

Putting Empirical Knowledge to Work: Linking Research and Programming on Marital Quality

Francesca Adler-Baeder,* Brian Higginbotham, and Leanne Lamke

When selecting a marriage education curriculum, educators can turn to programs that have been evaluated for effectiveness; however, few curricula have undergone such study. An alternative approach, consistent with best practices, is to ensure a research base for program content. A translation process model is offered as an initial attempt to explicate the often advocated yet seldom described research–practice linkage. This process is used to examine recent research on marital quality and provide examples of research-based content in existing marriage education programs.

Recently, leaders and policymakers at the highest levels have begun to emphasize the need to promote the availability of community-based programs to strengthen marital relationships. Support for these programs is based on empirical evidence that healthy marital relationships are beneficial to the adults involved and to the children growing up in the context of these relationships (Parke & Ooms, 2002). It is from this child-centered perspective that the current federal administration has proposed an initiative to allow states to compete for earmarked funds for “marriage strengthening and family formation” programs; this is the first time that such funds will be made available (Parke & Ooms). Bolstered by both the understanding of the benefits of healthy couple functioning for adult and child well-being and the potential for program support for offerings to the broader population, community family life educators and organizations who traditionally offer parenting and child development educational programming anticipate expanding their offerings to include marriage education programs.

Currently, a plethora of marriage education curricula exist. Marriage education efforts target audiences in religious settings, communities in general, schools, universities, and clinical practice. However, the question arises as to how to select a curriculum among those available. One approach is to select a curriculum based on evaluations of program effectiveness. Recent reviews indicate that a handful of curricula demonstrate short-term and limited sustained positive program effects (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004). The overwhelming majority of existing programs have not been empirically evaluated for a variety of reasons (e.g., lack of funding to support evaluation research, lack of evaluation expertise). Thus, an alternative approach is needed to guide decisions about program selection.

One such strategy is to compare program content with findings from an appropriate research base. This approach is consistent with best practices in family life education (e.g., Hennon & Arcus, 1993). Hughes (1994) stated that “... a well-grounded family life education program needs ... a demonstrated research basis in regards to the topic, the content, and the application techniques” (p. 75). Hennon and Arcus encouraged family life

educators to critically assess program content and ensure that curricula are not based on outdated or nonempirically supported information. When marriage education content is consistent with implications from empirical research, educators are armed with program content that theoretically provides participants with an effective learning experience (Hughes).

Although the importance of linking research with practice has been emphasized in family science over the last several decades, there is little, if any, description of the process of translating research into practice (i.e., educational programs). This linkage often is encouraged (e.g., Dumka, Roosa, Michaels, & Suh, 1995) but not explained. Therefore, our purpose was twofold: (a) to offer a description of a model for this translation process of linking research and educational program content, and (b) to review recent research on marital quality and provide research-based examples of its applications in marriage education programs. We do not examine existing curricula and retrospectively look for empirical support for program content, either explicitly or implicitly. In addition, providing specific curricula review is beyond our scope here. We hope that our effort will assist educators as they attempt to identify research-supported program content in existing marriage education curricula. Further, the guidelines we offer may help educators to determine the implications for education of new research as it becomes available. Thus, our intent was both to offer guidelines for educators whose primary goal is to deliver sound marital education programming and to open dialogue on the translation process in general family science research and education.

Our approach is deductive and prospective. As illustrated in Figure 1, the translation process begins with the identification of relevant literature and proceeds to a narrowing of the potential studies based on the application of exclusion and inclusion criteria. Exclusion criteria may consist of several factors, including nonrefereed publications, clinical studies, and instrument validity studies. Inclusion criteria are application driven. Consistent with research-based program development procedures previously described (Dumka et al., 1995), the focus for application is on potential modifiable mediators of marital quality outcomes.

We then organized the research by major themes, and the studies were assessed using identified criteria for research rigor. Next, a summary of research findings was used to guide the identification of marriage education content that is consistent with the empirical findings. Using a risk and resiliency approach and assumptions from intervention theory (Coie et al., 1993), we expected that modifiable factors found to negatively affect marital quality are risk factors that can be addressed in practice with the intention of reversing or avoiding them, thus positively affecting marital quality and or reducing marital dissatisfaction.

*Address correspondence to: Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder, 286 Spidle Hall, Department of Human Development and Human Studies, Auburn University, AL 36849, (adlerfr@auburn.edu). Work on this manuscript was shared equally among the authors.

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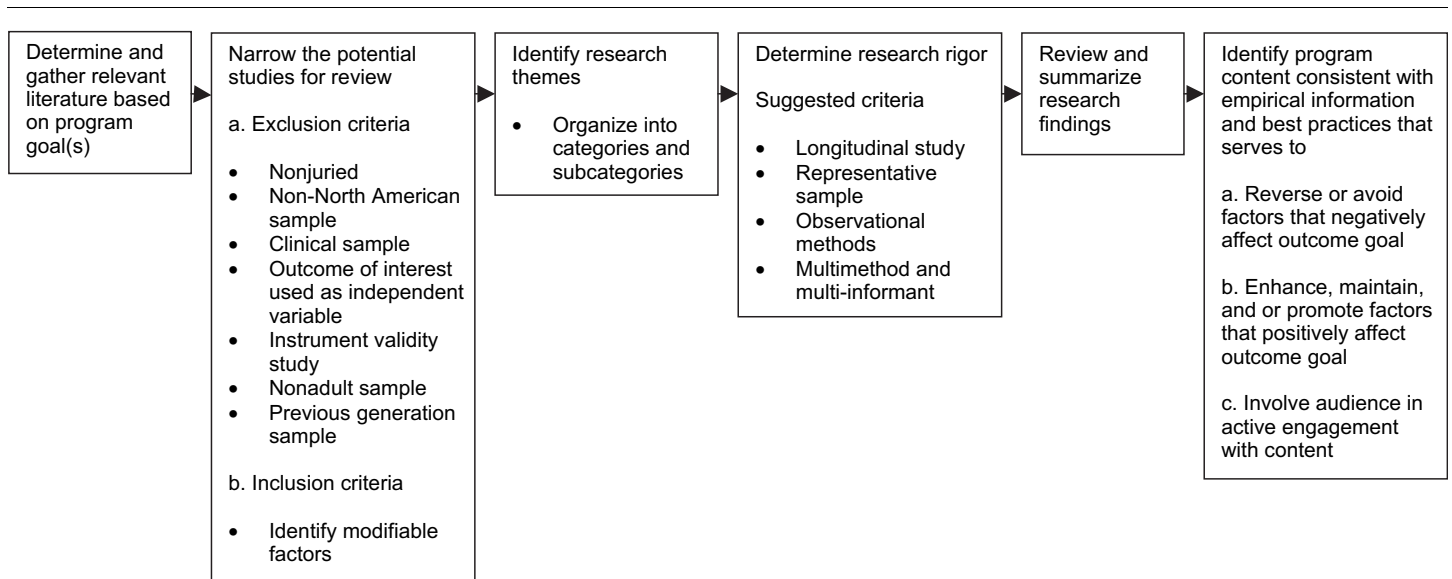


Figure 1. Guidelines for the process of linking research with educational program content.

We expected that modifiable factors found to positively affect marital quality are protective factors, and program content focused on enhancing, maintaining, and or promoting these factors will serve to positively affect marital quality.

Following the identification of these factors, examples of application in existing curricula are provided. Educators can then assess curricula in which they are interested and make judgments about the inclusion and inclusiveness of research-based program content and on the inclusion of program content without a clear research base.

The Translation Process

Identifying Relevant Literature

We reasoned that the overall program goal of education programs should dictate the research topic to be investigated. Marriage education goals have centered on the improvement and or enhancement of marital quality (e.g., Parke & Ooms, 2002); therefore, we focused our review of literature on factors related to marital quality. To generate a compilation of the literature, various combinations of key words (i.e., marital, satisfaction, relationship, and quality) were entered in a search of PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, and EBSCO's Academic Search Elite databases. We note that reviewing the research on predictors of marital quality is not an examination of one distinct literature. Overlapping and unique empirical information from such fields as family science, psychology, child development, sociology, demography, communication, public health, and business were identified. Our initial search resulted in the identification of over 2,000 articles.

Narrowing the Relevant Research

To narrow the 2,000+ articles to a smaller subset, only peer-reviewed articles published since 1990 that used adults as the sample were included. Such juried articles have undergone a blind-review process for scrutiny of methods and interpretation(s),

and they are likely to represent the most rigorous findings for guiding applied efforts. Studies published prior to 1990 would include data from couples in the mid- to late-1980s; such findings might have less application to the current generation of couples (and prospective program participants) than findings from more current studies. In addition, marriage education targets adults, so findings from studies of adult samples provide the necessary research base.

The resulting abstracts were examined to determine whether the entire article should be reviewed. To be selected for the full review, articles had to meet several additional criteria. Articles were excluded (a) if they used marital satisfaction or quality as a predictor rather than an outcome, or (b) if they used marital satisfaction to test the reliability or validity of an instrument. They also were excluded (c) if the sample came from outside North America, reasoning that observed marital dynamics might not be consistent across cultures, and studies outside North America might not reliably inform practice in the United States. Additionally, (d) studies of only clinical samples were excluded, because marriage education programs are intended to function as primary prevention rather than intervention for clinical populations. Finally, because a distinction has been made between marital satisfaction and marital stability (i.e., marital stability is not necessarily associated with high marital quality [Karney & Bradbury, 1995]), (e) articles with dissolution or stability as the only dependent variable were excluded.

The focus and scope of studies of marital quality can vary by a particular discipline's emphasis. In light of the subtle and distinct differences in approaches and contributions from disciplines, we integrated this array of research by focusing on the major themes that were evident. In general, factors related to marital quality can be grouped broadly into three categories: interactional process elements, contextual conditions or issues, and enduring personal and couple traits or characteristics (see Halford et al., 2003; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Larson & Holman, 1994). We narrowed our focus to only interactional variables, because these factors are considered changeable or modifiable (Karney &

Bradbury) and are the most appropriate targets for educational prevention and intervention work (Halford et al.).

Our emphasis on interactions is consistent with the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptability (V-S-A) model of marital outcomes proposed by Karney and Bradbury (1995) based on their review of existing longitudinal research. Although the V-S-A model includes the “enduring vulnerabilities” (i.e., personal and couple traits) and the context in which the couple is embedded (i.e., acute and chronic stressors), Karney and Bradbury argued that “... any variable that affects close relationships can do so only through its influence on ongoing interactions” (p. 231). Further, the V-S-A model incorporates a cognitive-behavioral approach to adaptive interactional processes that recognizes the interplay of observed behaviors and unobserved thinking. This model provides a basis for more closely examining studies of changeable behaviors and cognitions related to marital quality and or dissatisfaction.

Identifying Research Themes

Summaries of the research on couple interactional processes were constructed and put into table form. This 90-page summary document (consisting of 178 article summaries) can be obtained from the first author. An examination of these studies revealed three broad subcategories of findings: positive emotions and behaviors (positivity), negative emotions and behaviors (negativity), and cognitions. Further, within subcategories, we grouped similar topics. Under positivity, we included studies of positive emotions and affect, affectionate behaviors, supportive behaviors, time together, relational identity, and expressivity. Under negativity, we included studies of negative affect, overt negative behaviors, withdrawing behaviors, and the demand/withdraw pattern. Under cognitions, we included studies of beliefs or expectations, knowledge and understanding, attributions, perceived equity or fairness, and consensus.

Determining Research Rigor

Little, if any, guidance has been provided for educators concerning the quality of the research on which programs are based. Certainly, there exist varying and complex methods of determining research rigor and validity. We used four criteria as an initial means of identifying research information in which educators could have the most confidence. Studies that include (a) a longitudinal design, (b) a representative sample, (c) observational methods, and or (d) multimethod or multi-informant procedures generally are of higher quality than are studies not characterized by these methodological features. As compared with cross-sectional studies, longitudinal research provides more reliable information on directional effects and causal determinants of marriage quality and or satisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Thus, longitudinal findings provide the best support for anticipating desired program impact. A representative sample offers greater generalizability of findings to a broader array of program participants beyond those found in a more homogenous sample. Observational methods of data collection generally are considered to have greater validity than reports from a single informant (Babbie, 2001). If report and or survey data collection methods are used, rigor can be established through use of multiple methods and multiple informants (Babbie). These four criteria guided the review of the relevant research on marital quality.

Reviewing

Applying the four broad criteria for research rigor, we noted several characteristics of the research on marital quality. Relatively few (11%) of the studies included nationally representative samples, and this limited our confidence in the generalizability of any given finding to a broad population. Additionally, only 21% of the studies used observational methods. In contrast, the majority (76%) included information from multiple informants or from multiple methods of gathering data, and 40% of studies employed sampling procedures that generated data over more than one period.

Importantly, roughly 15% of the studies reviewed did not meet at least one of the four criteria. However, we noted that each of these studies had results that were consistent with those from other research that did meet at least one of the criteria for rigor. Even without meeting any of the four basic criteria, replication of findings lends support to the importance of considering the information for practical application. A study that did not meet any of the four criteria and whose findings were not consistent with those of other research required additional support before being judged important for application. None of the subcategories we identified was based on such studies; therefore, we offer the following research-supported categories and subcategories for consideration by educators as they make decisions regarding marriage education program content.

Positivity. Evidence on the importance of expressions of positivity, such as positive emotions and affect, affectionate behavior (e.g., fondness, touch), and supportive behaviors (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 1999; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000) generally met two or more of the criteria for rigor. Studies that supported the links between marital quality and spending time together (e.g., Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000) and the development of a relational identity (i.e., “witness:” e.g., Honeycutt, 1999; Shapiro et al.) also consistently employed two or more of the four criteria. Additionally, research consistently linked expressivity or self-disclosure with higher marital quality (e.g., Bogard & Spilka, 1996; Harper & Schaalje, 2000). However, this research typically did not include observational or longitudinal methodologies, nor representative samples.

Negativity. Studies meeting multiple criteria for rigorous methodologies supported the existence of specific patterns of negativity that affect marital quality. Importantly, it is not simply level of conflict, but rather distinct patterns of emotions and behaviors in the context of conflict and in daily interactions that are linked with lower marital quality. Studies show that negative affect (e.g., anger, disgust, sadness, fear) in positive, neutral (i.e., events of the day), and conflictual couple interactions was related to low marital quality (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Shapiro et al., 2000). That is, the more that couples in general experience negative affectivity toward each other, the lower their marital quality (e.g., Dehle & Weiss, 2002).

In the context of conflict, consistent and strong evidence (from studies that met three of the criteria) was provided for the association between low marital quality and overt behavioral expressions of negativity, such as coercive behavior, angry outbursts, aggression, demanding, and criticizing (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001). In addition to these confrontational behaviors, findings from research consistently underscored the negative effects on marital quality of disengaging behaviors, such as withdrawal, nonresponsiveness, contemptuousness, and dismissiveness (e.g., Crohan, 1996; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995).

Independently, aggressive, confrontational behaviors and nonresponsive, dismissive behaviors were corrosive factors that diminish the quality of marriage and are predictive of a decline in marital satisfaction (e.g., Heavey et al., 1995). However, the co-occurrence of these demanding and withdrawing behaviors was more predictive of lower marital satisfaction than were congruent patterns of negative behaviors (Johnson & Bradbury, 1999). In addition, this asymmetrical pattern was empirically distinguishable from the level of partners' expressed negativity in their everyday lives (Caughlin & Huston, 2002).

Cognitions. Findings from research illuminate the impact of several dimensions of cognitions on marital quality. Early research delineated several unrealistic beliefs about relationships (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982). Unrealistic beliefs are those about how life is supposed to be that are not based on reason and, as a result, work toward one's own detriment. These beliefs include: disagreement is destructive, mind-reading is expected, partners cannot change, sexual relations should be perfect, and the genders are different. Findings demonstrated that higher endorsement of these beliefs is associated with lower levels of marital quality (e.g., Kurdek, 1999). A related line of research focused on expectations in marriage and the degree to which expectations are met. Because expectations cannot be observed, such studies are largely self-report, with some using responses from both partners. Studies consistently find that the discrepancy between a partner's expectations for his or her spouse's relational behavior and the perceptions of his or her spouse's actual behavior was related to marital satisfaction (e.g., Vangelisti & Daly, 1997).

In contrast to the negative impact of unrealistic beliefs, having intimate knowledge of one's marital partner serves to promote high marital quality (e.g., Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1997; Harper & Schaalje, 2000). The more a spouse is aware of the details of the couple relationship (e.g., their history) and his or her partner's world (i.e., stressors, hopes, likes and dislikes), the higher their marital quality (Shapiro et al., 2000). Studies with less rigorous methodologies also find that couples with a higher level of understanding of their partner (i.e., the ability to empathize) and who feel understood have higher marital quality (e.g., Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001; Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002).

Consensus on values, beliefs, goals, and views of the relationship also is associated with higher marital quality (e.g., Kurdek, 1993). Kurdek suggested that spouses with large differences in attitudes, values, and beliefs may run into marital difficulties because they appraise relationship events from incompatible vantage points. Studies in this area have rarely been done with representative samples and or observational methodologies.

Research that focused on perceptions of fairness is one of the few areas where representative samples regularly were used. Additionally, most used multiple informants and consistently found that perceived fairness and equity in the relationship is positively associated with marital quality (e.g., Frisco & Williams, 2003; Grote & Clark, 2001).

A relatively sizable literature indicates that making positive attributions about a partner's behaviors (i.e., benign assumptions) is associated with higher marital satisfaction (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, Sullivan, & Kieran, 1994). Longitudinal studies of these attributions also indicate that positive attributions were predictive of marital satisfaction across time (e.g., Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 2000). Karney and Bradbury (2000) found that initial levels of attributions by newlywed couples predicted changes in

marital satisfaction more than initial satisfaction predicted changes in attributions after 4 years.

Consistent with these findings, results from longitudinal and observational studies show that spouses who make positive assessments about their spouse also had higher marital quality (e.g., Carrere, Buehlman, Coan, Gottman, & Ruckstuhl, 2000). It is not just making positive assessments that is linked with higher marital satisfaction but also positive biases and illusions toward the person and the relationship history (e.g., Carrere et al.; Halford, Keefer, & Osgarby, 2002). Specifically, marital satisfaction is higher among individuals who focus on the positives versus the negatives in their partner and their relationship, who assess their partner more highly than the partner assesses himself or herself, and who focus retrospectively on the positives in their relationships.

In summary, our review of recent research on marital quality revealed the impact of both positivity and negativity on marital outcomes. Additionally, cognitions play an important role in promoting marital quality. Table 1 provides a summary of research-supported education topics based on the identification of modifiable risk and protective factors involved in the couple interactional processes.

Identification of Program Content Consistent with the Empirical Research Base

We now offer examples from existing programs to illustrate how this research knowledge can be put into practice. The curricula from which we drew examples are a sampling of marriage education currently available and were provided to us for review following a broad solicitation. The programs cited here were not selected based on any other specific criteria (they may or may not have been empirically evaluated), and our references to specific activities or discussions are meant to be illustrative of research-based content in programs and do not necessarily represent a comparative best example. Consistent with best practices (Halford et al., 2003; Hughes, 1994), we incorporated the element of active engagement with content (rather than didactic delivery of information) in our search for program examples of research-based content.

Table 1
Research-Supported Topics and Subcategories for Marriage Education Prevention Programs

Topic	Subcategory
Positivity (protective factors)	Positive emotions, affect, and feelings Affectionate behaviors Supportive behaviors Time together Relational identity Expressivity and self-disclosure
Negativity (risk factors)	Negative affect, emotions, and feelings Overt negative behaviors Withdrawing, nonresponsive, or dismissive behaviors Demand-withdraw pattern
Cognitions (protective factors)	Realistic beliefs and perception of expectations met Knowledge and understanding Consensus Perceived equity and fairness Positive attributions and biases

Positivity. Clearly, the most recent studies on factors associated with marital satisfaction emphasize the importance of providing information and skills on maintaining and building positivity in the marital relationship. Factors in this category are viewed as protective factors; therefore, intervention theory (Coie et al., 1993) posits that promotion and or enhancement of these factors will positively affect marital quality. To promote expressions of positive emotions and affectionate behaviors, one program uses an activity in which couples write in their notebook, "... 5 things you like about your marriage or about being married to your spouse. Take turns reading these to each other" (Beckham, 1992, p. 18). Another program has partners write "strokes" cards for their partner, listing qualities that they admire about him or her, and then exchange these cards (Shirer, Contreras, Harden, & Spicer, 2002). To facilitate support for each other, one program has each partner come up with a list of things that contribute to his or her feelings of high self-esteem, self-regard, and self-acceptance. The couple then comes together, discusses the list, and discusses what things each can do to make it possible for the spouse to engage in these activities that he or she finds esteem-building and energy-restoring (Beckham).

To promote the importance of spending time together, a program has couples brainstorm "at least 10 things you could do together that would be fun and exciting for both of you and would nourish your relationship and the feeling of closeness and romance you felt on your honeymoon" (Jones & Howell, 2001, p. 123). Couples are encouraged to be "creative," "romantic," and "ridiculous," and then make a plan for implementing their ideas.

Promoting a sense of relational identity or a sense of wholeness is encouraged in one program by having couples play "paper-rock-scissors." This competitive game is used as a discussion launch for emphasizing the importance for couples to work on building a sense of being on the same "team" and the potential destructiveness of developing the sense that one's spouse is an opponent. Facilitators promote the notion that "when either ONE of us WINS, we BOTH LOSE" (Ennis, 1989, chap. 4, p. 2). Another program has couples create together a "montage" of drawings of such things as:

... an illustration showing activities you and your partner enjoy doing together; a picture illustrating the last time you and your partner felt very close; a picture to represent the largest obstacle preventing you and your partner from having more good times together; create a saying to help you and your partner promote closeness. (Utah Marriage, n.d., Couple Montage Instructions, para. 1)

This joint activity is designed to facilitate a "partnership approach" to these questions and activities.

Encouraging expressivity and self-disclosure is promoted in a program by encouraging couples to disclose to one another their deepest feelings, thoughts, concerns, and desires. The facilitator of the program explains,

If I fail to take responsibility for sharing my feelings and concerns with my partner, then I am inevitably setting up both of us for disappointment because I am leaving my partner in the impossible position of having to read my mind to determine what is of importance to me. (Nordling, Scuka, & Guernsey, 1997, p. 14)

Thus, based on the empirical evidence of the importance of positive affect and behaviors for high marital quality, programs can and do include activities that promote the expressions

of (a) positive emotions, (b) affectionate behaviors, and (c) supportive behaviors. Program content also should emphasize (d) spending time together as a couple, (e) the development of a relational identity (i.e., a sense of "we"), and (f) expressivity or self-disclosure.

Negativity. Empirically identified variables in this category are viewed as risk factors; therefore, intervention theory posits that practice that focuses on avoiding or reducing these factors also will reduce marital dissatisfaction. As such, information and practices in programs should include identification and or awareness of negativity patterns. Practices that control or soothe negative affect and affrontive behaviors, that discourage disengaging, nonresponsive, and dismissive behaviors, and that prevent demand/withdraw interactions should be included. The overall evidence-based approach would present conflict as normal, yet emphasize behavioral and emotional patterns that are destructive to marital quality and offer strategies to counter these patterns.

Program content should include techniques to regulate the expression of negative emotions. For example, one program provides the opportunity to practice the following:

If either partner fears ... a deterioration in the interaction and/or is feeling emotionally or physically unsafe, then we recommend that they communicate to their partner a desire to exit from the situation until such time as both partners are calm and able to use good expressive skills and empathic responding skills to deal with the substance of the issue at hand. To facilitate this disengagement, it is helpful if both partners agree in advance on a hand signal that both will honor. (Nordling et al., 1997, pp. 70-71)

Another program focuses on individual regulation of emotions and suggests that the facilitator brainstorm with participants specific strategies for "harnessing and channeling" negative feelings (Ennis, 1989, chap. 9, p. 4).

Teaching nonaffrontive methods of engagement in the context of conflict can take the form of practicing nondefensive listening during conflictual discussions. One program allows for this practice and instructs:

Invite the other person to talk about whatever is bothering them ... Commit to swallowing all judgments, questions, and advice ... Turn on your ear-and-eye empathy to receive and understand all your partner's verbal and non-verbal expressions ... Then give silent, attentive, regular listening, augmented with frequent, energetic, empathic, but content-less sounds, to give encouragement and support without really saying anything. (Jones & Howell, 2001, p. 47)

This program also includes an awareness-raising section on the use of sarcasm and blaming language and provides practice in the use of clear, declarative language instead (Jones & Howell). Similarly, another program teaches and has participants practice the "XYZ" technique to counter blaming and sarcastic tendencies: "When you 'X' (specific behavior) in situation 'Y' (specific situation), I feel 'Z'" (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001, p. 97).

Additionally, program content should offer strategies to deal with withdrawing, nonresponsive, or dismissive behavior. To this end, one program teaches

In the case in which one partner refuses or is unable to use the skills, but the other partner is willing to do so, then the person willing and able to use the skills can opt to use Relationship Enhancement skills unilaterally and begin in the

role of the empathic responder by responding empathically to their partner. (Nordling et al., 1997, p. 70)

The rationale underlying this strategy is that partners may be more willing to engage appropriately once they feel understood.

Raising awareness of the destructive combination of demand or withdraw behaviors between partners has a strong research base. One program incorporates a visual to lead a discussion on this topic. Facilitators are instructed to

Demonstrate this with a couple in the circle. Let the husband/wife stand straight. Let the spouse kneel down and grab hold of his/her leg and hang on “for dear life.” Then have the husband/wife try to shake her/him loose and walk away. Let each act out their part for about a minute until the observers see the way the cycle works. Then tell them, “If you see yourself in this scene you will need to do a lot of talking to begin to understand each other. The pursuer must stop pursuing. The distancer will need to stop running. This will ease the tension. The distancer will no longer feel the panic and need to distance or the pursuer will no longer feel the panic of abandonment.” (Ennis, 1989, chap. 8, p. 6)

In sum, evidence-based program content can promote the regulation of negative emotions in couple interactions. In addition, nonaffrontive (nonoffensive) engagement during conflict and strategies to counter withdrawing, nonresponsive, or dismissive behaviors are identified. The destructive combination of the two incongruent negativity patterns also is addressed.

Cognitions. Research on the cognitions of partners in marriage demonstrates the need for educational programs to facilitate (a) realistic beliefs and expectations about relationships; (b) partner knowledge and understanding or empathy; (c) partner consensus on values and beliefs; (d) perceived equity and fairness; and (e) positive attributions and assessments of the partner, the relationship, and partner behaviors. These cognitions are viewed as protective factors, so intervention theory suggests that the promotion or enhancement of each will positively affect marital quality.

Promoting the recognition of expectations and the degree to which a partner perceives that these expectations are met are addressed in a program in which facilitators have couples write in their notebooks “three expectations you had of your marriage or of your spouse that have been met. Read your expectations and the ways they have been met to each other” (Beckham, 1992, p. 23). Empirical information on unrealistic expectations is manifest in a program that uses a quiz and a follow-up discussion to “debunk several commonly held myths about marriage” (Weiner-Davis, 2001, p. 79). The leader manual states that,

Too often couples have unrealistic notions about the nature of relationships and what it takes to make them satisfying. Unreasonable expectations about marriage make people question the health of their own relationships and often lead to divorce. This interactive quiz is meant to normalize people’s experiences. (p. 79)

Another program identifies six “mistaken beliefs” that lead to continual disappointment and discouragement. These are the empirically supported dysfunctional beliefs about marriage and relationships put into layman’s terms (Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 2003, p. 18).

One program promotes “knowing your partner” with the following activity: Today, you are to share something with your spouse you have never shared before. It’s not that this thought has been a secret. Perhaps you’ve never thought

to share it before or were a little reluctant to share it until now. Write it down in your notebook and tell your partner. (Beckham, 1992, p. 26)

Another program provides a test of the spouse’s level of knowledge of his or her partner and includes such questions as “I can name my partner’s best friends; I know my partner’s most embarrassing moment; I know the things that currently cause my partner stress” (Utah Marriage, n.d., *Make Your Partner Your Best Friend*, para. 2)

Perspective-taking and building empathy skills (i.e., understanding) appear to be important program content. One program has an activity in which participants sit in a circle and discuss common controversial topics with participants expressing their own viewpoints. They then are asked to have the discussion again, but to adopt another person’s viewpoint. The facilitator then leads a discussion of the work involved in trying to understand another person’s perspective (Shirer et al., 2002).

Examples of evidence-based content that promotes consensus and shared meaning include one program’s activity for couples to develop a “marriage mission statement.” Couples are given prompt questions that help them construct a mission statement that “...expresses what you believe, want, support, and value” (Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 2003, pp. 9–10). Another program (Weiner-Davis, 2001) has couples complete the “Defining Love” worksheet. They list three to five things they can do that would make their spouse feel loved. They then list three to five things that their spouse can do to make them feel loved. Partners then share their lists with each other. This experience can promote a shared view of each other’s needs. Another program (Carlson & Dinkmeyer) offers the following information:

We interpret another person’s message in light of our own experience. Therefore, in order to understand what is communicated we must continually clarify what we mean and share what another person’s message means to us... Try to check out with your partner whether your interpretation of what was communicated is accurate. Listen to your partner’s tone of voice, and notice other nonverbal clues. Clarify what you mean if it is apparent that your partner’s interpretation seems inaccurate. (p. 63)

Participants then practice these empathy techniques by sharing meanings and thoughts they have on a given topic.

Addressing the importance of perception of fairness and equity, a program that emphasizes the perception that household work is being divided fairly, is more important than if tasks are actually divided 50–50. To illustrate this point, couples make a list of the household tasks that need to be done, how often the task needs to be done, and how long the task takes to complete. Once couples compute the time needed to complete the tasks, they are encouraged to negotiate changes and compromises in their division of labor. The curriculum explains,

The goal is to help you feel satisfied with how responsibilities are shared, and that does not necessarily mean that you each have to spend an equal amount of time contributing to the household... Remember, household responsibilities can be shared in a variety of ways. (Utah Marriage, n.d., *Deciding Who Does What*, para. 2)

Program content that encourages attending to and focusing on the positives and giving your partner the “benefit of the doubt” (Markman et al., 2001, p. 78) is based on evidence that

positive assessments and attributions promote higher marital quality. One program presents participants with example situations and asks couples to come up with alternative ways of regarding the situation.

Your partner leaves early for work without waking you and telling you good-bye. You feel slighted and ignored. What is an alternative way of looking at this behavior? An alternative is to recognize that your partner is being considerate and letting you sleep a few extra minutes. (Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 2003, p. 22)

Another program (Markman et al.) calls attention to the “filters” that are used that lead to negative interpretation of a person’s behaviors. The program emphasizes the importance of trying to view a partner and his or her behaviors in a more positive light.

These examples illustrate ways in which cognitions can be addressed in marriage education programs. When based on existing research, programs should encourage functional beliefs and expectations about marriage and facilitate raising awareness of current beliefs and expectations between partners. Programs can promote building consensus and increasing couples’ “knowledge and understanding” of each other and explore perceived fairness and equity in the relationship. Such programs will provide opportunities for forming positive attributions for partner behaviors and positive assessments of the partner, the relationship, and the relationship history.

In summary, a comprehensive approach that includes all of the topics noted in Table 1 is suggested. Through the selection, organization, and review processes, studies were narrowed so the resulting topics represent an inclusive list of empirically supported risk and protective factors related to marital quality. We suggest that intervention programs likely will have a positive impact on marital quality, if they address multiple risk and protective factors (Rutter, 1987).

Other Considerations for Marriage Education Programming

Revisiting Contextual Conditions and Enduring Personal and Couple Characteristics

Although our review focused on potential modifiable process variables (Coie et al., 1993), we are not suggesting a disregard for the empirical literature on contextual conditions or personal and couple characteristics associated with marital quality, typically thought of as “not likely to change as a function of intervention” (e.g., Halford et al., 2003, pp. 386–387). Information from several literature areas links marital quality and life events and circumstances, such as a family member death, birth of a child, work and family interface, military deployment, social isolation, financial hardship, and physical illness (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). There also are several studies that indicate that enduring individual traits—such as race, family history (e.g., divorced parents), and psychiatric disorders—are related to marital quality (e.g., Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000; Holman & Associates, 2001). Similarly, certain characteristics of the couple, such as cohabitation history and demographic homogamy, are associated with marital quality (e.g., Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Heaton & Pratt, 1990). Program content can certainly facilitate awareness-raising of the potential influence of these contextual and trait variables on marital quality.

Prioritizing Program Content

Because of the expanse of research on marital quality across disciplines and the often isolated study of specific variables, it has been difficult to determine the potency of factors related to marital quality and to make recommendations for prioritizing program content. However, growing evidence suggests that an element of positivity, specifically skills and knowledge in couple interactions that promote couple intimacy, may moderate the effects of negative or stressful contextual conditions and issues (e.g., Bradbury et al., 2000; Harper & Schaalje, 2000) and risky enduring personal and couple traits or characteristics (e.g., Caughlin et al., 2000; Sacco & Phares, 2001). When such positive marital processes are present and maintained, the resulting couple connectedness can serve as a buffer for stressful contextual conditions and enduring negative personal and couple characteristics.

Additionally, there are recent and consistent findings that couples who engage in positive friendship-building activities and practices are less likely to develop negative patterns of communication (i.e., contemptuous and critical behaviors during conflict; Gottman & Levenson, 1999; Shapiro et al., 2000). Expressions of positive emotions and the use of positive behaviors appear to have both a direct effect on relationship quality independent of level of negativity (Fincham, Beach, & Kemp-Fincham, 1997) and an indirect effect by moderating a couple’s interactive style during conflict (Shapiro et al.). Similarly, Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, and George (2001) found that it is not the emergence of negativity in the relationship but rather the abatement of overt expressions of positive emotions that predicts low marital quality among newlyweds.

There also is evidence that marital processes that support and maintain couple intimacy may serve as mediators (e.g., Harper & Schaalje, 2000). For example, when life events and other contextual stressors lead to reductions in friendship-building processes and increases in stress, they are subsequently linked with lower marital quality (e.g., Crohan, 1996). Similarly, Caughlin and colleagues (2000) reported that much of the association between trait anxiety and marital satisfaction is explained by communication processes. Sacco and Phares (2001) found that across trait categories, individuals were more maritally satisfied when their partners viewed them positively (i.e., made positive assessments), and less satisfied when their partners viewed them negatively.

Taken together, these findings suggest that building positive emotional connectedness may be particularly important for promoting high levels of marital quality. This conclusion is consistent with the findings from Karney and Bradbury’s (1995) meta-analytic study on the comparative predictability of factors related to marital quality in longitudinal research. Aggregate effect-size correlations showed that couple positive behavior was the most highly correlated factor with marital quality for both men and women.

Gender

Notably missing from our suggestions is an emphasis on gender in marriage education programs. The immense popularity of the self-help book, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (Gray, 1992) suggests that the view of men and women as inhabiting different social and psychological worlds resonates with a large segment of the general population. As such, couples may enter marriage education programs with the expectation that they will learn how to accept and deal with the “innate” differ-

ences between men and women. Similarly, family life educators and other professionals may seek to identify programs that include a focus on gender. The possibility that professionals may endorse this characterization of men and women is evidenced by the number of therapists who bill themselves as “certified Mars and Venus counselors” (Zimmerman, Haddock, & McGeorge, 2001). However, an examination of the empirical literature reveals little support for this polarized view of men and women. Research consistently has found minimal biologically based differences between the sexes (e.g., Hyde & Plant, 1995). Moreover, a critical analysis of Gray’s book (Zimmerman et al.) revealed an emphasis on the endorsement of power differentials between women and men. Zimmerman et al. concluded that, “[Gray’s] thesis and recommendations are in direct contrast to marriage and family therapy research, feminist theory, and principles underlying ‘best practice’ in the field,” (p. 55).

When gender differences in behaviors are found in the empirical literature, they still are outweighed by similarities (Canary & Dindia, 1998). In some cases, the differences are a function of the social context rather than gender per se. A case in point is the finding that women are likely to demand, and men are likely to withdraw (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 2000). By examining the context (i.e., who wants the change), both husbands and wives were found to be more demanding when they wanted change (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Thus, the empirical literature does not provide a basis from which to argue that behaviors are typically male or female, implying innate characteristics. Marital education program content that promotes positive communication (e.g., soft start-up and accepting influence from one’s partner) can appropriately be offered for both men and women.

Target Audience

We emphasize again that the majority of participants in studies on marital quality do not come from representative samples (see summaries by Bradbury et al., 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Larson & Holman, 1994). Most samples consist of White, middle-class couples. These sample characteristics are an important consideration when targeting the appropriate audience for a program built on extant research. Generalizability of empirical findings to ethnically and economically diverse populations requires further study. When studies better represent diverse populations, implications for practice with these audiences can be illuminated.

Similarly, few studies distinguished between first-married and remarried couples. Thus, it is not clear whether the findings are generalizable to remarried couples. Research conducted specifically with stepfamilies (a segment of the remarried population) points to important issues and developmental processes that uniquely affect these marital relationships (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). These issues include concerns related to stepchildren, complexity of across-household relationships, role ambiguity due to the undeveloped institution of remarriage, and managing coparenting relationships with a former spouse (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Visher, Visher, & Pasley, 2003). General marriage education programs used with remarried couples may be missing important information on unique issues and developmental processes that affect marital interaction among these couples.

Summary

Overall, our hope is to support educators’ interest in “... approaching prevention as a scientific enterprise as well as a service mission” (Dumka et al., 1995, p. 78). Our goal here was to articulate a process for selecting, reviewing, and applying existing research findings to the content needed in marriage education programs. The results of this process provide a basis for family life educators to move forward with greater confidence in their decisions regarding marriage education program curricula. Educators can use this information to examine curricula in which they are interested and determine how inclusive the program is of these topics, as well as the topics in the program that are not reflected in this review.

We adopted a risk and resiliency approach that focused on identifying the factors associated with marital quality and marital dissatisfaction. Further, an emphasis on the interactional processes in marriage as determinants of marital quality was supported by the V-S-A model. Intervention theory (Coie et al., 1993) provided the basis for applying the information and suggested certain modifiable risk and protective factors as the target topics for program content. In addition, we described the translation model as a stimulant for future discussions of a more explicit approach to the linkages between research and education. We invite future enhancements and advancements to this model.

Our specific effort informs educators of the current research base for prevention programming focused on promoting marital quality. However, more research is needed to guide practice. Although studies are beginning to demonstrate linkages among factors associated with marital quality, more research is needed to identify how factors are related to each other over time (Halford, 2004). In addition, there is little information on the relative importance of factors associated with marital quality that can inform the prioritizing of program content. There also may exist important variables that have yet to be empirically linked with marital quality. Further, research that examines process similarities and differences among different types of couples (i.e., based on ethnicity, number of marriage, and so on) is important for providing appropriate empirical bases for program content.

The use of extant literature to inform practice is an important step in developing seamless connections between research and practice. However, research-based program implementation is a recursive process that includes the empirical evaluation of program effects and a test of the validity of the intervention theory (i.e., a test of the hypothesized research and practice linkages). Thus, research is needed that examines the short-term and long-term effects of marriage education programs and that identifies program components and methods (Halford, 2004) that are most effective in promoting and maintaining high levels of marital quality. Such studies will serve to further close the gaps between research and practice and improve our efficacy and effectiveness in providing couples with programs that support healthy marriages.

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