The Influence of a Financial Management Course on Couples' Relationship Quality

Kevin J. Zimmerman and Carl W. Roberts

This mixed-methods study investigated the influence of a financial management course on couples' relationship quality. Based on family stress theory, we hypothesized that couples who attended the course would report an improvement in their relationship quality, and that greater implementation of the financial management practices recommended in the course would be related to an increase in relationship quality, accounting for time living together and income. The data from 32 couples supported our hypotheses and revealed that couples' relationship quality improved during the course. Greater implementation of financial management practices was found to be associated with improvement in relationship quality. Participants identified improved communication as the primary reason for improved relationship quality.

Key Words: couple and family therapy, couple communication, family stress theory, financial management course, relationship quality

Introduction

Couples who have conflict over money often report lower relationship quality. Research has linked couple financial strain to increased emotional distress for both the husband and the wife (Gudmundson, Beutler, Israelsen, McCoy, & Hill, 2007). Other research has found that financial factors predicted 15% of marital satisfaction, while couples' perceived magnitude of financial problems had an inverse relationship with relationship quality (Kerkmann, Lee, Lown, & Allgood, 2000). Further, high financial satisfaction has been shown to be strongly associated with marital quality (Grable, Britt, & Cantrell, 2007) and completely paying off consumer debt appears to be positively related to marital satisfaction (Dew, 2008).

Couples who are experiencing difficulty managing their personal finances may choose to attend a financial management course. Some research indicates that the crux of much couple conflict over money was a lack of communication (Klein, 1998; Olson, DeFrain, & Skogrand, 2007; Pahl, 1989; Zagorsky, 2003). Thus, participating in a financial management course may prove helpful for some couples because it provides a framework for systematically learning about and discussing financial topics. Further, couples who control their finances through budgeting, saving, and record keeping appear to be less likely to argue about money (Lawrence, Thomasson, Wozniak, & Prawitz, 1993). In a strengths-based, qualitative study of financial management practices of couples with great marriages, couples reported having a high degree of trust, good communication about finances, and little or no debt (Skogrand, Johnson, Horrocks, & DeFrain, 2011). The purpose of the present study was to investigate the influence of attending a financial management course on couples' relationship quality.

Review of Literature

Conger's family stress theory describes the process whereby financial strain affects relationship quality (Conger et al., 1990; Conger, Reuter, & Elder, 1999). When couples experience economic stress, they tend to increase their hostility, while reducing their warmth and supportive behaviors toward each other. The increased hostility and reduced warmth and support can reduce couples' relationship quality. Papp and her associates (2009) used family stress theory to examine the role of money as a topic of relationship conflict and noted that the model did not sufficiently explain why conflict continues to occur over money when it is not scarce.

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A study of 1,010 newlywed couples found that debt, particularly auto loan debt and credit card debt, was associated with lower marital satisfaction and was the most problematic difficulty that they encountered in the first months of their marriage (Skogrand, Schramm, Marshall, & Lee, 2005). Financial strain can also affect couples' feelings of validation, power, freedom, respect, happiness, and security within a relationship (Shapiro, 2007; Washburn & Christensen, 2008). Length of relationship has been found to influence couples' disagreements about money, with arguments over finances decreasing as length of relationship increases (Lawrence et al., 1993). One study of African-American men found that financial strain was a factor contributing to their divorce (Lawson & Thompson, 1995). A study of 92 gay male couples found that 39% of the couples reported persistent money conflicts despite generally high incomes (Berger, 1990).

Conflict over money may be a result of a lack of communication between partners about their finances. Some couples rarely discuss finances, or it may be a taboo topic (Klein, 1998; Olson, DeFrain, & Skogrand, 2007). Pahl (1989) noted that many of her interviewees seemed to have rarely, if ever, talked about finances with anyone before. Zagorsky (2003) found that partners who had smaller discrepancies with each other when reporting their household income and net worth were less likely to divorce than couples whose financial reports were more discrepant. Gudmunson et al. (2007) reported that couple financial strain was correlated to couple fights and negatively related to the quality time that the couple spends together. Papp, Cummings, and Goeke-Morey (2009) found that among 100 married couples with children, money conflicts were more severe than other conflicts and were less likely to be resolved. A lack of communication about finances can lead to misperceptions about partners' spending behaviors, which can lower relationship quality (Britt, Grable, Nelson Goff, & White, 2008).

Hypotheses

The present mixed-methods study aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the association between attending a financial management course and couples' relationship quality, and to account for the extent to which they adopted the recommendations of the course. Building on the family stress theory of Conger and his associates (Conger et al., 1990; Conger, Reuter, & Elder, 1999), two hypotheses were tested.

Hypothesis 1

On the basis of Conger et al.'s (1990) model that economic stressors negatively influence couples' warmth and supportive behaviors toward each other, thereby negatively influencing communication and relationship quality, we assumed that couples who attend a weekly course together, and who are asked to read and discuss content of the course between classes, would report an improvement in their relationship quality. Because the course is about personal financial management, a topic that many couples find uncomfortable discussing, it is likely to facilitate couple communication that either would not have occurred otherwise, or that might have occurred but with greater conflict. Specifically, we supposed that relationship quality improves from the beginning of the course to the end. This assumption is supported by the results of previous studies showing that relationship quality is negatively associated with financial stress (Conger et al., 1990; Conger, Reuter, & Elder, 1999) and positively associated with couple quality time (Gudmunson et al., 2007) and positive couple communication (Britt et al., 2008; Papp et al., 2009). To test this hypothesis, we measured couples' relationship quality at the beginning of the course, at the end of the course 13 weeks later, and six months after the completion of the course.

Hypothesis 2

Building on the theoretical model of Conger and his associates (1990, 1999), in which couples who experience economic stress report lower relationship quality, we hypothesized that greater implementation of the financial management practices recommended in the course (a concept we will refer to hereafter simply as "implementation") will be associated with greater gains in relationship quality. That is, there is a positive relationship between implementation and relationship quality. This assumption is based on previous findings indicating that an increase in financial satisfaction is positively related to an increase in relationship quality (Dew, 2008; Grable et al., 2007; Lawrence et al., 1993). To test this hypothesis, we constructed a measure to determine the degree of participants' implementation.

Method

Participants

Initial recruitment yielded 43 couples, and an attrition rate of 26% from the first wave to the third wave of data collection resulted in a total of 32 heterosexual, Caucasian couples ($N = 64$). The mean age was 36.7 years ($SD = 11.49$). The mean relationship duration was 11.25 years

(SD = 9.75), and all couples were married. All participants had completed high school, and most were college educated, having attended some college (N = 15), completed a college diploma (N = 32), or attained an advanced degree (N = 11). The median and modal (N = 18) household income range was $60,000 - $100,000 per year. An independent sample t-test revealed no substantive differences between male and female responses on any of the measured variables. When comparing the attrition group and the completion group, there were no differences in demographic variables including length of relationship, income level, age, or education, nor were there differences on the implementation measure between the two groups. However, members of the attrition group reported lower relationship quality as indicated by DAS scores than members of the completion group (at time 1, M = 98.56, SD = 19.98 for male attrition, M = 109.45, SD = 11.29 for male completion, M = 98.56, SD = 14.55 for female attrition, M = 108.07, SD = 13.16 for female completion; and at time 2, M = 100.71, SD = 13.71 for male attrition, M = 112.86, SD = 10.98 for male completion, M = 100.89, SD = 15.09 for female attrition, M = 114.65, SD = 7.65 for female completion). All participants self-selected to enroll in the financial management course.

Procedure and Measures

The first author identified upcoming courses and requested contact from course facilitators within a fifty mile radius of a Midwestern city using the "Find a Class" link on the Financial Peace University (FPU) course website (www.fpu.com). FPU is a 13-week personal finance training class for adults and covers topics such as cash flow planning, eliminating debt, investing, and saving. At each session, attendees typically watch a video presentation by Dave Ramsey, then engage in discussion related to the day's topic. Facilitators are individuals who volunteer to lead the course, usually among members of their church, although enrollment is open to all. Facilitators phoned the first author, who explained the nature of the research and asked for permission to come to the initial class and invite class members to be participants in the study. Twelve classes were visited in all, 11 of which met at various church buildings and one that met at a community center. Of the class members who were present, approximately 75% agreed to participate, and those who declined the invitation appeared to be older than those that agreed. Data were collected during the first class, the last class 13 weeks later, and six months after the end of the course when follow-up questionnaires were sent by mail to couples who had completed the first two rounds of data collection. There were no financial incentives for participants. In addition to demographic information, data were collected on implementation of course recommendations, relationship quality, and short-answer comments regarding whether or not they perceived an improvement in their relationships by administering the following measures.

Implementation Measure

Implementation was operationalized by participants' responses to questions about their personal money management, and items were created based on specific financial practices that students of the course were encouraged to employ. The 10 items addressed the number of credit cards the participants owned, having an emergency fund, having savings to cover 3-6 months of living expenses, keeping a balanced checkbook, following a budget, making financial decisions with a partner, negotiating for the price of purchases, investing regularly, using cash to pay for purchases, and how much participants expected to gain from attending the course. The implementation measure was given at time 1, which served as a baseline measurement, at time 2, serving as an end-of-course measure, and at time 3, serving as a follow-up to see whether any changes were lasting. Three additional items were added at time 2 that were relevant only during the course and thus appropriate to ask only at time 2. These three questions were about reading the book, using the buddy system, and using online resources. Since the number of implementation items varied by time of administration, the measure was averaged for each administration. The implementation variable, therefore, was the average of implementation items for each administration (Cronbach's α = .78 at time 1, .63 at time 2, and .72 at time 3).

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976)

This 32-item relationship satisfaction questionnaire is composed of four subscales: (a) dyadic satisfaction (e.g., "How often do you and your partner quarrel?"), (b) dyadic cohesion (e.g., "How often do you work together on a project?"), (c) dyadic consensus (e.g., "How often do you agree on handling family finances?"), and (d) affectional expression (e.g., "How often do you agree on demonstrations of affection?"). The linear combination of the four subscales represents a global index of relationship quality (Cronbach's α = .96, .94, and .94 for times 1, 2, and 3, respectively). Scores can range from 0 to 151, and higher scores reflect a better relationship.

Short Answer Responses

The follow-up questionnaire contained two open-ended response questions that read, “Dave Ramsey claims that couples who go through Financial Peace University see an improvement in their relationships. (a) To what extent has this been true for you? Please explain. (b) To what extent has this NOT been true for you? Please explain.” Response rates to the first question were high (N = 32 for males and 29 for females) and less than 50% for the second question (N = 18 for males and 10 for females), although 10 of the 28 total responses to question (b) did not address the question but rather were comments such as “already good,” or “It *has* been true.”

Data Analyses

Since our data involved measures at the level of the couple (namely, their joint income and months together) as well as repeated measures for each member of the couple (namely, on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale [DAS] and Implementation [I]), we fit multilevel growth curves to the data (Singer, 1998). The general form of these models is as follows: $Y = X\alpha + Z\beta + \varepsilon$, where $\varepsilon \sim N(0, \Sigma)$.

The usual relations were estimated between relationship quality or implementation (Y) and design factors (X) consisting of gender, assessment time prior to, during, and following the course, as well as couples’ income, months together, and (only when Y = relationship quality) implementation. Beyond this, marriages, within which our participants are paired, are identified within the Z-matrix, allowing marriage-specific variation in the dependent variable to be distinguished from its variation among measures taken at the three times that questionnaires were administered to each participant. The error variance-covariance matrix (Σ) is used to model any within-participant correlations among these measures, and any time-specific differences in variances. Although we found no evidence of the former (i.e., no autocorrelation), we did find that variance in DAS and I responses were nearly twice as large when administered at the first class as they were at either of the subsequent two administrations.

Results

Hypothesis Testing

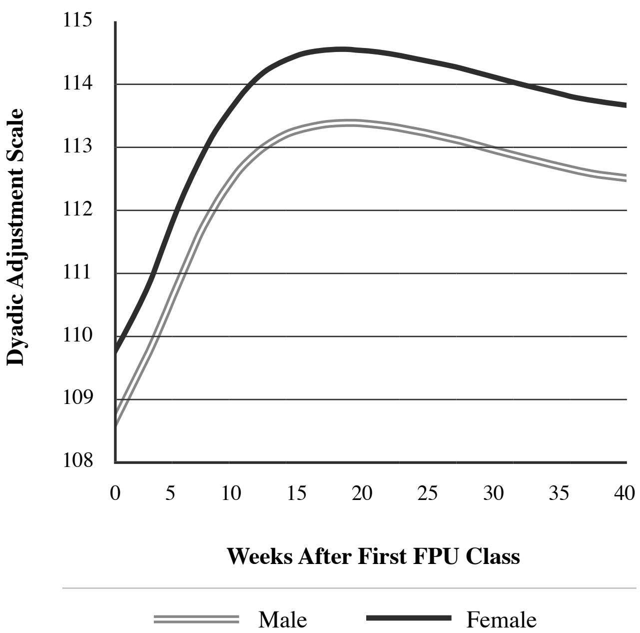
The raw DAS scores ranged from 75 to 135 and the raw implementation scores ranged from .10 to .90. Slope estimates of fixed effects from three multilevel growth curve models fit to the DAS data (see Table 1). Such models are appropriate whenever repeated measures of one’s dependent variables (i.e., *growth* in DAS and I) were analyzed as a function of independent variables that measured both group and individual (i.e., *multilevels* between joint income and months together versus DAS and I) characteristics of one’s subjects. The first model showed evidence of linear and quadratic changes in marital quality over the course of the study. Orthogonal coding of the linear and quadratic contrasts were respectively the number of weeks at which the survey was administered (0, 13, 39) and the values (2, -3, 1). In particular, the rate of increase in the Dyadic Adjustment Scale over the three administrations amounted to a modest .084 point average per week. Yet this gradual increase was supplemented by a boost of about 2 DAS points at the end of the 13-week course and a decline of .698 DAS point at the 6-month follow-up. Beyond this, neither gender’s interaction with time (not shown) nor its main effects differed significantly from zero. The plot in Figure 1 illustrates these trends.

Table 1. Multilevel Growth Curve Models Fit to the Dyadic Adjustment Scale

	Model 1.1	Model 1.2	Model 1.3
Linear	.084 (.031)	.051 (.034)	.019 (.035)
Quadratic	-.698 (.224)	-.463 (.245)	-.431 (.259)
Gender	1.162 (.882)	.921 (.897)	1.187 (.889)
Implementation		8.520 (3.847)	11.534 (5.175)
x Linear			-.226 (.171)
x Quadratic			4.077 (1.486)
x Gender			-1.959 (4.991)
Income			-1.050 (1.213)
Months together			.011 (.014)
BIC	-678.38	-673.90	-668.54
-2LL	1335.81	1326.87	1316.27

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses below estimates.

Figure 1. Plot of Estimated DAS Values from Model 1.1



However, note in Table 1 that in absolute value the linear and quadratic trends in Model 1.2 are considerably smaller than those in Model 1.1. That is, when one adjusts these temporal effects for concomitant trends in participants' implementation of course recommendations, changes in their relationship quality are no longer significant. Not only was the degree of implementation significantly associated with the quality of participants' relationships, it accounted for much of the trend in this quality depicted in Figure 1. This seems to provide empirical support that participation in a financial management class improved both female and male participants' marriages.

Model 1.3 provides an even better fit to the DAS data, and an even further reduction in their now only slightly positive (partial) linear trend. Moreover, we found that neither the magnitude of participants' incomes nor the length of their relationships had a significant effect on their relationship quality (net of these variables' collinearity with other independent variables in the model). In testing three interaction effects with participants' degree of implementation of course recommendations, we found only a single significant interaction between implementation and quadratic time. The positive slope here suggests that relationship quality was highest among participants whose degree of implementation contrasted with the overall DAS trend depicted in Figure 1–a contrast that begins and ends the study period with relatively high implementation but that at the 13-week point (when the course ended) showed lower implementation relative to times 1 and 3.

If degree of implementation was the determining factor in explaining participants' relationship quality, which participants implemented more of the financial management recommendations than others? Evidence in Table 2 is suggestive of an answer to this question. After modeling temporal and gender differences in degree of implementation (see Model 2.1), participants' income and months together were reconsidered in (an admittedly, considerably poorer-fitting) Model 2.2 as independent variables along with their interactions with the three independent variables in Model 2.1. Yet despite the marginal improvement in fit from Model 2.1 to a trimmed Model 2.3, a curious interpretation is afforded by the significant (p = .03) income-by-gender interaction estimated in the latter model.

Figure 2 depicts income- and gender-related differences in participants' overall implementation of course recommendations as estimated net of temporal effects in Model 2.3. In less affluent couples, husbands tended to implement more of the recommendations of the course than wives, whereas in more affluent couples wives tended to implement more recommendations than husbands.

Figure 2. Plot of Estimated Implementation Values from Model 2.3.

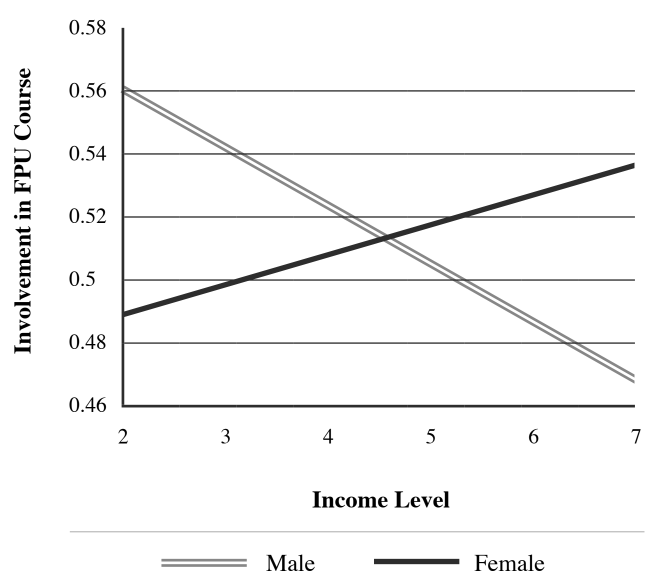


Table 2. Multilevel Growth Curve Models Fit to Degree Implementation

	Model 2.1	Model 2.2	Model 2.3
Linear	.040 (.006)	.040 (.006)	.040 (.006)
Quadratic	-.276 (.042)	-.276 (.042)	-.276 (.041)
Gender	.255 (.174)	.257 (.170)	.261 (.170)
Income		-.130 (.210)	-.044 (.169)
x Linear		.006 (.005)	
x Quadratic		-.017 (.033)	
x Gender		.305 (.135)	.277 (.129)
Months together		-.001 (.002)	
x Linear		-.0001 (.0001)	
x Quadratic		-.0004 (.0004)	
x Gender		-.001 (.002)	
BIC	-361.84	-392.39	-361.57
-2LL	702.74	764.00	702.23

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses below estimates. To provide more significant digits in the above estimates, implementation scores (originally on a value-range from 0 to 1 for each item) were multiplied by 10.

Thematic Content Analysis

Hypothesis 1 was that couples who attended the financial management course would see an improvement in their relationship quality. To understand participants' perspectives regarding the influence of attending the financial management course on their relationship quality, we conducted a thematic content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of short-answer responses. We coded each response by reason given for improved relationship quality or lack of improvement. Then we determined whether responses could be clustered into categories and whether the categories related to one another. Following this procedure, related categories or themes were combined. To ensure trustworthiness, short answer comments were then reanalyzed to determine whether responses adequately fit into the identified categories. The result was identification of two codes per question pertaining to participants' primary reasons for the course influencing or not influencing their relationship quality. We labeled the two themes that indicated improvement (a) communication and (b) consensus, and the two themes regarding a lack of improvement (c) pre-course relationship satisfaction and (d) persisting differences of opinion.

Eleven participants (18%) used some form of the word "communicate." One participant wrote, "My ex husband and I fought consistently about money and how it was spent and/or saved. [Name] and I have had open communication and started doing [the] plan right away and we rarely dispute financial matters." Another participant wrote, "We have an idea how to gain control of our finances. We are communicating about money." Consensus was indicated by two metaphors, which were being "on the same page" financially ($N = 11$) and working as a "team" ($N = 3$). One participant wrote, "Yes, we have had no fights over money and we are on the same page when it comes to finances. We have the same goal for paying off debt and being debt free. This has helped strengthen our relationship since we now have the same goal." Another participant wrote, "By getting on the same page with money it has eliminated most of the stress, worry and control issues involved with it. Because of that our relationship has improved greatly." Participants also used the team metaphor to communicate consensus, "I am more open with discussing financial things with my spouse. We discuss/compromise on our savings and spending. We work as a team." These responses support the quantitative data indicating an improvement in relationship quality scores, and they also indicate that participants in a financial management course see an improvement in their relationship quality. Participants most commonly reported improved communication about finances as the key explanation for their improved relationship quality.

Responses regarding lack of improvement indicated that participants were satisfied with their relationships prior to the course. One participant wrote, "We've always had a very good, stable relationship. I don't feel that we have any major issues that still need improvement." Such responses were more descriptive of the individuals' perception of the relationship than of the course. The second theme was couples' recognition that differences of opinion will continue to persist despite having similar goals or better communication. A participant wrote, “There are still some issues beyond money that pop up of course, but not having the money issues as a catalyst minimizes and lessens the frequency and anger etc. associated.” These responses indicated that participants were satisfied with their relationships prior to the course and that differences of opinion will continue to persist.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the association among variables focusing on couple relationship quality and degree of implementation of financial management practices in a financial management course, and to explore participants’ perceptions regarding the influence of the course on their relationship quality. Building on the family stress model proposed by Conger et al. (1990, 1999), three multilevel growth curve models were tested as outlined by Singer (2008). The results of the models supported our first hypothesis that attending the course was associated with improvement in relationship quality. Neither participant income level nor the length of their relationships had a significant effect on their relationship quality. Participants appeared to retain their gains in relationship satisfaction six months later, with only a slight regression toward pre-course levels over time. Additional post tests would likely indicate that relationship quality continues its return to pre-course levels. These qualitative data support earlier literature indicating a positive association between couple quality time (Hill, 2007), which we did not assess, positive couple communication (Britt et al., 2008; Papp et al., 2009; Skogrand et al., 2011) and relationship quality.

Evidence was also found for our second hypothesis that greater implementation of the recommendations of the course was associated with greater improvement in relationship quality. The degree of implementation was significantly associated with the quality of participants’ relationships, accounting for much of the trend in this quality. The written responses supported the quantitative findings of this study. While the data indicated an improvement in relationship quality, the written responses identified improved communication about finances as a key reason for the improved relationship quality. In particular, participants reported feeling “on the same page” and working as a “team” with their partners more than before.

Further, husbands in our sample tended to implement more of the course recommendations than wives in lower-income couples, whereas wives implemented more of the course recommendations than husbands in higher-income couples. We can only offer speculative inferences regarding this serendipitous finding. For example, males’ self-concepts may be more closely linked to their incomes than women’s (Chen & Volpe, 2002; Fehr-Duda, de Gennaro, & Schubert, 2006), making lower-income husbands more willing to try new money management practices in order to become more financially successful, and lower-income wives may feel less financial security to risk trying something new. Higher-income husbands, on the other hand, may be less willing than their wives to implement recommendations from the course because they perceive that what they have been doing has worked, so why change? Higher-income wives, on the other hand may feel more financially secure and therefore a greater willingness to make a change in the couple’s personal money management. Further, perhaps the reason higher-income couples have a higher income is because the wives have more experience managing finances and therefore more confidence to implement new financial practices that they may not have tried before (Chen & Volpe, 2002).

Results also supported the family stress theory (Conger et al., 1990, 1999), which predicts that improved communication about finances should decrease hostility and increase warmth and supportive behaviors, thereby positively influencing relationship quality. Improved communication, indicated by the written responses, and improved relationship quality are precisely what the results of this study indicate. In addition, Gudmunson et al. (2007) found that couple quality time mediated the relationship between financial stress and relationship quality in the family stress theory. A possible contributing factor to the improvement in relationship quality is that couples were spending more couple quality time together during the 13 weeks of the course. This study did not assess for couple quality time, but such an explanation would support the findings of Gudmunson et al. A financial management course, indeed any course, that couples are able to attend together is likely to increase opportunities for the couple to spend quality time together and to communicate with each other.

Implications for these results apply primarily to four groups: those who would enroll in a financial management course, family educators, family therapists, and financial counselors and planners. First, couples should recognize that financial management courses are first and foremost a course about personal financial management, not therapy. Nonetheless, couples taking such a course may experience an improvement in their relationship quality, regardless of their level of relationship quality at the outset. This improvement is likely the product of increased and better communication about finances. Several researchers have already noted the possible benefits of family therapists and financial counselors working together (Britt et al., 2008; Papp et al., 2009). Such collaboration may entail a form of "relational financial therapy" as described by Gale, Goetz, and Bermudez (2009), who used a five-session model aimed at reducing both relationship difficulties and problematic financial practices. Family therapists and financial counselors might wish to find ways to meet together with clients, when possible. More often, however, family therapists and financial counselors will find it infeasible to work together. In this case, financial counselors and planners might consider educating themselves more, formally or informally, about relationship dynamics and therapeutic practices that may aid them in their work with couples who experience conflict over money. Likewise, family therapists may wish to learn how to counsel their clients on such practical financial practices as writing and following a budget and keeping track of their expenditures.

In cases where family educators, family therapists, or financial counselors and planners lack sufficient training or confidence to provide the service that their prospective clients desire, they might wish to learn about others in the community who may be able to provide the service and make a referral, as others have recommended (Kerkmann, Lee, Lown, & Allgood, 2000). Similarly, family therapists may refer couples to financial counselors and planners (Brock & Barnard, 1998). Both therapists and financial counselors and planners may wish to stay informed regarding upcoming financial management courses that are being offered in the community and let their clients know that such a course may serve as an important adjunct to therapy or financial counseling.

Communication seems to be instrumental in both couple financial management practices and relationship quality. Most participants commented in their short answer responses that the course had improved their ability to communicate about finances. Therapists and financial counselors and planners may wish to encourage their clients to discuss their financial goals together, to work on a budget together, or to read a personal finance book together and discuss what they learn. A directed task such as this can provide couples with an external focal point of discussion, which may curtail the more unpleasant quarrels over their partner's perceived shortcomings regarding finances. Such discussions may also clarify misperceptions about each other's spending that Britt et al. (2008) found to be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction.

The findings of this study should be regarded with some caution. First, the sample was small and homogenous in that all 64 participants were Caucasian and married, and most had a college education and high household incomes. The participants self-selected to enroll in the course. The attrition rate from the initial questionnaire to the follow-up represents a serious limitation. Those who completed the study may be more altruistic and cooperative than those in the attrition group, which in turn possibly biased the validity of our qualitative findings. Further, given that the attrition group reported lower relationship quality as indicated by DAS scores than members of the completion group, we cannot exclude the possibility that the financial management program itself increased relationship conflict for these couples, leading them to drop out. Second, the degree of implementation measure was created for this particular study, and the low Cronbach's α (.78) indicates a low inter-item correlation on the measure, suggesting that its usefulness in assessing people's healthy personal financial practices needs further evaluation. Finally, given the practical limitations of conducting this research, there was no control group that could shed light on how those enrolled in the course might have compared to another group. There is a possibility, for example, that couples who attend a community course on any number of other topics might experience a similar improvement in their relationship quality. We hope that similar research will make use of a comparison group to advance understanding of best practices related to couples and finances.

In conclusion, this study provided support for the family stress theory that predicts that improved communication about finances should decrease hostility and increase warmth and supportive behaviors, thereby positively influencing relationship quality. It also demonstrated that a financial management course may serve as a valuable adjunct to relationship therapy or financial counseling and planning, and suggests that good couple communication, particularly regarding personal financial management, can buffer relationships against economic stress.

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