

Deciding Not to Un-Do the "I Do":

A Qualitative Study of the Therapy Experiences of Women

Who Consider Divorce But Decide to Remain Married

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to my daughter, Annika Marie. She was born between my 2nd and 3rd years in this program – and from when she ‘joined’ me in class while I was pregnant to when I was doing Skype interviews immediately after putting her to bed – she’s been an important part, and big motivating factor, of this wild ride. Beautiful girl, my greatest wish for you is that you can have the opportunity to achieve all your dreams!

Abstract

This preliminary study explores (1) women's experience of couple's therapy while they navigated decision-making around divorcing and (2) the role that the therapy played in the women's decision not to divorce. A phenomenological approach and qualitative method was used to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's therapeutic and decision-making experience. Women that considered initiating divorce before they turned 40 and attended at least five couple's therapy sessions (N = 15) were interviewed for this study. 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 specifically regarding the interaction of considering divorce and couples therapy. They were: *Women Initiated Therapy*, *Therapist Was Experienced as Neutral*, *Therapy was Helpful*, *Importance of Other Factors*, and *Gradual Process*.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Due to the fact that divorce rates remain high in the United States (Cherlin, 2010), more needs to be learned regarding women's experience of therapy, especially as they decide whether or not to initiate divorce. The *purpose of this study* is to explore women's experience of couple's therapy while they navigated decision-making around divorcing, and to explore the role that the therapy played in the woman's process of deciding not to divorce. This study begins to bridge the gap that exists in the research between divorce literature and research focused on therapy. The results offer clinicians insight regarding providing support to women and their husbands as they consider divorce. A qualitative method was used to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's therapeutic experience. These data add to research on women younger than 40 years who initiate divorce, as the majority of research on women and divorce has been using a more middle-aged sample.

Divorce has become a common occurrence in 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 (Lebow, Chambers, Christensen & Johnson, 2011; Amato, 2010). There were approximately one million divorces in the United States in 2007 (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2007). This rate varies by state, but overall there are a high percentage of marriages that end in divorce. Due to the frequency of divorce, many clients that marriage and family therapists see may have been affected by divorce or the dissolution of a long-term romantic relationship, whether it is their own

or that of their parents. Three prominent measures point to the need to specifically study younger women's experience earlier in marriage. On average, women initiated two-thirds of divorces (Enright, 2004; Pettit & Bloom, 1984), two-thirds of marriages end before the tenth anniversary (Center for Disease Control, 2002) and the average age of divorce for women is 33 (Center for Disease Control, 1995). It is important to understand the way that therapy affects a woman's decision to divorce as it is an event that permanently changes her life's course and the life course of her husband and their children. In a survey of 291 marriage and family therapists, the most frequently reported top presenting problem for the client's they worked with were "marital/couple difficulties", with 73% of respondents reporting it was in the top three most common issues (Northey, 2002).

Women are more likely to seek out therapy in general. In a review of several large epidemiological surveys, two-thirds of those seeking outpatient therapy services were women (Vessey & Howard, 1993). This study focuses on what the client experiences and how the way they interpret their sessions affect the way they think about their situation and ultimately make decisions in their life. Understanding what happens within that session to influence a client's decision-making will enable clinicians to be more aware of their part in the process of client's decision-making around divorce. Examining these issues specifically within the context of women and divorce presents the opportunity to offer new information regarding the decision-making process of younger women who consider divorce, but do not pursue it, and the influence of the therapeutic relationship in that process.

Currently little research has focused on the decision-making process leading to divorce, much less the way that therapy can interact with this decision-making process.

Much of the historical research on the divorce process has focused on the entire process, from when the divorce begins, to coping and moving on afterward (Rollie & Duck, 2006). The effects on men, women and children have also been thoroughly studied (Amato, 2010). Vaughn (1990) however, has written about the internal decision-making processes of those that took part in her qualitative study and found that this decision is often a private and internal one, where an individual may discuss it with friends but not specifically with the spouse. She writes about the potential initiator trying to create change and feeling discontented for long periods of time before approaching the spouse. It is in this time period, where there is discontent and desire for change, that therapists are likely to see struggling couples and have the possibility for creating change. Vaughn further notes that often couples come into therapy when they have already decided to divorce and are looking to the counselor to help them break the news or get their permission.

Reasons people choose to divorce have been extensively studied. Recently Amato and Previti (2003) analyzed 208 participants' open-ended responses to why their marriage ended. They found that the top three reasons women gave were infidelity, incompatibility and alcohol or drug use. Religiosity was high correlated with reporting infidelity as the cause of the divorce and women that married younger were more likely to report alcohol or drug use. As these researchers examined the literature overall regarding why people divorce, it demonstrated that women more often report emotional reasons. However, when a literature review was done regarding why women may consider divorce but choose not to, little previous research was found. It has been discussed that it may be due to financial considerations (Amato & Rogers, 1999;

Swenson, 1996), having young children (Waite & Lillard, 1991) or thinking that divorce goes against their moral or religious beliefs (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991).

One study that did compare couples that divorced to couples that were unhappy but did not divorce (Davila & Bradbury, 2001) examined their differences in attachment. They found that when compared to spouses that remained in happy marriages, and spouses that divorced, spouses that stay in unhappy marriage had the highest level of attachment insecurity. One way this was measured was regarding anxiety over abandonment. They also found that in their sample the majority of those divorced did not have a child. In reflecting on their results they call for work to target unhappy couples early on and offer interventions, especially because couples who remained in unhappy marriage reported high levels of depressive symptoms. This continues to point toward the need to better understand the process couples go through when they are unhappy and want to have 'something' change.

In research on the client's experience of therapy, Singer (2005) found that clients report desirable therapist characteristics as feeling cared for by the therapist, genuine warmth, a sense of humor, being a good listener and not feeling judged among other things. These therapist characteristics tend to be deemed as the most effective therapist traits according to existing common factors research. Common factors research is an area within Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) that examines the aspects of various therapeutic theories and interventions that are the same. Researchers have found that the client's perception of the therapist and process of therapy are the largest factors that contribute to the success of therapy (Miller, Duncan & Hubble, 2004). How client's view the therapy they did while considering divorce will give clinician's greater insight when

working with couples that are on the brink of divorce. This perspective supports the need for qualitative research to be conducted on this topic in the form of phenomenology.

Phenomenology is the method employed in the present study in order to better understand the lived experience and meaning making of the client considering divorce and seeking couple's therapy.

Couples considering divorce, or feeling dissatisfied in their marriage, are likely those couples that seek out therapy. New research is indicating that a sizeable proportion of divorcing couples still believe their marriage could be saved (Doherty, Willoughby & Peterson, 2011). Of 2,484 participants who had filed for divorce one in four individuals and one in nine matched couples indicated that they felt the marriage could still be saved. Three in ten were interested in professional reconciliation services. In these results, women were less likely than men to be interested. However, these results overall indicate that even after the decision to divorce has been made and legal action has been taken, spouses' may continue to wish for the relationship to improve. If clinicians are able to offer helpful services before this decision is made, perhaps fewer couples will find themselves divorcing though they wish for reconciliation.

The research on effectiveness in couple's therapy is growing and continues to indicate that treatment can be very helpful to couples (Lebow, et al., 2011). Specific interventions and models are becoming frontrunners, such as Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) and Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT). However, the way in which a client experiences therapy and their perspective on how change, support or help are taking place is less researched. How do clients who choose to remain married believe they were helped by couple's therapy?

I specifically chose to focus on younger women due to changes occurring in society, backed up through research and experiences of my friends and clients. As more women are in the work force and many make equal or more than their husbands, financial considerations come into considering divorce in different ways (Amato, Booth, Johnson & Rogers, 2007). There are also different expectations, women desire more emotional connection and partnership in their marriage (Amato et al., 2007). Women are getting married older, the average age is 25.8 (National Health Statistics Reports, 2012). Experts have written that why women decide to get married may be changing (Amato et al.2007). How does this then extend to why they decide to remain married even when unhappy enough to consider divorce, and how does our work as therapist's influence this? These questions, along with my background and values led me to the research question, methodology and a whole new body of literature.

To explore these issues, I chose to use the conceptual outline and method of transcendental phenomenology, hoping to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of women who have made this decision to remain married after couple's therapy. Chapter two details the theoretical background as well as Feminist Phenomenology, Human Ecological Perspective and Family Systems Perspective, all which influenced this study. A set of questions was used in each interview (see Appendix A) to explore these women's experience of considering divorce, attending therapy and deciding to remain married. Fifteen women were interviewed in person, via phone or via Skype. These interviews were transcribed and coded. This methodology is detailed in chapter four. In chapter five the main themes regarding how therapy influenced these women's decision to remain married and presented, and chapter six discusses how this

information impacts the therapy field, limitation of this study and next steps that could be taken.

To summarize, and begin, this study focused on developing a deeper understanding of the experience of younger women in couple's therapy who are considering divorce but ultimately decided not to divorce. This research will increase knowledge in the field by focusing on the client's experience, specifically in an area that has not been highlighted.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

Prevalence of Divorce

Divorce has been present in society for hundreds of years, but became more common and began to take on its present form after World War I (Phillips, 1991). Since then the occurrence of divorce has continued to increase. From 1960 onward divorce has shown a rapid increase in the U.S., England, Germany and France, with percentages at least doubling. Recent data from the Center for Disease Control shows that 10.4% of the United States population reported being divorced or separated at the time of the study (Center for Disease Control, 2004). The reasons discussed in literature for this sharp increase since the 1960's are varied (Amato & Irving, 2006). However, several pieces pertinent to this research come forward. One is that women's increase in employment outside of the home has been tied to the increase in divorce rates – women become more financially self-reliant, removing their reliance on a husband for financial stability. Another is the change in expectations of marriage, specifically expecting marriage to fulfill emotional needs and be a love based relationship. The third is the change in public opinion of divorce. The social stigma toward divorce is no longer as negative. With this public opinion change, legal avenues for pursuing divorce have increased.

Amato and Irving (2006) argue that these reasons for the increase in divorce support the hypothesis of the deinstitutionalization of marriage. Marriage is now seen as a contract and emotional bond between two people rather than a foundational unit of social organization that is regulated by law, religion and social norms. This view was originally posited by Ernest Burgess (Burgess & Wallin, 1953), and is compared to the more

desirable form of marriage – a companionate marriage. Companionate marriage is egalitarian and held together by the aforementioned ties of love and friendship rather than social obligation. This societal change of marital expectations, as well as women's roles and societal views of divorce merge together to tell some of the story of couples divorcing today.

Provisional data from 2009 on divorce shows 3.4 divorces per 1000 marrying couples per year (Center for Disease Control, 2009). In Minnesota, from which the sample for this study was drawn, the rate was 2.8 per 1000 in 2004 (Center for Disease Control, 2004). Nationally, 20% of all marriages that end in divorce end in the first five years and the average length of marriages that end in divorce are eight years (Center for Disease Control, 2002). Also, the younger a woman marries the more likely her marriage is to end in divorce (Center for Disease Control, 2002). This is also related to the fact that as divorces are more likely to happen early in a marriage, more couples with young children or no children will divorce (Kitson, 1992).

Divorce may also beget divorce. In a recent article summarizing the latest research on divorce, Paul Amato (2010) stated that some of the best predictors of divorce are being married as a teenager, being poor, cohabiting prior to marriage, having children before marriage, having been divorced before and having grown up without two continuously married parents. Two of these predictors are related to previous experiences with divorce, either one's own or one's parents. Divorce is significantly more likely in a second or later marriage than in a first marriage (Kitson, 1992). These trends are important to note during the decision-making process of divorce. Divorce is an experience many women in the US will encounter.

The Many Effects of Divorce for Women

Women are affected by divorce differently than men. Recent research has shown that divorce puts a financial strain on women, is the leading cause of poverty for women and children (Gadalla, 2009; Smock, 1993), and thus creates a new 'class' of poor – divorced mothers and their children because they experience substantial decrease in financial well-being after a divorce (Phillips, 1991). One-quarter of custodial parents, 82.6% of which are mothers, have income levels below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). This is despite the facts that women have increased their participation in employment, while at the same time reducing their fertility rate (Sayer, 2006). After divorce, women have a steeper decrease in income and it takes them longer to 'bounce back' to financial stability than men (Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2004).

Results from a qualitative study indicate that women who initiated divorce reported losing social support circles in their life. Conversely, women who did not initiate divorce reported feelings of having "been left", high levels of rumination though patterns, feeling vulnerable and seeking spiritual comfort (Sakraida, 2005). These reports demonstrate some of the potential negative mental health side effects for divorcing women. Research has demonstrated that whether or not women initiated the divorce, they go through a significant shift in identity when they divorce. While not always negative, it is likely to be a challenging process (Duffy, Thomas & Trayner, 2002). When previously divorced individuals that remarried were compared with those that did not remarry, those that did not remarry reported higher levels of depressive symptoms, alcohol consumption and personal mastery (Waite, Luo & Lewin, 2009). They found overall emotional well-being tends to go down following a divorce, but if the marriage was unhappy, the

decrease was not significant. Interestingly enough, for those that ended an unhappy marriage their levels of happiness across all measured variables did not improve after the divorce.

Divorce has been shown to affect women's identity in many ways. The majority of divorced women experienced a post-divorce increase in their feelings of being in control of their lives (Baum, Rahav & Sharon, 2005). In a qualitative study interviewing twenty-four women ages 34 to 53, those who initiated divorce reported themes of self-focused growth and optimism (Sakraida, 2005). In a qualitative study of 95 women who completed a mailed questionnaire 10 years after their divorce, divorce increased self-esteem, as women likely need to work after a divorce and this can raise their over-all positive sense of self (Duffy, Thomas & Trayner, 2002). The study discussed that 70 (73.7%) of the women they interviewed, all of whom had been divorced for ten years, reported their lives were better than ten years previously, and 68 women reported above average self-esteem. This rise in self-esteem could also be related to the decrease in marital conflict.

Research has found that women continue to recover from and adjust more quickly to divorce than men (Braver, Shapiro & Goodman, 2006). Several reasons have been found for this, including women's greater adaptation to creating and utilizing social supports (Kitson, 1992). Women are less likely to use harmful or ineffective methods of coping such as substances or alcohol (Baum, 2003). Because women are more likely to initiate divorce, they have more control over the decision and thus feel less stress (Gray & Silver, 1990; Pettit & Bloom, 1984). The change in status has been viewed more positively by women, such as they now see themselves as the head of their household

(Demo & Acock, 1996). Women report more stress when making the decision to divorce while men report more stress following the divorce (Bloom & Caldwell, 1981). And lastly, women tend to have high satisfaction with divorce settlement proceedings (Sheets & Braver, 1996).

It has also been discussed that those who marry may be healthier individuals overall (Wood, Goesing & Avellar, 2007). When considering the reported health benefits of marriage, it must also be noted that spousal conflict more negatively influences women's physical psychological health (Wanic & Kulik, 2011) and a divorce may decrease some of those negative effects. A study conducted by the Center for Disease Control (2004) has also demonstrated that married individuals, specifically younger married individuals, report fewer negative health characteristics, besides obesity, than unmarried individuals. This was found across genders and ethnicity and points to the fact that overall there can be health benefits for women in marriage. However, further research has pointed to nuances in these findings. Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham and Jones (2008) found that married individuals – who reported high levels of satisfaction in their marriage - also reported high levels of life satisfaction, and had lower ambulatory blood pressure, depression, and stress when compared with unmarried people unhappily married individuals. These facts point to the possibility that it is not the act of being married but the perceived quality of the marriage that may have protective health factors. When women with children divorce they take over more parenting duties than men. Over 70% of women who divorce are awarded full custody in the United States (Center for Disease Control, 1995). This puts the additional strain of being a sole caregiver on a newly divorced woman. There is a vast array of literature researching the effects of

divorce on children which will be discussed later in this literature review. The effect of divorce on children is important to note when examining divorce's effect on women because changes in children will affect their mother, and women who are divorcing were also once children who potentially could have had parents that divorced. Most of all however, women who have children consider the often negative impact of the divorce on their children and thus this plays into their decision-making process.

The majority of research over the past several decades regarding children and divorce has continued to find negative effects for children when their parent's divorce. Amato (2010) summarizes these findings by sharing that on average children of divorced parents scored lower than children of married parents on measures of academic, social, health, behavioral and emotional outcomes. Again there are nuances within these findings. When parents who have high amounts of conflict in the marriage divorce, this can actually benefit the children as compared to the parents staying together (Gordon, 2005). In a summary of children's adjustment following divorce Kelly and Emery (2003) reviewed all relevant literature and concluded that high levels of parental conflict and diminished parenting after divorce are difficult for children, but that there are many protective factors for children whose parents are divorcing. These include competent co-parenting and maintaining low levels of hostility. Though divorce is not easy for children, growing up in a high conflict household has been tied to negative outcomes for children (Amato, 2010). Children do much better when their parents maintain a civil relationship and continue to co-parent through the divorce rather than maintain a hostile marriage.

Divorce also strongly affects the parent's relationship with their children. An interesting relationship often occurs as mothers are more likely to be the one who initiates

the divorce, and the one who retains full custody. Thus, children are brought into a situation where they know one person wanted the divorce more, and they are spending the majority of their time with that person. But whatever household the children are in, research has suggested that at least short term divorce generally leads to less positive parenting and more negative parenting (Harold & Conger, 1997). There is an increase in parental stress which is related to decreases in supportive parenting, and a decrease in monitoring behaviors (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 2002). This creates a pervasive and ever-present stress for the child. With all of this in mind, couples often report to clinicians that they are staying married “for the kids.”

When reviewing extensive amounts of literature Penn State family studies researcher Paul Amato (2000) found that the long term effects of divorce on the couple, and the family, are related to the circumstances of the divorce, the moderators of resources, the definition of divorce and specific demographic characteristics. This demonstrates that the outcome of a divorce for each family being unique, and the decision-making process potentially difficult.

Why Couples Do or Do Not Divorce

There are many reasons given for why couples pursue divorce. Some research has indicated that these differences may vary by gender. Wives are more likely to say that emotional or relationship problems are what ended the marriage, as well as problematic behavior such as abuse or drinking (Amato & Previti, 2003). Men are more likely to focus on external causes or their own behavior, as well as to report not knowing that the marriage had any problems. Other predictors of divorce are aspects of marital satisfaction and marital stability. Younger participants reported ‘growing apart’ and drug and alcohol

use as related to the divorce more often. Spending time thinking about divorce and thinking negative or frustrated thoughts about your spouse are also precursors to divorce (Bromon, 2002). Reports of aggression predicted couples who separated or divorces in the first four years of marriage (Rogge & Bradbury, 1999). When individuals report a less negative view of divorce overall this may be connected to decreasing long term marital quality (Amato & Rogers, 1999).

These reasons are increasingly more about 'feelings' than anything else. 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" and "not able to talk." These results reflect women's dissatisfaction with the support and emotional closeness within their marriage. This builds on previous research showing that women's reasons for divorce are more reflective of the relationship and emotional support (Ponzetti, Zvonkovic, Cate & Huston, 1992). An additional study based on the National Survey of Families and Households data support findings that women tend to have a better sense of the marital relationship, be depended upon for the maintenance of the relationship and that their perceptions of conflict and fairness can predict how long the marriage will last (Heaton & Blake, 1999). This implies that women are more closely monitoring their satisfaction within the relationship and may be more likely to notice when things aren't going well first. Overall, couples report emotional hurt and thus relational distancing as elements that precede divorce and cause intimacy dissolution (Vangelisti, 2006). *Hurt* is an interpersonal construct and involves emotions, being pained or disappointed by the one you love. This

research warrants further exploration of women considering divorce as women are often the member of a marriage who is seen as monitoring the emotional climate, and may be more likely to report being the 'hurt' party and the first person to notice deterioration in relationship quality (Tavris, 1992).

Women report a range of reasons for their divorce. Questionnaires were used to gather information from 130 women regarding why they divorced (Dolan & Hoffman, 1998). Participants ranked 51 statements regarding reasons for their divorce that were then analyzed in subgroups. 'Incompatibility' was ranked the highest, with 'Emotional Support', 'Abuse', 'Sexual Problems' and 'Financial Problems' in the next highest group. 'Career Support', 'Housework', 'Child Rearing' and 'Child Care' were the lowest ranked groups. Within these groups, women who were divorced in the past 10 years ranked 'Career Support' as more of a factor than those that had been divorced longer. When comparing high and low-distress marriages that end in divorce, several differences regarding reasons for divorce appeared (Amato & Hohmann-Marriot, 2007). Couples in high-distress marriages experienced frequent arguments, rarely had quality time together and were more at risk for experiencing interpersonal violence. This compared to low-distress marriages in which reasons for pursuing divorce were not as linked to marital quality. The researchers theorized that perhaps this group's reasons were more linked to a perceived absence of barriers to divorce, better alternatives to their marriage or lower levels of commitment. In this study about half of the 509 couples fit the distressed profile and the other half the low distress profile.

Research into barriers to not divorcing has begun. *Barriers* refer to those issues that are blocking, for various reasons, one or both members of the couple from pursuing

divorce. Barriers include being married for longer periods of time (White & Booth, 1991) and financial (Previti & Amato, 2003). Additionally, it has been found that the greater time a wife spends maintaining a household – not doing labor outside of the home – the lower the probability of divorce (Weagley, Chan & Yan, 2007). However as gender roles are quickly changing, this family structure is being challenged as women earn more money and do not desire the traditional breadwinner/homemaker relationship (Rosin, 2012; Amato et al., 2007). This range of reported barriers seems to describe that the level of marital unhappiness that leads to divorce is not just later in marriage, but at all life stages.

In addition to barriers, Denise Previti and Paul Amato (2003) have examined basic reasons why people remain married. The top five reported rewards of marriage were love, friendship, communication, commitment to spouse and respect. The top barriers children, religion and financial need. Participants thought of marriage in terms of rewards, with 75% reporting rewards over barriers or lack of alternatives.

Spouses frequently diverge in their accounts of problems occurring in their relationship. In a specific study addressing these differences, Hopper (1993) interviewed divorced individuals and found that in most cases both former spouses reported considering divorce; however after the divorce, depending on if they constructed their narrative as being the leaver or the leavée, their story became very different. These narratives that individuals create internally become their script, and it is likely that once the individual starts on the path, it can be difficult to change. It is possible that this internal narrative is not yet set when a couple enters therapy and therapists influence how the narrative is written.

The time period preceding divorce that has been extensively studied is the 'emotional divorce', alternatively referred to as estrangement (Bohannon, 1970; Vaughan, 1990). This process begins with a seed of feeling distanced or unfulfilled in the relationship, and grows as the partner invests time, energy, emotions and affections in other areas of life. In Kitson's (1992) study of married and divorced couples the factors she found to lead to this estrangement were role expectations not being met, feeling that the marriage was a hindrance to personal growth, extramarital sex, the way they answered the question "would you marry the same person?", hesitancy toward the idea of divorce and willingness to seek professional help. These reasons touch on many foundational issues within a marriage, all of which could be addressed in marital counseling.

Therapy and Divorce

Two-thirds of divorces are initiated by women (Enright, 2004; Pettit & Bloom, 1984), and women are more likely to seek out counseling (Vessey & Howard, 1993). These two factors highlight the importance of clinicians understanding how their clinical work with these women affects the woman's decision. In a recent meta-analytic review of research on couples counseling for couples experiencing marital distress, Lebow et al.(2011) found , that counseling positively impacted 70% of couples. Additionally 50.4% of reconciled couples reported seeking help from a professional but only 31.9% from a mental health professional in a qualitative study of couples (Kitson, 1992). These couples reported that a key element in their reconciliation was not just making, but keeping agreements to make changes within the relationship. Therapy was significantly associated with making these agreements ($r=.28$, $p< .01$), but sadly not with keeping

them. Though this study is twenty years old, it demonstrates room for improvement in the counseling profession. These studies focus on outcome variables and satisfaction reports as compared to the focus of this current study, which focuses on the process and effect that therapy has on the way a client feels about their relationship and their consideration of divorce.

Marital counseling can help couples work through difficulties and avoid divorce. In a qualitative study examining the experience of women who attended both group and individual therapy as they went through a divorce, women reported many positive and meaningful experiences (Kimball, Wieling & Brimhall, 2009), including that the group meant a great deal to them and that the therapy helped them to deal with the stress in their lives. Specific models of evidence-based couples therapy have been developed to work with couples in conflict. Examples such as Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy, which is an experiential evidence-based treatment that focuses on couples' underlying and unexpressed emotions, (Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg & Schindler, 1999) are widely used. However, many community-based practitioners continue to use an eclectic model, which is a combination of several theories of therapy (Christensen, Baucom, Thuy-Anh Vu, & Stanton, 2005).

Ethically, clinicians are encouraged to respect the autonomy of the clients' decision-making ability. Often therapists are trained to be 'neutral' when it comes to whether a couple should divorce or not. Therefore, therapists typically would not advise a client to pursue a divorce or stay married they would be more inclined to assist the client through their own decision-making process. However, it could be possible that when deciding whether or not to divorce couples in therapy are still affected by their therapist.

A recent article by Knox and Corte (2010), builds evidence to show that couples who seek therapy want to make their marriage better. Fifty-nine couples going through the divorce process participated in an on-line study. Over two-thirds of both the men and women recommended that individuals try to 'work it out' or 'see a counselor' if they were struggling in their relationship. In this study the women stated that currently, while being separated, their largest concerns were finances and finding another mate. On her own or as a couple, seeking therapy may have an effect on the woman's perception of her relationship and her decision-making process around divorce. There is very little literature exploring this experience. Therapists need to understand the situations couples and individuals find themselves in when they are considering divorce and be properly equipped to address them. Therapists also need to understand how their work is experienced by couples on the brink of divorce and what, within therapy, contributes to a couples' decision to divorce or stay together.

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 marital relationship (51.3%), to attempt to avoid divorce (50%), for religious reasons (63.2%), or because other family members insisted (65.8%). The average number of counseling sessions attended prior to taking concrete steps toward divorce was 13. The majority of participants in this study disagreed (31.6%) with the statement "I felt counseling was effective." The majority of participants agreed (30.3%) 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." Additionally, one-quarter felt that couples counseling was effective. Rotfort (2011)

recommended that to further this area of research, examining the experience of couples considering divorce, qualitative interviews with those who did not divorce would be the next important step. This is direct support for the current study.

Divorce Initiation

Although women initiate the majority of divorces, a paucity of literature exists on these women. One recent article begins to examine the guilt that women may feel when initiating divorce (Baum, 2007). In her qualitative interviews Baum found that though these women initiated the divorce, they had feelings of guilt for creating a separation. The case illustrations in the article emphasized that this guilt can impair the women in their parenting, future relationships, and personal functioning.

A large study of 9,147 households in Australia compared divorces initiated by men and 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). Kincaid and Caldwell (1995) examined 56 separated couples and found women were more likely to initiate separation. The women reported a decrease in love, emotional abuse, growing apart and trouble communicating as the most frequent reasons why they wanted a divorce.

A piece of divorce initiation that is important to note is the difference in gendered expectations regarding what women desire out of marriage compared to what men desire out of marriage. Women are socialized to put priority on the process of relating, this is the closeness through communication and dialogue (Johnson, 1995). It then fits that women are more likely than men to desire greater degrees of emotional closeness and connection through communication (Feeney, 1999). This pattern, when examined with

men's pattern of withdrawal during times of marital distress (Gottman, 1994) can be a recipe for trouble and push women to initiate divorce when they feel their husbands are running from relationship problems. Also, though women were more likely to report initiating the divorce, they were also more likely to report that their former husband caused the divorce, and both spouses reporting the wife 'wanting' the divorce more (Amato & Previti, 2003).

Who initiated divorce was specifically examined in a recent study of Israeli men and women (Rokach, Cohen, & Dreman, 2004). The participants were all 45 years of age or older, and of the fifteen participants, one couple's divorce was completely agreed upon, while 8 were initiated by men and 6 initiated by women. The effect of initiator status on coping post-divorce was also examined in a study where the mean age of participants was 31 (Pettit & Bloom, 1984). They found that 70% of the initiators were women but that only a small part of the variance in adjustment to divorce could be accounted for by initiator status. However, female initiators perceived the most benefits of separation. Buehler (1987) examined differences in emotional and psychological well-being and stress between initiators and non-initiators at two time points for 80 mothers and fathers. She found that initiators reported more increase in well-being and decrease in stress at the first time point shortly after the divorce, but on many variables non-initiators reported similar changes in well-being and stress at the second time point. Sweeney (2002) found those that initiated divorce may feel that they have better odds of remarriage than non-initiators and in fact remarry more quickly. However, the study also revealed that initiator status was a stronger predictor of remarriage for older women than

younger women. This may indicate an important difference between younger women who initiate divorce and older women who initiate divorce.

Overall there is currently little known regarding why younger women initiate divorce and how therapy influences this decision. These women are the population that needs to be understood if therapists are to support younger couples in their decision-making.

Decision-making and Divorce

Over several decades many models of decision-making have been designed and researched, as well as specific models of divorce decision-making and the divorce process. A popular model of decision-making is divided into five stages to arrive at a stable decision (Janis, 1977). These five sequential stages are (1) appraising the challenge, (2) surveying alternative, (3) weighing alternative, (4) deliberating about commitment and (5) adhering despite negative feedback. Janis comments throughout this model, that the stability of the decision is related to the level of commitment an individual has to the cause. These stages can be seen later in research on divorce process, especially in Vaughan's (1990) book outlining the process of uncoupling and the weighing of alternatives and deliberating. The value of commitment comes into play in intimate relationships from two directions, commitment to the marriage or commitment to ending the marriage. It is during this decision-making time which clinicians often see couples thinking about divorce. The majority of divorce models focus more on the process of marital dissolution than the internal decision-making process of an individual. This process is separate from the process of marital disaffection, which focuses on the

internal thoughts, emotions and feelings an individual has toward their spouse and about their marriage (Gottman & Notorious, 2002).

Oz (1994) outlined a specific model that clinicians could use to assist couples in making a decision about divorce. Two or more alternatives are written on a board, and then all possible costs if that alternative is chosen are written underneath. The client's willingness to sustain that cost is then considered. Historically this intervention fits with the conceptualization of the decision to divorce being made depending on how the alternative (being single) is viewed (Kalb, 1983). The way in which this alternative is considered is affected by many factors according to Kalb, some of which include the individual's past romantic relationships, economic status, and number of children, age, risk-taking history and perception of their attractiveness. Kalb recommends to clinicians that they spend time discussing the idea of the alternative with the client(s), evaluating if they are realistic.

More recently, the concept of "hope" has been studied in qualitative interviews with couple's therapists, as a primary agent of change (Ward & Wampler, 2010). They 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 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. A recent study that used a questionnaires reviewed answers of twenty five couples who self-reported that they had great marriages but had considered divorce explored how they had made it through that time period (Tulane, Skogrand & DeFrain, 2011). The mean age was 57 and the mean length of marriage was 36 years. 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, seeking professional help - this was not necessarily counseling but includes treating medical issues, and the couples religious beliefs that included trusting in God. 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.

Stable, Unhappy Marriages

There is a small but growing body of research examining couples that remain married, but report low levels of satisfaction in their marriage. Heaton and Albrecht (1991) found that in unhappy marriages significant factors that decreased instability were older age, longer length of marriage, having parents that were not divorced, not being previously married, commitment to the institution of marriage and a belief that their life would be worse if they divorced and feeling like one has little control over their life. Other related reasons that have been discussed theorized as to why these couples remain married such as due to financial considerations (Amato & Rogers, 1999; Swenson, 1996), having young children (Waite & Lillard, 1991) or thinking that divorce goes against their moral or religious beliefs (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991). Waite and Lillard (1991) specifically examined the effect of children on marital outcome found that the firstborn child increase the stability of the marriage through their preschool years, other children increase the stability when they are young, older children and those born before the couple is married decrease the stability and over all couples that have children are only slightly more likely to be married at least twenty years. One-hundred and seventy-two

newlywed couples participated in a four-year longitudinal study that examined attachment in marriages (Davila & Bradbury, 2001). It was found that couples in stable, unhappy marriages had the highest levels of insecure attachment. Reports of challenges with communication predicted lower marital satisfaction in the first four years of marriage (Rogge & Bradbury, 1999).

Phenomenology: Background

In a phenomenological study the researcher is most interested in learning the essence, meaning or 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 that was experienced for the participants (Creswell, 2007). In the current study the phenomenon being examined is the experience of seeking couples' therapy while considering divorce and deciding not to divorce. The basis of phenomenology is rooted in four philosophical perspectives, (Mickunas, 1990 found in Creswell) that all are founded in the important beliefs that phenomenology is the study of the lived experiences of people, that these experiences are conscious and that what is reported is the essence of these experiences – not an explanation or analysis. The current study data are based on what the women reported, not on analysis of their behaviors. These four perspectives are that phenomenology is a return to traditional tasks of philosophy, it is without presuppositions, there is an intentionality of consciousness, and that the subject-object dichotomy is not focused on. However, within phenomenology there are two main approaches, hermeneutic phenomenology (van Mannen, 1990) and transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). This paper is based on the premises and recommendations of transcendental phenomenology.

Transcendental Phenomenology

Transcendental phenomenology 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). Husserl emphasized the differences between 'facts' and essences – that a derived essence is the true experience. In this study the essences found heard within the interviews are the true experience. Clark Moustakas has since written a handbook on transcendental phenomenology, which was followed as an outline for conducting and understanding the results of this study. The specific recommendations for set up, data coding, summarizing and completing participant checks were all followed throughout.

Epoche

The Epoche of a research study is at the beginning, and is essential in order to be able to study the given phenomenon with as little previous bias and influence as possible. The Epoche is the process of refraining from judgment and eliminating suppositions:

“In the Epoche, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomenon are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33)”.

For me this process was repeated both at the outset of the project, before each interview, and continually through writing and reading the interviews. In this study I worked to set aside my presuppositions of my own value of marriage, value of therapy, and when I thought couples should divorce, as well as how I thought or hoped therapy should be helpful to couples. The Epoche is important as it does not deny that our predisposed judgements and experiences exist, but it highlights the need to set them aside in order to

examine the true experience of a phenomena. In order to be transparent bracketing is used to suspend judgments and beliefs that the researcher is bringing into the study. This description is supported through transcendental phenomenological reduction which heightens the researcher's level of consciousness. The reduction, and bracketing does not assume that a researcher's presuppositions can be completely suspended, but calls for a critical analysis of them (Kvale, 1996).

Through this study I reflected on my own beliefs and biases and worked to set them aside in order to more clearly hear these women's experiences. In choosing to explore this topic using phenomenology and a perspective that includes valuing women's voices through post-modern feminism it is important to introduce the reader to me, the writer and researcher who is putting this work together, and my epistemology. I grew up in an intact family and have been married myself for six years with a two year old daughter. I live in Minnesota, am Caucasian and hold many Christian beliefs and values. I value family, equality and individuality. I value knowledge, understanding and empathy. I also value uplifting women's voices. The majority of my family and friends have not been divorced. I value marriage, but I value healthy marriages, and I also believe that divorce can be the healthier route for a couple or family at times. I chose to study psychology, family studies and marriage and family therapy. I work as a marriage and family therapist, and enjoy and believe in this work. I started working with families in 2004, and I had many parents bring their children in for therapy. They wanted their child to get help in dealing with the changes in the family resulting from their parent's divorce, separation or having only ever had one parent. I felt that in this situation you can help a child adjust and cope, and but child after child would just tell me that they wish

their parents would get back together. A few years later I began working up-stream from this situation and started to see more women coming in for individual therapy who were thinking about initiating divorce, and then couples coming in who were considering divorce. I believe therapists should not tell the client, whether an individual or couple, what choice to make. But, I couldn't help but think that whether we like it or not, the therapist may have a lot of power: an off-hand comment, a skeptical facial expression, a homework assignment gone wrong. I thought of the children I'd worked with and wondered if a therapist played a part in their parent's decision.

Intentionality, Noema and Noesis

Though transcendental phenomenology is a philosophical way of seeing knowledge, the process that this project is following is transcendental phenomenological reduction. The ultimate goal of this process is to explore the phenomenon completely and be able to describe its essence. What is the essence of how women experienced couples' therapy affecting their decision to not divorce? There is a clear intentionality to this process, and it is tied to every step be followed in a conscious way. This intentionality allows themes to become apparent (Moustakas, 1994). Within this process of intentionality Husserl (1931) wrote of the ideas of noesis and noema:

“The noesis refers to the act of perceiving, feeling, thinking, remembering or judging (Moustakas, 1994, p. 69).”

It is the action of perceiving a phenomenon. That the women were interpreting their own experience of therapy. The noema is that which is being experienced – the way it is experienced or remembered. In this case, it refers to how the women experienced considering divorce and therapy. These two concepts refer to meaning, and begin to help

separate the true meaning from the perceived meaning. Giorgi (2009) writes that this then enables the researcher to describe the phenomenon as accurately as possible. A key difference between phenomenology and other philosophical research stances is the emphasis on description. Description involves using participants' own language, neither adding to it or interpreting it (Giorgi, 2009).

Life World

Phenomenology has been seen as a return to studying the *Lebenswelt*, that is literally the 'lifeworld'. This refers to the world encountered in everyday life, and through interviews and observation, learning of immediate experience this world is made available for scientific study (Kvale, 1996). The life world is made up of – and thus studies – our relationships with those we are surrounded by and love (Holstein & Gubrium, 1993). This concept is relevant to my study as I worked to better understand these women's understanding of their marriage and how therapy influenced the choice they made to remain married. Because the life world is made up of relationships, it is experienced between two people. And it is just those experiences that phenomenology is interested in learning more about (Schütz & Luckman, 1973).

A phenomenological study is focused on seeing things as they are, it is a method to be used early in a line of research as it uses techniques to suspend previous beliefs and paint a clear picture of the essence of a phenomenon as it was experienced. By suspending pre-judgement, and paying careful attention to language the researcher can then use imaginative variation to look for the meanings and experiences shining through from the divergent perspectives of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). This step is when

the descriptions are synthesized. Once this process is complete the essences and meanings are clarified. I worked through these steps by writing individual and group textural and structural summaries as well as coding and carefully reading all transcripts several times.

Feminist Phenomenological Perspective

An emphasis in feminist research is to explore and understand women's experiences as they are lived (Levesque-Lopman, 2000). This also fits specifically with standpoint feminism, which emphasizes research coming from the perspective of those with less power (Bowell, 2011). Applying this to the premises of a phenomenological perspective, which could generally be seen as more connected to a post-modern feminist theoretical approach, many women's lived experiences can be heard together and synthesized to find greater understanding. Levesque-Lopman (2000) writes of the phenomenological technique of 'surrender and catch', which refers to the information throughout the interview being a time of surrender to the process. This also suggests the lack of hierarchy within the interview and the participant being seen as a co-researcher. The catch portion of the process is the "harvest of the surrender," the outcome and importance of the situation, which from a feminist perspective can also include women's own empowerment. My study was based on these premises by focusing on the women's experience and voice, as well as including them in the writing by sending summaries for their feedback. Interviews had little hierarchy as I worked to help the women feel comfortable and speak as experts of their own experience.

Standpoint feminist research perspective does not believe that any line of research can be value-free, but would instead focus to conduct research that is from a female perspective. This in some ways challenges Husserl's emphasis on Epoche. However, feminist phenomenology instead purports that bracketing of all things is necessary as they appear, but that a truly 'clear slate' may be very difficult. Feminist phenomenology focuses also on the relationship between researcher and co-researcher, the way this relationship develops the active involvement that co-researchers take on when engaging in these projects. It allows women the opportunity to tell their story, and then continue to be engaged in the process by interaction and discussion after interviews are transcribed. This stems from a belief in the co-creation of the story, and the empowerment of women.

Human Ecological Perspective

The consideration of a human ecology perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1997) is important to this study when considering the therapist's influence, as well as other family members, friends and greater cultural influence on the woman's divorce decision-making process. The human ecology perspective asserts that an individual is located within several layers of systems, starting with the family and other immediate contexts, moving outward to community contexts and a broader cultural context. The human ecology perspective also acknowledges the importance of the time-related dimension of an event. Thus, reflecting this theory back to my study, according to a human ecology perspective it is important to recognize the timing of marital distress within an individual and couples life, as well as within the sociological time frame.

Family Systems Perspective

The relationship between husband and wife can also be understood through a family systems perspective (Whitechurch & Constantine, 1993). This lens focuses on the way that each family member affects the other family members, in this case how changes in thought or behavior of one spouse would affect the other, and in many cases changes in the greater family system affect the marital unit.

Pertaining to this study, a family systems perspective also highlights how great or how small an influence the couple allows the therapist to have within their marriage. From a therapeutic standpoint this connection is crucial, it gauges how the relationship and decision-making process can be influenced by a therapist. This perspective also brings up the system's concept of boundaries (Rosenblatt, 1994), examining if a couple's boundary around their marriage is rigid, permeable or non-existent. This boundary can be seen by how couples report feeling connected to the therapist, trying the suggestions they made at home, and generally responding to the input the therapist is having into their marital subsystem. Throughout therapy clinician's may enter into the couple's family system.

Purpose of the Study

The rationale for conducting this study on the therapeutic experience of younger women in couple's therapy can be summarized by the following five points. First, the average age of marriage in the U.S. currently is 24 for women (Center for Disease Control, 2009), and second, in 1995 (the last year these data were collected) the average age at divorce for women was 33 and the highest number of divorces occurred for women ages 24-29 (Center for Disease Control, 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 a sample of middle aged women (Sakraida, 2005; Thomas & Ryan, 2008) or older women, specifically 65-72 years old (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 how therapy affects a woman's decision to divorce. The purpose of this proposed study is to explore younger (40 and under) women's experience in therapy as they navigate decision-making around initiating a divorce but ultimately decide to remain married.

General Research Question.

What do women, who are considering divorce but ultimately choose to remain married to their husbands, experience in couple's therapy that affects their decision?

Chapter Three

Methodology

Phenomenology

It was appropriate to use a qualitative method to answer this research question. The study investigated the experiences of women who turned to couples therapy to help them decide whether or not to pursue divorce. A phenomenological method was foundational for this research design. Phenomenology is a specific method of qualitative research which lends itself well to this topic and the stage of research as it is exploratory in nature. The focus of a phenomenological study is to:

“describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept of a phenomenon...to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p.57).

The perspective of this study is not that divorce as a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ event. It is viewed as something that could be a part the women’s lives. Additionally, this study is based on valuing the woman’s voice, experience and collaboration. By using this approach, I examined how these women understand their experience of therapy as related to solve marital problems and their consideration of divorce. I sought to seek out:

“the detailed examination of the particular case...to know in detail what the experience for this person is like, what sense this particular person is making of what is happening to them” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.3).

Phenomenology is a method that fits well in studying the therapeutic process as it seeks to understand the way in which a client experienced change within her own thought processes as well as within her marriage. Examining the client’s perspective through phenomenology enabled this research to see therapy from the client’s chair.

The Epoche and Bracketing

Bracketing is a process that is meant to allow the researcher to suspend judgment based on their previous experiences and biases (Creswell, 2007). As discussed earlier it is part of the Epoche, in which prejudgements, beliefs and values are examined and suspended (Moustakas, 1994). By acknowledging these beliefs and epistemologies that I hold within myself, it helps to unfetter the lens with which I examine the lived experiences of these women. It is an important process in phenomenological research in order to limit the bias a researcher brings when analyzing qualitative data. As discussed earlier I am the researcher conducting this study and am European American, female, in my early thirties. I am married. I practice marital therapy. Thus I have my own views and experiences personally and professionally with marriage, couples and divorce. Part of how I monitored my own assumptions and views was through bracketing: writing about my assumptions and hypothesis that exist from my own biases and experiences before I began interviewing, and then consistently checking these as I interviewed, transcribed and analyzed (Van Manen, 1990).

Bracketing was done through maintaining a journal and process notes, which included information on how the data was being processed, analyzed and coded as well as my own emotions, reactions and insights. I continued to think about who I am in relation to the study and the lens I brought to this project. Journaling enabled me to examine my reactions to the interviews, previous life and professional experience, and experiences outside the project that were relating to the subject such as clients I saw at work. Later, when working on the coding of these interviews I set these thought processes and experiences aside and focus solely on the interviews in front of me. Below

are two segments from the journal I kept to demonstrate my bracketing process that demonstrate my journey through the interviewing process as well.

This excerpt comes from the journal entry I made after the first interview, I was definitely preoccupied with my own skills at interviewing.

March 19th, 2012: Overall, I felt like I asked good questions, but continued to summarize too much. I think that maybe I should go back and study more regarding that, as then I can't use her words if they came out of my own mouth. I also think I asked too many yes or no questions. I should go back and read my transcripts. I may have fished too much for what the therapist did or did not do, but I wanted to push on that part.

As I continued to interview women and gain more confidence in my own skills my focus quickly turned from 'how am I doing' to 'what am I hearing'. At the point that the next quote is from I had completed 13 interviews and several transcriptions.

July 18th, 2012: A new theme I am noticing is that I may be the only person these women have really told this whole story to. And to me that is interesting in and of itself – that considering divorce is not something, or getting couples therapy, is not something we talk about with others. How does that then affect the decision-making as well as the therapeutic process itself? I am also beginning to wonder that though all of the women said that therapy is helpful, and some said they would not be together without it, and that it was life changing – if the decision to remain married was not made in therapy – but made slowly through seeing change in themselves, their spouse and their marriage – in part due to the work that was being done in and because of therapy.

I found bracketing and the journaling process, as well as staying in contact with my advisor very helpful in order to help me digest the interviews, reflect on them, continue to monitor my own values as well as monitor that I was doing my best to conduct the interview in a way that would most clearly give the woman an opportunity to share her story. I knew from the beginning that during the interviews I needed to make sure that I

was conducting an interview, and not practicing therapy. I monitored this internally, as well as reflected upon it in my process notes. It was actually less of an issue that I had considered it might be in the beginning.

Additional bracketing and reflecting was done throughout the process of this study from several angles. Even as I began to conceptualize this project I knew that I needed to notice the value placed on marriage throughout. Though I am a person who values marriage, this viewpoint was not that of the study and needed to be checked while I gathered articles for the literature review, conducted interviews and reviewed the data. An additional potential bias to this study is that the women interviewed value marriage and the marriage they choose to remain in. This is also a study that values their beliefs, and thus all of these needed to be kept in mind while studying the interviews. I monitored this and other values, such as valuing therapy and self-actualization, and continually examined how my personal lens could filter the data. I also found several ways of triangulating the data and consulted with peers which will be discussed further in a later section.

Participants

The data for this qualitative study was gathered through individual semi-structured interviews. Criteria to take part in this study included women who considered divorce at age 40 or earlier and sought out couples counseling while deciding whether or not to divorce. 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 couples counseling (Doherty & Simmons, 1996). "Problems with their partner" and/or

"considering divorce" need to have been among the main reasons they sought out couples counseling. Participants were able 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 (see recruitment information in Appendix B). Couples with specific marital concerns beyond considering divorce were recruited, and the recruitment was not specific as to whether I was looking for couples with high or low amounts of conflict. From the interviews, it seems that just one couple could be categorized as a high conflict couple.

Participants were recruited through a convenience sample after attaining permission from the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Nelson & Allred, 2005). This method was chosen in order to find participants that fit specific research criteria. Methods of recruiting participants included 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 such as College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) through the University of Minnesota and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT). Recruitment was more challenging than initially expected and while at first the study had only included women up to age 35 and did not include interviewing via phone or Skype, as the months went along and few participants were coming forward I consulted with my advisor and applied to the IRB for permission to recruit women who had considered initiating divorce up to age 40 and conduct the interviews via phone or Skype so that I could include women who did not live within driving distance. As it turned out, only one participant was over age 35 but several of the interviews took place via phone or Skype. This was true even for women that lived within Minnesota, but schedules and other barriers made

it difficult to meet in person. The study took part in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota, and the majority of respondents came from this area. But because interviews were also done via phone or Skype a few participants were from other parts of the country.

I planned to interview a minimum of 15 women, with the idea that if and when I had interviewed all 15 women and was continuing to find new information, I would recruit and interview until I am neared saturation (when I was no longer gathering new information and themes) (Daly, 2007). I conducted a total of sixteen interviews. As I completed the thirteenth and fourteenth interviews I was hearing similar themes and felt I was reaching saturation, so I believe data gathering by doing the initial interviews was complete at the sixteenth interview. I knew I had reached saturation as several themes were already beginning to emerge and the experience was being described in similar ways. No new information was emerging from the interviews. Only fifteen interviews are included as early in one of the interviews I realized that there had been a miscommunication between the participant and I and that while she had attended more than five individual therapy sessions while considering divorce she and her husband had just attended their first couples' session that day. I finished the interview and shared the situation with her and she said she would be happy to meet again and talk after they had had five sessions. However, when I contacted her later to try to meet she shared that their therapist had discharged them after three sessions saying they no longer needed therapy, thus we did not meet again and her interview was not included in this study. 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. Further demographic information can be found in Appendix D.

As this is a small sample, I realized early that the group of participants may not be diverse, but I did not choose or exclude participants based on ethnicity, religion or social economic status. At this time this line of research is not based on seeking out a diverse or representative sample as is at an exploratory stage, though as it turned out there was more diversity than I had expected within my sample. Interviews were conducted at the University of Minnesota in reserved classrooms, at local coffee shops or as mentioned previously via phone or Skype. Each participant received a \$25 gift card to Target in exchange for her time, one participant who was interviewed via phone and lives in a rural area asked for an Amazon gift card instead as she did not have access to a Target, I sent that to her instead. I was also aware that when conducting research situations and circumstances may change. Throughout the process I saw that some changes needed to be made and stayed flexible, as is imperative in phenomenological research (Maxwell, 1996). As mentioned, some of these changes included the inclusion criteria as well as methods of connecting with the women who were being interviewed. Flexibility extended to how I was able to finally connect with the participants, it was not uncommon to have to reschedule times to conduct the interview as participants.

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

Member Check

Each woman was interviewed once. It is important to note that before conducting the interview, the women and I had contact regarding what would be addressed (though

not the interview questions). For example, they were told the purpose of the project that they would be reimbursed after the interview had taken place, and that the interview was confidential. I also found it was important to ask some questions via email before the interview to make sure that they fit the criteria for the study. Through email we arranged a time and place or way of doing the interview. At the start of the interview I went over informed consent (Appendix E), risks and benefits of participating, and let them know that at any time they are free to no longer participate. If we met in person I provided a letter detailing how I'd like to stay in touch with them and with referrals for therapy if they felt that would be helpful (Appendix F). Participants completed a short demographics form (Appendix C), as well as signing the informed consent sheet. If the interview was not done in person these were emailed out and returned before the interview took place. The second touch point was when I emailed them with any questions that had come up for me in the following weeks, and asking if they had had anything they wanted to add. Most participants emailed back that they did not have anything else to add at that time. The third touch point was when I emailed each of them a copy of their individual textural and structural summaries and the group summary. Their responses and comments helped me to reflect on the results and themes and add validity to the project as a whole.

The interviews were based on the research questions included in this proposal. Specific interview schedule questions are detailed in Appendix A. However, because with each interview I learned more about this phenomenon some questions were added or slightly altered as the interviews progressed. Interviews ranged between sixty and ninety minutes. They were audio recorded digitally and focused first on gathering information

on what it was like for the woman to begin considering divorce, and then focused on their experience in therapy and how it contributed to their decision not to divorce. Included in this was when they started therapy and how long they continued therapy.

I sought to give the participants the chance to speak clearly and reflectively, and while my questions may have guided the interaction I did not want them to limit the women to discussing only my questions. As Smith, Flowers and Larken (2009) recommend, the interview schedule helps to prepare the researcher for the interview and is a guide for the order of questions they would like to ask. As the interviews progressed I was able to address all the questions that I had, and often addressed other aspects of the women's experience that they brought up. It was important for me to focus on listening during these interviews and not just getting through all the questions. As previously stated, the third touch point is the member checks that were included in the research process: at the conclusion of the project I offered each woman the opportunity to review two types of summaries of her interview and the main themes results, in order to allow them to correct anything they felt did not reflect their experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with the field notes and journal entries I made after each interview. These notes helped me to continue to craft the questions asked and hypothesis I considered when entering each new interview. I did not eliminate any questions from the interview protocol, but found some slightly new ways to ask a question, or specific follow up questions that would help me to further learn about a theme that had been

emerging from previous interviews. Each interview was transcribed shortly after it took place. Three undergraduate students from the University of Minnesota and one graduate student from Saint Mary's University volunteered as research assistants to help with transcription. I transcribed six of the interviews as well. The research assistants were trained on the importance of confidentiality and how to properly work with the data. They were given examples of transcriptions. Participants were given ID numbers and names were changed. Interviews were transcribed by listening to them and typing the conversation word for word, including 'ums', 'ahs' and pauses.

If I did not transcribe an interview I listened to the entire interview while reading the transcription after it is transcribed, checking for accuracy and making correction or adding to parts that the research assistants were not able to understand. Once the interviews were transcribed, I began coding them. This was done manually by reading the interviews and coding line by line, watching for patterns and themes that emerged. At first I coded for macro themes or categories, and then re-read both the entire interview and within the macro themes looking for micro themes and essences or qualities those they women discussed. I 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 created new coding categories, thus each interview was an opportunity to create interplay between analysis and interpretation (Daly, 2007).

The data was entered into NVivo and organized using this software to store and sort themes and create an emerging model of the women's experience. These themes and model were compared and referenced to my own journal entries. Data was examined

using axial coding to compare categories and sub-categories, specifically looking for themes related to ways in which therapy affected the woman's decision-making process. Data was sorted, summarized, ranked, and connected (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) once large categories had been identified. The analyzing and interpretation process inform each other, as I separated, identified themes, sorted sections of data, assigned meaning, attached significance and tied themes together (Daly, 2007). I worked through the data looking to make the implicit themes of meaning explicit. The limited amount of quantitative demographic data (Appendix C), such as participant age, length of marriage and length of time participating in the therapy was also examined.

The detailed process of data analysis is based on the recommendations given by Moustakas (1994). This process is made up of horizontalization, reduction into invariant constituents by clustering and interpreting themes, examining individual descriptions, combining descriptions into essences of the experience for individuals, and finally synthesizing these descriptions into meaning and essences for the group of women.

The first step in the process however, is to establish the Epoche which was discussed earlier. I did this through journaling throughout the interview and recruitment process, after each interview, before I began coding interviews, and throughout the writing process. Horizontalization is the next step that Moustakas (1994) recommends through the process of phenomenological reduction. This process refers to taking each interview individually and examining it for its own themes and essences, these are unlimited as the horizon is, and each is seen as important and valuable. I did this through reading the interview and recording themes that emerged throughout the conversation. This process has also been discussed by Kvale (1996) as meaning condensation.

The next step in phenomenological reduction is that of imaginative variation. A similar process described by Kvale (1996) is referred to as meaning categorization.

Within feminist phenomenology a similar process is the 'catch' is examining the recorded interviews. The goal of this step is to take different perspectives and merge them into a clear and vivid description of the given phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) outlines four steps in imaginative variation:

1. Systemic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings.
2. Recognizing the underlying themes of contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon.
3. Considering the universal structures that perpetuate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others.
4. Searching for exemplifications that vividly illustrate the invariant structural themes and facilitate the development of a structural description of the phenomenon.

Within these steps I noted themes as they emerged and wrote summaries of the phenomenon for each participant, as well as integrated them into a succinct description for the group, a synthesis of meaning of the essences of the experiences the participants have had as a whole. Many themes emerged throughout this process, at one point I had outlined thirty-two possible themes. In order to make sure that the themes reflected the essence of this experience for these women as a group I chose to only include themes that at least half the participants discussed in their interviews and that were relevant to the

general research question. Examples of themes that did not meet those criteria were: Women used their support system of friends and family; Their feelings that culture affects this decision and The lack of expectations they had for therapy. Within the main themes that surfaced subthemes were chosen when mentioned by the majority that had discussed the theme or when the researcher felt the subtheme was salient to the experience and common among participants. The final five themes will be presented in the results section.

Trustworthiness

I worked to maintain high levels of trustworthiness and credibility in several ways. I used several methods to improve credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1989). I was able to utilize auditors and triangulation in several ways. I met with two of the research assistants that transcribed several interviews each to discuss the themes I was noticing and see if they had noticed those themes as well. Each of them agreed that they had been noticing the same themes as I had. I also emailed the group summary to the research assistants to gather their feedback. I was also able to have my advisor read over several interviews and met to look over the themes that were emerging to verify themes and patterns. The preliminary results were presented during the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy National Conference, and I was able to dialogue with professionals around the country regarding my findings. The clinicians and academics I spoke with gave feedback that supported my findings, and several clinicians and researcher felt that they had seen the in their own work. During this process I also continued to dialogue regarding my project with colleagues and my committee to keep me open to ways of

interpreting the data. These methods improved the credibility, dependability and confirmability. Throughout data analysis and writing, transferability was improved by the thick descriptions and detailed quotes used in this project (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Finally, once the main themes were identified and summarized I performed member checks by emailing each participant. This process helps support the credibility of the results as participants get to weigh in on how accurately they have been represented (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I sent them their textural and structural summaries as well as the group summary (Moustakas, 1994). I asked for their input and if indeed the data were correctly revealing their lived experience. With their feedback I again looked over the data and finalize the results. Going back to check with participants that I had correctly understood their story, as well as cross referencing with my own field note journal entries and dialoging with my advisor helped to increase the validity of the data and decrease the bias that I bring to the work myself (Dahl & Boss, 2005). Employing all of these methods, as well as continuing to interview until saturation was reached enabled me to gather high quality data and trustworthy results. Once this process was complete I was prepared to write the results section.

Chapter Four

Results

Five major themes derived from the data are presented in this chapter.

Participants' own words, as well as those of the researcher, are used to illustrate the themes (see Table 4 below), and within each theme are subthemes. The overall result is what Moustakas (1994) refers to as a textural-structural synthesis. Quotes are labeled with a participant identification number in order to give the reader insight into the variety of responses collected.

Table 4.

Themes derived from participant interviews

Theme	Subthemes
<i>Women Initiate Therapy</i>	Ultimatum Feeling divorce was very likely
<i>Therapy Was Helpful</i>	Created space Accountability and encouragement to interact differently Connection to and feeling understood by the therapist
<i>Therapist Neutrality</i>	
<i>Importance of Other Factors</i>	Children Spouses were working hard to make changes Reaffirming love Faith Barriers to divorce
<i>Gradual Process</i>	Continued thoughts of divorce

Women Initiate Therapy

When asked how the couple started therapy, the majority of women shared that they were the ones to initiate therapy. Women were usually the ones to bring up the idea of therapy or to look for a therapist, though there were also times where a woman suggested the idea of going to therapy, but told her spouse to find a therapist if he was interested in making the marriage work. Their husband's responses to the idea of therapy varied. Some were interested and willing; others were dismissive and did not go with the wife until she had brought up the idea many times. A more positive tone for the therapeutic work was set when the women brought up going to therapy and their spouses were interested and agreed to go. Below, Participant 16 describes the former situation, while Participant 5 describes the latter:

I had brought it up a number of times, and he was very resistant. He fought it a lot...he did not want to do it. And so I brought it up and would let it go, brought it up and would let it go for a while, that was like for a year or so. And then our relationship really, frankly tanked ... I had actually scheduled a therapy session, I was waiting for a call back and the day she called back was the day I found out he was having an affair. Participant 16

I told him I felt like we obviously needed somebody else's help, it was beyond us and we needed to come up with a solution that was going to be helpful for all of us. 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 I haven't been able to solve this on our own. And he was never resistant to that so he did come. Participant 5

Ultimatum. Within the main theme of women initiating therapy there were also subthemes of how initiation happened. The circumstances illustrated the low point that the marriage was in at the moment of initiation. One subtheme that emerged regarding how women suggested going to therapy was that it came as an ultimatum to their husband, or that therapy was a final 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'... And I think it was just that... realistically I don't know if I ever would have actually gone through with it, but 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

I basically gave him kind of an ultimatum...we get help and fix this, and I think I said we need to fix this and figure out how. And he was like I'll talk to somebody, whatever (it takes). Participant 6

It was an ultimatum. It was like 'if you don't go back with me then we're not going to stay together.' Participant 8

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 in that manner. This conveyed the seriousness with which they were considering ending their marriage. 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 say (our chance for a divorce was) a seven. (out of 10) Participant 1

Ahhh (three second pause) more likely than not likely. So like more than 50/50 like it would have been, I don't know, I thought that we were pretty likely (to get a divorce) at least going to have a separation. Participant 10

I think in my own thinking I felt sort of 50/50 (divorcing vs. staying married) going into counseling. Participant 11

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

I want to say 50%, that's what you always hear (regarding likelihood of divorce). Participant 6

If I had to put a percentage on it was probably either 80 or 90. We're Christian and so there were two reasons that are in the Bible that you can divorce and one is infidelity. I was not going to stay in this marriage especially because there were ties with that (infidelity). Participant 9

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. This again emphasizes the seriousness with which they were considering divorce, as well as the low point they felt their marriage was in.

I had looked up divorce on the internet...like trying to find a lawyer. I'd never told my husband that but I did because I was just curious about how it all works and thought 'oh gosh what am I about to get into, do I really want to do this?'

Participant 14

I haven't retained a lawyer but I've been talking to one, and I'm looking at my marriage of 29 years and looking at my choice.... And at one point I had a protection order against him but I had dropped that, it had just gotten to the point where I couldn't even be in the same house as him. Participant 15

I would say a couple years after that (the affair and having started therapy) I actually got the point where I hired an attorney...and was drawing up paperwork and was getting ready to file. He (the attorney) actually had it all written up, and said, 'are you ready for me to file?' And that point is where the divorce process stopped. Participant 16

The theme of women being the ones to initiate consideration of divorce and the logistics of the divorce process, and the way they did so (by ultimatum), coupled with the low point that they felt their marriage was in when they began therapy are important findings. These factors speak to the state of the relationship as well as the state of the individuals in it at the moment when therapy begins. This initial presentation will have a different impact on each individual therapist (i.e., therapist comfort in relation to level of relational distress).

Therapy was helpful

All participants described going to therapy as a helpful experience. The majority specifically described couples therapy as helpful, although two women had attended couples 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 couples therapy was helpful.

Created space. The first subtheme was that therapy created a 'space' in which the couple could talk and listen. Participants described what that 'space' provided in several ways:

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. Was it the fact that we talked about all these great exciting things? Not even that...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, I think made us realize, you know, this is the same thing for our marriage and it is a season.

Participant 1

She really just made sure that she could create space where we were talking again. Participant 10

I would definitely say it (decision to not divorce) was influenced by therapy mostly because going to therapy creates space to have difficult conversations that I think couples in general do not have. Because they're afraid to have them... Participant 14

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 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 the activities or homework assignments assigned by the therapist. For the couple, going to therapy meant that the therapist was going to check in on how they were doing, especially on the improvements they were trying to make in their relationship. Many women also shared that they liked the readings,

activities and assignments both during the session and as homework. They described some of these as times when they were able to understand themselves and their spouse more clearly.

I think that the accountability with the therapist has been a major help for the both of us ...she heard us say that we were going to commit to one another to make it work. 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

Other mechanisms of accountability included homework assignments, that helped couples understand that much of the work of backing away from the brink of divorce would be done outside of therapy.

The assignment was that my husband and I had to come up with 2 lists. The first list was how do we express love, and the other list was how do you know that someone is loving you – how do you recognize that person really loves me. He said make them short, make them long, sky's the limit, write as many things as you can possibly think on your list. It can be outrageously expensive to the very mundane. Participant 12

We had different assignments of touch because my husband acknowledged that he was very untouchable in general. Actually the words he used were: 'Having sex is like going to the dentist to me. I get very anxious and it is not something I enjoy' ...I think that he (therapist) then tried to help us by (having us) do some basic touch. We had to do some facial massages with each other and then we went to more intimate (massage). One was feet and then it was whole body massages...and you know that was helpful for a while.

Participant 5

Drawings and painting, she had a lot of activities, it was almost like doing a lifeline, but we both created our own. I think we did it for a year ...She really took it slow, 0-5 sessions of me; 0-5 sessions for my husband. It was cool because it was kind of exciting to see what came out of each other's process. See our timeline. And then we made a time line together. Participant 2

One of the first things he did, he had us in the session write down the top three ways that our spouse has hurt us in our marriage and then from that he kind of worked saying: 'Okay, so he's done this and you've done this and what are some ways to mend this what are some ways this could be eliminated in your marriage?' It was really interesting for me to understand how I've been hurting my husband because I really didn't think that I had. It was all about me. He hurt me. And so it hurt and I was like whatever...I didn't realize I'd been hurting him. Participant 9

I like the part of learning the best way of communication and learning each other's love language. Before that I have never thought about how we have misunderstood each other so much. His way was more service focused. Mine was more verbal and appreciative words, confirmation of things so we have this misunderstanding. Participant 3

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 (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 theme that emerged in relation to the therapy experience being helpful was the woman feeling connected to and understood by the therapist. The experience of being understood, and working with someone who had a grasp on 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 understood our model (LDS) or our framework for how we understand marriage and so that was really good and I think he understood the mindset of an

LDS female. He was really good, I loved him, he didn't let my husband get away with squat. Participant 12

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. And even though he didn't talk all about himself he related stories and had a strong faith background and even incorporated that a little bit. He didn't dwell on it but included it. He had all these statistics about people that did get divorced and how it affected their kids and made it real for us in that way. But in the same way made it acceptable by sharing stories about couples that had divorced well and things that they did. I think it made it more real to us, than sitting in that room just talking about us...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 Neutrality

The majority of women in this study described experiencing their therapist's belief about whether or not the couple should divorce as neutral. In truth, the women could not really know if the therapist in fact was neutral, but this was the message that felt came across. However, the neutrality 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 what that was. The women seemed to appreciate the therapist not putting their 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. If I would have felt that, that could have been bias somehow subconsciously and I didn't feel like that at all. That was something that was really really important because I could see myself pleasing enough, well not pleasing enough but like wanting to please enough that I could even like see myself kind of fracturing, but I didn't feel like that at all. Participant 1

She was very neutral. I think she was more pro 'you got to be happy and healthy as a person.' And we were both not when we came to her. Participant 10

I feel like he's been really neutral. Actually, in that first conversation we had I felt like he really was just trying to hear what we wanted. Once we talked about how we felt about the other person hearing that (that we were both thinking about divorce), he asked if we both felt committed to staying in the marriage at that point, while we both worked on it, and we both confirmed that we did and so I think that was a good conversation for him to lead us through. Participant 11

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

And both times that we've been in counseling with these therapists they've always said "I'm here to support you, if you decide you're here to divorce then I'll support you in that, if you decide to stay together than I'll support you with that. So I'm just here to meet you where you're at." They've never really forced that thought on us...I don't think that they've tried to keep us together but I think that they've gotten a sense from us that that's what we want. We don't want to separate... but we've considered it because it's not healthy, we've not been healthy. And so I've never felt a push or anything from the therapist. A meet you where you're at kind of thing. Participant 14

She was very pro marriage right away in the beginning. But as we started to tease stuff out I felt her definitely become more neutral, you know maybe this isn't going to change, maybe some of this stuff will never go away. And if that doesn't, what do you want for your life and a marriage and a relationship. There was a lot of that too, I was headed toward personal growth, and he just wasn't meeting, you know he wasn't doing the work for awhile. So it was like we started off together, and he kind of went there. It wasn't an equal process. There were up and downs. Participant 2

Although the major theme was that women experienced their therapist's opinion of whether or not they should divorce as neutral, there were four that reported they experienced their therapist as being 'pro marriage', believing 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 experienced their therapist as coming from this perspective appreciated it. Some had specifically sought out a therapist with this perspective because it fit with the couple's faith background, which supported remaining married and working to improve the relationship.

I just appreciated his(therapist's) perspective, his thought was 'I'm here to save the marriage'...I think some people just go to a therapist to write for the court that he tried or whatever, but I think he asked right away do you want to save the marriage? Do you love each other? Some of those really important things. Those I think, in my personal opinion the purpose of couples counseling and marriage and family therapy is to save the marriage. Participant 10

Yeah, he wasn't forceful but he made sure to share that that is what...my ultimate goal is to keep you married...Because ultimately that's what we wanted. 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

He was Catholic, so he was very pro marriage... and that was ok because we wanted that, we wanted to have that, we didn't want to get divorced and we really didn't want it to turn out that way. Participant 8

Importance of Other Factors

It was evident throughout exploring these women's decisions not to divorce and therapy's impact on that decision, that therapy was not the only factor involved. 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 contemplate while considering divorce. 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. Both of these potential scenarios were factors that impacted the decision-making and counseling processes.

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 and they take care of them. Participant 11

I think (of) my son. Our son...he was a baby, he was one. He'd say mommy, daddy and I would look and think oh my goodness I can't imagine just one of us... We're a family. And I think that piece just stuck out. Participant 6

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. Things like that. Participant 9

Spouses were working hard to make changes. Another factor that is tied to therapy was that 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. Further, women reported feeling that their husbands were listening to their concerns and could follow through on making changes. It was not that everything in the marriage changed and became the way they had always wanted it to be. Rather, there was enough effort to convey hope, although sometimes the women wondered why their spouses hadn't started 'trying' sooner.

When I saw him doing the work. 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 lists we did that for almost a year. I was afraid to give it up because I was afraid to backslide. As long as he was doing his chips I knew he was invested in the family. Participant 12

I was kind of pleasantly surprised and at the same time pretty ticked off that it took me to 'I'm going to get a divorce from you' before he would actually do it

you know. I knew he could and so it was a nice affirmation that he had the ability to act the way I had, to be able to meet those needs because in some way I had questioned is it not possible, is he physically not capable? So, the fact that he was capable I was happy about but I was also angry that it took that much of an extreme, you know that he had to push me that far before he was willing to change. Participant 16

When we were going to the initial six months and then we took our break and then we went again. When we went back, I felt like, I don't know what it was, it wasn't any particular conversations that sticks out in my mind, it was different. My husband was interacting with the therapist in a different way. It just seemed like I knew then that it was going to be ok, so I don't know what changed. Maybe it was the break or the really tough time we went through during that break and then going back. It just felt like the investment for my husband was there and it was just a different feeling in the session after that. Participant 8

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 that even if we would have opened up our communication...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, I love you if we have to sell the house, if I have to stop my grad program, I love you, love you, love you, love you. And he felt the same way or, he said he did. If that wouldn't have been there we wouldn't have made it through. And that's kind of weird because I'm not really a cheesy person and so even when we got married I thought 'oh yea, I love my husband' but I never realized how deep that love was until we were in this miserable state and it was still there. Participant 10

My heart was always saying I love him. But I can't go through life every day, I can't leave and wonder what is he going to lie to me about. It's just I felt so insecure and then I felt like I questioned everything I did. Participant 6

Faith. For 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 focus on the study. Some women hold a belief that the tenets of their faith do not support divorce, while others asked why the unhappiness in their marriage existed if they were living in a devout manner.

My faith says you're supposed to stay with your mate till death do you part, but I always tell people but I don't want to die, as sad as that might sound. And I have a son who wants to break up a family... We've called the police on each other, the police know us by name. One time I had him removed from the house, that's when I got the protective order against him. And he went and lived with his mom for a while and that didn't work out so he said he was sorry and he came back and stayed, what am I going to do, it's his house you know? The domestic abuse, the physical abuse, the emotional abuse, the fact that I'm on antidepressants and my life doesn't seem to be getting any better, waiting for God and God not responding. Participant 15

The Bible says divorce is a sin (pause) so I dare not to sin again. Participant 3

Both of us are very religious and devout. That was a weird thing, the realization that you can be doing everything right, and then have a troubled marriage and have it so troubled that you're thinking of divorce. When you're doing everything right, you're having your family prayer, you're going to church together as a family, you're having scripture study, you're paying your tithing, you're serving in your calling and the world is still falling down around you. To me I thought you should be fine if you do all those things. Participant 12

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... So, he kind of took it from a Christian perspective which I appreciated, that worked well for us. 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, divorce was not a viable option due to financial constraints, or there were other limitations. These factors are important as they do not reflect improvement in the marriage, but rather barriers preventing the practical logistics of the divorce process.

Yea 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... Yea it would have made it worse instead of better. Participant 1

But recently we've talked about, it's just a phase it's like a phase of divorce and then not divorce. Recently I've said I feel like it would be more complicated to get divorced and then have me get remarried, him get remarried and then we have a daughter together and then we have step children. I feel like it complicates

things beyond what we need to do to make our relationship work. And so that's been a real driving force for me and trying to stay positive and try to keep going to counseling and keep working through things. Participant 14

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

I think finances were a part, I wouldn't have been able to support myself on my own. We had our house. That went through my mind. I don't want to say that's why I stayed but I was like 'we better work hard because there's no way that I could do this with our son without him.' I never went to the point where I got a lawyer. I probably would have figured out that it would have been fine. But to me I'm like 'I can't do this without someone else.' I remember at the time we'd gotten a puppy. And it was like all of these things 'what if, what would I do?' With the puppy... daycare? It was like I couldn't do this without him. Participant 6

Gradual Process

Women reported that the decision not to pursue divorce and remain married did not occur at a specific moment, or even on a certain day. The decision was a gradual one that participants described as slowly evolving as they felt themselves and their spouses changing. Sometimes it was a large shift, while other times it was changing 'enough' to continue being married. The decision was not made during a therapy session, and sometimes not even discussed in therapy. In some cases, the decision was discussed between the spouses as an acknowledgement of the relationship improving, but other times it was an unspoken shift in the relationship.

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...It's kind of hard to remember exactly how long, it was definitely slow...I would say probably somewhere between six months and a year, after we'd had been doing it (therapy) for 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

After that sixth month, no, I would say it was probably about a year into it (therapy). It was like okay, we're going to be okay. I didn't want to stop going. I really didn't, because we were starting to learn so much. Participant 2

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 whatever. 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 it was still what he had done still hurt. So, it was kind of a gradual thing. Participant 9

I remember having to kind of graph how things were going. Actually like a line graph, kind of like graphing how things are going with the dips and the rises and when we felt better and after we had been there for a while and things were getting better and we could see that on our graph and we were working towards our goals and we were doing better at communicating and he had us talk about that too, like what is going well now. So we talked about all the things that were going well. Participant 8

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

There are definitely those moments where if we're fighting or have a reoccurring issue or get annoyed or whatever, there are definitely circumstances that come up and you're like 'oh my gosh, what am I doing, are we still doing this?' There is that frustration but underneath I feel like my decision has been made, like it would take something catastrophic for me to really consider leaving him. Participant 13

I've thought about it a lot more lately just because of, I mean not this week, but just because of our daughter and just two weeks ago it became really heated. And so I just was thinking about it more because I felt disconnected. So in general I think I tend to go there just whenever I feel disconnected. Participant 14

It has not gone away... I would say we have drastically changed out living situation, or family situation. And I knew that that would happen, would have a significant impact on everything but I did that willingly and knowingly with eyes wide open. I've talked with my therapist (individual) about this, I think she and I have agreed that I will probably, I don't see myself leaving my spouse until after my children are grown if ever. You know once they're either away at college or probably done with college I would consider it again. If I didn't have children I would probably be divorced. Participant 16

I still keep this question in mind but I dare not tell them, my husband and pastor (therapist), because they keep persuading me that divorce is not a solution for me. Participant 3

No I, the idea of divorce stayed open for a while. There are moments, I just had a recent one a couple a months ago where I thought maybe this doesn't work for me, even after all these years. But it was triggered, his dad just passed away about six months ago and he has just been , I recognize he is depressed, and he is grieving and so what I was frustrated with was just the normal grief response, it's not really anything I need to be reacting to, it will get better. It wasn't anything urgent although at the time I just felt this was just this urgent thing I needed to act on. Participant 5

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. The other 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 going through with it.

I think it's funny because when it feels so low it feels like I'm almost grieving the loss of our relationship, but yet we're still married and we're still together, because I feel so isolated and alone sometimes in those low moments. At the same time I feel like we have those "mountain top" experiences too where things click together and we're on the same page. And honestly, and I don't know if all marriages are like this and people lie that their marriage is perfect, but I feel like in general marriage feels like a mixed bag of everything. Because, you have these crazy hard core fights, whether you fight yelling or you fight silently, however it is, and it just feels like this emotional roller coaster. And you just solve the problem by having sex or something like that you know, going out to dinner or

doing something fun. So...I feel like that's what I'm on constantly. These ebbs and flows of these bad times and good times and they tell you that in the vows so it's not like you're going in blind. You just aren't listening or paying attention to it all really. Cause you're on the high, the top of the roller coaster.

You know how, it's hard to answer this question about divorce because it is real and present sometimes in our marriage, and I think we're sometimes scared to talk about it but I think we know the times where we're both feeling like that's what we want. I think that we were at a crossroads about a year before we had our daughter. There was a sudden turn around. It's so hard to articulate because it's always been a thought and I feel like it's, like you know how people sometimes have this feeling like I feel like I want to hurt myself or do something crazy but I know I won't do it, but I have the thought. That's how it is with the divorce. And even when I was talking with my husband about it today he even said he's thought about it. I don't want to know that he's thought about it, I know I've thought about it and he's thought about it but we don't want to talk about it. Which is, I would guess, lots of couples are like that. You get these tough times and you feel like that but it feels like a possibility and it feels like a real easy way out.

Participant 14

In conclusion, several themes emerged throughout these interviews. Women were the ones who tended to initiate therapy and they reported that they found it helpful for their marriages. The majority of therapists were perceived as neutral with regards to whether the couple should divorce or remain married. There were many factors, of which therapy was one, that impacted the participant's decision to remain married. And, women reported that this decision took considerable time to make, and often did not occur at any specific moment. These findings depict an extended, evolving, and complex process for women who are considering divorce - one in which clinicians can play an important role.

Chapter Five

Discussion

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). This finding is not surprising as it is supported by previous research, and a requirement to participate in this study was to have attended therapy. Women also more closely monitor their own satisfaction, and how the relationship is going (Heaton & Blake, 1999). As this group of women is from a younger cohort, they reflect the expectations of marriage as love-based and egalitarian. The seriousness with which the women reported considering divorce fits with Vaughn'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. John Gottman has suggested that it takes couples six years to get to therapy after first sensing that the relationship has problems (Gottman, 1999).

Therapy was reported to be helpful to the women interviewed for this study. It was not a specialized technique or intervention that stuck 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). The ways that women reported therapy being helpful are similar to the four common factors associated with change in psychotherapy

(Lambert, 1992; Miller, Duncan, & Hubble, 1997; Blow & Sprenkle, 2001).

Client/extratherapeutic factors are the elements of client's lives that exist outside the therapy, such as careers, family, faith, event 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/extratherapeutic 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 families interactional patterns, which was reported in this study by participants as therapists helping couples interact differently. The theme "couples therapy was helpful" also fits with a recent review of literature on couples' therapy that found that 70% of couples who sought couples therapy were positively impacted (Lebow, Chambers, Christensen & Johnson, 2012).

The majority of the women appreciated that their therapist had a neutral stance regarding their decision to divorce. This does not reveal if the therapist was in fact neutral, but the theme was that the women did not *feel* that the therapist pushed their own agenda. It is challenging to know how participants could have sensed neutrality, as it is possible that a therapist who takes a stance supporting the individual being happy and healthy may actually be non-neutral. However, there were four participants that

specifically sought out therapists that they knew would be 'pro marriage'. These therapists often had belief systems similar to the clients' belief systems. Using a systemic perspective, this finding can be further clarified: 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 (Mamodhoussen, Wright, Tremblay, & Poitras-Wright, 2005). This theme may be an important area of continued discussion for therapists: finding a balance between supporting clients in troubled marriages and holding hope for the couple, while simultaneously not pushing them to embrace a certain decision.

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 logistics 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. Previti and Amato's study did

not assess for any kind of counseling in their discussion of rewards and barriers.

Although marital counseling was not the only deciding factor for participants in the current study, counseling could be viewed a method of increasing 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.

As much as the decision to divorce is an extended process (Vaughn, 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 in part due to what happened during therapy. When that happened more frequently, they could trust that the change they were witnessing and experiencing was going to stay. This is similar to the slow process of rebuilding trust after infidelity has occurred (Spring, 2004). Considering divorce does not mean that a marriage will remain unhappy: participants in Tulane, Skogrand and Defrain's (2011) study self-identified as having great marriages even though at some point they had considered divorce. In their interviews, they shared that it took time for feelings to change and the marriage to improve. The couples had some continued communication and relationship problems. This is similar to the theme found in this study: 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 changes enough that it is better to stay in it, the barriers to pursue divorce are big, and the

perceived rewards of divorce are low. This theme lends support for a social exchange theoretical perspective on marriage, in which women may remain married as long as the rewards of marriage are high or the barriers to divorce are substantial enough (Emerson, 1976). Future researchers in this area might ask: is it a common experience for many, maybe even most, married individuals to think about divorce but not openly discuss it with their spouse? What is the difference between divorce deliberations that happen at an internal level versus those that happen between partners? And further, how do these different types of deliberations contribute to eventual resolution?

One concept that did not materialize as a common theme, but was mentioned by one participant, was considering divorce when there is interpersonal violence (IPV) and abuse occurring in the marriage. In other studies abuse is often given as a reason for divorce (Amato and Previti, 2003). In the current study, only one participant discussed how physical abuse, emotional abuse, and having few resources were very large contributors to her decision to remain in the marriage after having considered divorce. She recognized the cycle of violence that advocates at her local domestic violence shelter had taught her, but she continues to remain married for religious reasons and barriers to divorce (in her case, lack of other housing or financial resources). Because only one participant discussed IPV within her marriage it is difficult to draw any far-reaching conclusions about how IPV affects one's decision-making to remain in a marriage or to consider divorce. It is also possible that when IPV is part of a marital relationship, that many women would have ended the relationship, and thus would not have met the selection criteria for this particular study.

Theoretical Reflections

A phenomenological method and theoretical basis was used to conduct this study, which influenced every step of the process. The findings are the essence of the experience for women of how therapy affected their decision making process. The quotes illuminate their experience and demonstrate similarities between participants. By being intentional and suspending personal judgments throughout the process, themes emerged that had not previously been considered. A surprising theme was that that many participants continue to think about divorce though years may have passed since seeking therapy as an attempt to salvage the relationship. This phenomenological study presented the women's experiences and involved them in the process (Moustakas, 1994; Levesque-Lopman, 2000). Of the women that have responded after being sent their individual and group summaries via email, all have provided me with positive feedback, noting that their story was captured appropriately and that they were thankful the study was done.

The Human Ecological Perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1997) and Family Systems Perspective (Whitechurch & Constantine, 1993) are apparent in the themes found in this study. By acknowledging that issues outside the marriage relationship (e.g. children, finances and faith) made a difference in their decision, the participants pointed out the importance of the interconnected layers elucidated by the Human Ecological Perspective. Some women said that their girlfriends wanted them to divorce and that many of their friends embraced an 'if something is broken you get a new one' attitude. Some women also shared that their families were supportive of the couple trying to make their marriage work. Applying a Human Ecological Perspective supports considering the social environment that marriages dwell within. A participant's friend telling her that she

'deserves better' and should look for someone else, or her parent encouraging her to repair the marriage reflects the ecology that impacts many contemporary marriages. This perspective is written about in detail by Huston (2000) who concluded that it was vital for researchers to examine the topic at the individual, marital and societal levels. He emphasized that what happens outside the home affects relationships in a similar way to things that happens inside the home affect marriage relationships. Decisions regarding divorce are not made in a vacuum but rather influenced by the many contexts.

Women considered divorce less when they saw their husbands working to change. From the Family Systems Perspective (Whitechurch & Constantine, 1993), the husband's actions influenced their wives decision-making. The therapist enters into the family system during therapy, and when the participants felt connected to their therapist they felt therapy was helpful. This is highlighted by process research on couple's therapy. In a recent review of research on couple's distress (Lebow et al., 2012) the importance of therapeutic alliance was emphasized. Therapeutic alliance has been found to be comprised of three parts: the alliance between oneself and the therapist, how one views the alliance between their partner and therapist, and the alliance between oneself and one's partner (Pinsof, Zinbarg & Knobloch-Fedders, 2008). In a study examining the outcome success of EFT, therapeutic alliance has been found to be a predictor of gains in marital satisfaction, within this it was specifically how the couple saw the therapist as helpful and the time spent in therapy as relevant to their concerns that was most connected to post-treatment marital satisfaction (Johnson & Talitman, 1997). Further research has found that marital distress when beginning therapy is a predictor of the therapeutic alliance for men and women (Knobloch-Fedders, Pinsof & Mann, 2004).

Because the therapist is part of the changing system, future research on divorce decision-making and therapy should consider both a Human Ecological Perspective and a Family Systems Perspective, reflecting the interconnected systems of which the couple and therapist are a part. As we encourage researchers to work from a larger, systemic perspective, this will better align with participant's view of their complex decision-making process.

Connection to Clinical Work

This themes found in this study connect to clinical work in four ways for Marriage and Family Therapists and other mental health professionals that are working with couples where one or both members may be considering divorce. The first is that it could be helpful to openly ask where each member is regarding desire to improve the marriage, divorce or separate. Clinicians could ask about how they came to start therapy, as coming into therapy due to an ultimatum is quite different than coming because both members agreed it would be helpful. This could help to develop the therapeutic alliance early, which has been found key to couples returning for subsequent sessions (Knobloch-Fedders, et al., 2004). The second is that the majority of participants appreciated their therapist working from a neutral stance, unless they specifically were looking for a therapist who was against divorce. Perhaps clinicians could talk with couples about what they want and work from there. This approach 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 in order to improve the marriage, before starting marriage counseling (Doherty, 2011). This process helps to slow the couple down and takes the therapist out of the decision-making role. Remaining married is not a

decision that the therapist makes for the couple, but rather is supportive that the marriage could improve.

A third connection to clinical work is to remember that there are a myriad of interwoven factors affecting the decision (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991; Fackrell, 2012), not just the time in therapy. Therapy does play a role in women's decision making process about divorce by having space to talk, being held accountable, being encouraged to interact differently, and feeling connected to and understood by the therapist. However, there is a complex relationship between all the variable that go in to deciding to divorce, including therapeutic experience (Amato & Previti, 2003). Despite the reported themes of therapy providing a safe 'place' for change to happen, therapy was not where or when the decision was made; the decision-making process was gradual. It may be helpful for therapists to consider the value of discussing the other factors, such as children, finances and belief system with the couple and point out the positive changes that have been witnessed for the marriage and each spouse. Newer research is focusing on the common factors specific to couples therapy which include holding hope for the couple and helping them to change behaviors and cognition (Sprenkle, Davis & Lebow, 2009). The change a couple feels (and a therapist points out) may be an important piece of their decision-making process.

The final connection to clinical work is normalizing that even after both members of a couple decide to remain married, the idea of divorce may again surface. 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 client 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 could consider normalizing this experience so they are less likely to be upset by the thought. This reflects that since it takes a period of time to for couples to reach the level of frustration in their marriage that they consider divorce, so too does it take time to reconnect and heal. This theme also helps clinicians to see deciding to remain married as a process and decrease anxiety they may have regarding the effectiveness of their work.

This is an interesting theme regarding marriage overall. Individuals (n=1,364) were interviewed in a study comparing those that were considering divorce with those that were not (Booth & White, 1980). This study found that women were more likely (12%) to think about divorce than men (8%), and that being employed outside of the home increases that likelihood. Thinking about divorce occurred more often in the first ten years of marriage and then decreased. Those with lower marital satisfaction reported thinking about divorce more often. Women with lower marital satisfaction thought about divorce more frequently than men with lower satisfaction. However, 4% of those who reported highly satisfying marriages also said they were thinking about divorce.

Vaughn (1990) begins her book *Uncoupling* by discussing how the process of divorce starts with the secret dissatisfaction that one partner holds from the other. She writes how it can start early, thinking the wedding was a mistake or that all relationships are hard at first. The internal experience of discontent - when left to grow - has negative consequences for the relationship. How differently would these thoughts be experienced if during premarital counseling couples were told '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.'

Could this empower couples to get help for their marriages earlier? Perhaps working with couples during typical marital frustrations would prevent some from moving into the first stage of divorce (Bohannon, 1970). Prevention literature supports couples in communicating about dissatisfaction and learning healthy ways to handle conflict (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

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 wives were interviewed, and only women's perspectives and experiences of the situations were obtained. In the future, interviewing the husbands or couples together would add to the existing literature. Another perspective would be gained by interviewing cohabitating couples that have not married, or to interview gay and lesbian couples in lifelong committed relationships to see how the themes reported here are similar or different. All of this would add to the literature on relational decision-making and the role therapy might play when considering ending a long-term relationship.

Another limitation is that the methodology is not designed to quantify the impact of other factors on women's decision or generalize themes to a larger population. Since this was an exploratory study, future studies should consider using path models and other quantitative measures to better compare the factors in decision-making and within therapy itself. Future methodology could include an SEM model with multiple items influencing the decision to remain married, including data from a large-scale sample of couples in therapy. This is the next step to move from a theoretical discussion to a

quantitatively grounded one. Following couples throughout therapy, videotaping and coding the sessions, as well as having couples fill out measures after each session would also give a wealth of information regarding the process of therapy as it relates to deciding whether or not to divorce. In addition to this, a limitation and possibly threat to confirmability of the data is that interviews were conducted via three different methods, in-person, via phone and via Skype. Participants may have responded and interacted differently based on the method used for the interview.

This study demonstrates that couples therapy can have a strong impact and be a support to women as they are wrestling 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. By creating space to talk, holding couples accountable, encouraging couples to interact differently, and supporting the couple, therapy can be a positive experience and important part of this process.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

- 1) Tell me what it was like when you started considering the possibility of no longer being married.
 - a. What were your feelings when you started considering this?
 - b. How long had you been married
 - c. How did you act on these feelings?
- 2) How did you cope with the situation?
- 3) How long had you been thinking about divorce before you told your husband?
 - a. Did you tell him?
 - b. What were the circumstances/conditions when you did tell him?
 - c. How did he respond?
 - d. To your knowledge, had he been thinking about the same thing?
- 4) Tell me how you came to seek therapy.
 - a. Was this the first time you had gone to therapy?
 - b. Did you meet with more than one therapist?
 - c. Was there any difference in your and your husband's desire to seek therapy?
- 5) What were your expectations, for the therapy and for your marriage at that time?
 - a. How likely did you think divorce was at that time?
 - b. Did you experience in therapy match your expectations?
- 6) Can you describe for me what your therapy sessions were like?
 - a. What were some of your goals in therapy?
 - b. What was discussed?
 - c. How was the therapist helpful or unhelpful?
 - d. What kinds of assignments or homework did the therapist give you?
 - e. What was your and your spouse's connection with the therapist like?
- 7) How did your work in therapy influence your feelings about your situation?
 - a. Was considering divorce explicitly discussed in therapy?
- 8) What was your experience of how your therapist worked with you while making the decision of whether to divorce or not?
 - a. What sticks out in your mind from your sessions with them?

- b. Can you give me some examples of how things that happened in therapy or as a result of therapy you decided to remain in your marriage and not pursue divorce?
- 9) How did your therapist discuss divorce with you?
- a. Did he/she seem pro marriage or pro divorce?
 - b. Can you give me an example of this?
 - c. What were some of the messages you remember them sharing?
- 10) Tell me about your confidence in your therapist.
- a. How connected did you feel with your therapist?
 - b. How connected do you think your husband felt?
- 11) Can you tell me about how you came to decide that you did not want to pursue divorce?
- 12) What other influences did you have in this decision making, family, friends, culture, community?
- 13) Has that thought (divorce) every really gone away? What is that like?
- 14) What advice would you give women your age considering divorce?
- 15) What advice would you give therapists working with these couples?
- 16) Research has shown that two-thirds of divorces are initiated by women. What are your thoughts on this?
- 17) Is there anything else important for me to know about?

Appendix B: Recruitment Flier

Have you and your husband sought out couples counseling?**Have you considered divorce but decided to stay married?**

Researchers at the University of Minnesota are searching for participants to interview for a ground breaking study on the affect that therapy has on women's decision making about whether or not to divorce. You may qualify if you meet the following criteria:

- Female
- Considered divorce before you turned 41
- Sought out couples therapy because you were considering divorce
- Attended five or more sessions with one therapist
- Decided to remain married

You may participate if you continue to attend counseling but have decided to remain married.

Interviews will be private and confidential and are likely to be 60 to 90 minutes long. They may be in person, via phone or skype. Participants will be compensated for their time.

If you are interested please contact Erica at kane0268@umn.edu

Appendix C: Demographics Questionnaire

- 1) Name:
- 2) Email Address:
- 3) City you live in:
- 4) Phone number:
- 5) Date of birth:
- 6) Age at marriage:
- 7) Number of years married:
- 8) Age when began attending counseling:
- 9) Approximate number of session attended with main therapist:
- 10) Number of therapists seen:
- 11) Age of spouse:
- 12) Do you identify with a specific faith? Is so what?
- 13) Your race/ethnicity:
- 14) Level of education:
- 15) Household income level (circle the best answer):
 - \$0-\$20,000
 - \$21,000-\$40,000
 - \$41,000-\$60,000
 - \$61,000 +
 - Prefer not to answer

Appendix D: Demographic Tables

Table 1. *Demographic Information*

	Age	Age When First Sought Therapy	Sessions	Years Married	Years Married When First Sought Therapy	Therapists Seen
Mean	37	28	25	12	5.6	1
Min	29	24	5	2	1	1
Max	48	38	"100+"	29	19	4

Table 2. *Religious and Racial Information*

Religious Affiliation	Race
Christian = 6	Caucasian American= 13
Lutheran = 3	Black/Canadian = 1
Catholic = 2	Chinese American = 1
None = 2	
Buddhist = 1	
LDS (Mormon) = 1	

Table 3. *Education and Income Information*

Education	Income Level
Masters and/or PhD = 12	\$0-\$20,000=1
Bachelors = 3	\$21,000-\$40,000=1
	\$41,000-\$60,000=3
	\$61,000 +=10

Appendix E:

CONSENT FORM

Deciding Not to Un-Do the "I Do": A Phenomenological Study of the Therapy Experiences of Women Who Consider Divorce But Decide to Remain Married

You are invited to be in a research study of women, decision making about divorce and therapy. You were selected as a possible participant because you shared that you sought out couples counseling about this topic. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Erica JW Kanewischer, Family Social Science, University of Minnesota

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to better understand how couples therapy affects a woman's decision about whether or not to pursue divorce.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

Answer researcher's questions during a 45-90 minute conversation which will be audiotaped. You may choose to continue to participate and be sent a copy of the results for analysis.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The study has several risks: First, you may experience strong emotions when discussing this potentially difficult period in your life. This risk is likely. Second, you may find yourself thinking about this time in your life more after our interview. This risk is also likely.

There are no specific benefits to taking part in this study.

Compensation:

After our interview you will receive a \$25 Target giftcard.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you or anyone you talk about. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection of confidentiality. Only members of the research team will have access to recordings and transcriptions of our interviews. They will not be used for educational purposes and will be erased when all projects using this data have been completed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is: Erica JW Kanewischer. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact them at the University of Minnesota, kane0268@umn.edu. You may also contact Erica's advisor Steve Harris at smharris@umn.edu or 612-625-1900.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study and have our interview audio recorded.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Appendix F: Participant Handout

Getting in touch, continuing the conversation...

First, thank you so much for sharing your story and experience with me! If you are willing I would like to set up two more 'touch points' of communication for us. Also know you are welcome to contact me with questions or additional thoughts at any time. My cell phone number is 651-470-5772, and my email is kane0268@umn.edu.

I would like to be in touch via phone in about two weeks. This brief phone call will be a chance for you to add any further thoughts you've had, and for me to follow up with any questions after I have had a chance to transcribe and begin reading through your interview. I believe this phone call would be 10-20 minutes, and offer a chance for even deeper insight into your experience. In order to set this up I would contact you via email in 10-12 days.

The second way I would like to be in touch is via email toward the end of this project. As I am looking for themes within and across each women's experience it would be helpful for me to check-in with you. I would like to send you a brief summary of the results and give you a chance to reflect on what I have written. You could then let me know if your own experiences seem to be similar to how other participants experienced marital counseling when they were wrestling with the decision to stay married or divorce.

Again, thank you so much for your time and participation!

Erica J.W. Kanewischer, M.S., LMFT

Referral List

If you feel that continued therapy services would be helpful to do here are some therapists/agencies:

Rum River Counseling: 763-482-9598

Karla Musser, MS LMFT: 612-701-9197

Kente Circle: 612-243-1600