

Abstract: Professionals generally believe that couples who choose to attend marriage education programs are not as distressed as are clinical couples and that distressed couples are not good candidates for marriage education. We examined these assumptions in 129 married couples who enrolled in a PAIRS, Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills ([Gordon, 1994](#)), marriage education course. Using the Enriching Relationship Issues, Communication and Happiness Inventory ([Olson, 2002](#)) typology classification with other measures of relationship adjustment, participants were classified as highly distressed, conflicted, and devitalized. Findings suggest that highly distressed married couples are among those who seek a marriage education experience. Implications for marriage education providers are discussed.

Myths about the inappropriateness of marriage and relationship education and enrichment programs for distressed couples have dissuaded professionals from recommending their use with this population, despite indications that such interventions may be helpful (e.g., [Aradi, 1985](#); [Giblin, 1986](#); [Riehlmede & Willi, 1993](#)). Couple therapists, marriage educators, and prevention specialists have long believed that marriage education programs are not the preferred intervention for highly distressed couples but rather that couples therapy is the intervention of choice.

This belief is partially due to the historical tendency in the marriage and family therapy literature to place treatment and enrichment at opposite ends of a continuum ([Lebow, 1997](#)). Clinicians believe that education and enrichment programs are better suited for engaged couples, newlywed couples, or couples seeking enhancement of an already committed and healthy relationship. They typically contend that marriage enrichment is only for stable marriages, that marriage education is for stable to moderately distressed couples, and that marital therapy is for seriously distressed couples who are at risk for divorce ([Hunt, Hof, & DeMaria, 1998](#); [Powell & Wampler, 1982](#)). However, past studies (e.g., [Giblin, 1986](#)) of the characteristics of marriage education participants upon enrollment suggested that many of these couples might be distressed. Consequently, the present study was designed to further explore the baseline characteristics of married couples who participate in a marriage education program.

In fact, our primary research questions were formulated to address the gaps in the literature regarding the characteristics of couples who enroll in marriage education programs such as PAIRS (Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills; [Gordon, 1994](#)). These questions were:

1. To what extent are married couples who enroll in the PAIRS program experiencing marital distress?
2. What are the other characteristics of married couples who enroll in the PAIRS program as measured along relational dimensions? More specifically, which types of couples enroll in PAIRS (e.g., devitalized), and how might they be characterized in terms of conflict tactic strategies, divorce potential, attachment styles, feelings of romantic love, and quality of sexual relationship?

Types of marital interventions

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Marriage education, marriage enrichment, and marital therapy are discrete forms of couples' intervention ([DeMaria, 2003](#)). Marital therapy or treatment is a remedial method that aims to reduce relationship distress. Typically, marital therapy is conducted through conjoint sessions designed to improve the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of the couple's relationship. Generally, marriage enrichment is considered a preventive method characterized by mutual support groups ([Hunt et al., 1998](#)). Marriage education has emerged primarily as a skills-based model provided in group environments.

In practice, these three approaches overlap. For example, couples group therapy incorporates the kind of peer support used in enrichment programs while exploring individual couple's issues. Similarly, marital growth groups, hallmarks of marriage enrichment, often incorporate the skills-based activities that are found in marriage education. Marriage education, although usually skills-based may include family-of-origin exploration, which is typical of many couples therapy approaches. Given such an overlap, more than one type of intervention (e.g., treatment) might be helpful to distressed couples (e.g., [Worthington & Drinkard, 2000](#)).

Professional attitudes toward marriage education

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Several researchers have suggested that the training and assumptions of practitioners influence their attitudes toward the use of marriage education and enrichment programs with distressed couples ([Fournier, Olson, & Druckman, 1983](#); [Tolman & Molidor, 1994](#)). In particular, [Elliott and Saunders \(1982\)](#) noted that clinicians usually make three assumptions about marriage enrichment programs: (a) participants are generally satisfied with their relationships, (b) enrichment emphasizes strengths, and (c) enrichment is preventive. Despite his understanding of the overlapping nature of enrichment and treatment, [Mace \(1986\)](#) supported these attitudes, stating that ACME (Association of Couples for Marriage Enrichment) discourages "clinical" couples from participating in their retreats. Similarly, in another review, [Riehlmede and Willi \(1993\)](#) explored clinicians' ambivalence toward enrichment programs and identified three factors affecting clinicians' use of these programs: doubts about the long-term effectiveness of enrichment programs, the reality that prevention is not generally accepted by the public, and the general refusal on the part of clinicians to accept pedagogic and norm-oriented interventions. [Arcus \(1995\)](#) suggested that such doubts could explain why marriage enrichment and marriage education typically are not included in professional training programs, which further contributes to their lack of use. [Lebow \(1997\)](#) highlighted these prevailing attitudes toward marriage education and enrichment and elucidated the assumptions described earlier by Eliot and Saunders and Riehlmedle and Willi by underscoring the continuum model for marital intervention strategies:

How are these programs similar or different from couples therapy? In contrast to the highly individualized approach of most couples therapy, these brief, time-limited programs use a group format and teach generic skills. Couples who enroll are basically satisfied with their relationship and do not, typically, describe themselves as having substantial difficulties. Usually, they are seeking enrichment, education, and new skills, not immediate help with a marital crisis (p. 88).

Lebow's statements underscore how the biases of practitioners influence their perceptions of marriage and relationship education and enrichment programs.

Who attends marriage education programs? Who benefits?

 

Despite the growth of marriage education programs, research on marriage education and enrichment primarily has emphasized program effects on marital distress while paying only modest attention to participant demographics and relationship characteristics ([Guerney & Maxson, 1990](#)). Only a few marriage education programs have conducted systematic research on participants or program conducted evaluation. Most notably this includes the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) ([Markman, Resnick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993](#)), Couple Communication ([Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1975](#)), and Relationship Enhancement ([Guerney, 1977](#)). Little is known about the characteristics of couples who attend other marriage education programs.

The available marriage enrichment outcome literature suggests that participants are predominantly Caucasian, middle-class, and religiously affiliated couples. Findings on the level of distress at baseline have been mixed. For example, [Powell and Wampler \(1982\)](#) concluded from their quasi-meta-analytic review that marriage enrichment participants are less satisfied with their marriages than are nonparticipants. However, they suggested that couples who participated in marriage enrichment were neither as discouraged nor as distressed as couples seeking marital therapy. On the other hand, [Krug and Ahadi \(1986\)](#) found that couples in a marriage education program showed greater similarity to couples in problem marriages (e.g., more distressed) than couples in well-functioning marriages. In another study, church members who participated in marriage enrichment had a mean Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; [Spanier, 1976](#)) score of 102, which falls below the cutoff for dyadic satisfaction (107) but is above the score that is predictive of a high likelihood of divorce (70) ([Noval, Combs, Winamake, Bufford, & Halter, 1996](#)). In contrast with the general assumption that marriage education participants have higher marital satisfaction than couples in treatment or couples at risk for divorce, these studies highlight significant gaps in our understanding of this population and the need for additional, more detailed knowledge of the characteristics of marriage education and marriage enrichment participants to ensure effective program delivery.

Although in their review of the marriage enrichment literature published between 1980 and 1990, [Guerney and Maxson \(1990\)](#) did not distinguish between educational programs and enrichment programs, they concluded that

on the whole, enrichment programs work and the field is a legitimate one. ...The major questions, however, are which programs, for what populations, what makes them best, and how they may be (the programs) made more efficient, less costly and better marketed (p. 1113).

[Giblin \(1996\)](#) reinforced their recommendation, suggesting that life stage, ethnic diversity, economic status, educational background, gender differences, family form differences, and levels of distress all need to be explored. Similarly, [Sullivan and Bradbury \(1997\)](#), who investigated whether couples who participated in premarital counseling were at greater or lesser risk for marital difficulties, contend that premarital prevention programs do produce reliable improvements in relationship functioning, but there was a need for further investigation of the characteristics of couples participating and not participating in such programs.

Method

 

Participants

Our participants were 129 married couples who had enrolled in a PAIRS semester-long (16 week) program with 1 of 20 different PAIRS leaders during the period between September 1996 and February 1997. The sample comprised 67% of all of the married couples who were enrolled in PAIRS courses during the study period. Like most marriage education participants reported in the literature, the modal PAIRS participant was a 35- to 45-year-old Caucasian in his or her first marriage, and he or she had completed college or had some graduate level education and was working full time. Religious affiliation was Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish. Based on the enrollment questionnaire, the majority had been in individual (65%) or couples therapy (61%) prior to registering for the course, and they were looking for something that would help improve the marriage. Participants also reported participating currently in individual (16%) or marital therapy (17%) at the time of their enrollment.

Based on data collected from the Enriching Relationship Issues, Communication and Happiness (ENRICH) inventory background information, the sample consisted of mainly Caucasians with incomes falling in the middle and higher ranges (46%, \$75,000, and above). The majority (62%) of participants had completed college or postgraduate education. Most were working full time in professional, managerial, sales, or clerical positions (86%). Twenty percent, predominantly women, identified themselves as homemakers. Most indicated their religion as being Christian, although a third did not specify a religious preference. Most couples (68%) were in their first marriage. The average age of participants was 41.4 years ($SD= 8.8$).

Measures

Assessment instruments included six existing measures and a questionnaire assessing participants' knowledge of the PAIRS course pre-enrollment, their expectations for the program, and their willingness to participate in a personal interview. The ENRICH ([Fournier et al., 1983](#)) inventory and the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS, [Busby, Christensen, Crane, & Larson, 1995](#)) were used together to provide a comprehensive self-report measure of couple satisfaction and distress. The other instruments explored individual attachment styles, considerations of divorce, patterns of aggression and violence, feelings of romantic love and sexual satisfaction, which are related to overall marital satisfaction in general and represent key areas of dysfunction in clinical couples ([Geiss & O'Leary, 1989](#)). These instruments included the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS; [Collins & Read, 1990](#)), the Marital Status Inventory (MSI; [Weiss & Cerreto, 1980](#)), the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; [Straus, 1979](#)), the Passionate Love Scale (PLS; [Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986](#)) and the Sexual Satisfaction subscale of ENRICH.

ENRICH. The ENRICH inventory ([Fournier et al., 1983](#)) was designed for use with married couples and assesses couple agreement on 13 subscales: communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, realistic expectations, personality issues, sexual relationship, children and parenting, family and friends, egalitarian roles, religious orientation, family-of-origin, and type of marriage. Each subscale has 10 questions with 5 possible responses that range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Items in each subscale have both positive and negative aspects. For example, "I am very happy with how we handle our responsibilities in our family/household" is a positive item in the Marriage Satisfaction subscale. In contrast, "I am unhappy with some of my partner's personal characteristics or personal habits" is a negative item in the Marriage Satisfaction subscale. The inventory is comprehensive, and a detailed description is provided in the PREPARE/ENRICH Counselor's Manual ([Olson, 2002](#)).

Norms have been established for ENRICH scores using 250,000 couples ([Olson, 2002](#)). Internal consistency estimates (α s) for ENRICH subscales range from .68 to .90, with test-retest reliability estimates ranging from .77 to .92. Content, construct, predictive, and discriminant validity are reported by Olson. For each subscale, a Revised Individual score (REV) and a Positive Couple Agreement (PCA) score is provided. Although these scores are related, they are derived independently. REV indicates an individual's satisfaction with a particular aspect of the relationship, such as marital satisfaction, and is corrected for Idealistic Distortion. PCA is a percentage score (0–100%) that indicates positive agreement on particular items in each subscale. REV and PCA scores are not designed to be compared but to provide different perspectives on each person and the couple (Olson).

[Olson and Fowers \(1993\)](#) developed an empirical typology of couples using cluster analysis and PCA scores on all 13 ENRICH subscales. In a sample of 6,267 couples, they identified 5 types of married couples distributed within the sample: Vitalized (12%), Harmonious (11%), Traditional (16%), Conflicted (25%), and Devitalized (36%). Vitalized couples reported high relationship quality on all dimensions. Harmonious

couples had relatively high relationship quality. Traditional couples had scores that were slightly above average, with markedly higher scores on parenting and religious scales. Moderately low scores on all but the roles scale characterized Conflicted couples. The Devitalized couples had the lowest scores on every ENRICH dimension. [Allen and Olson \(2001\)](#) validated the couple typology with African American couples, which also reaffirmed the relative distribution of the percentages of couple types.

Marital distress. Because of the number of instruments used, the shorter and more psychometrically sound RDAS ([Busby et al., 1995](#)), an adaptation of [Spanier's \(1976\)](#) DAS, was used as an individual's measure of perceived marital satisfaction. DAS is one of the most widely used and cited instruments for measuring relationship distress (Spanier). The RDAS was designed to improve the construct validity of the DAS and resulted in a shorter 14-item scale that correlated well with DAS scores (.97; Busby et. al.). Evidence exists for the content, criterion-related, and construct validity for the RDAS and reliability ($\alpha = .90$; Busby et. al). Possible RDAS scores range from 0 to 69, with a mean score of 41.6 ($SD = 6.6$) used as the cutoff for marital distress. Lower scores suggest increased risk for divorce.

Attachment styles. Because emotional attachments endure over the life cycle ([Hazan & Shaver, 1987](#); [Hazan & Shaver, 1990](#)), they have frequently been applied to the study of adult romantic relationships. However, there is no universal agreement about the numbers and types of adult attachment styles. [Collins and Read \(1990\)](#) developed the Adult AAS questionnaire to measure three attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, and avoidant). The 18-item AAS generates three subscale scores: (a) comfort with closeness, (b) the degree to which individuals feel that they can depend on their partner, and (c) the amount of anxiety related to fears of abandonment or being unloved. Respondents use a 5-point scale from *not characteristic of me* to *very characteristic of me* to answer questions such as, "I find it difficult to trust others completely." Scoring is based on combining scores for closeness, dependence, and anxiety. Reliability estimates (α) for scores from a sample of undergraduates ($N = 173$) were .81 for closeness, .78 for dependence, and .85 for anxiety (Collins & Read). Scoring procedure results in one of three styles: (a) secure (high level of closeness and dependence, low level of anxiety), (b) preoccupied (moderate level of closeness and dependence, high level of anxiety), and (c) avoidant (low levels of closeness, dependence, and anxiety).

Passionate love and sexual satisfaction. Romantic love and sexual satisfaction play important roles in marital satisfaction ([Hendrick & Hendrick, 1997](#); [Sternberg, 1988](#)) and often are barometers of overall marital satisfaction ([Geiss & O'Leary, 1989](#)). Given the importance of romantic love and sexuality in marriage, the PLS ([Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986](#)) and the Sexual Satisfaction subscale of ENRICH were used to explore these dimensions. The PLS Short Form (Hatfield & Sprecher) is a 15-item instrument to assess the state of intense longing for union with another and intense physiological arousal. Items such as "I wish rather be with _____ than anyone else" are rated on a 9-point scale from *not at all true* to *definitely true*. Scoring is based on the total score (range 15–135). Mean PLS scores for a sample of Caucasians were 97.5 for men and 110.2 for women,

indicating a high level of passionate love. Internal consistency reliability (α) for this measure is reported as .91 (Hatfield & Sprecher).

ENRICH includes a 10-item subscale called Sexual Expectations that assesses satisfaction with sex in the marriage. Participants rate their level of agreement with each of the 10 items on a 5-point scale. Both a REV score and a PCA score are provided. Earlier, we detailed the reliability, validity, and norms for ENRICH. Reliability (α) for the Sexual Relationship subscale is reported at .85 (Olson, 2002). Higher percentage of PCA indicates satisfaction with sexuality.

Divorce potential. Based on their research, Weiss and Cerreto (1980) found that most distressed couples consider the possibility of divorce and consequently they developed the MSI to assess divorce potential. Assuming that termination of a marriage unfolds as a series of events, the MSI includes 14 items. Using true/false statements participants score themselves on items such as, "I have occasionally thought of divorce or wished that we were separated, usually after an argument or other incident," and "I have filed for divorce or we are divorced," The mean score for a high level of distress and consideration for divorce is 4.8 ($SD= 2.1$; Weiss & Cerreto).

Intimate partner violence. The CTS (Straus, 1979) is one of the most widely used measures for detecting marital violence and assesses the level of aggressive conflict in marriage using three subscales: (a) Reasoning (three items—the use of rational discussion to deal with conflict), (b) Verbal Aggression (seven items—the use of verbal and nonverbal acts intended to hurt the other), and (c) Violence (nine items—the use of physical force to solve a dispute). Items range from behaviors low in coerciveness (e.g., "discussed an issue calmly," "brought in another person to help") to most coercive and aggressive (e.g., "slapped or hit," "threatened with a knife or gun"). In addition to a yes or no response to whether there has ever been an episode, respondents are asked to indicate the number of times each action occurred during the past year (0 to 20+ times). In Form N (used here), acceptable alphas are reported (Straus): Verbal Aggression and Violence subscale ($\alpha= .88$ for each) and Reasoning subscale ($\alpha= .76$).

Procedure

PAIRS leaders throughout the United States and Canada assisted in soliciting participants. Out of a total of 30 PAIRS leaders who offered the course during the survey period, a total of 20 (67%) leaders participated. The sample of participants contained two thirds of all married couples who enrolled during the survey period. The 10 nonparticipating PAIRS leaders included 7 who were ineligible because they had not yet taught the PAIRS course twice and 3 who declined to participate. The eligibility criterion of having taught PAIRS twice was used to minimize the number of participants drawn from the leader's counseling practice and to increase the potential of participants self-selecting into the program based on advertising in the community.

Surveys were distributed and completed during the first session. Only those surveys that were returned no later than the beginning of the third class session were included (over 90% were handed in at the end of the first class).

Description of the PAIRS program

PAIRS is a marriage education program based on a multidimensional model that integrates commonly accepted concepts, skills, and values about love, intimacy, and marriage. Like other empirically based approaches ([Gottman, 1994](#); [Johnson & Greenberg, 1994](#)), PAIRS is an emotionally focused model designed to strengthen secure attachment and emotional bonds in couples through the teaching and training of strategies that enhance relationship competence and emotional literacy. Theoretically, the PAIRS program integrates affective, behavioral, and cognitive intervention models.

Of the many programs described as marriage education, PAIRS is one of the most comprehensive, lengthy, and intense. The program incorporates elements of therapy, enrichment, and education ([Berger & Hannah, 1999](#); [DeMaria & Hannah, 2003](#); [Gordon, 1994](#)). To become licensed as a PAIRS semester course leader, one must be a mental health professional and complete 15 days of program training. Gordon also has created numerous short programs based on this comprehensive curriculum including a complete adaptation of the PAIRS program for youth.

The PAIRS semester-long course consists of 16 weeks of classes (3 hr per week) with 4 intensive weekend workshops (18 hr per workshop), which together amount to 120 hr of training. As detailed in *Building intimate relationships: Clinical applications of the PAIRS program* ([DeMaria & Hannah, 2003](#)), the first 6 classes and Workshop I (36 hr) focus on communication and conflict resolution skills. Skills learned in these sessions are reinforced throughout the remainder of the program. Self-awareness, including constructive expression of emotion, exploring family history and family dynamics, identifying reactive emotional patterns (referred to as negative emotional infinity loops), attitudes and feelings about death and loss, and understanding personal differences are addressed in Sessions 7 through 12 and in Workshop II. This portion of the course helps participants identify the impact of family-of-origin experiences and past personal experiences on their marriage. Sensuality, sexuality, commitment, and jealousy are explored in Sessions 12 and 13 and in Workshop III. The program concludes with Sessions 14 and 15 and Workshop IV addressing decision making and creating a committed, passionate, and companionate partnership. Throughout the course, PAIRS is designed to provide knowledge about relationship dynamics, opportunities for attitude reassessment, practice for skill development, and exercises for constructive emotional expression. Each session includes discussion of theory, experiential exercises, and opportunities for group and individual processing and sharing ([Gordon, 1994](#)).

A typical PAIRS session begins with presentation of a concept (e.g., the four stress styles of communication) followed by a small group exercise in which participants practice related skills and apply the concept while trying to solve a particular relationship problem. Participants then debrief and discuss what they learned from the exercise.

Couples share their small group experience with each other and apply the skill to their relationship. For example, the identification of stress styles in Session 2 is followed by the presentation of a congruent communication style, and participants have another opportunity to practice. At the end of the session, participants then are taught the Daily Temperature Reading tool, a technique for confiding and opening lines of communication.

Although there are limitations to the research assessing the program (see [Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004](#)), PAIRS exemplifies a clinically based educational model that attends to ethics, program evaluation, and ongoing training for leaders. To evaluate the long-term impact of PAIRS, [Durana \(1996\)](#) studied 137 married participants from five classes throughout the United States. No control group was used. Participants were evaluated pre- and post-PAIRS and 6–8 months after course completion, using quantitative and qualitative measures, as well as an open-ended questionnaire on participants' experiences with the program. The sample consisted of persons whose scores suggested that they were more distressed, higher in conflict and unhappiness, and lower in marital satisfaction than those in the general population. At the time of participation, 51% also were receiving couples or individual therapy. Findings immediately post-PAIRS showed significant increases in marital adjustment and marital satisfaction and reduced conflict and unhappiness. At 6–8 months, follow-up participants reported enduring changes, and their expectations and reasons for attending PAIRS appeared to coincide with the aims of the program. For example, 76% of participants demonstrated sustained gains in intimacy; most gave positive ratings to the group component of the experience; over half reported that PAIRS helped them make better use of therapy; and improvements in relationships with children, friends, and family of origin were reported. Similarly, [Turner \(1997\)](#) studied 75 participants from eight cities. She compared findings of PAIRS participants with a control group, a nonequivalent group of 45 persons waiting to enroll in PAIRS. Significant pre- to postintervention improvements were found on interaction style, social support, and marital discord. She also reported that the group model of PAIRS had a positive effect on reducing marital discord. Taken together, these studies suggest that the PAIRS course is associated with enhanced marital adjustment and satisfaction, intimacy, and conflict reduction and that such changes are enduring 6–8 months later.

A between-group *t* test comparing the survey sample ($N= 242$) with two comparison groups of PAIRS participants (n Group 1 = 39; n Group 2 = 87) yielded nonstatistically significant findings (Group 1: $t= .24$; $p > .05$; Group 2: $t= .07$; $p > .05$). These findings suggested that the survey sample is similar to other groups of PAIRS participants who have benefited from the PAIRS program.

Results

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Results from the ENRICH inventory showed that almost the entire sample of couples was categorized as either Devitalized or Conflicted (93%), using the couple typology ([Olson,](#)

2002). Specifically, 58.8% were characterized as Devitalized, and 34.2% were Conflicted. These results are in contrast with Olson's report that 36% of a national sample were Devitalized and 25% were Conflicted. In our sample, only 3.5% were categorized as Harmonious, and 3.5% were categorized as Vitalized. There were no couples categorized as Traditional.

Results regarding individual satisfaction also indicated that our PAIRS couples were distressed. The mean RDAS score for the sample was 39.1 ($N=242$; range 12–59). A score of 41.6 is established as the cutoff score for relationship distress (Busby et al., 1995). In our sample, the mean RDAS score for males was 39.63 ($SD=8.15$, range = 19–56), and for females it was 38.58 ($SD=8.33$, range = 12–59). No statistically significant difference was found between the mean scores for the husbands and the mean scores for the wives ($t=.987$); and the ENRICH type was significantly correlated ($p > .01$) with distress.

Regarding the different attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, or avoidant), 66.3% of the participants were classified as securely attached, whereas 33.7% were classified as preoccupied; 75% of men were classified as secure and 25% as preoccupied. Only 58% of the women were classified as secure and 42% as preoccupied. There were no individuals classified as avoidant, an unusual finding (see Table 1).

Further, regarding passionate love, Hatfield and Sprecher (1986) established a mean score of 100 for Caucasians with high passionate love for their partner. The mean score for our sample was 94.26 ($SD=23.2$); men's mean score was 93.3 ($SD=22.9$), and the woman's score was 95.3 ($SD=23.5$). This finding suggests that these couples still felt some romantic love for their partners at the time of enrollment. Despite this finding, the measure of sexual expression score indicated that their sexual relationship was a growth (60%) or possible growth area (15.8%), as indicated by couple agreement scores.

Established norms for the measure of divorce potential show a mean of 4.4 for married males and 4.8 for married females who are participating in marital therapy (Weiss & Cerreto, 1980). The mean scores for the present sample suggest that they were at risk for divorce; the mean score for men was 4.6 ($SD=4.2$) and for women it was 4.9 ($SD=3.7$). In contrast to Weiss and Cerreto's group, there is greater variation in scores within our sample of PAIRS participants.

Regarding conflict, the results showed that 29.95% who responded to this part of the survey ($n=233$, with a 90% response rate) acknowledged using physical aggression during conflict at least once in the past year. In fact, couples from all of the ENRICH types reported having used physical aggression at some point during their marriage. A comparison of their responses suggested that there was some underreporting by the aggressors. Specifically, 35% of respondents to the question of use of physical aggression by the spouse during the last year said their spouse had done so during conflict, whereas only 29.5% admitted that they themselves had done so. Both men and women reported using physical aggression toward their partners.

Summary of finding

Overall, our findings suggests that the majority of participants in the PAIRS course were distressed, that both spouses were highly dissatisfied with the relationship, and that individuals reported serious considerations of initiating a divorce sometime during the marriage. Specifically, 67 couples were characterized as Devitalized, and the remainder were Conflicted (39 couples), Harmonious (4 couples), or Vitalized (4 couples). The ENRICH inventory highlighted that sexually both spouses were highly dissatisfied and that the participants disagreed with their spouse about money, leisure time, sex, and children. Although findings based on the ENRICH inventory suggested that the couple relationship also could be described as equal, adaptable, and cohesive, for many there had been an episode of physical violence within the last year that involved pushing, shoving, and throwing something. In general, partners still felt a sense of attachment to each other, and reporting on the general survey and interviews suggested that there was a strong desire to learn to communicate to improve the relationship. Feelings of romantic love for the partner were still there. Based on all sources of data (the ENRICH inventory, all scales, and the preenrollment questionnaire), participants reflect commitment to the marriage and a willingness to examine one's own contribution to problems.

Discussion

 

The primary characteristic of marital distress in these PAIRS couples was quite high. That is, 93% of these couples were either Conflicted or Devitalized. Although contrary to generally held beliefs about marriage enrichment and education participants, these results parallel those found in previous studies (e.g., [Krug & Ahadi, 1986](#); [Powell & Wampler, 1982](#)). However, the unusually high number of Devitalized couples found in the present sample was unexpected. The expectation was that the majority of couples would be Conflicted and that Devitalized couples would be less inclined to take a marriage education program and more likely to participate in couples therapy. In this study, two thirds of the participants had been in individual or marital therapy, yet, they sought out the PAIRS program as an additional intervention.

Given the level of distress and lack of agreement in most areas of their relationship, these couples' continuing feeling of romantic love and sense of secure attachment may explain their motivation for attempting to improve their marriage through participation in a marriage education program. It appears that feelings of romantic love and secure attachment were maintained to some degree, independent of their experience of distress and sexual dissatisfaction ([Roberts, 1992](#)). The earlier experience of passion in their marriage also might motivate Devitalized couples who are attempting to improve their marriage through programs like PAIRS. Also, the findings are consistent with the contention of [Kernberg \(1997\)](#) that the romantic relationship is an integral and relatively permanent part of the overall couple relationship and with the suggestion of [Hatfield and Walster \(1978\)](#) that romantic love is an "intense longing for union with another, regardless of whether that longing is reciprocated, uncertain, or unrequited" (p. 9).

Perhaps the attention given by PAIRS to the topics of love, affection, bonding, sensuality, and sexuality attracted the Devalitized couples to the program.

The attachment theory provides an important perspective on the influence that romantic love may have on couples' participation in PAIRS. As [Johnson and Greenberg \(1994\)](#) observed, "Attachment behaviors and associated emotional responses are considered to be innate and tend to increase in intensity if the bond with the attachment figure is threatened" (p. 4). In this sample, despite their relatively high levels of distress and risk for divorce, most (65%) of the participants still reported secure attachment; therefore, separation anxiety may be acute, thus heightening fears of abandonment and increasing partners' attention to the romantic (and therefore more hopeful) aspects of their relationship.

The generalizability of these results is constrained by a number of factors, including the measurements used. A major methodological problem in assessing marital quality is the potential inaccuracy of self-report data. Limitations also were imposed by the nature of the sample that was composed of self-selected couples. On the other hand, this sample reflected the population of couples who are likely to enroll in PAIRS fairly well because the sample contained a majority of the PAIRS leaders and the married couples who enrolled in the PAIRS program during the survey period.

Differential use of marriage enrichment programs has been discussed in the marriage education and enrichment literature. [Zimpher \(1988\)](#) proposed the need for research to determine the characteristics of participants who benefit the most and the level of dysfunction for which relationship enrichment is most appropriate. This study suggests that the ENRICH typology may provide a useful organizing framework for exploring the needs of the different types of couples who attend PAIRS and other marriage education programs. For Devalitized couples, the desire to reclaim the loving and passionate aspects of the relationship may contribute to the motivation to participate in the PAIRS program and offers like it that focus on attachment, sexuality, and the more emotional and physical aspects of marriage. Surprisingly, there were no Traditional couples in the sample—another unexpected finding. This suggests that the PAIRS program may not appeal to couples who place a heavier emphasis in their marriage upon parenting and child-related issues, which is characteristic of Traditional couples. Like couples in many faith-based programs with modest levels of marital satisfaction, these couples may have different needs than Devalitized and Conflicted couples. Further research is needed on the defining features of such couples, as well as the marriage education and enrichment needs of couples participating in couples therapy. In the present study, the majority of couples had participated in couples and or individual therapy. Is therapy a unique experience of couples who participate in the PAIRS program, or may we find that many clinical couples turn to marriage education as a means to enhance and strengthen their marriages?

Until now, couples therapy was considered the intervention of choice for distressed and seriously distressed couples. Along with those from other studies that suggest the efficacy of marriage education and enrichment programs for couples (e.g., [Giblin, 1986](#)), the present findings suggest that practitioners need to reconsider their assumptions about

marriage education programs for distressed and seriously distressed couples. At this point, the development of an integrated service delivery model that includes treatment, education, and enrichment for troubled couples at risk for divorce is still in its infancy (DeMaria, 2003). Based on the findings of this study, a linear model in which treatment and education occupy opposite ends of a continuum may be less useful than a systemic model that explores overlapping dimensions that can provide a wider range of intervention strategies for couples.

In addition, major questions remain about which programs are best for which types of couples, what makes them best, and how they may best be delivered (Guernsey & Maxson, 1990). This initial study provides a broader view that needs to be replicated in future PAIRS research as well as research with other marriage education programs. A simple focus on basic demographic characteristics of couples who attend marriage education and enrichment programs and outcome measures does not help clinicians and educators construct a decision-making model that highlights similarities and differences among couples who self-select into marriage education programs.

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