

# Effectiveness of PREPARE Program with Premarital Couples in Community Settings

Luke Knutson & David H. Olson

*Life Innovations, Minneapolis, Minnesota*

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*This study evaluated the effectiveness of the PREPARE Program for couples receiving premarital counseling in community settings (churches and counseling centers) by professionals with only the required one-day training. There were 153 premarital couples in three groups: the PREPARE Program group (59 couples who received an average of 4 feedback sessions), the PREPARE No Feedback group (46 couples who received feedback after the post-test), and the Waiting List Control Group (48 couples who received PREPARE and feedback after the post-test). Only the PREPARE Program group significantly increased their couple satisfaction, while there was no change in the PREPARE No Feedback or the Waiting List Control groups. Significant changes were made in the couple types only in the PREPARE Program group and the Program had a significant impact on 90% of these couples.*

There is increasing interest by professionals (therapists and clergy) and couples in premarital counseling (Berger & Hannah, 1999). The best estimates are that about 75% of first marriages take place in a church setting, but that rate drops to only about 20% for second marriages. Most studies of premarital counseling, except for the recent study by Stanley et al. (2001) have not involved professionals working in their work settings but programs offered in university settings. The present study is community based and involves clergy and counselors who are currently offering the PREPARE Program in their own settings.

In a major review of outcome studies with premarital couples, Carroll and Doherty (2003) found that premarital programs had a significant impact on couples. In making a case for premarital education, Stanley (2001) indicated that

there are four main benefits of these programs. These include helping the couples deliberate more, sending a message about the value of marriage, helping couples learn that others can be helpful, and learning important relationship skills.

Others have questioned the impact of any premarital programs (Schumm & Silliman, 1997), especially for high risk couples (Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997). Simons (1999) describes premarital programs as focusing on increasing awareness and/or skill building. He maintains that while premarital programs are not able to provide sufficient impact to help high-risk couples, they might have a positive impact on less troubled couples. Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson (1998) maintain that the skills taught, such as active listening skills, are not the critical variables in predicting and impacting the long-term success of marriage. Stanley,

Bradbury, and Markman (2000) retort that active listening is critical to marital success, and that couples value learning better communication skills.

The ultimate goal of premarital counseling is to help couples stay happily married and to prevent divorce. The rate of divorce in the United States remains at about 50% (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000). Clearly, divorce takes an enormous toll on couples and their loved ones. It has been shown that marital dysfunction is one of the major social, psychological, and health risk contributors to the deterioration of our families and society, costing us billions of dollars yearly (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Conversely, there are a variety of positive outcomes associated with being married. In their recent comprehensive review of studies of marriage, Waite and Gallagher (2000) found that married couples had healthier lifestyles, lived longer, had more satisfying sex, and were wealthier than single persons. Also, in a national survey of 21,501 married couples, Olson and Olson (2000) found that happily married couples had better communication and conflict resolution skills, higher levels of couple flexibility and couple closeness, and greater personality compatibility than unhappily married couples.

It is assumed that if more couples would seek premarital counseling, then many potential relationship problems could be avoided in the future. According to Fraenkel, Markman, and Stanley (1997), the rationale for prevention is to provide couples with core skills and concepts for handling the inevitable issues and problems of married life *before* they arise.

### **Purpose of Study**

The specific purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the PRE-

PARE Program (Olson, 1996) in the community setting where the premarital couple was seeking premarital counseling. The two major hypotheses are:

1. Premarital couples taking the PREPARE Program will significantly increase their couple satisfaction compared to the PREPARE with Feedback and the Waiting List Control Group.
2. Premarital couples taking the PREPARE Program will significantly improve their scores in important areas of their relationships and improve their couple type compared to the PREPARE No Feedback group.

The premarital program used was the fourth version of the PREPARE Program that was designed to expand the assessment scales and integrate six couple feedback exercises. The Program begins with the couple taking the 165-item PREPARE couple inventory. Next, the couple receives three to four feedback sessions using six couple exercises. The six goals of the program and matching couple exercises are designed to build relationship skills (communication and conflict resolution) and increase insight and awareness so that couples can be more proactive in strengthening their relationships over time. The program is currently used by more than 50,000 counselors and clergy in the United States and more than 1.5 million premarital couples nationally have taken a version of the program.

The study consists of three groups: the PREPARE Program group, the PREPARE No Feedback group, and the Waiting List Control group. The PREPARE Program group is designed to measure the effect of taking the PRE-

PARE Inventory and having about four counseling sessions based on the results. The PREPARE No Feedback group is intended to measure the effect of simply taking the PREPARE Inventory alone with no counseling sessions. The Waiting List Control Group is used to evaluate how a couple changes over time with no inventory or counseling sessions.

The counselors in this study are all current PREPARE users and received no additional training in preparation for this research study. They all attended the full-day required training of those using the PREPARE/ENRICH Program. These counselors had responded to a mailing that the researchers sent out asking for volunteers to participate in the study. All couples received counseling in a "real world" setting at either the counselor's church or counseling center and were recruited individually by the counselors. Each counselor was randomly assigned to offer only one of the three programs in this study.

## **Review of Literature**

### *Pioneering Study on PREPARE Program*

One of the earliest studies on premarital programs was done in the late 1970's by Fournier, Druckman, Robinson, and Olson (1979). This study assessed the effectiveness of five types or levels of premarital preparation, ranging from no program to four premarital counseling sessions. Pre- and post-test assessment was made with three groups which used PREPARE and only post-testing with two comparison groups. The two comparison groups were only assessed three months after marriage.

Group 1 (Waiting List Control group) received no premarital counseling until after the study was completed. Group 2 (Clergy Typical Offering) had some type of premarital program typically offered by their clergy. Group 3

(PREPARE Delayed Feedback) received the pre-test assessment (PREPARE) before marriage, but received the PREPARE feedback three months after the wedding. This group was intended to assess the effect of simply taking PREPARE alone. Group 4 (PREPARE Limited Feedback) received PREPARE and one session of feedback on PREPARE by a trained counselor about three months before the wedding. This session was meant to inform the couple about their strengths and weaknesses as identified by PREPARE. The couple briefly discussed some issues but did not attempt to resolve conflicts. Group 5 (PREPARE Counseling group) received four premarital counseling sessions by a trained marriage counselor, and strength and growth areas were discussed. The couples were also encouraged to express their feelings, attempt to resolve conflicts, and to improve communication and problem-solving skills.

Results indicated that all three PREPARE groups (3, 4, & 5) that took PREPARE had higher marriage adjustment and satisfaction scores than the comparison groups. Couples from these three groups felt PREPARE was accurate, increased their awareness of difficulties, improved their relationship, and would recommend it for others. The PREPARE Counseling group, which had four premarital counseling sessions, did better than simply taking PREPARE on the objective measures. These couples felt the additional premarital sessions were very beneficial and highly recommended them.

### *Three Longitudinal Studies on the PREPARE Program*

Fowers and Olson (1986) carried out the first longitudinal study to determine the predictive validity of the PREPARE inventory. This three-year follow-up

study consisted of 164 couples who took PREPARE during their engagement and followed them three years after marriage. A couple satisfaction scale was used to identify happily married and unhappily married couples. Two other groups were identified including divorced couples and those couples who cancelled their wedding plans. It was found that happily married couples scored significantly higher on the PREPARE inventory compared to dissatisfied couples, divorced couples, and couples who cancelled their marriage. This study also demonstrated that PREPARE scores could predict with 80–85% accuracy, which couples were separated and divorced from those that were happily married three years after marriage.

A second longitudinal study by Larsen and Olson (1989) replicated the results of the first study on the predictive validity of PREPARE. Similar to the initial research, this study was a three-year follow-up of 179 couples who took PREPARE during their engagement. The results indicated that PREPARE was very accurate (80–85%) in predicting couples who got divorced from those that were happily married. The study also showed that the higher the score on the PREPARE inventory scales, the more satisfied the couple was in their marriage.

A third three-year longitudinal study of 393 couples focusing on the marital outcomes of the four premarital types three years after marriage was done by Fowers, Montel, and Olson (1996). In an earlier study of 4,618 premarital couples who took PREPARE, Fowers and Olson (1992b) identified four types of premarital couples which were called: Vitalized, Harmonious, Traditional, and Conflicted. These four types were created using cluster analysis based on the Positive Couple Agreement (PCA)

scores from the 12 relationship areas. In the longitudinal study, Fowers, Montel and Olson (1996) examined the relationship between the four PREPARE premarital types and marital outcome. Vitalized couples were found to have the highest satisfaction and the lowest rate of unhappy and divorced couples. Conversely, Conflicted couples had the lowest satisfaction and the highest rate of unhappy and divorced couples.

In summary, these studies on PREPARE demonstrated the reliability and validity as well as the clinical value of the instrument. The current study extends this work to investigate the clinical utility of the newest PREPARE Program (Version 2000) compared with just taking the PREPARE instrument as well as a waiting list control group.

#### *Review of Other Couple Programs*

Several other couple programs were developed in the 1980s and outcome research has also been completed on the effectiveness of these programs. These other couple programs include the *Couple Communication Program* developed by Sherod Miller, Elam Nunnally, and Dan Wackman (Miller & Sherrard, 1999), the *PAIRS Program* developed by Lori Gordon (Gordon & Durana, 1999), the *PREP Program* developed by Howard Markman and Scott Stanley (Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999), and the *Relationship Enhancement Program* developed by Bernard Guerney (Cavedo & Guerney, 1999). More details on all these programs and studies can be found in the excellent book, *Preventive Approaches in Couples Therapy*, edited by Berger and Hannah (2000).

The purpose of the current study is to examine the effectiveness of the PREPARE Program when provided by professionals (clergy and counselors) in their typical community settings who

have attended only the required one-day training workshop in the PREPARE Program. The major hypotheses are that premarital couples will benefit from participating in the PREPARE Program (PREPARE couple inventory and receiving about four sessions of feedback and counseling) and less so from just taking the PREPARE couple inventory, compared to a control group.

## **Method**

### *Sample*

This is a quasi-experimental study with a total of 153 premarital couples (268 individuals), with 59 couples in the PREPARE Program group, 46 in the PREPARE No Feedback group, and 48 in the Waiting List Control Group. The final sample included premarital couples from 23 states across the United States. The majority of couples in this study were between the ages of 20–25 years (43%), or 26–30 years (29%).

At pre-test, 47% of the couples were less than 2 months away from marriage, 28% were 3–6 months away from marriage, 18% were 7–12 months from their wedding date, and the remaining 7% were 13 or more months away from marriage. The average time before marriage was 5 months. The highest percentage of couples (36%) had known each other for 5 or more years, while 30% had known each other for 3–4 years. About 27% of the couples had known each other 1–2 years, while 7% had known each other less than 1 year.

In terms of education, 34% of the couples completed some college or technical school, 40% had a four-year college degree, and another 17% were at the Graduate/Professional level. The vast majority (77%) of participants had full-time employment. About 14% of the participants earned less than \$9,999, 40% earned between \$10,000 and

\$29,999, and about a third of the sample earned between \$30,000 and \$49,999 per year. About 10% earned between \$50,000 and \$99,999, and another 4% earned \$100,000 or more yearly. The participants held a variety of occupations with about one quarter reporting Clerical, Sales, or Technician positions, and another 22% working as Manager, Teacher, or Nurse.

The majority of couples were of a Christian religion (74%), while 26% of the couples listed “Other” religions. The majority of couples (89%) were Caucasian, 6% were African American, and another 5% were Hispanic/Latino. About 37% of the couples lived in a large city, 27% were from a small city, one quarter resided in a town, and the remaining 11% lived in a rural area.

Using chi-square analysis, there were no significant differences between the couples in the three groups in terms of age, years they knew their partner, education, employment, occupation, income, ethnicity, and community. The PREPARE No Feedback group had significantly fewer couples getting married within 0–2 months than the other groups, and the PREPARE No Feedback group had more Catholic and fewer Protestant couples than the other groups.

### *PREPARE/ENRICH Counselors Volunteered for Study*

Professionals who currently used the PREPARE/ENRICH Program with 10 or more couples were asked if they wanted to participate in this study, and 25 professionals volunteered from across the country. These professionals (70% clergy and 30% professional counselors) had an average of 7 years experience using the PREPARE Program.

The professionals received no special or additional training in the PREPARE Program, other than the one-day train-

ing workshop all counselors attend. The PREPARE/ENRICH training workshop is eight hours in length and consists of a detailed review of the materials used in the program. The majority of time is spent on training the counselors how to interpret the results of the Computer Report and then use the information effectively giving couple feedback using the six couple exercises.

#### *Counselors Offered Program*

This study used a quasi-experimental design where the 25 professionals that were trained in PREPARE/ENRICH and they were randomly assigned to offer only one of the three groups to couples. For example, a counselor who was assigned to offer the PREPARE No Feedback Group could ask couples if they were interested in participating in this specific group. If the counselor learned that a couple did not want to participate in the group, then the couple would not participate in the study and would receive whatever program the person typically offered.

The idea of using random assignment of counselors to offer one group versus couples was based on a pilot study. The study indicated that these professionals offering the PREPARE Program in the community had a very difficult time understanding and offering random assignment of the premarital couples to the three different treatment conditions. As a result, the professionals were randomly assigned to only offer one of the three options to couples.

#### *Measures*

*Couple Satisfaction Scale.* This satisfaction scale was the major outcome variable for this study. This 17-item scale was derived from the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction scale which contains 10 items and the ENRICH Idealistic

Distortion scale, which contains 7 items (Fowers & Olson, 1992a). The 10-item Marital Satisfaction scale consists of one item for each of the major categories in the PREPARE and ENRICH Inventory and they include: communication, conflict resolution, role relationship, sexual relationship, spiritual beliefs, etc. The idealistic distortion scale measured the level of social desirability in the person taking the assessment. That scale was used to revise the individual couple satisfaction score downward based on the level of idealism, thus creating the Revised Individual Score (REV).

Fowers and Olson (1992a) found high concurrent validity and predictive validity for the Couple Satisfaction scale. The alpha reliability for the Couple Satisfaction scale is .86 and test re-test reliability is .86. The scale has been validated with norms based on over 25,000 married couples in the United States.

*Research Scales.* There are 20 scales in the PREPARE Couple Inventory and most of the scales contain 10 items (Olson, 1996). There are 12 couple relationship areas (such as communication, conflict resolution, etc.), 4 couple and family system scales, and 4 personality scales. The norms are based on more than 150,000 couples, the average alpha reliability is .82, and the average test re-test reliability is .81. The couple inventory provides a REV Score for each person on the 12 relationship areas and also a PCA score for each area.

*Counseling Summary Form.* After the counselors offering the Program completed each session, they completed a Counseling Summary about the length of the session and what couple exercises were completed. After all the feedback sessions were completed, the counselors were also asked three questions about how much the couple improved in terms of communication, conflict resolution,

and goals. The questions were evaluated on a 5-point Likert Scale: 1=Not Improved, 2=Slightly Improved, 3=Somewhat Improved, 4=Generally Improved, and 5=Greatly Improved.

*Couple Feedback Form.* The couples in the PREPARE Program group were asked to complete a Couple Feedback Form to describe what they felt was discussed in the counseling sessions and how useful each area was to them. The Couple Feedback Form contained questions about the six couple exercises: Strength and Growth Areas, Assertiveness and Active Listening, Conflict Resolution, Family-of-Origin, Finances, and Goals.

#### *Procedures*

Each couple in all three groups (PREPARE Program, PREPARE No Feedback and Waiting List Control groups) signed a Consent Form, and completed the *Couple Satisfaction Scale* at pre-test and two months later at post-test. The couples in the PREPARE Program group and the Program No Feedback group also took the PREPARE couple inventory at

pre-test and post-test. All the couples in the PREPARE No Feedback group and the Waiting List Control group experienced the complete PREPARE Program after participating in this study.

*PREPARE Program Group.* This group consisted of 59 premarital couples who took the PREPARE couple inventory and received an average of four one-hour feedback sessions. This group (as well as the PREPARE No Feedback group and Waiting List Control group) was conducted by counselors and clergy in their own community setting. After each counseling session, the counselor completed a Counseling Summary that outlined the content of the sessions, number and length of sessions, and recorded the couple's improvement in certain areas. At the end of the last counseling session, the couple completed a Couple Feedback Form that asked questions about their counseling experience and what they learned.

*PREPARE No Feedback Group.* This group consisted of 46 premarital couples who took the PREPARE couple inventory and received *no feedback* or

**Table 1: Research Design for Premarital Study**

	Couple Satisfaction Scale		PREPARE Inventory		Couple Counseling Sessions	Counselor Summary	Feedback Form
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post			
PREPARE Program Group (n = 59)	yes	yes	yes	yes	During study	yes	yes
PREPARE No Feedback Group (n = 46)	yes	yes	yes	yes*	After study	no	no
Waiting List Control Group (n = 48)	yes	yes	no	no*	After study	no	no

Note: \*Couples in PREPARE No Feedback and Waiting List Control groups received feedback and counseling with the PREPARE inventory after the study was completed.

counseling sessions until after the post-test assessment. After completing the Consent Form and Couple Satisfaction Scale, these couples took the PREPARE Inventory but they received no feedback or counseling until after the eight-week waiting period. After the waiting period, the couples filled out the Couple Satisfaction Scale and received their feedback sessions on PREPARE.

*Waiting List Control Group.* This group consisted of 48 premarital couples who only took the pre- and post-test Couple Satisfaction Scale and did not take the PREPARE couple inventory or receive counseling until after the post-test. After the study, they received the complete PREPARE Program.

### **Treatment Approach**

#### *Description of PREPARE Program*

The PREPARE/ENRICH Program was developed to help counselors and clergy work more effectively with premarital and married couples (Olson, 1996; Olson & Olson, 1999). The PREPARE Program is designed to help premarital couples prepare for marriage and the ENRICH Program is designed to enrich the relationship of married couples. The program was designed to assist counselors and to help couples focus objectively on critical relationship issues and teach relationship skills.

The first step in the Program is for each couple to complete a couple inventory (PREPARE or PREPARE-MC), which consists of 30 background questions and 165 items. After the couple completes the inventory, the answer sheets are sent in for scoring. The counselor then receives a 15-page *Computer Report* of the couple's results, upon which the counseling is based. It is suggested that the counselor have about four counseling sessions with the couple.

During the feedback and counseling

sessions, the counselor uses the couple's *Computer Report* as a tool in guiding the couple through the six PREPARE couple exercises. The counselor also receives a *Counselor Feedback Guide* that outlines the six goals and how to conduct the six exercises of the PREPARE Program. The couple is provided with a 25-page *Building a Strong Marriage Workbook* that contains the materials for completing the PREPARE couple exercises.

#### *Counseling Sessions in PREPARE Program Group*

For the PREPARE Program group, the researchers instructed the counselors to focus their counseling sessions on the six goals of the PREPARE Program and the related six couple exercises: (1) exploring couple strength and growth areas, (2) strengthening couple communication skills, (3) learning how to resolve couple conflict, (4) exploring family-of-origin issues, (5) developing a financial plan and budget, and (6) developing personal, couple, and family goals.

The average number of sessions that the counselors had with each couple was 4, with a range of 3–6. These sessions averaged a total of 4.5 hours in length, with a range of 3–8 hours. The counselors focused heavily on the six couple exercises, especially strength and growth areas and the communication and conflict resolution exercises. They emphasized Strength and Growth Areas (mean = 77 minutes), Conflict Resolution (mean = 48 minutes), and Family-of-Origin issues (mean = 48 minutes). Three other areas were covered with all of the couples included Communication (mean = 44 minutes), Finances (mean = 29 minutes), and Couple and Family Goals (mean = 29 minutes).

About one third of the couples were given between one to three homework



assignments over the course of the counseling sessions. Overall, about half of the assignments given to the couples were the Ten Steps for Resolving Couple Conflict Exercise, and the other half was the Budget Exercise. If the couple completed three assignments, the Ten Steps exercise was usually assigned twice and then the Budget Exercise.

## Results

### *Couple Satisfaction*

The *Couple Satisfaction Scale* (Fowers & Olson 1992a) was used as the major outcome variable and pre-test and post-test data was collected for all three groups. Two types of scores were created for this analysis: a REV score and a PCA score. This satisfaction scale contains 10 items, each tapping a relevant area of the couple relationship (i.e. communication, conflict resolution, etc.)

Also, a 7 item *Idealistic Distortion*

*Scale* was used to measure much each person was distortion their answers in a socially desirable direction. REV scores on couple satisfaction for the male and female were created by revising their couple satisfaction score based on their level of idealistic distortion. For more details on this correction factor for couple satisfaction and all the PREPARE individual scales, see Olson (1996).

In addition to the REV scores, a PCA score was derived from the couple's responses on the Couple Satisfaction scale and all of the other scales in PREPARE. The PCA score is created by comparing the item responses for each partner and counting the items where the couple agrees about a positive characteristic of their relationship or both disagree with a negative characteristic. It is a percentage score based on the number of responses on which partners agree on each area and it ranges from 0 to 100%. The major

**Table 2: Pre-test & Post-test on Couple Satisfaction using Individual Revised Scores (REV) and Positive Couple Agreement (PCA)**

		Couple Satisfaction		
PREPARE Program (n = 59)		Pre-Test M (SD)	Post-Test M (SD)	t
	Male	79.6 (13.0)	82.0 (12.1)	1.50*
	Female	78.2 (14.7)	79.8 (14.0)	.70
	Couple (PCA)	72.7 (19.9)	76.1 (20.8)	1.40*
PREPARE No Feedback (n = 46)				
	Male	78.6 (13.6)	78.9 (14.1)	.10
	Female	80.9 (9.6)	82.0 (10.5)	.50
	Couples (PCA)	71.0 (17.3)	74.3 (19.1)	1.10
Waiting List Control (n = 48)				
	Male	82.9 (8.6)	81.6 (11.8)	.43
	Female	81.9 (11.3)	80.4 (15.1)	.51
	Couples (PCA)	75.4 (17.4)	76.9 (19.5)	.69

\*p < .05

advantage of the PCA is that it provides a specific score for each couple that measures positive consensus rather than an individual score.

Using ANCOVA to control for pre-test differences, the first major hypothesis was supported in that there were significant increases (using the PCA score) in the couple satisfaction scores for the PREPARE Program, but no change in the PREPARE No Feedback group and the Waiting List Control group. The mean pre-test scores and post-test scores for the three groups were: PREPARE Program

(72.7 to 76.1); PREPARE without feedback (71.0 to 74.3); Waiting List Control Group (75.4 to 76.9).

Using the REV individual, the only significant change was in the male's REV score in the PREPARE Program. No other pre- post changes were significant.

#### *Results on the Major PREPARE Scales*

For each of the PREPARE scales, a PCA was created for each couple. Evaluating the changes in the two PREPARE groups was complicated by the fact that the PREPARE Program group had signifi-

**Table 3: Pre-Post Changes in PREPARE Program & PREPARE No Feedback groups Using PCA**

Category	PREPARE Program Group (n = 59 couples)			PREPARE No Feedback Group (n = 46 couples)		
	Pre-test	Post-test	t	Pre-test	Post-test	t
	M (SD)	M (SD)		M (SD)	M (SD)	
Marriage Expectations	36.8 (17.9)	48.8 (20.7)	3.9***	24.5 (17.4)	29.1 (19.5)	1.1
Personality Issues	51.2 (27.4)	56.4 (29.8)	2.0*	46.4 (25.1)	53.6 (25.3)	1.8
Communication	65.1 (25.7)	72.2 (25.3)	2.2**	58.2 (25.3)	67.7 (24.0)	2.3 *
Conflict Resolution	50.1 (26.8)	54.2 (29.4)	0.9	44.5 (23.2)	50.0 (24.8)	1.2
Financial Management	46.4 (26.7)	56.4 (26.0)	2.9***	33.6 (27.4)	40.0 (22.9)	1.0
Leisure Activities	65.4 (23.1)	67.0 (21.4)	0.5	62.7 (27.9)	66.8 (27.3)	0.9
Sexual Expectations	64.8 (17.6)	67.8 (18.5)	1.1	53.2 (29.6)	63.2 (21.2)	1.9
Children & Parenting	62.9 (20.6)	73.7 (17.5)	3.5***	51.4 (24.6)	59.6 (21.3)	1.6
Family & Friends	72.4 (21.4)	79.7 (17.9)	2.6**	65.9 (27.9)	78.6 (20.3)	2.7 **
Role Relationship	73.8 (17.6)	77.5 (17.2)	2.3*	65.9 (24.8)	77.3 (17.2)	1.9
Spiritual Beliefs	68.9 (30.4)	77.1 (29.3)	1.4*	61.8 (49.2)	61.8 (31.1)	.00
Couple Closeness	86.8 (15.1)	91.0 (12.9)	2.0*	74.1 (30.2)	86.4 (17.6)	2.6 **
Couple Flexibility	69.5 (20.0)	76.4 (18.3)	2.5**	62.3 (29.4)	75.5 (21.1)	2.9 **

\* p < .05. \*\* p < .01. \*\*\* p < .001. No star = Not Significant

cantly higher pre-test scores on 10 of the 13 scales compared to the PREPARE No Feedback group. Because of these significant pre-test differences, two different approaches were taken for the data analysis. First, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to control for the covariance (differences) in the pre-test scores. Second, t-tests were used to analyze each group separately. This analysis would illustrate any pre-post changes within groups for each variable.

The second major hypothesis was supported by the ANCOVA findings which indicated that the PREPARE Program group had significantly greater change than the PREPARE No Feedback group on Marriage Expectations and Children and Marriage. These findings are consistent with the t-test analysis which shows greater significant change on these scales for the PREPARE Program than the No Feedback group.

The t-test analysis was done using PCA scores (see Table 3). The PCA score indicates the level of positive agreement partners report in each of the content areas. The PREPARE Program group showed significant change, from pre-test to post-test, in 10 of 13 content categories (see Table 3). This group showed the most positive change in Marriage Expectations, Financial Management and Children and Parenting. Improvement was also significant in Communication, Personality Issues, Family and Friends, Role Relationships, Spiritual Beliefs, and Couple Closeness, and Couple Flexibility.

The PREPARE No Feedback group showed significant change in only 4 of 13 categories (see Table 3). The significant change occurred in Communication, Family and Friends, Couple Closeness and Couple Flexibility.

#### *Four Types of Premarital Couples:*

One of the strengths of this study is the

use of couple typologies rather than variable analysis (Olson, 1981). Typological analysis shifts the focus from change in variables to change in an actual couple. Another advantage of a typological system of couples is that one can observe the overall change across several scales as a group rather than change on individual scales (Olson, 1981). This enables one to assess results based on a higher level of variance and avoid the contamination of lack of independence of husband and wife scores. Ultimately, couple level analysis provides more meaningful and useful data about couples rather than variables.

Using cluster analysis of 4,618 premarital couples, Fowers and Olson (1992b) identified four types of premarital couples that ranged in couple satisfaction from highest to lowest including: Vitalized, Harmonious, Traditional, and Conflicted. The four types of premarital couples identified by Fowers and Olson are illustrated in Figure 1. The four couple types were created using the PCA scores for the major categories from PREPARE. The Vitalized couples had rather high couple agreement scores across most of the categories, while the Conflicted had low couple scores in most areas. The Harmonious couples had numerous strengths and are similar to the Vitalized couples but had somewhat lower scores across most categories and a much lower score in the Parenting category. The Traditional couples had higher couple scores in religion, roles and parenting and lower scores in communication, conflict resolution and personality. Using an algorithm from the cluster analysis program, the premarital couples in this study were classified into one of the four premarital types.

### *Changes in Couple Types for the Two PREPARE Groups*

For the chi-square analysis, the Vitalized/Harmonious and the Traditional/Conflicted were combined so that there were at least five cases per cell. The 2x2 chi-square analysis showed significant positive change in couple types for the PREPARE Program group ( $X^2 = 2.77$ ,  $p < .07$ ). The number of Vitalized/Harmonious Couples increased from 28 (47.5%) at pre-test to 37 (62.7%) at post-test. Also, the number of Traditional/Conflicted couples decreased from 31 (52.5%) at pre-test to 22 (37.3%) at post-test.

For the PREPARE No

Feedback group, there were changes in the expected direction, but they were not significant ( $X^2 = 1.89$ , n.s.). In that group, there were 13 (48.1%) Vitalized/Harmonious couples at pre-test and 18 (66.6%) at post-test. For the Traditional/Conflicted couples, there were 14 (51.8%) at pre-test and 9 (33.3%) at post-test. While changes in the predicted direction occurred in both groups, the change was significant in only the PREPARE Program group.

### *Couple Type Changes for PREPARE Program Group*

For the 59 couples going through the PREPARE Program, the number of

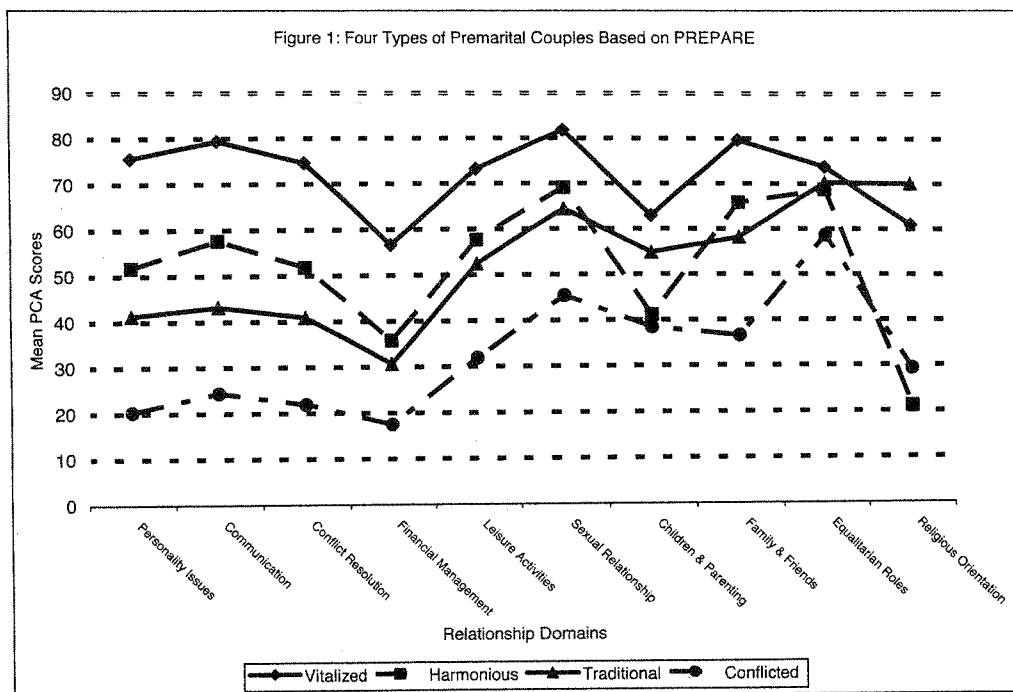
**Table 4: Types of Couples in PREPARE Program Group at Pre and Post-Test**

		POST-TEST				Total	%
		Vitalized	Harmonious	Traditional	Conflicted		
P R E  T E S T	Vitalized	17 (81%)	1 (5%)	3 (14%)	0	21	35.6
	Harmonious	5 (71%)	2 (29%)	0	0	7	11.9
	Traditional	10 (40%)	1 (4%)	12 (48%)	2 (8%)	25	42.4
	Conflicted	0	1 (16.5%)	4 (67%)	1 (16.5%)	6	10.2
Total		32	5	19	3	59	
%		54.2	8.5	32.2	5.1		100

■ = Couple increases one couple type or more

■ = Couple stays the same at pre and post

□ = Couple decreases on couple type or more



Vitalized Couples (happiest couple type) increased by 52%, from 21 to 32 couples (See Table 4). At pre-test, about one-third (35.6 %) of the couples were Vitalized and over half (54%) were Vitalized at post-test. Most of the Vitalized couples (81%) stayed Vitalized, but they also increased their scores on many scales.

Change was also assessed on the other three types of couples that were not Vitalized couples (21 out of 38). Over half (55%) of the three other couple types increased one or more levels, 40% stayed the same and only 5% moved down one type. For the Harmonious couples, about 71% moved to Vitalized (5 out of 7) and the other 29% stayed Harmonious.

For the highest risk couples, the Conflicted types, 83% moved to a more positive couple type (5 out of 6 couples) and only 17% of them stayed Conflicted. Over two-thirds (67%) became Traditional and 17% became Harmonious.

The second hypothesis was further supported in that the couples in the PREPARE Program made very positive changes in their type of couple relation-

ship. Excluding Vitalized couples (who cannot move up any higher), over half of the couples (55%, 21 out of 38) moved up at least one couple type and 29% (11 out of 38) moved up two levels. Also, there was a 52% increase in the number of Vitalized couples (32 vs. 21) and most of the Conflicted couples (83%) moved to a more positive couple type.

In summary, the PREPARE Program had a significant impact on 90% of the couples. Only 6 out of 59 couples (10%) moved to a lower couple type.

#### *Results from Counselor's Perspective*

Counselors in the PREPARE Program group completed an average of four counseling sessions with the couples. At the end of each session, the counselor completed a Counseling Summary. The Counselor was asked three questions about the couple and the questions were evaluated on a 5-point Likert Scale: 1=Not Improved, 2=Slightly Improved, 3=Somewhat Improved, 4=Generally Improved, and 5=Greatly Improved.

The counselors reported that the couples' communication skills "generally

improved" (mean response was 3.8); the couples' conflict resolution skills "generally improved" (mean response was 4.0); and the personal, couple, and family goals "generally improved" (mean response was 3.9). Overall, the counselors reported that all of the couples "generally improved" in communication, conflict resolution and awareness, and agreement of personal, couple, and family goals. It should be stated that because these results are from the counselor's perspective, these data are subjective and biased. One may argue that positive results are very likely to have been reported regardless of what the counselors did with the couples. However, their observations are very similar to what was found from the couple's perspective on the PREPARE scales.

#### *Results from Couple's Perspective*

The couples in the PREPARE Program group were also asked to complete a Couple Feedback Form to describe what they felt was covered in the counseling sessions and how useful each area was to them. The Couple Feedback Form contained questions about the six couple exercises: Strength and Growth Areas, Assertiveness and Active Listening, Conflict Resolution, Family-of-Origin, Finances, and Goals.

All six couple exercises were used with most of the couples. All couples reported that they discussed Strength and Growth Areas, Assertiveness and Active Listening, Conflict Resolution, and Family-of-Origin. In addition, 92% reported that Finances were discussed in their counseling. Goals were reported as part of counseling by 95% of the couples.

The Couple Feedback Form also included questions about how useful each of these content areas were to the couples. The responses were indicated on a 5-point Likert scale including Not Useful (1), Slightly Useful (2), Somewhat Useful

(3), Generally Useful (4), and Very Useful (5).

The couples reported that each of the six couple exercises was "generally useful" to "very useful," and overall they were "very useful" (4.5). The couples felt that the exercise on Strength and Growth Areas was "generally" to "very useful" (4.4); the assertiveness and active listening couple exercise was also reported as "generally" to "very useful" (4.3) as was the Conflict Resolution exercise (4.4). Discussion about Family-of-Origin was reported by the couples as "generally useful" (4.0); Finances was described as "generally useful" (3.8), as was Couple and Family Goals (4.1). In terms of overall usefulness of the counseling sessions, the average response of couples was "very useful" (4.5).

#### **Discussion**

The results of this study clearly indicate that the couples in the PREPARE Program group showed significant improvement in their couple satisfaction. Significant improvement was also shown on 10 of 13 relationship scales and in their couple type. This was in spite of the fact that the PREPARE Program group had high pre-test scores so the "ceiling effect" could limit the amount of improvement that could be made by these couples.

The number of Vitalized couples in the PREPARE Program group increased by 52% from pre to post-test. More than half (55%) of the three other types (Harmonious, Traditional, and Conflicted) increased one or more levels and 29% increased two couple type levels. Having a more positive couple type (i.e., Vitalized being the highest) is predictive of those that are happily married versus divorced three years after marriage (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996). This finding is from the three-year longitudinal study that followed premarital couples

about six months before marriage to three years after marriage. The Vitalized and Harmonious couples had the happiest marriages and lowest divorce rate. The Conflicted couples had the lowest rate of marital happiness and highest divorce rate.

In addition, Conflicted couples in the PREPARE Program group decreased by 83%, and these couples are at most risk for divorce. This is an important finding since some have criticized premarital programs for not having an impact with high-risk couples (Simons, 1999; Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997).

Counselors in the PREPARE Program group evaluated the couples' progress and reported that the couples' communication skills, conflict resolution skills, and personal, couple, and family goals "generally improved" over the course of counseling. The couples reported that each of the six couple exercises were "generally useful" to "very useful," and overall they were "very useful."

While both PREPARE groups, with and without feedback, made significant changes in several categories, the PREPARE Program with feedback had significantly more change in 10 of 13 scales while taking PREPARE without feedback changed significantly only 4 of the 13 scales. It is only in the PREPARE Program with feedback where the impact is significant enough to improve the couple type.

For the PREPARE No Feedback group, there may be three possible reasons for the small changes that resulted from just taking PREPARE without feedback. First, some change may be attributed to the fact that this group had lower overall PCA scores at pre-test and, therefore, had more room for improvement in each category. Second, answering the 165-item questionnaire may have

stimulated the couples to think and talk about their relationships. Third, the couples knew that they were not receiving counseling or feedback based on their PREPARE Inventory until after the study. Consequently, they may have felt it was more important to discuss their responses and may have attempted to work through some issues on their own.

In summary, the results of the current study indicated that only in the PREPARE Program with Feedback was there significant improvement in couple satisfaction, in 10 of the 13 relationship areas, and the couple type. Overall, the PREPARE Program group had a significant impact on 90% of these couples. Only 6 of 59 couples (10%) moved to a lower couple type. For couples taking the Program with Feedback, the number of Vitalized couples increased by 52% and the number of Conflicted couples decreased by 83%. In general, these findings suggest that the couples overall relationship improved to couple types where there may be less risk of divorce (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996). Therefore, the PREPARE Program can be a very useful prevention program that may lead to increased marital satisfaction and a reduced rate of divorce.

### **Limitations**

First of all, the sample size of this study was smaller than desired. Recruiting couples proved difficult. Some contributing factors were that the couples in the PREPARE No Feedback group and the Wait List Control group had to wait approximately eight weeks before they received premarital counseling and feedback on their PREPARE Inventory. Since many couples did not allow much time between seeking premarital counseling and their wedding date, some couples chose not to participate in the PREPARE No Feedback or Wait List Control groups.

Another confounding variable in this study is related to the treatment being tested and the assessment of this treatment. The couples in the PREPARE Program group took the PREPARE Inventory and then received an average of four counseling sessions based on the results of the Inventory. Then, as a post-test, the couples completed the same inventory again. The instrument with feedback is the treatment, and the instrument is one of the tests of the treatment. Some would argue that since the couples received feedback on the inventory, especially disagreement items, they would be likely to take the inventory again with this knowledge and therefore answer in a way that would make them seem healthier than they really were.

Another limitation of this study was that it was a short-term (pre- versus post-test) rather than a longitudinal design. Although a longitudinal design is ideal, the researchers decided it was not an option based on ethical considerations. Both the PREPARE No Feedback group and the Wait List Control group received treatment after the post-test. The investigators believed that it was unethical to deny couples the premarital counseling they were seeking, and since all three groups eventually received the same PREPARE Program, no valid follow-up study can or will be conducted. The study was conducted over an eight-week period, and although the PREPARE Program group showed significant improvement, it is not clear from this study, whether these are long-term results. The best way to generalize is based on the three-year longitudinal study (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996) which showed the value of a more Vitalized couple type.

### **Counseling Implications**

First, this study indicates that premarital counseling using the PREPARE Program

offered in the community by counselors and clergy has a very positive impact on the couple relationship. This is particularly important since clergy were the largest group offering the program and they did it in their own setting. Also, they received no special training for this project except the typical day-long training required for the PREPARE/ENRICH Program. The positive outcome of the PREPARE Program was demonstrated by their increase in couple satisfaction, improvement in most of the relationship scales and positive change in their type of couple relationship.

Second, just taking the PREPARE Couple Inventory without feedback had an impact on the couple in that it increased their couple satisfaction, led to improvement in 4 of 13 scales, but there was no change in the type of couple relationship. Third, the Waiting List Control group did not demonstrate any change on the Couple Satisfaction Scale.

Given the statistic that about half of all marriages end in divorce, effective premarital prevention programs are needed. The results of this study indicate that the PREPARE Program increased the number of Vitalized couples by 50% and decreased the number of Conflicted couples by 83%. Previous longitudinal studies on PREPARE (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996) demonstrated that Vitalized and Harmonious couples have a lower rate of divorce and higher marital satisfaction than Traditional and Conflicted couples. Therefore, since the current study has provided some evidence that the PREPARE Program improves the couple type, then it can be tentatively stated that PREPARE may increase marital satisfaction and decrease the risk of divorce for married couples.



*Luke Knutson, M.A., Marital & Family Therapist; Generations, 2331 University Ave. S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55414.*

*David H. Olson, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota and President of Life Innovations, 2660 Arthur Street, Roseville, MN 55113. He can be contacted at: dolson@lifeinnovations.com*

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