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An Exploratory Study of Formal and Informal Help-Seeking Behavior Among Married Individuals Who Are Thinking About Divorce

David Michael Simpson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science

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ABSTRACT

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Previous research on marital help-seeking has often focused on formal approaches such as marital therapy or relationship education and there is a greater need to understand married individual’s informal help-seeking behaviors. This study explores both formal and informal help-seeking behavior using a national sample of 745 participants who have thought about divorce within the past 6-months. Findings indicate these participants more often engaged in informal help-seeking approaches to repair their marriage. Of those sampled, only 25% engaged in marital therapy together and only 9% engaged in a marriage strengthening class while over 30% read a relationship themed self-help book or visited a website as a form of repair-behavior. A series of logistic regressions indicate there are no statistically significant differences in help-seeking behavior by gender while those that were highly religious and had more serious thoughts of divorce were more likely to engage in all forms of help-seeking. A latent class analysis was conducted to determine if there are common patterns in help-seeking behavior. Results indicate there are 4 distinct types of help-seekers: Highly Engaged (5%), Private Information Gatherers (7%), Private Seekers (43%), and Minimally Engaged (45%). Follow up analyses indicate having higher levels of religiosity or having more serious thoughts of divorce were both associated with a greater likelihood of being in one of the three more engaged classes compared to the minimally engaged class. Results demonstrate the need to place more emphasis on informal help-seeking approaches, private repair-behaviors, and to consider common patterns in help-seeking behavior.

Keywords: help-seeking, divorce ideation, latent class analysis
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An Exploratory Study of Formal and Informal Help-Seeking Behavior Among Married Individuals Who Are Thinking About Divorce

Results from a recent study indicate 53% of currently married individuals have thought about divorce and 25% of those couples have thought about divorce within the last 6 months (Hawkins et al., 2017). But it seems having thoughts about divorce does not equate to marital dissolution. The same study Hawkins et al., (2017) reported that only 3% of these couples who had recent thoughts of divorce were actually divorced a year later and only 4% of these couples were separated one year later. Results of another study looking at divorce rates for those who thought about divorce indicate that about 10% of couples who thought about divorce were divorced three years later (Broman, 2002). Little is known about why individuals who are considering divorce stay together (Amato, 2010), but one area that may provide insight is their help-seeking behavior.

Recently there has been an influx in scholarly interest on marital help-seeking behaviors (Stewart, Bradford, Higginbotham, & Skogrand, 2016). Most of this research has focused on formal approaches such as marriage therapy and couple relationship education (CRE) with results suggesting these approaches are effective (Stewart et al., 2016). However, there is concern that formal help-seeking does not reach a large enough audience to have a significant positive impact on marital stability (Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008). There is a growing body of literature that suggests informal help-seeking approaches, such as reading books or visiting websites may be the most utilized and most understudied methods to repair a relationship (Doss, 2009; Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Higginbotham, Miller, & Niehuis, 2009). Previous work including informal help-seeking in the analyses has used samples that make it difficult to generalize results to highly distressed couples (Doss et al., 2009; Georgia &
Doss, 2013; Higginbotham et al., 2009). Additionally, these studies did not investigate private repair behaviors, such as forgiveness or a spouse’s willingness to work hard on the marriage. If these informal approaches are being used more often, they may provide insight into ways practitioners and policymakers can reach a larger audience to improve marital stability. In the current study, I use a nationally representative sample of individuals who have recently thought about divorce to explore engagement in help-seeking behavior to determine which behaviors are most used and for whom. Additionally, given the variety of help-seeking options and differences in individual and couple dynamics, I explore if there are unique classes of individuals who share a common pattern in their help-seeking behavior and what predicts class membership.

**Double ABC-X Model of Family Stress Adaptation**

A theoretical framework that can be used to study marital help-seeking behavior for individuals who have recently thought about divorce is the Double ABC-X model of family adaptation (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Research on the divorce process has shown that while thoughts of divorce are common, divorce is often a long process that involves multiple interacting stressors (Amato & Rogers, 1997). McCubbin and Patterson (1983) outline how stress is a process that is better studied overtime and multiple interacting stressors often lead to what they call a “pile-up” event. From a divorce perspective, multiple interacting stressors can lead to a “pile-up” event, such as thoughts of divorce (aA). The way an individual/couple adapts to thoughts of divorce (xX) is a function of which new resources are available (bB) and the perception (cC) they place on this stressor (thoughts of divorce). McCubbin and Patterson (1983) also suggest that existing resources (b) can impact which new resources (bB) are available or used. For example, those with higher levels of income (b) may have more help-seeking (bB) options available to them. Furthermore, the help-seeking resources (bB) are also
influenced by the perspective (cC) one has about thoughts of divorce (xX). If an individual does not perceive thoughts of divorce or the potential to end a marriage to be stressful, then they may not engage in help-seeking to repair their marriage, or may only engage in specific-types of help-seeking options. In this paper, I concentrate on help-seeking behavior (bB) as a new resource when couples are thinking about divorce and explore how initial resources (b) and perceptions (cC) predict engagement in these new resources. Given unique resources and perspectives we may find that some individuals share common patterns in their selections of help-seeking behavior and I also consider if there are classes of help-seeking behavior and if the existing resources and perceptions predict class membership. A theoretical outline of the Double ABC-X model can be seen in Figure 1.

New Resources: Help-Seeking and Repair-Behaviors

Formal Help-Seeking

Formal approaches to help-seeking consist of professional services such as marital counseling (including counseling with clergy), couple relationship education (CRE), and clergy counseling. Research suggests these approaches have positive impacts on commonly measured relational outcomes. In a meta-analysis on the effectiveness of marital therapy (Dunn & Schwebel, 1995), found marital therapy to have a large, significant effect on general relationship measures ($d=.90$). Additionally, results from a meta-analysis on the impact of CRE suggest that CRE programs have a moderate, significant impact on relationship quality ($d=.30$ to $d=.36$) and communication skills ($d=.43$ to $d=.45$) (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). There is also emerging evidence which suggests CRE may be most effective for more disadvantaged and distressed couples (for a summary, see Hawkins, Allen, & Yang, in press), who participate in CRE in substantial numbers (Bradford, Hawkins, & Acker, 2015). Although these programs
seem to have significant positive relational impacts there is evidence to suggest these marriage-strengthening services do not reach a large audience. Johnson et al., (2002) found only 37% of couples who divorced spoke with a marriage counselor prior to finalizing their divorce and much of the participation in couple relationship education is done through premarital education courses, not marriage education. Halford and Hayes (2012) estimate that only about 30% of couples participate in CRE.

Informal Help-Seeking

Informal approaches to help-seeking usually involve communicating with friends or family, or other members of a social network. Additional categories of informal help-seeking often include relationship themed self-help books, and/or websites (Stewart et al., 2016). Research on the utilization of these help-seeking approaches is limited, but the small amount of research does suggest that informal help-seeking approaches are being used. A study of 77 couples that attempted a help-seeking behavior Doss et al., (2009) reported that 23% of these couples read a relationship focused self-help book. Results from a study that used a convenience sample of cohabiting, engaged, and married individuals found 70% of the sample spoke with a coworker or friend about their relationship (Georgia & Doss, 2013). In the same study, the authors also found that visiting websites to repair a relationship has the most potential reach of all studied help-seeking methods. A study of married couples found that it was common for married adults to speak with family and friends about their marital problems (Helms, Crouter, & McHale, 2003).

Private Repair Behaviors

Help-seeking often assumes the use of outside resources (e.g. books written by others, websites, professional services) to mend a troubled relationship, but an area that warrants further
attention is private repair-behaviors such as forgiveness, working-harder on the relationship, and having a serious discussion with a spouse. Previous literature has shown a link between private-repair behaviors and marital stability (Fincham & Beach, 2007; McNulty, 2008), but these approaches are yet to be studied as a help-seeking behavior to repair a marriage. This area broadens the scope of help-seeking to include direct private behaviors to repair a marriage.

Existing Resources

Gender

Previous research has found that on average, husbands are less likely to attend marital counseling and to engage in fewer repair behaviors compared with their wives (Bringle & Byers, 1997; Crane, Soderquist, & Gardner, 1995; Doss, Atkins, & Christensen, 2003; Eubanks Fleming & Córdova, 2012). Empirical evidence suggests variations in help-seeking behavior between men and women hold across age (Husaini, Moore, & Cain, 1994) and racial backgrounds (Neighbors & Howard, 1987). There is also evidence that the process towards divorce, or the way individuals think about divorce, varies by gender. Crane et al., (1995) found that women often think about divorce more frequently, are more likely to speak with their friends about their thoughts, and are more likely to make specific plans towards divorce. Some suggest these differences in help-seeking are due to masculine roles that lead men to disengage in help-seeking out of fear of feeling abnormal and losing control if they seek help for their problems (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). However, more research is needed to determine if men engage in less studied help-seeking behaviors.

Income

A commonly reported barrier to help-seeking is a lack of financial resources (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004). Typically, formal help-seeking approaches are often associated
with a higher cost due to the professional service involved and many insurance companies will
not cover the cost (Crane & Christenson, 2012). Additionally, formal approaches often require
the participant to travel for face-to-face interaction which can be a strain on those without
transportation or those that need to travel far distances. Finally, for some there may be a
childcare cost associated with seeking help. These barriers may only impact a specific group of
individuals, but for these people, their help-seeking options may be constrained.

Race

There are noted differences in help-seeking behavior by race, but these studies did not
focus specifically on marital help-seeking. Broman, Neighbors, & Taylor, (1989) found blacks
were more likely than whites to seek help for economic problems and mental health concerns;
both of which have been linked to divorce (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Lavner, Karney, &
Bradbury, 2014). In regards to marital help-seeking, there is concern that many therapists are not
adequately prepared to help minority groups with their marriage in the context of their cultures
(Trahan & Lemberger, 2014) which can lead some minorities not to engage in formal approaches
or not engage in help-seeking at all. The unique factors minorities experience should be
considered when studying help-seeking behavior to deal with thoughts of divorce.

Perceptions

Religiosity

Religiosity has found to be a major concern in one’s thoughts and feelings regarding
divorce (Murray, 2002). In a qualitative study, Marks (2005) found religion to be a mechanism
through which individuals developed a negative view of divorce. This negative view can lead
many to stay committed to their marriage, even during times of distress. Whitton, Stanley,
Markman, and Johnson (2013) found having a more positive attitude towards divorce was
associated with a higher likelihood of having thoughts of divorce and getting divorced. It is possible being religious may provide a unique perception of marriage that leads those who are more highly religious to seek help. Additionally, those who are more highly religious may also have more opportunities to engage in help-seeking through programs offered at their religious institution. Many relationship education courses are taught at or through religious institutions. For these reasons, it may be possible to find higher rates of help-seeking in those who are more religious.

**Divorce Ideation**

Doss et al., (2004) reported the most common reason participants listed for not attending marital therapy was because they felt it was “too late” to fix their marriage. This finding suggests some help-seeking behaviors may or may not be sought out depending on the perception one places on their thoughts about divorce. Results from a recent study found three distinct groups of individuals in the divorce ideation process: soft thinkers, serious thinkers, and conflicted thinkers (Hawkins et al., 2017). Individuals who were labeled soft thinkers tended to think about divorce less frequently and had higher levels of hope that their marriage would work out. Serious thinkers thought about divorce more frequently and had less hope that their marriage would work out. Different perceptions about thoughts of divorce may impact which help-seeking behaviors one would engage in.

**Current Study**

The current study has four aims. First, using a nationally representative sample, I sought to explore what formal and informal help-seeking behaviors are being used by individuals who have recently thought about divorce. Given previous research on informal approaches to help-
seeking, I hypothesize informal approaches are being more utilized by individuals who have recently thought of divorce compared to formal approaches.

Second, I seek to explore if help-seeking engagement for individuals who have recently thought about divorce varies by gender, race, income, religiosity, and divorce ideation. Given previous empirical findings I hypothesize males, minority groups, and those with lower levels of income will be less engaged in formal help-seeking compared to females, whites, and those with higher levels of income. Additionally, those with higher levels of religiosity and serious thinkers (about divorce) will be more engaged in all forms of help-seeking.

The third aim of the study is to explore if there are classes of individuals who have recently thought about divorce that share a unique pattern in their help-seeking behavior. Given the varying levels of resources and differences in perception it is likely some individuals share common patterns in their help-seeking behavior. Based on previous research that indicates most people are not participating in help-seeking to repair their marriage until problems become serious and the belief that informal approaches may be the most utilized, I hypothesize there will be at least 3 unique classes of help-seekers: one class that engages in all forms of help-seeking, another class that engages only in informal help-seeking, and a third class that is not engaged in any help-seeking.

The fourth aim of the study is to explore if gender, race, income, religiosity, and divorce ideation predict class membership. Given previous literature that females and more serious thinkers are often more engaged in help-seeking and those who are more religious have more opportunities to participate in help-seeking, I predict these groups are more likely to be in a more highly engaged class than a lower engaged class. Additionally, since I do not expect to find a
class that only engages in formal help-seeking, I hypothesize that there will be no significant
difference by race.

Method

Sample & Procedure

The sample was gathered under contract with YouGov, a large-scale, online market research company. The firm recruits people to take online surveys a few times a year about various topics. The study received IRB approval prior to administering the survey. The survey was administered to 3,000 participants in early 2015. All participants were between 25–50 years old and married for at least one year. These selection parameters maximized the number of parents with minor children in the home (66%); issues around divorce are more salient when dependent children are in the family (Amato, 2000). Only one spouse in each dyadic relationship was surveyed.

Procedures to gather the sample started with matching respondents to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, education, political party identification, ideology, and political interest. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file). Data on voter registration status and turnout were matched to this frame using the November 2010 Current Population Survey. Data on interest in politics and party identification were then matched to this frame from the 2007 Pew Religious Life Survey. The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and ideology. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated
propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles. Thus, in the end, weighted data at both survey times closely approximated a nationally representative sample.

Of the 3,000 survey participants, 745 indicated they had recently had thoughts of divorce (within the past 6 months). The participants were then asked about any help-seeking behavior they participated in to repair their marriage. This study focuses on this subpopulation ($N = 745$) of participants who have recently thought about divorce. Descriptive data for this subsample can be found in Table 1.

**Measures**

**Help-seeking behaviors.** Participants were asked to respond to the following question “Have you done any of the following to repair your relationship?” The following list of 10 help-seeking behaviors were included: We saw a counselor together, seen a counselor by yourself, taken a marriage strengthening class, talked to a religious leader, read a self-help book(s), looked at a self-help website(s), talked to others about how to improve my marriage, had a serious talk with my spouse about fixing some problems in our marriage, I just worked harder to fix some problems in my marriage, I forgave my spouse for something. Some help-seeking options were taken or adapted from recent studies on help-seeking behavior (Doss et al., 2009; Georgia & Doss, 2013). Answers were coded as a dichotomous variable (No = 0; Yes = 1).

**Gender.** Gender was assessed by one-item in each category in which participants were asked to describe themselves as male or female (0 = Male; 1 = Female).

**Race.** Race was assessed thorough an 8-item categorical variable. Due to lack of participants (< 1%) Native Americans and Muslim Americans were recoded into the “Other” category (1 = White; 2 = Black; 3 = Hispanic; 4 = Asian; 5 = Other; 6 = Mixed). For purposes of analyses, race was further recoded into a dichotomous variable (0 = Non-white; 1 = White).
**Income.** To assess income, participants were asked to answer, “What is your family’s annual income?” The item was recoded as a categorical variable (1 = < $20,000; 2 = $20,000-$39,999; 3 = $40,000 – $59,999; 4 = $60,000 – $79,999; 5 = $80,000 – $119,999; 6 = > $120,000).

**Religiosity.** Religiosity was assessed by one item “How often do you attend church?” Responses ranged from 1 “Never” to 6 “More than once a week” with higher scores indicating higher levels of religiosity.

**Divorce ideation.** Divorce ideation was measured by a dichotomous variable (0 = Soft; 1 = Serious). This variable was created in another study through a statistical procedure known as a latent class analysis (Hawkins et al., 2017). Classes were developed through 6 indicators that included questions about marital quality, marriage length, marital problems, frequency of thoughts of divorce, attitudes about getting a divorce, and clarity of thoughts regarding divorce. The original analysis resulted in three distinct classes of thinkers: soft, serious, and conflicted; however, there were only (n = 22) participants in the conflicted class which limited enough participants to conduct analyses on this group. The authors of the study explained the conflicted thinkers were a subpopulation of the more serious thinkers so they were recoded into the serious thinking class for this analysis.

**Plan for Analyses**

There were minimal instances of missing data (< 1%) for the indicator (help-seeking) variables and (< 5%) for predictor variables, all of which were not missing by design (nonresponse). I was unable to employ full-information maximum likelihood (FIML), a method that has been found to be a superior approach to handle missing data compared to other options such as listwise deletion, pairwise deletion, or similar response pattern deletion (Enders &
Bandalos, 2001), because Mplus would not allow FIML in the 3-step process. To handle instances of missing data I instead employed multiple imputation in Stata using the ICE command (Royston, 2005) then moved the data to Mplus. Due to minimal instances of missing data only one imputed dataset was generated.

The first research aim was addressed using Stata 14. The second research question was addressed through a series of logistic regressions using Mplus. Prior to analyses, checks for multicollinearity were conducted. The third research question was addressed through a latent-class analysis (Hagenaars & McCutcheon, 2002) using Mplus 7.2. A latent-class analysis (LCA) is a mixture modeling technique that allows for the study of unobserved heterogeneity in the population. This modeling technique has become popular in social science research (Nylund, Asparouhov, & Muthén, 2007). The full subsample of 745 participants was used to create classes. A variety of tests were used to determine the number of classes starting with likelihood-base tests which allow for neighboring class comparison. Although the Bootstrap Likelihood Ratio Test (BLRT) has been shown to be an accurate method when conducting LCA (Nylund et al., 2007) I was unable to perform a BLRT using weighted variables, so I used the Lo-Mendell-Rubin Ratio test (LRT) to test for differences in neighboring classes. To test proper class specification across a variety of models, I employed the Akaike information criteria (AIC), the adjusted AIC, the Bayesian information criterion (BIC), and the standardized adjusted BIC (SABIC; Akaike, 1987; Nylund et al., 2007; Schwarz, 1978). Finally, the entropy, a measure of the overlap of mixture components or classes, will be used to help with class classification (Celeux & Soromenho, 1996). The fourth research aim was addressed through the use of the three-step process (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014; Vermunt, 2010) to test if gender, income, race, religiosity, and divorce ideation significantly predicted class members.
Descriptives

The first aim of the study was to provide a summary of help-seeking and repair-behavior for individuals who have recently thought about divorce using a nationally representative sample. A descriptive summary of help-seeking and repair-behavior can be found in Table 2. Most notable are the findings that personal repair behaviors are the most utilized methods of helping to repair a marriage when thinking about divorce. Approximately 7 out of 10 people in the sample engaged in one or more of these personal repair behaviors. Additionally, findings indicate that individuals who have recently thought about divorce do indeed engage in informal help-seeking (Book 30%; Website 34%; Spoke with others 34%) more often than formal approaches, as suggested by Doss et al. (2009). Another noteworthy finding is that formal help-seeking had the lowest engagement rates with approximately 25% of the sample engaging in marital counseling and less than 10% of the sample participating in a marriage education class.

Logistic Regression

The second aim of the research study was to determine if help-seeking and repair behavior varied by gender, race, income, religiosity, and divorce ideation. To determine if there was a statistically significant difference in help-seeking behavior by these predictors, a set of logistic regressions was conducted by regressing each help-seeking/repair behavior on the five predictor variables. Prior to analyses, VIF test of multicollinearity did not reveal any problems with the predicting variables. The predictor variables were then analyzed simultaneously resulting in effect sizes that partial out the effects of the remaining predictors. Results of the logistic regressions are presented as odds ratio in Table 2. Parameters greater than 1 can be interpreted as: the odds increase that a participant will engage in the help-seeking behavior given
the participants’ characteristics and parameters less than 1 can be interpreted as the odds
decrease (1 - OR) a participant will engage in the help-seeking behavior given the participants’
characteristics.

Results of the logistic regression suggest there are significant differences in some help-
seeking behavior by gender. The odds of participating in marriage therapy with a spouse were
about 38% lower for females compared to the males (OR = .62; M = 31%; F = 20%).

Furthermore, the odds of engaging in a marriage strengthening class or meeting with clergy were
about 56% (OR = .44; M = 14%; F = 6%) and 45% (OR = .55; M = 21%; F = 12%) lower for
females than males, respectively. There were no statistically significant differences in help-
seeking/repair-behavior by race after controlling for gender, income, religiosity, and divorce
ideation. Results suggest there were statistically significant differences in help-seeking by
income with the odds of engaging in marriage therapy together (OR = 1.30), engaging in a
marriage strengthening class (OR = 1.25), and engaging in visiting a website (OR = 1.15) being
30%, 25%, and 15% higher, respectively, with every one-unit ($20,000) increase in family
income. Additionally, the odds of a participant forgiving their spouse as a repair-behavior was
about 14% lower (OR = .86) for every $20,000 increase in income. Results also indicate there
were statistically significant differences in help-seeking behavior by religiosity, with the odds of
going to marriage therapy together (OR = 1.21), going to individual counseling (OR = 1.16),
taking a marriage strengthening class (OR = 1.60), meeting with a clergy member (OR = 1.89),
reading a self-help book (OR = 1.32), visiting a website (OR = 1.12), and speaking with others
(OR = 1.27) all being higher for every one-unit increase in religiosity (6-point scale). Finally,
results also indicate there was a significant difference in help-seeking behavior based on divorce
ideation, with the odds of going to marriage therapy together (OR = 2.17), going to individual
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counseling together (OR = 2.07), taking a marriage strengthening class (OR = 3.45), meeting
with a clergy member (OR = 2.21), reading a self-help book (OR = 2.19), visiting a website (OR
= 1.90), and talking to others (OR = 1.46) all higher for those that were more serious in their
thoughts of divorce.

Latent Class Analysis

The third aim of the current study was to determine if there were shared patterns of help-
seeking behavior that can be seen through distinct classes. This aim was addressed through a
Latent Class Analysis (LCA). Results for the LCA are presented in multiple steps with the first
step describing model creation and selection and then the next step adding covariates in the
model to determine if they predicted class membership. When conducting an LCA there is not a
single model index that can be used to determine which model fits the data best, but a
collaboration of commonly used indices, including the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and
the Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC) can be used. Recent studies using simulated data have
shown the Bootstrap Likelihood Ratio Test (BLRT) is a better indicator of true classification
when conducting LCA (Nylund et al., 2007; Yang, 2006); however, the BLRT is not available
when using weighted data in MPlus, therefore, I will rely on the AIC, the Consistent AIC
(CAIC; Bozdogan, 1987), the BIC, and the Standard Adjust BIC (SABIC, Sclove, 1987) to help
determine the proper number of classes. The adjusted indices are used to account for variations
in parameter and sample size. Since both the AIC and the BIC are indictors of badness-of-fit, a
model with the smallest value typically suggests that the model is the most appropriate class
solution (Loehlin & Beaujean, 2016).

In addition to these indices, the Lo-Mendell-Rubin (LMR) test examines if the $k$ model
fits the data better than a ($k$-1) model. For example, a LMR test on a 2-class solution that
generates a significant value at $p < .05$ would indicate the 2-class solution is a statistically significant better model than a 1-class solution. Each solution will be tested against the $k-1$ model using the LMR. The final indicator of the best solution is the entropy. This value is an indication that members have been confidently classified into one of the classes. Previous research has used .80 as a standard cutoff (Nagin, 2005). A summary of model fit indices and class size can be found in Table 3 and Table 4.

**Model creation and selection.** Six models were generated starting with a 1-class solution up through a 6-class solution. Results from the LCA indicate the four-class model fit the data best ($\text{AIC} = 7337.95; \text{BIC} = 7536.32; \text{entropy} = .817$). In comparison, the 4-class solution had a clearer classification, represented by a higher entropy, and lower AIC and BIC indices compared to the one, two, or three class solutions. Although the AIC and BIC continued to depreciate in both the 5-class and the 6-class solution, the entropy was slightly lower in these solutions and the most likely class membership final class counts were too small to add meaningful value ($N = 12$). Additionally, results of the Lo-Mendell-Rubin test of neighboring models did not indicate a significant difference between the 4-class and 5-class solutions. For these reasons, the 4-class solution was selected as the most appropriate solution.

**Class meaning.** An important aspect of latent class analysis is the theoretical meaning placed on class membership (Bergman & Trost, 2006). The conditional item probabilities plot in Figure 2 provides a visualization of class members across help-seeking behaviors. Item probabilities shown on the y-axis indicate the probability that a member of a given class would endorse the repair behavior on the x-axis. For example, the likelihood that a member in Class 1 would endorse marriage counseling is 93%. Looking at Figure 2, Class 1 in red represents about 5% ($n = 33$) of the sample and I labeled this class “Highly Engaged” due to the likely high
endorsement of all forms of help-seeking and repair behaviors. Class 2 in blue represents about 7% \((n = 44)\) of the sample and they are labeled “Private Information Gatherers” due to their high probability of reading books and visiting websites as opposed to other forms of formal help-seeking and repair behaviors that involve others. For example, Private Information Gatherers were less likely to endorse professional services, such as meeting with a counselor or engaging in personal repair behaviors, such as, forgiveness compared to reading books and visiting websites. In contrast to these small classes, class 3 in green represents a little over 43% \((n = 316)\) of the sample and I labeled this class “Private Seekers” due to their high probability of endorsing personal repair behaviors such as talking to their spouse, working harder, and forgiveness, but lower probabilities of endorsing formal professional help and information seeking. Finally, class 4 in pink represents almost 45% \((n = 352)\) of the sample and I labeled them “Minimally Engaged” due to the lack of high endorsement of any kind of formal or informal help-seeking behavior. If a member of this group was engaged in a behavior they were most likely to endorse a personal repair-behavior such as “working harder” or “forgiving their spouse.” A summary of latent classes can be found in Table 5.

**Predictors of Class Membership**

The fourth aim of the study was to investigate if demographic and relational characteristics significantly predicted class membership. A concern in adding an observed predictor to a latent class model after the classes have already been defined is that the new predictors can lead to changes in class membership. If class membership changes after adding the predictors there could be misspecifications in class membership leading to incorrect inferences. To handle these potential errors, a 3-step solution can be used to accurately predict class membership (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014; Bolck, Croon, & Hagenaars, 2004; Vermunt,
The first step in this process is to generate class membership using only the 10 latent class indicator variables (repair behaviors). Next, a variable based on the most likely class member is created from the results of the estimation in step one. Finally, the new most likely class variable is regressed on each predictor variable. This process can be done simultaneously which ensures class membership does not vary after adding the predictors to the model. Furthermore, multiple predictors can be added to the model simultaneously so the effects are displayed as the effect after controlling for other predictor variables.

The predictor variables were added to the 4-class model using Mplus version 7.2. The 3-step process was computed using the R3STEP command. When adding predictors to the latent class model, the analysis becomes a multinomial regression with each class compared against a reference group. In our analyses the largest class, or the “Minimally Engaged” class, was used as the reference group. The multinomial regression lead to three separate analyses for review (Minimally Engaged v. Highly Engaged; Minimally Engaged v. Private Information Gatherers; Minimally Engaged v. Personal Repairs). The regression coefficient is the logit or the log odd of the person being in that class compared to the variable being in the reference class. Odds ratio information can be found in Table 2.

Results indicate that neither gender nor race is a significant predictor of class membership. This finding suggests males and females are equally as likely to be in the Minimally Engaged class as they are in one of the other three classes. Additionally, whites and non-whites are equally as likely to be in the Minimally Engaged class as they are in the Highly Engaged, Private Information Gatherers, or Private Seekers classes. Further results indicated there was significant difference in class membership by income with those with higher incomes being more likely to be in the Highly Engaged class compared to the Minimally Engaged class
(.50, \( p = .003 \)). Results also indicate there are significant differences in class membership by religiosity with those that have higher levels of religiosity more likely to be in the Highly Engaged class (.54, \( p = .003 \)), or to be in the Private Information Gatherers class (.60, \( p < .001 \)), or to be in the Personal Seekers class (.19, \( p = .005 \)) compared to being in the Minimally Engaged class. Finally, results also indicate there is a significant difference in class membership by divorce ideation with more serious thinkers being more likely to be in the Highly Engaged class (1.58, \( p < .001 \)), to be in the Private Information Gatherers class (2.79, \( p < .001 \)), or to be in the Private Seekers class (.50, \( p = .025 \)) compared to the Minimally Engaged class.

**Discussion**

The current study had four research aims which sought to provide insight into the help-seeking behavior of individuals who have recently thought about divorce. Findings from this study are especially useful for providing more information on the utilization of information approaches to help-seeking. Little is known about informal approaches to help-seeking and recent findings indicate these informal approaches may be the most utilized help-seeking methods. Additionally, this study provides evidence that for some help-seeking may be viewed a combination of many help-seeking behaviors. An understanding of these patterns is especially helpful for practitioners and policy makers as they seek ways to reach a larger audience and improve marital stability.

The first research aim of this study was to examine the help-seeking behavior of individuals who have recently thought about divorce. As expected, descriptive results indicate informal approaches are used more often than formal approaches with 30% of the sampled population reading a self-help book, 34% visiting a website, and 34% talking to someone about their marriage. These findings confirm results from other studies (Doss et al., 2009; Georgia &
Doss, 2013; Higginbotham et al., 2009) that indicate informal approaches have higher rates of participation compared to formal approaches. However, the participation rates for speaking with a friend were lower than a study by Georgia & Doss, (2013) which found almost 70% of their sample spoke with someone about their relationship problems while this study found only 34% did. This difference may be partially attributed to the stressor and perception of the stressor. Thoughts of ending a dating relationship may not be as drastic as thoughts of ending a marriage and therefore people may be more reluctant to speak with family, friends, or coworkers about a divorce knowing the seriousness of the conversation. Another significant finding is that as many as 70% of individuals engaged in a private repair-behavior. These private-repair behaviors may offer insight into how individuals transition into engagement in other help-seeking behaviors and additional research in this area may be beneficial as practitioners and policymakers attempt to reach a larger audience to increase marital stability.

Furthermore, findings from this study confirmed results from previous studies that indicate only a small percentage of individuals struggling in their marriages are engaged in formal help-seeking, with 25% of the sample engaging in marital therapy together and 16% seeking help from clergy. A finding that was much lower than previously estimated (Halford & Hayes, 2012) is that only 9% of the sample engaged in a marriage education class. This finding may indicate a public perception that marriage education classes are meant to prepare engaged couples for marriage or that the public is unaware of the availability of marriage education courses. Some scholars have stressed the need for educators to do a better job reaching distressed couples and this finding provides more evidence that adds to this assertion (Ooms, 2001).
The second aim of the current study was to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in help-seeking behavior by gender, race, income, religiosity, and divorce ideation. An unexpected finding was that males were more likely to engage in marriage therapy with their spouse compared to females, however, the finding may be somewhat supported by previous evidence that males are more likely to attend marriage therapy when there is a pile up of stressors or if their spouse has threatened divorce (Crane et al., 1995). Another important finding is that engagement in informal approaches of help-seeking held across gender and race, as well as held across income for reading a book and speaking with friends. There was a statistically significant difference of visiting a website to repair a marriage, with findings indicating there is a greater likelihood of engaging in the behavior as income increases. Since there are almost no differences across these new resources as predictors of engaging in informal help-seeking, this finding provides support for the thought that a greater understanding of informal help-seeking may be beneficial in reaching a larger audience to support efforts to increase marital stability.

As expected, higher levels of religiosity and more serious thoughts of divorce were associated with more engagement in a variety of both formal and informal approaches. This may be the best evidence to date that people do not seek out professional help until after their marital problems are serious. These finding are an indication of the challenges faced in the field as efforts to improve marital stability by practitioners and policymakers have increased. Preventative work is difficult when a large portion of society is not working with practitioners until the relationship is close to or beyond repair. And lower income couples who may be the most in need of the formal services are not the couples engaging in these behaviors. There is evidence that these formal approaches work for those that are less advantaged (Hawkins &
Fackrell, 2010), but the challenge is getting the resources to this population. There is a federal initiative (Hawkins et al., 2009) to help increase marital stability, but this initiative does not fund clinical work and findings from this study indicate non-clinical interventions are not being used. A shift may be needed, from formal help-seeking that traditionally has the participants coming to professionals towards an approach where the practitioners are going to those in need of services. Some CRE programs have attempted this by offering courses online (Loew et al., 2012), but making face-to-face interactions more convenient and affordable may be beneficial.

The third research aim of the study was to determine if there were common patterns in help-seeking or repair-behavior when individuals are considering divorce. My hypothesis was correct in that at least three distinct classes were found with one of the classes being highly engaged, a second class who engaged in informal behaviors, and a third class with less engagement. There was an additional fourth class that primarily engaged in the private-repair behaviors. This finding adds to the already established literature in several ways. First, this finding provides evidence that there are typologies of help-seeking behavior which can be helpful for scholars as they study the effectiveness of help-seeking behavior. Second, when looking at patterns in help-seeking behavior, a large portion of the population (45%) had a pattern of engaging in little to no help-seeking behaviors which may indicate many distressed couples are not seeking help to repair their marriage, even the informal approaches.

The fourth research aim of the current study was to determine if gender, race, income, religiosity, and divorce ideation predicted class members. I was partially correct on my hypotheses, as I predicted all variables would predict class membership, but neither gender nor race were significant predictors after controlling out the effects of income, religiosity, and divorce ideation. An important finding is the significance of religiosity in predicting class
membership. As religiosity increased, so did the likelihood one would move from being in the Minimally Engaged class to being in one of the other three class. Tenants of the Double ABC-X model of stress and adaptation would suggest this may be because those who are more religious may have a different perspective of stressors of divorce leading them to seek help (Marks, 2005; Murray, 2002). For religious individuals, stressors that are often viewed as normal marital disagreements may be perceived as threats to their marriage; this in turn could lead to more engagement in help-seeking/repair-behaviors.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the current study had significant findings that can be valuable to researchers, it is not without limitations. First, the study could benefit from using dyadic data instead of individual data. Using dyadic data could provide more information as to why men were more likely to engage in some of the formal help-seeking behaviors compared to females. Furthermore, dyadic data could provide more insight into which spouse, if either, is more influential in help-seeking engagement. Second, analyses in this study were conducted using cross-sectional data which limits our confidence in the inferences on predicting help-seeking behavior and class members. Lastly, the help-seeking measure had temporal limitations in that respondents were not asked when they engaged in help-seeking behavior, only if they engaged in the help-seeking behavior to help repair-their marriage. Given that respondents were asked this question after discussing their recent thoughts of divorce they were most likely responding to current help-seeking, but they could have been referring to long-past behaviors. This temporal limitation in the measure needs to be considered.

Even with these limitations, findings from this study provide a foundation for future research directions. First, few individuals seek out formal help to repair their marriage when
they are thinking about divorce and there needs to be more work done to understand how practitioners can do a better job going to the client instead of the client coming to the practitioner. There have been advances in outreach using technology, but more effort should be made to provide face-to-face interaction in a way that is convenient to the client. In addition, scholar-practitioners must make their wisdom more available to those seeking help through web-based platforms. Second, since such a large percentage of the population who have recently thought about divorce engaged in personal repair behaviors, we need to understand better how these private behaviors are related to marital stability. These personal repair-behaviors may provide insight into the help-seeking process and provide avenues to engagement in formal and informal help-seeking. Third, findings from this study indicate unique patterns in help-seeking behavior. More work on how these patterns relate to thoughts of divorce and marital stability are needed. Additionally, longitudinal work is needed to observe change and stability over time for membership in these classes and why changes take place.
References


https://doi.org/10.1080/10705510701575396


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.csda.2004.11.004
Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of Those Recently Thinking About Divorce*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Income</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<tr>
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<td>---</td>
</tr>
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<td>$40,000 - $59,999</td>
<td>22%</td>
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<td>---</td>
</tr>
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<td>---</td>
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</tr>
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<td>---</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt; $120,000</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-school</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-graduate degree</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>38.87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Years Married</td>
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<td>7.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Children under 18</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>1.35</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formal Help-Seeking</td>
<td>Informal Help-Seeking</td>
<td>Personal Repair Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marriage Therapy</td>
<td>Individual Counseling</td>
<td>Marriage Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (OR)</td>
<td>.62*</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male %</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female %</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (OR)</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>White %</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black %</td>
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<td>.33</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
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<td>Hispanic %</td>
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<td>.20</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian %</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other %</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed %</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income (OR)</td>
<td>1.30***</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.25*</td>
</tr>
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<td>.31</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<td>.10</td>
</tr>
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<td>.26</td>
<td>.12</td>
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<td>$80-119,999</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;$120K</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religiosity (OR)</td>
<td>1.21**</td>
<td>1.16**</td>
<td>1.60***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never %</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom %</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few times a year%</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month %</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week %</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once a week+ %  |  .41  |  .42  |  .36  |  .50  |  .55  |  .40  |  .50  |  .63  |  .73  |  .81  
Divorce Ideation (OR)  |  2.17*** |  2.07*** |  3.45*** |  2.21** |  2.19*** |  1.90*** |  1.46* |  1.11 |  .92  |  1.03  
Soft %  |  .18  |  .17  |  .04  |  .10  |  .21  |  .26  |  .29  |  .70  |  .71  |  .67  
Serious %  |  .31  |  .30  |  .14  |  .21  |  .38  |  .41  |  .38  |  .71  |  .69  |  .70  

*Note.* Percentage presented as percent that engaged in the help-seeking behavior; *p < .05, **p < .001, ***p < .001; OR = Odds Ratio
Table 3

*Model Fit Indices of Latent Class Analysis of Repair Behaviors for Individuals Thinking About Divorce (N=745)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>NPAR</th>
<th>LL</th>
<th>AIC</th>
<th>CAIC</th>
<th>BIC</th>
<th>SABIC</th>
<th>Entropy</th>
<th>LMR</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-4168.86</td>
<td>8357.71</td>
<td>8413.84</td>
<td>8403.84</td>
<td>8372.09</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-3757.18</td>
<td>7556.35</td>
<td>7674.24</td>
<td>7653.24</td>
<td>7586.55</td>
<td>.764</td>
<td>812.192</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>-3681.33</td>
<td>7426.65</td>
<td>7606.28</td>
<td>7574.28</td>
<td>7472.67</td>
<td>.704</td>
<td>149.645</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>-3625.97</td>
<td>7337.95</td>
<td>7579.32</td>
<td>7536.32</td>
<td>7399.78</td>
<td>.817</td>
<td>109.203</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>-3577.91</td>
<td>7263.83</td>
<td>7566.95</td>
<td>7512.95</td>
<td>7341.48</td>
<td>.805</td>
<td>94.925</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>-3547.25</td>
<td>7224.50</td>
<td>7589.37</td>
<td>7524.37</td>
<td>7317.97</td>
<td>.788</td>
<td>60.498</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Abbreviations: NPAR = Number of free parameters; LL = Log-Likelihood; AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; CAIC = Consistent AIC; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion; SABIC = Standard Adjusted BIC; LMR = Lo-Mendell-Rubin Ratio Test

Table 4

*Most Likely Latent Class Membership Final Counts (N=745)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solution</th>
<th>Class Counts by Class</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-class</td>
<td></td>
<td>745</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-class</td>
<td></td>
<td>392</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>--</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-class</td>
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<td>126</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-class</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>352</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-class</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>148</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-class</td>
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<td>236</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
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</table>
Table 5

*Demographic Statistics by Percent in Each Latent Class*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Highly Engaged</th>
<th>Private Information Gatherers</th>
<th>Private Seekers</th>
<th>Less Engaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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**Table 6**  
*Results of Predictors of Latent Class Membership*

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*Note.* Minimally Engaged class used as the reference class.
Figure 1 Double ABC-X Model of Family Stress Adaptation
Figure 2 Item Probability by Class

Note. Abbreviation: MT = Marriage Therapy together; IC = Individual Counseling; MS = Marriage Strengthening; Serious = Serious talk with spouse; Harder = I worked harder