

# Making A Case for Premarital Education\*

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*This article advances the argument that engaging in broadly applied premarital education efforts can reduce marital distress and divorce. Because of the complexity of design issues and difficulties inherent in outcome studies, researchers will reasonably continue to debate the effectiveness of premarital education regimens. Furthermore, there is a great deal more to be discovered that will guide prevention efforts in ways that will improve the effectiveness of those efforts in the future. Using a combination of rational argument and empirical findings, 4 key benefits of premarital education are discussed: (a) it can slow couples down to foster deliberation, (b) it sends a message that marriage matters, (c) it can help couples learn of options if they need help later, and (d) there is evidence that providing some couples with some types of premarital training, for example, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), can lower their risks for subsequent marital distress or termination.*

It is estimated that approximately 40% or more of new marriages among the younger generation will eventually end in divorce (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992, p. 5). Not only will many marriages end in divorce, but current evidence also suggests that marital distress negatively affects physical health (e.g., Burman & Margolin, 1992), mental well-being (see Halford & Bouma, 1997 for a review), and work productivity (e.g., Forthofer, Markman, Cox, Stanley, & Kessler, 1996). The staggering costs of marital failure have led many political leaders, religious leaders, persons in the media, and public policy advocates to issue calls to “do something,” with something of a “marriage movement” gaining momentum in the U.S. This movement is reflected in many activities. For example, various private organizations have become active in sounding the alarm about marital and family breakdown (e.g., the annual Smart Marriages, Smart Families conference in the U.S., the Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment, the Institute for American Values, and the Family Life Educator initiative of the National Council on Family Relations). These particular efforts reflect growing acceptance of a prevention mindset.

One of the more prominent calls within the broader marriage movement is for couples to undergo premarital education (e.g., McManus, 1993; Parrott & Parrott, 1995a; Stahmann & Hiebert, 1997; Stanley, 1997). Although these calls have historically been answered within religious organizations, there are also substantial efforts in various state governments to prevent marital distress and divorce. To be clear, “prevent” is a bit of a misnomer here. It is more realistic to aim for significantly reducing risk factors and the resulting harmful impacts, thereby improving the quality of life for adults and children alike. A society cannot prevent divorce and marital distress in any absolute sense, but it is a worthy goal to attempt to reduce such negative outcomes at cultural and couple levels. That is what is meant here by prevention.

State-level initiatives aimed toward prevention include ef-

orts to establish covenant marriage as an option (e.g., Louisiana and Arizona; Spaht, 2000), to encourage couples to undergo premarital education (e.g., Florida and Texas), or to initiate a broad-based, large-scale effort to strengthen marital and family relationships (e.g., Oklahoma). Despite various efforts aimed at increasing the availability of premarital education to couples, many questions remain unanswered:

- Is premarital education generally effective?
- Is it effective for all couples?
- Are we able to reach couples at higher risks for marital failure?
- Are some forms of premarital education more effective (or plausibly so) than others?
- Are some forms of premarital education more effective for some types of couples than others? High or low risk couples? First or second marriages?
- Who is in the best position to help couples build better marriages from the start?
- Will government initiatives encouraging premarital education help or hurt?

It will take decades of more research to answer such questions. Do we wait to have all the answers (were that possible) before we act on what is already known? Among those who study marriage and marital distress, people reasonably argue that we need to know far more about the nature of marital distress and what we can do to prevent it (Bradbury, 1998). There could be no reasonable disagreement on that. However, it will always be the case that we can know more than we know at present. Indeed, in another decade, we will likely know far more about key dynamics contributing to marital distress, as well as effective strategies for reducing it. As has been argued elsewhere (Stanley & Markman, 1998), the societal need to strengthen marriages is so great that we should act now on what we know. Later when we know more, we can and will refine our efforts on the basis of new knowledge gained.

If we act more broadly and immediately to prevent marital distress and failure, then our efforts can be based on two key factors: existing, empirically based knowledge and rational argument for engaging in plausible strategies. Here, four arguments are presented for the plausible benefits of engaging in premarital preventive efforts on a broad scale:

1. It can slow couples down to foster deliberation.
2. It can send a message that marriage matters.
3. It can help couples learn of options if they need help later.
4. It can lower the risk for subsequent marital distress or termination in some couples.

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The first three proposed benefits are based more on rational argument than existing empirical knowledge. The ideas seem straightforward; I believe they are not ideas that have been widely presented or discussed in the burgeoning marriage and prevention field. The fourth proposed benefit is based on existing empirical knowledge that leads to the position taken. Even though the arguments for the first three benefits rest more on logic than research, they all embody empirically testable hypotheses. Hence, one also could view these arguments as suggestive of a research program that might be undertaken to further our understanding of the potential to prevent or reduce marital distress and divorce.

### **Fostering Deliberation by Slowing Couples Down**

There have been many discussions in the U.S. about the advisability of making marriages harder to dissolve. Some of the dynamics of these issues are complex (see Parkman, 2000; Spaht, 2000). A common belief is that some increased delay might be valuable when couples are thinking about such a significant step like divorce. The rationale is to reduce the possibility of couples impulsively making decisions of great consequence by increasing time for reflection and discovery of other solutions. If delay may be of value when marriages are in dire straits, then might not delay be valuable in the service of premarital prevention efforts? The argument here is for delay in order to foster greater deliberation, not delay for the sake of delay.

Whereas there appear to be no published data testing this point, delay is a probable benefit of many premarital education efforts that is independent of the actual active ingredients of specific training programs. In other words, all other things being equal, if a particular regimen of premarital preparation (such as used in many churches) was known to couples to require a certain period (perhaps a number of months), then some couples would orient their wedding plans to this interval, setting dates later than what they might otherwise have chosen. In this scenario, delay might have a specific, preventive effect for the following reason: properly done, delay gives couples more time to deliberate about their union in marriage, even if only for a month or two. Premarital training could presumably foster this effect.

Of course, many couples do not need any external encouragement to achieve these benefits. Some couples approach marriage having already known one another over a significant period and have engaged in thoughtful discussions of their relationships. In fact for many couples, the courtship process is complex and not reasonably characterized by the overpowering influence of idealization and romanticism (Surra, Batchelder, & Hughes, 1995). Such couples may further benefit from a period of focused thinking about their impending union but they would not be as at-risk as other couples if they did not have it. In contrast, I believe there are many couples seeking marriage who have not known each other long and this alone is a significant risk factor (e.g., Kurdek, 1993). The lack of time knowing one another compounds the need for some thoughtful deliberation about their union. For such couples, a time where they are encouraged to be reflective might slow them in their rush to marriage that otherwise puts them at increased risk.

Delay and deliberation can help some couples discover dynamics that may lead them not to marry at all, saving them from the agony of marital distress and divorce later. In fact, David Olson has data on premarital counseling using the PREPARE

instrument that shows that approximately 10–15% of couples taking PREPARE within 6 months of their intended wedding date decide not to marry. Further, this figure goes to over 15% when couples take PREPARE 6–12 months prior to marriage and have numerous feedback sessions (David Olson, personal communication, February 10, 2000). These data document this potential benefit of premarital education efforts—deliberation with enough delay that leads some couples to re-evaluate their decision and, for some, avoid a significant mistake. Whereas these data are compelling logically, we do not know what the optimal length of time might be for the average couple to deliberate about their marriage in order to gain the proposed positive effects. Further, because it would not be easy to experimentally manipulate the time couples wait before getting married, empirical data addressing the matter would be useful but not definitive.

As an example of what is advocated here, many Catholic churches require couples to notify them at least 6 months in advance of a wedding for the purpose of premarital training. Although couples can obviously circumvent such a wait by pursuing a civil ceremony, couples who desire a certain kind of wedding will be asked to enter this period to consider having this kind of religious ceremonial start to their marriages.

The reasoning for the proposed benefits of delay is more compelling only to the degree that premarital strategies actually foster deliberation and thoughtfulness. The position presented here means that policies of government or religious organizations to encourage premarital training cannot achieve the hypothesized “deliberation effect” without couples actually having to slow down. The best hope for such an effect is in helping couples to take more time to discover potential weaknesses in their relationship.

For example, couples might be encouraged by religious organizations to engage in a rigorous exploration of expectations about their impending marital relationship. Such efforts are strongly suggested by research on the negative effects of dysfunctional relationship beliefs (e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Eidelson & Epstein, 1981; Fincham & Bradbury, 1989). Further, there are various tools available for practitioners to use to help couples more thoroughly explore their expectations and beliefs (e.g., Markey, Micheletto, & Becker, 1985; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994; Parrott & Parrott, 1995a; Stanley, Trathen, McCain, & Bryan, 1998).

Particular attention might be given to the articulation of expectations about aspects of commitment, such as the degree of acceptance of a long-term view, perspectives on how to cope with attractive alternatives, priority levels, and acceptance of the concept of sacrificial giving (e.g., Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickson, 1999; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, in press). A couple has likely done a careful exploration of expectations when the partners can articulate their own as well as their partner’s expectations in key areas. Couples tend to rate efforts aimed at clarifying expectations as among the more helpful aspects of premarital training (Stanley et al., 2001).

It is important to note that there could be costs that outweigh the benefits of delay for some couples. Some couples may benefit by having “rose colored-glasses” in early marriage, and the risk of diminishing some of the initial power of this could outweigh the benefit. For example, the protective buffering effect of positive sentiment override (Weiss, 1980) and idealism may be more valuable to some couples than the benefit of a more thorough understanding of the issues they will face in the future. Again, answering this question requires more empirical research.

We also need to know far more about which kinds of couples benefit from what kind of delay and deliberation. For example, do second marriages benefit as much or more from delays that foster deliberation? Given evidence that they are just as likely to endorse various myths about marriage as first timers, along with the fact that they are generally more at risk for divorce, one could make an argument that they might benefit as much or more from focused deliberation (Carter, Morris, & Blanton, 2000). We simply do not know the answer to such questions. If there is any reluctance on my part in advocating the benefits of deliberation it is that, broadly practiced, such strategies could be viewed as erecting more barriers to marriage when many couples are already deeming marriage unworthy of the effort. However, I argue that the probable benefit outweighs the risk.

### **Conveying that Marriage is Important and Worthy of Commitment**

Efforts at premarital training that are substantial convey an important message to the couples partaking in them: That marriage as an institution matters, and how their marriage turns out depends on their own attitudes and actions. Consider the meaning of this in the context of religious marriage ceremonies, as estimates are that about 75% of couples get married for the first time in religious organizations. (This 75% figure is widely quoted but rarely referenced. At least one survey—conducted by opinion research company Wirthlin Worldwide—has confirmed this percentage, though the data are not currently published.)

When couples come to a religious organization to be married, they get a message about marriage of one sort or another simply on the basis of the steps that precede the wedding. In some religious organizations, couples are told there is a substantial premarital training process that they must go through in order to be married. In others, couples are told that they merely need to meet with the clergy member to work out details of scheduling and, perhaps, fees. I am not suggesting that there is necessarily a strong correspondence between the approach taken and clergy views on the sanctity of marriage (though that is possible and testable). However, I think there is a clear difference in the message that is sent in these different approaches.

#### *Messages That a Couple May Gain From Strong Premarital Preparation*

*That the step the couple is about to take is important, with long-term consequences, and should be pondered carefully.* Requiring a couple to be more intentional reinforces the message that the decision and the transition should be approached with some gravity. Whereas earlier I emphasized the importance of couples reflecting on their relationship, here the emphasis is reflection on the nature of marriage itself.

There are no empirical data that I am aware of to judge if couples today take the decision to marry less seriously than years ago. However, my impression is that too many couples give too little weight to the decision to marry. Even if one had no philosophical reasons for believing there was something special about entering marriage from a social science and public policy perspective, there are still immense consequences (positive and negative) when one person chooses another as a mate. Yet, one has to look no further than the short-lived television show *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire* to get the pulse of a culture with regard to the seriousness of the commitment to marry. Although

this show was widely criticized—which may have resulted in a net positive effect for the societal image of marriage—its existence was startling for its portrayal of marriage as a trivial, marketed commodity. It nakedly portrayed what some have argued is a fundamental philosophy that too many people bring to marriage in a consumer-oriented culture (e.g., Stanley, 1998). Many couples clearly take the transition to marriage seriously; yet, there may be substantial numbers of couples who do not. As with other ideas presented here, research could tell us more about how seriously couples on average take the decision to marry today.

I am not arguing that every marriage should persist no matter how destructive it may be to the individuals in it. However, there is evidence that the decision to marry has been trivialized in our culture, a fact noted by marriage scholars (see Whitehead 1997 for a review; Doherty, 2000a). In the classic work, *Anna Karenina*, Leo Tolstoy (1875–1877/1993) captured the gravity with which marriage was entered into over a century ago in Russia. The lines below were written by Tolstoy in describing the mental state of the character of Levin during his wedding to Kitty. As the priest performing the ceremony prayed for them to receive help from God, Levin thought:

“How did they guess that it is help, just help that one needs?” he thought, recalling all his fears and doubts of late. “What do I know? What can I do in this fearful business,” he thought, “without help? Yes, it is help I need now.” . . .

Levin felt more and more that all his ideas of marriage, all his dreams of how he would arrange his life, were mere childishness, and that it was something he had never understood, and now understood less than ever, though it was happening to him. In his breast a tremor rose higher and higher, and tears that would not be checked came into his eyes. (pp. 514, 516)

Such words aptly portray a degree of respect for marriage and the wedding ceremony that appears to be greatly diminished in our modern society. One message couples may receive from premarital training is that the step they are taking, reflected in their vows, is of immense importance. For those couples open to religious influence, such a message might have the greatest force when delivered in the religious context because it is an obvious context for talking about the larger “meanings.” Premarital education can reinforce the message that, as with other investments, marriages are effected by short- versus long-term views, with great reason to believe that marriage quality is more protected when couples take the long-view (e.g., Amato & Rogers, 1999; Stanley, 1998). For males, the long-term view is particularly associated with the willingness to sacrifice for the partner (Whitton et al., in press).

Last, couples can be taught that their wedding is one in a series of important rituals that can strengthen the foundation of their marriage. The importance of ritual in regulating and sustaining positive marital behavior has been underutilized in what couples are taught about marriage, though the topic is now receiving increased attention as a potent vehicle for the protection of marital relationships (Doherty, 2000b). The transition into marriage might be a particularly good point in life to encourage couples to take advantage of the value of rituals in the life of their marriage.

*The couples’ impending union matters, not just to them or to those who witness it, but to the larger community.* David Blankenhorn (1997) of the Institute for American Values has argued

that couples have increasingly come to see their marriages as only a matter between the two partners, not as a relationship where the community has an interest and where they, the couple, have responsibilities. His perspective is bolstered by the fact that failing marital relationships are in some degree the “business” of the larger society because of the significant economic and social consequences involved in marital outcomes (Ooms, 1998; Stanton, 1997; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). In the case of a religious (or government) body encouraging premarital education, a message is given that the community is involved in what otherwise has come to be seen as an individual event. However, it is also the emphasis on individuality in western cultures that is most at odds with the perspective that marital partners have some social responsibility to the wider community. It is this dynamic tension between individual and social responsibility that has led to an ongoing debate in American society about no-fault divorce laws and divorce law reform (see Parkman, in press, for an excellent discussion).

Related to the involvement of the broader community, I argue in the next section that premarital education can inform couples that there are people who are concerned and may be of help should they struggle in the future. These messages of social responsibility and social support are implicit in some premarital preparation regimens. They are likely to be most effective when these messages are thoughtfully delivered and explicit. One of the more popular and growing expressions of community support and involvement in support of young couples’ marriages is the mentor movement (e.g., McManus, 1993; Parrott & Parrott, 1995b). Mentor models have the advantage of combining elements of increased community accountability with increased support, all with the assent of the couples involved. Premarital training can provide a point of contact wherein couples can become linked with interested mentor couples.

*The quality of the couple’s marriage from the start depends largely on their attitudes and actions—that what they do matters.* Properly done, premarital education produces a mindset that how a marriage turns out is not a matter of fate but in large measure is the outgrowth of decisions partners make and the actions they take every day for years to come (Markman et al., 1994).

Of course, messages such as these can be made explicit in premarital preparation regimens delivered in religious contexts. It is also quite possible that governmental efforts to encourage premarital education may have similar effects in terms of sending positive messages about marriage. Though challenging, studies could be devised that attempt to measure these subtle effects. It would be important to know what sort of messages premarital providers send and the degree to which couples accurately receive them. I believe that well-done premarital preparation can send powerful and positive messages that can affect the motivational structure of persons who are marrying. More basic research is needed on the ways in which attitudes affect behavior and the degree to which attitudes and behavior are modifiable in premarital training.

### **Couples Can Learn That Others Want to Help**

One of the potential benefits of premarital education efforts is that couples can learn that there are others who can help them or refer them to help if they experience difficulties later in life. This is one plausible effect of premarital education that has received only scant attention from researchers with some findings suggestive of the benefit proposed here (Bader, Microys, Willett,

& Conway, 1980). When a couple has a positive premarital educational experience, they may be more likely to seek the advice of either the person who helped them premaritally or others. If such a benefit exists, then the resistance to getting help in the future may be weakened by the experience of having done so in the past.

Surely the vast majority of couples who experience significant movement toward marital distress could be helped more effectively if they sought help earlier in the process of deterioration. Many couples wait so long to seek help that much damage has occurred. Much deterioration in marriages happens in the first 5–10 years (Glenn, 1998), and there is impetus to help couples be more aware of the existence of helpers early on. For many couples, clergy or lay leaders in religious organizations have provided premarital training, becoming trusted gatekeepers in referring couples to other services such as marital counseling.

This hypothesized effect depends on couples receiving premarital services that they perceive as helpful and from someone they trust. Thus, services must be competently delivered by caring individuals, and the content of the services must be perceived as plausible. As such, research on what couples report as most helpful in premarital training is important in devising training that allows couples to see that caregivers are truly useful.

In an important, large sample survey recently conducted in the Catholic church, couples were asked many questions about their premarital preparation experiences. When asked what content areas were most helpful, the top three rankings went to the three “C’s” of *communication* (73.5% rated as helpful), *commitment* (70.4% rated as helpful), and *conflict resolution* (67.2% rated as helpful); (Center for Marriage and Family, 1995). Rated significantly lower were topics such as personality issues, finances, background compatibility, and career issues (see Silliman & Schumm, 1989, for similar findings). Although it is doubtful that most of the premarital programs experienced by these couples were skills-based, it is very clear that these couples who were now well into their marriages recognized the central need for these foci in premarital training (Stanley, 1997, p. 57).

Do most premarital education efforts take such important information into consideration? Probably not (Trathen, 1995). Complicating matters somewhat is the lack of agreement among researchers as to the utility of techniques that couples rate highest for usefulness (i.e., training in handling difficult issues well through the use of structured communication skills and active feedback; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Stanley, Bradbury, & Markman, 2000). Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe distressed couples would seek services if earlier experiences left them thinking there was little value to doing so.

### **Primary Effects of Premarital Education**

On the basis of research on newlyweds, Sullivan and Bradbury (1997) have raised valid concerns about the effectiveness of much of the premarital training that currently is provided for couples prior to marriage. They found that approximately 90% of couples who had taken premarital training would choose to do so again. Yet, there were no differences between those who did and did not have some premarital training on marital outcomes. In nationwide polling data, those who had taken premarital counseling in the prior 5 years were less likely than others to have thought about divorce and were more likely to have confidence in their ability to handle their future (Stanley & Markman, 1997). However, such results could be attributed to

selection effects (i.e., those seeking such services may be more committed to begin with than those who do not). Only more rigorously designed studies can begin to tease out such effects, and even then it may be difficult to remove any question about selection effects as one interprets the findings.

Researchers will likely continue to debate what interventions have the greatest (if any) preventive effects. Nevertheless, there is no doubt or debate that the characteristics of couples and the individuals that comprise them have great bearing on the future quality of those marriages (for review, see Karney & Bradbury, 1995). This is crucial because the most plausible basis for thinking we can lower risks for marital dissolution or distress through prevention comes from being able to identify risks early in relationships (Markman & Floyd, 1980). Many studies have illuminated various risk factors for the development of marital distress and failure. Such research is of great value because it provides direction as to what to target for effective premarital education. At the least, a little education addressing risk factors can help couples ponder their level of commitment relative to some of the risks they face. At points prior to premarital training, this could even result in better mate selection.

Factors shown to increase the risk of marital distress or divorce include, but are not limited to, wives' employment and income (Greenstein, 1990), neuroticism and other personality dimensions (Bouchard, Lussier, & Sabourin, 1999; Kelly & Conley, 1987), premarital cohabitation (Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Thomson & Colella, 1992), difficulties in the areas of leisure activities and sexual relations (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996), physiological arousal prior to problem-solving discussions (Levenson & Gottman, 1985), parental divorce (Glenn & Kramer, 1987), previous divorce of husbands (Bumpass et al.), communication positivity/negativity (Markman, 1981), communication withdrawal and invalidation (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993), escalation, defensiveness and withdrawal (Gottman et al., 1998), higher ratios of hostility to warmth (Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996), dissatisfaction with partners' personality and habits (Fowers et al.), difficulties in communication and problem solving (Fowers et al.), religious dissimilarity (Heaton & Pratt, 1990), maintaining separate finances (Kurdek, 1993), knowing the partner a short time before marriage (Kurdek, 1993), marrying young (Booth & Edwards, 1985; Bumpass et al.), being less conscientious (Kurdek, 1993), low or differing levels of education (Bumpass et al.), having dissimilar attitudes (Kurdek; Larsen & Olson, 1989), premarital pregnancy, (Kurdek, 1991), and remarriage (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Kurdek, 1991).

Among such a plethora of targets, it makes sense to focus prevention efforts on risk factors that are relatively dynamic and changeable versus those that are more static and less likely to change (Stanley, 1997). My opinion is that far too much time is dedicated to unchangeable factors in many forms of premarital training. Current research suggests a number of dynamic variables that are associated with risk and make plausible targets for prevention strategies such as negative interaction, conflict management, dysfunctional attitudes and expectations, the preservation of friendship, and commitment beliefs and dynamics.

More specifically, how couples interact when in conflict is strongly related to risk and it is changeable. In contrast, some personality tendencies are related to risk (especially neuroticism) but they are generally not going to change. The best way to lower many risks that are relatively static, such as personality, is likely by focusing on the dynamic factors through which those risks are expressed. So, it may not be all that useful for a couple

to know one partner is relatively more neurotic (they likely know this anyway), but it might be useful to work with a couple on how this personality tendency affects how they interact when they are in conflict.

Reviews of the existing literature (e.g., Silliman, Stanley, Coffin, Markman, & Jordan, in press) demonstrate that, whereas there are a variety of programs for premarried and married couples, little research has been conducted on either prevention-oriented or enrichment-oriented programs over longer terms. This is especially true when it comes to research on outcomes on the use of various well-developed premarital assessment instruments (e.g., PREPARE, Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1989; FOCCUS, Markey et al., 1985; or RELATE, Holman, Busby, Doxey, Klein, & Loyer-Carlson, 1999; see also Larson, 2000). Whereas the rationale for their use is compelling, I am not aware of published outcome studies on the use of these instruments (in contrast to various published studies on their psychometric development and correlates of scores). More research on the effects of these widely used instruments would be of immense value to practitioners of premarital training and family life educators more generally.

### *Research on the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP)*

When it comes to long-term outcome studies of premarital education field, most of the published research in the past decade is on variations of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP; Markman et al., 1994; Stanley et al., 1998). Highlights from these studies are emphasized here to illuminate the (a) potential effects of comprehensive premarital training and (b) issues common in outcome research of this sort. As with any line of outcome studies in the social sciences, various weaknesses can be identified. Nevertheless, studies of PREP generally comprise up-to-date, empirically informed efforts to reduce the chances of marital distress and dissolution. There also are outcome studies of other well-conceived programs for couples (e.g., Relationship Enhancement, Guerney, 1977; Couples Communication, Miller, Wackman, & Nunnally, 1983) that demonstrate consistently positive effects, at least over shorter term follow-ups such as 6–12 months (e.g., Ridley, Jorgensen, Morgan, & Avery, 1982; see Giblin, Sprenkle, & Sheehan, 1985, for a meta-analysis and review).

Following is a summary of findings from studies on PREP (and variations of it). These results might be reasonably representative of the effects of programs that have a similar focus on both couple interaction and the preservation and protection of positive dynamics that bond couples together (e.g., friendship, fun, and commitment). For those who are more pessimistic about this literature, the results to date often are taken as examples of the ways in which potential selection effects can cloud interpretation of outcomes (discussed in Stanley & Markman, 1998). However, I believe such studies provide a rational basis for believing that some couples can be aided by premarital education (in addition to the effects hypothesized thus far).

PREP was designed as a program to decrease marital distress and divorce based on an empirical analysis of risk factors (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Lewis, 1986; Markman et al., 1994; Stanley Blumberg, & Markman, 1999; Stanley et al., 1998) emphasizing early prevention. The materials also are widely used to help married couples, though the research focus has been early prevention. The dominant framework for under-

standing the goals of prevention at this time is framed by the distinction between mechanisms that raise *protective factors* and those that lower *risk factors* (e.g., Coie et al., 1993; Rutter, 1979). As such, PREP is an attempt to help couples lessen vulnerability and risk in marriage by strengthening protective factors (e.g., friendship, fun, commitment, and spiritual or religious connection) and weakening risk factors (e.g., negative interaction and unrealistic expectations).

Studies on versions of PREP have been conducted by various researchers in a number of countries, with varying results, published elsewhere. With regard to couple outcomes, findings suggest that:

- Couples can learn to communicate more positively and less negatively, and some of these effects are clearly measurable up to 5 years or longer (Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993; Thurmaier, Engl, Eckert, & Hahlweg, 1993; Stanley et al., 2001). Further, where couples taking PREP have been compared to couples taking other premarital training such as Engaged Encounter, PREP couples showed clear advantages in terms of lowering negative interaction and increasing positive interaction (Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992; Stanley et al., 2001). These findings are based on objective coding of couple interaction.
- Couples taking PREP are less likely than control couples (taking either no programs or alternate programs) to break up or divorce up to 5 years following training (Hahlweg et al., 1998; Markman et al., 1993). In the study of a German version of PREP, the difference in divorce rates for PREP versus control couples at the 5 year follow-up was 3% and 16% (Thurmaier, Engl, & Hahlweg, 1999).
- Couples taking PREP, compared to control couples receiving no program or other programs, either gained in satisfaction or maintained higher levels of satisfaction in the years following the program (Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992; Hahlweg et al., 1998; Markman et al., 1988). Overall, this effect appears to be less robust and less enduring than the other effects noted above, though methodological issues complicate the interpretation of these data (as discussed later).
- There is some evidence of a primary preventive effect of PREP in lowering the likelihood of relationship aggression (Markman et al., 1993); yet more research is needed here.
- Couples taking an Australian adaptation of PREP retained the skills taught at 1 year. Four years later, low-risk couples who took the intervention were doing no better than were low-risk couples who took an alternate, bibliotherapy intervention in maintaining initial levels of satisfaction. However, high-risk couples (defined by parental history of divorce or aggression; Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999) who took the intervention showed significant advantages in maintaining satisfaction compared to high-risk controls (Behrens & Halford, 1994).
- Couples taking PREP were more satisfied overall with their premarital training experience than were couples who received other premarital offerings, though most couples were generally satisfied with services received (Stanley et al., 2001).

Taken together, studies such as these provide significant reason to believe in the value of providing empirically informed, premarital training to couples. However, there are other studies on PREP where the results do not show superior effects com-

pared to alternate interventions (Trathen, 1995; Van Widenfelt, Hosman, Schaap, & van der Staak, 1996).

*Methodological concerns.* Both the positive findings related to PREP (as well as other programs) and findings of little or no advantage for couples taking PREP variants point to numerous methodological challenges facing researchers conducting outcome studies in this field—challenges that leave room for both differences in interpretation as well as a clear need for further research. Some of the key methodological issues are briefly highlighted below.

- Whereas a number of PREP studies are the noted exceptions, a major limitation of most research on premarital training is the use of short-term designs for assessing what is, by nature, a long-term goal (the prevention of marital distress and divorce).
- Only studies using objective coding of video-taped interaction show the differences in positive and negative interaction noted previously.
- Concerns about selection effects with regard to initial group assignment of couples leave some key results open to interpretation.
- Differential attrition of participants affects the long-term interpretation of results in all of the long-term studies of PREP. Essentially, control couples are generally more likely to break up or drop out of the studies, leaving control groups that become more positive looking over time. This is essentially a kind of selection effect that compromises comparison of groups in these studies over time.
- We currently have little knowledge about the degree to which program fidelity is maintained as various kinds of premarital programs are disseminated into communities.

These methodological concerns are highlighted by two key studies of PREP. The long-term study conducted at the University of Denver through the 1980s provides some of the most positive findings regarding PREP (see Markman et al., 1988; Markman et al., 1993; Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995). However, because of differential attrition (more couples in the control group drop out of the study) and the probable attenuation of effects over time, differences between controls and PREP couples after 5 years are equivocal. Further, a significant number of couples randomly chosen to be offered the intervention decided not to take it. Thus, findings from this study are open to various interpretation because of potential selection effects; however, we never found any systematic differences between acceptors and decliners at pretest on a wide array of measures (see Stanley et al., 1995). The strengths of the study include the use of long-term follow-up and objective coding of couple interaction.

The second study examined an adaptation of PREP for Holland (Van Widenfelt et al., 1996), and the results received attention because of the lack of significant findings favoring couples receiving PREP. The study assessed the use of PREP with couples considered to be at higher risk. The findings could accurately reflect no advantage for the couples taking PREP in this study. However, it also highlights some of the difficulties conducting this kind of outcome research. The results were difficult to interpret because there was measurable, differential attrition between the PREP and control groups, with the more distressed control couples being more likely to drop out of the study. This effect, common to outcome studies on PREP, may actually mask a positive treatment effect. Yet, it is impossible to determine this

because the differential attrition leaves a control group that is increasingly select for couples doing well. A second difficulty in interpreting the findings results from the fact that, following self-selection, the PREP couples had been together significantly longer than the control couples. The groups were not obviously different at preassessment on other key variables but this difference in time together could have mitigated other differences.

More important, studies such as the one in Holland are quite valuable for the potential over time to shed light on which couples under which conditions are likely to benefit (or not benefit) from preventive efforts. Many more studies looking at the effects of various kinds of programs with different groups of couples are needed.

As noted earlier, selection effects represent a serious problem in interpretation of the results in outcome studies. Whereas there were no selection effects discovered on any of the measures in the 1980s Denver study, there is evidence that in the Germany study the PREP couples were communicating more poorly at preassessment in comparison to controls. Yet, the PREP couples still look better at each assessment thereafter (Thurmaier et al., 1993; Hahlweg et al., 1998). Even if there were no control group, the interaction changes maintained over time for the PREP couples would be impressive. A fair criticism of this line of research is that it has not been conclusively documented that other key preventive effects follow directly from the changes in interaction quality (whether measured or not). We also do not know if the positive effects some couples experience from premarital training are evidence of true prevention or reduction of distress and divorce or merely delay. Differential attrition of comparison groups in these kinds of studies make it difficult to answer such questions.

*New directions.* It is important to recognize that, as a field, we know little about the potential of improving effects by matching different kinds of couples to different kinds of interventions. Although the research would be expensive, we need to know which couples will not benefit from any premarital training, who may actually be harmed by it, and which couples will benefit the most. In terms of harm, it is possible that some couples could receive a false sense of confidence from premarital training. If we knew this to be true, then it would be valuable to (a) know how to identify such couples, and (b) have some evidence-based ideas for what would be most helpful to these couples. For example, this concern might argue for rigorous training because such procedures might have the most potential to challenge such couples prior to marriage.

There are many examples of the kinds of couples we need to know more about in terms of preventive intervention. For example, we need more research on how couples approaching second marriages are different from couple approaching first marriages, and we could make much better use of what we do know (e.g., Booth & Edwards, 1992; Carter et al., 2000). We also need to be careful when applying strategies based on research with middle-class couples to efforts with highly disadvantaged, fragile families who are in great need of many kinds of preventive services (Ooms, 1998).

We currently have underway a large scale, premarital training study designed to address the methodological weaknesses of other studies in the field (see Stanley et al., 2001). We are contrasting how couples trained in PREP by their religious leaders fare over time in comparison to those trained by our staff or with those who receive premarital services typically offered in religious organizations. Religious organizations were randomly as-

signed into these various tracks to reduce the possibility of selection effects affecting interpretation of results.

Tests of pretraining to posttraining outcomes have been conducted (Stanley et al., 2001). As was hypothesized, the couples receiving the empirically based PREP intervention show early advantages relative to those couples receiving more traditional premarital services in terms of interaction quality. The couples taking the PREP program were communicating more positively and less negatively than the group receiving naturally occurring premarital services following training. This finding held regardless of whether the couples were trained by our staff or their own clergy and lay leaders.

Among other things, these early findings suggest that clergy and lay leaders can be trained to effectively present this program. This is important because, at least in the U.S., religious leaders (or religious institutions with family life educators) are in the single best position to bring about the broadest range of meaningful early prevention efforts with regard to marital distress and divorce (Stanley et al., 1995). Over time, I think we are likely to see a wide range of service providers who demonstrate effectiveness in the task of premarital and early prevention of marital distress, including extension agents, social workers, home health visitors, and college or high school educators.

Whereas the couples receiving PREP from clergy and lay leaders are communicating significantly more positively (as rated by trained coders in our laboratory) by postassessment, it is noteworthy that couples who received naturally occurring premarital services actually increased in negative interaction from preassessment to postassessment (a replication of differences reported in Renick et al., 1992). Such findings may or may not hold up in the longer term. In the short-run, there are clear advantages in terms of interaction quality for couples taking the more empirically-based, skills-oriented training. If these differences remain over time and extend to other aspects of couple functioning, then the findings have significant implications for the practice of premarital education with regard to the inclusion of strategies designed to impact couples' patterns of interaction. Such inclusion seems particularly warranted on the basis of current evidence to devote substantial time to helping couples manage differences and negative interaction in ways that are protective of the positive elements of their relationship so that the former do not erode the latter. Long-term follow is necessary to evaluate whether the couples receiving PREP in this new study show advantages over time on dimensions such as divorce rate, satisfaction, or mental health.

## Conclusions

I would agree with those who assert that we need to know far more about how to prevent marital distress for the greatest number of couples. In fact, ongoing research will help us know more about how to accomplish this task. For example, we will surely learn more than we know now about how to help couples lower risk factors and raise protective factors. Hopefully, we will have empirical answers to many of the other research questions raised here. As practitioners and researchers who are concerned with the prevention of marital distress and divorce learn more, we can and will refine our efforts. In the absence of data we might wish to have now, there are many reasons to believe in the value of engaging in broadly applied, premarital education efforts with couples. We know enough to act and we should take action to know more.

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