

Resources from Imago Relationships International

We are grateful to Theresa Beeton for providing us with the following overview of research into the effectiveness of Imago Relationship Theory. Dr. Beeton is a Certified Imago Therapist and Workshop Presenter. More biographical details are provided at the end of this paper.

Imago and Research

Theresa A. Beeton, Ph.D

Imago Relationship theory provides a relational view of healing and growth. The theory developed from a synthesis of theories and the formulations of Harville Hendrix Ph.D. and Helen La Kelly Hunt Ph.D. Hendrix (1988) explains the formation of the theory in this way:

“To fill in the gaps. I worked with hundreds of couples in private practice and thousand more in workshops and seminars. Out of my research and clinical observations, I gradually developed a theory of marital therapy called Imago (ih-MAH-go) Relationship Therapy. My approach was eclectic. I brought together depth psychology, the behavioral sciences, the western spiritual traditions, and added some elements of Transactional Analysis, Gestalt psychology, systems theory, and cognitive therapy. In my view, each of these schools of thought made a unique and important contribution to the understanding of the psychology of the individual, but it was when they were all brought together in new syntheses that they illuminated the mystery of love relationships. (p.xvi)”

Like much of psychological theory and practice, Imago theory developed from observation and intuition. Imago theory provides a conceptual and philosophical understanding of relationship and proposes that individual growth and healing takes place in the context of relationship. The practice of Imago theory involves individual counseling and workshops for individuals and couples (“Keeping the Love You Find” and “Getting the Love You Want”).

Various research studies provide some information about the underlying theory and experience of Imago. Research informs about Imago practices and explores Imago in terms of Imago constructs and theory, the use of Imago relationship therapy skills, and outcome studies concerning the efficacy of Imago Relationship Therapy and workshops.

Studies Concerning Imago Constructs

Studies have explored the underlying theories of personal functioning that Hendrix addressed concerning the basic concepts of personality and related defense behaviors by discussing four basic functions of self (Hendrix, 1992). The categories of personal functioning are: thinking, feeling, sensing, and acting. According to Imago theory, people receive messages of wholeness or repression in the basic functions of self. Imago theory states that people will either externalize reactions and behaviors (maximize) or internalize reactions and behaviors (minimize). Imago theory also suggests

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that partners usually present with complementary styles that one partner might be a minimizer and that the other partner might be a maximizer.

Hannah & Marrone, et al, (1998) and Marrone & Hannah et al.(1998) developed a scale and a research process for exploring the ideas related to personality functions and defensive adaptations. The researchers developed the Imago Developmental Adaptation Profile (IDAP) to measure minimizing and maximizing behavior styles and the Imago Self-Functioning Scale (ISFS) that measure personality strengths and weaknesses in the areas of thinking, feeling, sensing, and acting. The research conducted studies to field test the survey measures and to test out the content validity of the scale.

The study results indicate that couples do not have blocks in the same areas of personal functioning and do show tendency for couples to exhibit complementarity of defensive adaptations within committed relationships. These findings provide preliminary information that helps to support one of the Imago concepts related to complementarity of defensive styles and partner interactions.

Gabler (2002) continued this exploration into Imago constructs by investigating the relationship between attachment theory and Imago theory by using the IDAP measure and comparing it to the Multi-Item Measure of Adult Romantic Attachment. Gabler was able to conduct surveys on 118 people prior to completing the Imago workshop. The research was able to demonstrate that by comparing the two surveys that partners had complementarity in terms of different attachment and defensive styles. This research joins previous studies that noted and supported the Imago concepts related to complementarity of defensive styles in relationship.

Studies Concerning the Use of Imago Relationship Therapy Skills

Hannah et al., (1996) explored the use of Imago skills by the Imago therapists themselves (N=392). Research identified current dyadic adjustment by using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) and surveyed the use of Imago skills by developing a scale to numerically measure the use of specific Imago skills, the Imago Intentionality Measure (IIM). The study results showed that Imago therapists had an average level of relationship adjustment which indicates a healthy connection according to survey standards. Imago therapists also demonstrated an average level of use of Imago skills. Over 86% utilized mirroring at least some of the time. Imago therapist reported strong use of skills such as validation and empathy. Other skills also reported a high usage such as 88% indicating that they used the Behavior Change Request process at least some of the time. The study showed a statistically significant connection between the use of Imago skills and dyadic adjustment. Therapists that used the Imago skills had higher levels of dyadic adjustment. Therapists had difficulty relinquishing behaviors such as criticism and the use of relationship exits.

In a study (N=102) that replicated the study on Imago therapists but changed the study population to past attendees of the “Getting the Love You Want” workshop for couples, similar results were discovered (Beeton, 2006). Past workshop attendees who completed the GTLYW at least a year ago, indicated average levels of dyadic adjustment and also indicated an average use of Imago skills. Specific explorations into the use of specific skills showed 64 % of past attendees using the mirroring skill at least some of the time. 81% claimed to use the skill of validation in relationship and 88% claimed to use

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the skill of empathy with their partner at least some of the time with the greater percentage of people claiming to use the skill frequently. This study added an open-ended questionnaire that allowed people a chance to add their own comments concerning the use of Imago skills. The study participant's own comments indicated that Imago skills made a significant positive impact on their relationship dynamic. Many of the study comments positively referenced knowledge concerning Imago concepts and skills. In additional similarities to the Imago therapist study, these study participants had difficulty relinquishing negative relationship patterns.

Weigle (2006) also questioned past workshop attendees (N=12) through a qualitative study and asked about the past participant's perceptions of the benefit of the GTLYW workshop on marital satisfaction a year after participating in the GTLYW workshop. The study also asked questions about family of origin issues and communication skills and conflict resolution. The past GTLYW workshop attendees in this study reported increased marital satisfaction and improvement in the ways the participants handle conflict. The study participants give credit to the information learned in the Imago workshop as a factor in their perceptions of relationship improvement.

A narrative investigation into the connection between the Imago couple's dialogue practices and experiences with personal expressions of spirituality revealed that some people experience the use of the couple's dialogue as a spiritual practice (Feldman, 1999). Of the study population (N=11) the couples who practiced dialogue skills more often indicted a stronger sense of spirituality in the process. This study provided information about the Imago processes in the words of the study participants themselves.

An investigation (Guagenti-Tax, 2002) into the use of Imago skills in dealing with conflict showed that men (N=121) ordered into a batterers treatment program were able to show improved scores on the Modified Conflict Tactics Scale (MCTS) after completing a program that incorporated Imago skills into the treatment program. The study participants were able to complete surveys before and after the intervention that included the use of Imago skills. The researcher indicates that Imago skills were a significant factor in the batterers' scores.

Outcomes and Efficacy of Imago Relationship Therapy and Workshops

Research reports on possible connections between relationship satisfaction and the experience of the Imago workshop and Imago therapy intervention. Some of the research reports on satisfaction with the Imago workshop and some of the research explored relationship experiences before and after completing Imago therapy. Initial studies concerning relationship satisfaction and improvement showed that people can improve their scores by participating in the workshop or a period of short-term treatment related to Imago skills.

Pitner & Bailey (1998) surveyed 110 couples experiencing nine different workshops across the United States. Participants completed the Marital Satisfaction Scale-Short Form (MSS) and the Relationship Change Scale (RCS) which measures relationship quality as a result of change behaviors. Participants of the study completed the questionnaire prior to attending the Imago workshop and immediately after completing the workshop, along with a follow-up questionnaire that was sent six weeks after attending the workshop. Study participants started the workshop with an average

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level of marital satisfaction. The post-workshop scores indicate that the group average score rose more than 10 points and continued to rise at the six week follow-up point. The RCS scale scores also increased 15.79 for the group average. The study participants showed increases in scores for marital satisfaction and for factors related to the relationship change.

A study regarding the relationship experience of people completing a short-term model of Imago therapy developed by Wade Luquet utilized the Compass Outpatient Treatment Assessment System (COMPASS) (Hannah, Luquet, & McCormick, 1997). The COMPASS scale is a scale that usually provides information about individual function in areas related to family, health, intimacy, social skills, self-management, and work areas. The study participants also completed three scales related to marital satisfaction and completed these surveys before treatment and after completing treatment. The post-test scores show positive differences in three of the four compass scales and on all of the relationship satisfaction scales. The results of this study show that Imago interventions could be a significant factor towards influencing relationship interactions.

Luquet and Hannah (1996) completed a preliminary study of 18 couples, who also completed a short-term intervention of Imago Relationship Therapy, exploring relationship quality by utilizing the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI). The MSI is a large survey that includes scores for 11 scales. This particular research study focused on three areas of the scale that include Global Distress, Affective Communication, and Problem Solving Communication Skills. The post-treatment scores show improvement on three of the areas of marital functioning.

Additional investigations by Hannah and Luquet et al, (1997) explored short-term interventions of 21 couples who experienced Imago therapy by using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, Relationship Maturity Index, The Dyadic Adjustment Scale, and the Imago Intentionality Measure. Researchers provided the study participants with pre and post-intervention surveys. The study participants show statistically significant improvements on survey scores for all of the four measures.

One study by Hogan et al (1996) researched 268 Imago workshop participants and utilized three self report questionnaires that explored demographics, satisfaction with the workshop, and the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). The overwhelming majority (96%) of the study participants indicated that the workshop experience was excellent and found the workshop experience to be very enjoyable. The study showed that study participants having a high score on the CTS were more likely to find the structure of the workshop enjoyable.

Research and Imago Theory

The philosophical and intuitive nature of Imago theory creates problems in developing research to explore the basic tenants and practices of Imago. Nonetheless, early research explorations do provide some encouraging results regarding the practice and experience of Imago theory on relationship functioning. Initial research studies reveal that scores on relationship scales can improve after participating in an Imago couples workshop or short-term treatment of Imago therapy. People report that Imago practices and concepts make a positive difference in relationship awareness and interactions.

The Board of Imago Relationships International recognizes the necessity of research to support Imago practices and plans to investigate ways to conduct more studies

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into the practices related to Imago. Research is an important tool in measuring the experiences of the participants and users of Imago skills and concepts. Plans are underway to establish ongoing research practices.

Imago Theory and Couples Counseling Research

Research concerning success in marital relationships can find application and support in Imago theory and concepts. Gottman (1993) identified four relationship patterns as predictors of divorce or relationship failure. These patterns include: criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling and contempt. Imago skills address the negative relationship behaviors, by providing processes and techniques that help to override and suggest alternatives to the common practice of these relationship behaviors. Other research suggests that the quality of connection between the couples is a factor that creates marital satisfaction or discord (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Matthews, 1996). Imago theory offers practical, enlightening skills and concepts that help to remedy the negative relationship attitudes that researchers indicate will facilitate divorce and relationship failure. Researchers, Stanley & Markman, (1997) suggest that marriage and relationship education programs include program content that will: raise awareness, foster change in attitudes and beliefs, along with skills training and the use of structure. Imago practices fulfill all of these criteria. Imago therapy and the Imago workshop provide opportunities for couples to re-image themselves, their partner and the relationship. As people develop new ways of viewing relationship interactions the experience of the couple relationship will have an opportunity to take on more connecting dynamics. Imago theory teaches specific skills and provides a structure for couples to interact and cope with negative personal reactions. The practices of Imago skills will help individuals and couples to move from unconscious and destructive relationship behaviors towards developing conscious, connecting relationship enhancing interactions.

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About the author:

Theresa Anna Beeton-Clark, PhD, MSW
Licensed Clinical Social Worker,

Theresa Beeton-Clark brings a variety of social worker experience to clinical practice. In her long and varied career, Ms. Beeton-Clark worked with the full spectrum of public and private agencies. Her early experience includes working in child welfare settings and providing services to teenage mothers. Professional work includes providing consultations to courts, hospitals and school systems. The counseling experience includes provision of crisis intervention and critical incident stress debriefings. Ms. Beeton-Clark provided counseling services in community mental health agencies and family service organizations. Counseling experience also includes working with mental health counseling issues and problem solving. Professional training includes specialized training as a family therapist and relationship specialist. In addition to the above stated services Theresa is an enthusiastic and provocative teacher. Her past teaching experience includes developing seminars for community and professional groups on parenting and relationship issues. She previously served on the faculty of Shepherd College and Virginia Commonwealth University teaching to both undergraduate and graduate students of psychology and social work. Currently Theresa engages in providing support and consultations to people developing relationships skills. She serves as CEO of Loudoun Family & Relationship Counseling. One of the premier services of the organization is the workshop for couples "Getting the Love You Want".

Education & Certifications:

James Madison University, B.S. Social Work

Catholic University of America, M.S.W.

Advance Clinician, Institute of Imago Relationship Therapy

Certified Workshop Presenter

Walden University, Ph,D