Whatever their structure, content and underlying rationale, marriage and relationship education (MRE) programs in general aim to prevent relationship distress and breakdown by providing information about, and increasing couples’ awareness of, the factors contributing to relationship difficulties, and raising the relational skills of couples – whether they are preparing to marry or are already married. Research evidence demonstrates that participating in a marriage and relationship education program, particularly those that address the management of conflict, can benefit couples through improved communication and conflict management, and better overall relationship quality. However, whether MRE actually prevents divorce is unclear. Benefits have been found to persist for between six months and three years; however, longer-term follow-up of couples who have participated in particular programs is rare (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Halford, 1999). Hence, the case for the effectiveness of MRE in reducing the incidence of divorce stems from the capacity of programs to improve couple communication and conflict, leading to a more satisfying and stable relationship (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). In this article, a recent analysis of survey data exploring the possible link between couples’ participation in MRE and their subsequent chances of divorce is reviewed.

Examinations of the effectiveness of marriage and relationship education programs are typically relatively complex and small-scale, short-term studies of particular programs that demonstrate some improvements in couples’ relationship satisfaction and relational skills. Such studies are unable to draw conclusions as to whether these programs can reduce the likelihood of divorce. However, Robyn Parker reports on a recent analysis of a large-scale survey in which lower odds of divorce were found to be associated with participation in a pre-marriage education program.

Research on programs to help – Stepfamilies and pre-marriage education

ROBYN PARKER

Recent research on programs to help stepfamilies and pre-marriage education has examined the effectiveness of such programs in improving relationship satisfaction and skills. However, the effectiveness of these programs in reducing the likelihood of divorce is unclear. Benefits have been found to persist for between six months and three years; however, longer-term follow-up of couples who have participated in particular programs is rare (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Halford, 1999). Hence, the case for the effectiveness of pre-marriage education in reducing the incidence of divorce stems from the capacity of programs to improve couple communication and conflict, leading to a more satisfying and stable relationship (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). In this article, a recent analysis of survey data exploring the possible link between couples’ participation in pre-marriage education and their subsequent chances of divorce is reviewed.

Research in marriage and relationship education

Stanley, Amato, Johnson, and Markman (2006) pointed out that research assessing whether marriage and relationship education has any beneficial effects on its participants tends to be relatively small-scale, and often does not include the elements of random assignment and control or comparison groups. These elements of research design allow for conclusions to be drawn about the nature, magnitude and cause of any differences found between those who participated in the program and those who did not. They typically have high internal validity but limited external validity. Other research designs, such as surveys, do not generally allow for conclusions to be drawn about causality, but their findings may be extended to a broader population, provided the sample is representative of that population.

In a large-scale survey, information about a wide range of respondent characteristics can be obtained, allowing for comparisons of respondents...
from a range of diverse groups, such as those with different income levels, years of education, relationship and family types, experiences of certain life events, cultural or ethnic background, or religion. The contribution of these characteristics to outcomes such as relationship satisfaction or stability can also be controlled statistically in surveys where there are large numbers of respondents, so that the effects of various factors can be isolated.

Using a telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of 3,344 respondents from four American states, the researchers sought to identify whether and how the experience of premarital education was related to marital quality and stability. As part of the telephone interview, married (or previously married) respondents were asked whether they had participated in “premarital preparation,” such as educational classes, a workshop, or counseling designed to help you get a good start in marriage. Those who responded in the affirmative were then asked about the setting in which the preparation took place (“inside or outside of a religious setting”) and the duration of the program (number of hours). With this information, the researchers could address several questions:

- Is participating in MRE related to marital quality and stability?
- Are the links between participating in MRE and marital outcomes moderated by certain characteristics of the respondents themselves, such as their race, education, age at marriage and being in receipt of welfare?
- Are the setting or the duration of the MRE programs related to marital outcomes?

The researchers measured respondents’ marital satisfaction, level of marital conflict, commitment, their experience of divorce, whether they married in a religious setting, whether they lived together before marrying, had children from the marriage, the year and length of the marriage and their age at marriage. Their education, gender, race and whether they had ever relied on welfare support were also recorded.

The sample

Just over half the sample were women (54%). Over three-quarters (78%) had been married in a religious setting, and 77% had children. Less than one-third (31%) had attended some form of MRE, cohabited prior to marriage (31%), or been married previously (30%). On average they had married at 26 years of age, and the mean duration of marriages was 21 years.

Characteristics of MRE participants

Those who had attended some form of MRE were most likely to have been married in a religious setting, have higher levels of education, be Latino (rather than white) and been married in the latter rather than the earlier decades of the 20th century. Being black or having been in receipt of welfare support decreased the likelihood of attending MRE.

Main findings

Does participating in MRE affect the likelihood of divorce?

The analyses showed that reduced likelihood of divorce was associated with participating in MRE, having a religious marriage ceremony, having children and marrying at a later age.

Respondents more likely to have experienced divorce were those who had lived together prior to their marriage or who had received welfare support. Compared to those married in the 1930s or 1940s, those who had married in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s were more likely to divorce, with the odds rising slightly with each successive decade until the 1990s. This pattern is consistent with the divorce trends in the United States, which began to decline slightly across the 1980s and 1990s.

Does participating in MRE affect marital quality?

Only two variables – participating in MRE and living together before marriage – were significantly related to all three measures of marital quality. Those who had experienced MRE were more likely to report high marital satisfaction, low levels of marital conflict, and high levels of commitment. Living together before marrying was related to reporting less marital satisfaction, more marital conflict and lower levels of commitment.

The researchers also examined whether some respondent groups were more likely than others to be affected by participating in MRE. They found that the effect of participating in MRE on levels of marital conflict was stronger for those who had been married for shorter periods compared to those in longer marriages, suggesting a deterioration of the impact of MRE over time. The impact of participating in MRE on the likelihood of divorce was negligible for those who did not finish high school, however the effect increased as the number of years of education increased. On its own, this finding might suggest that participating in a MRE program would have little value in terms of reducing the odds of divorce for couples with lower levels of education. However it must be noted that education was not related to any of the measures of marital quality: satisfaction, conflict or commitment. Thus, while MRE would seem to be particularly beneficial in terms of the likelihood of divorce for couples with moderate or high levels of education, it also has a positive impact on the quality of couples’ relationships, regardless of spouses’ levels of education.

Does the MRE setting (religious or non-religious) matter?

Comparisons of participants and non-participants in MRE showed that the two groups differed only with respect to marital conflict. At first glance, it appeared that those who participated in MRE in a religious rather than a secular setting reported significantly less conflict in their marriage. However, when factors such as cohabitation prior to marriage, age at marriage, education, sex, race, etc., were taken into account, the differences
The positive effects of participating in an MRE program on marital quality do not appear to vary for subgroups of married couples, although there was one finding of note regarding the effect of participating in MRE on the likelihood of divorce. While marital quality appeared to be positively affected by participation in MRE, regardless of the respondents’ level of education, the likelihood of divorce was reduced for respondents who had at least finished high school, but not for those without high school education. As the authors noted for this latter group, barriers to improving the odds of a stable marriage through MRE may stem from a range of factors associated with poor education, and clarifying the relationship between such factors and marital stability, and the potential benefits to be derived from MRE, requires the collection of more detailed data than were available in this study. Nevertheless, these findings indicate that the potential for MRE to contribute to improving the long-term stability of marriages for some couples may depend on adapting programs to couples’ education, employment, economic and other family circumstances.

Nonetheless, this study provides further evidence as to the possible benefits to be derived by couples’ participating in some form of MRE, and complements the findings of prior research that takes place within the context of the program itself. While there is a great deal more research to be done, these findings reinforce the view that participation in some form of MRE can contribute to better and more stable marriages.

Endnotes
1. In Australia, the term ‘marriage and relationship education’ is used to describe the range of programs available to couples preparing to cohabit or marry or who are seeking to enhance their relationship, and is used throughout this paper. In the United States, terms such as ‘marriage preparation’, ‘premarital education’ or, as used by these authors, ‘premarital preparation’ are among those used.

References