

PREMARITAL COUNSELING: A NEEDS ASSESSMENT AMONG ENGAGED INDIVIDUALS

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ABSTRACT: Although engaged individuals are the primary consumers of premarital counseling, no previous research has explored their perceptions regarding marriage preparation. This article reports what engaged individuals believe are the important areas to address when preparing couples for marriage. It also explores other attitudes and preferences that engaged individuals have toward marriage preparation.

Today's high divorce rate highlights the difficulty many couples have in achieving a happy and lasting marriage. One possible solution to this problem is to improve couples' preparation for marriage (Olson, 1983). However, the premarital counselor must answer two important questions when preparing couples for marriage. First, what areas should be addressed when preparing couples for marriage? Second, how can marriage preparation be made attractive so that engaged couples will take advantage of it? The goal of this study was to determine how engaged individuals would answer these important questions.

Since many believe engaged individuals are idealistic (Ball & Henning, 1981; Olson, 1983), some premarital counselors may question whether engaged individuals are the best judges of what they need for marriage preparation. Although it is true that premarital counselors know from training and experience what the key ingredients are to building a successful marriage, engaged individuals

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have an important perspective that should also be considered. A thorough assessment of engaged individuals' needs may uncover important areas that have previously been overlooked. Additionally, they can provide valuable insights into making marriage preparation more inviting for engaged couples to use.

Unfortunately, there are no published studies that examine in detail what engaged individuals perceive their marriage preparation needs to be. In fact, there is very little in the literature that examines what premarital individuals in general perceive their marriage preparation needs to be (Schumm & Denton, 1979). Some recent studies have examined premarital individuals' views on marriage and family life (Martin & Martin, 1984), perceived readiness for marriage (Larson, 1989), and marriage preparation program designs (Silliman, Schumm, & Jurich, 1992). Although these studies have provided us with important insights, a chief limitation of all three studies is that they surveyed college students rather than looking exclusively at engaged individuals. We should not automatically assume that the perceptions of engaged individuals are identical to college educated premarital individuals.

In summary, an assessment of engaged individuals' perceptions of marriage preparation is overdue. Therefore, this study explores engaged individuals' perceptions of marriage preparation in a variety of areas. These findings can help the premarital counselor both design and promote effectively marriage preparation for engaged individuals.

METHODS

Engaged individuals were surveyed by means of a mail questionnaire that was returned anonymously to the researcher. The questionnaire assessed several areas including: 1) what marriage preparation needs or topics engaged individuals believe should be addressed; 2) the preferred format for marriage preparation; 3) the most important format attributes; 4) the effectiveness of different referral sources; 5) attitudes of engaged individuals towards marriage preparation; 6) readiness for marriage; and 7) what types of marriage preparation individuals had actually used.

A convenience sample of engaged individuals was used due to the cost and difficulty of securing a totally random sample of engaged individuals. Thus, one must be cautious in generalizing the results to the total population of engaged individuals. Engaged individuals were recruited by using: 1) announcements in a marriage and family

life course in a large midwestern university; 2) referrals from churches in the local community; 3) engagement announcements in the local newspaper; and 4) personal referrals. Of the 170 engaged individuals who agreed to participate in the study, 112 (65.9%) returned their questionnaires in time to be included in the data analysis.

The demographics of the sample are included in Table 1. A little over half the sample was comprised of college students. Two-thirds of the sample had three or more years of college education. The large majority (84%) of individuals were engaged less than a year, and nearly all (92%) were preparing for their first marriage. A quarter of the individuals were living with their partner.

TABLE 1
Sample Demographics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Sex	Female	59.8%
	Male	40.2
Student?	Yes	58.0
	No	42.0
Highest Level of Education	HS equivalent or less	18.8
	1-2 years college	14.3
	3-4 years college	60.7
	Graduate degree	6.2
Length Engaged	Less than 6 months	42.0
	Between 6-12 months	42.0
	More than 12 months	16.0
Previously Married?	Yes	8.1
	No	91.9
Live with Partner?	Yes	25.0
	No	75.0
Degree of Religiosity	Very religious	23.2
	Moderately religious	44.6
	Slightly/not religious	32.1
Age	Mean	24.0 yrs
	(SD)	3.5

Note: Total sample = 112

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Important Topics

When asked via an open question what needs or topics should be addressed by marriage preparation programs, communication (60%) and money/finances (50%) were clearly the two most important concerns volunteered by engaged individuals. Next in order of importance were conflict negotiation/problem-solving (28%), children (24%), religion (19%), careers (15%), sex (14%) and family/in-laws (12%).

These results are generally consistent with what the premarital counseling literature suggests are important areas to explore. For example, many programs emphasize engaged couple learning communication and/or conflict negotiation skills (e.g., Bader, Microys, Sinclair, Willet, & Conway, 1980; Glendening & Wilson, 1972; Larson, 1989; Nickols, Fournier, & Nickols, 1986; Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992; Ridley, Avery, Harrell, Leslie, & Dent, 1981; Ridley, Jorgensen, Morgan, & Avery, 1982; Zoost, 1973). Additionally, finances, children, religion, sex, and family/in-laws are common areas that premarital counselors explore with couples (Bader et al., 1980; Glendening & Wilson, 1972; Nickols et al., 1986; Stahmann & Hiebert, 1987; Trainer, 1979).

While the responses to the open question indicate what general areas are important to engaged individuals, they provide limited information on which specific needs or skills should be addressed. Therefore, individuals were asked to select from an inventory of 52 items which needs or skills should be addressed in a marriage preparation program. The inventory items were selected from a review of the premarital counseling literature. The content validity of the inventory was evaluated by using three family therapists as judges.

Specific needs that engaged individuals considered to be the most important included: 1) dealing with stress from work; 2) the effect of children on marriage; 3) how to keep romance alive in marriage; 4) how to deal with anger or silence, 5) learning how to resolve differences; and 6) identifying trouble signs in marriage. The 20 most popular items are listed in Table 2.

The findings from Table 2 suggest that engaged individuals are looking to learn a variety of other skills besides simply communication or conflict negotiation skills. Engaged individuals would also like premarital counselors to help them learn financial and parenting

TABLE 2
Top Twenty Most Important Needs

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Topic or Need</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
1	Dealing with stress from work	86.6%
2	Children's affect on marriage	84.8
3	How to keep romance alive	83.9
4	Dealing with anger/silence	80.4
5	Resolving differences	76.8
6	Identifying trouble signs	75.9
7	In-laws/family	74.1
8	Being an effective listener	73.2
9	Dealing with both partners working	72.3
10	Raising/disciplining children	71.4
10	Sharing religion with children	71.4
12	How career decisions will be made	70.5
13	Taxes and insurance	67.0
14	How money decisions will be made	64.3
15	Parenting skills	63.4
16	Expectations on household chores	62.5
16	How to plan a budget	62.5
16	Learning to express one's feelings	62.5
19	How to buy a house	60.7
20	Dealing with partner's depression	59.8
20	Expectations on having children	59.8

skills. In fact, nine out of the top 20 items were related either to finances or children. (Note: Items pertaining to finances or parenting accounted for 15 out of the total 52 items.)

Unfortunately, learning financial or parenting skills typically has not been emphasized by premarital counselors. Rather, finances and parenting usually have been defined as content areas that engaged couples need to discuss, and not as skills that can be learned like communication or conflict negotiation. (Note: One exception to this is a program developed by Lown, McFadden, & Crossman [1989] that aims to prepare couples financially for remarriage.) The study suggests that engaged couples would like marriage preparation to include practical information on how to set up a budget, handle taxes

and insurance, or how to purchase a home. Many engaged individuals would also like to learn some basic parenting skills such as learning how to discipline children.

Helping couples manage the demands of careers and marriage also appears to be very important to engaged individuals. All three topics relating to careers were selected among the 12 most important needs in the closed question. All three career items were mentioned by more than 70% of the individuals. In fact, dealing with stress from work was the item selected most frequently, and was selected by more than 86% of the individuals in the study. Yet, specific skills or information to help engaged couples prepare for the impact of careers on marriage is generally nonexistent in the premarital counseling literature. Careers are seldom mentioned as a content area engaged couples should consider. Given the high number of dual career marriages, this is an important need that premarital counselors should devote more attention to.

Finally, the results point out other needs that engaged individuals have that are not addressed traditionally in the premarital counseling literature. Those needs include: 1) The effect of children on marriage; 2) how to keep romance alive in marriage; 3) identifying trouble signs in the marriage; and 4) learning how to deal with the partner's depression. These are important themes that would be helpful for premarital counselors to explore with couples.

Marriage Preparation Formats

The survey also examined which marriage preparation formats would be preferred by engaged individuals. The results in Table 3 show that counseling with a minister, weekend retreats, meeting with a married couple, and small group discussions were the clear favorites based on overall liking. Counseling by a therapist, lecture/classes, reading a book, or completing a workbook were the other four choices, and were clearly not as popular as the first four.

Table 4 shows the attributes that were considered most important in determining format preference. Engaged individuals indicated that effectiveness was the most important consideration in terms of format preference. Being interesting and protecting privacy were also important format attributes. Having a format that was inexpensive or did not require a lot of time were of lesser importance.

It is interesting to note that premarital counseling by a therapist was among the least popular format choices. It is not immediately

TABLE 3
Preference for Different Formats

<i>Type of Format</i>	<i>Mean Rating*</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>N</i>
Counseling from minister	.679	1.11	109
Weekend retreat	.636	1.10	110
Meet with married couple	.631	.94	111
Small group discussions	.559	1.09	111
Counseling from therapist	.216	1.04	111
Lecture/classes	.153	1.07	111
Read a book	.108	1.18	111
Complete a workbook	.045	1.07	111

*2 = strongly like, 1 = like, 0 = neutral, -1 = dislike, -2 = strongly dislike

TABLE 4
Format Attribute Importance

<i>Format Attribute</i>	<i>Mean Rating*</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>N</i>
Format is effective	2.43	.61	110
Format is interesting	2.14	.66	110
Format protects my privacy	1.91	.82	110
Format is inexpensive	1.59	.83	109
Format does not require a lot of time	1.40	.81	109
Format provides opportunity to meet other couples	1.36	.89	110

*3 = most important, 2 = very important, 1 = somewhat important, 0 = not important at all

obvious why counseling by a therapist would be unpopular based on the attributes that were considered most important. It is possible that counseling by a therapist carries a stigma that the other popular format choices do not carry. A breakdown by religiosity revealed that counseling by a therapist was the most popular format among the slightly religious/not religious, but was considerably less popular among the moderately religious and the very religious. In fact, counseling by a therapist was the least popular format among the very

TABLE 5
Likelihood of Participation Based on Referral Source

<i>Information Source</i>	<i>Mean Likelihood*</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>N</i>
Friend/relative	1.12	.88	112
Minister/rabbi	.92	1.02	110
Counselor	.66	.94	112
Work	-.01	.94	112
TV/radio	-.67	.92	110
Mailed brochure	-.80	1.01	112
Newspaper	-.89	.93	112

*2 = very likely, 1 = likely, 0 = unsure, -1 = unlikely, -2 = very unlikely

religious. This suggests that an individual's values may also play an important role in deciding format preference.

Sources of Information

Individuals were asked to rate the likelihood they would attend a marriage preparation program if they learned about the program from a particular source. The results (Table 5) indicate that personal sources of information such as friends/relatives, ministers, or counselors are most likely to lead an engaged individual to consider a marriage preparation program. Advertising through the mass media (TV/radio, mass mailings of brochures, or the newspaper) is least likely to lead an engaged individual to consider participating in a program. These results are consistent with Levant's findings (1987) that people were more open to going to a parenting prevention program if they heard about it from a personal source rather than impersonal sources such as the media.

These findings indicate that therapists who wish to supplement their practices with premarital counseling cases will need to rely on word-of-mouth referrals, because mass media sources were not compelling to engaged couples. Clergy will probably be the most likely source of referrals for a therapist since churches do the vast majority of premarital counseling (Olson, 1983; Stahmann & Hiebert, 1987). For example, therapists might build a referral base from clergy who wish to refer their most difficult cases. The author is also familiar

with a church that contracts out its premarital counseling to a therapist rather than having the ministers perform it. A therapist might be able to supplement his or her practice through contracts with one or more churches, but will likely have to settle for a contract fee that is substantially below the fee a therapist in private practice would make.

Attitudes Toward Marriage Preparation

Engaged individuals were surveyed to determine what their attitudes were toward marriage preparation. Results show that engaged individuals generally believe that most couples can benefit from a marriage preparation program. Only 22.3% agreed that most couples do not need special training or instruction in order to prepare themselves for marriage. Likewise, only 12.6% agreed that premarital programs should be required only for couples who were experiencing problems.

Based on self-report, compliance does not appear to be the chief reason for participating in a marriage preparation program for the majority of engaged individuals. Only 18.8% of the respondents indicated they would not participate in a program unless it were required. Likewise, only 21.5% believed they should have premarital instruction because it was expected of them. Given that nearly three-quarters (72.1%) of the individuals believed that a good premarital program would reduce the likelihood of their marriage ending in divorce, a reduced likelihood of divorce appears to be one incentive for participating in a marriage preparation program.

Readiness for Marriage

Engaged individuals appeared quite optimistic about their future marriages despite the fact that approximately half of all current marriages will end in divorce. Only a third (31.3%) agreed they were concerned about the possibility of their proposed marriage ending in divorce. Even more striking is the fact that 96.5% of individuals believed their marriages would be happy and long-lasting. Therefore, concerns about divorce seem to be more general rather than a specific concern about the relationship. Further evidence to support this is the fact that 90.1% did not anticipate any problems that they and their fiancée could not handle.

Only a small minority (6.3%) of individuals agreed that they and

their fiancée were not adequately prepared for marriage. This is consistent with previous research (Larson, 1989; Martin & Martin, 1984) which indicates that premarital individuals feel prepared for their future marriages. However, a much larger percentage (41.9%) agreed that there were problems in their relationship that needed to be addressed before marriage. Given the confidence placed in their future marriages, it is somewhat surprising to see more than 40% of the individuals admit to a problem in their relationship with their fiancée. It is possible that engaged individuals do not consider these problems as being serious, or they feel confident they will be able to address these problems successfully (like those arising after marriage).

Use of Marriage Preparation

Individuals completing the survey were asked to indicate if they had participated in any type of marriage preparation program or premarital counseling. Approximately half (50.9%) of the sample obtained premarital counseling or participated in a marriage preparation program. In addition, more than half (57.0%) of the people read a book on marriage preparation.

A stepwise multiple regression analysis was run to determine which variables were the best predictors of whether or not an individual had participated in a marriage preparation program. The predictor variables were chosen to reflect factors engaged individuals would consider in deciding whether to participate in some type of marriage preparation.

Two variables labeled Attitudes and Readiness were included in the regression analysis. Both were derived from a principle components analysis (using an orthogonal rotation) of the attitude statements discussed in the previous two sections. The Attitudes factor was comprised of four items (Cronbach's alpha = .78) and reflected how positive an attitude the individual had toward marriage preparation programs. The Readiness factor was also comprised of four items (Cronbach's alpha = .67) and reflected how well prepared the individual believed the couple was for marriage. Standardized scores for each item were weighted by factor loadings and summed to determine factor scores.

Also included in the regression analysis were variables reflecting factors that might keep individuals from participating in marriage preparation programs. These included: 1) Lack of time; 2) Do not have relationship problems; 3) Do not think programs are as effective as

counseling; 4) Too expensive; 5) Do not address topics of importance; and 6) Invasion of privacy. Finally, whether or not the program or counseling was required was included in the regression equation.

Results from the regression analysis (see Table 6) indicate three factors were useful in predicting whether or not an individual decided to participate in some type of marriage preparation program or counseling. These three variables together explained slightly more than half (51.7%) of the total variance. The most important factor was whether or not the program was required; this accounted for 38.9% of the variance. The Attitudes and Readiness factors were of next importance and accounted for an additional 9.3% and 3.6% of the variance respectively.

The regression analysis suggests that making marriage preparation mandatory or required was a major reason couples participated in a program or counseling. This is in contrast to what engaged individuals reported when surveyed regarding their attitudes toward marriage preparation. Only a small minority (approximately 20%) said they would do marriage preparation because it was either required or expected of them. It appears that most engaged individuals believe in marriage preparation in theory, but need some external pressure to put that theory into practice.

The regression results show that a positive attitude toward marriage preparation programs was positively correlated with participation in some form of marriage preparation. Because the results are correlational, it is not possible to determine whether having a more positive attitude led individuals to participate in marriage preparation, or if participating in marriage preparation created a positive attitude in individuals.

There was also a positive relationship between how well prepared an individual believed the couple was and whether they participated

TABLE 6
Stepwise Multiple Regression Results

<i>Step</i>	<i>Variable Entered</i>	<i>Multiple R</i>	<i>R Squared</i>	<i>Adjusted R-Squared</i>	<i>R-Squared Change</i>
1	REQUIRED	.623	.389	.383	.389
2	ATTITUDES	.694	.481	.471	.093
3	READINESS	.719	.517	.503	.036

in some type of marriage preparation. Again, the direction of causality is not certain because the results are correlational. It is possible that engaged individuals who felt uncertain about their relationships did not participate in programs because they did not wish to expose their relationship to scrutiny (out of a possible fear they would be told not to marry). It is also possible that participating in a marriage preparation program improved their confidence in the relationship. Future research using a longitudinal design could be used to determine whether positive attitudes toward marriage preparation and confidence in a couple's relationship lead couples to participate in marriage preparation, or if these are positive outcomes from having participated in marriage preparation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY THERAPISTS

Family therapists know from clinical experience that they will not be able to earn a living doing solely premarital counseling. Rather, most premarital counseling will probably continue to be done through churches. This is supported by this research which found that going to a therapist was generally not as popular as other marriage preparation formats such as going to a minister. This research also indicates that couples are more likely to obtain premarital counseling if it is required or mandatory. Because many couples desire to be married in a church, clergy can require premarital counseling or refuse to marry the couple in the church. However, the family therapist has no such leverage to make couples enter premarital counseling. Therefore, the family therapist generally will be restricted to working with couples who feel "forced" to come due to the severity of their problems. Couples who willingly come to a therapist due to a strong belief that marriage preparation is helpful will be a small minority.

Although family therapists cannot earn a living doing only premarital counseling, they can supplement their practices doing some premarital counseling. As discussed earlier, clergy may be a potential referral source for therapists desiring to do more premarital counseling. Family therapists might also consider donating their time and talents to a local church by doing premarital counseling. The therapist could supplement or substitute for the premarital counseling done by the pastor, or could coordinate the premarital counseling in churches where lay people do the marriage preparation.

Family therapists can also make an important contribution in premarital counseling through training clergy and others who will be doing premarital counseling. Olson (1983, p. 65) states that clergy do the majority of premarital counseling, but most feel ill-prepared to help couples properly prepare for marriage. Therefore, there is a great need to better prepare clergy for doing premarital counseling. This need for training also extends to lay people who frequently participate in preparing couples for marriage.

Training could be accomplished in a variety of ways including teaching classes, conducting workshops, or doing group or individual supervision. For example, William Hiebert (co-author of *Premarital Counseling: The Professionals Handbook*) routinely teaches courses in premarital counseling through a local seminary as well as a local university. These courses help clergy, seminary students, and others develop a systemic and developmental perspective on marriage. He and a colleague also provide classes and workshops on instruments such as PREPARE (Fournier, Olson, & Druckman, 1983) that are frequently used in premarital counseling.

Finally, family therapists also can make an important contribution in terms of conducting premarital counseling research. For example, there is a need for research proving the effectiveness of marriage preparation (Bagarozzi & Rauen, 1981; Schumm & Denton, 1979). The specificity question is pertinent here: What types of premarital counseling are most effective with different types of couples preparing for marriage? Toward this end, future research could explore how marriage preparation needs differ across different groups so that programs can be tailored to these needs. For example, how do the needs of engaged individuals preparing for their second marriage differ from those preparing for their first marriage? Likewise, does cohabitating or the length of engagement have a significant impact on marriage preparation needs? Finally, many premarital counselors are advocating sessions after the couple's wedding (Bader, et al., 1980; Buckner & Salts, 1985; Guldner, 1971; Stahmann & Hiebert, 1987). Research could explore the ways in which marriage preparation needs differ prior to and after the wedding.

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