Empowering Couples Program for Married Couples

R.W. Vince Arnold, Ed.D., D.Min., LPC


This study represents the first experimental study attempted to determine the effects of the Empowering Couples Program (ECP conducted in a weekend format). This randomized Pretest-Posttest Control Group study assigned 29 couples who volunteered to participate in a marriage enrichment retreat or a wait list control group. The ENRICH inventory and Stages of Change Questionnaire (SOCQ) were used to measure before and after treatment effects. Females increased their pre-post scores on 9 of 13 scales, while males scores increased on only 2 scales and couple scores increased on 6 of 13 scales. Combined treatment groups showed gains in 46.6% of the domains (ES of these gains ranged from .16 to .95). Over one-third (36%) of couples moved up one or more couple types, demonstrating increased couple satisfaction. Couples reported very high levels of satisfaction with their participation in the program. Ninety percent of the couples that responded to a 4 month follow-up survey stated they would recommend the program to their friends.

Researchers have recorded divorce rates as high as 50% for first marriages and 60% for second marriages (Olson & DeFrain, 2000). To add insult to injury, Barna (2001) makes the rather disturbing report that born-again Christians are just as likely to get divorced as are non-born-again adults, including the fact that 33% of all born-again individuals who have been married have gone through a divorce. This is statistically identical to the 34% incidence among non-born-again adults. More than 90% of these born-again adults who have been divorced experienced that divorce after they accepted Christ, not before. Barna's startling report rang the bell for the Christian community that seems to have, heretofore, assumed its anti-divorce proscriptions alone might insulate its members from such dis-ease. Whether a wake-up call, or a death knell, remains for future researchers and historians to document. In either event, the church cannot afford to wait any longer. These rates alone are enough to demonstrate the urgent need for proactive marriage enrichment efforts, throughout all marital life stages, within and without the church (Siliman, 2003; Whitehead & Popeno, 2003).

In response to the profound sense of threat and peril to marriage, countless books on marriage and the family continue to flood the public bookshelf, and to present themselves on various secular, and religious, "best seller" lists. Halford, Markman, Stanley and Klein (2002) note that most enrichment programs and materials, however, have not been systematically evaluated. Thus the metaphorical Holy Grail of research questions, first posited by Gordon Paul
and herein paraphrased, remains largely unanswered, although hotly pursued: what relationship enrichment program, by whom, is most effective for this couple with that specific problem, and under which set of circumstances (Shadish & Baldwin, 2002). In attempting to answer this crucial but elusive question, “customer satisfaction” data alone will not suffice. Gottman (1999) cautions that harder data that assess the outcomes of our interventions is required. Though speaking in reference to marital therapy, the same must be said of marriage enrichment programs, including those provided in faith-based settings. This study is based on the dissertation by Arnold (2005).

**Historical Review**

Beginning in the early 1950s various religious and spiritual leaders began to offer a front-line defense, and offense, in their efforts to combat the staggering costs associated with marital dissolution; i.e., couple relationship education was developed as their primary stratagem in this battle for marriage and the family. By the 1990s, upwards of one third of marrying couples in the United States, Australia, and Britain were attending some form of relationship enhancement education (Sprengle, 2002). During the past 50 years, marriage enrichment programs have exponentially multiplied. Some have matured to the point of establishing solid theoretical, psychological, educational, and theological foundations (Hunt, Hof & DeMaria, 1998).

While charismatic leaders and instructors of various marriage enrichment programs apparently provide a popular service in our culture, and in our churches, popularity, anecdotal hype, sales records, public relations prowess, and marketing savvy are not sufficient to warrant credible claims to legitimate effectiveness. While there are many apparently good marriage enrichment programs in the market place, there are some who seem more akin to snake-oil peddlers with their, as it were, marital elixirs and promises for a price. All who seek marital enrichment materials should heed the market place dictum: “Caveat emptor — let the buyer beware.”

In their review of more than 60 hours of video, and over 2000 pages of books and instruction manuals, Balswick and Balswick (2003) similarly concluded that research is more impressionistic than empirical when comes to assessing the strengths, limitations, and efficacy of marital enrichment programs. Addressing research efforts, Combs, Bufford, Campbell and Halter (2000) have summarized supportive findings of nearly three decades of marriage enrichment program research, and identify significant limitations to such research: (a) few approaches examined, (b) much enrichment research has been done with university populations, leaving questions about generalizability of the findings to other groups and, (c) though the marital enrichment movement began in the church, and continues to be widely practiced by various faith-based groups, little research has examined the effectiveness of marital enrichment among such populations (Ripley, 2003; Groom, 2001; Combs, Bufford, Campbell, & Halter, 2000; Combs, 1994; Noval, et al., 1996).

According to Ripley and Worthington (1998), due to this lack of research, Christian marital counseling largely relies on secular marital therapy research for evidence of its efficacy. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence notwithstanding, doubt remains as to the applicability of such secular programs, and their related research findings, when applied within
the religious or faith-based milieu. Neither case studies, nor empirical research, have investigated whether faith-based marital interventions are distinct from other types of marital interventions, and, perhaps more importantly, whether they are effective in improving marriages (Ripley & Worthington, 1998). Fortunately, the marriage enrichment movement has recently begun to answer the demand for more evidenced-based tools with an array of effectiveness and efficacy studies (Ripley, Parrott, Worthington, & Parrott, 2000; Combs, Bufford, Campbell, & Halter, 2000; Halford, Markman, Stanley, & Klein, 2002). The quest for the metaphorical Holy Grail of marriage enrichment is well underway.

Among the leaders of solid research and clinical efforts to identify effective psycho-educational marriage enrichment programs, including psychometric inventories for pre-marital and marital assessments, is David H. Olson, author of over 100 journal articles and 20 books on marriage and the family. Empowering Couples book and program (Olson & Olson, 2000a) is built upon the PREPARE/ENRICH Program (Olson, 1996) and over 20 years of clinical experience and research with couples on the national and international levels. Most recently, efforts have been made to achieve a culturally sensitive adaptation of the PREPARE Inventory with Japanese premarital couples, Asai & Olson, (2004).

Growing Together is a group program for couples based on PREPARE/ENRICH uses the couple inventory in a group setting and the couples receive a Couple Report. The six couple exercises from PREPARE/ENRICH are used in the program. An evaluation of the program demonstrated that it was able to produce positive changes in the couple's relationship (Hawley & Olson, 1995).

More than 1,500,000 couples have taken the very popular PREPARE/ENRICH program to prepare for, or enrich, their marriage. The ultimate purpose of the Empowering Couples program is to "build, improve, and energize" couple relationships (Olson & Olson, 2000b). The Empowering Couples program is designed with maximum flexibility in mind, including weekly, bi-monthly, monthly, or weekend formats. The leader's guide briefly notes various assets and liabilities for each of these formats. Likewise, there is the added flexibility in that both premarital couples and married couples (from newlywed to older couples) can participate together in the same program.

The goal of this project is to determine the "marriage enrichment effect" of the Empowering Couples Program. Heretofore, Empowering Couples has been subjected to only one systematic study. Burleson (2003) conducted a quasi-experimental single-group pretest-posttest design, and claimed "significant improvements in the quality of marriage". Unfortunately, Burleson failed to use a control group. Furthermore, the single-group pretest-posttest design is considered a poor quasi-experimental design for reasons outlined in most research textbooks (e.g., Gliner & Morgan, 2000). Empowering Couples has not, therefore, been the subject of any other empirical study, and clearly warrants additional, more rigorous, study. Nonetheless, Burleson's work represents an important addition to the Empowering Couples program in that he attempts to address the concerns raised by Balswick and Balswick (2003).

In general, there seems to be an inverse relationship between building a program on biblical texts and building a program on social science literature and research. In most instances, the Bible
seems to be used as a proof text, rather than as an integrated theological model for marriage. If God is the author of all knowledge, then it seems to us that what is needed is the development of marriage enrichment programs that are based on an integration of the best empirical studies on marriage, social science literature, outcome research on program effectiveness and a comprehensive use of biblical truth as a foundation for marriage.

Whitehead and Popenoe (2003) also contend that one of the best things a society can do for its children is to create optimal conditions for healthy marriages. They point out that a growing grass-roots movement, dedicated to providing people with the resources and skills to prepare for and achieve long-lasting healthy marriages, is gaining momentum. There is simply too much at stake to embrace such unexamined or undocumented claims, no matter how well intended their efforts and claims might be.

Therefore, “customer satisfaction” questionnaires and “testimonials” would perhaps better serve as augmentations to more objective (i.e., empirical) data in order to better establish the efficacy of such programs. Secular and faith-based organizations, truly interested in enriching marriages, cannot afford to settle for less. The credibility of program and program provider are at stake, not to mention the well being of enrichment program participants. This study was designed as an initial step in that direction, i.e. determining the empirical effects of the Empowering Couples program among married couples in a Pentecostal community, via use of an empirically validated assessment instrument.

Participants
Volunteers were solicited from among couples attending two churches in a southern city in the spring of 2004. Thirty-nine couples initially pre-registered; 17 couples from congregation A; and 22 couples from congregation B. For various unidentified or unspecified reasons, 11 couples later canceled participation before the assessment phase began. Because no formal assessments had been completed, differences between these initial drop and non-drop couples could not be formally ascertained. Most of the drop couples, however, were affiliated with one congregation. That congregation had a noticeable decrease in direct staff/leadership interest in the program (e.g., failure to follow-through with agreed financial support; and initial leadership commitment to participate as presenters/recruiters failed to materialize). These factors possibly suggest that overall congregational/staff leadership commitment to the purposes of the research project was perhaps somewhat different between the two congregations and may, therefore, have contributed to the initial drop rates.

Subsequently, 3 couples dropped after participating in the pre/post-test Waitlist group, (i.e., they did not complete the second retreat). All three of these couples scored as “vitalized couples”, and had understandable reasons for dropping out. Another couple signed-up in time to take the pretest and attend Retreat Two. Thus, the final sample (n= 29 couples) consisted of: (a) Tx Group One = 14 cases pre and post, (b) Waitlist Group = 14 cases pre and post and, (c) Tx Group Two = 12 cases pre and post.

With one exception, participants ranged in age from 21-49 (one couple was 50+). Regarding ethnicity, most participants were Caucasian (2 couples were African-American, 2 couples were Hispanic-Latino). According to report-
ed income: 57% of the males made less than 50K; 60% of the females made less than 40K. Academically, a majority completed some college or more (undergraduates/graduates accounted for 29.5%, some college 41%), and high school or less 29.5%. Years married averaged 11.7 (less than 10 years 36.25%, 11-15 years 40%, 16+ years 23.75%). Additionally, 26.25% of the individuals had considered divorce. Treatment and control groups were similar in terms of income, ethnicity, education, age, and years married.

Design
A randomized Pretest-Posttest Control Group research design was used, with 4-month follow-up, including two experimental groups and control group (Ohlund & Yu, 2002; Gliner & Morgan, 2000). Accordingly, both treatment and control groups received the assessment measurements prior to treatment (i.e., during the registration process for the Empowering Couples program). As noted, the design included a wait-list control group that subsequently received the treatment, only after the experimental group had completed their treatment. This design feature provided an opportunity to carry out a replication of the main investigation within subjects.

Empowering Couples Program
The Empowering Couples Program (Olson, 2001) materials include: an Empowering Couples book, a Leader’s Manual, Master Transparencies and/or PowerPoint package, and a seven session video tape. Program sessions typically feature one chapter from the Empowering Couples book, and are intended to last about two hours each. Components of the program include: couple quiz, couple dialogue, couple exercises, and group sharing (Olson, 2001).

Due to locally imposed time constraints, only six topics were presented during the respective retreat groups: Path of the Strong (strengths/growth area review); Communication; Conflict Resolution; Mapping Your Couple Relationship (couple closeness/flexibility and family-of-origin dynamics); Personal, Couple and Family Goals; and Spiritual Beliefs. These scripted topics were presented by the same six individuals (volunteers/leaders from each church) during each weekend event, with the exception that a different Spiritual Beliefs presenter was utilized during the second retreat. Several key biblical principles for marriage, largely summarized from Burleson (2003), were also incorporated in the presentations. “Happy couples”, a phrased used by Olson in his text, was used interchangeably with the phrase “Empowered Couples” throughout the weekend sessions and in the following outline. At the conclusion of each session, the retreat leader led the group in a “unison reading” of the “Key Biblical Principle” relevant to that session. Each couple received a complimentary copy of the Empowering Couples text, during the retreat.

Recruitment & Group Assignment
Informational meetings were conducted at the two churches, after initial meetings with the respective pastors. Various “couples ministry” leaders, from the respective congregations, attended the meetings. The purpose was to inform respective leaders regarding the nature, general purpose, and specific objectives of the study, including criteria for participation, in order to solicit their “support” for the program. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the local church officials, and Argosy University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Subsequently, pulpit announcements were made during worship ser-
vices at each church, retreat brochures were distributed, and sign-up sheets were posted, at each church.

Once all couples were registered, and the first round of pre-test assessments completed, couples were randomly assigned to one of two groups/dates, using a standard table of random numbers matrix. Group members were notified as to their assigned retreat date, by the researcher. Group One (treatment group one) and Group Two (waitlist/control group) were simultaneously administered the posttest assessments (approximately 30 days from the date of the pretest-to-posttest administrations). Two weeks later, the Control Group was provided the opportunity to attend their scheduled weekend Empowering Couples program, comprising Treatment Group Two, in May 2004. A third assessment (i.e., a true post-test for Retreat Group Two) was completed approximately 30 days after the pre-test.

Approximately four months after completion of the respective retreats, all participants were asked to complete the SOCQ questionnaire and a Satisfaction Survey as follow-up measures. These follow-up measures were conducted via mail during September 2004. Approximately 3-4 weeks after the initial mail-out, couples were contacted via phone as a reminder to return the final assessments, and/or to thank them for their participation. Final return rate for the follow-up assessments was approximately 56% (of the 28 couple participants).

**Instrumentation**

Because of the multiple research objectives, two primary assessment instruments were used: the ENRICH 2000 (Olson, 1996) inventory and the Stages of Change Questionnaire (SOCQ) (Prochaska, J. O., & DiClemente, C., 1982). A follow-up Satisfaction Questionnaire (created by this author) was also utilized, as an augmentation to the aforementioned primary assessment instruments.

**ENRICH**

The primary outcome measure used in this study was ENRICH Version 2000 (Olson, 1996). Based upon their theoretical and psychometric criteria pertaining to usefulness in educational and counseling settings, Larson, Holman, Klein, Busby, Stahmann, & Peterson (1995) found that the PREPARE/ENRICH assessment questionnaires were the best available to educators and counselors. The foundational theory behind the program is that in order to empower couples, the focus must be on strong marriages, and analyzing the differences between happy and unhappy marriages (i.e., a strength-based focus) (Olson, & Olson, 2000a). The program, as a whole, is based upon empirically tested assessment inventories, and combines a cognitive-behavioral, didactic and experiential, orientation.

ENRICH has 165 multifaceted statements and 30 background questions, printed in a questionnaire booklet. Participants were asked to record their answers on a separate answer sheet, using a five-point Likert Scale: 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The statements assess 13 key domains of marital functioning: (1) marital satisfaction, (2) personality issues, (3) communication, (4) conflict resolution, (5) financial management, (6) leisure activities, (7) sexual relationship, (8) children and parenting, (9) family and friends, (10) equalitarian roles, (11) spiritual beliefs, (12) marital adaptability, (13) marital cohesion.

The Counselor Report also includes several unique scores: (a) Positive Couple Agreement Scores (PCA)
for each area, (b) an individual Idealistic Distortion Score, and (c) an Individual Revised Percentile Scores (male and female) for each area. These scores combine into five Marital Types (Vitalized, Harmonious, Traditional, Conflicted, and Devitalized), and are defined in numerous articles (Olson & Fowers, 1993; Olson & Olson, 2000a; Olson & Olson, 2000b). Four personality issues are also simultaneously assessed: assertiveness, self-confidence, avoidance (tendency to minimize issues) and partner dominance (perception of how much a partner tries to control one’s life).

In this study, the results of the ENRICH pretests/posttests were compared and analyzed primarily for research purposes (i.e., the computer generated couple reports were not directly used during the Empowering Couples program sessions). Nonetheless, couples were offered the opportunity to request a private follow-up couple report consultation with the researcher, within 30 days of retreat program completion.

The ENRICH inventory has strong psychometric properties, making it a valuable tool for field (e.g., workshop, retreats), clinical, and research purposes. Each of the 20 scales in ENRICH have been assessed for alpha reliability and test-retest reliability. Internal consistency estimates range from .73 to .90 for ENRICH (Olson, 1996; Olson & Olson, 2000a). ENRICH has also been shown to have excellent construct and discriminant validity. Fowers & Olson (1989) found that ENRICH is able to discriminate between happily married and unhappily married couples with about 85-95% percent accuracy, based upon their study of 5,039 couples who took ENRICH as part of marital therapy or marital enrichment programs.

Stages of Change Questionnaire

The Stages of Change Questionnaire (SOCQ), and a similar version called the Stages of Change Scale (SCS), is a 32-item self-report instrument with four subscales: precontemplation, contemplation, action, and maintenance. The scales were originally developed by generating items based upon Prochaska and DiClemente’s (1982) transtheoretical model (TTM) of how change occurs. Inter-rater reliability and factor analyses have yielded a final factor of four 8-item scales. Internal consistency reliabilities for subscales have ranged from .79 to .89 (McConnaughy, Prochaska, & Velicer, 1983). Previous studies have yielded intercorrelations from -.52 for Pre-contemplation and Contemplation to .53 for Contemplation and Action. Consistent with the original theory, McConnaughy, et al. (1989) noted that adjacent stages are most highly correlated and that the others are “somewhat related, but not highly redundant”. The SOCQ uses a 5-point, Likert-type response format: 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Participants rate statements that describe how they feel as they initiate treatment (i.e., counseling, or in this case marriage enrichment). A total score, possible range = 8-40, is calculated for each subscale.

TTM and versions of the SOCQ have been defined, examined, adapted, and applied to numerous special populations and workshops (e.g., sexual behaviors and practices, mammography, smoking cessation, substance abuse, dieting and nutrition, weight loss, eating disorders, general health promotion, disease prevention, exercise, fitness training, organizational change, skin cancer prevention, medical compliance, dental hygiene, stress management, domestic violence, social work, parenting skills, in-patient psychiatric care, and various psychotherapy programs) (Prochaska,
et al., 1998; Bellis, 1993; Spoth, et al., 1995; O'Hare, 1996; Rochlen, et al., 2001; Astrot, et al., 2002; Zimmerman, Olsen & Bosworthy, 2000; Scott & Wolfe, 2003).

According to common factors scholars, change occurs because treatment activates a series of common change mechanisms that are believed to operate in all effective programs of change. Given the fact that central to all marriage enrichment programs is "change", the case may be made that such a common factor (e.g., readiness for change), might also mediate marriage enrichment program outcomes, and should therefore be identified when possible (Lambert & Bergin, 1994; Spreckle, 2002; Petrocelli, 2002).

However, to date, there has been practically no effort to specifically apply the TTM, or any version of its readiness to change scale, to marriage enrichment programs in either secular or faith-based settings. Researchers have not addressed the possibility that participants in marriage enrichment programs might enter such programs at very different stages of readiness for change.

Although not conducted in a church setting, Worthington, Kurusu, Collins, Berry, et al., (2000) tested their hypothesis that stage of change would mediate changes in forgiveness among a group of introductory psychology students at Virginia Commonwealth University. While their findings did not support their

| TABLE 1 |

**ECP Combined Treatment Groups 1 & 2**

Changes from Pre-test to Post-test Using Male, Female, & PCA Scores (n=26 couples)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MALE Scores</th>
<th>FEMALE Scores</th>
<th>Couple Scores (PCA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n = 26 males</td>
<td>n = 26 females</td>
<td>n = 26 couples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>Post</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage Satisfaction</td>
<td>56.31</td>
<td>57.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality Issues</td>
<td>43.81</td>
<td>44.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>47.46</td>
<td>49.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>46.23</td>
<td>47.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Management</td>
<td>56.69</td>
<td>54.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure Activities</td>
<td>35.88</td>
<td>35.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Relationship</td>
<td>46.69</td>
<td>49.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children &amp; Parenting</td>
<td>61.92</td>
<td>68.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>59.85</td>
<td>59.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Relationship</td>
<td>45.38</td>
<td>51.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Beliefs</td>
<td>71.04</td>
<td>73.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple Closeness</td>
<td>61.00</td>
<td>51.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple Flexibility</td>
<td>52.46</td>
<td>60.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2-tailed significance levels:
* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001; No star = Not Significant.
hypothesis, and their efforts to move participants from one stage of change to another stage of change were largely unsuccessful, their research efforts more importantly represent the continued need for additional study in this area. As such, their efforts served as a prolepsis for the current Empowering Couples study regarding the relationship, interaction, and/or impact of “readiness for change” and various ENRICH outcome measures.

The major study hypothesis related to the basic notion that Empowering Couples would enhance couple/individual scores on the ENRICH Inventory. Using the multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA), the between-groups factors in this analysis were treatment status (treatment group vs. wait-list control group) and gender. The covariate was pretest ENRICH Positive Couple Agreement scores (PCA scores), and the dependent variable was posttest PCA scores. While between groups analyses (MANOVA) confirmed minimal differences (Wilks’ \( \lambda = .001, F (2, 28) = .682, P < .05 \)) subsequent Paired t-test analyses identified numerous statistically significant treatment effects.

Using the t-test, Treatment Group One showed statistically significant improvement in 53.33% (8 out of 15) of the assessed domains. Treatment Group Two showed statistically significant improvement in only 6.66% (1 out of 15) of the assessed domains. Treatment Group One males showed improvement in 10% of the assessed domains, whereas the females improved in 50% of the assessed domains. Treatment Group Two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENRICH Domain</th>
<th>Combined Treatment Groups 1 &amp; 2 Effect Size &amp; % of Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marr. Satisfaction</td>
<td>.17 +7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality Issues</td>
<td>.45 -17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>.09 -4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>.16 +8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Mgmt.</td>
<td>.17 +7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure Activities</td>
<td>.42 -16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Relationship</td>
<td>.07 -3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children &amp; Parentg.</td>
<td>.95 +32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>.17 -5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Relationship</td>
<td>.21 +5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Beliefs</td>
<td>.21 +4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple Closeness</td>
<td>.02 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple Flexibility</td>
<td>.47 +13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Closeness</td>
<td>.24 -11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Flexibility</td>
<td>.46 -22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
males and females, alike, showed improvement in one domain, respectively. Control Group participants showed improvement in only one domain (female: family closeness).

Combining the two treatment groups, it was found that males significantly improved in 2 of the 13 scales; females improved in 9 of the 13 scales and the couple scores improved in 6 of the 13 scales, as reported in Table 1. Using the couple scores, couples significantly improved in their marital satisfaction, conflict resolution, children and parenting, spiritual beliefs, couple closeness, and couple flexibility.

Post-test treatment effect sizes (ES) on ENRICH PCA couple scores were computed according to Thalheimer and Cook (2002). Treatment Group One showed statistically significant improvement in post-intervention effect sizes for 9 of the 15, or 60% of the ENRICH domains measured. Treatment Group Two showed statistically significant improvement in post-intervention effect sizes for 5 of the 15, or 33% of the ENRICH domains measured. A combined treatment group analysis revealed gains in 7 of the 15 assessed domains (i.e., 46% of the assessed relationship domains) as reported in Table 2. Decreased scores were also herein observed. Not uncommon in enrichment program research, such decreases may indicate marital deterioration and, thus, may warrant careful attention and specific follow-up strategies (Doherty, Lester, & Leigh, 1986). Decreased scores may also indicate increased self-awareness and may actually indicate initial necessary steps toward positive change. Either case may require

---

**FIGURE 1**
*Couple Types at Pre-test & Post-test (Combined Treatment Groups 1 & 2)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vital</th>
<th>Harmon.</th>
<th>Trad.</th>
<th>Conf.</th>
<th>Devit.</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vital</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 (10%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmon.</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trad.</td>
<td>3 (27.9%)</td>
<td>5 (26.3%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conf.</td>
<td>2 (35%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devit.</td>
<td>1 (62.5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Legend:**
- = Couple increases one couple type or more (9 couples; 35.6%)
- = Couple stays the same at pre and post (15 couples; 57.6%)
- = Couple decreases one couple type or more (2 couples; 7.6%)
special follow-up with such couples.

Thus, while the major expectation of this between groups study was initially confirmed at minimal levels of significance, subsequent analysis found support for statistically significant changes within groups. Therefore, differences between treatment group and control group ENRICH scores did occur.

Changes in Couple Type
The ENRICH inventory assesses for five married couple relationship types, which range from the most happy to the most unhappy: Vitalicized, Harmonious, Traditional, Conflicted and Devitalized. Among combined treatment group couples, 93% either maintained the same type or improved their couple type; 36% moved up one or more couple types (100% of the Vitalized couples stayed the same); 25% of the Harmonious couples moved up one level to the Vitalicized type; 37.5% of the Traditional Couples moved up two levels to Vitalized. Lastly, 37.5% of the Conflicted couples and 67% of the highest risk couples, the Devitalized type, moved up one or more levels (12.5% and 33.3%, respectively, of the Conflicted and Devitalized couples moved up to Vitalized, the strongest relationship type), as reported in figure 1.

Readiness for Change Scores
A second major study hypothesis, related to the notion that Empowering Couples would enhance Readiness for Change Scores. The study attempted to assess the level of readiness for change among participants, and hypothesized that the Empowering Couples program would move participants to higher stages of change. The Stage of Change Questionnaire (SOCQ) mean scores were used to identify the stage of change for each participant. Unfortunately, all but two participants scored in the “Contemplative” stage at pre-test. As with Worthington’s et al., (2000) treatment efforts to move participants from one stage of change to another stage of change, this treatment was likewise unable to move participants from one stage of change to another. As a result, the study was unable to complete additional planned analyses regarding these areas.

While changes in SOCQ scores measured at a 4-month follow-up revealed no statistically significant overall change, a supplemental analysis was undertaken using the Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) in order to identify any differences in change by gender. A statistically significant main effect was observed in the between-groups data set regarding gender (F (1.155) = 0.038, P < .05, and in the within-groups data set, F (1, 91) = 12.143, P < .05). Female subjects showed more overall readiness to change than males. These gender differences appear consistent with the aforementioned MANOVA and Paired t-test results. These results clearly indicate that differences between male and female readiness for change scores occurred.

Follow-up Satisfaction Surveys
A follow-up questionnaire was conducted, as an augmentation to the aforementioned empirical design. Approximately 56% (29 of the 52 individuals who completed the retreat program) responded to this 4-month follow-up “Satisfaction Survey”, conducted via mail. A majority (66%) of the respondents described the Empowering Couples text as “Generally Interesting” to “Very Interesting.” Almost three-quarters (76%) of these participants indicated that they found the EC program as a whole to be “Generally” to “Very Interesting.” When asked if they would recommend
the program to friends, 90% of the respondents answered yes. When asked whether they preferred: a weekend format; a 10-week format; a combination (weekend-plus-10 week follow-up) program, participants greatly preferred the weekend (73%), then the combination (24%) and least only the 10 week format (4%).

Limitations
Although the study used random assignment of couples to treatment and waitlist group conditions, this was not a true random sample of the population. It was a small sample of couples referred or coming voluntarily to a church-sponsored marriage enrichment retreat program. With the exception of three Hispanic-Latino couples, and three African-American couples, the sample included mainly middle-class Caucasian subjects. The sample was somewhat skewed in terms of mean years of marriage, 11.7. Further research is, therefore, needed with a larger multicultural sample that would allow for investigation of program impact with couples of different ages, ethnicity, years married, or religious orientation. Generalization of the findings may, therefore, be somewhat limited by these factors.

Another limitation of the study was in the area of fidelity of delivery. Lesson plans (presentations) were scripted for each topic presented during the two retreats. Although presenters were faithful to these scripts, there was no objective evaluation of topic fidelity. Variance was observed, and appeared practically unavoidable, given the nature of retreat group dynamics (e.g., spontaneous discussions and interaction, which in turn impacted time available for each topic). Since presenters were responsible for presenting at both retreats, "presenter fatigue" may also have influenced program delivery quality (presentations for treatment group two would, perhaps, be more at risk for this factor). This, too, may have influenced program results, within and between groups.

Furthermore, the small effect sizes observed may have been the result of several factors: (a) time limitations imposed upon the weekend retreat schedule, rather than limitations within the Empowering Couples material itself and/or, (b) limitations due to possible test fatigue, (c) readiness for change variance, and (d) a test-retest ceiling-effect. While we have a general estimate of the "amount of therapy needed", i.e. "dose effect", in terms of marital therapy, dose effect may also prove to be a promising area for future marriage enrichment research.

Dose effect, in this case, has to do with the minimum number of enrichment sessions required in general, or the minimum subject areas of a particular program required to achieve a statistically significant desired effect. Couples had minimal topic-presentation time periods (approximately nine hours of presentations) and/or opportunity to interact during the condensed weekend format. Thus, they may not have had enough opportunity to receive valuable feedback (from partner, retreat leader, or other couples) in order to make desired attitudinal or behavioral (change) adjustments. This appears consistent with Davis, Hovestadt, Piercy, and Cochran (1982), who reported that weekly marriage enrichment groups may be superior to intensive weekend groups.

Test fatigue, also, may have contributed to the decrease in outcomes noted in Treatment Group Two, in that this group completed the ENRICH Inventory three times, and the SOCQ assessment four times, during the course of this study. Some couples apparently
mistakenly assumed the assessments were intended as part of the Empowering Couples program and, subsequently, criticized such repetitive assessments.

The small and mixed effect sizes observed in this study may still be significant for such retreat programs, as long as they are replicable in future studies. For example, Ripley, Parrott, Worthington, and Parrott (2000) reported similarly small effect sizes for their weekend program (around .20 or above). Therefore, future outcome studies might examine single-retreat, or combinations of weekend and multi-week Empowering Couples program formats, and/or seek to minimize repetitive use of the assessments with participants. Small changes may also be significant in that they may indicate the foundational “stepping stones”, upon which continued change in such relationship areas may be built (Ripley, Parrott, Worthington, & Parrott, 2000).

Regarding the possible impact of readiness for change among participants, although this study was unable to fully examine this potential common factor, the differences noted among males and females may, nonetheless, represent one of the influences that subsequently led to the somewhat limited gains noted among the respective treatment groups.

**Implications for Future Research**

Despite these limitations, this initial research effort represents success in bridging the lamented gap that exists between researchers and the front lines of intervention (Stanley, Bradbury, & Markman, 2000; Sprengle, 2002; Ripley, 2003). While Stanley and Markman (1995) have made great advances in bringing empirically validated prevention and enrichment programs out of university-based laboratories and into the communities of need, including but not limited to faith-based communities, their efforts are clearly not sufficient. This study represents, perhaps, the first experimental study on the Empowering Couples Program, the first such study to be conducted in a faith-based setting (a Pentecostal community), and the first experimental study to apply the SOCQ to the marriage enrichment process.

As such, this study represents an important step towards building the critical bridges between scientist-practitioner, field research and practice in the field, and between campus and congregation in, hopefully, at least three ways. First, by implementing the ENRICH inventory as a pretest-posttest measure of effectiveness, this study focused the need to field test marriage enrichment programs such as Empowering Couples in faith-based settings, in order to identify credible outcomes and to supply useful material for counselor educators who are interested in a growing marriage enrichment specialty area (Deacon & Sprengle, 2001).

Secondly, by identifying “assessment outcomes” and “enrichment effects”, not heretofore recognized, “readiness for change” may become a variable worthy of additional attention by providers of marriage enrichment programs. Understanding this variable may prove significant for improving or expanding future program and assessment strategies. Thirdly, this study also represents a nascent step toward exploring the application of the SOCQ (i.e., readiness for change as a “common factor”, for utilization among marriage enrichment programs in general, and in faith-based settings in particular).

Clearly evidenced-based marriage enrichment is a growing field. Although it has taken decades to reach the current status, the field is poised for a quantum leap as emerging scientist-practitioner
paradigms converge with advances in research methodologies and design, and postmodern ideas of collaborative ventures with clients, scientists, practitioners, ministers, and various faith-based organizations on the local, national, and international levels. These advances, and this study, represent an early prolepsis into the maturing of a critical, albeit nascent, marriage enrichment specialty. To this end, the Empowering Couples program is worthy of inclusion in the expanding body of evidenced-based marriage enrichment programs.

R.W. Vince Arnold, D.Min., Ed.D., LPC is an active duty U.S. Navy Captain currently serving as Group Chaplain, 2d MLG, Camp Lejeune, NC, and is endorsed by the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, Inc. He is a Clinical Member of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (AAMFT), Diplomate, American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress (AAETS), North Carolina Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), and Seminar Director, Life Innovations, Inc. He can be reached at drarnold@ec.rr.com.


Doherty, W., Lester, M., & Leigh, G. (1986). Marriage Encounter weekends:

Marriage & Family: A Christian Journal


