

**A SNAPSHOT OF EMERGING
RESEARCH THAT INFLUENCES
MARRIAGE EDUCATION:
2009 – 2010**



**national
healthy marriage
resource center**

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OVERVIEW

This Research Snapshot is a brief overview of research presented at national and international conferences. This research will likely impact marriage/relationship education (MRE) as it continues to evolve as a field and is not intended to be a comprehensive review of current research.

Select conferences were attended by scholars in the fields of sociology, psychology, and family studies based on professional interest and opportunity. The NHMRC collaborated with the scholars to identify key themes and research findings that could inform marriage/relationship education services in the U.S. The NHMRC did not pay for attendance at these conferences and acknowledges that other equally valuable conferences were held in 2009-2010.

In late 2009 and early 2010, the emerging research summarized here was presented at one of the following conferences:

- **The Doha International Institute Colloquium on Strengthening Marriage and Supporting Families, October 6-7, 2009, Malta.** The Doha Colloquium was designed to convene global family scholars in conversation about academic research, interdisciplinary studies and policy initiatives focused on marriage.
- **The Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) Annual Conference, November 19-22, 2009, New York City.** ABCT is a professional, interdisciplinary organization which is concerned with applying behavioral and cognitive sciences to understanding human behavior, developing interventions to enhance the human condition, and promoting the appropriate utilization of these interventions.
- **The Society for Prevention Research Annual Conference, June 1-4, 2010, Denver, Colorado.** This annual conference provides a forum for scientists, public policy leaders, and practitioners interested in the implementation of evidence-based preventive interventions in all areas of public health.
- **The American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, August 14-17, 2010, Atlanta, Georgia.** This conference offers nearly 600 program sessions to promote the scientific study of society and to share knowledge and new directions in research and practice.

HIGHLIGHTS

Studies and papers summarized below report on factors influencing relationship education and what is known about attitudes and behaviors among couples and families. These snapshots can help practitioners determine who to target with an intervention and to better understand how research can inform the field. Highlights from papers presented at recent conferences summarized in this Snapshot include:

- Fear of divorce, rather than negative views towards marriage, appears to be a significant reason why couples in the age group 18-36 who live together, choose not to marry.
- Other nations are also working to understand marriage and divorce trends and their social implications.
 - European children of divorce experienced greater behavior problems, greater risk of health problems (including injury, alcohol abuse, and suicide), and lower educational achievements than children of married couples. These outcomes occurred despite policies implemented in these countries to support divorced mothers and their children.
 - Available statistics indicate that the frequency of divorce is increasing in the Gulf societies of the Arab world, especially in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. These divorces tend to occur relatively early in marriage.
- New findings from a research-driven marriage/relationship education program, Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP), include:
 - A study examining the PREP program's effect on Army couples found those experiencing infidelity originally had lower marital satisfaction scores than their peers. However, these couples caught up to the same level of marital satisfaction as their peers after receiving PREP education.
 - Whether couples had a history of physical aggression did not affect the PREP program's positive effect on negative communication.
 - Couples *without* a history of aggression were slightly less likely to divorce if they received PREP than those couples who received training through their religious organization. Couples *with* a history of aggression divorced at higher rates if receiving PREP.
 - Couples who reported a strong working alliance with their facilitator conveyed a greater level of improvement in their communication than other couples.
- Young couples with high levels of economic stress reported less affection and more conflict in their relationships.
- When prayer or deliberate positive thoughts are a component of relationship programs, studies find couples experience a number of positive outcomes.
- Although household instability can have negative mental health outcomes for children, a divorce followed by the reunification of the child's parents was not associated with negative outcomes.
- Couple-focused relationship education can have a positive effect on the parenting practices of men.
- A recent study found that premarital preparation did not affect relationship satisfaction, supportiveness, hostile conflict or physical aggression. However, it did find that those who *did not* participate in premarital preparation were at greater risk for divorce.
- Women sought professional help for their marriages for a number of reasons; whereas, men were more likely to seek help when they sensed that they were close to divorce.

Note: the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center does not endorse any curricula. The selected 2009–2010 conferences included multiple PREP research projects that can inform the MRE field, however, is not an endorsement of the program.

SOCIOLOGY:

Selected Papers, Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association

Atlanta, Georgia, August 14-17, 2010

Paul R. Amato, PhD

The American Sociological Association has an active Family Section. Sessions in 2010 reported on couple relationships from a cross-national perspective; families and the economic recession, families in later life, class and race-ethnic variations in family life, and families and health. The following summaries may be of particular interest to family practitioners and policymakers.

Hardship and Family Relationships

Given the magnitude of the current “Great Recession,” it is not surprising that a session was devoted to the effects of financial hardship on families. In one paper, Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett used longitudinal data on economic distress, relationship quality, and demographic characteristics from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) with area-level unemployment and foreclosure data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) and private-sector databases to show that unemployment, income loss, and home foreclosures predict divorce.¹ They also found that income loss was associated with an increase in controlling behaviors on the part of fathers.

In a second paper, Amy Lucas and Jessica Hardie² looked at relationship quality as related to financial stressors such as not having enough money to pay bills at the end of the month and relying on government services for support. Their study estimated regression models predicting respondent reports of conflict and affection in cohabiting and married partner relationships using the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, 1997 (NLSY97, N = 2,841) and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health, N = 1,702). They found that young couples who reported a high level of economic stress also reported less affection and more conflict in their relationships. Moreover, the link between hard financial times and troubled relationships did not vary by the gender, ethnicity, or marital status (married versus cohabiting) of respondents.

Most practitioners probably recognize that economic recessions can undermine relationship quality and stability. However, practitioners should recognize that the corrosive effects of economic strain can affect a wide range of couples, including middle-class couples who normally fare well during economic downturns.

Family Stability and Child Mental Health

Family structure and divorce continue to be topics of particular interest to family sociologists and demographers. Because children thrive on stability, frequent turnover in household membership may be problematic for the adjustment of children. In fact, nearly one out of 10 children will experience three or more parental unions before reaching the age of 18. This occurs because following divorce, the new partners of parents (married or unmarried) often move into the home where the children live. Some of these partners eventually depart from the household and are replaced by other partners. Lisa Stroschein, Lucia Tramonte, and Douglas Willms’ paper³ discussed the

1 Schneider, D., & Harknett, K. (2010). Economic distress and relationship quality: Evidence from the Great Recession. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, August

2 Lucas, A. & Hardie, J. (2010). Relationship quality in response to economic stress among young couples. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, August

3 Stroschein, L., Tramonte, L., & Willms, D. (2010). Family instability and child mental health trajectories. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, August

family instability hypothesis. This hypothesis assumes that children from divorced families have an elevated risk of emotional and behavioral problems because of instability in household membership. The paper looked at single divorces, multiple transitions, and parental reconciliations. The results indicated that both single divorces and multiple transitions were associated with negative mental health outcomes among children. However, parental reconciliations were not associated with negative outcomes. This study is the first of its kind; therefore, the results will need to be replicated before conclusions can be reached with confidence.

Sleep Problems and Marital Relationship Quality

Previous studies have shown that divorced adults (as well as their children) have an elevated risk for a variety of mental and physical health problems. One paper reported on sleep problems, a health outcome that has rarely been studied. In the study “Did you sleep well? An examination of family ties, relationship quality, and troubled sleep,” Jennifer Ailshire⁴ found that divorced individuals reported more sleep problems than married individuals. Similarly, spouses in low-quality marriages reported more sleep problems than did spouses in high-quality marriages. These associations held for women as well as men. Other studies indicate that over one-fourth of Americans rate the quality of their sleep as either fair or poor. Apparently, marital problems and divorce are significant contributors to our national inability to get a good night’s sleep. Therapists and health professionals should keep in mind that sleep problems are common among individuals who are divorced or in troubled marriages. Not only is a lack of sleep problematic in its own right, but it also can make it more difficult for spouses to cope with relationship difficulties and the demands of adjusting to single life following marital disruption.

Cohabitation and Fear of Divorce

There is continuing research on why some people choose to cohabit rather than marry—a topic addressed by Dela Kusi-Appouh, Amanda Miller, and Sharon Sassler.⁵ The researchers, who interviewed cohabiting partners ages 18-36, found that concerns about divorce were common. Couples who cohabit had a strong desire to “get it right,” expected to be financially and emotionally ready for marriage, and wanted to be certain that they had found the right partner. Others were concerned that marriage is difficult to exit. These individuals focused on the legal and emotional difficulties of ending a marriage, as well as the possible negative effects that divorce may have on children. Some went as far as to say that the rewards of marriage may not be worth the risk of divorce. Almost all of these individuals had positive views of marriage and wanted to be married one day, but the fear of divorce made them hesitant to commit. Many of these individuals had experienced parental divorce as children.

⁴ Ailshire, J. (2010). Did you sleep well? An examination of family ties, relationship quality, and troubled sleep. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, August

⁵ Kusi-Appouh, D., Miller, A., & Sassler, S. (2010). The specter of divorce: Views from working and middle class families. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, August

**Selected papers presented at The Doha International Institute Conference on
Strengthening Marriage and Supporting Families, Malta, October 6–7, 2009
Paul R. Amato, PhD**

The Malta Conference on Strengthening Marriage and Supporting Families was jointly sponsored by The Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development, (contributor for the Qatar Foundation), the Center for Excellence for Family Studies at the University of Malta, the Cana Movement of Malta, and the Maltese House of Representatives' Social Affairs Committee. Many scholars at the conference expressed concern for the rising divorce rate in much of the world and the implications of recent shifts in family structure and family relationships. While divorce in the U.S. has declined since its peak in the 1980s and has stabilized in recent years, divorce rates in many other countries have increased. Divorce rates are still lower in Europe than in the United States, but the rate of divorce has been increasing in virtually all European countries during the last several decades. This conference does not focus on practice but does highlight research that can inform the field of marriage education.

Divorce in Gulf of Arabia Societies

Professor Laychi Anser of Qatar University discussed divorce in the Gulf societies of the Arab world - Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.⁶ Traditionally, in these countries, marriage and family are among the most sacred institutions. Large and cohesive families are highly valued. In the region, there is concern that an increase in divorce is having a negative effect on parents, children, and communities. Available statistics indicate that the frequency of divorce is increasing in these societies, especially in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia (it is important to note that many separations are not declared officially and many marriages are ended through customary law). These divorces tend to occur relatively early in marriage; more than half of all divorces in Qatar occur within the first three years of marriage. Contrary to trends in the United States and in most European countries, divorces also tend to occur more often among well-educated than poorly-educated couples. As in Western countries, the presence of children is associated with a lower likelihood of divorce.

Effects of Divorce on European Children

Although many believe marital disruption is less problematic for children in Europe than in the United States, the accumulating research literature is not consistent with this assumption.⁷ The assumption is that divorce has fewer negative consequences for children in Europe due to the more generous and inclusive social policies that protect single mothers and their children (e.g., universal health care, child care allowances, and income supports). An increasing number of European studies that compare children with divorced parents to children of continuously married parents test this assumption. These studies indicate that European children with divorced parents experience more problems than do their peers with married parents in most European societies. For example, divorce is associated with an increase in child behavior problems in Bulgaria, Denmark, England, Finland, the Netherlands, and Norway. In Denmark, England, Italy, and Sweden, children and adolescents with divorced parents are at greater risk of having health problems, accidents and injuries, abusing alcohol, and committing suicide. Children with divorced parents also do more poorly in school and attain lower educational qualifications than children of married parents in England, Italy, Norway, and Sweden. Finally, the intergenerational transmission of divorce—a tendency for young adults from divorced families to see their own marriages end in divorce—has been noted in countries as diverse as Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, and Switzerland.

6 Anser, L. (2009). Divorce in Gulf Societies: A major challenge to family and marriage. Presented at the Conference on Strengthening Marriage and Supporting Families, Malta, October.

7 Amato, P. (2009). Children and divorce: Similarities and differences between the United States and Europe. Presented at the Conference on Strengthening Marriage and Supporting Families, Malta, October.

In general, the links between divorce and problematic outcomes among offspring are similar in the United States and most European countries. Of course, children vary considerably in how they adjust to divorce, with some adjusting well and others adjusting poorly.

Prayer and Positive Family Relationships

Professor Frank Fincham, Florida State University, reported on a series of studies examining links between prayer and intimate relationships.⁸ In one study, participants were randomly assigned to either pray for their partners or think positive thoughts about their partners. Specifically, prayer participants were instructed to “pray for the well-being of your partner” and “in your own language ask for your partner to be blessed in different ways and for discernment in how you might be a vehicle of God’s love for your partner.” Participants who prayed reported more subsequent forgivingness toward their partners than did those who had engaged in positive thoughts. Another study indicated that couples who attended a marriage enhancement program achieved more lasting positive outcomes when prayer was included as a program component. Other research suggests that prayer for the partner leads people to dwell less on potential conflicts of interest with their spouses and to focus more on successful couple outcomes. More specifically, when people feel a grievance toward their partners, prayer may help them to shift their attention to love, compassion, and understanding. Prayer also may lead to enhanced commitment and a desire to take care of and protect one’s partner. Fincham noted that a prayer-based approach is not appropriate for all married couples, particularly those who are not religious.

The large majority of people in the United States (and in many other countries) feel that religion (or spirituality in general) is an important feature of their daily lives. Consequently, practitioners who integrate elements of spirituality or prayer into their work may enhance their potential to bring about positive change in many marital relationships.

Family-Focused Public Policy

Two speakers discussed public policy supporting families based on public policy research. Professor Karen Bogenschneider⁹ argued that families provide a fundamental foundation for producing productive workers and caring and committed citizens. Moreover, family policy is an efficient investment of public resources to achieve societal goals. In general, policies that support families are politically popular and more effective than policies aimed strictly at individuals. For example, programs to decrease substance use among adolescents are more effective when they include family components—such as parent skills training and in-home family support—than when they are aimed solely at youth.

Similar themes were echoed by Professor Janet Walker from Newcastle University in England. In a paper titled “Marriage, parenting, protecting children’s best interests and the role of the state,”¹⁰ she argued that the state has a legitimate interest in helping parents and children to communicate constructively with each other and in promoting stability in family relationships.

8 Fincham, F. (2009). Is there a role for prayer in strengthening families? Presented at the Conference on Strengthening Marriage and Supporting Families, Malta, October

9 Bogenschneider, K. (2009). Strengthening families: Why family policy is important and what role policymakers and professionals can play. Presented at the Conference on Strengthening Marriage and Supporting Families, Malta, October

10 Walker, J. (2009). Marriage, partnering, protecting children’s best interests and the role of the state. Presented at the Conference on Strengthening Marriage and Supporting Families, Malta, October

APPLIED FAMILY STUDIES RESEARCH

Selected papers presented at the Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies
Conference, New York City, November 19–22, 2009

Alan J. Hawkins, PhD

The Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies conference occurred in November 2009 in New York City. One of the goals of ABCCT is to help increase public awareness and understanding of mental health difficulties, as well as to assist with learning about and locating the most effective and efficient modes of treatment. This conference provided numerous presentations of new research related to relationship education for couples. Three are highlighted here.

Can Couples Education Improve Fathering?

The factors that influence father involvement are complex, but one of the most significant is the quality of the relationship between the father and mother. This presentation provided preliminary results from the Fatherhood, Relationship, and Marriage Education (FRAME) project at the University of Denver.¹¹ The goal of the FRAME project is to improve father involvement among low-income resident fathers by strengthening their communication skills, aiding in coping with financial stress, and increasing investment and satisfaction with their parenting through relationship education. In a randomized control trial (RCT) study, 112 ethnically diverse, lower-income, married and unmarried resident fathers were randomly assigned to an educational intervention group (either a couples group or a fathers-only group). The control group received no educational intervention. (Another group was for mothers only; their male partners did not attend the educational sessions.)

Fathers in the educational intervention groups (a PREP-based program), on average, modestly increased their involvement with their children by the end of the program. Fathers in the control group did not; the difference between these groups was statistically significant. In addition, decreases in negative communication and increases in positive co-parenting predicted increases in father involvement by the end of the program. (Fathers whose partners attended the program but themselves did not attend actually decreased their father involvement by the end of the program.)

These early findings with a diverse, lower-income group of resident fathers suggest that fathers who invest in relationship education not only improve their relationship with their partner, but also increase their involvement with their children. This mirrors recent similar findings with lower-income couples¹² and with white, middle-class couples.¹³ The study is also consistent with those showing that programs designed specifically to reduce marital conflict can improve parenting behaviors among white, middle-class families.¹⁴

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- 11 Rienks, S., Wadsworth, M., Markman, H., Einhorn, L., Moran, E., and Pregulman, M. (2009). A study of the positive impact of couples education on fathering. Paper presented at the Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, New York City, November.
 - 12 Cowan, P. A., Cowan, C. P., Pruett, M. K., Pruett, K. D., & Wong, J. J. (2009). Promoting fathers' engagement with children: Preventative interventions for low-income families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71, 663–679
 - 13 Hawkins, A. J., Lovejoy, K. R., Holmes, E. K., Blanchard, V. L., & Fawcett, E. (2008). Increasing fathers' involvement in child care with a couple-focused intervention during the transition to parenthood. *Family Relations*, 57, 49–59.
 - 14 Cummings, E. M., Faircloth, W. B., Mitchell, P. M., Cummings, J. S., & Schermerrhorn, A. C. (2008). Evaluating a brief prevention program for improving marital conflict in community families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22, 193–202.

Is Community-Based Premarital Education Helping Couples?

Christine Walsh, Ron Rogge, and colleagues examined the effectiveness of community-based marital preparation.¹⁵ They asked 284 mostly white, middle-class couples (and some individuals whose partners did not participate in the survey) about their premarital education experiences and their current relationship. About 40% reported that they had some kind of participation in premarital education; although likely some of this participation was relatively brief. The 40% figure is a little higher than found in larger surveys of individuals elsewhere in the United States.¹⁶ Nearly 90% received premarital education in a religious setting, a slightly higher figure than found by Stanley et al. in 2006.¹⁷

The study found:

- No differences between those who had no premarital education and those who did, on such outcomes as relationship satisfaction, supportiveness, hostile conflict, or physical aggression. The ‘no difference’ outcome remained even when premarital education participants were divided into two groups, low-satisfaction and high-satisfaction, with their premarital education experience. This differs from previous survey research that found a significant positive difference among those who did and did not participate in some kind of premarital education on such outcomes as relationship satisfaction, commitment, and destructive conflict.¹⁸
- Those who did not participate in premarital education were at *greater risk for divorce*. They were less religious, more likely to come from divorced homes, and more likely to have cohabited and had children before marriage. Thus, those who would likely benefit the most from effective premarital education are less likely to receive it, a problem noted by several other scholars.¹⁹

Although studies of formal premarital education programs designed by social scientists show evidence of positive effects,²⁰ and other large surveys of peoples’ experiences with premarital education have found evidence of modest positive effects,²¹ this study suggests that the less formal premarital education efforts typically found in our communities may not readily duplicate the effects found in carefully controlled “laboratory” studies. The question of whether premarital education (at least the kind that most people receive in a religious setting, where nearly all premarital education is provided) helps couples get off to a better start, may not yet be settled.

15 Walsh, C., Rogge, R., Lee, S., Funk, J., Rodrigues, A., Saavedra, M., & Baker, E. (2009). Are we helping couples? Examining the effectiveness of community-based marital preparation. Poster presented at the Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, New York City, November 21

16 For a summary of state surveys see Hawkins, A. J. (2007). Will legislation to encourage premarital education strengthen marriage and reduce divorce? *Journal of Law and Family Studies*, 9(1), 79-99, and Stanley, S. M., Amato, P. R., Johnson, C. A., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random household survey. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 117-126.

17 Stanley et al. 2006, op cit.

18 Stanley et al., 2006, op cit.

19 Ooms, T. J., & Wilson, P. C. (2004). The challenges of offering relationship and marriage education to low-income populations. *Family Relations*, 53, 440-447; Stanley et al., 2006; Sullivan, K. T., & Bradbury, T. N. (1997). Are premarital prevention programs reaching couples at risk for marital dysfunction? *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 65, 24-30.

20 Carroll, J. S., & Doherty, W. H. (2003). Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research. *Family Relations*, 52, 105-118

21 Stanley et al., 2006, op cit.

When Do Couples Seek Help With Their Relationship?

Two Clark University researchers were interested in learning more about why couples seek professional help for their relationships.²² Sixty couples—some who sought professional help and some who did not—were asked a number of questions about their attitudes toward seeking professional help and actually accessing help. The professional help provided was a brief, two-session marriage checkup with a counselor that helps couples identify ways to improve marital health; it was purposefully described as not being therapy.

Wives were more likely to seek professional help with their relationship when they sensed communication problems in their marriage, felt less accepted by their husbands, spent less time together, and were experiencing more depression. For husbands, the situation was considerably more straightforward; husbands were more likely to seek help when they sensed that they were close to divorce. That is, husbands delayed seeking help until they were concerned that the marriage actually might end. The researchers also found that husbands under these same circumstances had poorer attitudes about wanting to seek help. Nevertheless, they were more likely to actually get it, perhaps because they sensed a real possibility of divorce.

The challenge highlighted by this research is that by the time husbands choose to seek professional help and actually get it, it is likely that wives are in significant distress and problems are more entrenched.

22 Eubanks, C. J. & Córdova, J. V. (2009). Correlates of couples' help seeking in the Marriage Checkup. Poster presented at the Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, New York City, November 21.

PSYCHOLOGY:

Selected work presented at the Society for Prevention Research Annual Conference

Denver, Colorado, June 1-4, 2010

Galena Rhoades, PhD

The Society for Prevention Research Annual Conference is a forum for the communication between scientists, public policy leaders, and practitioners concerning the implementation of evidence-based preventive interventions in all areas of public health. Very few presentations at the conference were focused on marriage or healthy relationships as a public health issue; therefore, all of the presentations reviewed here focused on the relationship education program called the Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP), a program with which the reviewer is involved. The selected papers summarized here focus on moderators of the effectiveness of PREP, a highly researched, skills-based relationship education program.²³ Two papers examined types of couples for whom relationship education may be more or less effective. The third paper examined the role that the relationship education facilitators play in outcomes of relationship education.

NOTE: The NHMRC is not endorsing PREP. However, it is believed that the research conducted of this program provides valuable lessons for the field.

Serving Couples with a History of Aggression

This study's sample included couples who were about to be married through a religious organization. Of 172 couples, 35% reported having experienced some physical aggression in the current relationship. Prior research shows that physical aggression (including pushing and shoving in its mildest form and severe injury in the most serious form) is relatively common among premarital or newlywed couples.²⁴ The researchers analyzed data from videotaped interactions showing these couples discussing a problem before receiving PREP and a few weeks after receiving PREP. At both times, those who had a history of aggression demonstrated more negative communication than those without that history. Additionally, both groups showed significant declines in negative communication in approximately the same amounts.

The study also examined results for later divorce among these groups, comparing couples who received PREP to those who received the premarital training offered by their religious organizations. Among those *without* a history of aggression, those who received PREP were slightly *less* likely to divorce than those who received other premarital services. At the same time, for those who had experienced aggression in their relationships, receiving PREP was associated with a significantly *higher* rate of divorce than couples receiving other premarital training services.

These findings raise questions about whether relationship education is effective for high-risk or unsafe couples as well as whether practitioners should screen for physical aggression and treat couples with a history of aggression differently from those without such a history. They also suggest that practitioners may need to rethink whether divorce is a negative or positive outcome for some couples who participate in relationship education. Clearly, future research is needed to examine these issues carefully, as these implications could greatly affect the field.

23 Markman, H. J., Stanley, S. M., & Blumberg, S. L. (2010). *Fighting for your marriage*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. See www.prepinc.com for more information.

24 Lawrence, E., & Bradbury, T. N. (2001). Physical aggression and marital dysfunction: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15(1), 135-154.

Serving Army Couples with a History of Infidelity

In a study of Army couples, Elizabeth Allen of the University of Colorado at Denver and colleagues examined whether having a history of marital infidelity is related to the effectiveness of relationship education.²⁵ Therapy to help couples who have experienced infidelity can be difficult,²⁶ although some research finds couples with a history of infidelity benefit similarly to those without infidelity.²⁷ However, this issue has not been addressed in the prevention or relationship education field.

Allen and her colleagues examined 178 couples in which one partner was an active member of the U.S. Army. All of these couples received PREP education. Most of the couples had children and, on average, had been married approximately 4 1/2 years. In this sample, 26.4% of the couples reported experiencing infidelity. Those experiencing infidelity had lower marital satisfaction and were more likely to be distressed than those who had no history of marital infidelity. Both groups improved in terms of marital satisfaction after receiving PREP and those with a history of infidelity caught up to those without.

These results tentatively suggest that a skills-based program like PREP can be effective for couples who have experienced infidelity, but it is not known which components may have been most useful. This indicates that specific content dealing with infidelity and/or preventing infidelity could be included in relationship education for distressed couples. As mentioned earlier, few general relationship education programs include this particular information for couples, but for some couples, it may be one of the most pressing issues they are facing.

What Role do Marriage Educators Play?

The literature on both individual and couples therapy shows that the therapist has an impact on outcomes, but the role that specific relationship education workshop leaders play in outcomes has rarely been examined. (The terms “workshop leaders”, “trainers”, or “marriage educators” are used interchangeably to describe the person delivering a marriage and relationship education curriculum.) Owen and colleagues²⁸ examined whether couples’ ratings of the “working alliance” they had with their leader (that is, how well the leader engaged with the couple in collaborative, purposeful work) were associated with how much couple communication improved at a post-intervention assessment. All workshop leaders who were studied regularly led premarital training at a large, metropolitan-area religious organization. PREP was offered through the premarital training services that they normally delivered at their religious organization (the version of PREP was secular). The research also examined whether delivering PREP bolstered a workshop leader’s effectiveness in their effort to help couples improve their relationships. One hundred eighteen couples and 31 marriage educators, some of which were leader pairs, were involved in the project. There was not much data available on the demographic characteristics of the leaders so only two leader-level variables were tested. These included the working alliance and whether or not the leader was trained in PREP.

In this study, *who* delivered relationship skills to couples explained a meaningful proportion of the improvement couples made from the pre-intervention to post-intervention assessment. The more couples reported that they had a strong working alliance with their marriage educator, the more they improved. Additionally, relationship education provided by someone who delivered PREP was associated with stronger change than was premarital training normally delivered by the religious organization.

25 Allen, E. S., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (June, 2010). Infidelity as moderator of PREP effects in the Army. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Prevention Research, Denver, CO

26 For a research-based guide treating couples with infidelity, see Baucom, D. H., Snyder, D. K., & Gordon, K. C. (2009). *Helping couples get past the affair: A clinician's guide*. New York: Guilford.

27 Atkins, D. C., Eldridge, K. A., Baucom, D. H., & Christensen, A. (2005). Infidelity and behavioral couple therapy: Optimism in the face of betrayal. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 73*(1), 144.

28 Owen, J., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (June, 2010). The role of leaders’ working alliance in premarital education. In G. K. Rhoades (Chair), Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Prevention Research, Denver, CO

This study indicates that both curriculum and who provides relationship education matter, and raises important issues about how best to train workshop leaders to deliver relationship education most effectively. Thus, training likely should include not only the specifics of the content of a relationship education program, but also information on how best to deliver the information and how to form a strong, collaborative bond with couples for their relationship education services. It may also be important to test different training methods to know whether the working alliance is something that can be improved upon through service delivery or whether it is something that is more intrinsic to the person.

RESEARCH THEMES AND CONCLUSIONS

Frank Fincham, PhD

The research presented at select conferences across different disciplines in 2009 and 2010 provides valuable information for the field of marriage/relationship education (MRE). Social policy that strives to be evidence-based can continue to be informed by these recent findings.

This snapshot reports on research that indicates that marriage/relationship education (MRE) leads to improved parenting. The beneficial effect of couple therapy on children's well-being was documented some time ago²⁹ and this effect has recently been extended to couple-based, psycho-educational programs with middle class couples.³⁰ Extending this idea further, Reinks and colleagues showed that couple education leads to increased father involvement in parenting among ethnically diverse, lower-income couples. The research in this paper adds to the field's understanding of the association between the inter-parental relationship and child well-being in two important ways.

First, as Paul Amato's analysis shows, the presence of generous resources for single parents in European countries does not ameliorate the impact of marital disruption on children. Second, Strohschein and colleagues' work on the family instability hypothesis is intriguing: they showed that parental reconciliations were not associated with negative child outcomes, suggesting that there is something fundamental about the inter-parental relationship being intact for children's well-being. The picture emerging across diverse areas is clear: interventions that improve the inter-parental relationship are associated with improved child adjustment. This is probably because the skills taught to the parents are then applied to their relationships with their children, although this is speculation.

The research highlighted in this Snapshot also addresses the classic question for any intervention, "What works for whom and under what circumstances?" For example, Rhoades reports that MRE decreased divorce rates among those without a history of couple aggression but increased it among those with such a history. Whether dissolution of the relationship is a positive or negative outcome among those with a prior history of aggression remains to be investigated. However, what is abundantly clear is this: (a) it is no longer adequate to think only of main effects where everyone shows improvement or lack thereof; and (b) what constitutes an improvement can be complex, e.g., when there is persistent abuse, divorce may be the best outcome.

Another finding from the research summarized here informs who and when (in the couple relationship) seeks help. The Eubanks and Cordova study shows that men only acquiesce to obtaining help for their marriage when they are on the brink of divorce. This is consistent with a longstanding view that women tend to be the barometers of relationship well-being.

Further recognizing complex challenges, Owen and colleagues identified the importance not only of the curriculum offered in MRE but also the facilitation skills exhibited by those delivering it. This research reminds us that MRE can only be as good as the quality of its implementation. How much stronger might the effects of MRE be if implementation fidelity was routinely monitored? This has implications for out-of-the-box (a.k.a. no-training-required curricula) and indicates that curriculum "training" does not guarantee the trainee forever thereafter implements it skillfully, appropriately, or even implements something close to the original curriculum. In a world of limited resources, the critical impact of implementation fidelity is too often overlooked.

The maturity of the MRE field is further evidenced by the attention given to the challenge of dissemination. Although the efficacy of MRE has been documented (using programs designed and implemented by social scientists), its effectiveness (impact of programs offered under "real world" conditions) is not well documented.

29 Kelley, M. L., & Fals-Stewart, W. (2002). Couples versus individual-based therapy for alcoholism and drug abuse: Effects on children's psychosocial functioning. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 70*, 417-427.

30 Cummings, E. M., Faircloth, W. B., Mitchell, P. M., Cummings, J. S., & Schermerrhorn, A. C. (2008). Evaluating a brief prevention program for improving marital conflict in community families. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*, 193-202.

Walsh and colleagues' survey found no difference in relationship satisfaction between couples who had and had not experienced MRE; 90% of the respondents had received MRE in religious settings. This raises the question of how to get religious organizations (where the majority of services are offered) to implement empirically supported MRE programs. A new line of research on prayer in families reported by Amato includes study results suggesting that supplementing a well known MRE program with a specific prayer intervention facilitated greater gains.³¹

Other complexities in the MRE field are illustrated in this paper. Walsh's work, for example, shows that those who most need MRE are least likely to receive it. Further, the data reported on the "Great Recession" to show that economic hardship is adversely influencing family behavior and is predictive of divorce, shows that couple-level intervention may not suffice in confronting the impact of macro level forces impinging on families. However, this does not mean that these interventions have no role. Rather it means that MRE is only a part of what is needed to build the healthy marriages and families that are so fundamental to a well functioning society.

CONCLUSION

This Research Snapshot shows that research relating to MRE is reaching a new level of maturity. MRE is realizing its potential and fulfilling its role in helping bring about healthy marriage. The field is closer now than ever to meeting the challenges that fueled the "marriage movement," initiated in 2000³². In recent conferences, evidence was presented to show that MRE provides an avenue for enhancing fatherhood and that the role of the facilitator is important. We are informed by improved understanding of the role of economic hardship on couples, the importance of family stability to children, and that fear of divorce among young adults may dissuade them from marriage. We also know that more research is needed to improve the likelihood that couples who need services receive them; to monitor fidelity of services and improve the quality of services offered in communities; and to better understand infidelity and the complex associations between a history of aggression and the effectiveness of relationship education. Divorce continues to challenge families, especially children, around the world, and researchers and practitioners continue to dedicate energy to learning how to strengthen couple relationships and offer timely, effective services.

31 Beach, S.R.H, Hurt, T.R., Fincham, F.D., Kameron J. Franklin, K.J., McNair, L.M., Stanley, S.M. (in press). Enhancing marital enrichment through spirituality: Efficacy data for prayer focused relationship enhancement. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*.

32 Institute for American Values (2004). What next for the Marriage Movement? Available at <http://center.americanvalues.org/?p=11>. Accessed on September 8, 2010.

APPENDIX A: CONTRIBUTORS

Frank Fincham, PhD, is Director of the Florida State University Family Institute. Dr. Fincham's research interests include marriage/partnerships, romantic relationships in emerging adults, forgiveness in family relationships, and substance abuse and the family. His recent research projects have looked at the perspective of children on divorce, programs that help children deal with divorce, sustaining African-American marriages, adult-adolescent relationships, and interventions for families with alcoholic fathers. He is recognized as one of the top 25 psychologists in the world by the American Psychology Society Observer, and was the 2007 President of the International Society for Relationship Research. He received his doctorate in Social Psychology from Oxford University in 1980.

Galena Kline Rhoades, PhD, is Senior Researcher at the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. Dr. Rhoades' research interests are romantic relationship development and the related implications for children and adults. Research and collaborations have included studies of cohabitation, mechanisms of change in couple interventions, infidelity, spousal perceptions of one another, relationship processes and psychopathology, and adolescent adjustment. She is a Psychologist, currently working on several funded projects with Drs. Scott Stanley and Howard Markman, creators of the Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP). These studies focus on measuring and modeling early relationship development, and on the effectiveness of relationship education.

Paul Amato, PhD, is Professor of Sociology, Demography, and Family Studies at Pennsylvania State University. His research interests include marital quality, the causes and consequences of divorce, and subjective well-being over the life course. Dr. Amato has published over 100 journal articles and book chapters, and several books, including "Alone Together" published by Harvard University Press. Dr. Amato received the Rueben Hill Award from the National Council on Family Relations, given for the best article on the family, in 2008, 2001, 1999, and 1993. He also received the Stanley Cohen Distinguished Research Award from the American Association of Family and Conciliation Courts in 2002, the Distinction in the Social Sciences Award from Pennsylvania State University in 2003, and the Distinguished Career Award from the Family Section of the American Sociology Association in 2006. He received his doctorate in Social Psychology at James Cook University in 1983.

Alan J. Hawkins, PhD, is Professor of Family Life at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. His early research and outreach focused on the involvement of fathers with their children and the effects of that involvement on men's development, as well as the division of domestic labor in dual-earner households. More recently, his scholarship and outreach has focused on educational and policy interventions to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce. In 2003-2004, he was a visiting scholar with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, working on ACF's federal healthy marriage initiative. He also serves as vice chair of the Utah Commission on Marriage. He earned a doctorate in Human Development and Family Studies at Pennsylvania State University in 1990.

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