

DECIDING NOT TO UN-DO THE “I DO:” THERAPY EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN WHO CONSIDER DIVORCE BUT DECIDE TO REMAIN MARRIED

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This study explores women’s experience of marital therapy while they navigated decision making around divorce. A qualitative method was used to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ therapy and relationship decision-making experiences. How are women’s decisions whether or not to exit their marriage affected by therapy? The researchers interviewed 15 women who had considered initiating divorce before they turned 40 and had attended at least five marital therapy sessions but ultimately decided not to divorce. In general, participants reported that the therapy was helpful to them, their decision-making process and their marriages. Five main themes emerged from the interviews: Women Initiated Therapy, Therapist Was Experienced as Unbiased, Therapy was Helpful, Importance of Extra-therapeutic Factors, and Gradual Process.

Divorce has become a common occurrence in contemporary American families. The rate of divorce in the United States can be estimated at around 40–50% with divorce being most likely in the first seven years of marriage (Amato, 2010; Lebow, Chambers, Christensen, & Johnson, 2012). Due to the frequency of divorce, many clients that marriage and family therapists (MFTs) see may have been affected by divorce or are in the process of considering divorce as an option for resolving marital discord. This study attempts to discover what role marital therapy plays in a woman’s decision-making process when she has been considering divorce but ultimately chooses to stay married. In other words, the researchers ask, how might a woman’s decision to stay married be affected by her experience in marital therapy?

BACKGROUND

Women initiate two-thirds of all divorces (Enright, 2004; Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995; Pettit & Bloom, 1984). But women are also more likely to seek out therapy than men. In a review of several large epidemiological surveys, two-thirds of those seeking outpatient therapy services were women (Vessey & Howard, 1993). Currently, little research has focused on the decision-making process leading to divorce, much less the way that therapy can influence that process. Much of the existing research on divorce has focused on the entire process, beginning with the divorce and the subsequent coping and moving on afterward (Rollie & Duck, 2006). The effects on men, women, and children have also been thoroughly studied (Amato, 2010). Vaughan (1990), however, has provided some understanding about the internal decision-making processes of those considering ending a committed relationship. She concludes that this decision is often a private and internal one, where an individual may discuss it with friends but not specifically with the partner. Baum (2007) has recently studied and written about the emotions women feel when initiating divorce, which sometimes includes guilt. She specifically discussed separation guilt, which is guilt that arises when choosing to separate from loved ones and thus results in one feeling ‘disloyal.’

Reasons people give for their divorce have been extensively studied. Amato and Previti (2003) analyzed 208 participants’ open-ended responses as to why their marriage ended. They found that

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The authors would like to express their gratitude to the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy for the Graduate Student Research Award that was given to help support this project.

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the top three reasons women gave were infidelity, incompatibility and alcohol/drug use. However, the researcher's literature review focusing on the phenomenon of women who consider divorce but decide to remain married yielded little. There is some indication that it may be due to financial considerations (Amato & Rogers, 1999; Swenson, 1996); having young children (Waite & Lillard, 1991) or the belief that divorce goes against one's moral or religious beliefs (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991). Other researchers have focused on barriers to divorce, those issues that block one or both members of the couple from pursuing divorce. Some barriers include being married for long periods of time (White & Booth, 1991), having children together, religious reasons, and financial need (Previti & Amato, 2003). In addition to barriers, Previti and Amato (2003) have examined reasons why people remain married. The top five reported rewards of marriage were love, friendship, communication, commitment to spouse, and respect.

Two hundred and ninety parents filing for divorce in Hennepin County, Minnesota were asked to share "reasons that were important factors in your decision to divorce," (Hawkins, Willoughby, & Doherty, 2012). The top three responses for men and women included reasons such as "growing apart," "not (being) able to talk," and "how my spouse handles money." These results reflect dissatisfaction with support and emotional closeness within marriage. This builds on previous research showing that women's reasons for divorce are reflective of the relationship and the level of emotional support they believe they experience in it (Ponzetti, Zvonkovic, Cate, & Huston, 1992). A study of 9,147 households in Australia compared divorces initiated by men to those initiated by women and found that women were more inclined than men to initiate divorce based on their own and their husband's social characteristics, such as perceived desirability to others (Hewitt, Western, & Baxter, 2006). An additional study based on the National Survey of Families and Households supports findings that women tend to have a better sense of their marital relationship. That is, they more closely monitor emotional connectedness, and are depended upon for the maintenance of the relationship. Moreover, their perceptions of conflict and fairness can predict how long the marriage will last (Heaton & Blake, 1999).

Marital therapy can help couples work through difficulties and avoid divorce. In a recent meta-analytic review of research on marital therapy for couples experiencing marital distress, Lebow et al. (2012) found that counseling positively impacted 70% of couples that received it. Individuals who attended marital counseling and initiated divorce were surveyed regarding their counseling experience (Rotfort, 2011). The top reasons reported for seeking counseling were to improve the marital relationship (51.3%), to attempt to avoid divorce (50%), for religious reasons (63.2%), or because other family members insisted (65.8%). Additionally, a sizeable group of participants (30.3%) agreed with the statement "I think my ex-spouse and I would have had a better chance of preventing divorce had we sought couples counseling at an earlier point."

Although women initiate the majority of divorces, a paucity of literature exists on these women. To add to that body of literature, we interviewed women who considered divorce but decided to remain married. We sought to understand more about the role of marital therapy in women's divorce decision-making process. Specifically, we focused on women under the age of 40 for the following reasons. First, the average age of marriage in the United States currently is 25.8 for women (Center for Disease Control & Prevention, 2012), and second, the average age at divorce for women is 33 and the highest number of divorces occurred for women ages 24–29 (Center for Disease Control & Prevention, 1995). Third, little research has focused on this younger group of women and divorce. The majority of the research examining the experience of women who have been divorced has used samples of middle-aged (Sakraida, 2005; Thomas & Ryan, 2008) or older women, specifically those 65–72 years of age (Reynolds, Prior, & Lim, 2008). Fourth, it is important to understand the experience of a younger population given that individuals who are divorced once are more likely to remarry and divorce again (Amato, 2010). Finally, there is little known regarding the role marital therapy plays in a woman's decision to either divorce or remain in her marriage.

METHODS

The researchers employed a phenomenological approach to the study. Phenomenology is a specific method of qualitative research that lends itself well to this topic and the stage of research as it is exploratory in nature. In a phenomenological study, the researcher is most interested in

learning the essence, meaning and lived experience of an individual or group of individuals. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to identify a specific phenomenon and seek to understand, in a deep way, how it was experienced for the participants (Creswell, 2006). This article is based on the premises and recommendations of transcendental phenomenology, which originated from the philosophical writing of Edmund Husserl who focused on the development of knowledge as it is experienced, perceived and sensed by a person (Moustakas, 1994).

Transparency

To be transparent, bracketing is used to underscore and even suspend biases of the researchers during the research process. Bracketing does not assume that a researcher's presuppositions can be completely suspended, but calls for a critical analysis of them (Kvale, 1996). Bracketing involves making the researcher's beliefs, feelings, and values explicit, which allows the researchers to understand the topic more clearly with them suspended. Through this study, the lead author reflected on her own beliefs and biases prior to data collection and subsequent analysis and worked to set them aside in order to more clearly hear these women's experiences. Personal biases that may have influenced data analysis without an appropriate bracketing experience include, for example, the lead author's marital status (married), and her belief in the role of gender equality in healthy marriages, the importance of hearing women's voices in family therapy research, and the belief that divorce is a necessary mechanism for resolving some marital conflict. She also reflected on why she chose this topic, mainly due to her experiences working with clients in this situation and wanting increased understanding on the process. The second author has similar research interests and clinical experiences around couples who are deciding on the future of their marriage. The researchers' literature review did not yield any studies like this, and thus, they consciously chose to study the role marital therapy plays in women's decision making when the ultimate decision was to remain married rather than divorce. The bracketing process helped the researchers bring a degree of objectivity to their efforts in interviewing the participants and analyzing the data.

Participants, Recruitment, Setting

The data for this qualitative study were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews. Selection criteria to take part in this study included seeking out heterosexual women who considered divorce by age 40 and sought out marital therapy while deciding whether or not to divorce. The women needed to have attended at least five sessions with one therapist and their husband. Five sessions has been found to be the most common number for marital therapy (Doherty & Simmons, 1996). "Problems with their partner" and/or "considering divorce" need to have been among the main reasons they sought out marital therapy. Participants were deemed eligible to take part in the study if they were still attending therapy but had to verify that they had made the decision to remain married. Participants were recruited through a convenience sample by posting advertisements throughout the community and online, word of mouth, contacting area therapists to ask them to refer past or current clients, and emailing several listservs. Participants' average age was 37, and the average length of marriage was 12 years. Twelve reported being Christian, one Buddhist and one reported no religious background. Thirteen were Caucasian, one Black/Canadian and one Chinese/American. Twelve reported having a Master's or PhD degree, the other three reported having a Bachelor's degree. Fourteen of the fifteen women had one or more children.

The interviews were conducted either in person, via phone or via secure video conferencing. The researchers reviewed the data and met to determine that saturation was reached around the fourteenth interview, several themes were already beginning to emerge and the experiences of the participants were being described in similar ways. No new information was emerging from the interviews. Of the fifteen participants included in the project, eleven live in the greater Twin Cities area, though one is originally from China and another from Canada. Two reside in eastern Wisconsin, one from Texas and one from Louisiana.

Three Touch Points of Contact: In-depth Individual Interviews, Email Contact, & Member Checking

Each woman was interviewed once for 60–90 min, and the interview was audio recorded. Participants were provided a letter detailing how the researchers would like to stay in touch with them and provide referrals for therapy if they felt that would be helpful. Participants completed a short

demographic survey as well as signed the informed consent document. The second touch point was when they were sent a follow up email and the third touch point was a member checking exercise when all interviews had been coded. Their responses and comments helped the researchers reflect on the results and themes and add trustworthiness to the project as a whole.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed shortly after they took place. Coding was carried out manually, line by line, watching for patterns, themes, and meaning clusters that emerged from the data. First, macrothemes or categories were coded, and then, within the macrothemes, microthemes and essences discussed by the women were coded. This process has been described by Kvale (1996) as meaning condensation and then meaning categorization. The researchers looked for themes within each interview and then across the interviews. This process was cyclical, as each time an interview was coded it informed the reading of the other interviews and contributed to the creation of new coding categories. Thus, each interview was an opportunity to create interplay between analysis and interpretation (Daly, 2007). The researcher's goal was to take different perspectives and merge them into a clear and vivid description of the phenomenon under investigation.

The data were entered into NVivo and organized using this software to store and sort themes and create an emerging model of the women's experience. The small amount of quantitative demographic data, such as participant age, length of marriage and length of time participating in the therapy was also examined.

The researchers wrote summaries of the phenomenon for each participant, as well as integrated them into a succinct description for the group, a synthesis of meaning for the experiences the participants had as a whole. Many themes emerged throughout this process; at one point, 32 possible themes were outlined. The researchers condensed these by only including those themes that reflected at least half of the participants' experiences. This helped to ensure that the themes broadly reflected the essence of this experience for these women as a group. Within the main themes that surfaced, subthemes were chosen when mentioned by the majority that had discussed the theme or when the researchers felt the subtheme was salient to the experience and common among participants. The final five themes will be presented in the results section as well as an exhaustive description, summarizing the women's experience.

Trustworthiness of the Analysis

High levels of trustworthiness and credibility were maintained throughout this study ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the participant's experience. Researchers used the following methods to improve credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1989). First, we used auditors and triangulation in several ways to increase credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Throughout data analysis and writing, we improved transferability by using detailed descriptions and quotes (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Once we identified the main themes, we conducted member checks by contacting each participant and sharing with them our initial findings. This process helped support the credibility of the results as participants were able to weigh in on how accurately they had been represented in the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). We also shared with participants their individual textural (participants actual words) and structural (meaning condensation) summaries as well as the group structural summary encompassing all interviews (Moustakas, 1994). We asked participants to share with us their responses and reflections regarding the accuracy of the results. We then cross referenced our member check data with our field notes and with conversations with colleagues. These procedures helped to increase the validity of the data and decrease the bias that we each brought to this project (Dahl & Boss, 2005).

RESULTS

We present in this section five major themes derived from the data. In some cases, we used the participants' own words to illustrate the themes (see Table 1), and within each theme are subthemes. The overall result is what Moustakas (1994) refers to as a textural-structural synthesis. We

| Table 1 <i>Themes Derived from Participant Interviews</i> | |
|--|---|
| Theme | Subthemes |
| Women Initiate Therapy | Ultimatum |
| Therapy Was Helpful | Feeling divorce was very likely Created space Accountability and encouragement to interact differently Connection to and feeling understood by the therapist |
| Therapist Unbiased | (None) |
| Importance of Extratherapeutic Factors | Children Spouses were working hard to make changes Reaffirming love Faith Barriers to divorce |
| Gradual Process | Continued thoughts of divorce |

labeled quotes with a participant identification number to give the reader insight into the variety and depth of responses collected.

Women Initiate Therapy

When asked how the couple made the decision to start therapy, the majority of women shared that they were the ones who initiated therapy. Women were usually the ones to bring up the idea of therapy or to look for a therapist. There were also times where a woman suggested the idea of going to therapy but told her spouse that he would have to find a therapist if he was interested in making the marriage work. The women reported that their husbands' responses to the idea of going to therapy varied. Some women reported that their husbands were interested and willing, while others were dismissive and did not attend therapy until they (the wives) had brought up the idea many times.

I told him I felt like we obviously needed somebody else's help... And I did validate that yes, I hear you don't want a divorce, and truthfully I don't want one either but this isn't working for me and you.... And he was never resistant to that so he did come. (Participant 5)

Ultimatum. Within the main theme of "Women Initiate Therapy," there were also subthemes of how initiation happened. The circumstances illustrated the low point that the marriage was at, at the moment of therapy initiation. One clear subtheme that emerged regarding how women suggested going to therapy was that it came as an ultimatum to their husband, or that therapy was an effort to give the marriage "one last try."

It was a flat out "we are either going to therapy to do this or I'm out" ... it was very much a, "this is the only way I know how to threaten you." (Participant 2)

Yeah, it took a little convincing and I think I actually might have said either you're going to do this or this is it. (Participant 4)

Feeling divorce was very likely. Women discussed how likely they felt divorce was and what they were thinking and feeling about divorce when they entered therapy. Despite the fact that they were not specifically coached to give an odds ratio or a numerical percentage, many women responded with just that. The overall theme was that the women were strongly considering divorce and that they thought there was at least a fifty percent chance of divorce.

I would have said, well there was 100% chance of separation and I would have thought that divorce was a 60 or 70% chance. (Participant 12)

Other women described the likelihood of divorce and the extent to which they had been considering it in different ways, such as having begun talking to a lawyer or looking into the legal process of divorce.

I would say a couple years after that (the affair and having started therapy) I actually got to the point where I hired an attorney...and was drawing up paperwork and was getting ready to file...And that point is where the divorce process stopped. (Participant 16)

Therapy was Helpful

All participants indicated that going to therapy was a helpful experience. The majority specifically described marital therapy as helpful, although two women had attended marital therapy as well as individual therapy sessions and felt that the individual sessions were more helpful for their marriages. Overall several subthemes surfaced that describe how marital therapy was helpful.

Created space. The first subtheme was that therapy created a “space” in which the couple could talk and listen.

Having a place, having a safe space, to be able to talk and know that we could talk and we could have somebody else hear...So, was it the therapist? Probably not. ...but we were actually able to have a place and a space and another person and that nobody passed out when you said anything... And that we were intact at the end and life would go on. (Participant 1)

I think it helped me articulate my feelings, I can think them and feel them but I have a very hard time putting words to what I feel that makes sense to my husband. Therapy was especially helpful for that because they (the therapists) were able to see how I was feeling and through talking with me help me articulate my feelings in the presence of my spouse. (Participant 16)

Accountability and encouragement to interact differently. Another prominent way that therapy helped the couple was by holding them accountable, both individually and as a couple. This included being more accountable to their spouse, trying to make changes in their marriage, and the doing activities or homework assignments assigned by the therapist.

I think that that accountability is key especially when we initially went in there because we were having problems keeping our word... she was holding us accountable when we came back and my husband is kind of a procrastinator and not very accountable. It's good to have a third party holding you accountable. I like that because I didn't have to be the one holding him accountable. (Participant 13)

Some women also described that the act of going to therapy and specific activities within therapy affirmed their commitment to each other. This was a helpful part of the process for them and their spouse.

I think at this point my husband and I are committed to being together. Part of going to therapy was making that commitment I think. To at least give it a try to work on it. (Participant 11)

I know that what that (the therapy experience) taught me was that we have the tools. We're both committed and if we really wanted to work on it and change to be better we could. It was a very purposeful: 'oh, we can do this, it takes two.' (Participant 12)

Connection to and feeling understood by the therapist. The last subtheme involves the woman feeling connected to and understood by the therapist. The experience of being understood, and working with someone who had a grasp of the situation and the needs of the couple, seemed to help the couple to reconnect and gain security in their marriage.

There was just so much trust. She did a really good job of connecting with both of us...and then connecting with us as a couple. And then she was really good at pulling out strengths, I mean very strength based. (Participant 2)

He was very open-minded, he was very patient. We liked him, I think of one the reasons we both connected a lot is that he was very personable. Never was there a time that he made us feel like we were going backward. He would always try to reassure us 'you know what you guys are saying you really want to work on it you love each other.' So he was really reassuring, I would be like 'do you think we can make it?...you know...I just needed that reassurance. (Participant 6)

Therapist Unbiased

The majority of women in this study described experiencing their therapist's belief about whether or not the couple should divorce as unbiased. In truth, the women could not really know if the therapist in fact was unbiased, but this was the message they felt came across. However, the approach that was described was not a distance or an impression of not caring, but rather an essence of wanting what was best for the couple, and the therapist not acting as though they knew exactly what that was. The women seemed to appreciate the therapist not putting his or her own agenda forward and were glad that they had experienced their therapist in that way.

I think it was really good because I don't think I felt a leaning towards whether he was pro divorce or not (and) ... that was something that was really really important... (Participant 1)

I don't think she took a side...which is good. I think that she wanted us to be happy and after a few sessions I think she got the sense that we wanted to try and make it work so then I think she took more measures to try to help us make it work. (Participant 13)

Although the major theme was that women experienced their therapist's opinion of whether or not they should divorce as unbiased, there were four participants that reported they experienced their therapist as being "pro marriage," or holding a belief that the couple should remain married. This is an important theme as well, even though this description was not what the majority described, due to the impact it had on their decision making. Women who reported experiencing their therapist as coming from this perspective, also reported appreciating it. Some had specifically sought out a therapist with this perspective because it fit with the couple's faith background and religious beliefs, which supported the idea that couples should remain married and work to improve a troubled relationship.

I just appreciated his (therapist's) perspective, his thought was 'I'm here to save the marriage' ... I think he asked right away do you want to save the marriage? Do you love each other? Some of those really important things. In my personal opinion the purpose of couples counseling...is to save the marriage. (Participant 10)

Importance of Extra-therapeutic Factors

It was evident throughout exploring these women's narratives that neither therapy, nor the therapist were the sole factors involved in their decision to stay married. Therapy was helpful and important, but the importance of therapy in the decision-making process varied from person to person and could not be quantified by this study's methodology. However, as clinicians it is important for us to gain an understanding of factors outside therapy that women (and maybe all people) contemplate while considering divorce. Other main themes that appeared as part of the decision-making process were; their children, seeing their spouse work to change the marriage, remembering how they loved their spouse, their faith, and feeling that there were few or no other viable options other than to remain married.

Children. Though it was not a requirement for inclusion in the study, all but one participant had at least one child. Participants spoke about not wanting their children to experience "this." However, "this" meant different things to different participants. Sometimes "this" referred to

living in a home with an unhappy or argumentative marriage, or “this” was growing up with divorced parents.

I don't feel like they're (kids) getting that (a good model of marriage) at this moment from us. I don't want that to be their model of what adult relationships look like. So, I think part of the decision is can my husband and I get to a place where we're providing that model for them? Because that's what I want for them. I want them to be in a relationship where they take care of someone. (Participant 11)

I remember thinking that there would come a day in my life where I'd have to look my daughter in the eye and tell her that I did everything I could possibly do to keep her family together. And that was really hard...I mean for the rest of her life, she'd be 30 and splitting her Christmases between us. (Participant 9)

Spouses were working hard to make changes. Another factor that is tied to therapy but does not necessarily have to be tied to therapy, was that some of the women reported thinking about divorce less when they saw their spouses working to change themselves and the marriage. This seemed to connect emotionally to their hope that their husbands also wanted the marriage to be different.

I was very hopeful when I saw him doing the work. Yeah, I would say really within 6 months, we did the 3 things on each other's list. We did that for almost a year. I was afraid to give it up because I was afraid to backslide. (Participant 12)

Reaffirming love. For some women, the time during which the couple was attending therapy helped them remember or reaffirm their love for their spouse, and feel loved in return.

I don't think our marriage would have been salvageable if we didn't right away have that ... it's that 'wait, I love you.' And that's sort of what it all came down to. That, I love you no matter what...And he felt the same way or he said he did...but I never realized how deep that love was until we were in this miserable state and it was still there. (Participant 10)

Faith. Some of the women faith also influenced this decision-making process. Faith played a different role for each participant, which was not deeply explored as it was not the main focus of the study.

I brought up the whole 'there's two reasons that I can leave him.' He (therapist) said, if your husband is willing to repent and offer you some restitution then the Bible also has something to say about that.... (Participant 9)

Barriers to divorce. The last theme that emerged as another factor in women deciding to remain married was that the idea that there were barriers to divorcing. In these cases, divorce either seemed more difficult than remaining married, or was not a viable option due to financial constraints, or there were other limitations.

I was so resource poor in terms of financial stability that I couldn't possibly imagine how we could be apart from each other and actually live. So I felt like I probably didn't want to be living with him but I couldn't imagine how I could make it work to not live with him. (Participant 4)

Yeah, you know in a lot of ways I don't know if it (divorce) really could have worked either to be honest but I just, I think so much is going on and so much of life was going on that to throw in a divorce would have just...it would have made it worse instead of better. (Participant 1)

Gradual Process

The women also reported that the decision not to pursue a divorce and remain married did not occur at a specific moment. The decision was a gradual one that participants described as slowly evolving as they felt themselves and their spouse changing.

I don't think for me there was any click when it just went away. There was a lot of hurt and it took a long time. I guess I just tried to hang in there and go from session to session and see what would happen and give my husband more chances to be honest with me... I would say probably somewhere between 6 months and a year. I think I was pretty sure that I was in it to stay. I don't know if we ever exactly vocalized that to each other in a session until after we had been going to therapy for a year. (Participant 13)

I remember gradually feeling different. Something would happen at work and I'd want to call him, just like tiny little things that were pointless, just random... Once that started to come back it reminded me how much I enjoyed his time, how much I loved him, how much I really wanted to get past it, but...what he had done still hurt. So, it was kind of a gradual thing. (Participant 9)

Continued thoughts of divorce. In spite of women's decision to remain married within this gradual process, nine women said that the idea of divorce has not totally gone away. They reported that the idea of not wanting to be married to their spouse resurfaces. It may resurface during a fight, or it could be a reoccurring idea that remains for months at a time. Though most of the women reported that they have these thoughts, they are all currently committed to remaining married.

I always have leaving kind of in the background. For me it's always been, and that's sounds weird but not that I have it in the back of my mind but it's always one of those options like how do you make your marriage better or do you decide that it's not going to work? (Participant 1)

I wish I could say that it has gone away, not really, once in a while it still comes back... you know? I think more it's like you say it but I don't really mean it. (Participant 8)

Participant 14 described marriage like a roller coaster and likened thinking about divorce to thinking about hurting oneself. The roller coaster metaphor illustrates the gradual, meandering, and often complicated, path toward deciding to remain married. Another metaphor Participant 14 described was that when people think about hurting themselves but make no specific plans or steps toward it, it is similar to considering divorce in moments of stress, but not with the intention of actually going through with it.

In conclusion, we offer the following exhaustive description (Creswell, 2006) of the results of this study:

The women we interviewed initiated therapy at a very difficult time in their marriages. They found support there, and some of what they experienced as helpful in therapy was having space to talk, being held accountable for their thoughts and actions within the relationship and feeling understood by the therapist. They reported feeling that therapy was helpful because the therapist's beliefs about marriage matched their own. However, their experiences in therapy were not the only factors that influenced their decision to stay married. Other important factors included the women's concern for the impact divorce might have on their children, their faith and religious beliefs about the importance of marriage, seeing their spouse make changes, the logistical barriers to divorce (i.e., the financial realities of it) and feeling as though the love in their marriage was being reaffirmed. They reported that their decision-making process was gradual that it took time and was something the women continued to revisit even after therapy had concluded.

These findings depict an extended, evolving, and complex process for women who are considering divorce—one in which marital therapy can play an important role.

DISCUSSION

This study has shed some light on the question of how marital therapy affects women's divorce decision making by demonstrating that therapy is helpful in the conversation space it creates for

couples. However, the results are not definitive, and the interviews have led to additional questions for the researchers. The results of the current study are consistent with research that suggests women are more likely to initiate therapy than men, and women do tend to seek out therapy more often than men (Vessey & Howard, 1993). The seriousness with which the women reported considering divorce fits with Vaughan's (1990) ideas that whether one or both spouses are considering divorce, by the time they enter therapy, they have been considering divorce for a long time.

Therapy was reported to be helpful to the women interviewed. It was not a specialized technique or intervention that stood out to the women as being helpful. It was having space to talk, being held accountable, being encouraged to interact differently, and feeling connected to and understood by the therapist. This finding supports research that suggests that it is the way the client's perceive their therapist and the process of therapy that is most important to having a positive, helpful experience (Miller, Duncan, & Hubble, 2004). It has been discussed that not only the alliance between therapist and client is important but also the confidence with which the therapist uses the model they are working from (Simon, 2012a, 2012b). The ways that the women we interviewed reported therapy being helpful are similar to the four common factors associated with change in psychotherapy (Blow & Sprenkle, 2001; Lambert, 1992; Miller, Duncan, & Hubble, 1997). Specifically, *client/extra-therapeutic* factors are the elements of client's lives that exist outside the therapy, such as careers, family, faith, events out of their control and individual motivation. The *relationship factors* describe what happens between the client and therapist such as warmth and empathy. *Technique/model* factors are related to the specific theory, model or intervention that a therapist uses. Lastly, *expectancy, placebo and hope* factors refer to the changes that occur simply because a client has sought out treatment. In this study, religious beliefs, willingness to work to change, and social support could be seen as client/extra-therapeutic factors. The ways the therapists engaged clients could fall into the technique/model category. And having 'space to talk' could be seen as an expectancy, placebo or hope factor. In addition to these four factors, five common factors have been proposed as unique to MFT (Sprenkle, Blow, & Dickey, 1999). One of these factors is that MFTs work to create change in a family's interactional patterns, which was reported in this study by participants as therapists helping couples interact differently. The theme "marital therapy was helpful" also fits with a recent review of literature on marital therapy that found that 70% of couples who sought marital therapy were positively impacted (Lebow et al., 2012).

The majority of the women appreciated that their therapist had an unbiased stance regarding their decision to divorce. This does not mean that the therapist was, in fact, unbiased, but the theme reflects that the women did not *feel* that the therapist pushed a specific agenda. It is difficult to know how participants could have sensed non-bias, as it is possible that a therapist who takes a stance supporting the individual's agenda (i.e., being happy and healthy) over a relational agenda (i.e., individual happiness may fluctuate within the more important goal of supporting the couple's overall satisfaction) may actually reflect a bias. This perceived unbiased approach may be important in light of research that shows the potentially negative effect of therapist's negative perceptions (Ro & Wampler, 2009).

There were four participants that specifically sought out therapists that they knew would be "pro marriage." That is, these couples sought out therapists with similar beliefs to their own. All participants reported feeling supported in making their own decisions, and the therapist wanted to work with them to improve the situation, regardless of whether or not the woman was still considering divorce. This may indicate to clinicians that it may benefit couples if the therapist learns about the client's belief system and their desires for the purpose of therapy. This emphasizes the importance of a solid couple-therapist alliance being built early in treatment to prevent premature termination (Blow et al., 2009; Mamodhousen, Wright, Tremblay, & Poitras-Wright, 2005). A strong therapeutic alliance has been recently discussed as one of the core common factors of family treatment (Fraser, Solovey, Grove, Lee, & Greene, 2012).

Participants reported that many factors went into making the decision to stay in the marriage. Some of these were related to improvements they saw in the relationship (i.e., husband's efforts) while others were related to the negative impacts of divorce (e.g., finances, disruption to the lives of their children, etc.). This theme is similar to previous research regarding barriers to divorce and rewards that keep the marriages going (White & Booth, 1991). Previti and Amato (2003) discussed rewards such as love and commitment that were also mentioned by the women in this study as

reasons to remain married. Rewards offer more opportunity for marital cohesion than barriers, but both rewards and barriers existed in the stories of the participants. The reported barriers to divorce aligned with Previti and Amato's (2003) findings. Although marital counseling was not the only deciding factor for participants in the current study, counseling could be viewed as a method to obtain increased rewards in marriage. Fackrell (2012) found that children, care for one's spouse, finances, and commitment to marriage were factors impacting those she interviewed as they were deciding whether or not to divorce. These factors are similar to those reported by participants in the current study.

Oz (1994) outlined a specific model that examines the "costs," or sacrifices, of the decision to divorce, which clinicians could use to assist couples in making a decision about divorce. More recently, the concept of "hope" has been studied in qualitative interviews with couple therapists, as a primary agent of change (Ward & Wampler, 2010). The authors discuss hope as an essential element of the change process. Their own, as well as the couple's hope in the possibility of change within the relationship were seen by our participants as key to improving the marriage, thus moving away from the decision to divorce. This may be tied to making it through tough times in marriage. Similarly, an in-depth study of one marital therapy case found hope to be an important factor (Blow et al., 2009). In another recent study, researchers surveyed twenty-five couples' who self-reported that they had great marriages but had considered divorce (Tulane, Skogrand, & DeFrain, 2011). The top reasons for considering divorce in this sample was poor communication, spending lots of time apart, stress from extended family and infidelity. The ways that the couples "got through it" were most often cited as improving communication, relying on each other and working together and seeking professional help. This was not necessarily counseling but included treating medical issues, and their religious beliefs. This study calls on researchers to further understand the story of couples that go through struggles but do not divorce, which the current study continues to build upon.

The decision to divorce has been hypothesized as being an extended process (Vaughan, 1990). Women in the current study indicated that their decision to remain married following serious consideration of divorce was a similarly long process. The decision was not made during any one particular therapy session. The women described experiencing their husband and their marriage in a different way due, in part, to what happened during therapy. They learned in time to trust the change they were witnessing and had a sense that it was going to last. This is similar to the slow process of rebuilding trust after infidelity has occurred (Spring, 2004). Tulane et al.'s (2011) study found that couples who considered divorce took time for feelings to change and the marriage to improve. These couples had some continued communication and relationship problems. This is similar to the theme found in this study. That is, for some, the thought of divorce resurfaces, and some still strongly consider it while others have pushed it out of their minds. In these cases, the relationship may have changed enough that one or both partners believe it is better to stay in the marriage than to leave it.

Future areas of inquiry around this topic might include the following: Is it a common experience for many, maybe even most, married individuals to think about divorce but not openly discussed it with their spouse? What is the difference between divorce deliberations that happen at an internal level versus those that happen between partners? And, how do these different types of deliberations contribute to or prevent eventual resolution?

Connection to Clinical Work

The themes found in this study connect to clinical work in four ways. The first is that it could be helpful to openly ask couples considering divorce where each partner is regarding desire to improve the marriage, divorce or separate. Clinicians could ask about how the couple decided to seek therapy, as coming into therapy due to an ultimatum is quite different from coming because both members agreed it would be helpful. This could help to develop the therapeutic alliance early, which is a key factor in whether or not couples return for subsequent sessions (Knobloch-Fedders, Pinsof, & Mann, 2004). The second is that the majority of participants appreciated their therapist working from an unbiased stance, unless they specifically were looking for a therapist who was against divorce. This finding fits with the Discernment Counseling protocol, a process that helps each member of a mixed agenda couple decide if they would like to pursue marriage counseling to

improve the marriage before actually starting marriage counseling (Doherty, 2011). This process helps to slow the couple down and takes the therapist out of the decision-making role.

A third connection to clinical work is to remember that there are a myriad of factors affecting the decision to divorce or stay married (Fackrell, 2012; Heaton & Albrecht, 1991), not just the time in therapy. Therapy plays a role in women's decision-making process about divorce by providing space to talk, holding the participants accountable, encouraging partners to interact differently, and by the women feeling connected to and understood by the therapist. However, there is a complex relationship between the factors that go into deciding to divorce, including the therapy experience (Amato & Previti, 2003). It may be helpful for therapists to consider the value of discussing the extra-therapeutic factors, such as children, finances and the clients' belief system with the couple and point out the positive changes that have been witnessed for the marriage and each spouse.

The therapist may wish to normalize that, even after both members of a couple decide to remain married, the idea of divorce may resurface. It may be weeks or years, and it may be a fleeting thought or a stronger desire. That was the experience of the women in this study. Given what participants said, therapists might suggest to their clients that they may feel frustrated again, and may find themselves thinking about divorce again. This does not mean they have "back tracked" or that the progress they made was lost. Clinicians should remember that deciding to remain married is a process, which may also decrease the therapist's anxiety regarding the effectiveness of their work. Clinicians may also consider during premarital or marital therapy, to say something like "There may be times you are so upset you'll think about leaving. This is normal. Talk about it, work at it, don't be afraid." Messages like this could empower couples to get help for their marriages but not to panic at the thought of divorce.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this study that point toward areas for continued research. The first is that in this project only women's perspectives and experiences were obtained. While important, the women's perspective is only part of the story. In the future, interviewing the husbands or couples together would add to the existing literature. Also, the methodology was not designed to quantify the impact of extra-therapeutic factors on women's decision or to generalize themes to a larger population. As this was an exploratory study, future studies should consider using path models and other quantitative measures to better examine the factors in decision making and within therapy itself.

This study demonstrates that marital therapy can have a strong impact and be a support to women as they wrestle with the decision of whether or not to divorce. The participants' stories demonstrate the difficult experience, influenced by many life factors, that considering divorce can be. For the participants in our study, marital therapy was a positive experience that contributed to their decisions to remain married because it provided a space for couples to talk, hold each partner accountable, to interact differently, and ultimately to strengthen their relationship.

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