JMFT Journal of Marital and Family Therapy
Journal of Marital and Family Therapy 44(1): 90–106
doi: 10.1111/jmft.12233

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF MARRIAGE PREPARATION AMONG U.S. MUSLIMS: MULTIPLE VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

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Although Muslims in the United States are a growing population, there is limited research on their relational patterns and how they prepare for marriage. We conducted in-depth interviews with 32 members of the Muslim community in Southeast Michigan including married individuals, divorced individuals, therapists, and imams (Muslim religious leaders) to explore their perceptions and experiences of marriage preparation. Our analysis revealed that marriage preparation varies but is less likely to involve a requirement of premarital counseling, with imams being the primary providers, not therapists. Barriers to participation include stigma, lack of awareness, logistical and financial challenges, and parental influence. Partnerships between imams and therapists, and family and community efforts are necessary to address barriers and increase participation in premarital education programs.

In the United States, approximately half of all first marriages will end in divorce (Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010; Krieder & Ellis, 2011), and each year there are about 850,000 divorces (Tejada-Vera & Sutton, 2010). Family scholars and professionals have called for couples to be better prepared for marriage (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Marriage preparation is "any intentional effort delivered before marriage that is designed to help couples form and sustain healthy

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Funding for data collection was provided by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. The Family and Youth Institute provided funding for data analysis. We are indebted to our participants for being generous with their time and sharing their insights. We also thank Amany Killawi, BSW for her assistance as project manager and Zain Shamoon, MA, LLMFT for his assistance with interviews and data analysis.

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marriages" (Wilmoth & Fournier, 2008, p. 31). It is also known in the literature as premarital education and premarital counseling, so these terms will be used interchangeably in this article. Usually time-limited, marriage preparation programs aim to educate couples about potential problems in marriage and provide them with information and resources to prevent or address these problems (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Topics commonly addressed include communication, conflict resolution, commitment, gender roles, sexuality, parenting expectations, finances, and family of origin (Stahmann & Salts, 1993). Some programs also utilize questionnaires for the couples to assess themselves and their relationship.

Research suggests that premarital education can benefit couples from a variety of racial, financial, and educational levels (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). Premarital education programs can help couples improve their communication and conflict resolution skills and the quality of their relationships, thereby decreasing the risk factors for future marital distress and divorce (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). Premarital education programs have also been associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction and commitment to one's spouse, lower levels of conflict, and reduced odds of divorce (Stanley et al., 2006). A review of the most widely used marriage preparation inventories and couple questionnaires including the Relationship Evaluation Questionnaire-RELATE (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001), Premarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement-PREPARE (Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1996), Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study-FOCCUS (Markey, Micheletto, & Becker, 1997), and Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program-PREP (Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999) found that when used with engaged couples, these inventories may be considered an intervention that improves marital outcome (Madison & Madison, 2013). Premarital education has been associated with an increased likelihood of couples participating in marriage counseling later on (Williamson, Trail, Bradbury, & Karney, 2014), but research on the long-term effects of premarital education on marital stability and satisfaction remains limited and has had mixed results (Halford & Snyder, 2012; Silliman & Schumm, 2000).

Most couples in the United States do not participate in marriage preparation programs (Glenn, 2005; Silliman & Schumm, 2000; Stanley & Markman, 1997). Most couples who do seek premarital education, do so through a religious institution (Glenn, 2005). Thus, clergy tend to be the majority of providers of premarital education in the United States (Glenn, 2005; Murray, 2005), although there is a wide range in the number and content (Schumm et al., 2010; Williams, 2007) and quality and helpfulness of their sessions (Schumm et al., 2010).

Muslims and Marriage Preparation

Given the predominance of faith-based marriage preparation, the Muslim community may be of particular interest. Muslims are a diverse and growing community in the United States, estimated to become the second largest religious group by 2050 (Mohamed, 2016). Little is known about how U.S. Muslims perceive and utilize marriage education programs and professional and religious-based services to prevent divorce (Macfarlane, 2012). Most research on premarital education in the United States has relied on samples with predominantly White, middle-class couples (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008; Silliman & Schumm, 2000). In our review of the literature, we were unable to identify any research focused specifically on marriage preparation among U.S. Muslims. Only two studies examine this issue, but within the context of research on divorce processes (Macfarlane, 2012) and marital trends (Alshugairi, 2010). Our article seeks to address this gap in the literature.

In order to understand marriage preparation in the Muslim community, it is important to first understand how Muslims get married. Although they are united by common religious beliefs and values, Muslims are ethnically and racially diverse, so there is significant diversity in how they court and marry. In general, family tends to play a strong role in choosing a spouse (Carolan, Bagherinia, Juhari, Himelright, & Mouton-Sanders, 2000; Daneshpour, 1998), and at the very least couples seek parental approval (Macfarlane, 2012). Traditionally, Muslims are expected to abstain from sexual and romantic dating relationships, instead courting purposefully for marriage. However, Muslims do not adhere to these rules in a monolithic way. Couples may meet through families, friends, religious leaders, or online social networks, and compatibility may be sought

through in-person meetings and/or virtual communication that may or may not be chaperoned by family and friends. The courtship phase is usually concluded with the couple signing the *nikah,* a written contract that formalizes the marriage according to Islamic law. It can be signed during the engagement or wedding ceremony, often in addition to the civil license (Macfarlane, 2012), and it gives couples the freedom to cohabitate and consummate their marriage. The *nikah* is typically formalized by an *imam*, a Muslim religious leader who serves roles similar to pastors and rabbis, such as leading prayer services, delivering sermons, and providing spiritual advice to a congregation (Padela, Killawi, Heisler, Demonner, & Fetters, 2011).

Some mosques have requirements for premarital education before the *nikah*, but these requirements vary widely and most often consist of a brief meeting between the couple and the imam to discuss the rights and responsibilities of marriage in Islam (Macfarlane, 2012). Although some mosques utilize professional therapists to provide premarital education programs, most often it is the imams who provide premarital counseling to couples seeking to marry. There have been some efforts around marriage preparation in the Muslim community such as premarital questionnaires and books, therapists advertising their services, workshops offered at mosques, and initiatives such as the Healthy Marriage Community Covenant, a policy requiring imams to commit to a minimum of three sessions of premarital counseling with a couple before they conduct their marriage (Macfarlane, 2012). However, there is no standard process or model of marriage preparation developed specifically for U.S. Muslim communities.

Although anecdotal evidence by religious leaders and service providers points to an increase in the divorce rate among U.S. Muslims (Ghayyur, 2010; Siddiqui, 2009), there are few empirical studies quantifying how many U.S. Muslim marriages end in divorce. Two studies identified a 32.33% (Ba-Yunus, 2000) and 21.3% (Alshugairi, 2010) divorce rate, but studies utilizing larger and more representative samples are needed. Research by Chapman and Cattaneo (2013) found that 56.1% of Muslim couples reported at least one moderate or major issue in their relationship related to in-laws, family or friends, different interests, attitudes toward sex, and finances. In another study, Macfarlane (2012) found that changing gender-role dynamics and mismatched expectations about family life were the most frequently reported contributors of marital conflict, along with relations with in-laws, taking on of a second wife or infidelity, differences in religious practice, and domestic abuse. Thus, it becomes increasingly important to explore how marriage preparation can help Muslim couples build and sustain a healthy marriage.

This article attempts to explore the perceptions and experiences of marriage preparation among U.S. Muslims, as well as the role of imams and therapists in preparing couples for marriage. Our findings are based on interviews of married individuals, divorced individuals, imams, and therapists during a larger study focused on understanding how U.S. Muslims utilize various types of marriage education before and during marriage. This article will focus on premarital education and is guided by the following questions: (a) How do Muslim couples get to know one another and make the decision to marry? (b) How and when do Muslim couples prepare for marriage? (c) What are the roles of imams and therapists in preparing Muslims for marriage? (d) What is needed to help Muslim couples prepare for marriage? Our hope is that these findings will inform existing marriage preparation efforts and enable religious leaders and service providers to better understand the marriage preparation needs of U.S. Muslims.

METHODS

Design

We utilized qualitative interviews due to limited research about the relational patterns of U.S. Muslims and to allow for in-depth exploration of our study questions. Our research team members identified as Muslims, were familiar with the Islamic tradition, and were trained in mental health treatment and qualitative research methods. Some team members had extensive experience with marriage education and counseling.

Participants

Our research was conducted in Southeast Michigan, home to one of the oldest and largest Muslim communities in the United States with an estimated population of up to 200,000 and more

than 30 mosques and civic organizations (Bagby, 2004). We sought to interview members of this community, specifically married individuals, divorced individuals, and key helpers including imams and therapists. Using triangulation to interview multiple data sources (Patton, 1999) offered us a more robust and comprehensive understanding of marriage preparation in the U.S. Muslim community. Interviewing imams and Muslim therapists in particular, enabled us to gain insight about their firsthand experiences working with Muslim couples.

We used purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit participants. Table 1 describes the inclusion criteria of our sample. Members of the research team who had intimate knowledge of the Muslim community in Southeast Michigan identified for recruitment imams and therapists who provided services to Muslim couples. Married and divorced participants were recruited through a variety of methods including announcements at mosques, fliers and emails, and referrals by community stakeholders. We aimed for at least one man and one woman from various mosque communities in an attempt to include participants from the three main ethnic groups (e.g., Black, Asian, and Arab) of U.S. Muslims (Mogahed & Perves, 2016). We sought people who had participated in at least one marriage education activity, which we defined as "any activity to improve your marital relationship." This could include premarital education or counseling *before* marriage or marriage education or counseling *during* marriage. Sampling aimed for a diverse variety of marriage education activities. This article focuses specifically on our participants' perceptions and experiences of marriage preparation, which we defined as "any activity to prepare for marriage." This could include premarital counseling with an imam or therapist, attending a marriage education workshop, or using a survey tool to determine compatibility. A total of 32 individuals participated in the study after saturation was obtained.

Procedure

We conducted face-to-face in-depth, semistructured interviews at a location convenient for participants. Interviews lasted up to two hours. Three slightly modified interview guides were used for the three different groups of participants (married and divorced individuals, imams, therapists). We asked married and divorced individuals about their courtship and decision-making process and their experience preparing for marriage, including the types of marriage preparation activities they participated in and their usefulness. We asked imams and therapists about their role in preparing Muslims for marriage, including their marriage preparation procedures, topics addressed with couples, and tools and resources used. We asked all groups for recommendations to help U.S. Muslims prepare for a healthy marriage. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis, except for one interview during which the audio equipment failed. We relied on the interviewer's field notes instead. Participants signed a consent form, were assured

Table 1
Sampling of Participants

Group	Inclusion criteria
Married individuals	Muslim man or woman (not couples) between the age of 18–50, married for at least 1 year and may have children, lives in Michigan, has participated in at least one marriage education activity
Divorced individuals	Muslim man or woman (not couples) between the age of 18–50, has been divorced once and may have children, lives in Michigan, has participated in at least one marriage education activity
Imams	Imam affiliated with local mosque and who officiates marriages in Michigan, has had more than 5 years of experience providing services.
Therapists	Muslim mental health professional providing marriage education and/or counseling services to Muslims in Michigan.

of their confidentiality, and received a gift card for their time. The study was approved by the IRB at St. Cloud State University.

Analysis

To facilitate coding and analysis, we used the Nvivo 10 software (QSR International, 2012). We used content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and thematic analysis (Patton, 2015) to allow for an inductive exploration of common themes and experiences across our participants. This approach ensures that the knowledge gained is based on the unique personal experiences of participants instead of preconceived theories, and is most appropriate for exploratory work on a phenomenon (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis and thematic analysis involve a systematic classification process to code qualitative text for patterns and themes that share similar meanings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Patton, 2015). After reviewing the transcripts, we developed a preliminary coding scheme, which is a systematic and logical framework and process for organizing data into categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Poole & Folger, 1981). Creating and adhering to a good coding scheme is essential for the trustworthiness of a study (Folger, Hewes, & Poole, 1984; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). To calibrate the coding scheme, two team members with extensive experience in coding (AK-the PI and EF-research assistant) independently coded two transcripts using the same codebook with very similar results. During weekly meetings and through a general consensus of team members, we refined the codebook and coding definitions, and incorporated new codes into the coding scheme. Analysis proceeded with weekly team meetings to clarify any concerns and resolve any disagreements. We developed summaries by code, and a global integration of themes was performed across the interviews (Weiss, 1994). We highlight these themes in this article.

Trustworthiness of Data

This study was designed to adhere to the four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability. To ensure credibility and accuracy in the description and interpretation of our data, we actively engaged in debriefing sessions throughout the course of data analysis in order to obtain convergence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Direct quotations from the data provide support for our findings (Sandelowski, 1994), and the triangulation of different data sources and data analysts enhances the credibility of our study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability, the extent to which findings can be corroborated, is also enhanced by our data and analyst triangulation, and by maintaining an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability, the extent to which findings might be applicable in other settings, is enhanced by our careful description of the context and participants involved in our research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability, the consistency and repeatability of findings, is enhanced by our careful documentation and description of the processes of recruitment, data collection, and analysis, and by taking a team approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS

Participant Demographics

Participants in the study included ten married individuals, ten divorced individuals, six imams, and six therapists. There were equal numbers of married and divorced men and women. All imams were men, and all therapists were women. Half of our participants identified as Arab American (n = 16), followed by African American (n = 8), South Asian (n = 6), and Other (n = 2). Most (n = 20) participants lived in the United States for their entire lives. Almost all (n = 30) participants had at least a 4 year college degree, and more than half (n = 21) had a master's degree or higher. Married and divorced participants had an average age of 31.7 and 36.5, and were married for an average of 7.1 and 8.7 years, respectively. Table 2 provides a summary of participant demographics by group.

Thematic Analysis

Nine major themes emerged from the data. We explain each theme in detail.

Table 2
Demographics of Participants (N = 32)

Characteristics	Total frequency[a]	Married	Divorced	Imams	Therapists
Total/group		10	10	6	6
Gender					
Female	16	5	5	0	6
Male	16	5	5	6	0
Age (years)					
Mean (Range)	41.1 (28–68)	31.7 (28–40)	36.5 (29–60)	55.8 (40–68)	50 (28–60+)[b]
Time in U.S. (years)					
Mean (Range)	34 (14–68)	28.9 (14–40)	35.6 (28–60)	33 (14–68)	42.4 (26–60+)[b]
Ethnicity					
Arab	16	6	4	4	2
Black	8	1	3	2	2
South Asian	6	2	2	—	2
Other	2	1	1	—	—
Country of origin					
Middle East	13	6	2	3	2
USA	12	3	5	1	3
South Asia	3	1	1	—	1
Africa	3	—	1	2	—
Other	1	—	1	—	—
Islamic denomination					
Sunni	27	10	9	4	4
Shi'ite	1	—	—	—	1
Sunni & Shi'ite	1	—	—	—	1
Prefer not to say	3	—	1	2	—
Education level					
Some college or less	2	—	2	—	—
Bachelors	9	3	4	2	—
Above bachelors	21	7	4	4	6
Length of marriage (years)					
Mean (Range)	14 (1–40)	7.1 (1–18)	8.7 (1.5–40)	28.2 (13–37)	24.8 (16–35)

[a]Totals may not always sum to 32 due to missing data. [b]One participant responded with 60+ as her age, so it was counted as 60.

Theme 1: Courtship is often short and fraught with a number of challenges. Most married and divorced participants courted for less than a year before getting married, with courtship often lasting between 3 and 6 months. Participants across all groups noted that one of the challenges of courtship was that couples did not spend enough time getting to know one another. Most divorced participants reported that they did not know their spouse well before marriage.

> We knew after a week of talking that we wanted to get married, which was probably the biggest part of the mistake. We just thought, we get along. We like each other. We're attracted to each other. Why wouldn't we get married? We don't date, so we'll just get married. – Divorced woman

Many married and divorced participants described feeling helpless, confused, and frustrated during the courtship process, stating that they lacked a framework to help them get to know someone and determine compatibility for marriage. Participants across all groups reported a number of challenges preventing individuals from truly knowing their spouse during courtship including being young and inexperienced with relationships, limited time spent together particularly in ordinary situations, limited time communicating alone as a couple, family pressure to marry, and misrepresentation by their partner.

> What I thought I knew about him wasn't necessarily who he ended up being … everything I thought I knew about him before marriage turned out to be quite different after. – Divorced woman

They also reported challenges such as ignoring red flags due to being emotionally invested, losing objectivity for fear of rejection, and reconciling family, cultural, and religious expectations about the courtship process.

> My parents are like, oh go meet this person … You go have lunch with 12 people and that's awkward. Then you go somewhere else … It's you, the girl, the girl's dad, your dad, your ma … because that's what happens back home. – Divorced man

Theme 2: Families play an important role in the courtship process and decision to marry. Seven out of twenty married and divorced participants met their spouse through introductions by their families, while others met through friends, imams, school, work, mosques, volunteer activities, or online. All groups identified the important role families play in the courtship process. For example, family members sometimes joined the couple in their meetings with imams or participated in the couple's communication. They also assessed for compatibility, provided advice about marriage, noted concerns about a potential partner, and encouraged the couple to discuss specific topics.

> My father … before we got engaged said … you're coming from a comfortable lifestyle. And you're going … into a home where your husband is still a student. So sit down … Talk about what your life is going to be like … he had that forward thinking about what it takes … – Married woman

Some married and divorced participants expected more guidance from their families and were frustrated that they did not receive it during the courtship process.

> My parents didn't really guide me in the right way … when I would tell my mom things that I wasn't … sure about, she didn't really guide me. She would … stress me more, she would be like … Why are you thinking negatively? Do you want to end the marriage? Instead of guiding me … oh that happens to everyone. – Married woman

A few married and divorced participants attributed their parents' limited guidance to the fact that their parents were divorced, had unresolved issues in their own marriage, or divided about their choice of partner. Across all groups, it was reported that families sometimes pushed for the marriage to happen. This occurred because families were excited about the match and saw no reason to extend the courtship process, or they feared that the couple would engage in premarital sex.

Theme 3: The decision to marry is often based on practical or religious reasons instead of romantic ones. Although some married and divorced participants reported that they married based on romantic love, most reported that they made the decision to marry based on practical or religious reasons. They reported considering a variety of factors including their spouse's reputation, personality, character, religious beliefs and practices, family background, education, future plans, as well as their own feelings of attraction, chemistry, and emotional connection. They also consulted with their families, friends, and religious leaders. Most of the married participants said they knew their spouse well before marriage, or at least well enough to marry.

> I knew enough about her to make my decision … I knew her ethnic background … her educational motivation … her family structure … it wasn't a love story by any means but it wasn't arranged by any means. – Married man

For some married and divorced participants, the decision was also a spiritual one, so they turned to a specialized prayer called *Istikhara*[1] that is used for seeking guidance for a decision, to help them decide whether they should move forward with their marriage.

> Certain things happened in the process of us getting to know each other that made me feel like this is from Allah … I did have some … reservations, but since my overall feeling after (the) Istikhara prayer was good, I felt comfortable. – Divorced woman

For a few, the decision to marry was made haphazardly and with limited prior planning.

> My dad's like, so let's do this thing (nikah). And everyone else sat quietly and then we went ahead and did it. I was somewhere between ambivalent and supportive of it, not against it, certainly. And I had no idea how she felt at the time. But her family was enthusiastic and it sort of happened. – Divorced man

Theme 4: Premarital counseling with an imam or therapist is not a common occurrence, nor is it a regular requirement by imams. Although married and divorced participants reported a range of informal marriage preparation activities such as listening to lectures about marriage, attending marriage workshops, or reading self-help books, most did not participate in premarital counseling with an imam or therapist. Seven of the married and divorced participants met with an imam either individually or with their partner to prepare for marriage, and only one person participated in premarital counseling with a therapist, except after her *nikah* had already been formalized. Almost all married and divorced participants reported that they were not required to participate in a marriage preparation activity by the imam who officiated their marriages.

> I called the (imam). Booked him. Asked him his fee. When he came, he did it in my parents' living room. It took about 15–20 min. Gave him a thank you card with the money and that was it. – Married woman

Conversely, most of the imams reported that they have a policy requiring couples to meet with them for what they describe as premarital or marriage counseling before officiating marriages.

> I'm part of the imam's council … And the imams have decided that we would not initiate a marriage unless we go through marriage counseling. – Imam

Some imams didn't have a policy and married couples anyways.

> My gut feeling is that if I require that, it may alienate many couples because unfortunately we live in the fast food era. People want to do everything fast. So imposing more conditions may alienate people from doing marriages. And as an institution, we cannot close that door. – Imam

Theme 5: When it occurs, premarital counseling is most often provided by imams, but is generally considered unhelpful. Of the eight married and divorced participants that sought premarital counseling, all minus one sought it with an imam. Only one participant sought premarital counseling with a therapist. As reported across all groups, premarital counseling with imams usually involves one session and tends to focus on the spiritual principles of marriage, technicalities of the marriage contract, rights and responsibilities of each spouse, gender roles, in-laws, and finances. Imams generally based their advice on religious scripture and tradition, but did not have a standard curriculum. Some imams used compatibility questionnaires, referred couples to additional resources or therapists for more severe issues, or required additional sessions; however this was not the norm. Most imams believed that their premarital sessions were useful.

> They leave equipped … They're very appreciative … It helps them a lot … I see less divorces from the people I have married … so it does work without a doubt. –Imam

In general, however, many married and divorced participants expressed frustration with the premarital sessions by imams, noting that they were too generic, reflected conservative views, did not help them gauge compatibility, and were limited in number.

> The imam met with us twice and I don't feel like that was helpful, because he told us a little bit about marriage . . . I didn't know him so I didn't really feel comfortable talking to him about everything. I didn't really feel like he guided us . . . The imam should have an agenda outlined for you. He should counsel you . . . We're not going to have any questions. We're in the honeymoon stage. – Married woman

Theme 6: Premarital counseling occurs close to the marriage date or after. Across all groups, participants noted that premarital counseling often occurred after a couple had already committed to one another and had scheduled their wedding date. Even though some imams required premarital counseling before conducting the marriage ceremony, their sessions were often scheduled close to the couple's wedding date, and there was no standard timeline or mandatory number of sessions required for the marital process. When therapists provided premarital counseling, it was often at a later stage in the courtship when conflicts emerged. Therapists expressed concern about the timing, as this changed the purpose of premarital counseling. Instead of assessing for compatibility, premarital counseling was often used to provide education about marriage from a religious perspective or to resolve an issue a couple was experiencing in the relationship.

> I . . . think learning to use premarital counseling as a means to make a decision to marry . . . (as opposed to) we're going to get married, so we want to work on our issues. What if after four sessions, you realize this isn't going to be good? . . . I have couples who might come in for premarital counseling, and they tell me their wedding is in 2 months. And they have very major issues that need to get resolved. – Therapist

Theme 7: Barriers to seeking premarital counseling include stigma, lack of awareness, logistical challenges, cost of counseling, and parents. Participants across all groups identified stigma as a factor impacting couples' participation in premarital counseling, and they noted that counseling is often associated with pathology and failure. To relieve the stigma, some therapists referred to premarital counseling as premarital preparation or advisement.

> I think counseling is associated with pathology. And nobody wants to be even touched like that at a happy, high point in their lives . . . I like the word preparation more than counseling, because I think counseling subconsciously means problems. –Therapist

Lack of awareness was another common barrier identified across all groups. Several married and divorced participants noted that it had never occurred to them to consider premarital counseling because it didn't seem necessary, and no one emphasized its importance or brought it to their attention. Most divorced and married participants stated that they would have participated in premarital counseling if someone had encouraged them or required them to do so.

> We were able to make the decision, get married . . . plenty of people willing to throw parties . . . for us, but no one ever said, hey, you want to sit down? Let's talk about marriage. It would have just took an imam . . . someone saying, hey, this is important. You should do it. Instead, everyone is worried about . . . what (mosque) are you going to book? Cake . . . All someone would have needed to do was say Brother, you thought about Islamic marriage precounseling? I wouldn't have fought it. Not one bit. – Divorced man

Logistical challenges and the cost of counseling were other barriers to premarital counseling identified by married and divorced participants and therapists. Some married and divorced participants reported that long-distance relationships made it difficult to participate in premarital counseling, while others had no services available in their locality at the time. Some therapists reported that couples do not view counseling as valuable enough to spend money on and are not yet ready to put in the financial expense for quality marriage preparation.

> There's always the negotiation of . . . the price and . . . time and . . . logistical things, and, oh, you're so far away. Don't you have an office that's closer? They want something . . . more accommodating than I can offer. – Therapist

Participants across all groups identified parents to be significant barriers to premarital counseling. They reported that parents did not seem to value premarital counseling, were

concerned that premarital counseling could prevent the marriage from happening, interpreted the suggestion for premarital counseling as a negative reflection of their parenting skills or their children's intelligence, or just assumed that their children would figure it out like many couples have for years.

> A lot of times people will say . . . I want to get . . . premarriage education but everybody says I don't need to . . . .especially with . . . immigrant parents, they will be like what's the point. People have been getting married all these years. They never had premarriage education. What are you insinuating? – Therapist

Theme 8: Premarital counseling with a trained therapist is considered the best way to prepare for marriage; however, collaboration between therapists and imams is essential. All participants were asked what would be the best way for Muslim couples in the United States to receive education before marriage: premarital counseling with a trained therapist, meeting with an imam for religious advice about marriage, or community workshops at their local mosque. Eleven participants, mostly married and divorced participants, believed that meeting with a trained therapist was the best way to prepare for marriage.

> Imams who don't have any formal training in the subject . . . probably don't have the skill set to talk about how to deal with complex human emotion . . . The therapist is the way to go, in terms of someone with actual expertise, and conflict resolution, and teaching effective communication . . . discussing all the core issues that should be discussed before marriage. –Divorced man

Eight participants, mostly therapists and imams, prioritized all three suggestions equally. As for the rest of the participants, five prioritized meeting with an imam, four prioritized participating in community workshops, and three prioritized meeting with both an imam and therapist.

Most participants across all groups believed that a collaborative effort between imams and therapists is essential. Some of the imams and therapists reported collaborating with each other around premarital counseling, either by having the imam refer couples to the therapist before conducting a marriage, or by providing premarital counseling to a couple together. However, this was rare, as most imams did not refer couples to therapists before marriage unless there was a serious issue, and most therapists worked separate from imams. Participants emphasized the need for imams and therapists to build trusting relationships and to utilize their expertise to work together more effectively.

> There is this divide between . . . mental health workers and imams . . . They don't know each other and there isn't that trust . . . in reality . . . I have to have a good relationship with imams because there are going to be some issues that you don't know about or if you do know about, there may be alternatives that affect perspectives. – Therapist

Theme 9: Family and community efforts are necessary to normalize marriage preparation. Participants across all groups offered recommendations for the community. Some participants expressed the importance of families in helping couples prepare for marriage, noting that parents can be the best educators if they model healthy relationships to their children, teach them about the responsibilities of marriage, and discuss marriage with them. They also suggested that parents should support community workshops about marriage and encourage premarital counseling. Several participants felt it was important for families to be part of the premarital counseling process, so that they may also benefit from premarital education.

> Maybe if (the) therapist also has sessions with the parents and advises them and counsels them on how to behave . . . Maybe they can give the parents their assessment. We don't think this is such a great match. Here are the issues we think may occur. – Divorced woman

Some participants also discussed making premarital counseling a requirement "like in the Catholic religion." Across all groups, fifteen participants believed that couples should be required to participate in premarital counseling or a premarital education program.

> I think starting with the (imam) and the parents, making it a requirement. Everybody has to go through it, just like he demanded I get the marriage license. Why can't he demand that I go to premarital counseling? – Married woman

Seven participants, however, believed that it should be encouraged and highly recommended, but not required.

Some participants believed that it was important for communities to prioritize healthy marriages and to develop grass-roots campaigns encouraging couples to participate in premarital counseling. They suggested that parents, imams, community leaders, friends, and couples who "come out of the counseling closet" can be champions for the cause, normalizing the "premarital education vaccine" and creating a trend with strong peer pressure to participate.

> It helps to ... get gatekeepers, and individuals ... respected within the community to really latch onto the idea and ... be ... champions for this ... If they are able to normalize it and make it ok, it is more likely that people will be willing to accept it. – Therapist

Finally, some participants noted that it was important to brand and "sexify" premarital counseling, with a particular focus on men, who might be less inclined to participate.

DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, this is the first article on marriage preparation among Muslims in the United States. Most research on premarital education in the United States tends to rely on samples with mainly White, middle-class couples (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Halford et al., 2008; Silliman & Schumm, 2000). Using content and thematic analysis, we summarized a number of themes from participant interviews. To understand marriage preparation in the Muslim community, we first sought to understand how Muslims court and marry. Courtship was short and challenging for most of our married and divorced participants. Little experience with relationships and limited time together were identified factors that prevented individuals from knowing their spouse well before marrying. Premarital education programs can empower individuals to more effectively navigate courtship by teaching them about healthy relationships and helping them to assess compatibility, recognize red flags, and improve communication patterns. These programs can also facilitate opportunities for couples to spend time together and learn more about each other, noted in one study to be the most valuable aspect of premarital education (Williams, Riley, Risch, & VanDyke, 1999). For most of our married and divorced participants, the decision to marry was not based solely on romantic love but on a variety of factors related to their partner's characteristics and background, along with spiritual signs and consultations with family, friends, and religious leaders. Thus, we recommend that premarital education programs for Muslims address the role that these factors may play in partner selection and motivation to marry, and teach individuals how to effectively utilize advice from others, along with spiritual signs, and their own self-knowledge to make an informed and confident decision.

As we observed in our sample, families play a role in partner selection (Carolan et al., 2000; Daneshpour, 1998; Macfarlane, 2012), courtship, and the decision to marry. Premarital education programs can help Muslim couples to reconcile family expectations about a future spouse and about the courtship process, while setting boundaries for the couple's own decision-making. We also observed that cultural and family attitudes can discourage couples from participating in marriage preparation (Murray, 2005). We recommend that community education efforts focus on teaching families about the benefits of marriage preparation. This is particularly important for families who may rush marriage or worry that discussing concerns beforehand will prevent the marriage from happening. Imams can play an important role here by educating their congregation about the benefits of premarital education and teaching parents how to be supportive mentors for their children during the marriage process.

Our analysis revealed that most married and divorced participants sought education about marriage via lectures, workshops, or books. It may be useful to develop a wide array of resources tailored to Muslim audiences and to include self-directed reading materials, videos, podcasts, and online services. Our analysis also found that any premarital counseling usually occurred close to or

after the *nikah* date with no bearing on the decision to marry. Premarital education can help delay couples, so that they can carefully consider their decision and send a message that marriage is a weighty commitment with long-term consequences (Stanley, 2001). Imams and therapists can play an important role in educating Muslim couples about the purpose of premarital counseling and encouraging couples to participate earlier in the courtship process.

We also found that premarital counseling with an imam or therapist was not a common occurrence and most often provided by imams, not therapists. This is similar to Macfarlane's (2012) findings from a study on divorce among North American Muslims; not one of the 101 men and women in her sample had participated in premarital counseling before the *nikah*, and when premarital counseling was offered at a mosque, it was typically conducted by the imam. This is also in line with what is observed in the larger U.S. population. Most American couples do not participate in marriage preparation (Glenn, 2005; Silliman & Schumm, 2000; Stanley & Markman, 1997), and if they do, it is usually provided by clergy (Glenn, 2005; Murray, 2005) through a religious institution (Glenn, 2005), instead of a marriage counselor. It is well known that clergy often serve as frontline mental health providers, usually approached first for assistance with personal problems and marriage and family issues (Weaver, 1995; Weaver, Flannelly, Flannelly, & Oppenheimer, 2003). Among U.S. Muslims, imams also play a major role in mental health and are often the first responders to family conflict and mental health issues despite their limited training in counseling (Abu-Ras, Gheith, & Cournos, 2008; Ali, Milstein, & Marzuk, 2005).

The lack of counseling training can impact the utility and experience of premarital counseling. Similar to Macfarlane's (2012) findings, most of our married and divorced participants who met with an imam did not find the sessions to be helpful because they were brief and tended to focus on the marriage contract and Islamic rights and responsibilities of marriage. Paradoxically, most of the imams in our sample believed that couples found their sessions to be helpful and effective in preventing conflict, even though they did not have a standard curriculum. Research has found that clergy often do not have set practices around premarital counseling (Buikema, 2001); some feel inadequately trained (Buikema, 2001; Manley, 2006; Wilmoth & Fournier, 2008); and there is a wide range in the number and content of sessions (Schumm et al., 2010; Williams, 2007) and their perceived quality and helpfulness (Schumm et al., 2010). It is difficult to determine the effectiveness of general marriage preparation that is commonly provided by clergy; however, some studies have found effectiveness to be associated with clergy using premarital inventories (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010) and being trained in PREP (Stanley et al., 2001). Thus, imams may consider using premarital inventories with couples and participating in trainings or partnering with educators trained in research-based premarital education such as PREP (Schumm et al., 2010; Stanley et al., 2001). Imams may also consider modifying their sessions to focus on communication, conflict resolution, and resolving differences, considered by couples to be the most important topics to discuss in counseling (Borowski & Tambling, 2015; Tambling & Glebova, 2013).

Even though more participants in our study considered meeting with a therapist to be the best way to prepare for marriage, the reality is that imams will continue to be the most likely providers of premarital counseling or serve as gatekeepers for other providers. Clergy have this advantage over therapists because of their strong belief in marriage, strong institutional base for educational programming, and greater access to and influence of couples, particularly in ethnic minority communities (Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995). Their perceived expertise and social influence can amplify the impact of premarital education, especially for religious couples (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). Additionally, since the trustworthiness, professionalism, and experience of facilitators providing premarital education is considered especially important to couples (Borowski & Tambling, 2015; Sullivan & Anderson, 2002; Tambling & Glebova, 2013), it is important for imams to be viewed as exhibiting these characteristics by couples seeking premarital education. This is where collaboration between imams and therapists is key and can be useful, as noted by most of our participants. Scholars have indicated the benefits of collaboration between clergy and therapists around relationship education (Halford et al., 2003; Weaver, Koenig, & Larson, 1997; Weaver et al., 2003). Opportunities for collaboration include therapists providing imams with training in counseling skills and premarital education; imams providing therapists with training about religious and spiritual issues; establishing a two-way system for referrals; and working together to develop and provide Muslim-specific marriage preparation via books, workshops,

and premarital counseling (Halford et al., 2003; Weaver et al., 1997, 2003). By learning from each other and regarding one another as resources (Weaver et al., 2003), imams and therapists can work together more effectively. We found some examples of these types of collaborations in our sample, but more efforts are needed.

In addition to parental influence which we address earlier, our analysis identified stigma, lack of awareness, and logistical and financial challenges to be barriers to participating in premarital counseling. Stigma can contribute to the underutilization of counseling services by Muslims (Aloud & Rathur, 2009; Ciftci, Jones, & Corrigan, 2012; Utz, 2012). In our analysis, we found that couples and their families may associate premarital counseling with pathology and failure. Like some of our therapists noted, reframing premarital counseling as premarital preparation or advisement may encourage participation. We also echo our participants' recommendations for community awareness campaigns utilizing imams, community leaders, mental health providers, parents, and couples to normalize and increase participation in premarital education. Having someone respected recommend counseling has been noted as one of the strongest predictors of participation in premarital counseling (Sullivan, Pasch, Cornelius, & Cirigliano, 2004). Most of our married and divorced participants said that they would have participated in premarital counseling had someone encouraged them or required them to do so. In a similar vein, almost all of the divorced participants in Macfarlane's (2012) study wished that they had been offered more extensive premarital counseling. Alshugairi (2010) found that divorced participants were the most likely group to believe in the helpfulness of premarital counseling compared to married or never married participants. Thus, enlisting the help of divorced individuals in promoting premarital counseling may also be useful.

Mandates by clergy requiring premarital education are common in some religious communities (Center for Marriage and Family, 1995; Office of General Assembly, 1996). A national telephone survey of Americans found that almost half of respondents believed that premarital counseling should be required (Glenn, 2005). Almost half of our participants believed that couples should be required to participate in premarital counseling or some type of premarital education. We observed a discrepancy around this requirement among our sample. Almost all of our married and divorced participants reported that they were not required to participate in premarital counseling by the imams who officiated their marriage. Most of our imams however, emphasized that they require premarital counseling, often referencing their commitment to the Healthy Marriage Community Covenant, a pledge signed by imams that they will not marry a couple until at least three sessions of premarital counseling (Macfarlane, 2012). We are unable to verify if and how many of our married and divorced participants were married by the imams in our sample. It appears however, that policy requirements for premarital counseling may not be applied consistently across all couples. Policies setting minimum standards for marriage preparation have been established by clergy in almost all states across the United States (McManus, 2008) and have been associated with a decreased divorce rate (Birch, Weed, & Olsen, 2004), so the imams' pledge is a step in the right direction. However, more research is needed to understand how this policy is implemented in the Muslim community and how effective it is in improving marital outcomes. We recommend that imams and mosque leaders continue to mandate or strongly recommend marriage preparation, though they may want to consider offering incentives such as discounted fees, convenient hours/location, and growth opportunities to recruit couples (Silliman & Schumm, 1999).

Logistical and financial barriers were also identified in our analysis. One of the most significant barriers to participation in premarital counseling is the convenience of counseling (Borowski & Tambling, 2015; Sullivan et al., 2004). In one study, young people preferred counseling to be close to their workplace or home, with a maximum number of six sessions and maximum cost of $150 (Borowski & Tambling, 2015). Communities may consider providing low-cost counseling at convenient hours and locations (Sullivan et al., 2004), offering counseling at multiple sites or at couples' homes (Borowski & Tambling, 2015), contracting with therapists to provide counseling at the mosque, incorporating technology such as teleconferencing for couples separated by distance or with no access to counseling in their locale, and making available a list of referrals and resources on mosque and community center websites. Training more Muslim therapists in premarital counseling can also increase the availability of services. Finally, cultural sensitivity training for non-Muslim providers can address the reluctance of some Muslims to seek premarital counseling

due to concerns about cultural and religious competence of therapists (Hodge, 2005; Kelly, Aridi, & Bakhtiar, 1996), and there are growing efforts to adapt premarital education programs for diverse racial and ethnic groups (Ooms, 2007). Overall, to increase participation rates in premarital education, it is necessary to focus on reducing barriers and emphasizing the benefits of premarital education programs (Borowski & Tambling, 2015).

Limitations

Our findings were strengthened by our qualitative research design and sampling of a diverse group of participants. However, our findings are representative of Muslims in Southeastern Michigan who are affiliated with the Muslim community, and thus cannot be generalized to all Muslim communities. Our sample is not representative of the educational level, ethnicity, or religious adherence of all U.S. Muslims, as our participants were highly educated, more likely to be Arab, religiously adherent, and a resident of the United States for their entire lives. Interviews with participants from varying backgrounds may identify different themes. Since we did not specifically ask participants about their immigration history (if any), we were unable to make conclusions about the impact of acculturation and immigration experiences on participant responses.

Implications for Research

Overall, our findings suggest the need for further research on marriage preparation among U.S. Muslims since so little is known about this community. To improve generalizability, future studies utilizing larger and more diverse samples of Muslims are needed. Comparative research examining differences between first- and second-generation immigrant Muslims and Muslims of varying ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds may be helpful. Longitudinal studies assessing the effectiveness of different types of premarital education programs among Muslims can also be useful. Future research can also explore ways to strengthen partnerships between imams and therapists. Finally, studying Muslim communities can reveal knowledge and interventions that may benefit other minority groups who are often understudied in the marriage literature.

Conclusion

Our study offers insight into the perceptions and experiences of marriage preparation among U.S. Muslims, and we examine the role of imams and therapists in preparing couples for marriage. Our findings reveal that partnerships between imams and therapists are key, and that family and community efforts are necessary to address barriers and increase participation of Muslim couples in premarital education programs. Further research is needed to understand how to help Muslims in the United States prepare for healthy marriages.

NOTE

[1]See http://seekershub.org/ans-blog/2015/07/03/istikhara-the-prayer-of-seeking-guidance/.

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