Couple Relationship Education in Australia

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In Australia, the strengthening of marriage through relationship education has received strong governmental policy support and some modest financial support. Couple relationship education services are offered by a variety of community-based, church-affiliated, and church-based providers. There is a strong emphasis on providing programs that are developed locally in response to perceived couple needs and government policies. Available evaluations show that most couples who attend education value the service, but relationship education providers need to do a better job reaching out to couples at high risk for future relationship problems, and more research is needed on the effects of education on long-term marital outcomes. There is significant scope for building on current initiatives to incorporate evidence-based approaches and to expand the program reach to more couples.

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The Australian government promotes couple relationship education as an important element of strengthening marriage and reducing the personal and social costs of separation and divorce (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1998). In this article, we analyze the offering of relationship education in Australia. We begin by describing some contextual factors about Australia that shape the offering of relationship education. We then describe the approaches taken to relationship education in Australia, and the funding and provision of education. A critical evaluation of the current services is offered, focusing on the content and reach of relationship education.

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT OF COUPLE RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION

Australia is a geographically large country (approximately the same size as the mainland United States) with a relatively small but densely concentrated population. Of Australia's 20 million people, about 85% live within a small coastal strip stretching

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around the southern and eastern coastlines. This strip makes up about 10% of the land area, making Australia one of the most urbanized nations. The remaining 90% of the land area is sparsely populated. Relationship education delivery in Australia, as for many services, needs to be accessible across diverse settings, including large cities, regional towns, small rural communities, and remote areas involving vast distances with low population.

Funding and Access of Couple Relationship Education

Australia is a federation of six states and two territories, and the Australian Constitution, law, and administrative precedent accord responsibility for different aspects of services to state or national governments. The national government is empowered by the Marriage Act 1961 to fund marriage and family education services, and has done so since the mid-1960s (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1998). The funding of education services under the Marriage Act is subject to organizations' adherence to particular guidelines for service provision. The guidelines define relationship education as ''preventative programs which deliver education to assist men and women to develop skills to foster positive, stable relationships with their partner or family,'' which are described as ''adopting a preventative, adult education and training approach'' (Australian Department of Family and Community Services, 2004, p. 6).

The national government funding to accredited agencies includes both block funding to provide base operating funds, and fee-for-service funding. Most agencies charge clients on a fee-for-service basis, often on a sliding scale adjusted for family income. The fee level is often set below the costs of providing the service, with the subsidy provided through government funding. However, the total funding for relationship education is very modest. In 2002–2003, the Australian government allocated AUS $3.7 million (US $2.5 million) to provide family relationship education, much less than the $19.1 million allocated to fund family relationship counseling services (Australian Department of Family and Community Services, 2003). In addition to the national relationship education funding, state governments fund other family services and provide some relationship education. A range of secular and religious organizations fully or partially fund services, and participants also make a significant contribution through payment of fees (Simons & Parker, 2002).

Trends in Couple Relationships

Australians are marrying a little less than a generation ago. The proportion of all adult Australians in registered marriages declined slightly from 51% to 47% between 1991 and 2001, while the proportion in de facto relationships rose from 4% to 6% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). The marriage rate in Australia in 2001, 5.3 per 1,000 population, is substantially lower than in the United States (8.3 per 1,000 population in 1998; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002).

Pathways into marriage are changing. As in many Western countries, the age at first marriage is increasing in Australia. The median age of first marriage in 2002 was 29 years for men and 27 for women, compared with 25 and 22, respectively, in 1982. Rates of premarital cohabitation have increased; in 2002, 73% of marrying couples had cohabited, compared with 16% in 1976 (de Vaus, Qu, & Weston, 2003). Furthermore, the rate of divorces in Australia increased markedly between 1960 and 1990 and then

stabilized, with an estimated 35% to 40% of Australian first marriages now ending in divorce (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). By way of international comparison, in 2001, the Australian crude divorce rate of 2.8 per 1,000 population was markedly lower than that of the United States (4.2 per 1,000 in 1998; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002).

APPROACHES TO RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION

Couple relationship education occurs in diverse formats and settings within Australia, and many of these offerings are not described as relationship education. For example, a range of school curricula address interpersonal relationships and often include some focus on couple relationships. An exemplar is a program entitled Crossroads, which is offered in the state of New South Wales. Crossroads is a compulsory 25-hour personal development program that includes building and maintaining positive, nonviolent relationships and interpersonal communication (Simons & Parker, 2002).

About 25% of Australian adult education activities self-identified as having a significant couple relationship component are embedded in services that primarily focus on other areas of learning (Simons & Parker, 2002). For example, Australian Defence Force Community Service programs preparing military families for overseas deployments include some couple relationship education (Simons & Parker). As a second example, the CanCOPE program is an Australian couple-focused program that helps women recently diagnosed with cancer (Scott, Halford, & Ward, 2004). CanCOPE's primary focus is helping couples cope with cancer, but also includes enhancing mutual support and communication. More generally, learning about couple relationships is embedded in programs as diverse as assisting grandparents caring for their grandchildren, training carers for patients with Alzheimer's disease, and helping people address sexuality after traumatic brain injury (Simons & Parker).

Relationship education offered by service providers predominantly targets committed, married, premarital, or remarrying couples, parents, and parents-to-be (Simons & Parker, 2002). About one third of marrying Australians attend some form of premarriage education (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1998). The main relationship education providers include secular providers, who are a diverse group of community-based and independent organizations; church-affiliated providers who are part of large welfare organizations; and church-based providers who are connected to a specific church or parish (Simons & Parker).

Most relationship education providers develop their own programs, usually in response to perceived local needs or in response to calls from funding providers to address the needs of identified target groups. Many of these programs are not documented in a way that permits evaluation (Simons & Parker, 2002). Where documentation is available, the programs often include stated goals of the acquisition of both knowledge and skills, and address a variety of risk and protective factors identified in the literature. However, provider estimates of time spent on skill development (explaining the skill, demonstration, practice, and feedback) suggest that there is limited skill training offered in most programs (Simons & Parker).

A significant feature of many programs is a focus on adult learning processes. Drawing on adult learning research and theory, significant emphasis is placed on

creating the conditions that enable self-directed learning, and on developing a relationship between adult learners and educators that facilitates learning (Simons & Parker, 2002). In particular, educators focus on the need for curricula to be negotiated between participants and educators rather than determined by educators.

There are some evidence-based couple relationship education approaches that have been disseminated in Australia: inventories and skill training (Simons & Parker, 2002). The most widely used inventories in Australia are PREmarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement (PREPARE; Olsen, Fournier, & Druckman, 1996), and the Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study (FOCCUS; Markey & Micheletto, 1997). In both PREPARE and FOCCUS, each partner completes a self-report inventory assessing a range of relationship dimensions and is provided with feedback about that assessment (Larson, Newell, Topham, & Nichols, 2002). In current practice, the feedback sometimes is supplemented with some skill training, though the skill training is not a central part of the inventory approach (Simons & Parker).

There are several important potential strengths in the inventory-based approach to relationship education. First, FOCCUS and PREPARE have both been shown to predict the trajectory of relationship satisfaction in the early years of marriage (Fowers & Olsen, 1986; Larson & Olsen, 1989; Williams & Jurich, 1995). Thus, each inventory assesses factors relevant to relationship outcomes. Second, the inventories provide the opportunity for couples to assess their personal risk and resilience profiles. Third, there is structured training on how to use these inventories (e.g., Olsen, Dyer, & Dyer, 1997). The structured approach to use of the inventories, and the training available, probably at least partially explains the widespread adoption of inventory-based relationship education.

The term skill training has been used in the research literature to describe approaches that focus on active training of skills, though these approaches typically include other components (e.g., building awareness and cognitive change; Stanley, 2001). Examples of skill-training programs include the Relationship Enhancement program (RE; Guerney, 1987), the Premarital Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaalsi, 1988), and the Couples Communication Program (CCP; Miller, Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1992). These various skill-training programs have a number of content areas in common. For example, positive communication, conflict management, and positive expression of affection are included in RE, PREP, and CCP. Significant variations also exist. For example, in PREP, there are multiple foci of intervention, but the most time is devoted to prevention of destructive conflict because this is argued to be central to the prevention of relationship problems (Markman et al., 1988). In contrast, in RE, the development of partner empathy receives very strong emphasis (Guerney, 1987). In Australia, there has not been widespread adoption of these skill-training approaches, although education providers report incorporating some skill training into their programs (Halford, 1999).

EVALUATION OF CURRENT PROGRAMS

The locally developed programs in Australia have either not been evaluated, or have been evaluated using uncontrolled postprogram surveys of participants. In such surveys, participants report high satisfaction with programs (Harris, Simons, Willis,

& Barrie, 1991; Keys Young, 1997). In addition, 90% of couples report that they would be more likely to seek help with problems in their marriage; 42% indicate that their commitment to their marriage had increased and that they saw a need to work on their relationship (Harris et al.); 72% reported that they applied new relationship skills as a result of attending the programs; and 81% believe that they learned ideas or skills that would be of lasting value (Keys Young). However, these surveys had modest return rates, and dissatisfied attendees of relationship education services might be underrepresented in the data. Moreover, it is unclear if the positive subjective evaluations of attendees soon after program completion are associated with better long-term relationship outcomes.

The application of inventory-based relationship education in Australia has largely been consistent with original designs of the programs (Simons & Parker, 2002). However, to our knowledge, there has not been any published evaluation of the long-term effects of inventories on relationship outcomes. One recent conference paper reported that, relative to a wait-list control, administration of the Relationship Evaluation (RELATE; Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001) produced some modest short-term increases in relationship satisfaction (Vatter, Larson, & Holman, 2003). RELATE is not widely used in Australia but has a similar structure to PREPARE and FOCCUS. The Vatter et al. study did not establish that inventories improve long-term relationship outcomes, but does suggest that there are short-term benefits.

There is substantial evidence on the short-term effectiveness of skill-training programs. Skill-based relationship education produces large improvements in relationship skills immediately after programs (Giblin, Sprenkle, & Sheehan, 1985; Hahlweg & Markman, 1988), and these persist over time (see Halford, Markman, Stanley, & Kline, 2003, and Silliman & Schumm, 2000, for reviews). Although few studies directly compare the skill-training approaches, meta-analyses suggest that the short-term effect sizes look similar across the available approaches (e.g., Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Some evidence suggests that skill training helps couples sustain long-term relationship satisfaction. Three published controlled trials evaluating PREP (or a variant of PREP) for marrying couples have included follow-up assessments of more than 12 months (Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001; Markman et al., 1988). All three studies found that PREP was associated with enhanced maintenance of relationship satisfaction. However, in two studies, participants self-selected into conditions, and selection effects made definitive interpretation difficult (Hahlweg et al.; Markman et al.). The third study was a randomized controlled trial, but the benefits of skill training were only evident in couples classified as high risk for future marital problems (Halford et al.).

A major strength of the skill-training approach is that standardized training programs have been developed for disseminating the approach. For example, PREP has been successfully disseminated through religious leaders in community and military settings in the United States (Stanley et al., 2001; Stanley et al., 2005) and by religious and secular professionals in Norway (Thuen & Lærum, 2005). However, as noted previously, widespread dissemination of skill-training programs has not occurred in Australia. Dissemination might be enhanced with more access to training in delivery of evidence-based programs for Australian religious and secular relationship education providers.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF COUPLE RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION

Timing of Relationship Education

If couple relationship education is to remain relevant to couples in contemporary Australian society, the timing of education, the reach of current service provision, and the relevance of content to diverse relationships need to be addressed. Most couple relationship education in Australia is focused on providing education when couples are entering marriage (Halford, 1999; Simons & Parker, 2002). Entry to marriage *is* a good time for relationship education because couples often face significant challenges early in marriage. In Australia, average relationship satisfaction declines across the first 10 years of marriage, between 10% and 15% of couples separate within the first 3 to 4 years of marriage (McDonald, 1995), and 33% of couples divorce within 10 years of marriage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Thus, helping marrying couples to establish effective relationship roles and communication is likely to be beneficial.

In addition to the time of marriage, there are numerous life events that might be associated with receptiveness to relationship education. For example, relocation, major illness, and the transition to parenthood are all associated with increased risk of relationship problems (Gagnon, Hersen, Kabacoff, & van Hasselt, 1999; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000). In particular, the transition to parenthood warrants attention as a time for relationship education (Cowan & Cowan, 1995). In Australia, approximately 85% of first-married couples have children (McDonald, 1995), and becoming parents is uniformly reported to bring a wide range of changes in the partners' relationship with each other (Cowan & Cowan). In Australia, a number of programs are widely used that prepare couples for parenthood, though most existing programs pay limited attention to the couple relationship itself (Polomeno, 1999). One controlled trial of a couple-based program for the transition to parenthood produced significant enhancements in couple satisfaction and adjustment (Cowan & Cowan), but there has been no replication of this finding.

In many couples, relationship satisfaction progressively deteriorates (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, in press) and leads to contemplation of dissolution of the relationship (Gottman, 1993). In Australia, only a small proportion of divorced people ever sought any form of relationship education or counseling before their divorce, and couples who do present for counseling typically only do so after a long period of relationship distress (Wolcott & Glazer, 1989). In the United States, Cordova, Warren, and Gee (2001) evaluated a ''relationship checkup'' that targeted couples who perceived the possibility of difficulty beginning in their relationship. The checkup involved systematic assessment of the relationship and motivational interviewing to promote self-directed relationship enhancement. Significant gains in relationship satisfaction after the checkup were maintained for at least 12 months (Cordova et al.). The Cordova et al. study was only quasi-experimental and has not been replicated, but it illustrates the possibility of early intervention in the process of erosion of relationship satisfaction.

Reach of Relationship Education

Relationship education must be extended beyond married or marrying couples. In Australia, the vast majority of couples choose cohabitation as either a prelude or an alternative to marriage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Research on cohabiting couples who do not marry is scarce, but suggests that they have higher rates of

relationship problems and breakdown than marrying couples (de Vaus et al., 2003). However, in Australia, the strength of the association between premarital cohabitation and risk of future marital problems has declined in recent years relative to past cohorts of marrying couples (de Vaus et al.). As cohabitation has become socially normative in Australia, relying exclusively on marriage as a marker of transition into a committed relationship is unrealistic, and offering relationship education to cohabiting couples is likely to reduce rates of relationship problems.

In Australia, as in many Western countries, the national government encourages participation in couple relationship education. Given that only about one third of marrying couples attend education, and about 60% of marrying couples remain married for the rest of their lives (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001), clearly many couples sustain lifelong marriages without attending formal relationship education. If relationship education primarily prevents problems in high-risk couples, then for education to reduce the prevalence of relationship problems, it must attract attendance by those high-risk couples. This is not to say that low-risk couples should be discouraged from attendance, only that attendance by high-risk couples should be encouraged.

Targeting relationship education to high-risk couples requires being able to identify risk with reasonable accuracy. There are over 200 published longitudinal studies that predict relationship satisfaction and stability from psychological and sociodemographic variables (for reviews, see Bradbury, 1998; Holman, 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. As noted by Heyman and Slep (2001), many of the prediction studies used large numbers of predictors and found that only a small subset of assessed variables predict marital outcomes. There have been few systematic replications of these prediction studies, so at least some findings are likely to be unreliable chance associations. Despite these limitations, some well-replicated predictors of high risk for future relationship problems exist, such as negative family-of-origin experiences, certain personality characteristics, patterns of couple communication, and low religiosity (Halford et al., 2003; Holman, 2001).

Some of the established relationship risk factors are associated with reduced likelihood of attending relationship education (Halford, O'Donnell, Lizzio, & Wilson, in press; Simons, Harris, & Wills, 1994). In Australia, couples are less likely to attend relationship education if they have the following relationship risk factors: they have children from prior relationships, they cohabited before marriage, or they are not religious (Halford et al., in press). Some other risk factors are unrelated to relationship education attendance in Australia. The established risk factors of female parental divorce, male parental aggression, neuroticism, relationship aggression, and relationship satisfaction show little or no association with relationship education attendance (Halford et al., in press). In summary, some relationship risk factors are associated with low relationship education attendance, and other risk factors show no association with attendance, but no evidence suggests that risk factors are associated with high attendance.

A range of factors might mediate between relationship risk and education attendance. In Australia, there is a perception that relationship education predominantly targets young people without much experience in committed relationships (Simons et al., 1994). This perception might inhibit older couples from attending, even if they are repartnering into a stepfamily and actually are at high risk for future relationship

problems. In addition, practical issues like lack of child care have been suggested to inhibit stepfamily couples from attending relationship education (Simons et al.). The association of religiosity with relationship education attendance (Halford et al., in press; Simons et al.) probably reflects the commitment to and active participation in marriage education by many religious organizations (Keys Young, 1997). Religious marriage celebrants are more likely to encourage couples to attend marriage education than are civil celebrants (Keys Young; Simons et al.).

Marketing might encourage underrepresented couples to attend relationship education. Potential targets and strategies for such marketing have been developed (Donovan Research, 1998) but not yet implemented. Large-scale marketing targeting high-risk couples has not been tried in Australia. However, Halford et al. (2001) and Bouma, Halford, and Young (2004) each conducted Australian evaluations of relationship education targeting high-risk couples. Newspaper articles describing factors that put couples at high risk, combined with descriptions of relationship education programs that might reduce that risk, yielded high proportions of high-risk couples. Wider application of these strategies might increase participation in relationship education by high-risk couples.

Another possible strategy to enhance reach is to diversify the formats of relationship education delivery. Relationship education in Australia, as in most Western countries, is delivered predominantly as face-to-face programs for small groups of couples (Halford & Moore, 2002). Many adults prefer to access learning through more flexible programs that can be undertaken at times and places that suit participants rather than through face-to-face programs (Christensen & Jacobson, 1994). Couples might prefer such flexibility in relationship education. Many couples view their relationship as private, report that attending multiple group sessions is inconvenient, and believe that they should be able to work out their relationships for themselves (Simons et al., 1994). Such beliefs might make flexible delivery education more attractive than face-to-face programs. Further, in a large country like Australia, distance can make attending face-to-face programs difficult.

Flexible learning through reading and watching audiovisual materials can promote skill acquisition that changes problem behavior (Christensen & Jacobson, 1994). In Australia, a flexible delivery relationship education program entitled Couple Commitment and Relationship Enhancement (Couple CARE) has been shown to enhance couple relationship satisfaction in a randomized controlled trial (Halford, Moore, Wilson, Dyer, & Farrugia, 2004). Couple CARE consists of three components: (a) A videotape (or DVD) that presents key ideas and models core relationship skills; (b) a guidebook that presents a series of structured tasks for the couple that applies the key ideas to their relationship and helps partners set learning goals and engage in self-change; and (c) a series of telephone calls with a psychologist to review progress and troubleshoot problems.

Web-based services also might provide flexible access to relationship education. For example, the U.S.-based RELATE inventory program is accessible via the Web. In Australia, the national government has established a RELATE Web site (no association with the U.S. RELATE) that provides advice and referral for a range of couple relationship and family issues.

There have been some attempts to enhance relationship education reach in Australia. Pilot programs directed at premarital couples and couples living in regional and remote areas (Donaghy & Mackay, 1999) have used self-directed learning kits such as

the We're Still a Team program. Vouchers provided to couples to defray the cost of premarriage education have also been trialed (Donovan Research, 2001). Although surveys of couples after these initiatives showed some promise, widespread dissemination of these initiatives has not been pursued.

Tailoring Content of Education to Couple Needs

Given the diversity of couples who might benefit from relationship education, some tailoring of program contents is needed. The crucial risk factor for particular couples may not be routinely covered in generic programs because the risk factor is relevant to only some couples. For example, hazardous drinking in early-stage relationships predicts aggression, deteriorating relationship satisfaction, and instability (Leonard & Roberts, 1996), and reducing hazardous drinking can enhance relationship stability in couples with a hazardous drinking partner (Bouma et al., 2004). As a second example, stepfamilies are at particularly high risk of relationship breakdown (White & Booth, 1985; Whitsett & Land, 1992). A predictor of distress in stepfamilies is conflict over the role of the stepparent in child discipline, and major decisions about children (Fine, Kurdek, & Hennigen, 1991). These issues are important in work with stepfamilies, but not specific to them (see Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

Relationship education may often need some tailoring because overly standardized curricula probably do not meet the varying needs of any group couples. For example, one key focus of PREP places emphasis on reducing negative and increasing positive communication. However, only some couples have problematic communication, and lowering negativity from a low baseline might not be particularly helpful. Recently, Schilling, Baucom, Burnett, Sandin-Allen, and Ragland (2003) found, as expected, that the extent of decreased negative communication and increased positive communication by men after PREP predicted higher relationship satisfaction 2 years later. However, they also found increased positive communication in female partners after PREP predicted *lower* relationship satisfaction 2 years later. This latter counterintuitive finding was not replicated in two as-yet-unpublished studies that found that increased female positive communication following completion of PREP predicted enhanced maintenance of relationship satisfaction (Stanley, Kline, Osmos-Gallo, & Markman, 2005). However, the possibility remains that not all couples need to learn to reduce negative communication.

There are limited data on the attendance of relationship education by different socioeconomic and ethnic groups, but Simons and Parker (2002) noted significant gaps in the provision of relationship education services for indigenous Australians, people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), older Australians, couples from specific community groups (such as gay and lesbian couples), and people with mental illness or intellectual disability. It has been suggested that available programs might not reflect the culture or special needs of these underserviced groups (Halford, 1999). A series of pilot programs in Australia have attempted to provide content that is culturally appropriate. For example, programs developed with indigenous and Vietnamese communities have incorporated the importance of extended family and other cultural issues within the relationship education programs (Halford, 1999). However, systematic evaluation of the efficacy of these programs has not occurred.

There is a dialectic between tailoring relationship education content to meet individual couple needs and implementing standardized, evidence-based programs. For

example, it is unclear how appropriate the inventories PREPARE or FOCCUS, or standardized skill-training programs like RE or Couple CARE, are in assisting indigenous or NESB Australian couples to sustain mutually satisfying relationships. A reciprocal, ongoing collaboration between communities, relationship educators, and researchers seems necessary to tailor appropriate content while ensuring that the programs delivered have demonstrated efficacy.

CONCLUSION

In Australia, couple relationship education occurs across a wide range of contexts, and there is great diversity in the programs available. The existing services are limited, and might not be reaching those couples at high risk for future relationship problems or those with special needs. The vast majority of relationship education services in Australia are locally developed, largely undocumented, and have adopted a limited approach in evaluating their service effectiveness. Inventory approaches have been systematically disseminated, and although the long-term benefits of the inventory approach are unproven, there is some preliminary evidence that they may be helpful. Skill-training approaches have a substantial and developing research base on their effectiveness. However, in Australia, skill-training programs have not been adopted in a systematic manner, though programs developed locally incorporate some elements of skill training. The future holds the possibility of building upon existing services, making greater use of the available evidence-based programs, tailoring programs more to the individual needs of couples, and developing more self-directed learning programs. However, realizing the potential of these developments will require commitment from the national government and more effective collaboration between researchers and service providers.

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