

The Impact of PREPARE on Engaged Couples: Variations by Delivery Format

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To further advance our understanding of the efficacy of inventory-based premarital education programs, this study examined whether the effects of the PREPARE program varied by delivery format. Following participation in the program, engaged couples exhibited positive gains in knowledge, felt more confident in their relationship, engaged in more positive conflict management behaviors, and felt more satisfied with their relationship. No differences were found between participants who completed a series of conjoint sessions versus a 1-day group workshop. These findings highlight the robustness of premarital education and suggest group workshops can have similar effectiveness as the more prevalent conjoint sessions.

KEYWORDS *premarital education, prevention, program evaluation, relationships*

INTRODUCTION

The current instability of marriage has prompted greater interest and demand for preventive approaches such as marriage education and enrichment programs (Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004; Stahmann, 2000), with particular attention placed on marriage preparation, or premarital prevention programs (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Larson, Newell, Topham, & Nichols, 2002). To promote the participation of engaged couples in premarital prevention programs, many states have explored both incentives and requirements (for a review, see Brotherson & Duncan, 2004). While receiving increased

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attention, various researchers (e.g., Carroll & Doherty, 2003) have noted the need to better understand the efficacy of these programs along with cost-effective delivery strategies that yield similar positive effects. The current study examined if engaged couples participating in a premarital prevention program exhibited similar positive gains whether completing six weekly conjoint sessions or one all-day group workshop.

One approach to premarital prevention that has become increasingly accepted for its utility is premarital inventories, also referred to as premarital assessment questionnaires (PAQs) (Larson et al., 2002). The use of PAQs has been advocated for as assisting educators and counselors to best tailor premarital prevention programs to meet couples' specific needs (Morris & Carter, 1999; Busby, Ivey, Harris, & Ates, 2007). Three widely utilized comprehensive PAQs are Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study (FOCCUS; Markey, Micheletto, & Becker, 1997), PREmarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement (PREPARE; Olson & Olson, 1999), and the RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE; Holman, Busby, Doxey, Klein, & Loyer-Carlson, 1997). These PAQs have been recommended for their high quality and evidence of predictive validity (see Larson et al., 2002, for review). Moreover, professional and lay counselors find PAQs cost-efficient, helpful with becoming better acquainted with couples, and useful in identifying couples who may require more intensive counseling prior to marriage (Larson, Vatter, Galbraith, Holman, & Stahmann, 2007).

Likewise, several attributes to PAQs are useful for couples as well. Foremost is the ability of PAQs to provide individualized and systematic feedback to couples about their relationship functioning (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). Additional benefits from PAQs include helping couples assess their personal risk and resiliency profiles (Halford, 2004) and addressing topics premarital couples tend to find the most helpful and ones that typically are avoided (Williams et al., 1999). While premarital inventory programs have numerous benefits, scholars have critiqued PAQs, noting their difficulty to adequately assess potentially problematic behaviors (Silliman & Schumm, 1999) and their greater emphasis on offering feedback rather than skills-training (Halford et al., 2003).

Based on our review of the literature, only a few peer-reviewed studies were found examining the impact of PAQs on relationship outcomes (Busby et al., 2007; Knutson & Olson, 2003; Larson et al., 2007; Rowden, Harris, & Stahmann, 2006). For instance, Knutson & Olson (2003) reported that premarital couples who completed PREPARE and received feedback from community counselors exhibited significant increases in relationship satisfaction compared to couples who did not receive feedback and couples who did not complete PREPARE. Busby and colleagues (2007) found that couples who received premarital counseling guided by RELATE demonstrated significantly better results over time than couples who received unstructured therapist-directed counseling or who participated in a workbook-only

self-directed program. However, it is noteworthy to mention that this study used the RELATE instrument at pretest as well as its variant RELATE-L at posttest and 6-month follow-up to evaluate outcome measures. While RELATE has established concurrent validity, the authors acknowledge future studies are warranted that use measures independent of the program's inventory to test its efficacy (Busby et al., 2007).

Program Structure

Premarital prevention programs often times are designed with different features in terms of recommended timing prior to marriage, amount of total program time, number of sessions, and delivery modalities. For example, some have suggested that couples contemplating marriage should enroll in premarital programs at least 4 to 12 months prior to marriage (see Silliman & Schumm, 1999), thus allowing couples ample time to foster thoughtful deliberation about their decision to marry (Stanley, 2001; Fowers & Olson, 1986). Significant variation also exists in terms of the number of hours of premarital education that couples receive. Often times, clergy-led marriage preparation programs, the most common provider of marriage preparation (Stahmann, 2000; Stanley, 2001), tend to be less than 6 hours (see Silliman & Schumm, 1999). However, Silliman and Schumm (1999) suggest that couples should receive 12 to 24 hours of marriage preparation, particularly when skills-based activities are included, to allow sufficient time for skill development.

Another differing feature among premarital prevention programs, the number of sessions, is closely related to the number of hours that couples actually participate in these programs. Although most couples participate in four or five sessions, couples participating in less than four sessions tend to rate the value of their marriage preparation lower, whereas couples who participate in eight or nine sessions report greater value in their marriage preparation (Williams et al., 1999). Still, we were unable to find research that has actually tested for variations in the effects of marriage preparation based on the number of sessions offered.

Delivery modalities used to conduct marriage preparation programs generally include individual couple sessions (conjoint), group sessions with multiple couples, and weekend sessions (McGeorge & Carlson, 2006; Stahmann, 2000; Williams et al., 1999). According to Silliman and Schumm (1999), most young adult couples prefer the conventional 'couple-counselor' conjoint format, yet are open to other formats. However, for couples who are nearing their wedding date or experience schedule conflicts, the weekend format was suggested as a viable alternative (Silliman & Schumm). Williams et al. (1999) found that couples using the FOCCUS inventory perceived private meetings with a counselor (i.e., clergy, parish staff), weekend programs, and meeting with married couples to be equally helpful.

When comparing conjoint and group sessions, notable advantages and disadvantages exist. Conjoint sessions are often preferred because counselors or facilitators are better able to personalize each session to address couples' specific concerns (Silliman, Schumm, & Jurich, 1992; Stahmann, 2000). Also, conjoint sessions require couples to attend to their own matters, thus reducing distractions that may occur when other couples are present (Stahmann, 2000). In contrast, group sessions tend to be more cost-efficient when multiple couples can be served with fewer facilitators or counselors. In addition, the group modality allows couples to learn vicariously from others as well as compare their experiences with other couples, thus helping to "normalize" their premarital and marital experiences (Rowden et al., 2006). Yet, the group format can also present a variety of constraints to couples, such as not having adequate time to practice the skills being learned, not having their specific needs addressed, and not feeling comfortable disclosing in front of others (Stahmann, 2000). Despite these differences, both individual and group session formats have been found to be equally effective in reaching positive outcomes (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; McGeorge & Carlson, 2006). However, to date, research on the efficacy of using premarital inventories in a group format is scarce. Although premarital inventory programs offer some guiding principles on how to use PAQs in group settings (Rowden et al., 2006), the conventional format to administer these programs have primarily been conjoint formats (Busby et al., 2007; Olson & Olson, 1999).

The Current Study

The research clearly demonstrates the vast differences in premarital prevention programs. While there are many assumptions and recommendations about premarital prevention programs, in general, there is little known about how program structure influences the immediate- and short-term impacts resulting from premarital inventory programs. To further advance our understanding of the efficacy of these inventories, the current study examined the short-term effects of the PRE-marital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement (PREPARE) program. Theoretically grounded in Family Systems Theory and the Circumplex Model (Olson & Olson, 1999), PREPARE is a self-report inventory program that includes a skills-based component designed to help couples identify and build on their relationship's strength and growth areas (Larson et al., 2002). Studies have found the PREPARE inventory to be predictive of later marital success (Fowers & Olson, 1986) and satisfaction (Larsen & Olson, 1989). Also, participation in the PREPARE program has led to improved relationship satisfaction (Knutson & Olson, 2003).

Although the PREPARE inventory is widely used and highly regarded for its quality and predictive validity, limited peer-reviewed research has specifically examined the immediate impact of PREPARE on engaged couples' knowledge, attitudes, and perceived readiness for marriage as well as

specific changes in behaviors that are predictive of marital success. Furthermore, while PREPARE is traditionally designed for six weekly conjoint sessions or a group format with multiple couples who meet weekly or over two weekends, no research exists on variations in the efficacy of the various modes of delivery. Hence, the purpose of the current study was to explore whether engaged couples participating in a 1-day group workshop, compared to those participating in six weekly conjoint sessions, would exhibit similar improvements in their understanding of relationship-enhancing topics and strategies taught during the program, as well as their reports of communication and conflict management behaviors, relationship satisfaction, and perceived readiness for marriage.

METHODS

Design

This present study utilized a nonexperimental design where a convenience sample of couples who were planning to marry was recruited and allowed to self-select into one of two program formats: six weekly conjoint (single couple) sessions or a 1-day weekend group format. A control group of non-program participants was not established for practical purposes (e.g., pilot study with very limited funding) and because the traditional conjoint delivery format was the comparison of interest. Participants were recruited from the local university community in a southeastern state and its surrounding counties through local advertisements and promotional materials distributed to places of worship, social service agencies, and a local bridal fair. Couples paid an initial registration fee to participate in the program and received a notarized certificate of completion at the conclusion that could be used for a discount on their marriage license fee. Each individual also received \$15 for completing all the evaluation surveys.

The Program

Couples who enrolled to participate in conjoint sessions (CS) attended an initial appointment at a family therapy clinic where the program and research study were described. Couples participating in the group weekend workshop (GWW) were e-mailed or mailed a letter describing the program and study and asked to bring their signed consent form to the workshop. Two weeks prior to their first scheduled CS or GWW, couples were e-mailed and instructed to individually complete the 165-item PREPARE inventory no later than 3 days prior to their session/workshop date. This 165-item inventory identifies areas of agreement or disagreement between partners on various dimensions known to impact marital quality and stability. Couples' responses are used to classify couple type (i.e., vitalized, harmonious, traditional, or

conflicted) and facilitate dialogue during the program (see Olson & Olson, 1999, for further explanation).

In both CS and GWW formats, a trained PREPARE facilitator, with the aid of a workbook and report summarizing a couple's inventory responses, guided each couple through the various topics outlined in the PREPARE program including relationship strength and growth areas; communication skills; conflict resolution skills; family-of-origin issues; financial issues; and personal, couple, and family goals. Couples who enrolled in the CS format met with their assigned facilitator once per week for 90 to 120 minutes over the course of 6 weeks, totaling approximately 9 to 12 hours of contact. In contrast, the GWW format consisted of a one 8-hour day with allotted time for structured couple exercises, modeling, and couple dialogue. Like the CS format, the same topics were covered and couples had opportunities for experiential learning and conjoint processing (i.e., each couple met with their own facilitator to complete and process each exercise). In addition, a DVD, created by the developers of PREPARE, was used during the GWW to engage the couples in active learning, model various recommended skills, and help the couples process the information by generating discussion between the couple(s) and the group as a whole. In both formats, treatment protocol adherence was insured by clinical supervision, detailed clinical case notes, and regular meetings between the facilitators and principal investigator.

Participants

Data were gathered from 53 couples (106 individuals) who participated in conjoint sessions ($n = 25$ couples) or one of five weekend group workshops ($n = 28$; respective group sizes of 6, 4, 4, 6, and 8 couples). A majority of participants were between the ages of 21 to 30 (77%), Caucasian (80%), and never-married (91%). The participants were well educated (91% completed some college or more) and 46% reported earning individual annual incomes less than \$20,000, 29% earned \$20,000 to \$39,999, and 25% earned \$40,000 to \$74,999. Nearly one-third (32%) of the 53 couples began participating in the program 7 or more months prior to their wedding date, 34% within 3 to 6 months, and 34% within 2 or less months. Most of the couples (68%) had been dating or known each other for 3 or more years, and 70% were currently cohabiting. Ten couples reported having children together or from a prior relationship.

Due to unreturned postprogram questionnaires from one or both individuals in a couple, only 40 of the 53 couples (75%) were included in the final analysis presented here. Analyses comparing the couples with complete data and those dropped revealed only three statistically significant differences: couples with complete data were more likely to be cohabiting (46% versus 78%; $\chi^2 = 4.57$, $p = .03$), less likely to have children from a prior relationship (10% versus 39%; $\chi^2 = 5.42$, $p = .02$), and females were less likely

to have been previously married (23% versus 3%; $\chi^2 = 5.95, p = .02$). Of the 40 couples with complete data, demographic comparisons between couples participating in the CS ($n = 22$) and GWW ($n = 18$) formats revealed no statistically significant differences. Last, based on their PREPARE inventory scores, 16 (40%) couples were classified as vitalized (eight in each program format), seven (18%) as harmonious (four in CS, three in GWW), six (15%) as traditional (four CS, two GWW), and 11 (28%) as conflicted (six CS, five GWW). No statistically significant demographic differences were found across couple types between the couples participating in the CS or GWW formats.

Measures

The current study examined changes on various outcome indicators assessed at the start of the GWW or first CS (Time 1, T1), immediately following the end of the GWW or sixth CS (Time 2, T2), and approximately 3 weeks following completion of the program (Time 3, T3) in order to examine immediate application and influence of the skills learned. Short-term outcomes, assessed at T2, consisted of changes in participants' knowledge and attitudes. Intermediate outcomes, assessed at T1 and T3, examined participants' communication/conflict management behaviors, overall perceptions of relationship quality, confidence in making their marriage last, and perceived readiness for marriage. Participants also shared their comments about the program and their experience at T2 and T3.

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At T2, participants responded to nine items concerning how well they understood (1 = *poor*; 4 = *excellent*) various aspects of their partner/relationship and particular topics/skills covered during the program. Using a retrospective pre-post design, participants were asked, at the conclusion of the program, to first think about how well they understood each item before participating in the program and second, how well they understood it after completing the program (for a review of the advantages of this design in assessing perceived changes in knowledge and attitudes see Pratt, McGuigan, and Katzev, 2000). A mean score was computed to reflect each participant's level of understanding before ($\alpha = .81$) and after ($\alpha = .82$) completing the program, with higher scores reflecting greater understanding.

CONFIDENCE

At T1 and T3, participants completed the Confidence Scale (Stanley, Hoyer, & Trathen, 1994), a four-item scale that measured participants' level of confidence that they (the couple) can handle what is in the their future and stay together. Responses ranged from (1) *very strongly disagree* to (7) *very*

strongly agree and mean scores were computed for T1 ($\alpha = .95$) and T3 ($\alpha = .96$) with higher scores reflecting greater confidence in their relationship. Also, at T2 participants were presented a list of seven skills reflective of those taught during the program and asked to report how confident they were in practicing the skills compared to before the program (1 = *not at all confident*; 5 = *a lot more confident*). A mean score was computed ($\alpha = .84$), with higher scores reflecting greater confidence in using the learned skills.

COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT BEHAVIORS

At T1 and T3, participants completed Kurdek's (1994) Ineffective Arguing Inventory (IRI) and Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI). The IRI is an eight-item scale designed to assess how *couples* argue and resolve conflicts. Participants rated how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) that each statement fits their relationship; a sum score was computed at T1 ($\alpha = .89$) and T3 ($\alpha = .90$) with higher scores indicating greater levels of ineffective arguing. The CRSI is a 16-item scale that assessed each participant's *individual* style of arguing and resolving conflicts. Each participant rated how frequently (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*) they used each style to deal with arguments or disagreements with their partner. Four items were summed representing each of the four specific conflict resolution styles: (a) positive problem solving (e.g., *focusing on the problem at hand*); (b) conflict engagement (e.g., *throwing insults and digs*); (c) withdrawal (e.g., *remaining silent for long periods of time*); and (d) compliance (e.g., *not defending my position*). Alpha coefficients at T1 and T3 ranged from .77 to .89 for the four subscales.

RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

At T1 and T3, participants rated their current satisfaction with their relationship by completing the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). The seven items that make up the scale were rated by participants along a 5-point scale. A sum score was computed at T1 ($\alpha = .76$) and T3 ($\alpha = .71$), with higher scores reflecting greater relationship satisfaction.

READINESS FOR MARRIAGE

Perceived readiness for marriage was measured at T1 and T3 using a five-item scale that assessed feelings of overall readiness as well as more specific areas of readiness related to emotional maturity, communication skills, and compatibility (Larson et al., 2007). In contrast to the original measure's 5-point Likert scale, participants indicated their level of agreement with each

item along a 7-point scale to facilitate greater variability in responses. A mean score was computed (α , T1 = .85 and T3 = .85) with higher scores representing greater perceived readiness for marriage.

ANALYSES

To explore whether the two delivery formats were differentially effective in influencing change over time for both male and female participants, we conducted a three-way repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance on all nine dependent measures with condition, time, and gender as the independent variables. Time was a within-subjects factor. If the multivariate analyses yielded statistically significant results, univariate analyses were conducted to identify where those differences existed. The practical significance of the findings, or effect size, is reported using the partial η^2 , which highlights the proportion of the variance of the dependent variable that is related to a particular factor (Green & Salkind, 2008).

RESULTS

Mean scores, standard deviations, and ranges for each scale for the overall sample and for the two formats (CS and GWW) before and after the program are presented in Table 1 and summarized here. Because there were some demographic differences between the 40 couples with complete data and the omitted 13 couples where one or both partners did not return a survey at T3, preliminary analyses were conducted to examine whether respondents across these two groups (80 with complete data versus 22 with T1 data but no T3 data) varied across the dependent variables at T1. Multivariate analyses revealed no statistically significant differences, $F(8, 91) = 0.78$, $p = .63$. After completing the program, the 80 participants (40 couples), on average, scored high on knowledge and relationship confidence, reported engaging in more effective conflict management behaviors, felt more satisfied with their relationship, and felt more ready for marriage. Multivariate analyses only showed an overall within subjects difference on time, $F(9, 68) = 37.24$, $p = .000$ (partial $\eta^2 = .83$). No significant variations were found as a function of delivery format or gender. Though participants' perceptions about their relationships and the program's impact were expected to be independent from their partner, post-hoc analyses were conducted for men and women separately to control for potential situations of interdependence. Multivariate analyses showed an overall within subjects difference on time for both men, $F(9, 30) = 19.48$, $p = .000$ (partial $\eta^2 = .85$), and women, $F(9, 30) = 17.16$, $p = .000$ (partial $\eta^2 = .84$). Univariate analyses are presented below.

TABLE 1 Means (Standard Deviations) and Range of Dependent Measures Before and After Program Participation

Measure	Overall (<i>n</i> = 80)		Conjoint (<i>n</i> = 44)		Weekend (<i>n</i> = 36)	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Knowledge	2.64 (0.50) 1.6–3.8	3.49 (0.36) 2.4–4.0	2.59 (0.45) 1.6–3.4	3.43 (0.38) 2.4–4.0	2.70 (0.55) 1.7–3.8	3.56 (0.33) 3.0–4.0
Relationship Confidence	5.95 (1.11) 1.0–7.0	6.20 (1.02) 1.0–7.0	5.88 (1.21) 1.0–7.0	6.10 (1.18) 1.0–7.0	6.03 (0.98) 3.8–7.0	6.31 (0.80) 4.8–7.0
Skills Confidence	—	3.92 (0.73) 2.4–5.0	—	3.84 (0.66) 2.6–4.9	—	4.02 (0.81) 2.4–5.0
Ineffective Arguing	19.47 (6.50) 8.0–35.0	16.93 (6.30) 8.0–34.0	19.41 (6.27) 8.0–33.0	17.36 (6.04) 8.0–33.0	19.54 (6.85) 9.0–35.0	16.40 (6.64) 8.0–34.0
Positive Problem Solving	15.40 (2.57) 8.0–20.0	16.18 (2.73) 8.0–20.0	15.16 (2.26) 11.0–20.0	16.18 (2.48) 10.0–20.0	15.70 (2.91) 8.0–20.0	16.17 (3.04) 8.0–20.0
Conflict Engagement	8.31 (3.44) 4.0–16.0	7.19 (2.79) 4.0–14.0	8.47 (3.43) 4.0–16.0	7.67 (3.01) 4.0–14.0	8.10 (3.48) 4.0–16.0	6.61 (2.41) 4.0–13.0
Withdrawal	8.70 (2.84) 4.0–15.0	7.58 (2.56) 4.0–15.0	8.66 (2.81) 4.0–15.0	7.61 (2.39) 4.0–12.0	8.76 (2.92) 4.0–14.0	7.56 (2.78) 4.0–15.0
Compliance	7.43 (2.82) 4.0–16.0	7.14 (2.69) 4.0–14.0	7.32 (2.75) 4.0–14.0	7.18 (2.68) 4.0–13.0	7.56 (2.94) 4.0–16.0	7.08 (2.74) 4.0–14.0
Relationship Satisfaction	31.34 (2.81) 24.0–35.0	31.91 (2.73) 24.0–35.0	31.69 (2.94) 25.0–35.0	31.94 (2.95) 24.0–35.0	30.92 (2.62) 24.0–35.0	31.88 (2.46) 27.0–35.0
Readiness for Marriage	5.62 (1.00) 3.2–7.0	5.79 (1.25) 2.2–7.0	5.60 (0.94) 3.8–7.0	5.88 (1.17) 2.2–7.0	5.65 (1.08) 3.2–7.0	5.68 (1.35) 2.2–7.0

Note. Scores presented here from both male and female partners (*N* = 40 couples).

TABLE 2 Reported Change in Understanding Across Program Topics (N = 80)

	% Good or excellent	
	Before	After
My understanding of our strengths as a couple	75.0	98.8
My understanding of our growth areas as a couple	55.7	100.0
My understanding of how to express my feelings and share what I want from my partner	57.6	97.5
My understanding of how to be an active listener	42.5	96.3
My understanding of how to manage conflict in a healthy way	57.0	96.2
My understanding of the influence our family-of-origin has and will have on each of us and our relationship	57.5	95.0
My understanding of how to develop a realistic budget and set financial goals	62.5	91.3
My understanding of how to develop personal, couple, and family goals	63.8	95.0
My understanding of how to achieve our goals	58.8	93.8

Gains in Knowledge and Confidence

Overall, participants' reported understanding across the various program topics, on average, improved from fair ($M = 2.6$) to good or excellent ($M = 3.5$), $F(1, 76) = 305.43$, $p = .000$ (partial $\eta^2 = .80$). Examination of the individual items (see Table 2) revealed that the proportion of participants who felt their understanding of each topic was good or excellent increased after the program with exceptional increases observed in understanding active listening and conflict management, skills that are particularly critical to promoting healthy and stable relationships. Similar improvements in knowledge were reported by men and women.

Also, though participants felt more confident in their relationship, $F(1, 76) = 3.68$, $p = .06$ (partial $\eta^2 = .05$), separate analyses by sex revealed that women showed significant improvement in relationship confidence from T1 ($M = 5.92$, $SD = .98$) to T3 ($M = 6.24$, $SD = .85$), $F(1, 38) = 5.50$, $p = .02$ (partial $\eta^2 = .13$), but not men (T1: $M = 5.97$, $SD = 1.23$; T3: $M = 6.16$, $SD = 1.18$), $F(1, 38) = .72$, *ns*. Still, participants, on average, felt very confident in their relationship prior to and 3 weeks following the program. A more clear perceived gain in confidence was evident in the participants' responses at T2 (immediately following the completion of the program) in terms of their ability to use the skills they learned. As shown in Table 1, participants, on average, felt "somewhat more confident" ($M = 3.9$) in their ability to practice the skills learned, and ANOVAs showed no significant differences between CS and GWW format samples and between male and female respondents. As noted in Table 3, at least 78% or more of the participants felt *more* confident in engaging in each of the behaviors learned and in making their marriage last as a result of their participation in the program.

TABLE 3 Reported Change in Confidence Across Program Skills Learned (Percentages, $N = 80$)

	About the same as as before	A little more confident	Somewhat more confident	A lot more confident
Expressing my feelings and sharing what I want from my partner	17.5	13.8	32.5	36.3
Using active listening skills	10.1	21.5	29.1	39.2
Handling conflict using the 10-step plan	10.0	26.3	33.8	30.0
Developing and following a budget	21.5	20.3	29.1	29.1
Setting personal, couple, and family goals	8.9	27.8	30.4	32.9
Reaching our goals together	6.3	22.5	30.0	41.3
Making our marriage last	15.0	8.8	22.5	53.8

Note. None of the respondents indicated "not at all confident."

Communication and Conflict Management Behaviors

One of the primary foci of the PREPARE curriculum is helping couples to develop effective communication skills (e.g., being assertive and expressing one's feelings and needs; active listening) and strategies for handling conflict (e.g., defining the problem, exploring and evaluating possible solutions, clarifying how each partner will work toward an agreed solution). Following the program, both men and women, on average, felt that as a couple they handled disagreements more effectively and that they personally practiced more effective conflict management strategies. Specifically, analyses showed a statistically significant reduction in mean scores on ineffective arguing ($F[1, 76] = 30.36, p = .000$; partial $\eta^2 = .29$), conflict engagement ($F[1, 76] = 24.46, p = .000$; partial $\eta^2 = .24$), and withdrawal ($F[1, 76] = 17.38, p = .000$; partial $\eta^2 = .19$). Participants also reported engaging in more positive problem solving behaviors over time, $F(1, 76) = 13.62, p = .000$ (partial $\eta^2 = .15$). Although the magnitude of change in positive behaviors was modest (i.e., on average participants agreed or strongly agreed that they used these strategies before and after the program), it is noteworthy that the greatest change was in reducing the presence of negative behavior patterns. No significant change was observed in compliance (a possible indicator of nonassertiveness); however, participants, on average, reported low levels of compliant behavior at T1 and T3.

Relationship Satisfaction and Readiness for Marriage

Though relationship satisfaction scores, on average, were high at T1 and T3, participants, in general, reported feeling more satisfied with their relationship following the program, $F(1, 76) = 7.95, p = .006$ (partial $\eta^2 = .10$). However, separate analyses by sex revealed that women showed significant improvement in relationship satisfaction (T1: $M = 31.09, SD = 3.05$; T3: $M = 31.77, SD = 2.83$), $F(1, 38) = 5.98, p = .02$ (partial $\eta^2 = .14$), whereas men

did not (T1: $M = 31.60$, $SD = 2.57$; T3: $M = 32.04$, $SD = 2.64$), $F(1, 38) = 2.46$, *ns*. Despite modest improvements in relationship satisfaction (mostly due to initially high scores), respondents' reports immediately following the program (T2) suggest greater perceived change. When directly asked how much their satisfaction with their relationship changed as a result of participating in the program (1 = *decreased a lot*; 5 = *increased a lot*), 34% of the participants reported it increased a lot and 49% felt it increased a little. On average, there were no statistically significant differences between those participating in the CS ($M = 4.1$, $SD = .68$) and GWW ($M = 4.3$, $SD = .78$) delivery formats and between male ($M = 4.2$, $SD = .69$) and female ($M = 4.1$, $SD = .78$) participants. Last, participants, in general, "strongly agreed" that they were ready for marriage prior to ($M = 5.6$) and following ($M = 5.8$) the program; no significant difference was observed over time. Analyses run separately for men and women, however, did reveal a significant increase in perceived readiness for marriage for women from T1 ($M = 5.54$, $SD = .98$) to T3 ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.03$), $F(1, 38) = 5.01$, $p = .03$ (partial $\eta^2 = .12$).

DISCUSSION

Prior research shows that couples can benefit from premarital education programs (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006), and the results of the current study add to the literature by showing that these benefits are evident for couples who participate in either multiple conjoint sessions or 1-day group workshops. Both male and female participants in both formats showed similar gains in their understanding about strategies to enhance the quality of their relationship and in their application of the skills learned. As well, women, more so than the men, reported feeling more confident in and satisfied about their relationship and felt more ready for marriage following the program.

Participants reported gains in their perceived understanding of the skills and topics covered during the program: couple strength and growth areas, assertiveness, active listening, conflict management, family-of-origin influences, financial management, and setting and achieving goals. As noted by two participants at T2:

I learned that we are more compatible than I thought we were and that we share many likes and dislikes that I was unaware of. I learned a lot about our relationship and some of the skills we learned I will continue to use for the rest of my life. (Female)

The program gives couples time to discuss problem areas that need to be worked on before becoming ending problems, which is great. My partner and I realized how much we want the same things and how to work together as one to achieve them. (Male)

Furthermore, regardless of program format, participants tended to report positive gains in their level of confidence in handling, as a couple, what is in their future and their ability to stay together. A female participant commented at T2 that “[a]s a couple we have learned how to listen to each other and appreciate each other a lot more. It has given me more confidence to address our weaknesses.” Though this shift in relationship confidence was greater among the female participants, males still felt more confident at the conclusion of the program (T2) in using the skills they learned. For instance, at T3, a male commented that “Overall, we are both more relaxed and at ease with each other. We feel confident and secure in our relationship and our abilities to solve problems and communicate.” Similar to the findings of Larson et al. (2007) with the RELATE program, all participants in the current study, regardless of program format, reported that they learned strategies for lowering their risk of marital failure. As noted by a male participant at T2, “We now have a much better understanding of what are our red flags and ways to increase our hopes of a successful marriage.”

Also, consistent with previous findings on the effects of premarital interventions (Carroll & Doherty, 2003), participants in both groups demonstrated improvements in how they communicate and manage conflict in their relationship. This gain is especially crucial because of PREPARE's continuous emphasis on assertiveness and active listening. As one female reported at T2 “[the program] helped us in understanding each other more. It gives us a chance to really hear what the other has to say and where they are coming from. I have learned a lot about my partner and understand him better.” As emphasized by Gottman (1999), a couple's ability to engage in less negative patterns of communication (e.g., criticism, withdrawal) and more positive approaches to handling differences reduces marital distress and probability of divorce and is important to work on early in the relationship.

Last, participants, and especially females, in both groups felt more satisfied with their relationship and females, on average, felt that they were more ready for marriage. Although the change over time in satisfaction was modest, participant comments following the program reflected affirmation of their love for their partner and satisfaction in their relationship. For instance, a female participant commented at T3: “I feel that our relationship is stronger and closer than before. I feel confident that we can work out any conflict in our relationship.” Another female wrote, “Although we are not engaged yet, I feel a greater commitment to our future and a great faith in our marital preparedness since doing PREPARE.”

Limitations and Future Research

It is important to acknowledge some limitations in this study. First, we acknowledge the limits of a non-experimental design and recognize that couples who self-select to participate in a conjoint- versus group-based program

are distinct. These decisions are made based on the couple's personal schedule, personalities, and needs. While the two samples were similar in their demographic profiles and couple type, couples were not randomly assigned into each format and thus these results are not completely generalizable. Second, although the results that emerged are significant and consistent with previous research, our small sample size limited our statistical power and therefore limited our capacity to explore the impact of moderating variables (e.g., ethnicity, SES, couple type) and variations within the two program formats (e.g., couples' experiences during the program with information overload and fatigue). In addition to examining variations in program efficacy by couple characteristics and programmatic experiences, future research could benefit from observational assessment of communication skills in order to reduce potential reporter bias in self-reporting measures.

Even with the limitations in mind, this study has many strengths and unique aspects. First, this study expands our understanding of the efficacy of premarital prevention programs based on premarital assessment questionnaires. Furthermore, building off the recommendation of prior studies (e.g., Busby et al., 2007), this study uniquely used standardized measures of relationship behavior, attitudes, and well-being that were distinct from the premarital assessment questionnaire, thus providing evaluation data independent of the program's educational tool. Last, this study identifies intermediate change and impact over time, uniquely including the short-term impact on specific gains in knowledge. Future analyses are needed with a larger sample to examine the direct association between these short-term and intermediate changes (Silliman & Schumm, 1999), and to examine whether long-term changes and the excitement of the premarital program and skill-building lasts into the couple's newlywed years.

Implications for Practice

Overall, the current study suggests that a 6-week conjoint session or all-day group program format may be equally effective and beneficial in helping engaged couples learn about skills that can enhance the quality of their relationship. In regards to the implementation of premarital programs, these findings indicate that the more cost-effective group format is equally effective as the potentially more costly and time-intensive individual format. For providers and educators who are overwhelmed with the number of couples they need or desire to serve or who have insufficient time for multiple sessions over time, a 1-day group workshop format of PREPARE may be a viable alternative. While couples in previous studies have reported decreased value of marital preparation with fewer sessions (Williams et al., 1999), our study found no such decrease in actual impact. While not disregarding the necessity for conjoint sessions, all-day group workshops offer a potentially more cost-effective means of delivery as well as practical means of attracting

couples that would otherwise not have the time to attend weekly conjoint sessions. In light of the fact that couples who participate in premarital programs have better marital outcomes than those who do not (Stanley et al., 2006), offering this program in this format may allow more couples to participate in premarital education.

As supported by previous findings that couples who receive premarital counseling guided by PAQs have more positive outcomes than couples who received unstructured therapist-directed counseling (Busby et al., 2007), the findings from the current study suggest that therapists may be able to use PREPARE in both conjoint and group settings to achieve similar positive results. In addition to the benefits of using PAQs, the different delivery formats also offer several benefits to premarital counselors (e.g., priests, therapist, educators) who are well-trained in the program and accustomed to working with couples and groups (Rowden et al., 2006). Furthermore, the standardized, preplanned PAQ format provides the opportunity for therapists and lay-educators to collaborate in jointly facilitating the group format.

However, a cautionary note is warranted that the long-term benefits of one format over another are still unknown and require further investigation. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that there may be short-term benefits for couples who prefer and choose a 1-day workshop. Furthermore, a 1-day workshop format may be appealing to educators who are not trained counselors and feel pressured in conjoint sessions to balance the educational focus of PREPARE with a couple's desire to discuss personal issues and cross the line into counseling.

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