



Module 2*

Using Research in Marriage/Relationship Education Programming

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Slide 1: Introduction – Name, title, University

Hello. My name is Brian Higginbotham and I am an Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist at Utah State University. In this presentation I will discuss ways to use research in marriage and relationship education programming. Before beginning, however, I would like to acknowledge the work of my assistant, Katie Henderson, with the preparation of this presentation.

Slide 2: Objective

My objective with this presentation is to support educators who have an interest in "...approaching prevention as a scientific enterprise as well as a service mission" (Dumka, Roosa, Michaels, & Suh, 1995, p. 78). Consequently, my presentation will focus on two aspects of research. These aspects may be broadly labeled as (1) "research informed programming" and (2) "programmatic research." In other words, I will be talking about a framework to develop and modify programs using existing research as well as discussing techniques to evaluate existing marriage education programs.

Slide 3: Model

Slide 3, depicts how research and programming interrelate and serves as an overview of my presentation. As a field we have been encouraged to use existing research as the basis for what we do (Hughes, 1994). Existing research comes in two forms: programmatic and non-programmatic. Programmatic research includes information gleaned from evaluative studies of existing programs. This type of research tells us "if" a particular program works. It can also tell us "why" and for "whom" the program is effective. This information should inform decisions about "which" program to offer in your community, "how" and "where" the program will be offered, and "who" will be the target audience. Non-programmatic research includes empirical studies on factors related to relationship and marital quality and should inform "what" topics are taught in relationship education programs. Theories related to relationship development and adult learning can also inform program content and program implementation.

Unfortunately for those who want black and white answers, the research on marriage and relationship education programming is not definitive and there is much that we still do not know. Consequently, we need to be diligent in researching the effectiveness of our programs and evaluating variables that may account for the success or failure of our endeavors. Coming full circle now in my model, the lessons learned from our own evaluations - and that from others in the field - should inform modifications and updates to our existing programs.

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Now, I am aware that some of you may be listening to this presentation because of your interest in developing a research informed program. Others may have tuned in to get some ideas on how to evaluate an existing program. Regardless of where you are in the process of development and evaluation, I hope that you will listen to my whole presentation. For as programmers and educators, we need to be certain that the information we are sharing – or intend to share - with others is accurate, relevant, and helpful. As illustrated in the model, “research informed programming” and “programmatically research” are both critical components in the on-going process of developing, implementing, and refining successful relationship and marriage education programs.

Slide 4: Research Informed Practice

Let's talk now, in more detail, about “research informed programming.” One of the first and most fundamental considerations in relationship education is deciding what program to offer. Presently, there is a plethora of marriage education curricula in circulation. You can find a directory that includes most marriage/relationship education programs at www.smartmarriages.com. After seeing the menu of choices you may ask “how do I select a curriculum among all those available?” One legitimate and respected approach is to use a curriculum based on empirical evaluations of program effectiveness. Trustworthy evidence of program effectiveness can typically be found in peer-reviewed academic journals. For those who don't want to scour the literature themselves, I have included on my citation list a number of recent reviews that highlight programs with demonstrated short-term and/or sustained positive program effects (Carol & Doherty, 2003; Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004).

Slide 5: Cautions about Choosing Programs

Choosing a well-evaluated program, however, may come at a price your budget cannot afford. I often hear complaints about how pricy it is to purchase some of the most well-known and well-evaluated programs. This being the case, don't hastily conclude that unevaluated programs are comparatively “bad” or “less effective.” The overwhelming majority of programs have not been empirically evaluated, yet it is plausible they may be quite effective. The absence of documented programmatic effects may be due to the lack of funding to support evaluation research or the lack of evaluation expertise by those offering the program.

I would also counsel against hastily concluding that a program, which was found to be effective 10 years ago, is still effective today. Programs that have not been updated for some period of time may be missing important information from the latest non-programmatic research. The absence of program updates may also indicate that the developers of the program are not evaluating their program – or worse, that they are not refining their program by incorporating suggested alterations indicated by programmatic evaluations.

A final cautionary note pertains to the assumptions that originally guided the curriculum development. Be aware that the guiding assumptions and content of established programs may not necessarily fit with your context or target audience. Many programs have been developed with a “nuclear family bias,” religious undertones, and/or with White middle class Americans in mind (see Coontz, 1997). For programming considerations in diverse audience I would encourage you to listen to Linda Skogrand and Karen Shirer's module on cultural and economic diversity.

Slide 6: Another approach to program selection

In light of the above considerations, an alternative approach to comparing empirical outcomes is needed to guide decisions about program selection. One strategy that my colleagues and I encourage



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involves comparing program content with findings from an appropriate empirical research base (see Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004). This “research informed” approach is consistent with “best practices” in family life education (e.g., Hennon & Arcus, 1993). Robert Hughes (1994), for example, has 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 have also encouraged family life educators to critically assess program content to ensure that curricula are not based on out-dated 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).

In other words, when choosing an ESTABLISHED program it is important to verify that program content is still clearly supported by the current literature. If you are developing a NEW program, it is important to translate the extant research into program content. The extant literature refers to all the existing literature related to your program goals. The process of identifying, reviewing, or translating all the relevant literature into its appropriate programmatic application may seem daunting. It's actually not that hard. However, because it does take a considerable amount of time, I will share not only the steps but also the results of the process my colleagues and I recently undertook to identify program content implicated by the current base of research on marital quality. For a more detailed description of this process and results please see the October 2004 issues of Family Relations.

Slide 7: Step 1: Determine and gather relevant literature based on program goal(s)

The first step is to determine and gather the relevant literature related to your program goal(s). The overall program goal of education programs should dictate the research topic area to be investigated. Since the goals of marriage and relationship education are centered on the improvement and or enhancement of marital quality (e.g., Parke & Ooms, 2002); a review of literature should center on factors related to marital quality. There are a number of electronic search engines, such as EBSCO and PsychINFO, which will generate a compilation of the literature associated with specified key words. When we did this using as the key words: “marital,” “satisfaction,” “relationship,” and “quality.” The search engines identified over 2,000 related articles.

Slide 8: Step 2: Narrow the potential studies for review

Two thousand articles is a lot of reading material - so Step 2 involves narrowing the identified articles to a smaller subset. The narrowing process should be guided by a clear and defensible rubric. In the case of general marriage education programming, my colleagues and I recommend that articles should be a) empirical, b) peer-reviewed, c) published since 1990 and d) use adults for their sample. Our rationale is that juried articles have undergone scrutiny of methods and interpretation(s), and they are likely to represent the most rigorous basis for guiding applied efforts. Studies published prior to 1990 would include data from couples in the mid- to late-1980's; therefore, findings may have less application to the current generation of couples (which are your prospective program participants) than findings from more current studies. In addition, marriage education targets adults; therefore, findings from studies of adult samples provide the necessary research base.

We also advocate for the EXCLUSION of articles if they used: (a) a clinical sample, (b) marital satisfaction or quality as a predictor rather than an outcome, (c) marital satisfaction to test the reliability or validity of an instrument, or (d) samples outside North America. Additionally, we would recommend narrowing the focus to articles that assess *interactional* variables. In relationship education programs, family and couple interactional processes, not family structure, should be the center of programmatic attention. Interactional variables, such as spending time with your partner, are factors that are



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considered changeable or modifiable (Karney & Bradbury) and are considered to be the most appropriate targets for educational prevention and intervention work (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003).

The focus on “modifiable” interactional variables is informed by intervention theory (Coie et al., 1993), which leads us to expect that modifiable factors found to negatively affect marital quality are risk factors. These negative process, such as criticizing your spouse, can be addressed through educational programming with the intention of reversing or avoiding them, thus positively affecting marital quality and or reducing marital dissatisfaction. Assumptions of Intervention theory would also lead us to expect that modifiable processes found to positively affect marital quality, such as self-disclosure and affection, will be protective factors. In theory, program content focused on enhancing, maintaining, and or promoting these factors should serve to positively affect marital quality.

Slide 9: Step 3: Identifying Research Themes

Step 3 of linking research to practice involves identifying themes in the relevant literature. After separating out and reviewing the appropriate articles on couple interactional processes, we identified three broad themes or categories of empirical findings: positive emotions and behaviors (Positivity), negative emotions and behaviors (Negativity), and cognitions.

Slide 10: Step 4: Determining & Reviewing Research Rigor

Although we identified three themes, it is conceivable that someone else could identify others. After all, these days one can find an article or two that supports nearly anything. Consequently, it is valuable to check the rigor of the articles included in the identified categories. There is not clear guidance on what constitutes “rigorous research” but allow me to share four criteria that seem to work well and tend to be accepted in the academic community. Educators can have the most confidence in studies that include (a) a longitudinal designs, (b) a representative sample, (c) observational methods, and or (d) multi-method or multi-informant procedures. These types of studies are generally of higher quality than studies that are not characterized by these methodological features.

As compared to 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 for a broader array of program participants. Observational methods of data collection generally are considered to have greater validity than reports from a single informant (Babbie, 2001). If self-report or survey data collection methods are used, rigor can be established through use of multiple methods and multiple informants (Babbie).

Slide 11: Research-Supported Topics and Subcategories for Marriage Education Prevention Programs

My colleagues and I used these four criteria to guide the process of reviewing the rigor of relevant research on marital quality, we found considerable support for our three categories. Furthermore, within each category, we found that we could subgroup similar topic areas.

This table summarizes the list of research-supported education topics based on the empirical research related to modifiable risk and protective factors in couples' interactional processes. You, as marriage and relationship educators, are welcome to use this list to examine curricula you are currently using, or which you may be interested in adopting, to determine how inclusive the program is of these topics, as



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well as the topics in the program that are not reflected in this review. Theoretically, relationship education should have the most positive impact on marital quality when they address multiple risk and protective factors (Rutter, 1987).

You are also welcome to use the process I just went through, if you have somewhat different program goals or target audience. For example if you are interested in evaluating the content of a youth-focused relationship education program you would want to include in your initial literature review studies with adolescent samples. Using this process of identifying and categorizing appropriate research and then reviewing whether a program includes research based topics, you can move forward with greater confidence in the decisions regarding relationship education program curricula.

Slide 12: Research Informed Implementation

Deciding on a curriculum, however, is just one of the decisions you will have to make as an educator...and it should NOT be the only decision that is research-based. When doing relationship education there are a host of implementation issues that should also be informed by the extant literature. I will briefly cover just a few to illustrate how you can use research to inform the implementation of your program.

How a program is implemented may be just as important as what the program content actually covers. After all, if participants can't stay awake during an educational workshop it matters very little what content is being presented. The instructional experiences, facilitator characteristics, and implementation attributes can greatly add or distract from the program goals. For example, in order for participants to stay engaged, it has been observed that activities should clearly compliment the objectives and there should be a variety of teaching activities and formats to accommodate different participant learning styles. Teaching aids, such as handouts, should reinforce what is being said by the facilitator (Hughes, 1994).

Slide 13: Program and Audience Characteristics

Culturally appropriate material is an important factor in creating a successful program. A common critique of many marriage/relationship education programs is that they were designed for, based on research from, and developed by White middle class Americans. Culturally insensitive examples, as well as material that under- or overestimates the reading ability or educational level of the participants, may quickly induce an audience to tune out or dismiss the presenter's message. With a diverse audience - and by diverse we could be talking about ethnically, economically, number of times married, etc. - the program and staff must be able to meet the needs and expectations of everyone in the room. This is not an easy task. For example, citing a Biblical scripture about marriage may be really meaningful to a Christian participant. However, for non-Christian participants the use of the Bible in what was billed as a community relationship education program may be seen as inappropriate or even offensive. That being said, if you are interested in offering a program in a religious setting be advised that "couples united by a particular faith may be best served by those who can communicate content within their culture and language of their religious beliefs and practices" better than those who are not (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, and Willoughby, 2004, pp. 26-27.)

There is support from the literature that, where possible, participant groups be as homogeneous as possible. Not only does this help the facilitator tailor his/her message, stories, and examples it also appears to help participants feel more comfortable (see Lengua, Roosa, Schupak-Neuberg, Berg, & Weschler, 1992). Although group-specific program content can be infused into general marriage



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education curricula for mixed group participants, effectiveness will likely be enhanced if couples participate in homogeneous group.

Slide 14: Facilitator Characteristics

Clearly, the presenter can be extremely influential in the effects of a program. I'm sure we can all remember a time when we struggled to stay awake through a boring lecture...even if the lecture was on a very important subject. Notwithstanding the value of the information being shared, if the presenter is not interesting or is inappropriate, the intended message of the program may be missed.

The importance of good facilitators was really made clear to me a few years ago when I was evaluating a study in Alabama. We had implemented a well-known marriage preparation class in several counties throughout the State. When various aspects of the marriage education program were correlated with program satisfaction many of the SAME variables were significant for both our Caucasian and African American participants... and they had to do with the workshop facilitator. Specifically, overall perception of the program was associated with the facilitator's ability to stimulate participation and explain the material. For Caucasian participants, program satisfaction was also significantly correlated with the facilitator's perceived concern about group members. African American participants reported greater program satisfaction when the facilitators' (a) drew on personal experiences and (b) if the material was relevant or useful.

It has also been suggested that facilitators who are familiar with the issues being covered may be the most credible presenters. Credibility is vital in order to gain trust and respect of program participants (Hawkins, et al., 2004). Morris, Cooper, and Gross (1999) have found that in marriage education, participants prefer a facilitator they can trust; one who can be supportive, empathic, and caring.

It is important for educators to be sensitive to group dynamics and the specific needs of their audience in order to cultivate this trust and credibility. Flexibility and changes in teaching methods, material, or even the facilitator may be needed. Scholars (e.g., Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, and Willoughby, 2004) have noted in regard to facilitator characteristics noted: "gender may be an important issue. Some men are more responsive to the content of a program if delivered by a male-female team instead of just one instructor (pp. 26-27). Participants may be less comfortable in formal settings with self-disclosure related to emotional aspects of their intimate lives; therefore, once again the program and instructor must tailor to participants needs. For example, if participants do not respond to activities that include group discussions the instructor should be flexible and prepared with individual or couple exercises.

Slide 15: Do you have to have a great marriage to be a great marriage educator?

Now having said all this, don't believe as one aspiring educator recently said to me, "I don't know if I can facilitate a marriage education workshop because I'm not personally in a great marriage." Not true. You can't simultaneously be rich and poor or male and female but that doesn't mean you still can't be a successful educator to participants who are different from yourself. Remember, successful instructors do not necessary have to have the exact life-experiences or characteristics as their participants. However, the more the instructor has experienced and learned about the participants' context the better the instructor will be able to understand and relate to his/her participants (Hawkins, et al., 2004).



Slide 16: Programmatic research

Hopefully, you can see why and how implementation issues may factor into the effects of relationship education participation. Unfortunately, as a field there are large gaps in our understanding and documentation regarding the effects of implementation variables. The reasons for these gaps in the literature lead us into the final portion of the presentation – “programmatic research.” Accounting for all the programmatic, audience, and facilitator variables, which may confound or moderate program effects, requires a level of evaluation that few are able to execute. Controlling for variables, ensuring fidelity to program design and procedures, comparing participants to control subjects, assessing for change over time – all these procedures take time and money. Consequently, much of what is assumed about instruction and implementation is still in need of empirical support. By engaging in programmatic research, you, I, and others currently offering programs can greatly contribute to the field by generating research that can guide practice in the future.

Although programmatic research does take time and money, there is likely some sort of evaluation that every organization can undertake. The old saying, “the more the merrier” certainly applies to documenting the effects of relationship education and explanations for the positive effects on couple relationships.

Slide 17: Assumptions regarding the role and value of program evaluation

Recognizing that every organization is different in terms of scope, budget, and evaluation expertise I will highlight Jacob’s five-tiered approach to evaluation, which orders evaluation activities at five levels. All levels share common assumptions about the role and value of program evaluation (see Jacobs, 1988). These assumptions include:

1. “Evaluation should be viewed as the systematic collection and analysis of program-related data that can be used to understand how a program delivers services and/or what the consequences of its services are for participants” (p. 49). Consequently, evaluation is both descriptive and “judgmental.”
2. “Evaluation is a necessary component to every program, regardless of its size, age, and orientation” (p. 49). All programs should engage in some sort of evaluation, if for no other reason than to improve their own program’s effectiveness.
3. “There are numerous legitimate purposes for evaluation. Programs must be committed to providing an effective service, but not all evaluations should attempt to determine program impact per se” (p. 49).
4. “There are also many legitimate audiences for an evaluation” (p. 49). The intended audience of the evaluation should impact the evaluation design.
5. “Evaluation activities should not detract from service delivery” (p. 49).

Slide 18: Five-tiered approach to evaluation

With these assumptions in mind, let’s talk about Jacobs’ five-tiers of evaluation. In Jacobs’ five-tiered approach to evaluation each level demands greater efforts, increased precision in program definition, and a larger commitment to the evaluation process. Although I will discuss each tier independently, programs can certainly engage, simultaneously, in several levels of evaluation. If you are NOT currently evaluating your program, try to find a level at which you can begin. If you ARE currently evaluating your program, try to identify additional facets that you can include to create a more



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comprehensive evaluation strategy. Please remember that one level of evaluation is not better than the others. All aspects of evaluation have inherent value and can contribute to the refinement of individual programs and to the field as a whole.

Slide 19: Level One: The Pre-implementation Tier

The first level of Jacobs' five tier framework is the Pre-implementation tier. Activities in this tier include: needs assessments, determining the fit between the community and the program, detailing program objectives, and establishing the basis on which the curriculum was developed. As you can probably surmise, the activities in this tier provide the foundation, groundwork, and basis for the credibility of the program and all subsequent evaluation efforts. The process I highlighted earlier in this presentation - that of evaluating programs against the standard of the extant literature - is an example of an evaluation activity in the pre-implementation tier and can document the appropriateness of the topics included in a particular program. In terms of program development, in this tier of evaluation "the minimum expectation would be that program developer's show evidence that the program was developed through a process in which the needs of a particular audience were considered. This might be done through a variety of approaches including focus groups" (Hughes, 1994).

All organizations should go through this level of evaluation before offering a marriage or relationship education program. A friend of mine learned this lesson the hard way. A funding agency believed in the merits of his program and paid handsomely for a slew of facilitators to be trained in a well-known curriculum. Soon he and his colleagues began to offer the program throughout his State. Unfortunately, couples did not come swarming to the workshops as anticipated. Does this story sound familiar? Speaking with colleagues and from personal experience I can say with some confidence that the results of my friends' endeavor have been replicated over and over around the country. Why? Well, there are many more reasons than I have time to go into here; however, I'll highlight one particular reason because I've seen it with many other well-intentioned programs. With relationship education there seems to be the belief that "if you offer it, they will come".

Slide 20: The Pre-implementation Tier cont.

It is important to remember that just because a funding agency sees the merits of relationship education and you offer a program doesn't mean that couples in your targeted community will see the value of the program nor that they will be willing to take the time to attend the workshops. In addition to providing programs that couples need, we also need to be aware of what couples want. I strongly believe that most couples do want their relationships to be stronger. However, because every community and target audience is different it is important that we ask potential participants what it is they want and what format they want it in. If you perform needs assessments, engage in focus groups with potential participants about the implementation of couple's education, and then you incorporate your findings you will increase the chances of having participants attend the resulting program.

However, sometimes for political or other reasons, programs are often hastily established. As a result these programs are not always thorough in their objectives, definitions, design, or organizational structures which may hinder the programs success. The ability to create a quick program so that one may "take the money and run," may be tempting but it is not advisable. It is likely that at some point, information about the relevance of, and need for, the program will be requested. So it is too your advantage to have this information readily available. Done well, evaluations at this level provide the foundation and baseline for the broader range of future evaluation activities (Jacobs 1988).



Slide 21: Level Two: The Accountability Tier

Level two is the accountability tier. This tier involves the documentation and systematic collection of client-specific and service-utilization data. For those familiar with the logic model approach to program development and evaluation, this is consistent with what is referred to as outputs. It is called the accountability tier because it is necessary for any program to demonstrate accountability to funders and/or other interested parties. At a minimum, programs should be able to report that in a specified period of time: X couples were provided Y services at a cost of Z. Examples of ways to do this include: keeping track of the number of couples registered for your classes, the number who attend, and their demographic characteristics. To document program services you may consider tracking the number of sessions you offer, amount of time per session, and other aspects of the workshop format.

Although it may be assumed that programs regularly collect this type of data the research indicates that relatively few actually do. In one national program study (Hite, 1985) over 20% of survey respondents kept no data at all, and among those who do, there is a wide variety of data collection methods. If data collection is sporadic or unsystematically gathered, programs may have difficulty reporting the numbers of people they serve, who they have reached, how staff spend their time, etc.

Tier two evaluations do not require documentation of outcomes. To quote Jacobs (1988), "second tier evaluation simply documents what exists – client characteristics, service/intervention descriptions and costs – and it may be the correct place to stop to allow newly organized programs to 'catch their breath'" (p. 56). Make sure you keep this accountability data and that you frequently update it. It comes in handy when you want to apply for grants or request larger budgets.

Slide 22: Level Three: The Program Clarification Tier

The third level of evaluation includes the clarification of information gathered, with the opportunity for feedback and improvements in order to improve the program. Jacobs (1988) explains "often this is the most useful genre of evaluation, with many data collection and analysis options open to younger, low-budget programs. At this level, program staff relies primarily on their own 'collective wisdom' to answer the question of 'how can we do a better job serving our clients....This information often can be put to immediate use, and evaluation here remains close to the program, reflecting the ever changing beliefs and behaviors of the real people who work there and participate in it'" (p. 57-59). So, this stage is where data is put to use. For example, you may notice from level two data that your program is attracting couples in first marriages but remarried couples are not attending. This is the time to ask yourself, "Why might this be case?" Have we clearly identified our target audience?" "Is this the group we want to be attracting?" "What aren't we doing that might possible attract the group we intended to serve?"

At this point you may want to ponder a quote attributed to Albert Einstein, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." If you aren't getting the results you want, you need to alter your method or at least clarify what it is you want. Based on further analysis of tier two data, the program objectives, and program implementation adjustments, should then be made in an effort to verify that objectives are realistic and that the program design is conducive to the achievement of those objectives. Educators and program administrators should be able to examine the programmatic content, instructional processes, and procedures to determine what is working and what is not. This, of course, requires that you and your colleagues put your heads together. Colleagues and/or staff that work on different parts of the program or with different audiences may have different but insightful viewpoints on what is and isn't working. Engaging in this sort of "self-evaluation" is critical to improving the implementation and content of individual programs.



Slide 23: Level Four: The Progress-Toward-Objective Tier

At the fourth level of the evaluation, the focus turns to program effectiveness. Activities include progress towards short-term objectives, measuring client and staff satisfaction, and assessing for differential effects (i.e., does the program work better for couples of one particular cultural group?). This type of an evaluation is often undertaken with more established and financially secure programs. To document progress-toward-objectives, programs must have the time and resources to collect and analyze the necessary information. Often professional evaluators are hired, either from universities/colleges or other contractors, to help design and implement these types of evaluations. I'm going to put a plug in here for University researchers. They can often perform quality evaluations at a substantially lower cost than for-profit evaluation companies. The evaluations may consist of several methods including pre/posttest evaluation or standardized tests that assess variables that may explain differential impacts such as participants' age, race, etc. This level of evaluation increases knowledge about the effectiveness of the program and is usually expected when applying for large grants.

Slide 24: Level Five: The Program-Impact Tier

The fifth and final tier of evaluation pertains to program impact. This type of evaluation includes a rigorous experimental design to (a) assess the program's effectiveness and (b) discern whether the positive results were spurious. Random assignment and comparison groups are typically employed to identify and measure long- and short-term impacts. Such evaluations often require longitudinal designs and in the case of long-term impacts an organization may be looking at a multiyear effort. Although program-impact studies can certainly inform individual programs, usually these studies are "externally directed, meant to contribute more broadly to developmental theory and clinical or evaluation practice" (Jacobs, 1988, p. 61). It is these types of studies that provide the most convincing data to policy makers. They demonstrate that outcomes did not occur by chance or by other controllable factors. Rather, results from these studies provide evidence of the utility and unique contribution of the program.

Slide 25: Summary (five-tiered figure)

This completes my overview of Jacobs (1988) five-tiered approach to evaluation. The activities in the tiers range from actions that will improve your design, to refine your program, to document the effectiveness of your program. It is my hope that each of you has heard or thought of some evaluation strategy that you can incorporate into your existing programs. All of these activities are worthwhile and valuable and I hope you will share your lessons learned with others so that we don't each reinvent the wheel.

Most likely, some sort of program evaluation is already required by your organization's administrators who are accountable for budgets and to grantors. However, I would also encourage you to look for other outlets through which your program evaluations and research can inform policy makers and others in the field.



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Slide 26: Evaluation Resources

For those interested in learning more about evaluation, I have included a number of web addresses to sites related to program evaluation.

- Child Trends' compilation of evaluation instruments:
http://www.childtrends.org/docdisp_page.cfm?LID=2CACD57D-1090-419B-8D4BB6C5F7ED10DC
- Harvard's Evaluation Exchange: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue28/>
- NCSU On-line course on Program and Evaluation Development in Family Life Education:
<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/courses/fcs510.php>
- University of Wisconsin-Extension - Program Development and Evaluation Information:
<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/>

Slide 27: Conclusion

In conclusion, I have discussed two important ways in which research can and should be used with endeavors to provide relationship and marriage education. The first of course is making sure that research supports the content and practice of any program you may be using or developing. The use of extant literature to inform practice is a critical step in developing seamless connections between research and practice. Researching and evaluating existing programs is also critical. Research-informed program implementation is a recursive process that includes the empirical evaluation of program effects. Consequently, more research is still needed to examine the short-term and long-term effects of marriage education programs and to identify program components and methods (Halford, 2004) that are most effective in promoting and maintaining high levels of marital quality. With more of these studies we will be able to further close the gaps between research and practice and improve our efficacy and effectiveness in providing couples with programs that support healthy relationships (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004).

Best wishes to you as you strive to use and create research that not only improves your own program but contributes to the whole field of marriage and relationship education!



Module 2 References

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