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Which Relationship Skills Count Most?

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*In an Internet-based study with 2,201 participants, the new Ep-
stein Love Competencies Inventory (ELCI) was shown to have high
internal-consistency reliability and to be a good predictor of var-
ious self-reported measures of success in romantic relationships;
scores on the ELCI predicted satisfaction in current relationships
especially well. A blind review of test content by licensed therapists
also suggested that the test has strong content validity. The new test
measured seven relationship competencies that various research
suggests are important in the maintenance of long-term roman-
tic relationships: (a) communication, (b) conflict resolution, (c)
knowledge of partner, (d) life skills, (e) self management, (f) sex
and romance, and (g) stress management. ELCI scores were found
to improve with both age and the number of hours spent in rela-
tionship skills training. After communication, knowledge of partner
and life skills were the competencies that best predicted self-reported
positive outcomes in relationships—a potentially important finding*

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given that the latter two competencies are not always assessed or taught in couple therapy or education contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Societal concerns about the poor state of America's romantic relationships, particularly the high rate of failure in our marriages, have grown in recent years. Initiatives by both government and private groups are intended to remedy the situation, and several initiatives, informed by numerous research studies, emphasize the importance of teaching various relationship skills to people in committed relationships (Fagan, Patterson, & Rector, 2002; Hawkins, Wilson, Ooms, Nock, Malone-Colon, & Cohen, 2009; Reardon-Anderson, Stagner, Macomber, & Murray, 2005). A number of studies have indeed demonstrated that strengthening relationship skills can have positive effects (e.g., Barnacle & Abbott, 2009; Larson, Vatter, Galbraith, Holman, & Stahmann, 2007; Stanley, Allen, Markman, Rhoades, & Prentice, 2010), and skill training has long been central in a number of relationship education programs (Gordon, Temple, & Adams, 2005; Gottman, 2002; Notarius & Markman, 1993).

Among the more dramatic outcomes reported, a program using the PREP paradigm and focusing on improvements in communication and conflict resolution skills found that training reduced marital conflict and produced higher satisfaction levels in trained couples compared with matched controls. Even more significantly, the program appeared to produce lasting effects 5 years after training; trainees had a 12% break-up rate at this point, compared with a 36% break-up rate for controls (Stanley, Markman, & Jenkins, 2002).

Meta-analyses of relationship education and therapy programs have generally reported positive results (e.g., Butler & Wampler, 1999; Carroll & Doherty, 2003), although recent studies have cast some doubt on the generalizability of earlier studies. For example, Fawcett, Hawkins, Blanchard, and Carroll (2010) found that premarital education programs did not significantly improve relationship quality or satisfaction when unpublished studies were included in their analysis; they concluded that skill training is more likely to be effective when it is customized to meet the needs of specific couples (cf. Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2009; Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010).

Tools for assessing relationship skills also exist. In some cases, skills are assessed as part of a more comprehensive look at a relationship, which might examine partner satisfaction, existing sources of conflict, personality factors, family background, and other characteristics. Instruments that assess

relationship skills (among other things) include the online Couple Checkup (Olson, Larson, & Olson-Sigg, 2009), Couples Resource Map Scales (Murray & Forti, 2009), PREPARE (Fowers & Olson, 1986), and the RELATE question-naire (formerly known as the PREP-M) (Holman, Larson, & Harmer, 1994). Both the RELATE and PREPARE instruments focus on communication and conflict resolution as key relationship skills. Other tests, such as the CDEM, the FOCCUS, and the PMIP, were developed by religious groups with reli-gious couples in mind (Larson, Holman, Klein, Busby, Stahmann, & Peterson, 1995; Larson, Newell, Topham, & Nichols, 2002). Assessment tools have also been developed for particular cultural groups (e.g., Elias & Malik, 2009).

Although relationship skills are both measurable and valuable, a com-prehensive understanding of relationship skills appears to be lacking. It is not clear which of the broad range of skills that people possess play a role in healthy adult relationships, which skills are most important, or how we can measure such skills comprehensively. Identifying and prioritizing a wide range of relationship skills might help improve couple education, couple therapy, and self and couple awareness. With this in mind, we examined the relevant empirical literature to identify competencies that appear to be helpful in long-term romantic relationships and then devised an inventory to assess the current state of an individual's relationship competencies.

In addition, we are aware of the recent shift in relationship and mar-riage education toward preventative, competency-based training and of the public's new reliance on the Internet to address relationship needs (Olson, Larson, & Olson-Sigg, 2009). With these issues in mind, we sought to develop an online, user-friendly test that could be used by singles for self-evaluation and could also be used by couples, couple educators, and therapists to measure a broad range of competencies within existing relationships.

Finally, we sought to prioritize the competencies according to how well they predicted desirable outcomes in relationships.

METHOD

To determine potential competencies that might contribute to success in romantic relationships, we looked for studies that presented evidence that a measurable competency—a functionally related set of skills that may or may not have been previously expressed—(a) increased the longevity of relationships, (b) increased satisfaction in relationships, or (c) reduced con-flict in relationships. Based on a review of relevant studies, we concluded that there are at least seven different competencies that have the potential to contribute to success in romantic relationships (listed here in alphabet-ical order): (a) communication, (b) conflict resolution, (c) knowledge of partner, (d) life skills, (e) self-management, (f) sex and romance, and (g) stress management. Definitions and relevant references are given in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Seven Important Relationship Competencies

Communication: knowing how to listen, sharing one's thoughts and feelings honestly, refraining from criticizing, etc.

Sample Item: "I often ask for feedback from my partner."

References*: Fawcett et al., 2010; Ferch, 2001; Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004

Conflict Resolution: staying focused on the topic, staying focused on the present, being ready to forgive or apologize, etc.

Sample item: "I'm always ready to forgive when my partner apologizes."

References: Bodenmann, Charvoz, Cina, & Widmer, 2001; Creasey, 2002; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010; Shigemasu & Ikeda, 2003

Knowledge of Partner: knowing how to have fun with one's partner, knowing about his/her preferences, caring about one's partner's hopes and dreams, etc.

Sample item: "I always remember my partner's birthday and other special days."

References: Gottman, 1999; Gottman, Ryan, Swanson, & Swanson, 2005; Showers & Kevlyn, 1999

Life Skills: managing money responsibly, exercising and staying fit, being able to find and keep a job, etc.

Sample item: "I'm always prepared for possible hard times."

References: Britt, Grable, Goff, & White, 2008; MacDonald, 1999; Olson & Olson, 2000

Self Management: knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, striving to overcome one's weaknesses, identifying and reaching one's goals, etc.

Sample item: "I regularly take time to reflect on my dreams and obstacles."

References: Barker, 2010; Frederickson, 1998; Gordon & Baucom, 2009; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007

Sex & Romance: inquiring and caring about how to please one's partner sexually, setting aside time for intimacy, staying attractive for one's partner, etc.

Sample item: "I always make time for sensual intimacy with my partner."

References: Butzer & Campbell, 2008; MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Sprecher, 2002; Yabiku & Gager, 2009

Stress Management: using imagery techniques, thought management techniques, planning and organizational skills, muscle relaxation techniques, etc.

Sample item: "I have trouble prioritizing."

References: Berry & Worthington, 2001; Bodenmann, Atkins, Schär, & Poffett, 2010; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009

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*For a complete list of supporting references in each category, download http://drrobertepstein. com/downloads/Epstein_et_al_2012-relationship_skills.pdf

Using methods employed by the first author in developing other tests (e.g., Epstein, 2000a, 2000b; Epstein, Fox, Garcia, & McKinney, 2012; Epstein & Muzzatti, 2011; Epstein & Rogers, 2001; Epstein, Schmidt, & Warfel, 2008), we then created items to be used in an agree/disagree 5-point Likert scale inventory. All items were derived from specific ways in which

skills were characterized in relevant studies. For example, because asking for feedback from one's partner is an important communication skill (e.g., Shumway & Wampler, 2002), one item in our set of communication questions was "I often ask for feedback from my partner" (see Table 1 for other sample items). The final test, called the Epstein Love Competencies Inventory (ELCI, accessible at MyLoveSkills.com), contained 70 items, 10 for each subscale. Each group of 10 items consisted of nine unique questions, plus one item that was a variant of one of the other nine. The latter item—a dummy item, in effect—was not used to compute subscale or total scores; rather, the correlation between items in the test's seven dummy pairs yielded a measure we call the internal consistency score (ICS). A low ICS indicates for an individual subject that he or she has misunderstood the instructions or has responded at random or dishonestly. The ICS can be used to eliminate a subject from a statistical analysis (no participants were eliminated in the present study), to ask a subject to retake the test (again, this was not done is the present study), or, using techniques that we have reported elsewhere (e.g., Epstein, Schmidt, & Warfel, 2008), to maximize validity or reliability measures; no such techniques were used in the present study.

Participants

Participants were recruited through a notice placed in an online newsletter that reaches many couple therapists and counselors (Smartmarriages.com). Over a period of about 30 days, at least 18 therapists and counselors directed 2,201 participants to take the ELCI. Sixty-five percent of the participants were female ($n = 1,434$), and 35% were male ($n = 767$); the mean age was 36.6; 84% were white ($n = 1,848$), 3.5% were black ($n = 77$), 4.5% were Hispanic ($n = 99$), 3.9% were Asian ($n = 85$), 0.3% were Native American ($n = 6$), and the remaining respondents characterized themselves as "other" ($n = 77$). Twenty-four percent ($n = 530$) indicated that they had completed high school, 11.9% ($n = 263$) had an associate's degree, 31.4% ($n = 691$) had completed college, 24% ($n = 528$) had a master's degree, and 7.1% ($n = 157$) had completed doctoral work. Seventy-four percent ($n = 1,624$) of the participants said they were currently in a relationship, with 824 of those individuals currently married. Twenty-six percent ($n = 564$) were neither married nor in a relationship, and 0.1% ($n = 13$) did not respond to this question. Forty-four percent ($n = 982$) of participants had never been married.

Validity and Reliability

INDEPENDENT RATINGS

The legitimacy of the seven subscales was established initially by our literature review, but we subsequently sought to assess the content validity

of these subscales using a blind evaluation procedure with independent raters. This procedure was also used to help determine the content validity of the 63 scoreable test items. Specifically, we asked a licensed clinical psychologist (based in San Diego, California) who specializes in couple therapy to distribute a form to 10 licensed couple therapists. The form did not identify the name of the new test or the names of the authors of this study. It merely noted that a new test of relationship skills was under development and asked recipients to rate the importance of the subscales and the appropriateness of the items for each subscale. Completed forms were subsequently returned to the authors of this study without the names of the raters.

CRITERION QUESTIONS

In addition to basic demographic questions, participants were asked to rate their current and past relationships on 10-point scales. To assess the predictive validity of the test, we sought specifically to predict answers to the question, "How satisfied are you in your current relationship?" We hypothesized that ELCI scores would be positively correlated with satisfaction in the current relationship, since, presumably, better relationship skills would help to produce better relationships. Since the length of one's current relationship at the time one takes the test is arbitrary, we predicted that ELCI scores would not predict current relationship length. Moreover, because skills tend to improve over time, we predicted that ELCI scores would be positively correlated with our participants' ages. Because skills were likely weaker during past relationships and memory of older events is relatively unreliable, we predicted that ELCI scores would be only modestly correlated with overall satisfaction in relationships (past and present), if at all. We also conjectured that ELCI scores would improve with level of education, that women would outscore men by small margins in some areas, that racial and ethnic differences would be minimal, and that skills would improve with training. Internal-consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's α and the Guttman split-half test.

RESULTS

Independent Ratings of Subscales and Items

Completed ratings forms were received from 7 of the 10 clinicians who had been approached. Five of the raters listed California as their location; two did not list a location. Two listed the PsyD as their terminal degree, one listed an MSW, and the others identified themselves as LMFTs.

Mean ratings of importance for six of the seven competencies (communication, conflict resolution, knowledge of partner, self-management,

sex and romance, and stress management) were high: between 9.3 and 9.8 on a 10-point scale. The mean rating for life skills was considerably lower: 7.8. (Complete results from the content validity study may be downloaded at http://drrobertepstein.com/downloads/Epstein_et_al_2012-relationship_skills.pdf.)

There was more variability in how the appropriateness of items was judged, with mean item scores for each competency ranging from 7.7 to 9.2. Once again, the lowest mean was for life skills, an area not normally explored in couple therapy or education (see Discussion).

Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's α for our sample was .93, and the Guttman split-half value was .91, suggesting that the ELCI has high internal consistency. Test scores were predictive of several of our criterion questions. Total scores were significantly correlated with whether participants had ever had relationship skills training (Mann-Whitney $U = 469,029.5$***, $mean_{yes} = 72.10$, $mean_{no} = 69.33$), and with the number of hours of training participants had received (Spearman's $\rho = .16$***), with how highly participants rated their average satisfaction in romantic relationships ($\rho = .14$***), with whether they had ever been married ($U = 509,728.5$***, $mean_{yes} = 71.4$, $mean_{no} = 69.2$), and with their level of education (Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2 = 52.4$***, $mean_{none} = 66.8$, $mean_{high\ school} = 68.2$, $mean_{associates} = 70.0$, $mean_{bachelors} = 70.8$, $mean_{masters} = 71.7$, $mean_{doctoral} = 73.8$). (Nonparametric statistical tests such as Spearman's ρ, the Mann-Whitney U, and the Kruskal-Wallis H are used throughout this study because scores on the ELCI lie on an ordinal scale. Significance level is indicated by asterisks: *** indicates $p < .001$, ** indicates $p < .01$, and * indicates $p < .05$. Unless otherwise indicated, all test scores are reported as a percentage of total correct rather than as raw scores.) As predicted, total scores were not correlated with the length of participants' current romantic relationship ($\rho = -.02$, $p = .47$), with the average length of all their romantic relationships ($\rho = .02$, $p = .40$), or with the length of time since their last romantic relationship ($\rho = -.01$, $p = .61$) but were relatively highly correlated with the level of satisfaction participants reported in their current relationships ($\rho = 0.23$***). There was no significant difference between the total scores of participants who were in a relationship (which includes all married participants) and the total scores of participants who were not in a relationship ($U = 449,433.5$, $p = .59$, $mean_{yes} = 70.47$, $mean_{no} = 70.44$).

Although training in relationship skills made a significant difference in total scores, it did not affect the seven competencies equally. Six of the seven competencies—communication, conflict resolution, life skills, self-management, sex and romance, and stress management—were improved by training; however, knowledge of partner was not improved (Table 2).

TABLE 2 Total and Subscale Scores by Gender, Age, and Training Level

	All participants (n = 2,201) Mean (SD)	Men and women			Age			Training		
		Men (n = 1,434) Mean (SD)	Women (n = 767) Mean (SD)	Mean difference	Age <35 yr (n = 1,037) Mean (SD)	Age ≥35 yr (n = 1,164) Mean (SD)	Mean difference	Training (n = 826) Mean (SD)	No training (n = 1,346) Mean (SD)	Mean difference
Total score	70.5 (10.2)	69.9 (10.5)	70.8 (10.1)	0.9	69.2 (10.2)	71.6 (10.1)	2.4***	72.1 (10.1)	69.3 (10.1)	2.8***
Communication	77.4 (13.6)	75.5 (13.6)	78.4 (13.5)	2.9***	77.4 (13.6)	77.4 (13.6)	0	78.7 (13.4)	76.4 (13.6)	2.3***
Conflict resolution	66.1 (12.9)	67.7 (11.7)	65.2 (13.5)	2.5***	63.4 (13.2)	68.5 (12.2)	5.1***	67.7 (13.4)	65.0 (12.5)	2.7***
Knowledge of partner	77.0 (12.6)	74.2 (13.5)	78.5 (11.8)	4.3***	77.3 (12.7)	76.7 (12.5)	0.6	77.2 (12.5)	76.7 (12.7)	0.5
Life skills	68.3 (15.3)	69.2 (16.4)	67.8 (14.7)	1.4**	66.3 (15.9)	70.7 (14.5)	3.8***	70.7 (14.4)	66.7 (15.6)	4.0***
Self management	75.9 (13.2)	74.6 (13.6)	76.5 (12.9)	1.9**	73.8 (13.2)	77.2 (12.9)	3.4***	78.9 (12.5)	73.8 (13.2)	5.1***
Sex and romance	68.0 (15.3)	67.5 (14.7)	68.2 (15.6)	0.7	67.5 (15.5)	68.3 (15.1)	0.8	68.7 (15.6)	67.3 (15.1)	1.4*
Stress management	60.6 (13.4)	60.6 (12.7)	60.6 (13.7)	0	58.7 (13.1)	62.3 (13.4)	3.6***	62.5 (13.1)	59.4 (13.3)	3.1***

$*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.$

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Gender, Race, and Age

The mean total score was 70.8 for women and 69.9 for men, with no significant difference between these values. Female strengths were in the communication, knowledge of partner, and self-management competency areas, and male strengths were in the conflict resolution and life skills competency areas (see Table 2). Differences between male and female scores in the stress management and sex and romance competency areas were not significant (Table 2). In addition, race was not a significant predictor of total score (χ^2 = 8.3, $p = .14$, $mean_{white} = 70.4$, $mean_{black} = 73.1$, $mean_{Hispanic} = 70.4$, $mean_{Asian} = 70.5$, $mean_{American\ Indian} = 67.0$, $mean_{other} = 70.3$, $mean_{unknown}$ = 73.8).

Splitting the data set at the median age of 35, we found that both the total score and several subscale scores improved with age. The mean total score (69.2) for participants under 35 was slightly lower than the mean total score (71.6) for participants 35 and over ($p < .001$). Older participants were stronger in four of the seven competency areas: conflict resolution, stress management, self-management, and life skills (Table 2). Younger participants did not score significantly higher in any competency area. Overall, there was also a small but highly significant positive correlation between age and total scores ($\rho = 0.15^{***}$).

Regressions and Factor Analysis

Linear regression was used to determine how well the seven subscale scores predicted both current and average relationship satisfaction. With respect to current relationship satisfaction, Communication was the most predictive competency ($\beta = .16^{***}$); knowledge of partner ($\beta = .14^{***}$) and life skills ($\beta = .09^{***}$) were also somewhat predictive. Sex and romance ($\beta = .10^{***}$) and communication ($\beta = .07^{*}$) were somewhat predictive of average relationship satisfaction.

An exploratory principal components factor analysis was performed for all 63 scored items for all participants. To test the appropriateness of the principal component analysis, we used both the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Our sampling adequacy was .94, well above the recommended cutoff value of .6, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was highly significant ($p < .001$). Overall, the analysis produced five distinct, interpretable, and statistically sound components (Table 3): (a) communication, especially about intimacy and other needs, (b) self and stress management, (c) conflict resolution, (d) life skills pertaining to goal attainment, and (e) life skills pertaining to health and appearance. Components b, d, and e appeared to represent participants' personal skill set, and components a and c appeared to represent participants' interpersonal skill set.

TABLE 3 Factor Loadings for the 63 Scored Test Items

Item No.	Communication, especially about intimacy and other needs	Self and stress management	Conflict resolution and perspective taking	Life skills pertaining to goal attainment	Life skills pertaining to health and appearance
36	0.70				
26	0.62				
42	0.62				
47	0.58				
34	0.57				
22	0.56				
61	0.56				
44	0.53				
13	0.53				
4	0.50				
30	0.50				
8	0.49				
49	0.49				
58	0.46				
66	0.45				
10	0.45				
54	0.44				
20	0.42				
2	0.40				
32	0.40				
57		0.58			
56		0.56			
68		0.56			
7		0.50			
64		0.46			
25		0.44			
70		0.45			
62		0.42			
3		0.42			
53		0.41			
46			0.66		
29			0.57		
69			0.53		
17			0.49		
5			0.49		
1			0.48		
40			0.46		
28			0.41		
19				0.58	
52				0.52	
27				0.50	
23				0.49	
18				0.49	
38				0.46	
48				0.45	
51		0.40		0.44	
35				0.42	
12					0.72
37					0.62
59					0.62
9					0.59

Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization. Factor loadings <0.40 are not shown.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study generally support some commonly held views. First, relationship skills, like wine, get better with age, although not dramatically so. Improvement with age applies especially to certain competencies: conflict resolution, life skills, self-management, and stress management. Second, our findings support the view that couple education is beneficial: ELCI test scores were higher for people who had had relationship skills training (Table 2), and more training hours were associated with higher test scores.

Third, although women did not significantly outscore men overall, they did score higher than men in three important competency areas (communication, knowledge of partner, and self-management), with men outscoring women in two competency areas (conflict resolution and life skills). The small but significant difference in the communication competency supports the current view that women may have only slightly better communication skills than men (cf., Hyde & Linn, 1988; Mulac, 2006). The biggest gap between male and female scores, with women outscoring men, was in the knowledge of partner competency. This result is consistent with the finding that women generally elicit more self-disclosure than men (Dindia, 2002).

Fourth, this study also supports the widely held belief that communication skills are essential for relationship success. Our regression analysis confirmed that the communication competency was the best predictor of self-reported satisfaction in one's current relationship. Our study also directs attention, however, toward two other competencies—life skills and knowledge of partner—which are often not stressed in couple therapy or education programs.

We were fortunate in this study to be able to obtain a relatively large number of participants rapidly through referrals made by couple therapists and educators to an Internet address (MyLoveSkills.com). Normally, with unknown participants responding over the Internet, one would need to be cautious about the validity of one's data. Because referrals were made mainly by couple professionals, however, we can be reasonably confident that our participants were adults providing relatively honest responses. Some research suggests, in fact, that people may be more honest when taking a test via computer than when being tested face-to-face (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009). However, it is still problematic that, because our participants were informed about the test while in a therapeutic or education setting, many were presumably in troubled relationships and therefore may not be representative of the population as a whole.

Reflecting the subpopulation that normally seeks therapy, our participants were also mainly white (84.0%) and highly educated (31.4% with bachelor's degrees and 31.1% with graduate degrees). Our scores may therefore be inflated; that is, the average American adult probably has weaker

relationship skills than are reflected in this study. This is further suggested by our findings with respect to relationship training. Of our participants, 37.5% said they had received such training, a number undoubtedly well above that for the general population, and subscale scores—except in the knowledge of partner category—were indeed significantly higher among participants who had reported having such training (Table 2).

Because the ELCI relies on self-report, it could be argued that ELCI scores (as well as the results of this study) may not be reflective of actual behavior but rather are indicative of an individual's self-perception. We question this perspective. Well-designed competency tests—that is, tests that pinpoint behavior—are usually good predictors of performance, as a wealth of data in the competency-testing literature has long demonstrated (Boyatzis, 1982; Smith & Smith, 2005; Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Wood & Payne, 1998). While vague test items ("I'm a good communicator") might produce answers indicative of self perception, behavior-specific test items ("I always ask my partner how his or her day was") predict behavior well, and improvements in behavior can often be predicted from increases in competency scores. In another validation study recently reported by Epstein, Schmidt, and Warfel (2008), for example, increases in scores on a computer-based test of creativity competencies were associated with a 55% increase in the number of new ideas employees suggested to managers each week.

Because our test was administered on the Internet, we were also unable to measure both test-retest reliability and concurrent validity. In a newer version of the test (currently in use), we ask for participants' email addresses, which should allow us to do follow-up testing. This should make it possible to assess both test-retest reliability and concurrent validity with at least a self-selected subset of our participants.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESULTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The results of this study have implications for couple education, as well as for clinical practice with both couples and individuals. Currently, couple educators and therapists often focus on strengthening communication and conflict-resolution skills, sometimes focusing exclusively on these skills. The present study reminds us that other skill sets are also important in relationships. Two competencies in particular—knowledge of partner and life skills—proved to be reasonably good predictors of satisfaction in one's current relationship; only communication was a better predictor.

One's ability to hold a job, manage money, take care of one's health, and so on—the competency we are calling life skills—is essential in long-term romantic relationships (Britt, Grable, Goff, & White, 2008; Olson & Olson, 2000; Olson & Olson-Sigg, 2008; cf. Carroll, Dean, Call, & Busby, 2011), but such skills are not always assessed or taught by couple

professionals. Indeed, the experts who participated in a blind evaluation of our test content ranked life skills as the least important of the seven relationship competencies we evaluated. Although couple professionals might be able to help someone hold a job by assisting him or her with anger management or assertiveness, they may have little to offer when it comes to advising people about money management, economic trends, technical obsolescence, downsizing, and so on. Life skills may be one of those areas, like the proverbial elephant in the room, which is critically important in a relationship but which we are poorly equipped to tame. Just as non–medically trained therapists now routinely refer clients to physicians when medication or other medical treatment is indicated, in an effort to strengthen their clients' life skills, couple professionals may also need to refer clients on a routine basis to money managers, headhunters, life coaches, and continuing education programs. As an alternative, couple professionals might consider adding life coaching skills to their current repertoires, as Williams and Davis (2002) have suggested.

The other important competency that emerged in this study— knowledge of partner—has more immediate relevance to current relationship education and therapeutic practices. In short, this competency should perhaps be elevated in importance. We say this in part because knowledge of partner is easier for people to learn and master than are other relationship skills. When a birthday is missed or someone seems unaware of a food preference or shirt size, the effects can be devastating, especially when these omissions are habitual. Making people sensitive to this issue is relatively straightforward, and fairly simple information swapping and memorization exercises, given as homework, can presumably strengthen this skill substantially.

If relationship educators are now widely assessing or teaching the knowledge of partner competency, it is certainly not clear from our results. (A notable exception is the "Love Maps" technique taught at The Gottman Relationship Institute, which has been shown to boost the friendship component of marital relationships when used in combination with other techniques [Gottman, 1999; Gottman, Ryan, Swanson, & Swanson, 2005].) Knowledge of partner was the only one of the seven competencies we examined that was not stronger among people who had received relationship skills training, presumably because it had never been taught. Our finding that women outscored men in the knowledge of partner category more than in any other category may be relevant here. This may be a rare instance in which the failure to assess and train allows natural gender differences to be expressed more than they otherwise would be (cf. Dindia, 2002). It is curious that the clinicians in our blind evaluation study rated knowledge of partner the highest of the seven competencies; relationship skills training may not currently be consistent with their intuitions.

Although this study has yielded some fairly clear and potentially useful results, we consider it preliminary in nature. We are currently in the process of conducting a larger-scale study with more criterion variables to further assess the validity of the ELCI. In the meantime, we believe that the ELCI can be helpful to both couple educators and therapists as a tool for assessing baseline relationship skills in both individuals and couples—information that is increasingly seen as valuable to the therapeutic process.

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