

Evaluation of a Marriage Preparation Program Using Mentor Couples

Steven A. Wages, Ph.D., CFLE
Abilene Christian University

Carol Anderson Darling, Ph.D., CFLE
Florida State University

An evaluation of a marriage preparation program determined the effect of integrating 3 intervention strategies including (1) didactic instruction, (2) mentor couples, and (3) homework communication exercises using the PREPARE Inventory. Premarital couples improved on 9 of 11 PREPARE categories which demonstrated that they developed more realistic expectations of their partner, identified their strengths and weaknesses as a couple, increased their skills at resolving differences, and related to each other in more positive ways. The design of the program was highly effective for helping premarital couples evaluate their choice of a marriage partner, assess their readiness to marry, and prepare for the challenges they will face during the early years of married life. The program demonstrated the value of mentor couples and skill building exercises.

A significant number of married couples experience serious conflict during the first few years of their marital relationship, as indicated by the high rate of marital disruption early into marriage. A recent report by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) noted that approximately 24% of marital disruptions occurred before the third anniversary, 32% of couples who separated or divorced did so by the fourth year, and 40% of all marital dissolutions occurred within the first five years of marriage (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). The typical marital disruption occurred within the first seven years of marriage with over 50% of all marriages eventually ending in divorce.

The prevalence of early marital distress is indicative of two significant problems relative to the mate selection process and the formation of loving relationships (1) poor choice of

a marriage partner, and (2) poor preparation for married life. Further, the high rate of marital distress and divorce, especially within the first few years of marriage, suggest that few premarital couples successfully anticipate the difficulties they are likely to encounter and/or simply lack the skills to resolve conflicts that inevitably arise. Clearly, couples are not adequately prepared to deal with the challenges of married life (Berger & Hannah, 1999; Olson & Olson, 1999). Attempts to reduce the rate of marital difficulties and divorce have given rise to a variety of marriage preparation programs designed to equip couples for the early years of marriage.

There is considerable evidence that relationships that become troubled within the first few years of married life contain the seeds of that distress prior to marriage. Various studies provide data that group differences in marital

satisfaction and stability, or conversely, marital distress and dissolution, are relatively predictable based on factors indicative of premarital relationship quality (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993). The prevalence of problems early into marriage underscores the need for preventive interventions that address potential issues before they become problems and the need to equip couples with the necessary skills and insights to handle future difficulties. It has been demonstrated that premarital interventions increase a couple's ability to confront and resolve issues in a manner that enhances their readiness for marriage and continued commitment to the relationship (Berger & Hannah, 1999).

Efforts to reduce the occurrence of divorce and its consequences have fostered numerous premarital counseling and educational programs. Generally, the design of marriage preparation programs involves four primary procedures. First, factors that relate to marital success need to be identified. Second, couples need to be assessed on those critical variables. Third, information and exercises need to be provided to couples to help them deal with problem areas. Fourth, couples need skill-building exercises focusing on communication and conflict resolution skills. In addition, it is suggested that premarital programs employ an instrument or questionnaire to assess those factors that are critical to the development of premarital relationships and are predictive of later marital satisfaction and stability (Berger & Hannah, 1999; Olson & Olson, 1999).

Marriage preparation programs vary greatly in content, duration, format, and other factors that influence the effectiveness of each intervention strategy. A comprehensive review of

contemporary preventive approaches in couples' therapy identified 13 premarital and marital intervention programs (Berger & Hannah, 1999). Most of these programs incorporated didactic instruction and experiential exercises in a group setting. Only a few of these programs, such as PREPARE/ENRICH and "Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts" (SYMBIS) utilized a formal assessment instrument to evaluate the relationship dynamics of premarital couples. Two programs, the "Caring Couples Network" (CCN) and SYMBIS, used married couples as mentors for premarital couples.

Couples often perceive tension or experience anxiety and uncertainty with some aspect of their relationship without being able to clearly identify the difficulty. A formal assessment instrument can facilitate the process of marriage preparation by orienting premarital couples to salient relationship issues and by prompting them to discuss these issues both within and outside the enrichment setting. Thus, an opportunity is provided for secondary prevention, in which early recognition of incipient distress leads to the prevention of more serious difficulties after marriage (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996). As such, incorporating a standardized assessment instrument into a marriage preparation program may have a greater impact upon a couple's awareness and discussion of their relationship dynamics than only utilizing instructional approaches.

Mentoring as a preventive intervention derives from the basic assumption that premarital couples can benefit from observing and interacting with couples who are models of successful marriages. The primary activity or procedure involves an interpersonal relationship between couples in which

married mentors share their insights and experiences. It is believed that couples learn from these role models by observing their styles of interaction and modes of resolving conflicts (Hunt & Hunt, 1999). However, empirical evaluation of mentoring programs has usually been limited to informal, anecdotal reports of couples helping other couples.

The purpose of this study was to conduct an evaluation of the marriage preparation program entitled "Fit To Be Tied" to assess the effectiveness of the program in accomplishing stated goals regarding the relationship quality and readiness for marriage of a group of premarital couples. This program was chosen for study because the integration of three disparate intervention strategies was distinctive and innovative as a premarital intervention strategy. These methods included:

(1) didactic instruction with group exercises, (2) married couples as mentors for premarital couples, and (3) homework communication exercises using the PREPARE Inventory.

Methodology

Program Design

To be effective, the design of marriage preparation and enrichment interventions should involve three basic steps: the presentation or *teaching* of a relational concept, the *modeling* of the concept by the group leader or couple, and the *application* of the concept to their own relationship by the couples within the group (Mace, 1983). Accordingly, the "Fit To Be Tied" program utilized a multi-method approach to teach, to model, and to apply relational concepts as follows.

(1) *Didactic instruction/group exercises*. Each content area of the program was introduced in a "mini-lecture" by one of the leaders who then asked premarital

couples to participate in an activity designed either to teach new insights or build relationship skills. Couples completed the activities individually or with their mentors and then shared aspects of their experiences with the entire group.

(2) *Mentoring*. Each premarital couple was paired with a married mentor couple who participated in each session of the program. Group leaders facilitated learning by asking mentor couples to share their experiences or insights related to each content area with their assigned premarital couple. Mentor couples identified problems they had faced and modeled how difficult issues were resolved. In addition to sharing important values and beliefs, mentors modeled the expression of caring behaviors toward one another. Mentor couples encouraged and challenged prospective spouses to learn or to perform new behavioral repertoires.

(3) *Homework communication exercises using PREPARE*. A formal assessment of each premarital couple's relationship using the Premarital Personal and Relationship Evaluation (PREPARE) Inventory (Olson, 1999) was utilized to educate participating couples about relevant interpersonal issues specific to their relationship. The PREPARE Inventory assessed strength and growth areas for 11 relational categories by identifying couple differences and areas of indecision. Each premarital couple completed a weekly homework exercise in which they *applied* the communication skills learned in class to resolve significant couple differences and areas of indecision in their relationship as identified by PREPARE. They then completed a report card whereby they graded one another on a scale from A to F on nine items designed to assess the effectiveness of their communication styles (e.g., not interrupting me, keeping calm).

The multi-method approach employed by the "Fit To Be Tied" program addressed a variety of relational topics and employed a number of procedures and exercises to actively involve participants. There were eight weekly, two-hour sessions that included the following content:

Session 1: Introduction and relationship assessment. The goal of this session was to provide participants with an overview of the program, to strengthen their commitment to program objectives, and to complete relationship assessments for both premarital and mentor couples. Whereas the PREPARE Inventory was used to assess each premarital couple's relationship, married couples completed the ENRICH Inventory in order to assess their relationship strength and qualifications to serve as mentors. The class instructor used the couple typology according to the PREPARE/ENRICH assessments, natural connections, and other similarities to pair premarital and mentor couples.

Session 2: Marriage expectations. This session was designed to help each person understand how family of origin issues may affect the marriage. The exercise, "House Rules," allowed each participant to identify the unspoken rules and roles in their family of origin with respect to decision-making, recreation, traditions, expression of affection, domestic tasks, careers, parenting, and resolving conflicts. Prospective spouses were given an opportunity to openly discuss their expectations of one another, to define roles, and to negotiate the rules that govern interpersonal behaviors and married life. The exercise, "Marriage Makers/Marriage Breakers," allowed premarital couples and their mentors to share specific caring behaviors with one another.

Session 3: Communication. The goal of this session was to equip premarital

couples with effective communication skills including an ability to share important beliefs and emotions with one another. Couples were made aware of differences in male/female communication styles and were trained to use the Complete Communication Model (Miller, Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1991). Topics were identified to give participants an opportunity to practice expressing their thoughts, feelings, wants, and actions in a straightforward, nonjudgmental manner.

Session 4: Conflict resolution/problem solving. The goal of this session was to examine the role of conflict in relationships and to develop effective decision-making and problem-solving strategies. The Simple 1-2-3 Model of Communication was used to explain how to avoid conflicts that arise from differences in male/female communication styles. The exercise, "Do Opposites Attract or Attack?" allowed couples to identify relationship differences that could lead to potential conflicts and demonstrated how couple differences could actually be used to facilitate change and build intimacy when conflicts were handled in a constructive manner. The group explored four destructive patterns of conflict management, including escalation, avoidance, negative interpretation, and invalidation, and identified rules or strategies for avoiding these patterns. The "Four C's for Resolving Differences" demonstrated how most conflicts can be resolved via coexistence, capitulation, compromise, or collaboration. In addition, participants were provided a nine-step model of mutual decision-making/problem-solving to use in resolving an issue confronting their relationship.

Session 5: Personality and power. This session was designed to help premarital couples understand how individual personality issues are related to underlying

couple dynamics. Couples completed and discussed an abbreviated version of the Myers-Briggs Temperament Indicator (MBTI), which explained the interactional and relational styles of various personality types. In addition, couples examined four personality traits as assessed by the PREPARE Inventory including assertiveness, self-confidence, avoidance, and partner dominance. The instructor explained the role of assertiveness and self-confidence in decreasing the negative aspects of avoidance and partner dominance.

Session 6: Intimacy and sexuality. In this session, couples explored the process by which intimacy forms in loving relationships and examined the physical and psychological components of sexual relations. The group leader discussed the importance of developing interpersonal intimacy across various domains including emotional, social, recreational, financial, and spiritual intimacy. Separate male and female group activities allowed individuals to express their feelings or concerns regarding sexual issues and to ask pertinent questions about sexual matters.

Session 7: Financial management. “The Meaning of Money” exercise was used to assess the meaning and use of money for each participant and to identify potential areas of conflict or difficulties associated with different money styles. Couples were provided basic money management rules and strategies and allowed to negotiate how financial decisions would be made. Forms for preparing a budget for the first year of married life were presented to provide the couples with a realistic view of their family finances. Significant issues such as balancing work and family life, career moves, and one’s standard of living were discussed by the group.

Session 8: Planning for the

future. During the final session a video clip from the television show “Home Improvement” was used to identify various factors that lead to dissatisfaction in marital relationships over time. The exercise, “Bricks to Build a Strong Marriage,” summarized strategies for building and maintaining a strong marriage including suggestions specifically designed to guard against factors that contribute to growing apart. Each premarital couple was asked to identify unreconciled differences and to contemplate the possible difficulties that these unresolved issues might present in the future. Finally, couples planning to marry were asked to reevaluate and reaffirm their decision.

Mentor Couples

The manner by which mentors, as role models, and group members influenced premarital couples occurred in two forms, both of which are consistent with the assumptions of social-learning and group-process theories. First, there was learning that involved direct or instrumental training wherein mentors and group leaders were relatively explicit about what they wanted the premarital couples to learn. For example, group leaders and mentor couples modeled the communication puzzle, as well as provided specific suggestions in response to the sexuality questions submitted by participants. A second style of learning was also evident in that the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of premarital participants were vicariously altered through active imitation of their mentor couples’ style of relating. Learning occurred even in the absence of the mentors’ deliberate attempts to teach. For example, in the case of one couple, the male stated that observing how the mentor couple shared equal roles had broken down his “male thinking” and had influenced him

to change the way he related to his partner.

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 11 premarital couples who responded to advertisements at a local university and the host church. Twenty of the premarital participants were between 20-25 years old and two individuals were over 30 years old. The group was entirely Caucasian, mostly Protestant, and mostly consisted of students who worked part-time. Twenty-one of the individuals had never been married and one participant had been previously married and divorced. Six of the couples indicated they planned to marry within the next three to six months, two within the next 7-12 months, and three couples did not plan to marry within the next year. No couples indicated they were currently cohabiting. Nearly half (five) of the couples had broken up or separated at some point in their relationship and two couples reported the occurrence of some degree of abuse in their relationship. Mentors consisted of married couples from the host church who completed the ENRICH Inventory in order to assess their relationship strength and qualifications to serve as mentors. In addition, mentors attended a two-hour training workshop as a condition of their participation.

Evaluation Measures

The PREPARE Inventory (Olson, 1999) was utilized to identify and measure the dynamics of each couple's relationship in 20 areas including 12 content scales, 4 personality scales, and 4 scales related to family-of-origin issues. The specific content areas addressed by the 165-item inventory included marriage expectations, personality, communication, conflict resolution, financial

management, leisure activities, sexual relationships, children and parenting, family and friends, role relationships, spiritual beliefs and idealistic distortion. The four personality scales assessed by the questionnaire included assertiveness, self-confidence, avoidance, and partner dominance. High reliability coefficients have been found for both alpha reliability and test-retest reliability on each of the PREPARE Inventory subscales. Alpha reliability or internal consistency coefficients for the instrument ranged from .75 to .85 ($n=1742$) and test-retest reliability coefficients ranged from .74 to .93 ($n=693$). Various methods utilized to assess the content, concurrent, construct and predictive validity of the PREPARE Inventory as a premarital assessment found the questionnaire to be "psychometrically sound" (Larson, Holman, Klein, Busby, Stahmann, & Peterson, 1995).

The Relationship Change Scale (RCS) (Guerney, 1977) was designed to be sensitive to changes in the quality of a couple's relationship and was utilized to measure the effects of the program on premarital relationship adjustment. Twenty-four items from the RCS were evaluated on a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. The RCS measured each couple's perception of improvements in their relationship quality over the time frame of the "Fit To Be Tied" program. Adequate reliability for purposes of group testing, as well as construct and concurrent validity, can be inferred from evidence that the RCS correlated with two measures designed to assess specific components of relationship change. There were significant correlations of the RCS with the Handling Problems Change Scale (.29, $p < .01$) and with the Satisfaction Change Scale (.49, $p < .001$).

A Weekly Evaluation Form (WEF) was used to collect quantitative data on a 5-point Likert-type scale to determine each participant's evaluation of the content, presentation, and achievement of specific participant outcomes for each session of the program. The Likert-type scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree for all items. Qualitative data were also obtained by asking participants to describe the most and least valuable aspects of each session, any suggestions they had for improving the session, as well as something they had learned that week from their mentors and the homework communication exercises.

A nonstandardized Self-Report Survey (SRS) consisting of 54 items scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale and six open-ended questions was designed to evaluate each participant's global satisfaction with the program and the helpfulness of the program's primary intervention strategies, particularly the use of mentor couples and the homework communication exercises. Responses to SRS items ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Procedures

The summative evaluation of the program was facilitated by having all premarital couples complete the PREPARE Inventory pre- and post-tests, along with the Relationship Change Scale and Self-Report Survey at the end of the program. The formative evaluation was facilitated by having each premarital participant and married mentor complete the Weekly Evaluation Form at the conclusion of each of the eight sessions. In addition, three premarital couples were interviewed prior to and again at the end of the program to collect additional qualitative data regarding the effectiveness of the

program's components and intervention strategies.

Results

Evaluation of Sessions

The formative evaluation of the program's didactic instruction revealed substantive achievement of the stated goals and participant outcomes for six of the eight sessions of the program. Premarital participants made suggestions for improving the content and/or presentation of each topic, particularly with respect to the program materials pertaining to Session 6: Intimacy and Sexuality, and Session 7: Financial Management. These two sessions did not adequately address important questions and concerns relevant to the needs of many of the premarital participants. The percentage or frequency of favorable responses (%FAV) was computed for each item designed to measure the participant outcomes or specific program goals for each session as summarized below.

Session 1: introduction. Participants indicated they understood the program requirements (%FAV=100), had a strong commitment to completing these requirements (%FAV=91), and clearly understood how to complete the PREPARE Inventory (%FAV=95).

Session 2: marriage expectations. Participants indicated they were more knowledgeable of personal behaviors that could either hurt or strengthen their relationship (%FAV=91) and they were more aware of how family of origin differences could affect their relationship (%FAV=87). One person suggested that this session focus less on how each person's family of origin functioned and more directly on how partners will address or negotiate the various roles and tasks of married life.

Session 3: communication skills. The

communication skills training was highly effective as participants indicated they could identify the components of effective speaking skills (%FAV=95), that they had successfully practiced the complete communication model (%FAV=95), and they were better prepared to express feelings and share wants and needs with their partner (%FAV=90). Though participants reported an awareness of ineffective communication styles (%FAV=100), they had not acquired a knowledge of specific listening skills. The usefulness of the Complete Communication Model was noted by one participant who said, "Practicing using the communication cycle helped me better understand that there is way more that I need to communicate than just how I feel." As stated by other participants, "We do all right when we talk to each other the right way" or "I learned I can keep my cool, but I need to work on not interrupting my partner."

Session 4: conflict management. This session appeared to be highly effective as participants indicated they were more knowledgeable of destructive patterns of conflict management (%FAV=94) and rules for avoiding such patterns (%FAV=89). They had identified personal differences that could lead to conflict (%FAV=83) and indicated that they had acquired strategies for resolving interpersonal differences or difficulties (%FAV=95). Perhaps more importantly participants had applied problem-solving strategies to a relationship issue they faced (%FAV=77). Understanding how personal differences can be a catalyst for change received the lowest evaluation (%FAV=72) because the group leader did not complete all of the material in this area.

Session 5: personality and power. This session helped premarital participants become more aware of their personality

types and preferences (%FAV=95) and, most importantly, helped them assess how personality preferences impacted their relationship (%FAV=95). Participants understood the importance of evaluating power dynamics in their relationship (%FAV=100) and an awareness of the difference between a collaborative and a competitive marriage (%FAV=81).

Session 6: intimacy and sexuality. Participant responses to individual items regarding intimacy and sexuality were clearly lower than the other sessions. One of the primary goals of this session was to answer participants' personal questions about sexual relationships. However, this outcome received the lowest evaluation (%FAV=57) of the group. Similarly, participants gave a less than favorable evaluation regarding the opportunity they had to evaluate their personal attitudes about sex (%FAV=65). In addition, the degree of knowledge participants acquired about sexual relationships including differences in male/female sexual expectations was less than expected (%FAV=76). Participants did report they were more knowledgeable of different types of interpersonal intimacy (%FAV=85), could identify behaviors that build intimacy (%FAV=85) and behaviors that undermine or preclude intimacy with one's partner (%FAV=90). There were mixed reviews on the separate men's and women's group discussions of sexuality, with the men's "bull session" receiving a much more favorable review. Female respondents were upset that the responses were vague, "Although some of the women may be embarrassed at first, I think all of us would appreciate some blunt answers."

Session 7: financial management. The financial management exercises were effective in helping participants understand their style of using money

(%FAV=94) and potential difficulties they may face in managing money (%FAV=100). However, most couples had not prepared a budget for the first year of married life (%FAV=27), an important goal of this session. Understanding how they would make financial decisions as a couple (%FAV=72) and couples expressing their expectations for balancing work and family life (%FAV=72) represented additional areas of potential improvement. Premarital participants expressed concern "with immediate financial situations" and strongly recommended that they "actually write out a budget."

Session 8: planning for growth. This session received very strong evaluations as premarital participants reported an intent to evaluate or to examine their readiness for marriage (%FAV=100) and an intent to reconsider or to affirm their relationship plans (%FAV=95). Participants indicated a willingness to examine their level of commitment to one another (%FAV=100) and to address any significant issues in their relationship that remained unresolved (%FAV=100). Finally, premarital participants signified a knowledge of factors that foster couples growing apart over time (%FAV=95) and an awareness of specific strategies for maintaining a strong and enduring marriage (%FAV=95).

Evaluation of Mentors

The majority of participants either strongly agreed (59%) or agreed (27%) that the utilization of mentor couples was a valuable and effective component of the program. As stated by one participant, "This was the most beneficial part of the experience. Our mentor couple was amazingly open with us and willing to give all they could to strengthen our relationship." Nearly 91% of premarital participants indicated that interacting

with their mentor couple provided them with a more realistic view of marriage and fostered their relating to each other in more positive ways. It is notable that approximately 80% of the premarital participants reported that their mentor couple effectively modeled how to resolve relational conflicts and helped them identify issues they had not previously discussed. One participant observed, "Just hearing their stories and experiences helped us combat future problems." Two-thirds of the premarital couples reported that interacting with their mentors had actually helped them resolve relationship issues they faced. One person noted, "They have tackled some of the same issues that concern us."

Mentors were most beneficial to premarital couples when they were open and honest, shared their own marital experiences, normalized relational difficulties, modeled interpersonal skills, and provided practical advice. They influenced premarital participants via both direct and vicarious or observational learning. However, there was evidence that the mentoring component of the program could be more effective in helping some couples identify and resolve specific relationship difficulties that needed to be addressed prior to marriage. Further, the married mentors indicated that they could benefit from additional training in the use and interpretation of the PREPARE Inventory results. Likewise, mentors desired further training in issues related to each content area or topic of the program.

Evaluation of Homework Communication Exercises Using PREPARE

The homework communication exercises utilizing the PREPARE Inventory assessments were a useful intervention strategy as approximately 80% of pre-

marital participants reported that the exercises helped them change ways they related to each other including being more sensitive to one another's feelings and relating in more positive ways. Over 90% of respondents indicated that the homework exercises provided a more realistic view of their strengths and weaknesses as a couple. The homework exercises revealed issues couples had not previously discussed and decreased areas of indecision and potential conflict in their relationship. Nearly three out of four participants suggested that the exercises increased their skills at resolving differences and over two-thirds reported that the exercises had actually helped them resolve relationship issues. A female participant stated,

My greatest weakness is in communicating. This class gave me the opportunity to discuss issues of all kinds with my partner in a non-threatening way. I grew up in an environment where things weren't discussed at all. It is still not easy, but after this class it is easier to discuss things and I am much more willing to do so.

A notable minority, approximately one-third, of the premarital participants did not take completion of the homework exercises seriously. This intervention strategy would be more effective if procedures were developed whereby premarital couples identified and discussed specific personal difficulties as part of the exercises. Though 90% of the participants supported the continued use of PREPARE as a catalyst for couple communication, it was evident that the couples needed to be provided additional topics and issues for their homework assignments.

Global Evaluation of Premarital Program

Over 75% of the premarital participants rated their experience as either very good or excellent and 95% found the topics to be either "very" or "extremely" relevant to their needs. With respect to how much they had learned, 86% of the respondents reported that they had learned either an exceptional amount (13.6%), very much (31.9%), or much more (40.9%) about marital relationships as a result of the program. Over 63% of the participants rated the usefulness of the program materials as either very good or excellent, however, the fact that one-third of the respondents only evaluated the materials as good would indicate components of the program (e.g., sexuality, finances) could be improved to meet the needs of some participants.

Substantive achievement of the stated goals and participant outcomes identified for the eight sessions of the program contributed to the satisfactory attainment of the 11 global goals of the marriage preparation program. Ninety-one percent of the premarital participants reported that they were better prepared to make a more knowledgeable decision about their readiness to marry, were able to make a more informed decision when choosing a marriage partner, and had developed more realistic expectations of their partner and married life. All of the premarital participants indicated that they could better recognize their strengths and weaknesses as a couple including being more aware of personal differences that may be problematic.

Seventy-seven percent of the couples had acquired communication and conflict resolution skills for resolving problems and nearly two out of three couples had confronted significant issues that needed to be resolved prior to

marriage. Approximately nine out of 10 participants reported that they had a better understanding of the difficulties of married life and were more knowledgeable of how to build and maintain a satisfying marital relationship. Similarly, nearly all of the premarital participants had reevaluated or affirmed their relationship plans and almost 90 % of couples indicated that they were more likely to seek help if they experienced relationship difficulties.

These findings indicated that the design of the program was a highly effective strategy for helping premarital participants evaluate their choice of a marriage partner and prepare for the challenges they will face during the early years of married life. However, a female participant provided an insightful observation regarding the areas that needed improvement, "The program was very helpful in pointing out things to be discussed or worked on, but not as good at giving practical methods or solutions for achieving the goals that were set. Two examples were finances, "great

goals, but no solutions or methods," and sex, "good theories for discussion, but no practical information."

Evaluation of Changes in Relationship Quality

Premarital couples who participated in the premarital program demonstrated meaningful improvement on multiple measures of relationship functioning and positive changes in factors predictive of future marital satisfaction and stability. An improved readiness for married life was indicated by a significant increase between pre- and post-tests scores on eight of the eleven relational categories measured by the PREPARE Inventory as summarized in Table 1.

The Relationship Change Scale (RCS) provided additional evidence of favorable changes in the relationship dynamics of the premarital couples. There were significant differences between observed and expected frequencies on 21 of 24 items assessed by the RCS. It was particularly noteworthy that over 95% of respondents reported that they were either more or much more concerned

Table 1 Summative Program Evaluation: PREPARE Inventory T-tests of Positive Couple Agreement (PCA) Scores

PREPARE Categories	PCA Scores		t	p
	Pre M	Post M		
Marriage Expectations	49.1	61.8	2.71	.022*
Personality Issues	41.8	56.4	1.99	.075
Communication	55.5	75.5	2.47	.033*
Conflict Resolution	46.4	62.7	2.37	.039*
Financial Management	27.3	50.9	2.55	.029*
Leisure Activities	53.6	67.3	2.14	.058
Sexual Expectations	53.6	66.4	2.43	.035*
Children/Parenting	68.2	82.7	5.16	.000*
Family and Friends	59.1	76.4	2.61	.026*
Role Relationships	70.0	77.3	1.20	.257
Spiritual Beliefs	81.8	91.8	2.47	.033*

Note: PCA scores are on a scale from 0 to 100.

n = 11 males and 11 females, df = 10,

* significant at $p \leq .05$

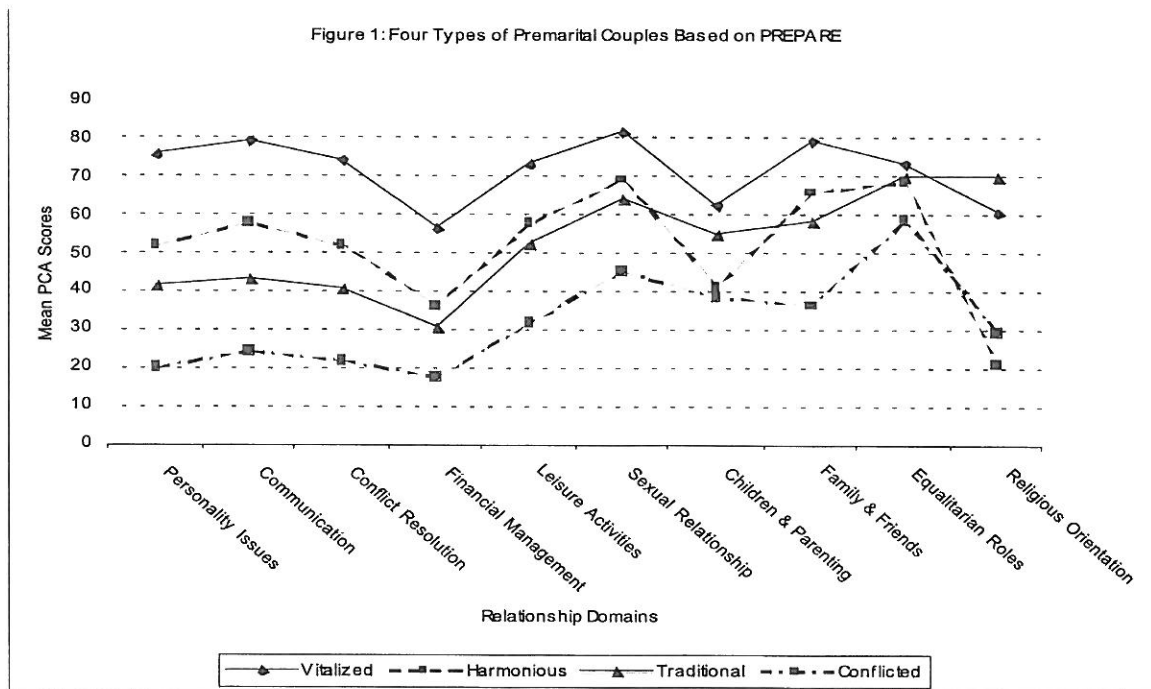
for their partner's happiness, including over half of the males who were much more concerned. Similarly, more than 95% of participants indicated a greater awareness of their partner's needs and an increased sensitivity to the other. A male respondent stated, "I think that each of us has been much more considerate of the other's needs."

Most of the respondents indicated an increased ability to express and deal with negative emotions more constructively and 86% said they had a greater ability to resolve disagreements more effectively. Couples reported a greater willingness to talk about difficult issues, actively listening to one another, and in general having more agreeable discussions "with less fighting and better understanding of each other." One female participant stated, "We really practice listening to each other when we have a disagreement, whether it is big or small. We try to understand each other's point of view before getting upset, thus avoiding a worse argument. Thanks

for that lesson." A female participant stated, "We are both more encouraging of each other as well as more open to different opinions and ideas that we may each have." One couple noted that they were spending more time together and having more fun. An important but perhaps unexpected change reported by a male participant was, "We are more forgiving of each other." Finally, several couples observed that they were more confident in the future of their relationship as demonstrated by one person who stated, "We are just plain happier."

Changes in Premarital Couple Types

Using data from 5,030 premarital couples who took PREPARE, an empirically based typology of engaged couples identified four types of premarital couples: Vitalized, Harmonious, Traditional, and Conflicted (see Figure 1) (Fowers & Olson, 1992). Longitudinal studies have found these premarital couple types to be predictive of later marital quality and stability. Vitalized couples reported a



high degree of overall relationship satisfaction and confidence in their ability to discuss feelings and resolve problems together. They represented the highest percentage of happily married couples (60%) and had a low percentage of separated and divorced couples (17%). Conversely, the Conflicted couples indicated distress on most PREPARE scales and subsequently reported the highest occurrence of separation/divorce (53%) and the least number of happily married couples (17%). Harmonious couples were found to emphasize the current internal harmony of their relationship and were characterized by a moderate level of overall relationship quality. Later studies indicated that 46% of Harmonious couples were happily married, 29% were unhappily married, and 25% reported being separated or divorced. Traditional couples exhibited a strong commitment to the relationship though they reported moderately low current relationship quality. As such, Traditional types had the highest percentage of unhappily married couples (50%), but the lowest percentage of separated or divorced couples (16%) (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996; Olson, 1999).

There were positive changes in the couple typology as measured by the PREPARE Inventory for 10 of the 11 premarital couples who participated in the marriage preparation program "Fit To Be Tied." At the time of the pre-test assessment, one of the premarital couples was classified as Vitalized, eight couples were identified as Traditional, and two couples were considered Conflicted. According to the post-test assessment, the Vitalized couple remained Vitalized and seven of the eight (87.5%) Traditional couples had become Vitalized. One of the Traditional couples had become Conflicted according to the post-test assessment; however, it is

noted that this couple broke off their relationship subsequent to completing the program. In addition, the typology of the two couples who were identified as Conflicted according to the pre-test PREPARE Inventory had improved to a Traditional assessment.

Evaluation of Personality Changes

Whereas personality characteristics were not clearly addressed in many existing marriage preparation programs that focused on modifying communication processes or behavioral exchanges (Bergner & Hannah, 1999), it is particularly noteworthy that the results of this study provided evidence that it is possible to design intervention strategies to address personality issues and foster changes in the intrinsic qualities of premarital participants. For example, personal changes were depicted in one mentor's description of a male participant, "At the beginning of the program he frequently said 'that is just the way I am,' but by the end of the program he didn't say that any more."

The PREPARE Inventory assessed four individual personality traits including the assertiveness scale which measured each participant's ability to express his or her thoughts, feelings, and personal needs. The self-confidence scale appraised how a person felt about himself/herself and the person's ability to control his or her life. The avoidance scale assessed each individual's tendency to minimize issues and his or her reluctance to deal with matters directly. Finally, the partner dominance scale evaluated how much one's partner tried to control or dominate his or her life. Each of the four personality traits was assessed as either very low, low, moderate, high, or very high for all premarital participants via pre- and post-test on the PREPARE Inventory. Successful couples

tend to be those in which both partners score high in assertiveness and self-confidence and low in avoidance and partner dominance (Olson, 1999).

Nine participants had pre-test scores on the assertiveness scale in the very low to moderate range. Post-test scores on the assertiveness scale were either high or very high for five (55.5%) of these participants. Six participants had pre-test scores on the self-confidence scale in the very low to moderate range. Self-confidence scores improved for three (50.0%) of these participants and remained unchanged for the other three. Only one premarital participant scored in the moderate to high range with respect to the premarital assessment of avoidance. The post-test assessment indicated the degree of avoidance for this individual had declined to very low. Four premarital participants had moderate to high pre-test scores on the partner dominance scale. The post-test assessment of partner dominance had declined to very low for three (75%) of these participants.

Discussion

The results of this study provided support for the design of marriage preparation and enrichment programs promulgated by David Mace (1983) when he suggested that the format of such interventions should entail three basic steps: (1) the presentation or *teaching* of a relational concept, (2) the *modeling* of the concept by the group leaders, and (3) the personal *application* of the concept to their own relationship by the participating couples. The "Fit To Be Tied" program successfully utilized a multi-method approach to teach, to model, and to apply relational concepts. Didactic or educational instruction increased the knowledge and skills of premarital couples regarding various

aspects of interpersonal relationships deemed critical to marital functioning. Mentoring couples functioned as role models and provided pertinent examples of the realities of married life and the dynamics of marital relationships for premarital participants. Homework exercises utilizing the PREPARE Inventory assessments facilitated the application of program materials and relational concepts to various dimensions of each premarital couple's relationship. However, the inherent limitations of both formal and informal programs that emphasize generalized education in relational concepts without some form of modeling and personal application of those concepts should be acknowledged. This study provided evidence of the benefits of utilizing a multi-method intervention strategy in the design of marriage preparation programs as opposed to educational or instructional approaches alone. The value of the multi-method approach was reflected in the statement of one participant, "It is easier to see it done and then do it, than for you to tell us this is what you should do and then do it."

The topics chosen and educational materials presented in the "Fit To Be Tied" program have substantial support in the literature for premarital interventions. However, it should be recognized that other subjects are worthy of inclusion and should be considered by marriage educators. Additional attention could be given to such topics as parenting, leisure activities, or role relationships, which were addressed only indirectly in the content of the program. In addition, it would appear that the premarital participants could benefit from a more extensive discussion of legitimate and illegitimate needs that are characteristic of healthy versus unhealthy relationships. Because the

needs of men and women can be very different, premarital couples should find it helpful to have a more comprehensive discussion of their specific personal needs.

The research findings supported the basic assumption that premarital couples can profit from observing and interacting with couples who are models of satisfying marriages. Mentors demonstrated a willingness to be more transparent and candid about their personal marital experiences and were more open about how they resolved different marital problems than one would typically expect to be acknowledged by ministers or therapists who provide premarital counseling services. One participant suggested that hearing everyone had problems from the mentors "helped me tear down some male thinking that I don't need help." In contrast to ministers and therapists, who do not typically involve their spouse's in counseling, mentor couples combined both the male and female perspectives regarding a variety of relationship issues. As previously discussed, mentors can also be a potential resource for post-wedding "counseling" or enrichment designed to assist newlywed couples with the ongoing transition to the realities of married life.

The effectiveness of mentoring as a preventive intervention in marriage preparation strongly implies the potential benefits of "couples helping couples" in other arenas of marriage and family enrichment. Mentors could be an effective intervention strategy utilized by family professionals who work with parents experiencing difficulties rearing their children during various stages of development. For example, experienced, seasoned parents who have launched children could serve as mentors for parents who are facing the transitions and

perils of adolescence. Similarly, mentors could be used as a primary, secondary, and/or tertiary prevention strategy for marriage and family professionals dealing with the unique and sometimes profound problems faced by couples in troubled marriages, stepfamilies, or single parent families.

Few premarital counseling and marriage preparation programs utilize a formal assessment instrument as an essential intervention strategy (Berger & Hannah, 1999). The results of this study provided evidence of the benefits of using premarital inventories or assessment devices as an intervention strategy in primary prevention efforts. The ability of many marriage preparation programs to facilitate real changes in the relationship dynamics of premarital couples could be enhanced by the use of a relationship assessment. First, participants supported the notion that the PREPARE Inventory helped them identify strengths and weaknesses in their relationship including specific issues that needed to be resolved before marriage. Upon seeing the results of the PREPARE Inventory, one premarital participant said, "I have a lot of work to do." Second, the homework communication exercises using the PREPARE Inventory constituted an intentional and structured strategy to stimulate premarital couples' discussion of significant matters both within and outside the setting of the "Fit To Be Tied" program. Third, used in conjunction with the homework communication exercises, the relationship assessment actually helped many premarital couples resolve important issues and areas of actual or potential conflict that could be the seeds of future marital distress. Identifying and confronting relationship difficulties that are predictive of subsequent marital instability may

contribute to couples at a high-risk of marital dissolution to reconsider their plans to marry, which is an important goal of premarital interventions.

The results of this study also have important implications regarding the relative importance of addressing personality issues when predicting marital outcomes. Though there is considerable evidence that individual personality traits have an impact on mate selection, as well as marital quality and stability, these personality characteristics are not clearly addressed in many existing marriage preparation programs that focus on modifying communication processes or behavioral exchanges (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Kelly & Fincham, 1999). Most premarital interventions attribute couple problems to a lack of communication and conflict resolution skills rather than personality issues or intrinsic qualities, because the latter are considered "less amenable to change" (Stanley, Markman, Peters, & Leber, 1995). As such, most marriage preparation programs emphasize helping couples develop communication skills and changing negative patterns of resolving interpersonal conflicts (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001).

Clearly, many of the negative behavior exchanges and interactional processes observed in distressed couples are the consequence of the personality characteristics or intrinsic qualities of the partners. Admittedly, many relationship problems or difficulties encountered by couples (e.g., personal finances, parenting, and/or sex) may represent a lack of skills or knowledge. However, intrinsic qualities such as a lack of concern for your partner's happiness; an insensitivity to your partner's feelings, wants, or needs; or a propensity to be selfish, critical, or domineering

demonstrate a lack of caring and could be defined as "heart issues." Certainly interactional processes and personality issues are intertwined and mutually influence one another. For example, a person who possesses communication skills, but has an uncaring attitude toward his/her partner is likely to be manipulative, defensive, critical, or even domineering in the relationship. Conversely, persons who possess the ability to be caring, understanding, patient, unselfish, sensitive, and compromising are likely to promote or to initiate positive behavioral exchanges.

Though further research is needed to explore the effect of marriage preparation programs on relationship dynamics that are indicative of underlying individual personality traits and qualities, the results of this initial study of the "Fit To Be Tied" program provided evidence that it is possible to design more effective intervention strategies to address personality issues and intrinsic qualities of premarital participants. One of the strengths of the multi-method approach utilized by the "Fit To Be Tied" program was its ability to address both cognitive and emotional issues. The mentor couples openly demonstrated caring behaviors in conjunction with group exercises in addition to interactions with their premarital couples outside the class. The homework exercises using the PREPARE Inventory not only allowed couples to practice communication skills, but also focused participants on the manner of their communications and caring aspects of their relationships. Reported changes in attitudes and caring behaviors by premarital couples strongly implied that greater attention to personality issues and intrinsic qualities that are predictive of future marital satisfaction and stability is warranted.

The results of this study indicated

that most premarital participants were willing to confront difficult relationship issues and should be encouraged and even challenged to do so. For example, though couples found the training in financial management skills to be helpful, they preferred to actually complete a personal budget and to address more specific and immediate financial concerns. Similarly, they wanted examples of how married mentors and group leaders resolved the sexual issues and concerns they had raised. These findings underscore the need for preventive interventions to be intentional about efforts to focus premarital couples on relationship difficulties they are experiencing.

There were several related research findings that pertained to interpersonal skills and insights, even though they were not a direct focus of the primary research questions. Females reported a greater willingness to share their personal concerns with their partners, while more men believed that the mentor couples and homework communication exercises had brought issues to light that they had not previously discussed as a couple. However, nearly twice as many females indicated that their mentor couples and the homework communication exercises had actually helped them resolve relationship issues that needed to be addressed. The reasons for these differences are unclear; however, it could be that females were more open about relationship difficulties than males, or simply, that the females had more issues with respect to their partners than vice versa. Another explanation could be that the support of a mentor couple may have helped the premarital couples resolve issues that female participants had previously attempted to address (i.e., unsuccessfully) with their male partners.

Nearly all of the participants

reported that interacting with their mentor couples had helped them relate to their partners in more positive ways and had provided them with a more realistic view of married life. However, the fact that considerably more men strongly agreed with these statements was indicative of a differential effect among males. A plausible explanation could be that the women already possessed a more realistic view of marriage and that the men observed themselves relating to their partners in more positive ways. A secondary benefit of the "Fit To Be Tied" program was that it provided a source of marriage enrichment to the participating mentor couples. Mentor couples described their involvement in the program as a "booster" for their marriage, serving to motivate them to be attentive to their own relationships and not to take one another for granted.

Limitations of Study

The methodology utilized for the formative and summative evaluation of the "Fit To Be Tied" program had several acknowledged limitations. Interpreting the results of this study and generalizing to other populations are limited because the demographics of the couples participating in the program were not representative of a larger population of premarital couples. Whereas most of the premarital participants appeared to have strong religious affiliations, there was little or no representation in the sample from the larger secular community. Similarly, considering all participants in the program were Caucasian, ethnic minorities were under-represented in the sample. Though several couples who were classified as "conflicted" participated in the program, no particular effort was made to enlist premarital couples who were at a relatively high risk for marital difficulties. The PREPARE Inventory (Olson, 1999) was used prior

to the "Fit To Be Tied" program to assess each couple's relationship strengths and weaknesses and again upon completion of the program as an assessment of change. Utilizing the same instrument twice and as a tool for discussing relationship issues through homework communication exercises, could have had an impact on post-test scores as couples addressed personal differences and items of indecision. However, this apparent weakness was mitigated by triangulating multiple data sources of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Conclusion

The utilization of married mentors in conjunction with a formal assessment instrument (i.e., PREPARE) was demonstrated to be an effective strategy for helping premarital participants evaluate their choice of a marriage partner and for equipping them to negotiate the early years of married life. In general, the research findings indicated that participants gained useful knowledge, strengthened relationship skills, and showed improvement on various factors predictive of marital satisfaction and stability. The program was beneficial as a means of both primary and secondary prevention as premarital couples reported an increased ability to resolve conflicts and, more importantly, that they had actually dealt with significant issues that needed to be addressed before marriage. Participants also reported an ability to make a more informed choice of a marriage partner, expressed an increased confidence as future spouses, and asserted a greater readiness for married life. Program effects included notable changes in individual attitudes and behaviors indicative of a premarital couple's interpersonal relationship dynamics. Further, the integration of multiple learning methods was unique in its ability to address both

"knowledge issues" or skills and "heart issues," such as personality and caring, which govern the behavioral exchanges and interactional processes of premarital couples. As such, it is hoped that the results of this study will contribute to more effective premarital interventions that lead to better mate selection strategies, greater preparation for married life, and ultimately to an enhanced degree of marital quality and stability.

Steven A. Wages, Ph.D., CFLE

*Department of Sociology and Social Work
Abilene Christian University
Abilene, Texas 79699-7890*

**Carol Anderson Darling, Ph.D.,
CFLE**

*Department of Family and Child Sciences
Florida State University
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-1491*

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