

Connecting Romantic Beliefs With Marital Communication and Conflict Resolution

DAVID LEE DALTON
College of the Ozarks

This research sought to determine whether any relation exists between romantic beliefs and beliefs regarding communication and conflict resolution. Two questionnaires were administered to 133 college students. The first questionnaire, the Implicit Theories of Relationships Scale (Knee, 1998; Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2001), measured belief in romantic growth and belief in romantic destiny. The second questionnaire, the Communication and Conflict Resolution Beliefs Inventory (CCRBI; developed for this study), measured beliefs regarding communication and conflict resolution. As predicted, the participants who had a high level of belief in romantic growth in combination with a low level of belief in romantic destiny had the highest level of healthy communication and conflict resolution beliefs. Conversely, high belief in romantic destiny combined with low belief in romantic growth was associated with the poorest communication and conflict resolution beliefs.

EVERY YEAR, THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY 8.4 marriages per every 1,000 people. Unfortunately, each year also yields approximately 4.2 divorces for every 1,000 people (National Center for Health Statistics, 1998). Statistics such as these have led many researchers to suggest that as many as half of all marriages end in dissolution (Cherlin, 1981; National Center for Health Statistics, 1987). Furthermore, about one third of marriages dissolve within the first 5 years (National Center for Health Statistics, 1991). In many cases, divorce tends to be accompanied not only by financial problems, but also by difficulties of great concern to mental health professionals. For example, adults and children from divorced families are more susceptible to psychological and emotional problems than people from intact families (Bloom, Asher, & White, 1978; Guidubaldi, Perry, & Cleminshaw, 1984).

Given the severity of the divorce problem, it is no wonder that many professionals have made it their quest to identify predictors and preventers of marital dissolution. According to Gottman and Levenson (1992), low marital satisfaction is the first step in the cascade toward separation and divorce. Thus, in an effort to design preventative intervention strategies,

many professionals have sought to identify those variables that have considerable impact on marital satisfaction (Boyd & Roach, 1977; Hansen & Schuldt, 1984; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Worthington et al., 1997).

Conflict and Marital Satisfaction

Some of the most widely researched factors that are related to marital satisfaction include communication issues such as active listening, self-disclosure, conflict management and resolution, and discussion of expectations. These factors play an important role in the degree of satisfaction felt by both partners in a marital relationship (Block, Block, & Morrison, 1981; Boyd & Roach, 1977; Gottman, 1993b; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Hansen & Schuldt, 1984; Kurdek, 1995; Lydon, Pierce, & O'Regan 1997; Markman et al., 1988; Worthington et al., 1997).

Perhaps the most researched of these variables is conflict resolution. People argue about a number of things, the most common arguments occurring with regard to money and children (Stanley and Markman, 1997). However, contrary to popular belief, conflict itself is not necessarily damaging to

a relationship. In fact, some experts have suggested that conflict is not only unavoidable, but is necessary to the long-term survival of a marriage (Gottman, 1993a; Gottman, 1993b; Gottman et al., 1998; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Gottman (1993b) suggested that a “relationship that is totally positive may thus be as undesirable and unstable as one that is all negative” (p. 14).

Research suggests that what is actually important is not the presence or absence of conflict but rather how the conflict is handled (Gottman, 1993a; Gottman, 1993b; Gottman et al., 1998; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Kurdek, 1995; Lydon et al., 1997; Markman et al., 1988). For example, Gottman et al. (1998) presented evidence that anger itself is not maladaptive, but the usage of belligerence, criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (listener withdrawal) as conflict resolution styles are reliable predictors of dissatisfaction and subsequent divorce. Gottman et al. also found that husbands in happy marriages frequently de-escalate low-intensity negative affect (sadness, anger, tension, whining, fear, and domineering), whereas wives in happy marriages tend to de-escalate high-intensity negative affect (defensiveness, contempt, and belligerence). In another study, Gottman (1993b) suggested that one of the most important variables in predicting how conflict will affect the longevity of a marriage is the ratio of positive to negative communication. According to his findings, Gottman stated that this positive to negative ratio is about 5 to 1. Thus, according to research, conflict itself is not problematic. In fact, as long as one handles it appropriately, conflict can be longitudinally functional and positive (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Poor conflict resolution styles, on the other hand, are predictive of marital dissatisfaction and, in many cases, divorce (Gottman, 1994; Kurdek, 1995; Markman et al., 1988; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993).

Other Communication Factors

A second factor that is related to marital satisfaction is self-disclosure. Hansen and Schuldt (1984) found evidence that self-disclosure is positively related to and predictive of the marital satisfaction of both partners. Couples who indicated that they had low levels of self-disclosure also reported being least satisfied. In a similar study, Komarovsky (1962) found that blue-collar husbands in happy marriages are self-disclosing, whereas husbands in unhappy marriages tend to be withdrawn.

The importance of communication cannot be overemphasized. Gottman (1979) suggested that, as a predictor of marital satisfaction, compatibility

between partners is not as significant as the quality of the couple’s communication. Markman et al. (1988) used an intervention strategy that emphasized communication skills, problem-solving skills, clarifying and sharing of expectations, and sexual enhancement. Three years following the intervention, couples in the experimental group showed not only higher levels of satisfaction, but also lower levels of problem intensity. Perhaps even more interesting is the fact that at the time of the 3-year follow-up, all of the intervention couples were still together, whereas 19% of the control couples had dissolved their relationships.

Based on the accumulating data, researchers have identified a number of communication patterns that could be deemed as “healthy” or “unhealthy.” However, there is perhaps one additional factor that deserves a great deal more attention. Do people actually realize what “healthy” and “unhealthy” patterns of communication are? How do couples feel about conflict, self-disclosure, and active listening?

Romantic Destiny Versus Romantic Growth

A number of studies have examined human perceptions and belief systems, but one particular study, related to beliefs about relationships, may be helpful in providing insight into the healthy and unhealthy beliefs that people have about communication and conflict resolution. Knee (1998) developed a questionnaire designed to measure people’s beliefs about romantic destiny and romantic growth. He defined *romantic destiny* as the belief that “potential relationship partners are either meant for each other or not” (Knee, 1998, p. 360). The romantic destiny perspective often holds that for every person there is only one compatible mate, and relationships that are initially poor are doomed to fail. Belief in *romantic growth*, on the other hand, is the belief that “successful relationships are cultivated and developed” (Knee, 1998, p. 360). Romantic growth believers are likely to view a relationship as a process of resolving conflicts and challenges that require work and time.

In his study of 265 undergraduate students, Knee (1998) administered an eight-item Likert-style questionnaire that measured the degree to which each student believed in romantic growth and romantic destiny. Knee found that belief in romantic destiny was associated with the tendency to end a relationship in response to a negative event. Furthermore, Knee found that a strong predictor of relationship longevity among those students who believed in destiny was initial satisfaction. If the relationship was not initially satisfying, the romantic destiny believer was likely to withdraw. On the other hand, belief in

romantic growth was associated with the utilization of relationship maintenance methods during times of conflict. Additionally, Knee found that those students who believed in romantic destiny had more “one-night stands” than those students who believed in romantic growth.

Romantic Beliefs, Communication, and Conflict Resolution

Research has shown that interpersonal communication variables can predict within 80% to 94% accuracy which couples will stay married and which couples will not (Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000; Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996; Gottman, 1994; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Kelly & Conley, 1987). The goal of the present research was to identify any links between romantic beliefs and unhealthy beliefs concerning communication and conflict resolution. Knowledge of such connections could be beneficial to future research and future premarital/marital intervention strategies. I hypothesized that strong belief in romantic destiny, in combination with low belief in romantic growth, would be associated with relatively low measures of healthy communication and conflict resolution beliefs. Conversely, I expected to find that strong belief in romantic growth, in combination with low belief in romantic destiny, would be associated with higher measures of healthy communication and conflict resolution beliefs. In addition, I expected to find that high destiny scores, in combination with low growth scores, would be associated with a larger number of dating relationships.

Method

Participants

One hundred and thirty-three students at College of the Ozarks participated in the study (83 freshmen, 24 sophomores, 10 juniors, and 8 seniors). The sample included 59 men and 74 women (mean age = 19.77 years, range = 17–45). Eighteen of the students participated during an Industrial/Organizational Psychology course. Ten of the students participated during a Behavioral Management course, and the remaining one hundred and five students participated during Introductory Psychology courses. At the time of the study, 58 of the students were single, 59 were dating, 8 were engaged, 5 were married, and 3 did not specify their relationship status. One hundred and two participants indicated that their parents were married, whereas only 27 participants indicated that their parents had divorced. The remaining 4 students did not specify the marital status of their parents.

Testing Instruments

The first phase of the present study was completed using C. Raymond Knee’s 22-item Implicit Theories of Relationships Scale (ITR; Knee, 1998; Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2001). The questionnaire’s even-numbered items rated belief in romantic growth, whereas odd-numbered items rated belief in romantic destiny. Because the questionnaire measured belief in romantic growth and belief in romantic destiny independently, the ITR gave each student two scores. The instrument utilized a Likert-type scale from 1 (indicating strong disagreement) to 7 (indicating strong agreement).

In order to rate the communication and conflict resolution beliefs of the present study’s participants, I developed a 20-item Likert-type questionnaire, called the Communication and Conflict Resolution Beliefs Inventory (CCRBI). Seventeen of the CCRBI items addressed four primary areas of interpersonal communication: reality-based communication (5 items), self-disclosure (4 items), conflict resolution (4 items), and active listening (4 items). For example, the reality-based communication items asked the participant to indicate his/her level of agreement or disagreement with statements such as, “A couple considering marriage should discuss their beliefs about child-raising practices prior to marriage.” The second area, which rated the participant’s beliefs regarding self-disclosure, included items such as, “Because my mate will learn about my personal preferences eventually, it is unnecessary to discuss them prior to marriage.” The third area, conflict resolution beliefs, included items such as, “No matter how you handle it, conflict is always negative.” The final area rated the participant’s beliefs regarding active listening. The active listening items included statements such as, “During a conversation, making eye contact is important to me.”

The remaining 3 items were considered neutral because they did not directly address participant *beliefs* and, therefore, were not included in the CCRBI composite score. For example, one of the neutral items asked the participant to indicate his/her level of agreement or disagreement with the following statement: “When I was young, my parents/guardians frequently argued.” Instead of being included in the CCRBI composite score, the 3 neutral items served merely as comparative variables for future data analysis.

All of the CCRBI items utilized a Likert-type scale. However, the items varied in their scoring procedures. First, of the 20 items in the questionnaire, 10 had reversed scores. Secondly, while 15 of the CCRBI

items corresponded to a Likert-type rating system of 1 (strong disagreement) to 7 (strong agreement), the remaining 5 items were weighted in that they utilized a scale from 0.5 to 7.5. These 5 items were weighted because they addressed specific variables and issues that, according to the accumulating body of research, are relatively strong predictors of relationship stability and satisfaction.

I designed the CCRBI as a relative measure of healthy and unhealthy communication and conflict resolution beliefs. The CCRBI items were developed based upon specific definitions of healthy and unhealthy communication. I defined *healthy communication* as those interactive styles that, according to the previously mentioned body of research, increase marital satisfaction and longevity. I defined *unhealthy communication* as those interactive styles that, according to research, have a negative impact on marital satisfaction and longevity.

In order to ensure that all of the CCRBI items were clear and understandable, a pilot study was conducted. A facilitator distributed copies of the CCRBI and the ITR Scale to 20 college students in a Research Methods class. It took approximately 5 min for the entire class to complete the questionnaires. Once they had finished, the facilitator asked the students whether or not they found any of the items confusing. Interestingly, the students indicated that they had not experienced any difficulties understanding the CCRBI or ITR Scale items. However, some of the students stated that they had difficulty understanding a few of the demographical questions presented in the lower portion of the CCRBI. Although these demographical items had no immediate impact on the scores of the CCRBI, I revised them in order to increase the accuracy of statistical interpretation later in the study.

Procedure

Once the students were seated, a facilitator read the following instructions from a prewritten instruction sheet:

The questionnaire you are about to receive regards beliefs about romantic relationships. Your participation will assist in the collection of data for psychological research. Your responses will have no impact on your grade, and will be used solely for research purposes. Please do not write your name on this questionnaire. This will ensure your confidentiality, so please answer each item openly and honestly. If you have already completed this questionnaire in another class, you are asked not to participate now. It is important that you work alone while completing this questionnaire. Once you have finished, you may bring it to the podium.

Once the facilitator finished reading these instructions, he proceeded to distribute the questionnaires to the students. When the students had each received a copy of the questionnaires, the facilitator continued with the following instructions:

The following items regard beliefs about romantic relationships. For each item, write the number (from 1 to 7) which best reflects your level of agreement or disagreement. Please notice that the number 1 indicates strong disagreement while the number 7 indicates strong agreement. Please complete the questionnaire which reads "Implicit Theories of Relationships" first. You may begin.

Results

Upon examination of the collected data, a number of relations became evident. Sixty-six percent of the students who scored above the mean romantic destiny score ($M = 38$, $SD = 9.41$) scored below the mean CCRBI composite score ($M = 99$, $SD = 10.30$), whereas only 49% of those students who scored below the mean destiny score rated below the mean CCRBI composite score. A two-way chi-square revealed that these differences were statistically significant, $\chi^2 = 4.215$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$. In addition, 68% of the students who scored below the mean romantic growth score ($M = 58$, $SD = 7.17$) scored below the mean CCRBI composite score. Inversely, only 49% of those students who scored above the mean growth score rated below the mean CCRBI composite score. A two-way chi-square demonstrated that these differences were statistically significant, $\chi^2 = 4.915$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$. Examination of the Pearson correlation coefficient between these variables revealed the following: for growth and CCRBI composite, $r = 0.32$, $df = 131$, $p < .01$, with 10.24% explained variance. For destiny and CCRBI composite, $r = -0.34$, $df = 131$, $p < .01$, with 11.56% explained variance.

The Identification of Two Groups

As predicted, a much stronger relation was evident when I simultaneously compared the growth and destiny scores against the CCRBI scores. This result led to the identification of two groups. The first group consisted of those respondents who scored above the mean destiny score and below the mean growth score ($n = 32$). For the purposes of the present study, this first group was referred to as the "high-destiny/low-growth group." The second group consisted of those students who scored below the mean destiny score and above the mean growth score ($n = 41$). They were referred to as the "low-destiny/high-growth group." Of the participants that constituted these two groups, 31 were men and 42 were women.

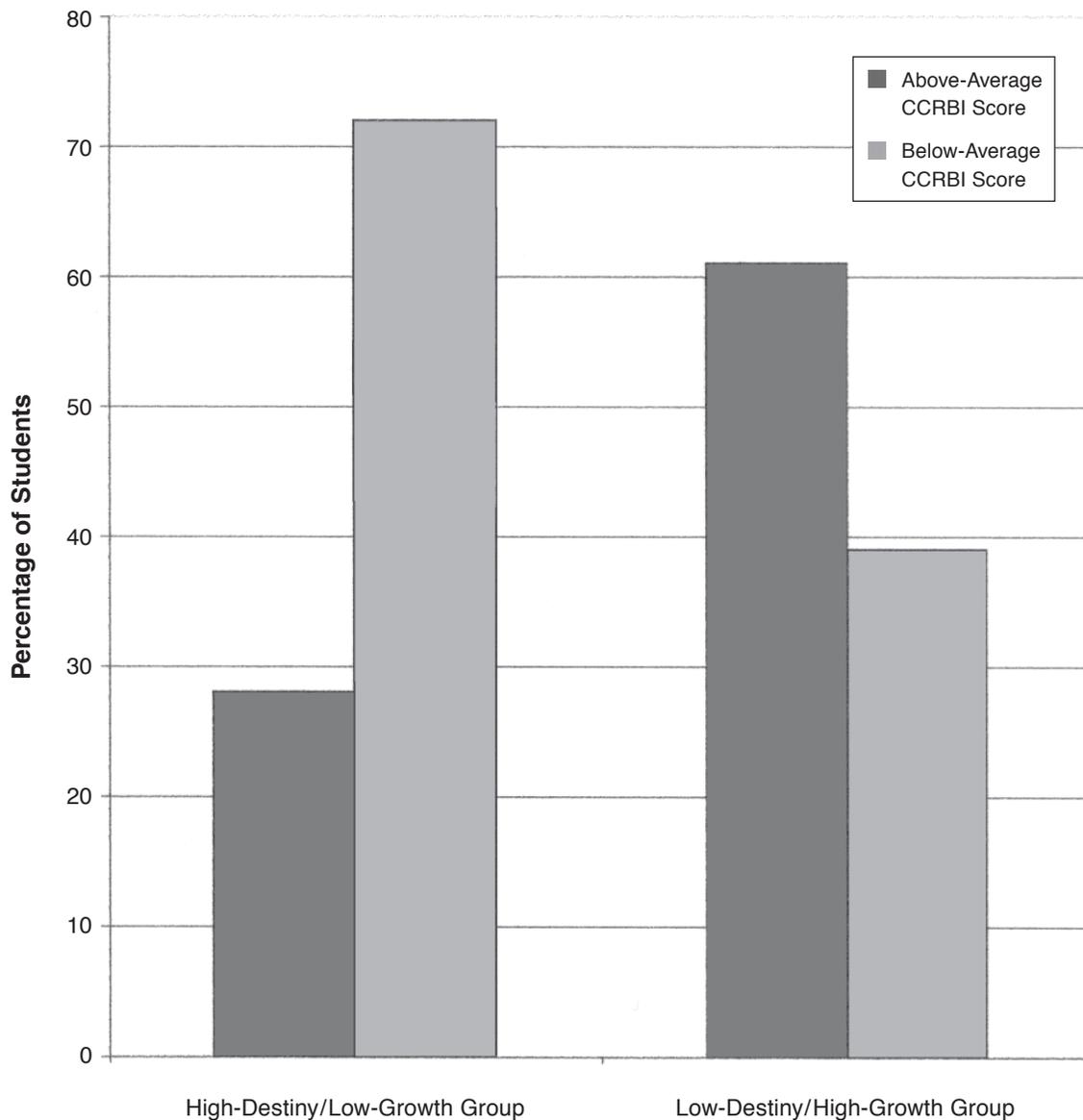
Comparison of the Two Groups

Seventy-two percent of the participants in the high-destiny/low-growth group rated below the mean CCRBI composite score. Conversely, 61% of the participants in the low-destiny/high-growth group rated above the mean CCRBI composite score (see Figure 1). A two-way chi-square revealed that these differences were statistically significant, $\chi^2 = 7.794$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$. When I examined the scores of the respondents from *both* groups ($n = 73$), the Pearson correla-

tion coefficient was stronger than it had been during the examination of all 133 participants: for growth and CCRBI composite, $r = 0.41$, $df = 71$, $p < .001$, with 16.81% explained variance, and for destiny and CCRBI composite, $r = -0.50$, $df = 71$, $p < .001$, with 25% explained variance. Furthermore, using the CCRBI composite as the criterion variable and the growth and destiny scores as predictor variables, the multiple correlation coefficient was moderately strong, $R = 0.50$, $df = 71$, $p < .01$.

FIGURE 1

Percentages of the two groups with regard to CCRBI composite scores.



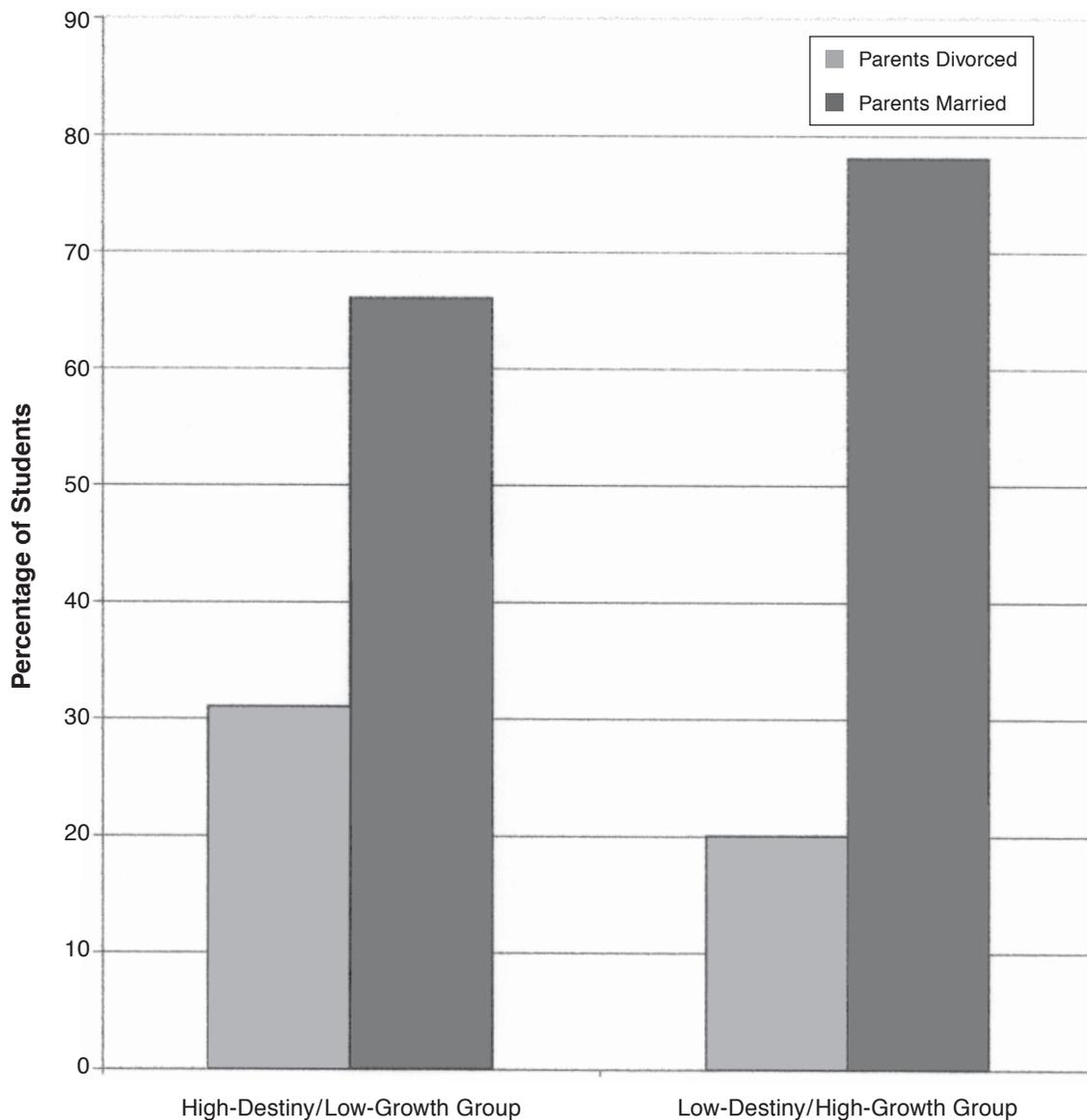
In addition to these findings, the data analysis revealed that approximately 31% of the students in the high-destiny/low-growth group had parents who were divorced, $\chi^2 = 4.500$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$, one-way. On the other side, only 20% of those students in the low-destiny/high-growth group indicated that their parents had divorced, $\chi^2 = 15.244$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$, one-way. In other words, there were approximately 11%

more parental divorces in the group that had above-average destiny scores and below-average growth scores (see Figure 2).

One of the demographical items in the CCRBI asked participants to indicate the number of people they had dated within the past 4 years. I had predicted that students in the high-destiny/low-growth group would indicate that they had had a larger number of

FIGURE 2

Percentages of the two groups with regard to parental marital status.



dating relationships than students from the low-destiny/high-growth group. Consistent with predictions, the mean number of relationships for students in the high-destiny/low-growth group was 6.65, whereas the mean number of relationships for those in the low-destiny/high-growth group was 3.88, $t = 2.43$, $df = 71$, $p < .05$, two-tailed test. This result suggested that the students who scored above the destiny mean and below the growth mean tended to engage in more relationships—in this case, almost twice as many—as those students who scored below the mean destiny score and above the mean growth score.

The Relation Between Age and Romantic Beliefs

In order to ascertain whether or not age had any effect on belief in romantic growth and belief in romantic destiny, the sample of 133 students was divided into two groups using the mean age (19.77 years) as the dividing line. Although the two age groups did not appear to differ in their beliefs regarding romantic destiny, 66% of those students who were ages 20 and older ($n = 44$) scored above the mean growth score, whereas only 52% of those students who were ages 19 and younger ($n = 89$) scored above the mean growth score. However, although belief in romantic growth appeared to be slightly stronger in those who were 20 and older, a two-way chi-square failed to demonstrate statistical significance, $\chi^2 = 2.422$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$. Thus, the null hypothesis could not be rejected, and the data did not suggest any significant differences between the age groups.

Discussion

In general, the results of this study suggest that there is a relation between romantic beliefs and beliefs regarding communication and conflict resolution. Essentially, these findings suggest that strong belief in romantic destiny is associated with relatively unhealthy beliefs about communication and conflict management. Furthermore, when an individual has both strong destiny beliefs and weak growth beliefs, he/she is likely to possess even poorer conceptions regarding marital communication and conflict resolution. Because previous research has suggested that poor communication and conflict management skills are predictive of marital dissatisfaction and divorce, people who hold to such beliefs may be more susceptible to marital distress and eventual dissolution.

In contrast, strong belief in romantic growth appears to be associated with healthier communication and conflict resolution beliefs. In fact, of the two primary groups in this study, the participants who had an above-average level of belief in romantic growth in combination with a below-average level of belief

in romantic destiny had the highest level of healthy communication and conflict resolution beliefs. It is reasonable to speculate that such individuals will demonstrate greater success in their marriages than men and women from the high-destiny/low-growth group.

In addition to these findings, the present study suggests that individuals with a high level of belief in romantic destiny in combination with a low level of belief in romantic growth tend to have more dating relationships than individuals with low-destiny/high-growth beliefs. In the present sample, the students from the high-destiny/low growth group engaged in almost twice as many dating relationships. This result is consistent with Knee's study (1998), which suggested that belief in romantic destiny is associated with a greater number of one-night stands.

Limitations

One should interpret the results of this research with some degree of caution. First, one must understand that the items on the CCRBI were based upon the findings and suggestions of previous research and psychological theory regarding "healthy" and "unhealthy" styles of marital communication and conflict resolution. The present study operates under the assumption that these research findings and theories are correct.

Another possible limitation of this study is the fact that I selected the respondents, students from a relatively small, 4-year, liberal arts college in southern Missouri, on the basis of convenience. Out of the 133 participants, only 27 indicated that their parents were divorced. The findings of previous research has suggested that as many as half of all marriages end in dissolution (Cherlin, 1981; National Center for Health Statistics, 1987). Thus, in light of the present study's relatively low frequency of parental divorce, the present sample may have some difficulty generalizing to the population at large. However, the relatively low number of parental divorces may also serve a positive function. It is possible that this low number reduced the effects of parental divorce as an extraneous variable in the relation between the ITR and the CCRBI.

One other important factor is the inherent limitation of self-report measures. It is at least conceivable that some of the participants gave responses that were not necessarily consistent with their true-life behavior. For example, it is possible that although a participant may claim to agree with a particular item on the CCRBI, he/she might not demonstrate that belief with his/her actions. It is one thing to say that a couple should actively listen to each other with empathy and understanding; it is another thing to

actually live up to that statement. Fortunately, the present study does not attempt to directly address the behaviors of the participants, but rather their beliefs.

Implications

Research has suggested that, as a predictor of marital satisfaction, compatibility between partners is not as significant as the quality of the couple's communication (Gottman, 1979). However, communication patterns do not simply materialize after a couple exchanges wedding vows. Furthermore, there is evidence that poor communication patterns prior to marriage are predictive of future marital distress (Markman, 1981), and, once developed, poor communication patterns are difficult to change (Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974). Some research has suggested that during premarital and newlywed interactions, couples are more open to change and adaptation in their methods of communicating (Carrere et al., 2000). In light of such evidence, the early stages of a relationship may be the optimum time to employ intervention strategies designed to improve satisfaction and marital longevity.

The present research may have practical applications in future premarital/marital intervention efforts. For example, low-destiny/high-growth believers might prove to be better candidates for relationship counseling than high-destiny/low-growth believers. I speculate that, more often than not, high-destiny/low-growth believers have an external locus of control, whereas low-destiny/high-growth believers are more likely to view relational outcomes from a standpoint of personal accountability, placing greater emphasis on relationship maintenance and healthy communication. This interpretation would certainly explain why the high-destiny/low-growth group tended to score low on the CCRBI. After all, if a person believes that the success of his/her relationship is dependent upon external forces (fate, destiny, etc.) and is beyond his/her control, why should communication and conflict resolution skills be of any great importance?

I believe that because of their greater sense of personal accountability, low-destiny/high-growth believers are likely to demonstrate greater improvement in relationship counseling settings than persons from the high-destiny/low-growth group. I surmise that low-destiny/high-growth believers, who tend to view relational outcomes as the product of personal behavior, will display greater motivation to internalize and apply various communication and conflict management skills taught in counseling sessions. Perhaps future research efforts will be able to test these hypotheses in an experimental fashion.

It is necessary to note that, despite the present study's findings, I do not believe that it is rational to conclude that all "destiny believers" are doomed to fail in their relationships. The results of Knee's study (1998) suggested that there was relative flexibility in the romantic beliefs of his undergraduate participants. Under those conditions, the implementation of premarital intervention strategies that address romantic beliefs may prove highly effective at increasing a person's chance for a stable, satisfying relationship. Similarly, such intervention efforts should also attempt to counteract unhealthy communication and conflict resolution beliefs. In sum, the present study seems to support the idea that belief systems are worthy of being a primary focus in relationship counseling.

Future Research

Because the results of the present study suggest that students from the high-destiny/low-growth group are more likely to have divorced parents, I believe that this issue deserves additional attention. What is the relation between parental marital status and a participant's romantic and communication/conflict resolution beliefs?

At the time of the present study, the CCRBI demographical item which asked the participant to indicate his/her parents' marital status included only the following selections: married or divorced. In retrospect, these two options appear to be too limited. In the future, this item should be revised to include "never married, but living together," "never married, and not living together," and "separated." Perhaps this adaptation will more accurately reflect the demographical profile of CCRBI participants, and future efforts can begin to focus on any possible connection between parental divorce and ITR/CCRBI scores. However, there is another option that might be even more beneficial. The ITR and CCRBI could be administered to the participants *and* their parents. Comparing a participant's beliefs with that of his/her parents might be more revealing than a mere comparison between participant scores and parental marital status.

Future research should attempt to ascertain whether or not the responses given on the CCRBI coincide with the true-life behavior of the participants. Perhaps an observational study would best accomplish this goal. For example, a facilitator could administer the CCRBI to various couples, and then a trained professional could observe the couple's interactions through a two-way mirror or video monitoring system. By recording the frequencies of specific behaviors and other observable variables (determined prior

to the onset of the study), the observer could monitor the couple's interpersonal communication and discover whether or not their true-life behavior is consistent with their responses on the CCRBI.

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