt constraining beliefs about romance and mate selection, and more knowledgeable and confident in their abilities to select a marital partner after participating in the program. These findings are important and serve as a stepping stone for future researchers to evaluate the long-term effects of premarital education programs.

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Figure 1:

The Romantic Attachment Model (R.A.M.)

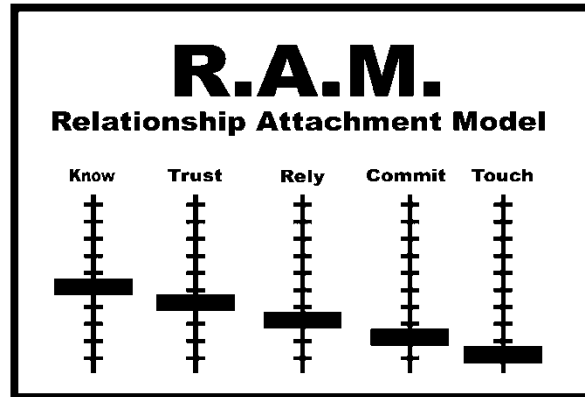


Table 1.

Program Delivery Method and Number of Program and Survey Participants.

Method (Site)	Number of Sessions	Teaching Format	Number of Participants	Returned and Completed Surveys
Method 1 (FJ)	2	Lecture, PowerPoint, Movie Clips, Discussion	63	62
Method 2 (FJ)	2	Program Video and Discussion	22	20
Method 3 (FJ)	1	Lecture, PowerPoint, Movie Clips, Discussion	25	25
Method 4 (DLI)	6	Lecture, Movie Clips, Discussion	39	16

Note: FJ = Fort Jackson; DLI = Defense Language Institute.

Table 2.

Demographic Characteristics of Program and Comparison Group Participants

	Overall (N=272)	Comparison (n=149)	Program (n=123)
Gender (% Male)	44.1	49.7	37.4
Current Age (%)			
17-20Years Old	48.4	53.7	41.9
21-24 Years Old	30.6	31.6	29.5
25 and Older	21.0	14.7	28.6
Mean (SD)	22.3 (4.9)	21.3 (3.9)	23.4 (5.7)
Age when joined the Army (%)			
17-20Years Old	57.6	57.8	57.4
21-24 Years Old	29.9	32.2	27.0
25 and Older	12.5	10.0	15.6
Mean (SD)	21.0 (4.1)	20.8 (3.9)	21.2 (4.4)
Race (%)			
Caucasian	60.9	66.9	53.7
African American	14.4	12.8	16.3
Hispanic	10.3	7.4	13.8
Other (Multiracial)	14.4	12.9	16.2
Religiously Affiliated (% Yes)	83.8	85.2	82.1
Highest Grade Completed (%)			
Less than High School	3.3	4.1	2.4
High School Grad/GED	32.7	36.3	28.5
Beyond High School	63.9	59.6	69.1
Marital Status (% Never Married)	88.2	93.9	81.3
Have Children (% Yes)	15.6	8.8	23.6
Prior Participation in Relationship Programs (% Yes)	6.6	6.7	6.5
Parent's Marital Status (%)			
Never married	11.6	10.4	13.1
Married	37.5	35.2	40.2
Separated/Divorced	44.9	47.6	41.8
Widowed	6.0	6.8	4.9

Table 3.

Program and Comparison Group Mean (SD) Scores on the Importance of Knowing and Exploring the Five Areas of a Potential Mate During the Dating Relationship (F.A.C.E.S.)

Construct	Comparison Group (n=144)	Program Group (n = 120)			
		Before	After	F-value	Partial η^2
Family Background	7.04 (1.78)	6.54 (2.01)	8.39 (1.78)	100.96	0.46
Attitudes and Actions of the Conscience	8.29 (1.40)	8.02 (1.69)	8.77 (1.68)	41.10	0.26
Compatibility Potential	8.04 (1.32)	7.72 (1.56)	8.52 (1.60)	46.67	0.28
Examples of Other Relationships	6.18 (2.34)	6.45 (2.23)	7.95 (2.21)	55.64	0.32
Skills in Relationships	8.27 (1.53)	8.03 (1.77)	8.87 (1.70)	40.34	0.25

Note: all F-values significant at $p < .001$.

Table 4.

Program and Comparison Group Mean (SD) Scores on the Attitudes about Romance and Mate Selection Subscales.

Construct	Comparison Group (n=148)	Program Group (n=120)			
		Before	After	F-value	Partial η^2
One and Only	4.24 (1.36)	4.44 (1.29)	4.45 (1.40)	.01	0.00
Love is Enough	4.51 (1.29)	4.39 (1.37)	3.89 (1.41)	25.91**	0.18
Cohabitation	4.35 (1.67)	4.04 (1.63)	3.46 (1.61)	25.37**	0.18
Opposites Complement	3.37 (0.84)	3.29 (0.87)	3.13 (0.96)	4.65*	0.04
Ease of Effort	3.78 (1.07)	3.54 (1.30)	3.26 (1.24)	8.73*	0.07
Perfect Partner/Idealization	4.50 (0.96)	4.59 (1.02)	4.84 (1.20)	10.90**	0.08
Perfect Relationship/ Complete Assurance	5.50 (1.04)	5.34 (1.14)	5.83 (1.04)	28.99**	0.20

*Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$*