
A Literature Review of the Strengths and Limitations of Premarital Preparation: Implications for a Canadian Context

Un Recensement de la littérature sur les forces et les limites de la préparation au mariage et les implications pour le contexte Canadien

Amy R. Green

Lynn D. Miller

University of British Columbia

ABSTRACT

The adverse effects of marital dissolution and dissatisfaction point to a need for interventions, such as premarital preparation, to improve marital quality. Although several studies support the potential for premarital preparation to improve couples' marital satisfaction and interpersonal skills, results from other studies are mixed. Moreover, current research investigating the effectiveness of premarital preparation in a Canadian context is virtually nonexistent. This literature review examines the contributions and limitations of premarital preparation from international research and discusses implications and next steps for Canadian researchers and practitioners.

RÉSUMÉ

Les effets négatifs de l'insatisfaction et la rupture maritales indiquent la nécessité de l'intervention telle que la préparation prénuptiale pour améliorer la qualité du mariage. Bien que plusieurs études soutiennent le potentiel de la préparation au mariage pour améliorer la satisfaction des couples et leurs compétences interpersonnelles, les résultats d'autres études sont moins clairs. De plus, pratiquement pas de recherche courante au Canada n'examine l'efficacité de la préparation au mariage. Se basant sur des recherches internationales, cet article examine les contributions et les limites de la préparation prénuptiale, en discute les implications, et suggère des pistes à poursuivre pour les chercheurs Canadiens et les praticiens.

A recent study of 5,500 Canadian adolescents revealed that 90% expected to marry and stay with the same partner for life (Bibby, 2009). However, Statistics Canada (2005) estimates that 38% of marriages will end in divorce before the couples' 30th wedding anniversary. Divorce rates in the United States are even higher, approximated at closer to 50% (Amato, 2010). The substantial financial costs associated with marital distress and breakdown has led several political leaders in the U.S. to advocate for what Stanley (2001, p. 272) calls a "marriage movement." This movement centres on providing efforts to avert divorce and unmarried child bearing. In fact, U.S. federal policy makers in 2006 designated

\$500 million to support premarital and marital education programs (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008), and many state governments currently offer incentives, such as discounted marriage licenses, for couples to partake in premarital preparation (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Although the Canadian government does not currently support such initiatives, Canadian couples, similar to their American neighbours, may pay hundreds of dollars to receive premarital preparation. In light of substantial public and private spending on premarital preparation, programs should be able to demonstrate their effectiveness. Although several studies on premarital programs have been conducted in the U.S., current research investigating the effectiveness of premarital preparation from a Canadian perspective is nearly nonexistent. This article will briefly outline the types of premarital preparation used in Canada and the U.S. and will critically examine the contributions and limitations of premarital preparation from international research to shed light on their effectiveness for couples in general. Based on this examination, implications for a Canadian context and next steps for Canadian researchers and practitioners will be offered.

TYPES OF PREMARITAL PREPARATION

Premarital preparation in North America can be dated back to the 1930s, with the earliest interventions being administered through churches (Duncan, Childs, & Larson, 2010). Currently, the vast majority of premarital preparation is provided in a religious context (Hart, 2003); thus, many of these funded programs directly or indirectly involve clergy participation (Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Johnson et al., 2002; Murray, 2005). However, premarital preparation is also administered by a wide range of professionals, such as mental health workers and nurses, in a number of different settings, such as private counselling practices and community mental health centres (Murray & Murray, 2004). Moreover, couples are increasingly accessing self-directed forms of premarital preparation, such as books, Internet sites, and online courses and inventories (Duncan et al., 2010).

Carroll and Doherty (2003) offer a definition of premarital education as “knowledge and skills-based training that provides couples with information on ways to sustain and improve their relationship once they are married” (p. 106). There are dozens of specific premarital education programs that are largely psychoeducational and skills-based and that follow a standardized curriculum (Bruun, 2010). Programs vary widely in their service delivery approach, content, and target population, and although some have been scientifically evaluated, many have never been researched (Dion, 2005). The best known and most researched of these premarital education programs is the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP; Markman, Stanley, Blumberg, Jenkins, & Whiteley, 2004).

A Canadian-developed curriculum is the Marriage Preparation Program. Although this program is based on the research of experts in the field, no research to date has examined the Marriage Preparation Program specifically.

Premarital counselling or therapy is fundamentally different from skills-based premarital education, involving more intensive work between couples and therapists and focusing on more specific personal problems (Duncan et al., 2010; Hawkins et al., 2008). Premarital counsellors operate from a variety of theoretical orientations: behavioural couple therapy, emotionally-focused couple therapy, insight-oriented marital therapy, imago relationship therapy, Bowen family systems theory, and solution-focused brief therapy (Bruun, 2010). Studies cited in this article that focus specifically on counselling will be referred to as *premarital counselling*, and those that focus on skills and instruction will be termed *premarital education*. When studies included both types of interventions, or when studies did not specify the type of intervention, the broader term *premarital preparation* will be used.

Some mental health practitioners working with premarital couples choose to utilize various inventories to help explore a couple's belief systems and attitudes (Bruun, 2010). Premarital inventories are typically completed by the couple independently; however, these paper/pencil or electronic measures are usually delivered as part of an overall assessment in counselling or as part of a premarital education program that also teaches conflict management, communication, and problem-solving skills (Bruun, 2010). Three widely used premarital inventories that have received substantial attention in the research literature are Premarital Personal and Relationship Evaluation (PREPARE; Olsen, Fournier, & Druckman, 1996); Facilitating Open Communication, Understanding, and Study (FOCCUS; Markey & Micheletto, 1997); and Relationship Evaluation (RELATE; Holman, Busby, Doxey, Loyer-Carlson, & Klein, 1997). All three assess couple dimensions and have been shown to be predictive of marital satisfaction and stability (Busby, Ivey, Harris, & Ates, 2007). Larson, Newell, Topham, and Nichols (2002) compared the PREPARE, FOCCUS, and RELATE inventories, and concluded that due to their high quality and predictive validity, all three can be effective for use in premarital preparation.

RATIONALE FOR PREMARITAL PREPARATION

Premarital preparation is typically designed to help couples maintain relatively high levels of functioning (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Stahmann, 2000). Because programs are provided to couples seeking to strengthen their relationships, premarital preparation can be described as preventative (Stahmann, 2000). Prevention efforts may be particularly important given the argument that once dysfunctional interaction patterns develop within a marriage, they become more difficult to change (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988). Indeed, similar to prevention efforts regarding public health issues (e.g., influenza, diphtheria, chicken pox), and how these activities have improved individuals' physical health and life circumstances across the globe, premarital preparation programs may confer similar relationship "immunity" for engaged couples.

Premarital preparation is offered with the goal of creating more stable and satisfying marriages and consequently preventing divorce (Stahmann, 2000). These goals are particularly relevant in light of an argument presented by Ambert (2009), who has researched divorce and remarriage in Canada for over 30 years. She has found that although some divorces are certainly necessary, approximately one third of divorces dissolve “average to good marriages” (p. 24) that were “actually quite salvageable” (p. 25). Consequences of these arguably unnecessary dissolutions include an increased risk of poverty (particularly for women and children) and behavioural and emotional problems for children (Ambert, 2009). Similarly troubling is research on individuals who remain in unsatisfying or conflicted relationships and who remain at risk for compromised physical and mental well-being (Stanley, 2001; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). The serious effects of divorce point to a need for prevention strategies such as premarital preparation to improve marital quality and reduce the current rates of marital distress and divorce.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF PREMARITAL PREPARATION

Improved Relationship Quality and Divorce Prevention

In 2001, leading researchers in the premarital preparation field opined, “If efforts are made to address the complexity of relationship development premaritally, then the probability of high marital quality increases” (Holman, Larson, Stahmann, & Carroll, 2001, p. 193). Based on Holman et al.’s (2001) review of research in premarital prediction of marital quality, the researchers asserted that when interventions help couples come to terms with family-of-origin experiences, revise any negative attitudes and beliefs about marriage, and improve couples’ communication and conflict resolution skills, the probability of later marital success increases. In support of these claims, Carroll and Doherty (2003), in their meta-analysis of premarital preparation programs, concluded that such programs are generally effective in producing significant gains in marital quality. In fact, of the 13 studies examined that included a control group (of which all but two randomly assigned participants to treatment and control conditions), 12 revealed that couples in the experimental group had significantly better overall relationship quality than couples in the control group at follow-up.

Other research supports the positive impact of premarital preparation on relationship quality. For example, Schumm, Resnick, Silliman, and Bell (1998) surveyed more than 14,000 traditional military couples (civilian female married to military male) and found that couples who did not receive premarital counselling had the lowest marital satisfaction scores, and that marital satisfaction improved as satisfaction with premarital counselling increased. Interestingly, they found that even relatively unsatisfactory premarital counselling was associated with higher marital satisfaction than no premarital counselling. Furthermore, studies suggest that premarital preparation may improve relationship satisfaction

both immediately following the intervention (e.g., Carlson, Daire, Munyon, & Young, 2012; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006) and long-term (e.g., Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993). For example, Carlson et al. (2012) found that both men ($n = 23$) and women ($n = 23$) in couples who completed the PREPARE program had statistically significant improvements in relationship satisfaction. Additionally, in a longitudinal controlled study, Markman and his colleagues (Markman, Floyd, et al., 1988; Markman, Renick, et al., 1993) showed that couples that participated in the PREP program premaritally had higher levels of relationship satisfaction than control couples at 3- and 4-year follow-up. Premarital education programs also show promise in reducing a couple's probability of relationship dissolution. In Markman, Floyd, et al.'s (1988) longitudinal study, the divorce rate for the intervention group was 5%, compared to 24% for the control group at 3-year follow-up. At 4-year follow-up, intervention couples continued to show lower combined rates of breakup or divorce (Markman, Renick, et al., 1993).

Premarital inventories may be useful in predicting and assessing factors related to relationship outcomes (Halford, 2004). Flowers, Montel, and Olson (1996) had 393 couples complete the PREPARE inventory prior to marriage. Results showed that couples who were identified as "conflicted" comprised nearly half of the separated or divorced group at a 3-year follow-up, and that marital satisfaction followed a linear pattern with the four PREPARE couple types (the "vitalized" group had the highest scores, followed by "harmonious," "traditional," and, finally, "conflicted"). The authors argued that inventories such as PREPARE can help counsellors and educators identify couples at risk for divorce, and, as such, tailor premarital interventions to meet various couples' specific needs.

Improved Communication and Conflict Management Skills

Most premarital preparation programs emphasize teaching communication and conflict management skills to couples (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001). This may be particularly important given the body of literature suggesting that couples' interaction patterns impact marital quality (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004), as well as Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, and Whitton's (2010) finding that premarital negative communication patterns were significantly associated with divorce and lower marital adjustment across the first five years of marriage.

In Carroll and Doherty's (2003) meta-analysis, the majority of couples in the experimental groups improved noticeably in communication and problem-solving skills, scoring significantly higher than control couples in these areas. Markman, Renick, et al. (1993) showed that these results might be sustained long-term. In their longitudinal study, these researchers found that couples that participated in PREP exhibited less negative interactions and more positive interactions at a 4-year follow-up than control couples who did not partake in a premarital preparation program. At a 5-year follow-up, couples in the experimental group continued to show increased communication skills.

Diversity, Gender, and High-Risk Couples

Limited research supports the benefits of premarital preparation programs for couples from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds (Stanley et al., 2006). Findings from pre-post studies (without control groups) suggest that the PREP program improves relationship quality for a variety of different couples, including lower-income couples in which one partner is incarcerated (Einhorn et al., 2008), and lower-income/racial minority couples expecting a baby or with a child less than 3 months old (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch, & France, 2012). Additionally, in their survey of over 3,000 American adults, Stanley et al. (2006) found that although African American couples were less likely than Caucasian couples to participate in premarital preparation, they were as likely to derive benefits when they did partake. Similarly, although economically disadvantaged couples were less likely than economically advantaged couples to participate, they too appeared to receive benefits.

Premarital preparation programs may be similarly beneficial for men and women. McGeorge and Carlson (2006) found the effectiveness of PREP did not differ by gender. The authors argued that the lack of gender effect supports the reliability and universality of the program. Furthermore, men and women may have similar needs in premarital preparation. For example, in their survey of 86 engaged couples, Sullivan and Anderson (2002) found that men and women were largely in agreement on the importance of 13 of 14 different characteristics of premarital preparation; both genders agreed that having a well-trained, trustworthy leader and relevant program content was of utmost importance. Similarly, all participants agreed that the inclusion of roleplaying activities or the gender of the program leader were of little concern.

Premarital preparation may be effective for couples at higher risk of divorce or relationship distress. Halford et al. (2001) found that high-risk couples who participated in Self-PREP (a variant of the PREP program) showed less negative communication and had higher relationship satisfaction than control couples at 4-year follow-up. Similarly, Nock, Sanchez, and Wright (2008), in their study of newlyweds across the first 5 to 7 years of marriage, concluded that “couples who seem most ‘in need’ of premarital counseling seemed to benefit most, in terms of reduced divorce” (p. 121).

Benefits of Varied Delivery Formats

In a recent study, Futris, Barton, Aholou, and Seponski (2011) concluded that premarital preparation programs could be delivered effectively in a wide variety of formats. These investigators compared engaged couples ($n = 53$) who participated in either six conjoint sessions ($n = 25$ couples) or one-day group workshops ($n = 28$ couples) of the PREPARE program and found that men and women from both groups showed similar increases in their understanding and application of strategies to enhance their relationship. Furthermore, couples in both formats reported gains in their confidence in handling future conflicts and in their ability

to stay together. Other research has also found limited differences between group and conjoint session formats in producing positive outcomes (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; McGeorge & Carlson, 2006; Owen et al., 2012). Varied formats may be promising for many couples, given that group sessions tend to be more cost and time effective than individual couple counselling (Futris et al., 2011). Similarly, Duncan et al. (2010) found that four types of premarital interventions (class, workshop, counselling, and self-directed) were seen as helpful, with only small differences in their effect on positive change.

Additional Benefits

Participating in premarital counselling may increase couples' awareness that help is available should they encounter distress later in their marriage (Stanley, 2001). In support of this contention, Bader, Microys, Sinclair, Willett, and Conway (1980) found that couples who were randomly assigned to partake in premarital preparation could name more types of helpers and reported using a wider support system in solving individual or marital problems than control couples at a 1-year follow-up. Additionally, premarital interventions may decrease the likelihood that couples will make impulsive decisions to wed by giving them more time for thoughtful reflection (Stanley, 2001). As Stanley (2001) stated, "Delay and deliberation can help some couples discover dynamics that may lead them not to marry at all, saving them from the agony of marital distress and divorce later" (p. 273).

LIMITATIONS OF PREMARITAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Despite research supporting the effectiveness of premarital preparation, conclusions regarding divorce prevention, marriage enhancement, and other proposed outcomes are questionable due to the limited number of robust longitudinal studies. In fact, in their meta-analysis of evaluation research on premarital education, Fawcett, Hawkins, Blanchard, and Carroll (2010) concluded that "we do not see good evidence yet for a positive effect of premarital education on relationship quality/satisfaction, at least over the short time frame of the typical study" (p. 225). Adding clout to this assertion is Sullivan and Bradbury's (1997) finding that, after assessing marital outcomes in 60 couples after 18 months, there were no differences in marital satisfaction and stability between couples who participated in premarital preparation and those who did not. These findings suggest that Carroll and Doherty's (2003) assertion that premarital preparation programs are generally effective should not be taken for granted, and that the field of premarital preparation may best be served by ongoing, vigorous research.

Methodological Concerns in the Research

Published versus unpublished studies. Carroll and Doherty's (2003) meta-analysis of premarital education is cited widely throughout the literature. However, several methodological problems in their study challenge their findings (Fawcett et al., 2010). For example, the researchers failed to include unpublished studies in

their analysis. Although this is a common approach to the meta-analytic method, only including “positive” outcome studies can result in overestimated effect sizes (Fawcett et al., 2010). Fawcett et al. (2010) used what they argued to be the current best research practices to conduct a new meta-analysis. The researchers examined 47 independent studies, including unpublished doctoral dissertations, from 1975 to 2008. Published and unpublished studies were similar in their inclusion of evidence-based programs and standardized outcome measures. From their analysis, the authors concluded that, when unpublished studies are included in the analysis, premarital preparation programs are not shown to increase relationship satisfaction. When analyses were limited to published studies exclusively, the overall effect size was significant, providing evidence that previous studies may exaggerate the efficacy of premarital preparation programs (Fawcett et al., 2010).

Short-term designs. Most controlled studies are limited by their use of short-term follow-up (e.g., Carlson et al., 2012; Stanley et al., 2006). This is problematic given that the goal of premarital preparation is to support long-term marital satisfaction and functioning (Stanley, 2001). In fact, very few studies have examined the outcomes of premarital preparation programs after more than one year (Halford et al., 2001). More studies are needed that follow couples past the “honeymoon stage” to determine the long-term effects of premarital preparation programs on marital quality and deterioration (Fawcett et al., 2010).

Self-report versus observational measures. The assessment methods used in premarital preparation studies may be a significant moderator of the effects found (Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2009). Carroll and Doherty (2003) found that premarital preparation studies using self-report measures to detect changes in couple interactions had smaller effect sizes than studies using observational measures. Blanchard et al. (2009) suggested that, although behavioural observations may assess how well couples learn a targeted skill, they may not reflect couples’ overall interaction and problem-solving competencies. In other words, “It is one thing to demonstrate their newly acquired skills in a post-intervention laboratory and another to generalize those skills in the hubbub of real, day-to-day life” (Fawcett et al., 2010, p. 235).

Furthermore, when using observational methods, participants’ behaviours are interpreted by researchers rather than by the couples themselves. Thus, the generalizability of their behaviours may be limited (Blanchard et al., 2009). The above findings point to at least two implications: First, more research is needed that collects both self-report and observational data to better determine the effectiveness of premarital preparation (Blanchard et al., 2009). Second, programs may need to better prepare couples to translate their newly acquired skills into the overall schema of their communication and problem-solving patterns (Fawcett et al., 2010).

Limitations of Premarital Inventories

Premarital inventories often place greater emphasis on providing feedback than actual skills training (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). Silli-

man, Stanley, Coffin, Markman, and Jordan (2002) argued that the use of premarital inventories to identify relationship weaknesses may actually be harmful if couples are not helped to cope effectively with the highlighted issues. However, because published research on the long-term effects of inventory administration is lacking, it is unclear whether or not this argument is valid (Halford, 2004). Furthermore, inventories rely on self-report measures, which may be less reliable (Blanchard et al., 2009). Thus, future research involving the use of premarital inventories would be best served by long-term designs incorporating observational methods.

Generalizability Concerns

Research in premarital preparation has included mostly young, Caucasian, well-educated, middle-class couples entering their first marriage (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Fawcett et al., 2010; Holman & Linford, 2001). This makes generalizing findings to couples of different ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds and to couples entering their second or third marriage difficult. Additionally, couples engaging in premarital preparation typically make a personal decision to participate (Bader et al., 1980) and may arguably be more committed and less likely to divorce than other couples (Stanley, 2001). Similarly, couples at higher risk for marital distress and divorce may be less likely to participate in premarital preparation programs (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, Markman, & Johnson, 2009; Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997). For example, Doss et al. (2009) found that couples with lower levels of education, household income, religiousness, or those who lived together before marriage—factors found to be associated with marital dissolution—were less likely to partake in premarital counselling. Rigorous studies that randomly assign couples to intervention and control conditions can, however, rule out such selection effects, and such studies do exist in the field of premarital preparation (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). There is a need for more well-controlled, high-quality research in this area (Fawcett et al., 2010).

Religious underpinnings. The majority of premarital preparation programs in Canada and the U.S. are provided in a religious context (Hart, 2003; Wilmoth & Smyser, 2012). These programs may be less relevant for nonreligious couples because such couples generally prefer to obtain premarital preparation in a secular environment (Stanley et al., 2006). Furthermore, because many premarital programs are offered through the Catholic or other Christian churches (Stanley et al., 2006), they may exclude or be irrelevant for couples from other religious denominations.

In their survey of over 3,000 American adults, Stanley et al. (2006) found that couples married in religious settings were over seven times more likely than couples married in secular settings to have participated in premarital counselling or education. However, religion itself may be a protective factor for many couples (Stanley & Markman, 1992). In other words, religious couples who partake in premarital counselling may be more committed to marriage and less likely to divorce than other couples with or without premarital preparation (Holman & Linford,

2001). Thus, because research participants in studies on premarital preparation are often recruited through their religious organizations (e.g., Markman et al., 2010), these studies, even when well controlled, may overestimate the efficacy of premarital preparation and its generalizability to non-religious couples (Stanley & Markman, 1992).

NEXT STEPS FOR CANADIAN RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS

Several studies support the potential for premarital preparation programs to produce gains in marital satisfaction and interpersonal skills in couples (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). However, contradictory research contributes to an ongoing debate over the actual effectiveness of premarital preparation interventions (Fawcett et al., 2010). It is the responsibility of researchers to conduct more high-quality, longitudinal, and controlled research in the premarital preparation field to determine the best methods of intervention and their effectiveness with a wide range of couples.

Currently, very little research has examined premarital preparation in Canada. In fact, only one study (to the authors' knowledge), conducted over 30 years ago (Bader et al., 1980), has empirically investigated the use of premarital preparation in Canada. Thus, little is understood about the effectiveness of premarital preparation in a Canadian context or how Canadian couples utilize and benefit from premarital interventions. It is important that Canadian researchers begin to address how premarital preparation can serve the needs of the diverse Canadian population.

Limited studies have examined couples' preferences regarding the content and characteristics of premarital preparation programs (Sullivan & Anderson, 2002). An important next step for researchers is to include the client perspective in order to identify any discrepancies between couples' needs and what is being offered by practitioners. For example, Wilmoth and Smyser (2012) found that nearly half of the clergy they surveyed who offered premarital preparation ($n = 793$) required that couples remained sexually abstinent. This may not be relevant for many couples, or may deter some couples from engaging in premarital preparation.

Furthermore, in a Canadian context it is important to investigate not only the needs of heterosexual, well-educated, middle-class couples, but also diverse couples representative of the Canadian population. For example, according to Statistics Canada (2011), there are over 60,000 same-sex couples in Canada, and—reflecting the legalization of same-sex marriage across Canada since 2005—approximately 20,000 of these couples are married. However, because no empirical research has investigated premarital preparation with same-sex couples, little is known about the unique needs of these couples in accessing and utilizing premarital preparation. Furthermore, premarital preparation is rarely offered to same-sex couples (Shurts, 2008). Given the fact that many religions are opposed to same-sex unions while the majority of premarital preparation is offered by members of the clergy,

same-sex couples may not be comfortable in accessing premarital preparation in this manner (Shurts, 2008).

Shurts (2008) offered recommendations for premarital preparation for same-sex couples (which, due to legal restrictions on marriage between same-sex couples in most countries, he termed *pre-union* counselling). He asserted that the biggest challenge for practitioners working with this population is getting same-sex couples through the door, and that, before this can happen, a paradigm shift is needed wherein same-sex couples are viewed with the same respect and legitimacy as their heterosexual counterparts. Casquarelli and Fallon (2011) suggested that premarital preparation become inclusive of the needs of same-sex couples by covering topics such as relationship issues resulting from societal discrimination and ways to nurture a relationship within a social context that perpetuates discrimination. Overall, they argued that current premarital preparation is not serving the unique needs of same-sex couples, and that researchers and practitioners have a responsibility to design, implement, and research premarital preparation for same-sex couples.

Additionally, Canada's profile has become increasingly multicultural, with the number of visible minorities growing (Statistics Canada, 2010). In fact, Canadians identify with more than 200 different ethnic origins, and Statistics Canada (2010) estimates that, by 2031, 29–32% of the population could belong to a visible minority group. It is important that advances and research in premarital preparation in Canada address the unique ethnic and cultural needs of the population. For example, future premarital programs might offer more culturally relevant examples, activities, and leaders. Premarital counsellors and educators should also be willing to explore the unique issues faced by these couples that can impact relationship quality (e.g., racism, different value systems; Owen et al., 2012). Moreover, research and advancements in this field should honour the diverse needs of Canada's first peoples, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis individuals.

The finding that high-risk couples are less likely to participate in premarital education or counselling (Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997) suggests that educators and clinicians are failing to reach couples at greatest need of intervention (Sullivan & Anderson, 2002) and that premarital programs are failing to address the unique needs of high-risk and lower-income couples (Dion, 2005). Conventional teaching methods utilized in such programs, such as didactic instruction, are often inappropriate for the literacy levels and learning styles prevalent amongst higher-risk populations (Dion, 2005). Thus, although research suggests that high-risk couples may benefit the most from premarital preparation programs (Sullivan & Anderson, 2002), such programs cannot be effective if they are inaccessible and ineffective for these couples. Canadian practitioners and agencies should be aware of and sensitive to the unique needs of this population—for example, offering curricula with a more hands-on, experiential approach, or providing child-minding or transportation reimbursement for those who are economically disadvantaged (Owen et al., 2012).

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING PRACTICE

Unlike other types of counselling (e.g., addictions or grief), Canadian practitioners who offer premarital preparation are in the unique position of helping couples in a largely preventive manner. Existing research reveals that such work is beneficial for a wide range of individuals and can be effectively delivered in a variety of formats. This research is promising, given that promoting healthy marriages is important. Unhealthy and conflicted marriages are associated with compromised psychological health (Overbeek et al., 2006; Whisman, 2007), alcohol abuse (Whisman, Uebelacker, & Bruce, 2006), decreased physical health (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu, & Needham, 2006), and suicide attempts (Kaslow et al., 2000). However, the conclusions of the research are mixed in regards to the effectiveness of premarital preparation; thus, in order to provide the highest quality of premarital preparation possible, it is the practitioner's responsibility to monitor the research on the most efficacious interventions, and consider each couple's specific needs in providing premarital preparation.

Farley (2011) argued that, with the rising number of couples choosing to cohabit rather than marry, limiting early relationship interventions to those who are "marrying" could be detrimental and isolating to a significant number of couples. In light of this argument, it would be beneficial for practitioners to include preventive counselling and education to all couples wanting to make a stronger commitment to one another—whether it is in the form of, for example, marriage, cohabitation, or common-law union. Additionally, because the majority of premarital preparation is offered through the clergy, practitioners working outside the church could advertise relationship preparation more widely. Couples who do not attend a religious institution may not even be aware that such interventions are available.

Gonzales (2009) pointed out that one of the consequences of divorce is remarriage. Such marriages often bring children into the union, creating blended families. Gonzales argued that a preventive approach (which he termed "preblended family counselling") should be available wherein all family members meet with a counsellor or educator before they are legally and officially acknowledged as a new family. It is important that practitioners alter their services when premarital preparation includes multiple family members and blended families with children.

CONCLUSIONS

Little is known about successful premarital preparation being implemented with Canadian couples. Due to the adverse and painful effects of marital dissolution in the context of increasing rates of divorce, several studies support the potential for premarital preparation to improve couples' marital satisfaction and interpersonal skills. However, premarital preparation demands further scrutiny, due to mixed results and the question of generalizability to the Canadian populace. Successful premarital preparation, as suggested from research with couples in the United

States, is sensitive to couples' unique needs and marital expectations, and focuses on communication and conflict management skills. Additionally, for any type of premarital preparation to be successful, the program must be successful at getting all types of couples interested in attending. Thus, premarital preparation needs to be well advertised, accessible, and available to Canadian couples. Helping couples learn that assistance is available to explore and strengthen their relationship is the first step for premarital preparation. Fawcett et al. (2010) argued that "the time has come for marriage educators to critically examine and reconsider the content, intensity, methods, settings, delivery mechanisms, and target populations of premarital education" (p. 236). As Canadian researchers empirically examine the delivery of premarital preparation in Canada, and as educators and practitioners monitor this research and refine their practices, service delivery in this country may become more effective and relevant for Canadian couples.

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About the Authors

Amy Green is an MA candidate in counselling psychology at UBC. Her thesis research explores the lived experience of creative expression with young adult cancer survivors.

Lynn D. Miller is an associate professor of counselling psychology in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, University of British Columbia. She conducts school-based research in the area of prevention of mental health disorders in children and youth.

Address correspondence to Amy Green; email <amyrosegreen@gmail.com>