

Jennifer Franco
7/24/07
Research Summary

Are We Helping Couples: Examining the Efficacy of Community-Based Marital Preparation

As many as one to two thirds of newlywed couples receive some form of marital preparation ranging from informal meetings with clergy to more formalized psycho-education workshops, and the majority of newlywed couples report having received this preparation through their religious organization (Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997). There is promising evidence to support the efficacy of structured psycho-educational workshops – particularly those focused on communication skills – to strengthen relationships and prevent divorce for up to 3 years after the workshop (see Carroll & Doherty, 2003 for a review). As communication skills have been consistently linked to changes in relationship quality over time (see Rogge & Bradbury, 1999 for a review), it is likely that improvements in couples' communication serve as one of the mechanisms of positive change seen by these workshops. However, as the relationship workshops with the strongest empirical support have yet to be widely disseminated at a national level, it remains unclear whether the current programs offered to couples in the community achieve this same level of benefit. Thus, the current study examines the effects of community-based marital preparation to see if those couples who received preparation exhibit higher levels of relationship satisfaction and better communication skills than couples who did not receive marital preparation.

Based on Sullivan and Bradbury's (1997) findings, we hypothesize no significant differences between the two groups on levels of relationship satisfaction or communication / conflict behavior. However, following the results of Schumm et al. (1998), we seek to extend this research by examining how additional factors such as

satisfaction with preparation, type of preparation, and type of provider (e.g., level of professional training) might influence the effectiveness of the marital preparation. Thus, we propose that higher post-treatment satisfaction will be associated with stronger positive effects on relationship and communication quality. We also hypothesize that interventions provided by people with greater amounts of professional training will show greater benefits in comparison to training provided by untrained providers.

Self-report and observational data on conflict behavior and relationship satisfaction was taken from a sample of 330 engaged or newlywed couples. Results suggested that the 30% of couples participating in premarital preparation failed to demonstrate robust differences in the quality of their self reported and observed communication when compared to the remaining couples in the sample. In contrast, the 12% of couples participating in couples counseling prior to marriage reported engaging in more aversive conflict after therapy than the remaining couples although no differences were found on the corresponding observational measures of conflict behavior. Results further revealed that couples were more satisfied with interventions of both types when offered by providers with at least some professional training. More importantly, higher levels of satisfaction with treatment were associated with more adaptive communication behaviors- especially for husbands.

The results presented revealed several significant implications. First, community-based preparation programs are not as effective as the empirically validated programs. Thus, validated preparation programs should be more widely offered to couples to increase success rates. In terms of couples counseling, results suggest that a smaller population of couples participate in this form of marital intervention. These couples might have had greater levels of aversive and hostile conflict behaviors prior to

participating in couples counseling. However, these couples looked similar to the remaining couples in the sample after treatment which might actually be a positive outcome, suggesting that the counseling was effective in improving their communication skills to the same levels as couples who did not need to seek counseling for serious relationship problems. Finally, the current study discourages the use of untrained providers for both types of premarital interventions examined.