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# Marriage Preparation Education Programs: An Evaluation of Essential Elements of Quality

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MARRIAGE PREPARATION EDUCATION PROGRAMS: AN EVALUATION OF  
ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF QUALITY

by

Geniel Childs

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

School of Family Life

Brigham Young University

August 2009

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Geniel Rowley Childs in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### Marriage Preparation Education Programs: An Evaluation of Essential Elements of Quality

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Department of Marriage, Family, and Human Development

Master of Science

The efficacy of marriage preparation education (MPE) continues to be demonstrated through participant outcome research. However, understanding the elements that make MPE effective is still unclear and standards for quality have not been established. In an effort to address these deficits and promote improvement in the field of MPE, currently available and widely recognized marriage preparation education programs were examined according an evaluative model created by Hughes (1994). The four components of the Hughes model (content, instructional process, implementation process, and evaluation) outline research-supported elements that are essential in the development of quality family life educational programs. Eight MPE programs that had undergone previous outcome research and been included in meta-analytic studies or reviews were selected for evaluation in the current study. An evaluation team of three researchers rated the components and elements of each program. Evaluators also included

qualitative comments associated with the utilization of the programs. Quantitative rating scores were summed for all members of the evaluation team. Results in this study showed that programs varied between the measured components in the extent to which they adhere to research-supported factors that are essential for a quality educational experience, and that none of the selected programs scored consistently high, or low, on the all of the program elements measured . Quantitative and qualitative results illuminated strengths and weaknesses within individual programs, as well as deficits common among current MPE programs. Recommendations are offered for improving MPE programs and professionalism in the field of marriage preparation education.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I have been fortunate in having a large cheerleading squad of family and friends who have encouraged me through this academic experience. I absolutely could not have achieved this educational goal without the confidence and help of my wonderful children and, principally, my beloved husband, friend, and eternal companion, who sees in me much more than I see in myself. He continues to be the facilitator of all my dreams. Overarching this experience has been quiet, divine comfort and direction, repeatedly reminding me that with God only, are all things possible.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Among the current efforts to address the high rate of marital distress and divorce, marriage preparation education (MPE) has emerged as one of the more hopeful and promising approaches. As evidence of the effectiveness of marriage preparation education continues to increase (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008; Silliman & Schumm, 2000), so does support for making the benefits of this education more widely available (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004; Halford, 2004; Stanley, 2001). However, development of marriage preparation resources has far outpaced the empirical evaluation of individual programs. Only a small percentage of the plethora of marriage preparation resources currently available has been empirically tested for effectiveness (Larson, 2004). The testing that has been done focuses on effectiveness as determined by participant outcomes.

As important as it is to establish that a resource is effective in producing measurable change in participants, it is equally necessary to consider the individual components of a resource that make it effective (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004; Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Once effective components are identified, it is then possible to consider how these elements can be enhanced to make positive outcomes even more likely. Identifying effective components provides a clearer standard and criteria for marriage preparation educational resources and aids in the development of future quality resources (Hughes, 1994).

Although empirical evaluation of marriage preparation resources is limited, even less attention has been given to the methodology of marriage preparation education. The empirical evaluation called for in marriage preparation education literature has come to

mean outcome testing only and not in-depth evaluation of resources themselves. “Until most programs are subjected to greater scrutiny, their effectiveness remains uncertain” (Larson, 2004, p. 423). Just as careful attention to the methods involved in an empirical study is necessary to quality research, greater attention to methods in the practice of marriage preparation education can improve the quality of marriage preparation resources; quality resources that lead to improved appeal, wider audience participation, and better outcomes for participants.

It has been argued that the current need for marriage preparation education cannot wait for the involved and lengthy process of empirically evaluating the outcome of resources (Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008; Stanley, 2001). More in-depth evaluation may appear to prolong the process of obtaining the information needed to determine the quality and beneficial components of a resource. However, a framework for evaluation has been designed that provides an efficient means of evaluating MPE resources.

In an effort to promote the development of quality educational programs addressing various aspects of family life, Hughes (1994) created the Framework for Developing Family Life Educational Programs. Hughes developed this framework as a tool to guide new resource development, but also to assess existing educational resources and to suggest criteria and standards of resource quality. The Hughes framework evaluates the educational resource components of content, instructional design, implementation design, and the resource evaluation process. According to a review of available literature, no systematic evaluation of marriage preparation resources has been done according to the quality standards presented in the Hughes framework.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate currently available marriage preparation educational program curricula against the standards and criteria suggested by the Hughes framework. Sensitivity to these standards of quality will arguably improve the outcomes for participants as well as the professionalism of the field of marriage education.

## Chapter 2. Review of the Literature

This literature review covers the following areas pertinent to this study of marriage preparation educational resources: A current definition and theoretical foundation of MPE; empirical evidence of the effectiveness of marriage education; recent evaluation and testing of resources; the growing support for educational initiatives; the components of the evaluative model; and the goals and contribution of the current study.

### *Defining Marriage Preparation Education*

To begin with, it is important to understand what marriage preparation education means today. With its roots in the counsel offered by religious marriage celebrants, MPE has evolved over the years into diverse resources led by mental health professionals, educators, and trained lay couples. Marriage preparation has been presented in various forms such as a series of therapy sessions, structured classes, and community support groups (Halford, 2004; Doherty & Anderson, 2004). While couple therapists may provide MPE, it is distinct from couple therapy in that it does not provide the intensive work on specific personal problems offered in a one-to-one setting between participants and a therapist. (Hawkins et al., 2008). The focus of MPE is also distinct from more general marriage education that addresses problems or issues common later in marriage. Scholars have recommended that MPE should address many of these same issues, but that it also should attend to the unique interests and concerns of premarital couples such as maturity and readiness for marriage, and marital adjustment issues (Silliman & Schumm, 1999). Several terms are used interchangeably in the literature discussing marriage

preparation interventions: premarital therapy, premarital counseling, premarital educative counseling, and marriage preparation (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

For the purpose of this study, MPE is defined as a means to offer couples knowledge and skills-training to help them sustain and improve relationships once they are married. An MPE resource commonly addresses problems that may occur after marriage and offers training that may help to prevent or ameliorate potential problems (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Halford, 2004).

The theoretical framework of MPE is founded in the emerging discipline of prevention science. The field of prevention science draws from developmental research and intervention-based clinical research and “focuses on risk and protective factors by increasing understanding of these factors and developing and evaluating intervention strategies to address them” (Carroll & Doherty, 2003, p. 106). Fundamental in prevention science is to provide a knowledge base that will prevent personal or interpersonal disorders (Coie et al., 1993). In line with the concepts of prevention science, marriage preparation education is “working upstream,” or working with couples before problems develop or become serious and entrenched (Larson, 2004).

MPE resources are available in a vast variety of formats: pamphlets, self-help books, internet programs, university courses, community and faith-based workshops, weekend retreats, and luxury cruises to name just a few. An MPE program is a well recognized resource format. MPE programs are commonly understood to be educational curricula that have been developed by a commercial, educational, or religious entity for widespread use and distribution. An MPE program generally includes an instructor guide



and materials (e.g., DVDs, workbooks) needed for presenting the curriculum as well as materials to aid participants in learning what is taught.

### *Evidence of Effectiveness*

Evidence is growing for the benefits of marriage preparation education in strengthening marriages and decreasing the chances of distress and divorce. Some of the studies reported in this literature review have considered both marriage preparation education and education for couples in longer marriage relationships. Although the current study focuses on marriage preparation, the evidence for effectiveness of both types of resources contributes to an understanding of the value of MPE and the importance of standards of quality in educational offerings.

In the year 2000, Silliman and Schumm conducted a review of MPE programs and found that of the programs that had been empirically tested, each showed evidence of short-term and long-term improvements for couples in the areas of marital satisfaction, interactive competence, and marital stability. However, they also found that the majority of marriage preparation programs at that time had not been adequately tested. Since their observation, researchers have continued to call for more empirical testing of marriage and marriage preparation programs (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Larson, 2004; Stanley, 2001).

An extensive evaluation of marriage preparation educational programs was conducted in 2003 by Carroll and Doherty. This was a meta-analytic review of research studies on the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs. Thirteen experimental studies and two “quasi-experimental” studies were examined as well as ten non-experimental programs. Careful attention in this meta-analysis was given to the

inclusiveness of the populations reached by marriage preparation programs, the characteristics of the programs, the methodological approaches of studies evaluating the programs, and the effectiveness outcomes of these investigations. The meta-analyses were done using the effect-size method to evaluate the collective findings of outcome studies on these programs. Effect size is the rate of change that can be attributed to the treatment in a study. Effect sizes vary in magnitude between -1 and 1. A general guide for interpreting effect size statistics is as follows: less than .1 is a trivial effect, .1 to .3 is a small effect, .3 to .5 is a moderate effect, .5 and greater is a large difference effect (Cohen, 1988). Seven of the thirteen experimental studies reviewed reported sufficient data to be included in the meta-analyses. Effect sizes were averaged, resulting in a mean effect size of .80, showing that the average person who participated in a premarital prevention program was better off after the program than 79% of the people who did not receive a similar educational experience. Effectiveness outcomes for both experimental and non-experimental research showed that premarital prevention programs are generally effective in producing significant immediate gains in communication processes, conflict management skills, and overall relationship quality. These gains appear to hold for at least six months to three years.

Halford et al., (2003) conducted a review of twelve controlled-trial studies on relationship education programs that targeted couples who were engaged, dating, recently married, or in committed relationships. Each of the studies had follow-up assessments of at least six months. Their review reaffirmed the general effectiveness of marital education programs.

Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, and Miller (2004) recognized the need to evaluate the effectiveness of individual programs. This research group conducted a comprehensive search to identify all available marital education and enrichment programs, including those directed at marriage preparation education. Only those programs that had been empirically evaluated for effectiveness, with published results, were included in their review. The search identified only thirteen programs that met the criteria. These programs were then placed in one of three categories: efficacious, possibly efficacious, and empirically untested. Programs met the requirements for being designated efficacious if they had been supported by two or more published outcome studies by separate research teams and included control or comparison groups and random assignment. For the designation of possibly efficacious, programs had only one published outcome study, or had more than one study done by the same researchers. Programs were considered empirically untested even if some outcome research had been done, but no published controlled randomized studies had been done to support them. In this review, four of the programs were designated as efficacious: PREP, Relationship Enhancement, Couple Communication Program, and Strategic Hope-Focused Enrichment. Three programs were designated possibly efficacious: Couple CARE, ACME, and Couple Coping Enhancement Training. The five following programs were designated as empirically untested: Structured Enrichment, Marriage Encounter, PAIRS, Imago, Traits of a Happy Couple, SYMBIS.

Most recently, Hawkins et al. (2008) conducted an exhaustive meta-analytic review of marriage and relationship education studies. This review evaluated 117 studies producing over 500 effect sizes. Both published and unpublished studies were included in

this review, and the design of the studies ranged in rigor from full experimental to a simpler pre to post-test design. Two common outcomes were examined in this review: relationship quality and communication skills. Overall effect sizes for relationship quality were moderate and ranged from .30 to .36. For outcomes in communication skills, effect sizes ranged from .43 to .45. Effect sizes for experimental studies were larger as compared to quasi-experimental studies, and moderate-dosage programs produced larger effect sizes than low-dosage programs. Dosage was measured by the number of hours participants spent in the program. Dosage levels were considered low for programs of one to eight hours, moderate-dosage for programs of nine to twenty hours, and high-dosage for programs 21 hours and above. The authors conclude that over all, marriage and relationship education produces modest but reliable effects.

Other efficacy studies have been conducted to evaluate specific features of educational programs, the method of program delivery, or how program structure and individual characteristics influence the effectiveness of the program. For example, in 2001, Stanley et al. conducted an empirical study to compare the effectiveness of the delivery of a marriage preparation program by university staff members and lay clergy leaders. Principal findings in this study showed that lay clergy leaders were just as effective in delivering the program as the university staff.

A study conducted by McGeorge and Carlson (2006) found the Marriage Assessment and Preparation program (MAP) to be effective in improving participants' knowledge concerning marital relationships and healthy interactions. This study also compared marriage preparation education delivered to couples conjointly versus a group setting and found evidence, contrary to prevailing ideas, that outcomes for couples in

group delivery were slightly better, although not significantly, than couples in a conjoint delivery program. Gender differences were also considered in this study and showed that premarital education was equally effective for males and females.

Busby, Ivey, Harris, and Ates (2007) recently compared three models of premarital education: A self-directed program, a therapist-directed program, and an assessment-based relationship enhancement program. All deliveries showed effectiveness; however, significant difference was shown in the effectiveness of the three approaches at the six-month follow-up. This study reported the assessment-based program to have greater influence than the therapist-directed or self-directed programs in problem areas of the relationship, and greater influence than the therapist-directed approach in improving areas of communication and relationship satisfaction. It also illustrated the value of conducting relationship assessments to determine the best plan to meet the specific needs of each couple.

An evaluation done by Halford, Moore, Wilson, Farrugia, and Dyer (2004) showed the effectiveness of a self-directed program in increasing satisfaction and relationship stability. An important objective of this study was to assess the viability of using an intervention that has a flexible format. The authors concluded that this flexible format may increase participation in relationship education. The convenience and privacy inherent in this format may enhance the availability of marriage preparation education, especially for those who may be resistant to a face-to-face educational format.

Researchers have increasingly responded to the call for more empirical evaluation of marriage preparation education; however, there are many aspects yet to be evaluated. In the meta-analysis conducted by Carroll and Doherty (2003), they found no

experimental studies that directly compared different models or programs of marriage preparation education. Because there have been no studies which have used the same dependent measures to evaluate effectiveness, accurate comparisons cannot be made to determine relative effectiveness between programs. Nevertheless, evidence for the overall effectiveness of education to prevent or ameliorate future marital problems continues to mount.

### *Growing Support for Marriage Education*

Inspired by research that has shown the effectiveness of MPE, diverse groups have encouraged the use and development of marriage preparation resources. MPE has been increasingly supported by professional, government, and religious leaders as a way to build healthy marriages (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004) and promote the beneficial effects of marriage for both adults and children (Amato & Booth, 1997; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Several marriage education initiatives have been started through grassroots efforts in response to growing concerns about changing societal attitudes toward marriage.

Government efforts to preserve and promote marriage continue to grow. Hawkins et al., (2008) point out that marriage and relationship education has moved beyond traditional realms of private professional or lay practitioners and is used as a tool in public policy. Reports from 2004 showed that more than 40 states had launched programs to support marriage and couple relationships (Dion, 2005). Government initiatives have been developed on local, state, and federal levels and cover a wide range of issues involved in strengthening marriages, including marriage preparation education. In the past few years, the role of the federal government in the movement to promote marriage

education has principally been in providing funding through grants and tax incentives (Dion, 2005). Increased funding has been available to professional, government, and community entities interested in promoting marriage education as a preventive measure in the battle against marital distress and divorce.

The details of the growth of the marriage education movement are beyond the scope of this study. Unfortunately, the field is still relatively new and historical records have not been kept of the comparative numbers of available programs. One indication of the increasing efforts associated with marriage preparation resources is the number of participants and presenters at the annual Smart Marriages conference sponsored by the Coalition for Families and Couple Education (CMFCE). There were approximately 400 in attendance in the first conference held in 1997. Over 2500 people attended the most recent conference (2008) and there were over 200 presenters and 100 exhibits on display (D. Sollee, personal correspondence, Aug. 4, 2008). Suffice it to say that in the past ten years, the variety of groups supporting marriage education, as well as the variety of means for presenting educational materials, has increased exponentially (Doherty & Anderson, 2004).

Evaluation of marriage preparation resources has not kept pace with the swift and extensive growth of the marriage education movement. Ideally, each resource would be peer-reviewed with published results of the evaluation of the resource. Because the time required for thorough empirical review is extensive, it is even more imperative that lay and professional educational leaders make use of a variety of empirical advancements and guidelines in their efforts to develop and offer the quality educational resources needed to help marriages now (Stanley, 2001).

### *Concerns of Relying on Effectiveness Based Solely on Outcome Studies*

The focus of evaluation conducted in MPE has been principally on participant outcomes. Although outcome studies are valuable, several issues should lead us to question the sufficiency of relying on outcome studies in order to fully determine the quality of a marriage preparation resource. For example, the amount of rigor in the research design of an outcome study impacts evaluation results. This includes features such as random selection of participants and using control group methods in a study. Meta analytic studies have found substantial differences in effect sizes based on differing research study design methods (Hawkins et al., 2008).

Effectiveness studies have generally been conducted with participants who have self-selected into a study (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Halford et al., 2008). This raises questions of generalizability to those who do not extend themselves or who choose not to be involved with a research study (Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997). For the most part, couples who do participate in MPE begin the resource before relationship problems begin or are evident. Participants report high relationship satisfaction and have little room to improve this rate following the resource (Busby et al., 2007; Halford et al., 2008). Because of this ceiling effect, small effect sizes may be deceptive of the amount of improvement participants have made through a resource. Evidence of effectiveness may not be apparent until later in relationships when participants show resiliency during times of relationship stress or transition (Halford et al., 2003; Silliman & Schumm, 2000).

Other means of evaluating MPE resources may broaden our understanding of the effectiveness of resources as well as help us know what makes a program effective.



### *Advancing Quality in MPE Resources*

Certainly the goal of MPE is to achieve positive effects in participants. However, in order to understand what makes an MPE resource effective in terms of participant outcomes, it is essential to identify those components responsible for a resource's effectiveness (Adler-Baeder et al., 2004; Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Through systematic resource evaluation, the components that are responsible for a resource's effectiveness can be identified. Evaluating the resource, rather than the participant, is essential in this process. Once effective components are identified and then included in MPE resources, resource quality is improved and participant outcomes can logically be enhanced. Identifying effective components also provides a clearer standard and criteria for the development of future quality resources (Hughes, 1994).

Evaluation directed to identifying effective components can give a more in-depth view of a resource and help to address other concerns expressed by researchers about the limitations of previous types of evaluation. Many researchers have expressed concern over the lack of diversity among the participants included in previous MPE effectiveness studies. The majority of outcome studies have principally involved white, middle class participants. It would be inappropriate to assume that effect statistics should be generalized to a more diverse population (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Halford et al., 2008; Hawkins et al., 2008; McGeorge & Carlson, 2006). A deeper examination of resource components can reveal issues and approaches that may be culturally sensitive.

An important benefit of a deeper examination of the components of an educational resource is to facilitate adaptation for individual participant needs. The need for more customized educational resources has been expressed by several researchers

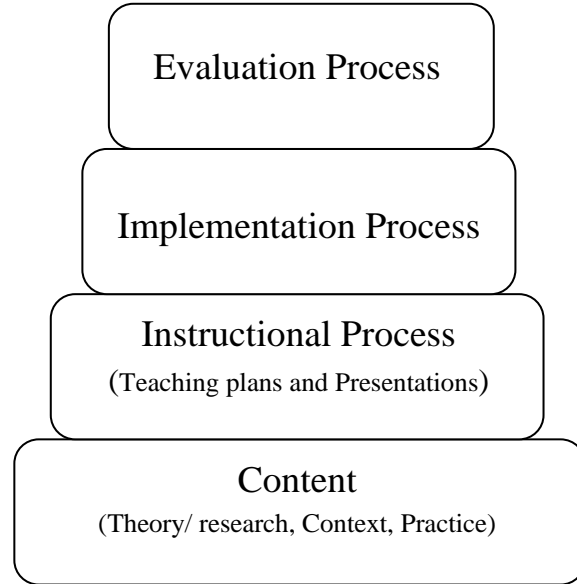
(Busby et al., 2007; Halford et al., 2007; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004; Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Silliman and Schumm (1999) emphasized that customizing an educational experience is necessary to meet the different needs of premarital and marital audiences, as well as the unique needs of individual couples. Logically, you cannot offer customized education without knowing the deeper details of a resource. The impetus of providing quality marriage preparation resources is not to find the one perfect resource with the largest effect sizes, but to provide the resource that best meets the needs of the individual participant (Kerpelman, Pittman, & Adler-Baeder, 2008).

#### *A Framework for Evaluating Marriage Preparation Educational Resources*

Tools are available to conduct the type of systematic evaluation of educational resources that gives a broader picture of the quality of a resource than is available from reports of participant effect change statistics alone (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

Such a tool is the Framework for Developing Family Life Educational Programs (Hughes, 1994), mentioned earlier. According to Hughes, program developer attention to each of four components: content, instructional process, implementation process, and evaluation process (see Figure 1) is essential for a resource to meet high standards of quality (Hughes, 1994; Hughes & Schroeder, 1997). Hughes stresses the importance of the interactive nature of these components to produce an effective learning experience. “The translation of content results in instructional and implementation processes that are essential to the teaching of the content” (Hughes, 1994, p. 74).

Figure 1. *Hughes (1994) Framework for Developing Family Life Education Programs*



Several other researchers have made recommendations for MPE with the intent to improve the effectiveness of educational resources (Adler-Baeder et al., 2004; Halford et al., 2003; Halford, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2004). The comprehensive nature of the Hughes framework encompasses those factors that have been presented as “best practices” in marriage preparation education. Applicable recommendations will be addressed through the discussion of the components of the Hughes framework. Each component is explained below as well as how it will be applied in the current study.

### *Content*

Fundamental in the Hughes framework is that all resources are developed based on research supported content (Hughes, 1994; Hughes & Schroeder, 1997). The content of a resource consists of the theory, research, context, and practice aspects of the resource. The theory behind the program should be explicit and clearly articulated, and the research

well supported. Consideration should be given to the specific context of the family life issues addressed and how these issues may be influenced by immediate settings as well as by a larger social system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The current practices of other successful educational resources should be reflected, and references to these programs clearly presented.

Other researchers have recommended similar important factors relating to the content of educational resources. Adler-Baeder et al. (2004) conducted an extensive review of literature to extract research-supported topics associated with marital quality. These researchers asserted that program content must be consistent with empirical information and with best practices recommendations, and should cover the following areas of program content: Positivity or protective factors, Negativity or risk factors, and Cognitions or further protective factors. Halford et al. (2003) reviewed twelve outcome studies of marriage education programs and concluded that there is strong evidence to support that a skills-based focus in the content of relationship education is effective in helping couples acquire and maintain relationship skills. Hawkins et al. (2004) offered a comprehensive framework designed to encourage educators to consider the multiple dimensions of providing marriage education. These authors also acknowledge that a research-based content is an essential part of effective education. They suggest that marriage education content should include relationship skills-training; content that fosters awareness of potential relationship problems, as well as knowledge and attitudes that support healthy marriages; and content that promotes motivations and virtues that are associated with sustaining positive marital outcomes. Halford et al. also encouraged developers to match the content of a marriage education resource to couples with special

needs. This concept is in line with Hughes' emphasis on considering content in light of the context of family life issues and how these may be influenced by other social systems.

Past research has established that empirically supported content is essential to effective MPE, however; the degree to which quality research is used in the content of marriage preparation resources has not been the subject of systematic research.

*An additional content focus of the current study: predictors of marital quality.*

One of the most extensively researched efforts associated with the complexities of marital relationships resulted in the construction of a developmental contextual model of premarital factors that lead to marital satisfaction and stability (Busby, Gardner, & Tanaguchi, 2005). Based on over 50 years of research, the developers of this model have compiled a comprehensive list of premarital predictors of later marital quality and stability (Busby, Holman, & Tanaguchi, 2001; Larson & Holman, 1994). The resulting RELATE model (RELATIONSHIP Evaluation) is principally founded on an ecosystemic developmental perspective. This perspective emphasizes the dimensions of time, change, and continuity involved in the marital system (Busby et al., 2005; Gottman, 1999; Holman, 2001; Larson & Holman, 1994). The RELATE model organizes the numerous constructs into various relationship contexts or subsystems that influence a couple's relationship. The contexts most pertinent to premarital and marital relationships are the individual, couple, familial, and cultural, contexts. These contexts interact with one another and also change over time.

Because the research behind the RELATE model demonstrates the most current and comprehensive theoretical and empirically-supported thinking about premarital relationships, it is a valuable guide in the effort to advance the standards and criteria for

MPE content. After reviewing the previously mentioned research offering recommendations concerning content of marriage preparation resources, it is this researcher's conclusion that the topics incorporated in the contexts and sub-categories of the RELATE model include those topics suggested by other researchers. The comprehensive list of constructs from the RELATE model are used as the basis for evaluating the content of marriage preparation educational resources in the current study.

Each context of the RELATE model is briefly explained as follows:

- Included in the *individual context* are the inherent characteristics, personality traits, beliefs, and attitudes of an individual in a relationship.
- The *familial context* involves the parent's couple relationship; its style and quality. It also involves the relationship of the parent with the child, and the level of stress and trauma experienced in the family of origin.
- The *cultural context* includes socioeconomic status, race, religion, and ethnic backgrounds of each individual.
- The *couple context* involves the couple's interaction patterns, their relational traits and behaviors, the consensus of values, similarity of cultural factors, and the perceptions of the partner.

A complete list of constructs organized according to contexts and sub-categories is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Premarital Predictors of Marital Quality and Stability*

Context	Subcategories	Constructs
Individual	Traits or characteristics	Gender Age Physical health
	Styles of interacting or behaving	Emotional maturity Self-esteem Depression (happiness) Flexibility Calmness Sociability Kindness Substance abuse
Family	Parents' relationship	Parental divorce Parental marital conflict style (validating, avoidant, volatile, hostile) Parental marital satisfaction
	Parent-child relationship	Relationship with mother Relationship with father
	Family Environment	Family status (step, adoptive, etc.) Family stress Family trauma and addiction Family tone and influence Support from parents and in-laws
Cultural		Race Religion Occupation Education Income Support from social network
Couple	Interactional patterns	Empathy Clear sending Regard-love Soothing Criticism Contempt Defensiveness Stonewalling Relational style (validating, avoidant, volatile, hostile) Sexuality Boundaries Possessiveness Physical and sexual coercion
	Relational traits or behaviors	Length of the relationship Status of the relationship Cohabitation Pregnancy and childbirth Problem areas
	Homogamy-consensus	Consensus on values and attitudes Perceptions of partner Similarity on socioeconomic status, age, religion, and so forth
	Relational outcomes	Satisfaction Stability

### *Instructional Process*

The instructional process is the next step in the framework for educational resource development. This aspect involves the instructional design and specific plans for teaching the prepared materials. It is not enough to present empirically supported factors that predict marital success; it must be presented in a manner that is conducive to learning. Presentation organized according to established principles of instructional design is more likely to be effective (Duncan & Goddard, 2005). A detailed discussion of the growing science of instructional design is beyond the scope of this literature review; however, some core principles are readily available for those interested in incorporating effective instructional design in MPE. (For example, see Merrill, 1983, 1994).

Other important aspects of the instructional process are having the goals and objectives of the resource clearly defined. Specific participant objectives should be presented and all learning activities tied to these objectives. Attention should be given to the appropriateness of activities for the intended audience, and the use of a variety of teaching aids and methods to accommodate a wide range of learning styles. Clear and detailed instructions should be included on how to conduct the teaching and activities. This should include the amount of time that should be spent on an activity. The presentation of a program is also critical to its success. The readability of participant materials is a very important feature of the presentation. Careful consideration should be given to the appropriateness of written material so that reading levels are not under- or overestimated. Attention must also be given to the appropriateness of the examples given to the specific audience and that examples are culturally sensitive.



Hawkins et al. (2004) also encouraged sensitivity to learning styles in educational resource development. It is important to recognize that participants who have had a more formal educational background will be comfortable with a more cognitive and didactic approach common in higher education, whereas, those with less formal educational backgrounds may appreciate a more active and experiential learning environment. These researchers also point out the importance of being familiar with cultural and faith traditions related to marriage.

*Including relationship assessment tools in MPE.* Assessing relationship strengths and challenges is also a valuable element in MPE. Several researchers have supported using a comprehensive premarital assessment as a first step in MPE (Halford, 2004; Halford et al., 2003; Larson, 2004; Larson, Newell, Topham & Nichols, 2002). Generally in the format of a questionnaire, relationship assessments or inventories are designed to predict couples relationship trajectory. An assessment also allows couples to consider their own relationship risk and resilience profiles (Halford, 2004). Most assessments include questions concerning personal and couple marital expectations, personality issues, and communication and conflict styles. Assessments can potentially address the concerns that have been expressed in regards to the common “one size fits all” type of relationship education (Busby et al., 2007; Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Halford, 2004, Larson, 2004; Silliman & Schumm, 1999). Using an assessment can aid in developing content for an educational resource that will better meet the needs of the participants. Larson (2004) asserted that a comprehensive ecosystemic assessment serves as a means to help an educator organize the predictors of marital outcomes in a manner that provides a more personal and effective intervention.

Provisions for some form of relationship assessment will be an element evaluated as part of the instructional process of marriage preparation resources in the current study. The purpose of the current study does not include evaluating the quality of the specific relationship assessments used in MPE programs. However, based on the review of literature and the best practices recommendations, inclusion of some type of assessment is an important consideration in the overall quality of an MPE program.

Attention to each of these aspects of the instructional process of a resource is essential for an effective learning experience. According to a review of available research, marriage preparation resources have not been evaluated to determine the quality of resources based on instructional process guidelines.

### *Implementation Process*

Even with a strong theoretical and research foundation, and detailed instructional and presentation plans, a program may still fail without careful attention to the implementation process. The key component of implementation is knowing the target audience. Ideally, the target audience will be consulted in each of the stages of development from the formulation of content to the evaluation. The resource material should include information describing the target audience and include for whom the material would, and would not be, appropriate. Implementation also includes the logistical details of presenting an educational resource. This includes information on marketing the resource, recruiting an audience, and suggesting an appropriate setting. It is also important to clarify whether the material is best presented by a professional, may be independently taught or learned, or requires training for laymen and volunteer instructors.

Consideration should also be given to the involvement of community partnerships and support for implementing the resource.

A common concern expressed by relationship scholars is the challenge of getting the educational resource to those who would benefit the most from it. Several studies have shown that those most likely to be helped are the least likely to access MPE (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Duncan, Holman, & Yang, 2007; Halford et al., 2003). The studies done on the effectiveness of marriage and premarital programs have been dominated by white, middle-class couples. The question still remains if current resources are effective for participants of more diverse backgrounds (Hawkins et al, 2008). The implementation part of the Hughes model includes a component to assess how well resources are promoted and implemented to reach diverse audiences.

Different strategies have been proposed for reaching those who would potentially benefit the most from marriage preparation education. Both Halford et al. (2003) and Hawkins et al. (2004) have proposed that using various forms of mass media could help both to recruit participants and provide information on the benefits of MPE. These same researchers have also stressed the value of making educational resources more flexible in time and delivery settings. Preferred formats for delivery of resources vary among individuals. Some may prefer the more traditional face-to-face format, whereas others may respond more readily to the privacy and anonymity of a self-directed format.

To date, marriage preparation resources have not been evaluated in terms of implementation processes. This deficit will be addressed in the current study.

### *Evaluation Process*

The final component of the Hughes model involves the evaluation process of the resource. Evaluation is optimally done at several phases of program development (Jacobs, 1988). Attention to the evaluation process involves more than whether evaluation data about program effectiveness has been done, but whether the means or direction are provided practitioners for evaluating the program both formatively and summatively (Duncan & Goddard, 2005). A quality resource will provide documentation on the evaluation done, and tools and provisions for those using the resource to conduct ongoing evaluation. In the initial stages of development, documentation should be kept of how the target audience was consulted or considered in development of the resource and how this information led to the current design of the resource. Information should be included concerning the costs of involvement in the resource for participants and presenters. This includes the cost of time as well as other resources. Evaluation should be made and documented considering the implementation of a program; what works, and what does not work. It is valuable to document what variations have been effective for different audiences. Evaluation is essential to determining if the resource is really accomplishing what it was designed to do. Ultimately, as a resource has been used and modified over time, evaluation will include data that demonstrates the short-term and long-term effectiveness of the resource.

Although there has been abundant support illustrating the benefits of empirical outcome evaluation, less has been said about the importance of ongoing review and evaluation for the improvement of developing resources. This type of evaluation offers greater insight into the components that make a resource effective. It can also serve to

answer the question of “which programs work for which people and under which conditions” (Arcus, 1995, as quoted in Larson, 2004, p. 423). The current study will determine the degree to which MPE resources include evaluation through the development and use of the resource.

### *The Model and Goals for the Current Study*

The goal of this study is to evaluate currently available and widely used MPE curricula against the standards and criteria for a quality marriage preparation educational experience as assessed by the Hughes model. Adherence to these standards of quality will ultimately increase the beneficial effects of MPE.

An increased awareness of the effectiveness of marriage preparation education has helped to make research and development funding more available and has led to a significant increase in the number of marriage preparation resources currently available. As gratifying as that may be, the large number of programs now available makes it challenging for practitioners, as well as potential participants to select quality resources (Adler-Baeder et al., 2004). The current study will serve as an aid in this selection process as well as to promote standards of quality in new resource development.

The components of the Hughes framework for developing family life education were used as the basis of the evaluative model for the current study. Integrated into the content portion of this model is a means of evaluating whether program content addresses those premarital factors shown to be predictive of marital quality and stability from a comprehensive, ecological systems perspective. Provisions for a form of relationship assessment are also considered in the evaluation of the instructional process of the MPE programs reviewed.

According to available research, the Hughes framework has not been used for a systematic review of MPE resources. For this initial research using this framework to evaluate MPE, it was considered valuable to review resources commonly known as MPE programs because of their broad availability, and because they have most commonly been the subject of previous effectiveness research. These programs have not been systematically compared to one another according to the standards and criteria outlined by the Hughes framework (Hughes, 1994).

In this study, the following research questions were addressed:

- 1) Of the marriage preparation educational programs currently available, and that have been previously evaluated for effectiveness, to what extent do these programs adhere to research-supported factors for a quality educational resource in areas of content, instructional process, implementation process, and resource evaluation process?
- 2) How do these MPE programs compare to one another along the quality assessments?

## Chapter 3. Methods

### *Selection of Programs*

A comprehensive search was conducted for currently available marriage preparation education programs which have previously been examined in empirical evaluation studies. This was done through examining the results and bibliographies of recent meta-analytic and program review studies (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Hawkins et al., 2008; Jakubowski et al., 2004); searches in major databases (Psych-INFO [EBSCO], Family & Society Studies Worldwide [EBSCO], Dissertations & Theses [ProQuest]); and internet searches (Google Scholar, using keywords: marriage preparation education, marriage preparation programs, premarital programs, marriage education programs).

*Selection criteria.* To be selected for this study, a program needed to meet all three of the following criteria: 1) The program has undergone previous outcome evaluation and has been included in the three published, meta-analytic studies considering the effectiveness of marriage and relationship education referred to above; 2) The program presents itself in the scholarly literature or through advertising as being appropriate for premarital or early marriage participants, and 3) The program has been developed and widely distributed by a commercial, educational, or religious entity. These criteria were selected because it was believed this would lead to the programs used by the most professionals and attracting the most participants. It is important to note that evaluation studies included in the Carroll and Doherty (2003) and in the Jacobowski research were all published studies. The Hawkins et al. (2008) study included both published and non-published studies. The value of peer-reviewed, published work has

been previously acknowledged. However, Hawkins et al. (2008) point out that including both published and non-published studies minimizes publication bias. Studies using rigorous research methods are more typically published; however, studies using less rigorous design may more closely represent how marriage education is presented and evaluated in actual educational settings.

### *Sample and Procedure*

Nine programs were found that met the above selection criteria: Couple Commitment and Relationship Enhancement program (Couple CARE), Couple Communication Program (CC), Engaged Encounter (EE), Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS), Prepare/Enrich Group program, Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), Relationship Enhancement (RE), Saving Your Marriage Before it Starts (SYMBIS), and the Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment (ACME). The developers or organization administrators were contacted in order to receive permission to examine program materials. Developers of the ACME program are currently revising the curriculum for their marriage preparation program so the ACME program was not available for review at this time. The eight available programs constituted the sample for this study. Descriptive information about these programs is available in Appendix A.

An evaluation team was formed consisting of three members. The evaluation team included two graduate students with backgrounds in marriage and family studies, one of which is the author of the current study, and a university professor with over 20 years of experience developing, implementing, and evaluating family life education programs, training marriage and family life educators, teaching courses on marriage preparation and



enrichment in university settings as well as in Cooperative Extension programs, and who is a Certified Family Life Educator. Each team member received advanced training in evaluating family life (FLE) education program curricula, including using the Hughes model, through a graduate level FLE outreach course. This general training was then applied to the needs of this study. Specifically, team members first met together to discuss the guidelines for the evaluation process, and to review each element of the evaluation tool in order to gain a shared understanding of what was to be evaluated through the individual questions. Team members then conducted a practice evaluation of a program together.

Following this tailored training, team members independently evaluated each of the selected programs for adherence to the guidelines for quality family life education as outlined by the components of the Hughes framework: content, instructional process, implementation process, and evaluation process. This was done by reviewing all materials provided in the program including instructor materials, student materials, and instructional aides such as DVDs, as well as the information available on the program's website.

### *Measures*

An adaptation of the Hughes Family Life Education Program Review Form (Hughes, 1994) was used as the tool for assessing the quality of the MPE programs evaluated in this study. This 65-item assessment device measures the quality of family life education resources according to content, instructional process, implementation process, and evaluation process; 64 of the items are measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale with 1= Low/Poor to 5=High/Excellent, and one item is a dichotomous (yes/no)

measure. Each of the 64 scored items had a potential score of 15 when summed across the scores of the three reviewers. The assessment form is presented in Appendix B. This measure is described below.

*Measures of program content.* The Hughes framework evaluates content in three separate areas: Theory and Research, Context, and Practice. There are 15 items measuring these three areas of program content.

An additional aspect of content evaluated in this study is to assess the degree to which the predictors of marital quality and stability are included in the content of the program. Thus, additional assessment items in the format of the original Hughes tool were created for this area of evaluation based on the RELATE contextual framework: Individual, Couple, Familial, and Cultural (See Table 1, pg. 20) and more specifically, the sub-categorization of these four relationship contexts. The sub-categories of the “Individual” context are “Traits or characteristics” and “Styles of interacting or behaving.” The “Couple” context sub-categories are “Interactional patterns,” “Relational traits or behaviors,” “Homogamy-consensus,” and “Relational outcomes.” Sub-categories of the “Familial” context are “Parents’ relationship,” “Parent-child relationship,” and “Family environment.”

Nine items measured the inclusion of the predictors of marital quality and were assessed using the same Likert-type scale as mentioned earlier. The nine items are associated with a subcategory of one of the four contextual factors outlined in the RELATE model, with the following exceptions: Item number 4 assesses the subcategories of Parent-child relationship and Family Environment together, and item number 5 directly assesses the Cultural context because no subcategories are given for

this context (see Table 1 for contexts, subcategories, and individual constructs associated with each context and subcategory).

A study by Larson and Hickman (2004) evaluated college marriage textbooks for inclusion of premarital predictors of marital quality. The guidelines used in their study to evaluate adequate inclusion of these predictors were adapted for use in the current study and are as follows:

- A rating of 1- A reference to the general concepts of the context subcategory:
- A rating of 2- At least one reference to a specific construct associated with the context subcategory
- A rating of 3- Reference to more than one specific construct associated with the context subcategory
- A rating of 4- Reference to one or more constructs and an explanation of how it impacts marriage
- A rating of 5- Includes the above, as well as examples or activities to teach about the construct and how it impacts the relationship

A total of 24 items measure the four areas of program content in the current study. Rating scores for individual raters have a possible range of 24 to 120 for the overall content component of the program, and a range of 72 to 360 across the scores of the three raters. Scores were also calculated for each of the four separate areas of the content component. Seven items measure the sub-component of Theory and Research. Scores in this area have a possible range of 7 to 35 for individual raters and 21 to 105 across all three raters. The Context sub-component was measured with three items. Individual rater's scores had a possible range of 3 to 15 and a range of 9 to 45 possible across the

three raters. Five items measured the Practice sub-component with possible scores ranging from 5 to 25 for individual raters and from 15 to 75 across the three raters. Scores for the predictors of marital quality range from 9 to 45 for individual raters and from 27 to 135 across the three raters. An example of items used to evaluate the Content component is “Resource is based on current research findings.” An example of an item used specifically to evaluate content addressing the premarital predictors of marital quality and stability is “Content addresses the relationship of individual traits or characteristics to marital quality such as gender, age, physical health.”

*Measurements of the instructional process component.* The instructional process was assessed by evaluating the inclusion of clearly defined goals and objectives of the program and of the inclusion and variety of teaching aids (e.g., PowerPoint, video or other visuals, participant manuals or handouts, etc.). Background information is also assessed, such as the extent to which information is included on how to conduct the teaching and activities, and the length of time allotted to activities. Nineteen individual items were used to measure the instructional process component. Rating scores for this component have a possible range of 19 to 95 for individual raters and of 57 to 285 across the scores of the three raters. This component is also divided into subcomponents: Teaching Plans and Presentation. Thirteen items measure Teaching Plans with possible scores ranging from 13 to 65 for individual rating scores and 39 to 195 across scores for the three raters. Six items measure the Presentation sub-component with a possible range of individual rating scores from 6 to 30 and of 18 to 90 across all three raters. An example item used to measure this component is “Directions for conducting (or doing online) teaching or learning activities are sufficient.”

Since the inclusion of a relationship assessment device is an important part of best practices in marriage and relationship education (Halford, 2004), whether the programs included some form of relationship assessment was also evaluated in the instructional process component of the selected programs. As stated earlier, a detailed evaluation of the quality of an individual assessment tool was not a part of the current study. The inclusion of a form of relationship assessment in the reviewed MPE programs was simply measured by a dichotomous (yes/no) variable.

*Measurements of the implementation process component.* The implementation process was evaluated based on the inclusion of information about how to carry out a program, assessing the target audience of the resource, as well as how the program may be adapted to diverse audiences. The implementation process includes providing information concerning recommended settings, marketing, recruitment, and instructor training. Ten items were used to measure this component. Individual rating scores had a possible range of 10 to 50 and a possible range of 30 to 150 across the three raters. A sample item measuring the implementation process is “General information in regard to using the program is provided.”

*Measurements of the evaluation process component.* Resources were examined as to the inclusion of documentation regarding past evaluation of the program (i.e., customer satisfaction, change measures), as well as directions and materials for current participant evaluation. Eleven items were used to measure the evaluation component. Possible rating scores ranged from 11 to 35 for individual rating scores, and from 33 to 165 for rating scores across the three raters. An example of an item used to measure this component is “Evidence of needs assessment process with appropriate audience(s) is provided.”

In addition to the quantitative scoring of a curricula, at the end of each component section in the review form is a place for the reviewer to add open-ended comments about each of the four components of a program. This allows the evaluator to add qualitative aspects, such as perceived strengths and weaknesses of a program component. Comments concerning strengths or limitations were based on the guidelines outlined earlier in the literature review which describe necessary features for quality program components (Hughes, 1994). The open-ended comments allowed the evaluator to note any special issue of a program component that is not addressed through the quantitative assessment

#### *Treatment of Data*

*Quantitative analysis.* The rating scores determined by each of the three evaluators were summed for each of the four components and subcomponents of each program. Percentages of the possible rating scores for each of the components and subcomponents were calculated and compared across programs.

*Qualitative analysis.* Analysis of the open-ended comments was conducted using inductive qualitative methods adapted from Patton (1997) and focused on practical utilization of evaluation data. This approach was used to identify major themes that can be applied to the component rating of the programs. Following independently generating comments in each section, the evaluation team met to review the comments made by each of the evaluators concerning the four components of each program. Through discussion, the team members organized the comments into common strength and limitation themes. Differences and discrepancies were resolved through discussion and, if needed, a review of pertinent literature in the program. After reaching full inter-rater agreement, the

summary of data was then applied to the components of the MPE programs reviewed.

The themes of the comments are presented as part of the results of this study and serve as suggestions to developers of how programs may be revised to improve the program quality and ultimately increase program effectiveness.

## Chapter 4. Results

### *Program Rating Scores and Percentages*

#### *Percentages of Possible Scores for Program Components Scores*

Tables 2, 3, and 4 present the percentage scores for each of the four components, and their subcomponents if applicable. Percentage scores of the content component ranged from 56.7 % to 91.7%, with Relationship Enhancement and Prepare/Enrich scoring the lowest and the highest. Instructional Process component percentage scores ranged from 75.4% to 95.4%, with the lowest score received by Engaged Encounter and the highest score received by the Couple Communication program. Implementation Process component scores ranged from 52.0% to 86.7%, with the lowest score received by the SYMBIS program and the highest score received by the Couple Communication program. Finally, Evaluation Process component percentage scores ranged from 36.4% for the Engaged Encounter program to 78.2% received for the Couple Communication program.



Table 2

Percentage of the Possible Rating Score for the **Content** Component and

Subcomponents of each MPE Program

Program Name	Theory and Research	Context	Practice	Premarital Predictors	Total for component
	*105	*45	*135	*135	*360
Couple CARE	88.6	60.0	86.7	77.8	80.6
Couple Communication	93.3	60.0	93.3	63.0	77.8
Engaged Encounter	41.9	55.6	52.0	91.1	64.2
PAIRS	83.8	73.3	81.3	75.6	78.9
Prepare/Enrich	97.1	82.2	96.0	88.1	91.7
PREP	94.3	68.9	85.3	84.4	85.6
Relationship Enhancement	61.9	44.4	77.3	45.2	56.7
SYMBIS	72.3	55.6	78.7	85.9	76.7

*Note: \*indicates possible total rating score summed across the scores from the three program reviewers.*

Table 3

Percentage of the Possible Rating Score for the **Instructional Process**

Component and Subcomponents of each MPE Program

Program Name	Teaching Plans	Presentation	Total for Component	Relationship Assessment (yes or no)
	*195	*90	*285	
Couple CARE	95.4	86.7	92.6	Yes
Couple Communication	95.9	94.4	95.4	Yes
Engaged Encounter	84.6	55.6	75.4	No
PAIRS	93.8	91.1	93.0	Yes
Prepare/Enrich	88.7	92.2	89.8	Yes
PREP	90.3	96.7	92.3	Yes
Relationship Enhancement	88.2	53.3	77.2	Yes
SYMBIS	94.4	96.7	95.1	Yes

*Note: \*indicates possible total rating score summed across the scores from the three program reviewers.*

Table 4

Percentage of the Possible Rating Score for the **Implementation**

**Process and Evaluation Process** Components of each MPE Program

Program Name	Total for Implementation Process Component	Total for Evaluation Process Component
	*150	*165
Couple CARE	62.0	57.0
Couple Communication	86.7	78.2
Engaged Encounter	80.0	36.4
PAIRS	80.0	64.2
Prepare/Enrich	64.7	56.4
PREP	84.0	45.5
Relationship Enhancement	59.3	46.7
SYMBIS	52.0	39.4

*Note: \*indicates possible total rating score summed across the scores from the three program reviewers.*

*Percentages of possible scores for program subcomponents and other measures.*

Also shown in Table 2, are the scores for the subcomponents and premarital predictors measured in the Content component of each program, and in Table 3 are the scores for the subcomponents of the Instructional Process component of each program. Percentage of possible scores in the Theory and Research subcomponent ranged from 41.9 for the Engaged Encounter program to 83.8 for the Prepare/Enrich program. Percentages of possible scores for the Context subcomponent ranged from 44.7 to 82.2 with Relationship Enhancement receiving the lowest score and Prepare/Enrich receiving the highest. For the Practice subcomponent, percentages ranged from 52.0 to 96.0 with Engaged Encounter receiving the lowest and Prepare/Enrich the highest. Percentage of possible scores for the inclusion of the premarital predictors of marital quality and stability ranged from 45.2 for Relationship Enhancement and 88.1 for the Prepare/Enrich program

Teaching Plans, a subcomponent of the Instructional Process component, received percentages of possible scores ranging from 84.6 to 95.9 with Engaged Encounter and Couple Communication receiving the lowest and highest percentages respectively. For the subcomponent of Presentation, percentages ranged from 53.3 to 96.7 with Relationship Enhancement receiving the lowest and PREP and SYMBIS both receiving the highest percentage of possible rating scores.

Results evaluating the inclusion of relationship assessment showed that only the Engaged Encounter program did not have any form of relationship assessment included

in as part of the program. It should be noted that the extensiveness of the assessments varied greatly among the programs from the over 200 item assessment available in the Prepare/Enrich program to the personal assessment questions that are included in the learning activities of the Relationship Enhancement program.

### *Overview of Programs Including Qualitative Analysis Results*

A brief description of program features and emphasis is given below, followed by a summation of the qualitative comments compiled by the reviewers concerning the utilization strengths and limitations in the four components of each program. These strengths and limitations are summarized in Appendix C.

#### *Couple CARE*

The focus of the Couple CARE (2006) program is to help couples recognize and define strengths and vulnerabilities in their relationships, and to develop personal and couple goals that will strengthen the relationship. Of particular emphasis is the concept of self-change and the recognition that relationship enhancement is a matter of partners taking the responsibility for changing their own behavior and not their partner's. Couple CARE is offered in a self-directed format that is generally completed by couples at home. The program is presented in six sessions. It is recommended that couples complete one session per week. A session typically consists of watching a presentation on DVD, completing exercises in the guidebook, followed by a 30 to 40 minute phone call with a professional relationship educator. The program may also be presented in a face-to-face format.

*Content.* The clearly stated theoretical foundation of Couple CARE is an important strength of this program. Extensive references to up-to-date sources and well-

supported practices are provided. However, the majority of this information is found on the web site and not in the written materials. It may not be clear to those using the program that this information is available. Another weakness of the program is that little information is offered concerning limitations of research findings concerning the program.

Couple CARE offers a new approach in the area of practice by using a professionally supported, self-directed educational program. Of particular note is the extensive background research on adult education instructional design that went into the development of this program (Halford, 2008). The content and delivery practices of the program are well linked to how adults learn.

The majority of the premarital predictors of marital quality and stability were addressed in the content of this program. The area of the premarital predictors most lacking in this program is attention to the cultural and social influences on marriage relationships.

*Instructional process.* This program includes very clear instructional goals and objectives. The flexibility in time and delivery is a great strength of this program. A good variety of teaching and learning activities and exercises are offered in the presentation. Instructions are easy to read and follow. A weakness in this area is that the support materials seemed to be designed for non-visual learners. More diagrams and other types of visuals would aid in the presentation.

This program includes a relationship assessment. The format of the assessment is a self-assessment checklist.

*Implementation process.* Good training is available for practitioners. However, very limited details are offered on specific ways to carry out the program such as financing, marketing or recruitment, or community involvement.

*Evaluation.* Some information concerning outcome, effectiveness, and evaluation of critical features is provided. This information is principally found on the web site. There is no evidence presented concerning needs assessments with appropriate audiences, or feedback evaluation from facilitators or others involved with the program. No tools are provided for on-going evaluation.

### *Couple Communication*

Couple Communication offers two instructional programs, Couple Communication I and Couple Communication II. Couple Communication I is more commonly used and was the program reviewed for this study. The focus of the Couple Communication program is to teach practical communication skills. This includes an emphasis on a collaborative marriage, which includes recognizing the difference between effective and ineffective ways of talking and listening in order to improve the quality of couple communication. Participants are taught skills to help them increase their self awareness, to carefully tune in to his or her partner in order to develop productive listening skills, and they are taught a process for “mapping issues” in order to make decisions and resolve conflicts collaboratively.

Couple Communication is presented in two formats: four, 2-hour sessions in a group with an instructor and other couples for a total of eight hours of instruction, or six fifty-minute sessions with the instructor and one couple.

*Content.* The program information offers a clear and extensive outline of the theoretical foundation and research base of Couple Communication (2007). The research and practices are current and well tied to best practices recommendations. One weakness of the program is that little is presented concerning the limitations of research findings. Also, attention to contextual issues in the content is limited.

The program offers comprehensive instruction in communication skills and addresses the premarital predictors for marital quality and stability related to communication very well. However, because of this focus, other premarital predictors are less thoroughly addressed, or not included at all.

*Instructional Process.* This program includes an effective and detailed instructor's guide. Teaching and learning goals and objectives are well defined, sessions are well outlined. More detailed direction on use of the couple workbooks and the DVD would be beneficial.

This program is effectively designed for a format requiring this minimal time commitment. The use and integration of diagrams, models, and others support materials is very effective. The program would benefit by having the DVD updated.

There is provision for taking an on-line relationship assessment as part of this program. The assessment is called Thrive and is a marital inventory designed to give couples a comprehensive profile of their strengths and weaknesses.

*Implementation Process.* This program provides exceptionally thorough information concerning the use of the program and helpful information concerning other implementation issues. Less information is provided concerning costs or working with existing agencies.



*Evaluation.* Utilization and client satisfaction information is well presented. Some information on the effectiveness of the program with specific audiences is offered. No other evaluation tools are provided for on-going or summative evaluation by participants.

### *Engaged Encounter*

The Engaged Encounter program was developed by the Catholic Church. The program is presented in a highly structured 44-hour weekend retreat. This generally begins on a Friday evening and runs through Sunday afternoon. The retreat is led by a trained clergy leader and two volunteer couples. Didactic presentations cover topics such as openness in communication, marital unity, decisions in marriage, and sexuality. Emphasis is on allowing the couple an experience away from daily pressures to learn relationship skills and to have time to talk openly and honestly about their future together. After each presentation, participants are given time for personal reflection and writing about a presented topic and then are encouraged to discuss the ideas with their spouses.

*Content.* The philosophical underpinnings of Engaged Encounter (2000) are based in Catholic tradition and doctrine. Although not explicitly founded in academic research, much of the content addresses issues and concepts recognized by scholars to be important to premarital education such as the emphasis on open communication and relationship commitment. Attention to contextual issues is not addressed in the content other than reference to including those not of the Catholic faith. The practice aspect of Engaged Encounter content is unique to the program with some tie to established clinical practices of encouraging couples to engage in in-depth discussion. The premarital predictors are

well represented in the content of the program. The leader's guide encourages examples that would support these constructs.

*Instructional Process.* Teaching plans include goals or objectives, but at times these are more instructor-focused than participant-focused. The design for instruction has good built-in flexibility to adapt to individual participant needs. Much is dependent on instructor fidelity to the guidelines for writing the instructional "talks." The volunteer couples serve as both instructors and models for the concepts addressed, but this may also be a challenge for close adherence to the instructional guidelines. The questions used to guide self-reflection and discussions are well designed to encourage exploration of common marital challenges. There are no provisions for relationship assessment in this program.

A noticeable deficit in this program is the lack of support materials such as visual aids or written materials that couples can review following the workshop. Presenters may recognize the need and create their own, but no direction is offered. The variety of learning activities is limited.

*Implementation Process.* Although general information regarding use of the program is provided in the written materials, details of implementing the program are only available on the Engaged Encounter web site, such as a timetable for a weekend retreat format, suggestions for housing participants, and on training volunteer couple presenters.

*Evaluation.* Limited information is available on-line concerning feedback from staff trainers, but aside from this there is no information on utilization evaluation or provisions for program evaluation.

*Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS)*

The PAIRS (2008) curriculum is designed around four goals: Promoting effective communication; strengthening, connecting, and confiding; effective decision-making and conflict resolution; and strengthening trust and commitment. A prime focus of the program is instruction in emotional literacy. Participants are taught ways to identify feelings and needs, and learn to communicate them in a way that they may be met.

PAIRS is presented in twelve 2-1/2-hour workshops for a total of 30 hours of instruction. Workshops generally consist of 12 to 30 participants. The program has also been adapted for other format lengths and for different audiences. The program may be led by professionals that have received PAIRS training or by lay persons who have been trained as PAIRS certified instructors.

*Content.* The theoretical foundation of PAIRS is clearly presented. Much of the supporting research is current and based in best practices for MPE, but some is quite dated. For example, research on bonding and attachment is cited from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Little information is given as to the limitations of research findings or of limitations in regards to the use of the program.

The skills are presented in the program with effective illustrations and metaphors to support the concepts taught. Most of the premarital predictors are addressed in the program content, however; relationship contextual, social, and family-of-origin issues receive only minimal attention. The order of topics presented in this program is somewhat disjointed and does not always flow in an organized sequence. One example is that the concept of emptying one's "emotional jug" is taught before the more foundational discussion on emotional development.

*Instructional Process.* Teaching goals and descriptions are clear and well detailed. The program offers a good balance of structured and unstructured approaches during the workshops. There is a good variety of visual support materials. Some of the graphics contain too much material making it difficult to capture key features readily.

Relationship assessment is done as part of an instructionally based activity during the presentation of this program.

*Implementation Process.* This program offers more direction than others for implementation. Suggestions are given for implementation processes such as recruitment, setting up a classroom, partnering with existing agencies, and addressing the challenge of helping participants use skills in between sessions. However, there is a lack of clear information on budgeting and marketing issues.

*Evaluation.* Very little evaluation information is provided. Some provision is made for evaluation of the program training experience. Nothing is provided for ongoing participant evaluation of the program.

#### *Prepare/Enrich*

The theoretical underpinnings of the Prepare/Enrich program (2008) are based in assumptions that quality marital relationships can be predicted from premarital relationship factors (Olson & Olson-Sigg, 1999). The preventive approach of this program focuses on identifying factors related to marital success, assessing couples on those factors, giving couples feedback and exercises designed to help them deal with problem areas, and to provide couples with skills-building exercises that focus on communication and conflict resolution.

This program covers six couple goals and exercises during 3-6 sessions. The goals and core exercises of the program are to explore strength and growth areas, strengthen communication skills, identify and manage major stressors, resolve conflicts using the Prepare/Enrich 10 step model, develop a more balanced relationship using the Prepare/Enrich couple and family maps, and understand personality differences and maximize teamwork. Professional counselors, clergy, or lay couples may be trained to be facilitators of the Prepare/Enrich program. The couple begins the program by taking a relationship assessment inventory. The couple receives an exercise workbook that includes feedback from the assessment and instruction on the exercises. The instructor receives a computerized report assessing the strengths and growth areas in 12 different relationship categories.

*Content.* This program has a very strong theory and research foundation and presents this information clearly for practitioners and participants in written materials as well as on their web site. The program builds on established teaching and intervention practices and also adds a new approach of designing program content to focus on the needs unique to the participating couple. The content of the program addresses the majority of the premarital predictors of marital quality and stability, however; it is somewhat weak in addressing contextual influences on relationships.

*Instructional Process.* The flexible design of the program allows personalization of content for specific couple needs. Support materials are attractive and engaging. Direction is given for most learning activities, but not all are explained in detail or demonstrated on the DVDs, and the goals and outcomes for these activities may not be clear to leaders or participants. There is a relationship assessment for this program and it

is integral to the design of the content and presentation of the program. The overall presentation of this program is very attractive, however; there is limited diversity in the range of racial or ethnic portrayal in the support materials.

*Implementation Process.* General information for using the program is clearly outlined, however; no information is given as to limitation of audiences the program would most likely benefit, or concerning potential implementation problems. No information is given concerning marketing or budgeting issues in the written material provided. Some discussion of recruiting participants is given in the research references on the program web site, but this is imbedded in other information and may be difficult for practitioners to readily access.

Program training is conducted in a 1-day workshop. Professional counselors have the option of completing program training through a self-training manual and video presentation. The training and support for program leaders is an exceptional strength of this program.

*Evaluation.* Although utilization information is provided, and some reference to an evaluation report is available on the web site, no provisions for other types of evaluation such as client satisfaction or facilitator feedback is provided.

#### *Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP)*

PREP is a well known MPE program and has undergone fairly extensive effectiveness research (Duncan & Goddard, 2005). PREP content focuses on training couples in communication, conflict resolution, and problem-solving skills. The goal is to reduce relationship risk factors and build protective factors through these skills. The

PREP program addresses topics such as commitment, conflict, gender differences, fun, friendship, and sensuality.

PREP is presented in a full-day workshop plus two 2-hour weeknight sessions for a total of 12 hours of instruction. Information is presented through lectures and demonstrations modeling skills and coaching couples in practicing the skills.

*Content.* The PREP program information clearly presents the theoretical background and extensive research-supported foundation of the program. The PREP program is based in cognitive-behavioral and communication theory. Only limited information is offered in the program materials concerning limitations of research findings or of contextual influences on relationships. The PREP content addresses the majority of the premarital predictors of marital quality and stability, however; a thorough discussion on family-of-origin issues is lacking.

*Instructional Process.* Goals and objectives for instruction are implied in the instructor materials, but no clear, or measurable learner-centered goals are provided. Instructor materials offer only minimally scripted detail for the presentations. No clear detailed guideline for the length of activities is offered.

Instruction is well balance between structured and unstructured learning time, and the visual materials are engaging. Instruction includes a good variety of learning activities. One specific technique presented in this program called the “speaker/listener technique is an effective activity to teach communication skills.

Prep includes some limited relationship assessment which is embedded in the learning activities of the program.

*Implementation Process.* The leader's guide offers fairly detailed information on program leader requirements and the role of the "coaches" used in the program to guide couples in the practice of the skills. Good direction is offered on other implementation issues such as marketing/recruitment, budgeting, and working with community organizations or established agencies. Potential implementation problems are also discussed such as suggestions about screening couples before participation in the program.

*Evaluation.* Information is provided on research that supports the effectiveness of the program and of the participant satisfaction. However, little information is given on other types of evaluation and no means or directions are provided for on-going evaluation of this program.

#### *Relationship Enhancement (RE)*

The Relationship Enhancement model is based on the assumption that the most effective way to resolve relationship problems, or to enhance relationship quality and satisfaction is to teach skills for constructively resolving problems in ways that meet the needs of everyone involved. In the RE program, relationship problems are viewed as an inevitable result of the differing beliefs, feelings, needs and desires of individuals. Relationship problems are also influenced by life events and transitions. The skills taught in RE are intended to bring about change in individuals on a cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal level in order to effectively navigate problems that arise.

RE is most often presented in a two-day weekend format or in a multi-session format totaling 15 hours of instruction. Workshop groups generally are comprised of from 4-10 couples. Program leaders are trained by the National Institute of Relationship



Enhancement and leaders are encouraged to master the skills themselves in order to effectively teach the skills to the participants.

*Content.* The theoretical basis of Relationship Enhancement (2004) is not explicitly stated. Research resources are only given on the web site. An extensive bibliography is presented, however; the majority of references are made to articles associated with the author and developers of the program; they do not seem to draw on a broader spectrum of research by other researchers. Some references are also somewhat dated referring to research from the 1960s and 1970s.

The focus of this program is communication and conflict resolution skills training. The content of the program is centered in these areas and is very thorough in this regard, however; it is therefore very limited in addressing any other MPE topics such as relationship contextual issues or the premarital predictors. The teaching techniques are based on clinical research and practice and information is included concerning some limitations in program applicability.

*Instructional Process.* The teaching plans for this program are clear and well detailed. There is very little variety in types of learning activities. The program is very high on text and lecture. The only visual material suggested is the DVD demonstrating communication skills. The quality of the DVD is extremely poor. It appears outdated, unprofessional, and at times was difficult to hear or understand what was being said. The DVD also seems to be more applicable to leader training than to participants although it is suggested for use during the workshop sessions. Limited relationship assessment is included as part of the teaching activities in the program. It is not a comprehensive assessment.

*Implementation Process.* Very little direction is given in any areas of program implementation. It is possible that these issues are addressed in the instructor training, but if that is the case, the program developers did not provide the reviewers with this information.

*Evaluation.* Utilization and participant outcome evaluation is imbedded in the bibliography on the web site. It is not included in written program materials. Much of the outcome data is dated. Information on, or provision for, other types of evaluation are not included.

#### *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts (SYMBIS)*

The SYMBIS program is organized around seven questions that are designed to help couples identify and overcome stumbling blocks to healthy relationships: Have you faced the myths of marriage with honesty? Can you identify your love style? Have you developed the habit of happiness? Can you say what you mean and understand what you hear? Have you bridged the gender gap? Do you know how to fight a good fight? Are you and your partner soul mates? The SYMBIS model is designed to help couples build a successful marriage through strengthening self-differentiation (Parrott & Parrott, 1999). Learning activities are outlined on the program DVD and in the men's and women's workbooks. Couples are also encouraged to read each of the chapters in the SYMBIS book addressing the relationship questions.

SYMBIS may be presented in a group setting or to couples on their own by trained instructors, or through a self-directed video presentation format. The program is presented in 8 to 10 one-hour sessions and covers each of the seven key relationship questions in the SYMBIS model.

*Content.* The prevention or intervention theory of the SYMBIS (2006) program is not clearly stated. There are references to research resources, however; some of these references are older and some assertions and sources are not cited. The program offers a new approach to MPE practice using a studio audience presentation design. Topics discussed in the program content cover the majority of the categories of the premarital predictors of marital quality and stability.

*Instructional Process.* The directions for teaching and learning activities are fairly clear, but more specific detail in the leader's guide may be beneficial. This program includes a very good variety of support materials and learning activities. The visuals are appealing and engaging. Examples are a well integrated blend of science, literature, movies, and personal experience. Visual materials may be seen as portraying only a middle or upper class socioeconomic population. A relationship assessment is offered in this program, but is presented as an optional activity. The assessment is offered on the SYMBIS web site and was created by an independent business, eHarmony.com Inc.

*Implementation Process.* Some information is given as to the use of this program, and guidelines for appropriate audiences. Information is lacking on budgeting issues and potential implementation problems. Some information is available on the web site for training, however; this could easily be overlooked because it is embedded in other information and not available in the written material.

*Evaluation.* Some utilization data are given for this program, but there is no breakdown beyond broad utilization statistics. Evidence of participant satisfaction and measures of effectiveness are only offered in marketing information. No evidence of

initial needs assessment is indicated, and no provisions for further feedback from participants or facilitators are provided.

## Chapter 5. Discussion

### *Overall Findings and Implications*

In discussing the findings of this research, it is important to reiterate that the purpose of this study was to explore the degree of adherence to research-supported guidelines for quality MPE in existing programs, as articulated in the adapted Hughes evaluative tool. It was not the purpose of this study to criticize the design or approach of any given program. The descriptive nature of this study does not lend itself to making inferential claims and conclusions. Comparisons between programs are a means of illustrating differences between programs, strengths and deficits among programs, and of highlighting areas for potential improvements within programs. The goal of this research is to encourage sensitivity to standards and criteria that will improve the quality of MPE programs and potentially increase the effectiveness of efforts intended to help couples have healthy and stable marriages.

The fact that programs selected for this study were included in other meta-analytic studies or reviews is evidence that scholars have already acknowledged a certain level of effectiveness for each program. In other words, the value of the programs has been at least minimally recognized. However, improvement is always possible. Recognition of this is evidenced by the fact that several of these programs have undergone repeated revisions leading to multiple editions. The Hughes guidelines offer an efficient view of what may need to be included or altered in an existing program, and also give direction for the development of new programs.

The MPE programs reviewed in this study varied greatly in the degree to which each of the elements were included that have been shown to be essential for an effective

educational experience. For example, the SYMBIS program had the highest percentage of the possible rating score for the Presentation subcomponent, and yet the lowest percentage of the possible score for the Implementation Process subcomponent compared to other programs. The Couple Communication program which had the highest percentage of the possible rater score for the Instructional component, had the second lowest percentage of the possible rater score for inclusion of the premarital predictors of marital quality. The Engaged Encounter program received the highest percentage of the possible score for inclusion of the premarital predictors, but scored lowest in the Theory and Research, and Practice subcomponents, and in the Instructional Process and Evaluation components. None of the programs consistently received high, or low, percentage scores on every component or subcomponent measured.

A positive finding was that the majority of programs included explicit information concerning the theoretical and research basis of the program: Couple CARE, Couple Communication, PAIRS, Prepare/Enrich, PREP, and SYMBIS. This was noted in the qualitative comments of each member of the evaluation team. Many researchers have noted the importance of clearly stated theories and foundational research in the development of MPE programs (Adler-Baeder et al., 2004; Halford et al., 2003; Hawkins et al., 2004). A clearly defined theoretical foundation undergirds and guides the development of all other aspects of an educational program.

It may be tempting to think that taking the strongest areas of each of the existing programs would create the one most effective program. However, as mentioned in the review of literature, the goal in MPE development is not to create the one perfect program. Emphasis on a one-size-fits-all program goes against research showing the

importance of tailoring curricula to the needs of those being served (Larson, 2004). Attending to these standards for quality as outlined by the Hughes framework can improve effectiveness while maintaining unique and personalized approaches in each of the components of an MPE program.

#### *Key Findings of Program Components*

*Content.* The examination of the content of each of the programs in this study brought to light the diversity of approaches available in MPE. Even though the majority of these programs share aspects of theoretical underpinnings, the focus and emphasis of content varies greatly. One content feature common to MPE programs is a focus on teaching communication and conflict management skills, and yet techniques vary greatly. Each of the reviewed programs emphasizes that empathetic or attentive listening is crucial to effective communication. Some programs have a very structured means of teaching these skills such as the maps and diagrams of the Couple Communication and PAIRS programs. The PREP program outlines these skills with a list of ground rules for use when discussions involve strong emotion or conflict. PREP developers acknowledge that these techniques may seem unnatural to use in everyday communication, but are valuable to promote change in behavior patterns. The Couple CARE DVD presentations teach these skills simply by demonstrating effective and ineffective communication, but the program also emphasizes the value of couples deciding what works best in their own relationships.

On the other hand, focus on communication skills is not without controversy. The benefit of teaching communication skills has been well established (Gottman & Notarius, 2000), and studies show that these skills are teachable and measurable (Halford, 2004).

However research has not precisely determined which communications skills determine long-term positive relationship outcomes, and findings have been inconsistent concerning the impact of teaching these skills in relationship education (Halford et al., 2004). Other researchers have noted that a focus on communication skills may neglect other institutional features that support successful marriages (Carroll, Badger, & Yang, 2006; Hawkins et al., 2004). The content of the Couple Communication and Relationship Enhancement programs focuses predominantly on communication skills. Program developers may choose to design programs specifically aimed at teaching communication and conflict management skills, but should also be explicit when presenting or promoting the program that the content focus is exclusive to these skills and that the program does not address other factors that influence marriage relationships. Clarity in this matter aids practitioners and participants in choosing programs that meet individual needs.

A common deficit among the programs reviewed was the low level of attention in program content to contextual issues that influence marital relationships. Scores were not consistently low across all reviewers; however, the lack of attention to relationship contexts was noted in the qualitative comments as a relative weakness in several programs including Couple CARE, Couple Communication and Prepare/Enrich. Reviewers agreed that instruction concerning the role that various contexts play in relationships was not adequately addressed. Larson (2004) has pointed out that the many levels of cultural, social, and environmental systems that a couple comes in contact with influences relationship outcomes and that recognizing this is the only way to fully understand the marital process.



Findings in this study concerning the factors predicting marital quality and stability as outlined by the ecosystemic RELATE model also merit noting. With the strong research and theoretical foundation supporting those factors that predict marital quality in MPE programs, it was somewhat surprising that the program scoring the lowest in the area of Theory and Research also scored the highest on inclusion of the premarital predictors. Although the theoretical basis of the Engaged Encounter program is not explicitly stated or referenced to scholarly research, the high level of inclusion of the premarital predictors of marital quality and stability may be tied to the longevity and experiential knowledge supporting this program. As mentioned earlier, organized MPE efforts have evolved from the counsel offered by religious leaders to marrying couples. It is interesting to note that those same relationship constructs recognized by scholars to be predictive of marital success are also recognized as important features of educational efforts based in experiential understanding. This finding has valuable implications for all providers and supporters of MPE. Researchers should view what is learned through lived experience as an important resource, and similarly, nonprofessionals could improve their programs by understanding the theoretical support available through scholarly research.

*Instructional Process.* Hughes (1994) emphasized the importance of clearly stated goals and objectives in the educational design of quality family life education programs. Program reviewers in the current study noted the clarity of the goals outlined in the Couple Communication and Couple CARE programs. These programs scored highest in the area of Teaching Plans among all the reviewed programs. Although the Relationship Enhancement program scored less well overall in this area because of other deficits, this program included clear and detailed goals and instructions for the program presentation.

The goals in this program are participant focused and designed so that participants and presenters can recognize when goals have been achieved. Well defined goals and objectives shape all of the instructional processes, and influence all other components of an educational program. It is difficult for presenters to organize what to teach or how to create effective presentations without clear learning goals. It is also difficult to evaluate a program or determine if desired outcomes have been obtained without explicitly defined and presented goals and objectives for the program participants.

Based on best-practices recommendations, the inclusion of some form of relationship assessment was also measured in the Instructional Process component of each program reviewed. Only one program, Engaged Encounter, was found to be completely without any form of assessment. However, the findings on this measure may not be extremely valuable until there are research-based standards and criteria for relationship assessments. Assessments included in the reviewed programs ranged from very comprehensive assessments as in the Prepare/Enrich program to minimal assessment on certain topics within the teaching activities of a program such as in PAIRS, PREP, and Relationship Enhancement. The assessment provided by the SYMBIS program is provided by a commercial organization and no research or scholarly-based information was available concerning the design of this assessment. Larson et al., (2002) reviewed three comprehensive relationship assessments and offer recommendations for therapists and educators in using these assessments. Further research is needed to understand the value of individual assessments and to guide the use and development of other relationship assessment techniques.

*Implementation process.* The majority of the programs reviewed received only low/poor scores from each of the reviewers in this study in the implementation areas of marketing, recruiting, budgeting, and working with other agencies. Only Couple Communication and Engaged Encounter were given higher scores in these areas by two of the reviewers. It appeared through this study that implementation is an area of program development that is generally given less attention. Just as clear goals and objectives influence the makeup of other components in a program, the implementation processes have an influence on other components, particularly the program development and delivery.

Greater emphasis by developers on the implementation factors in the Hughes model will potentially address several issues researchers have noted as concerns in MPE. Information on the initial target audience of the program can help practitioners understand who would best be served by the program. Researchers have questioned if all programs work for, or are right for, all audiences. Adequate direction concerning recruitment and marketing of a program can help address concerns about whether MPE programs are reaching those who would benefit the most from them. The question of “effective for whom” remains. An evaluation of resources based on these guidelines may give a clearer view of how to implement programs for diverse audiences while we await empirical direction in answering the questions concerning for whom particular resources are most effective.

*Evaluation Process.* A key finding in the Evaluation Process component is the low scores received by all the programs reviewed. The highest percentage score for Evaluation Process was relatively low at only 78.2% received by the Couple

Communication program. The lack of evaluation was also noted in the qualitative comments by all three reviewers. Hughes (1994) described the need for a systematic process for conducting various levels of program evaluation and asserted that evaluation of several types is essential to knowing if a program is achieving what it was designed to do. The majority of the programs include at least some information on outcome evaluation or participant satisfaction (only Engaged Encounter did not). Only Engaged Encounter and PAIRS provide information on instructor or provider feedback. None of the programs provided information on initial needs assessment with a target audience or provide tools or directions for conducting on-going participant or provider evaluation.

#### *General Findings, Recommendations, and Limitations*

The Hughes framework appears to be a valuable evaluation tool for examining adherence to standards of quality in MPE programs. This type of evaluation does not replace effectiveness research. In fact, it incorporates it; one of the items measured by the Hughes model is the availability of the results of effectiveness evaluation. Evaluation processes examined by the Hughes model offers a more comprehensive view of the quality of a MPE program in this area. Practitioners and participants are better able to make an informed decision on the choice of a program to access.

A detailed view of the quality of a program also aids in choosing a program that meets the individual needs of the participants. As stated earlier, many scholars have been concerned about a “one-size-fits-all” approach to MPE. The deeper examination of program components as demonstrated in this study can help practitioners make decisions about the selection of programs that meet the needs of their target audience.

It is certainly a complex challenge to develop programs that address the unique needs of individual couples. Several of the programs reviewed in this study are marketed to marital as well as premarital audiences. Some relationship education programs are promoted as education for those at any stage of a relationship (e.g. dating, engaged, premarital or later marital), or in any type of relationship (e.g. cohabiting, same-sex, second marriage, healthy or distressed). Marriage preparation education requires attention to relationship issues specific to premarital contexts. Efforts to make a program more broadly available, applicable, or appealing, may dilute the effective benefits of MPE. Further research would be necessary to show that the benefits of relationship education are equal for those in differing stages or types of relationships. The quality and professionalism of the field can be advanced by developers being specific and transparent in what their program has to offer and to whom it is targeted.

In this study, programs that have been developed for a specific audience, or to address a specific relationship issue received high rating scores for program features related to the specificity. For example, Engaged Encounter had the highest percentage of the possible rating score for measuring the inclusion of the premarital predictors of marital quality and stability. Couple Communication was rated high for those predictors related to communication and conflict resolution. Programs offering a specific focus, rather than a more comprehensive MPE experience, are a valuable means for addressing certain issues that are pertinent to premarital audiences. However, it is important that developers and program promoters are explicit about the comprehensiveness of the program. Couples or practitioners may recognize a need for education specifically in communication issues, but should also be aware that communication is only one of many

issues that are valuable to address premaritally. Program information should be clear concerning the program focus, as well as the depth and breadth of MPE content.

The means of providing information of all types including MPE, seems to be in the midst of transition from pen and paper, to the world of online resources. This was evident in accessing MPE program information for this study. Some program details, research and evaluation history, and contact information were available in the written materials and some were only available on program websites. Access to and acceptance of getting information on-line continues to increase. However, assumptions by developers that all practitioners or individuals seeking information about MPE programs will search both written and web information may be inaccurate. Whether information is in the written materials, or on a website, developers will aid program users in finding information by being clear and explicit about where the information can be found. Certainly most convenient would be to have the information in both places.

Advancing the quality of MPE has important implications for developers receiving financial support for creation and presentation of programs. For practitioners, promoters, and participants of MPE, funding is an on-going concern in efforts to provide beneficial programs. Why would Government and other agencies allocating funds to marriage education consider low quality programs when evidence of higher quality ones are accessible?

*Study limitations.* The sample in this study is only a small number of the many available MPE programs. It was deemed appropriate for this initial application of the Hughes model in examining MPE programs to use widely available and previously evaluated programs. Greater insight in understanding the degree to which program

development has incorporated the Hughes recommended standards and criteria for quality educational programs will be available through research with larger samples of MPE programs.

An important limitation of this study has to do with the lack of comparative research conducted on different MPE models or programs. As mentioned earlier, Carroll and Doherty (2003) recognized that MPE programs have not been systematically compared to one another on measures of effectiveness using the same dependent variables. One older study (Brock & Joanning, 1983) did compare the effectiveness of Relationship Enhancement and Couple Communication; however, this was an earlier version of Couple Communication. Being able to compare the findings of the current study concerning the measures of quality program design to comparative measures of program effectiveness would offer even greater insight into the specific elements that constitute an effective program. It is hoped that future research will provide this comparative information.

### *Conclusion*

The positive results of efficacy studies show that MPE is a valuable means to address the high rates of distressed marriages and to promote successful and healthy marital experiences. Efforts to improve MPE programs facilitate even greater potential benefits for participants. A comprehensive examination beyond outcome results offers a clearer view of what is effective in MPE, and who will best be served by specific MPE programs. This research has demonstrated an efficient and effective means for more closely examining elements of MPE programs that are essential for a quality educational experience. It is the first comparative study of leading MPE programs, and although a descriptive and qualitative assessment, it offers some explicit acknowledgement of the strengths of programs, as well as suggestions for program improvement. Attention to the standards and criteria for quality shown in this research can increase the effectiveness of already beneficial programs and advance professionalism in the field of marriage preparation education.



## Appendix A

### *MPE Program Information*

#### Couple CARE, 2006

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Contact	<a href="http://www.couplecare.info">http://www.couplecare.info</a>
Program	Focus on defining the strengths and vulnerabilities of the relationship,
Focus	defining couple goals, and an emphasis on self-change and the contribution and each partner offers to the relationship.
Format	Flexible format design or face-to-face delivery presented in six two-hour sessions. Self-directed format includes telephone support from trained relationship educator.
Available	DVD and program guidebook for each partner.
Materials	Educator's manual.
Author(s)	Kim W. Halford, Keithia Wilson, Elizabeth Moore, Carmel Dyer, Charles Farrugia, Kevin Judge

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#### Couple Communication, 2007 (CC)

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Contact	Interpersonal Communication Programs, Inc.  <a href="http://www.couplecommunication.com">www.couplecommunication.com</a>  30772 Southview Dr. #200 Evergreen, CO 80439  800-328-5299 <a href="mailto:icp@comskills.com">icp@comskills.com</a>
Program	The goal of this program is to increase self and partner awareness and
Focus	develop clear, direct, and open communication. Instruction on talking and and listening skills. Coached practice.

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Format	Two formats: eight one-hour group instruction, or six fifty-minute sessions with instructor and couple.
Available	Skills workbook for each partner, a skills mat for talking and one for
Materials	listening, skill pocket prompt cards, two skills charts
Author(s)	Sherod Miller, Phyllis A. Miller, Daniel B. Wackman, Elam W. Nunnally

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Engage Encounter, 2000 (EE)

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Contact	National Executive Team Rick & Patty Ruppert  7819 Highpoint Road Baltimore, MD 21234-5407 410-665-95318  <a href="http://www.engagedencounter.org">www.engagedencounter.org</a>  Western Region Directors John & Mary Saxman ceenet@qwest.net
Program	Didactic presentations on communication techniques, marital attitudes and
Focus	expectations followed by time for personal reflection and couple discussions.
and	A 44- hour weekend retreat format taught by a team of trained clergy and 2
Format	trained volunteer couples.
Available	Weekend Outline and Presentation Writing Guide.
Materials	
Author(s)	Catholic Engaged Encounter, Inc.

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Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills, 2008 (PAIRS)

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Contact	PAIRS Foundation Weston, Florida 866-388-5683 <a href="http://www.pairs.com">www.pairs.com</a>  <a href="mailto:info@pairs.com">info@pairs.com</a>
Program	PAIRS offers instruction to direct self-knowledge, emotional literacy, and
Focus	building skills for couple intimacy. Taught in groups of 12-30 individuals.

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and	PAIRS is presented in twelve 2.5-hour workshops for a total of 30
Format	hours.(Other workshop formats are available)
Available	Instructor's curriculum Guide, Power Point presentations, Participant's
Materials	handbook, concept reminder cards.
Author(s)	Lori H. Gordon

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Prepare/Enrich, 2008

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Contact	Life Innovations P.O. Box 190 Minneapolis, MN 55440 800-331-1661  www.prepare-enrich.com
Program	This program focuses on identifying factors related to marital success,
Focus	assessing couples on those factors, giving couples personalized feedback and
and	exercises designed to help them deal with problem areas, and provide
Format	couples with skills-building exercises that focus on communication and  conflict resolution.  Presented in 3-6 one hour sessions by trained professional, clergy, or lay  couple facilitators.
Available	Resource guide, sample facilitator report, sample couple's report, couples
Materials	workbook, two training DVDS, facilitator's manual on CD.
Author(s)	David H. Olson, Peter J. Larson

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Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, 2008 (PREP)

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Contact	PREP Inc P. O. Box 4793 Greenwood, CO 80155-4793 800-366-0166  www.prepinc.com
Program	Designed to teach couples communication, conflict resolution, and problem-

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Focus	solving skills, PREP is presented in a one all-day session followed by 2 two and hour weekday evening sessions for a total of 12 hours in the workshop.
Format	
Available	Instructor manual, PowerPoint CD, skills demonstration DVDS, personality
Materials	assessment tool, DVD of lecture on commitment, participant manual.
Author(s)	Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, Natalie H. Jenkins, Susan Blumberg

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Relationship Enhancement, 2004 (RE)

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Contact	National Institute of Relationship Enhancement 4400 East-West Hwy Suite 28 Bethesda, MD 20814 1-800-4-FAMILIES <a href="http://www.nire.org">www.nire.org</a> <a href="mailto:niremd@nire.org">niremd@nire.org</a>
Program	A psychoeducational program designed to teach skills focusing on self-
Focus	disclosure, empathic listening, problem-conflict resolution, self and other and change.
Format	Generally presented in a 15 hour workshop; Saturday from 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. and Sunday from 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. Usually includes 4-10 couples.
Available	Program leader's manual, Participant handbook, skills demonstration DVD.
Materials	
Author(s)	Robert, F. Scuka, William J. Nordling, Bernard Guerney Jr.

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Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts, 2006 (SYMBIS)

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Contact	<a href="http://www.realrelationships.com">www.realrelationships.com</a>
Program	SYMBIS helps couples build a successful marriage through strengthening
Focus	self-differentiation. 8-10 one hour sessions in a group or self-directed

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and format.

Format

Available Workbook for men, workbook for women, instructor's guide, SYMBIS

Materials book, and DVD.

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## Appendix B

### *Family Life Education Resource Review Form, adapted for assessing MPE programs*

Evaluator's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Reference Information

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Ratings of the Resource: Please rate the educational resource on the following dimensions.

<i>Content: Theory and Research</i>	<i>Low/Poor</i>			<i>High/Excellent</i>		
1. Prevention/intervention theory is clearly stated.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
2. Resource is based on current research findings.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
3. Resource includes the major and/or most important research resources. (This is considering the reliability of research sources and includes "leading edge" research.)	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
4. Resource accurately uses the findings from research or other sources. (This includes recommendations for best practices in MPE.)	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
5. Resource clearly presents the findings from research and other sources. (This includes clear and available documentation of sources.)	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
6. Resource draws appropriate implications from the research and other sources. (Recommendations for application are based on the research.)	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
7. Resource notes limitations of research findings and conclusions.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
<i>Content: Context</i>						
8. Contextual information regarding the families' involvement in relevant settings (school, work, child care, church) is appropriately considered.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
9. Culture and social class influences are appropriately considered.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
10. Political, economic, and other macrosocial	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

influences are appropriately considered.						
<i>Content: Practice</i>						
11. Resource adds something new to the practice/intervention approaches on this topic/issue.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
12. Resource builds on appropriate existing program resources (e.g. other programs, professionals, clinical research).	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
13. Resource accurately uses finding from clinical research/practice. (Consider how the findings are presented, including the use of best practices in MPE).	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
14. Teaching/intervention strategies and techniques are based on clinical research/practice.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
15. Resource notes current limitation of clinical/practice knowledge in regard to this program/topic.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
<i>Content: Premarital Predictors of Marital Quality and Stability</i>						
1. Content addresses how individual traits or characteristics such as gender, age, and physical health can affect marital quality.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
2. Content addresses how individual styles of interaction or behavior affect marital quality such as emotional health, maturity, self-esteem, depression/happiness, flexibility, calmness, sociability, kindness, substance abuse.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
3. Content addresses factors of parents' marital relationship that influence marital quality in the participants' marriage such as parental divorce, marital conflict style, and marital satisfaction.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
4. Content addresses factors of the family-of-origin environment that influence marital quality such as family status (step, adoptive, etc.), family stress, trauma, addiction, family tone, parent-child relationships, and support from parents and in-laws.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
5. Content addresses cultural influences on marital quality such as race, religion, occupation, education, income, and support from social networks.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

6. Content addresses couple interaction patterns that influence marital quality such as empathy, clear-sending communication, regard/love, soothing, criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling, relational style, sexuality, boundaries, possessiveness, and physical and sexual coercion.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
7. Content addresses couple relational traits or behaviors that influence marital quality such as the length of the relationship, status of the relationship, cohabitation, pregnancy and childbirth, and problem areas.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
8. Content addresses factors of couple homogamy-consensus that influence marital quality such as consensus on values and attitudes, perceptions of the partner, similarity on socioeconomic status, age, religion, etc.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
9. Content addresses the influence of relational outcomes on marital quality, such as marital satisfaction and stability	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
<i>Comments:</i>						
<i>Instructional Process: Teaching Plans</i>	<i>Low/Poor</i>			<i>High/Excellent</i>		
1. The topic is important for the intended audience.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
2. There are clear goals and objectives for instruction or the interactive/teaching elements of the Web site.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
3. Activities/interactive features fit the goals and objectives.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
4. Activities/interactive features are appropriate for the intended audience(s) (age group, family type, gender, ethnic group).	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
5. Directions for conducting (or doing online) teaching or learning activities are sufficient.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
6. A variety of activities and teaching formats are used.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A



7. Balance between giving information, discussion, and learning activities is achieved.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
8. Structured and/or unstructured approaches are used appropriately.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
9. Sufficient time is allowed to cover topics/activities (not too much or too little).	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
10. The structure of the content is logically organized and easy to follow.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
11. Teaching aids (visuals, materials, handouts, etc.) are appropriate.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
12. Potential teaching/practice problems are discussed and solutions suggested.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
13. Appropriateness of the length of the resource for the topic and the intended audience.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
14. Provisions for relationship assessment.	Yes			No		
<i>Instructional Process: Presentation</i>						
15. Appropriate readability for the intended audience.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
16. Appropriateness of the examples for the intended audience.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
17. Attractiveness of the resource for the intended audience.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
18. Appropriate portrayal of a range of racial/ethnic groups.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
19. Effectiveness of pictures/graphs, etc.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
20. Quality of the overall design and layout.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Comments:						
<i>Implementation Process</i>			<i>Low/Poor</i>		<i>High/Excellent</i>	
1. General information in regard to using the program	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

is provided.						
2. Appropriate audience for program is outlined.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
3. Limits are provided about audiences that would not be expected to benefit from the program.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
4. Marketing/recruitment materials and suggestions are provided.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
5. Logistical issues in implementation are clarified.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
6. Budget issues are explained clearly.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
7. Community or agency issues in implementation are explained.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
8. Potential implementation problems are discussed and solutions suggested.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
9. If appropriate, staff or volunteer training guidelines are sufficient.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
10. Background material and/or resources are provided to implementers/trainers.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
<i>Comments:</i>						
<i>Evaluation</i>	<i>Low/Poor</i>			<i>High/Excellent</i>		
1. Evidence of needs assessment process with appropriate audience(s) is provided.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
2. Utilization data are provided.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
3. Accountability procedures are provided to track utilization of the program.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
4. Results of client satisfaction are provided.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
5. Procedures for assessing client satisfaction are provided.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
6. Feedback from staff trainers, other stakeholders is	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

discussed.						
7. Procedures for obtaining feedback from staff trainers and other stakeholders are provided.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
8. Evaluation of critical program features is provided.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
9. Effectiveness of the program for specific audiences is clear.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
10. Limits of the effectiveness of the program are clear.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
11. Guidelines for impact evaluation are provided.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
<i>Comments:</i>						

(Adapted from Hughes, 1994,)

## Appendix C

### *Summary of the Qualitative Comments on Component Strengths and Weaknesses*

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Couple Care (2006)		
Content	Clear theoretical base supported by research. Extensive background research on adult education design. Many premarital predictors represented.	Lacks information on limitations of research and practice
Instructional Process	Flexible delivery format. Instructions are easy to follow. Variety of teaching and learning activities	Low quality DVD presentation. Not sensitive to various learning preferences.
Implementation	Training available for practitioners.	Limited information on implementation details.
Evaluation	Reports on outcome and effectiveness.	No report on pre-program assessment or tools for ongoing evaluation.
Relational assessment: Self-Assessment Checklist.		
Couple Communication (2007)		
Content	Very strong research supported program.	Limited attention to contextual issues. Focus on communication and limited

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		instruction on other relationship issues.
Instructional	Clearly defined goals and objectives.	None noted.
Process	Variety of instructional materials and activities.	
Implementation	Comprehensive information on using the program.	Little information on cost or providing the program or working with agencies.
Evaluation	Research on utilization and participant satisfaction.	No provisions for on-going evaluation.

Relationship assessment: An on-line marital inventory.

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Engaged Encounter (2000)

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Content	Addresses issues recommended in best practices literature and the majority of the predictors of marital quality.	Not founded in research. Theories are not documented.
Instructional Process	Built-in flexibility. Questions to guide couple discussions.	No visuals or support materials.
Implementation	Directions available for most of the specific implementation issues.	Lacks information on budgeting issues.
Evaluation	Some information on program provider and trainer feedback.	No other evaluation information or provisions. Relationship Assessment: None

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PAIRS (2008)

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Content	Clearly presented theoretical base. Effective illustrations and metaphors to support concepts taught.	Some research information is older. Topics not logically organized.
Instructional Process	Detailed goals, and teaching directions. Variety of visual materials.	Some graphics look busy and contain too much material.
Implementation	Direction on implementation.	Little information on budgeting or marketing.
Evaluation	Some provision for evaluation of participants in program leader training.  Relationship assessment: minimally done as part of a learning activity.	No provision for ongoing evaluation.

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Prepare/Enrich (2008)

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Content	Very clear theoretical and research foundation. Representation of premarital predictors.	Little considering of relationship contextual issues.
Instructional Process	Attractive and engaging program. Flexible design. Variety of teaching activities.	Lacks detailed explanation of many of the learning activities. Limited diversity in visuals.
Implementation	Directions for most implementation issues. Training for providers.	Lacks information on limitations for specific

		audiences and marketing /budgeting issues.
Evaluation	Some information on utilization.	No other information or provisions for evaluation
Relationship Assessment: comprehensive on-line evaluation		

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PREP (2008)

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Content	Clearly presented theoretical and research foundation. Addresses the majority of the premarital predictors and challenges made by scholars in earlier versions.	Little information on contextual relationship influences. Little attention to family-of-origin influences.
Instructional Process	Effective visual material. A balance of structured and unstructured learning activities	Little detail in the presentation outline.
Implementation	Detailed information on leader requirements and “coaches.”Direction on many implementation issues.	Incomplete information on budgeting and logistical issues.
Evaluation	Some information on effectiveness and participant satisfaction evaluation.	No provision or direction for on-going evaluation.

Relationship Assessment: Limited assessment as part of the learning activities.

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Relationship Enhancement (2004)

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Content	Thorough coverage of communication	Theoretical base is not
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	and conflict resolution. Teaching practices supported by research.	explicitly stated. Focus on communication, does not address other relationship topics. Research references are dated and limited to those of the program developers.
Instructional Process	Detailed teaching outline. Clear goals and objectives.	Little variety in learning activities. High on text and lecture. Extremely poor quality DVD.
Implementation	Some information on limitations of program. Good general information on using the program.	Few specifics on marketing, working with existing agencies.
Evaluation	Utilization and participant outcome evaluation is available.	Much of the information is older. No provisions for on-going evaluation.
Relationship Assessment: Limited assessment included in the presentation.		

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SYMBIS (2006)

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Content	The program design offers a new approach in MPE. The instructional	Foundational theory is not clearly stated. Some of the
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	topics cover most of the premarital predictors of marital quality and stability.	research references are older.
Instructional Process	Flexible format. Variety of learning activities. Visually appealing. Professional quality support materials.	Leader's guide is not detailed. Limited portrayal of socioeconomic diversity.
Implementation	Some information given for the use of the program with specific audiences.	No information on budgeting issues or implementation problems. Training information is not explicit.
Evaluation	Some utilization and participant satisfaction information.	No breakdown of utilization statistics. No evidence of initial needs assessment with a target audience. No provisions for on-going evaluation.

Relationship Assessment: Optional part of the program. On-line assessment created by

eHarmony.com Inc.

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