

Marriage Enrichment

Rationale for Marriage Enrichment

Within the framework of the family is reflected the rapid change that characterizes our modern society (Diskin, 1986). The need for marriage enrichment services has been heightened by sociological changes in our culture (Garland, 1983). The move from traditional to companionship marriage, with its basis in intimacy, equity, and flexible interpersonal interactions, has changed the requirements for effective performance in marriage. As the institution of marriage changed, so have the skills necessary to function effectively within the marital relationship. Traditional marriages based upon functional and integrated work roles of the spouses have given way to expectations of companionship between partners (Diskin, 1986).

A very significant factor in the growth of marriage enrichment programs has been the alarming frequency with which marriages dissolve (Krug & Ahadi, 1986). The dramatically increased divorce rate in the United States since World War II has lead many religious institutions to initiate group efforts to enhance marriage relationships. At the same time, the helping professions were promoting the human potential movement, which included self-help and paraprofessional help (Hammonds & Worthington, 1985).

Another significant change which has helped to foster the marriage enrichment movement has been what Mace (1987) described as a change in marriage from a one-vote to a two-vote system. This offers a better relationship, but it is more difficult to manage, and consequently, there are many failures.

Dinkmeyer and Carlson (1986) offer the following assessment:

The need for marital enrichment is greater now than at any time in history. The need has been accelerated because of the move toward democratic relationships. Divorce statistics suggest that one out of two marriages will dissolve as a result of the marriage experience. This is not to mention the large numbers of marriages which continue even though unhappiness and lack of satisfaction abound. The challenge now appears to make resources widely visible and to help the couples become more motivated and to become involved in moving toward a bright, enriched and energized marriage (p. 139).

Definition of Marriage Enrichment

Marriage enrichment is a term which refers to a philosophy of marriage and its functions for persons and for societies, to an educational model of couple and group services offered by the helping professions, and to a number of specific programs for providing these services. The major focus is the improvement of married life (Garland, 1983). This improvement is described as enabling partners "to create self- and other-awareness of the growth potential of the marriage; to explore and express their thoughts and feelings with honesty and empathy; and to develop and use the skills needed to relate together effectively, solve their problems and resolve their conflicts" (Garland, 1983, p. 1). Zimpfer (1988) described marriage enrichment as a systematic effort to improve the functioning of marital couples through educational and preventive means.

Dinkmeyer and Carlson (1985) describe marriage enrichment as follows:

An enriched marriage can be contrasted with the marriage which experiences infrequent enthusiasm, energy, commitment, and mutual involvement. In an enriched marriage, each spouse has a feeling of personal worth and self-esteem. Each is willing to cooperate in the give and take of the relationship, to be willing at times to give without expecting to immediately receive. The system, then, is open, congruent, and cooperative (p. 446).

Marriage Enrichment as an Alternate Approach to Marital Improvement

To deal with difficulties in marital relationships, there are currently two solutions being offered: education as information-giving, which is often not acted upon, and therapy, which can come too late to be effective (Mace, 1987). Mace believes that both systems must be retained, but a third process, marriage enrichment, applies our new knowledge preventively. He further adds that this new approach promises to be more effective and is the "wave of the future."

Marriage enrichment as offered by the secular helping professions differs in some respects from marriage enrichment as it has developed in church settings. The church-related marriage enrichment movement is more a philosophy than a methodology for human services. Historically, the church has supported the family as an institution. Marriage enrichment as it comes from the church represents the concerned response of religious groups and their leaders to changes in modern family life. The helping professions offer marriage enrichment services that are designed to enhance people's ability to communicate within and derive satisfaction from their marriages

(Garland, 1983).

Objectives of Marriage Enrichment

The main objectives of a marriage enrichment program can include: awareness of each person's own needs and expectations, awareness of the partner's needs and expectations, improved communication, enhanced problem-solving and negotiating skills, and increased overall adjustment, optimism, satisfaction with the marriage (Zimpfer, 1988). Garland (1983) reported that marriage enrichment programs currently being provided to couples are a mixture of attitudinal and skills training experiences, designed to achieve particular goals. These include increasing spouses' satisfaction with their relationship, improving partners' communication with one another, and resolving particular conflictual issues or crises in the relationship (p. 17).

Target Population of Marriage Enrichment

Generally, marriage enrichment services are considered most appropriate for couples who are committed to their marriages and who are not in the midst of marital crisis. They are designed to "make good marriages better (Garland, 1983). The typical participants for whom marriage enrichment was originally intended were a married couple who had no real conflicts, who perceived their marriage as basically healthy, and who wanted to further enliven and make fuller their relationship (Zimpfer, 1988). The assumption is that if happily married couples could be provided with appropriate skills and growth experiences, not only would their immediate marital satisfaction be heightened, but they would be able to resolve future developmental crises without resorting to divorce. The target population became "couples who have what they perceive to be fairly well-functioning

marriages and who wish to make their marriages even more mutually satisfying" (Powell & Wampler, 1982).

Even though the working assumption of marriage enrichment programs is that participants have satisfying, well-functioning marriages and seek only to strengthen their present relationships and prevent possible disruption, some research would suggest that this assumption may not be entirely correct (Krug & Ahadi, 1986). When Powell and Wampler (1982) compared men and women participating together in marital enrichment with control subjects, consistent patterns of personality differences emerged. Enrichment participants were less adjusted, less caring, and more hostile than non-participant controls. From these results, the authors concluded that there are some important ways in which men and women who participate in marriage enrichment differ from the general population. They appear to be generally less well adjusted and more dysfunctional in their interpersonal relationships.

Mace (1987) has stated that our present programs aim to the right and to the left of the "bull's eye", and sooner or later we must focus on the center. The center is the first year of marriage; the time when the interaction pattern of the couple is shaped either for good or ill. Mace further stated that besides working extensively with newlyweds, group programs will be offered at follow-up points across the marital life span. Typical points would be: expecting the first child; children moving into adolescence; children leaving home; moving toward retirement; and the later years.

Although the typical participants for whom marriage enrichment was originally intended were a married couple who had no real

conflicts, there has been an expansion in recent years to include premarital and dating couples. In addition, services are offered to couples who are experiencing severe difficulty and dysfunction intrapersonally, interpersonally, or both (Zimpfer, 1988).

Programs

Since marriage enrichment programs provide skills and models for partners in their search for a new kind of relationship, different types of programs have evolved. yet, it is difficult to generalize about the current marital enrichment programs in existence. Some are highly structured, some change with the experience of the leader or composition of the couples' group. There are group sessions with couple interaction, and some designed so that the partners will only encounter each other. There are even leaderless group experiences intended to be guided by readings or cassette tapes made for this purpose (Diskin, 1986).

Marriage enrichment programs are typically conducted in groups. Thus they benefit from the assembly effect, which builds cohesiveness and fosters the realization among participants that they are not alone in their struggles (Zimpfer, 1988). In a study conducted by Worthington, Buston, and Hammonds (1989), two primary components were identified in marriage enrichment programs: information about marital life and discussion (with other couples or with a counselor). Results showed that information had little apparent effect on couples, but discussion in groups improved couples' marriage satisfaction and their sexual and intellectual intimacy throughout the study relative to couples not receiving group discussion. Improvement was thought to be due to the group discussion heightening couples' attention to

how they use their time as a couple.

Zimpfer (1986) hypothesized that in marriage enrichment a group of several couples derives special value from the sense of common purpose and cohesiveness provided by the assemblage of persons and their activities. Conversely, the group becomes the object of care by the participants, each giving attention to the needs of the group and assuming a sense of responsibility for the welfare of the whole. Bastian and Miller (1981) concluded that the group setting provides a temporary and safe learning environment, through which trust can grow and from which support can be drawn. In addition, couples have the opportunity to observe alternative models of relating and to give and to receive appropriate feedback.

Religious-based Programs

The church has been very active in the marriage enrichment movement, with Marriage Encounter being one of the earliest expressions (Gallagher, 1975; Bastian & Miller, 1981). An outgrowth of the Christian Family Movement, Marriage Encounter was brought to the United States in 1967 by fifty Spanish couples who conducted weekend "retreats" across the country with U. S. priests. Since the first weekend held in Spain in 1962 by Father Calvo, the movement has split into three divisions: Worldwide Marriage Encounter, National Marriage Encounter and Encuentro Conjugal (only in Spanish-speaking countries). The basic philosophy and content of the weekend of the three programs remain the same. The difference lies in the organization and emphasis on conjugal dialogue (focusing on and expressing of inner feelings to one's partner). Worldwide is more dogmatic, structured, and organized, placing much emphasis on daily

dialogue of participants in follow-up. National is more liberal and ecumenical, placing less emphasis on daily dialogue (Becnel & Levy, 1983).

Silverman and Urbaniak (1983) gave the following brief description of a Marriage Encounter weekend:

Marriage Encounter (ME) is a brief, highly structured couples-centered program designed to help participating couples learn techniques of communication and to experience each other as fully as possible during the process. There is an emphasis on the opportunity for participants to be together as a couple, away from normal routines, commitments, and pressures, in an atmosphere of seclusion and leisure. There is no sharing of marital experiences between couples or in the total group, except by the leadership couple. This couple working with a trained religious leader, makes several presentations to the entire group. Afterward the couples, in the privacy of their own rooms, write down their personal reflections on a variety of personal, interpersonal, and spiritual issues. Following the writing, each partner reads what the other has written, and each encourages the other to verbally develop and further describe the written feelings in an attempt to experience each other more fully at an affective level. The specific dialogue process is practiced repeatedly throughout the weekend (p. 42)

To determine characteristics of Marriage Encounter (ME) participants, Silverman and Urbaniak (1983) presented certain descriptive data. It was concluded on the basis of the self-reported

information gathered that the assertion of ME that the program is for couples with a fairly well-functioning relationship who wish enhancement held true for this sample. The great majority of the couples in this sample do view their marriages as above average to excellent on the selected variables, and do perceive themselves as being involved in ME to enrich an already stable relationship.

Participants from two encounter weekends were allowed by World-wide Marriage Encounter (WME) to be examined for proposed effects. Also, another group of future WME participants was examined as a control. The results of the analysis of the data indicated that, except for focusing ability, the WME experimental group did not significantly change compared to the no treatment control group on the variables of sex-role identity, self-disclosure, and marital need satisfaction. However, there was a significant difference in "finding meaning in life", indicating that WME program partners may experience existential shifts toward purposeful living (Becnel & Levy, 1983). Becnel and Levy concluded that it follows that the ability to focus on feelings could allow one to examine one's life in terms of meaning.

Doherty and Walker (1982) conducted an exploratory study to investigate the relation between participation in Marriage Encounter and subsequent marital or family distress. They reported that there was a segment of participants who emerge from their Marriage Encounter weekend, either immediately or later, damaged and in need of assistance. They concluded that the most troublesome feature of the Marriage Encounter weekend is its intensity. The program is designed to create rapid change in a marriage by inducing open communication

on sensitive marital issues and by dramatically altering a couple's expectations for marriage. Even though therapy itself is also powerful medicine a difference, however, is that therapists are trained to assess couples before intervening, to diagnose trouble when it occurs in therapy, and to respond by trying to prevent further deterioration. Marriage Encounter, on the other hand, provides no systematic way to detect or deal with marital distress before, during, or after the weekend, other than telling couples they are free to talk to the clergyperson during the weekend (Doherty, Lester, & Leigh, 1986).

A study by Doherty, Lester, and Leigh (1986) examined interview and essay data for 50 married couples who had the most positive or most negative reactions in a larger sample of participants in Marriage Encounter weekends. According to their findings, about 1 in 8 couples (12.3%) were strongly affected by Marriage Encounter, with about half of this number harmed and half helped. The majority of those strongly affected either way were distressed prior to the weekend. Beyond that, the rest of the couples experienced moderately beneficial weekends or no effect at all.

In an earlier study, Lester and Doherty (1983) conducted a retrospective survey to determine how couples felt about their Marriage Encounter experience and average of four years later. Results showed that 80% of the couples reported a totally positive experience. The most frequently cited positive aspect of the program was the "dialogue" or communication technique designed to encourage the expression of feelings. The most frequently cited negative effect was that needs were identified on the weekend but not subsequently

fulfilled, resulting in greater frustration for the respondent. However, it was concluded that Marriage Encounter is viewed as a helpful experience by most couples, but that a significant minority of couples may experience negative consequence of the program.

Being communication scholars, Witteman and Fitzpatrick (1986) were interested in evaluating Marriage Encounter because it advertised itself as a communication intervention program. They found that the program devotes no time to the teaching and modeling of specific communication and problem-solving skills. While team leaders talk about their marriages, they are not disclosing about specific communication interactions that have taken place in their relationship, and they do not model effective marital communication.

Zimpfer (1986) reported that focus on personal awareness, individual growth and development, and interpersonal relationships while adopting a religious-spiritual attitude are becoming more common. Kvernen (1983) developed an 8-hour seminar on growth that was based on Bible concepts and relevant psychological concepts to encourage personal growth. Participants, who were volunteers from the Christian congregation, were compared with a no-treatment control group from a church Sunday school class. Significant results favoring the seminar participants were found on 7 of 11 rating scales including a Self-Esteem Scale, Purpose in Life Scale, and several other scales developed for the study.

Strozier (1981) evaluated the effects of the basic model of the National Marriage Enrichment System of the Southern Baptist Convention with couples who professed this faith. The results were inconclusive, although at least one finding (change on the Relationship Change scale)

favored the treatment over a nontreatment waiting group.

Another study of marriage enrichment among Southern Baptist couples was conducted by Strickland (1982). In this treatment a retreat setting was used and the content was based on principles of the Bible and Southern Baptist values regarding the quality and stability of marriage. Strickland compared a social-exchange marriage enrichment strategy with the basic Southern Baptist model. Retreat participants were found to differ significantly from controls at the post-test and 6-week follow-points with the social exchange model effecting the greatest improvement.

Major Secular Programs

Hammonds and Worthington (1985) reported that the best known programs in marriage enrichment were the Couples Communication Program (Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1979); the Association of Couples for Marriage Enrichment (ACME) program (Mace & Mace, 1975); the Conjugal Relationship Enhancement (Guerney, 1977); the Pairing Enrichment Program (Travis & Travis, 1975); and the Structured Marital Enrichment Program (L'Abate, 1977).

A more recent major program in marriage enrichment is Training in Marriage Enrichment (TIME) (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1984). Dinkmeyer and Carlson (1986) describe TIME as an educational program designed to help married couples learn the skills they need to build a loving, supportive relationship. In TIME groups, couples develop skills that enable them to enrich their marriage and to deal with particular challenges that they experience. Couples define the marriage they want and develop and retain the skills to maintain that relationship. Participation in a TIME group does not imply that a couple has an

ineffective marriage or marriage problems. Rather, a couple's participation is an indication that they want to grow and want to strengthen their relationship.

Other Secular Programs

Hammonds and Worthington (1985) conducted a research study in which participants volunteered for either an ACE-type marital enrichment discussion group or an assessment-only control group. Initially, couples in this brief marriage enrichment group were more dissatisfied with their marriages and reported poorer communication than those in the assessment only condition. However, the enrichment group raised their level of marital satisfaction to equal that of the control group at post-treatment and at follow-up. The treatment resulted in continued increases in verbal communication, finally resulting in a higher mean for the treatment group at follow-up than that of the control group. Though statistical regression to the mean and "placebo" effects are possible reasons contributing to the improvement, the group apparently had a beneficent effect.

Ford, Bashford, and DeWitt (1984) examined three approaches to marital enrichment to determine if predictors of client gains could be identified empirically. Direct training of spousal communication skills, observation of videotaped simulations of direct training, and bibliotherapy with telephone contacts were the three approaches, and a wait-list control group was also evaluated. Prediction of outcome was more robust for these three trained groups than for the wait-list group. Changes in clients' communication behaviors were not well predicted, leading to the conclusion that attitudinal changes in marital enrichment programs may be facilitated by optimal matching of

different client with the appropriate type of intervention, but that behavior changes are more a function of systematic skills training for all clients.

Floyd and Floyd (1987) described a Cognitive-Emotional-Behavioural Marriage Enrichment Retreat, which was an attempt to enhance the quality of an already good marriage by assisting spouses to develop both improved intrapersonal and interpersonal skills of communication. Participants were involved in both didactic and experiential activities which teaches the individual to dispute beliefs or self-talk which causes strong adverse emotions. Also, Cognitive-Emotional-Behaviour therapy teaches that humans tend to exaggerate and generalize in ways which are destructive to one's emotional well-being. It was concluded that the primary difference between this enrichment weekend and other approaches resulted from the introduction of a rather structured framework which was applied within an educational model.

In an effort to reconcile theory and research, Gingras, Adam, and Chagnon (1983) structured a marital enrichment program which was developed from Sager's theoretical model (Sager, 1976) from which concepts could easily be translated into therapeutic objectives. An outcome study revealed that this program was effective in improving marital adjustment, communication, and certain problem-solving skills. The results showed that a positive awareness of one's expectations and of the marital relationship seemed to be particularly important to couple functioning. The role of communication skills and of negotiation training were not as clear. One trend that emerged was that negotiation skills seemed more useful for seriously dysfunctional

couples. Improvements were maintained for a one-year follow-up.

Cleaver (1985) investigated the effectiveness of teaching communication skills to married couples by means of a structured videotape. Two groups of married couples were taught the relevant communication skills. The experimental group was taught the skills using the videotape. Pre-, post-, and follow-up measures were taken. A significant improvement for both groups in the use of the skills taught was found. Even though both methods appeared to be effective, the follow-up measures indicated that the effect of the videotape was more lasting over a period of 2 months. One advantage of such findings is that a less qualified person could serve as a facilitator with the use of the video.

The Creative Marriage Enrichment Program (Bastian & Miller, 1981) shares three theoretical roots that are common to many marriage enrichment programs. First, there is an empathic environment in which participants can freely express their feelings and experience increased self-acceptance. Secondly, there is the behavioral emphasis on enabling participants to learn and practice specific skills they can use to change their own behavior. Thirdly, there is an emphasis on the use of group process to provide an environment in which various curative and growth factors can be experienced.

L'Abate and Sloan (1984) hypothesized that to sustain an intimate committed marriage, two differentiated individuals with well developed identities need to cultivate the skills of communicating, accommodating and negotiating within the partner dyad. They designed a structured enrichment workshop to facilitate marital intimacy.

Moxley, Eggeman, and Schumm (1987) evaluated the "Recovery of

Hope" program, which was founded in 1981 when it became apparent that between 15 and 25 percent of couples attending marriage enrichment events could benefit more from marital therapy than from marital enrichment. They concluded that Recovery of Hope probably works most effectively at linking couples up with a professional counselor. The program helps to overcome resistance to "therapy" by allowing couples to enter via a more optimistic sounding "program", which provides some motivation during the initial session for subsequent counseling.

While a substantial association between marital communication and marital satisfaction has been demonstrated in much previous research, Barnes, Schumm, Jurich, and Bollman (1984) suggested that previous research has overlooked the possibility that positive regard might be able to explain much of that association. In a study of two samples from Kansas of predominantly white, middle-class couples, they compared the effects of partiallying regard from the marital communication/marital satisfaction relationship with the effects of partiallying communication variables from the regard/marital satisfaction relationship. Their results indicated that marital communication variables of empathy and congruence do not explain variations in marital satisfaction as effectively as does positive regard. They suggested that this finding could have important implications on how marital communication training programs are designed and implemented, since most programs are based on a rather simplistic theoretical model of the relationship between marital communication and marital satisfaction.

As the marriage and family enrichment movement has matured, issues concerning the selection, training, and certification of

leaders have become more important. Dyer and Dyer (1986) reviewed four approaches to training and certification for enrichment programs. In their review, they presented in detail the training and certification model used by the Association of Couples for Marriage Enrichment (Mace & Mace, 1975), and in less detail the models used by Couples Communication Program (Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1979), Understanding Us (Carnes, 1981), Family Clusters (Sawin, 1979), and Relationship Enhancement (Guerney, 1982).

Criticisms of Marriage Enrichment Research

Hammonds and Worthington (1985) stated that marriage enrichment research has been criticized on several methodological grounds, including the failure to include control groups, over reliance on participant self-report or trainer assessment, and lack of follow-up assessments. In short, little is known about what actually happens in any particular marriage enrichment group and about what factors are responsible for beneficial effects of the group.

Worthington, Buston, and Hammonds (1989) reported that marriage enrichment programs have been shown to be effective for many couples, but no research has investigated components of marriage enrichment. Further, there is little explicit theorizing about what effective marriage enrichment is and how it might be measured. Each approach measures what it teaches, with most measures being global self-report of happiness, marital adjustment, or consumer satisfaction. They propose that a multidimensional approach to assessment is needed in investigating marriage enrichment programs. Marital adjustment or satisfaction should not only be addressed, but also an investigation of intimacy, communication and conflict resolution. In addition,

both self-report and behavioral measures should be used.

General Outcomes of Marriage Enrichment

Comprehensive reviews of various marital enrichment programs conclude that outcomes are generally positive, especially for joint and for structured approaches. Enrichment programs dealing specifically with communication have been most convincingly demonstrated to be effective (Gingras, Adam, & Chagnon, 1983). In a thorough and exhaustive study of the enrichment field by Giblin (1984), it was indicated that the average person who participates in enrichment is better off following intervention than 67% of those who do not. Giblin discovered that couples involved in various approaches to marital enrichment reported a positive impact upon relationship quality. This appeared to be true with non-distressed as well as distressed couples.

Conclusions

Zimpfer (1988) has done the latest comprehensive review of marriage enrichment research which he considered simply an extension of the review done by Bastian and Miller (1981). As with Bastian and Miller, Zimpfer categorized three general types of enrichment programs: those that offer a variety of contents and experiences, those whose focus is primarily on communication training, and those based mainly on behavioral exchange principles. An extension of Bastian and Miller's (1981) review of outcome studies on marriage enrichment can be summarized as follows:

1. Practitioners and researchers can continue to be optimistic about the effectiveness of relationship enrichment.
2. The Relationship Enhancement Program was the most commonly

investigated and with generally positive results, especially on the outcome of marital adjustment.

3. The outcomes of the Couples Communication Program are positive in the relationship skills (communication) realm over the short term, but are less clear over a follow-up period.

4. There are a greater number of follow-ups among the reported studies.

5. There is a greater use of placebo controls.

6. There are fewer studies using independent ratings, relying instead on self-reports.

7. There is a trend to expand marriage enrichment to relationship enrichment in general.

Summary

Marriage enrichment can be described as a systematized effort to improve the functioning of marital couples through educational and preventive means. It emanated from the belief that prevention is more effective and less costly than the cure of problems after they have emerged.

Numerous programs for marriage enrichment have been developed both by the religious and secular segments of the population. These programs include Marriage Encounter (Gallagher, 1975), the Relationship Enhancement Program (Guerney, 1977), and the Couples Communication Program (Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1979). Bastian and Miller (1981) reported knowledge of at least 50 different programs, each ranging in audience exposure from as few as 10 couples to more than 420,000.

Marriage enrichment programs are typically conducted in groups,

thus benefitting from the assembly effect, which builds cohesiveness and fosters the realization among participants that they are not alone in their struggles. In addition, participants may benefit from the effects of modeling.

The target group for which marriage enrichment was originally designed was married couples who had no real conflicts and perceived their marriage as basically healthy. This notion has been challenged, suggesting that participants were somewhere between those whose marriages were totally satisfying and those who were dysfunctional enough to seek for therapy. In addition, there is increased emphasis on newly-weds and even dating couples.

The results of marriage enrichment are mixed, depending on who is doing the reporting. However, Zimpfer (1988) reported that an extension of Bastian and Miller's (1981) research review supports their optimism about the use of marriage enrichment. From a research point of view, there are several methodological weaknesses. Yet, in the words of Mace (1987), marriage enrichment appears to be the "wave of the future."