

Recent progress in marriage and relationship education in Australia

Robyn Parker

Rising rates of marriage breakdown in Australia have led to increasing interest in and support for strategies that help couples withstand both the everyday hassles and less common stressors that impact on relationships. One of these strategies involves the provision of marriage and relationship education services. This paper summarises recent developments aimed at addressing challenges and directions for the field of marriage and relationship education, originally outlined by Halford (1999). Issues of service accessibility, effectively incorporating research into practice, tailoring program content to specific clients, and evaluation of programs aimed specifically at couples preparing to marry or re-marry, or those wanting to enrich or adapt to changes in their marriage, relationship or life circumstances, are examined.

Learning about marriage and relationships takes place informally throughout the life course, but more formal learning can take place through structured programs. Marriage and relationship education (MRE) programs aim to reduce the risk, prevalence, and costs, in social and personal terms, of marital or relationship distress. Programs are designed to impart skills and information and raise awareness of the factors known to contribute to, or detract from, a happy, stable relationship (Markman & Halford, 2005). Although open to couples not intending to marry, historically the field in Australia has focused on the marital relationship, with programs often referred to as pre-marriage education or marriage preparation. A more inclusive terminology is now used (*marriage and relationship* education) to reflect the range of relationship types found in Australian society and the breadth of services in which education about relationships might occur.

The origin of the field of marriage and relationship education in Australia is likely to have been in the Pre-Cana Conferences offered to marrying couples by the Young Christian Workers in the 1940s. These lectures promoted Christian values as a remedy for the rise in marital breakdown following the Second World War (Harris, Simons, Willis, & Barrie, 1992). From the lecture-based, large-group structure of those original marriage-centric conferences, the field has moved to largely learner-centred and facilitative programs designed for individuals and couples in varying



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types of relationships, at various stages in the life course, delivered in a wide range of settings, by a diverse group of providers (Harris et al., 1992; Simons & Parker, 2002).

In Australia, marriage and relationship education programs may be delivered as part of a large welfare organisation operating under the auspices of a particular church (church-affiliated), by a provider based in a particular church or parish (church-based), or by one of a diverse group of community-based, independent, secular providers. Staff involved in delivering a program also vary in their backgrounds and qualifications, and the development of programs tends to be influenced by the orientation of those designing or overseeing a particular program and the environment in which the service is provided (Simons & Parker, 2002). Relationship education can be found in programs and services operated by many hospitals, schools, juvenile justice and corrections facilities, community-based education or health care centres, the defence forces, and workplaces (Employee Assistance Programs) (Simons & Parker, 2002).

Despite the diversity in programs, certain content areas are commonly addressed: understanding relationships; self-awareness, self-care, or self-esteem; and communication and conflict resolution (Simons & Parker, 2002). Most marriage and relationship education in church-based programs is targeted at single people seeking a partner, or at couples who are marrying, married, or re-marrying. Secular and church-affiliated providers offer services for the range of couple groups, as well as a broad range of clients including adolescents, parents, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, gay and lesbian couples, and couples where one partner is ill. Some relationship education takes place in programs in which relationship elements are *embedded* within courses designed for other purposes, such as preparing military families for overseas deployment, or parenting programs. About one quarter of Australian relationship education activities take place in embedded programs (Simons & Parker, 2002).

The predominant mode of service delivery is face-to-face, either in a group or as an individual couple, however new flexible methods of service delivery are emerging, such as the Couple Commitment and Relationship Enhancement (Couple CARE) (Halford, Moore, Wilson, Dyer, & Farrugia, 2004), self-directed packages aimed at couples living in rural and remote regions (Donaghy & Mackay, 1999), and internet-based services such as the RELATE inventory¹ (Halford, 1999).

¹ www.relate-institute.org

Challenges in marriage and relationship education

As a field, marriage and relationship education has only recently become well organised (Simons & Parker, 2002). In the past two decades, changes in the field have come about partly as a result of:

- increased funding by the Australian Government, which helped to expand the number of programs available as well as opening the door to the involvement and recruitment of a wider range of professional educators and providers;
- the introduction of inventory-based approaches such as PREPARE-ENRICH (Olsen, Fournier, & Ruckman, 1982) and FOCCUS (Markey, 1985) during the 1980s and 1990s;
- the gradual adoption of new approaches to program delivery that – at least to some degree – applied principles of adult education, provided training in communication and conflict management skills, and gave participating couples input into program content; and
- the recognition that couples can benefit from educative programs at stages of the life course other than just the transition to marriage (Harris et al., 1992; Simons & Parker, 2002).

Along with these developments have come questions regarding the basis on which MRE programs are constructed and the ways in which they are provided. There is general agreement across the sector that the field faces a number of challenges. Halford (1999) outlined several of these in his review of the field. Evidence of progress in addressing some of these challenges – incorporating research findings into programs, awareness and accessibility, program content, and research and evaluation of programs – is discussed below.

Incorporating research findings into programs

A frequent comment made by reviewers of marriage and relationship education is the need for programs to be firmly grounded in evidence about what makes relationships ‘work’. Three categories of risk and protective factors have been identified (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004):

- Positivity – affection, supportive behaviours, couple time, couple identity, and expression of emotions.
- Negativity – negative emotions and behaviours, non-responsiveness, and the demand-withdraw pattern of interaction.
- Cognitions – realistic beliefs and expectations, knowledge and understanding of partner, equity, consensus and attributions and biases.

Halford (1999) provides a more comprehensive classification of the predictors of relationship dissatisfaction that distinguishes between dynamic, or modifiable, risk factors (e.g., aspects of couple interaction such as communication and conflict management styles, partners’ goals, and supportive behaviours) and static, or fixed, risk factors (e.g., experience of parental divorce, or parental status).

Evidence from providers participating in the survey of Australian relationship education activities conducted in 2002 (Simons & Parker, 2002) indicates that both risk and protective factors are incorporated into Australian programs. In particular, protective factors of interpersonal support, friendship, fun, and commitment and the risk factors of poor communication/conflict skills, dysfunctional attitudes and beliefs, and other negative couple interactions are addressed. This would suggest that educators are aware of the need to include research findings, have acquired information (in part through articles written for, or reprinted in, educator resources such as “Threshold”² and “The Educator”³, or via conference attendance), and have devised ways of imparting the relevant knowledge or skill.

Unfortunately the survey was unable to determine how these issues were dealt with in the context of the particular program – what activities were based around them, how much time was spent on each, the actual messages given to couples, etc – or what criteria are used to

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2 Published by the Catholic Society for Marriage Education (www.csme.catholic.org.au/threshold.html).

3 Published by the Marriage and Relationship Educators Association of Australia (www.mareaa.asn.au).

determine the quality of the findings to be incorporated into programs. Critical information is still lacking with respect to how these findings are being used in the range of settings in which programs are delivered, the extent to which they are altered from the original authors' concepts or theories, and the proportion of time allocated to each within a given program. Until programs are more widely documented, it will be difficult to determine whether and how the transmission of knowledge and skills derived from research on relationships has an influence on individual partners' cognitions or behaviours, how other factors in couples' lives affect or are affected by the educative experience, and how long any effects may last.

Awareness and accessibility

Conservative estimates suggest that approximately 20 to 30 per cent of couples marrying in Australia attend some form of pre-marriage relationship education (House of Representatives, 1998; Simons et al., 1994). Of those, couples with characteristics known to put a relationship at risk are underrepresented among participants (Halford, O'Donnell, Lizzio, & Wilson, 2006). Providers recognise the need to actively reach out to groups who are less likely to access couple and family services. Across the field of marriage and relationship education, efforts are being made to facilitate access to these services for particular groups by creating new programs or

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tailoring existing programs to their specific needs. In 2002, around 16 per cent of programs were conducted specifically for Indigenous couples or groups, and 17 per cent for those from culturally and linguistically diverse groups (Simons & Parker, 2002). There were also programs offered for, among others, couples where one partner is ill (14%), gay or lesbian couples (17%), prisoners or their partners (12%), and couples where one or both partners has a physical or intellectual disability (14%).

A number of obstacles to participation in marriage and relationship education services have been identified. Awareness of programs is, of course, essential. A review of the Family Relationship Services Program identified a lack of awareness of the Program and of the benefits of preventive services such as Family Relationships Education. Awareness and access are also hindered by the lack of a crisis event to serve as a catalyst for finding and utilising a service (Colmar Brunton Social Research, 2004). One initiative that may be helping to increase public knowledge of the existence of marriage and relationship education is the reforms to the marriage celebrants program implemented in 2003 by the Australian Government Department of the Attorney-General. The reforms require celebrants to at least advise couples planning to marry of the availability of marriage and relationship education programs. While more couples planning to marry will become aware of the existence of marriage and relationship education, it is debatable whether the period leading up to the wedding is the optimum time for relationship education to take place.

Simons, Harris and Willis (1994) found that almost three in four of the marrying couples they surveyed were, in fact, aware of pre-marriage programs, yet only 23 per cent of these actually participated. Simons et al. (1994) identified predominantly intrinsic factors as most important barriers to participation, in that they reflected characteristics or attitudes of the individual respondents – their belief in keeping personal issues private, perceptions of programs as not relevant to them or as being closely associated with religious organisations, lack of interest, or their own or their partner's previous marital experience. Extrinsic factors that respondents rated as important related to time constraints, cost, and availability in their area.

Further insights were gained from responses to open-ended questions asked of those who did not participate in a program about their non-attendance. Some responses suggest that there are members of the public who are unlikely to be convinced about the value of marriage and relationship education – those who hold strong beliefs about marriage as a private relationship, or who believe that they and their partner have sufficient relationship experience or are so well-suited that they have no need for such programs.

In addition to informing members of the public about marriage and relationship education through civil celebrants, further attempts to improve public knowledge and awareness of programs have been implemented by the Australian Government in recent years, including subsidising the cost of programs and creating web-based materials (Halford, 1999; Simons & Parker, 2002).

Van Acker (2005) suggests that greater use of the mass media would advance the process of normalising marriage and relationship education. If attending parenting education programs can become broadly acceptable, she asks, why not marriage and relationship education?

In principle it would seem to make sense to use a mass media/public education campaign to raise awareness of, and participation in MRE. Such a campaign would need to be able to capture (a) the range of beliefs and attitudes contributing to people's reticence to participate in MRE, and (b) the range of conditions under which changes in attitudes that flow on to changes in behaviour can be achieved (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1997). However, simply improving awareness of MRE services may not necessarily lead to increasing public acceptance of, or participation in, MRE. Previous attempts to promote marriage and relationship education programs appear to have achieved little in the way of measurable increases in knowledge of or attendance at programs (Halford, 1999). The multimedia 'Relate' campaign had no apparent impact on the general public in terms of awareness or recognition (Francas & Zappelli, 1999). Educator feedback and the evaluation consultants' conclusions suggest that the campaign needed to be longer and to include television advertising.

Some researchers have suggested that specialised recruitment techniques are required in order to increase the number of at-risk couples coming to programs (Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997), and there is evidence that a strategy involving broadcasting factors that place couples at risk and providing information about relationship education improved the proportion of high risk couples participating in a program (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001). It seems reasonable, then, to suggest that facilitating the development and implementation of strategies similar to those used successfully elsewhere for attracting high risk couples to programs would be an effective way of building the client base for those programs as well as raise the profile of MRE in general, especially if done systematically and collaboratively across regions or agencies.

Program content

Although programs that are directed at meeting the needs of specific groups are emerging (Simons & Parker, 2002) these tend to be programs into which couples self-select. That is, providers do not tend to assess couples for characteristics such as experience of violence or history of psychological disorder, which might suggest a need for a specific kind of program that would better meet their needs (Halford, 1999). While ideally such assessment would be routine and the appropriate resources readily available, this is a complicated and potentially confronting issue, and for many providers it may not be practicable.

Just as some mainstream programs will not address the needs of couples with certain patterns of interacting, there are other couples for which programs may need to be customised, such as those with significant cultural or language issues (for example, one or both families of origin are from a non English-speaking background). Programs for specific culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups are available,⁴ but demand outstrips supply (Urbis Keys Young, 2004). In developing programs and resources, providers are cognisant of the need to avoid 'half-baked' responses (especially in regard to services for Indigenous clients) and extensive consultation and relationship-building is undertaken between providers and members of the target community. There is also acknowledgement among some practitioners across the spectrum of family relationships services (that is, other subprograms of the Family Relationships Services Program) that they lack the specialist knowledge or expertise to begin the process (Urbis Keys Young, 2004).

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Some resources are beginning to appear that would help practitioners adapt existing programs to particular cultural needs. For example, Huang (2005) suggests a number of strategies to facilitate positive experiences and outcomes for couples from several Asian societies (see box on page 9). It may be unwise, however, to assume that all couples from a particular CALD group would prefer to attend a program specifically targeted to their familial or cultural background. Anecdotally, it appears that some couples from CALD backgrounds "vote with their feet" and enrol

⁴ For example, Centacare Melbourne has worked with the local Vietnamese community to provide a program for Vietnamese couples, run by Vietnamese educators, and delivered at their local place of worship; Relationships Australia in both NSW and Adelaide provide programs specifically for various CALD communities (Urbis Keys Young, 2004).

in non-targeted programs even when one is available (Jenny Cleal,⁵ personal communication, September 2006). It would therefore be useful to establish evidence of the program preferences of couples from CALD and Indigenous communities before investing significant resources in establishing programs that are unlikely to be well attended.

Research and evaluation of programs

As well as using research to inform the content of programs (discussed above) there is a need to know whether and how programs work, as well as which programs work for which clients and the durability of any effects. In the past several years, the topic of research and evaluation has gradually become more prominent at state and national marriage and relationship education and other family services conferences. It has also been the subject of a number of reports and papers (for example, Halford, 1999; Simons & Parker, 2002; Urbis Keys Young, 2004), and become part of the conditions upon which Commonwealth funding for marriage and relationship programs is contingent. Although more conversations about research and evaluation may be occurring across the sector, it is difficult to determine the extent of any research and evaluation activities being undertaken beyond those specifically submitted as part of funding agreements. Few programs are fully documented, and little research that is undertaken makes its way into (refereed) publications.

While programs are themselves plentiful, there is a paucity of published, peer-reviewed research as to their effectiveness (Larson, 2004). The exception is some skills-based programs, for example, Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) (Markman et al., 1994) and Relationship Enhancement (RE) (Guerney, 1977). Studies do show that couples are generally satisfied with the program they attended (Halford & Behrens, 1996; Harris et al., 1992), although this can depend on factors such as age, education, effort expended to attend the program, and the time between the program and the wedding (Russell & Lyster, 1992). However, if the objective of programs is to prevent the development of relationship difficulties, studies of couples' satisfaction with the program add little to our knowledge as to whether programs contribute to the creation and maintenance of healthy stable relationships. Overall, research demonstrates that participants' relationship satisfaction increases slightly in the short term. Participants also acquire or improve their relationship skills and retain these for at least the first few years of the relationship (Halford, 1999), but questions remain. For instance, the relative effectiveness of various elements of a program is unknown (Larson, 2005).

Research into marriage and relationship education, Australian or otherwise, tends to be somewhat flawed. Few studies adhere to the strict scientific principles of using control and comparison groups and random assignment to treatment and non-treatment groups (Larson, 2005). Notwithstanding the need for well-designed research grounded in scientific principles, there needs to be an acknowledgement that such principles are very difficult to apply in the service environment. Methods such as those used in action research may provide the best alternative (Tomison, 2000; Parker, 2005). Excellent, in-depth information that can be immediately accessible to individual service providers can also be obtained through qualitative research methods, and can be gathered as part of the ongoing assessment and evaluation of the program itself. Providers do have access to considerable resources that would allow them to conduct their own research and evaluation studies (perhaps in collaboration with other providers of similar services), but actually carrying out such activities can create significant additional burdens, over and above actually conducting the project, on the managers and coordinators of programs (Parker, 2005). Support from funders and provider organisations to facilitate the establishment and ongoing conduct of research and evaluation efforts from within the field are essential to its ongoing development.

Conclusion

Recent evidence suggests that, within the field of marriage and relationship education, service providers are addressing the various challenges identified by Halford (1999) in various ways. This includes the development of innovative approaches designed to improve accessibility for groups

5 At the time of writing, Jenny Cleal was the Co-ordinator of the Marriage & Relationship Education Program at Lifeworks in Melbourne.

other than couples preparing for marriage, to accommodate specific life circumstances such as living in rural and remote regions, and to adapt to cultural customs and differences.

Programs are available for couples from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, in web-based and self-directed formats, and for individuals and couples in a range of specific settings such as those in correctional facilities or in the defence forces. These and other programs, such as those focusing on post-separation and step-parenting, are innovative responses to the gaps in service provision identified over the past ten to fifteen years. It is likely that some relationship education is provided to under-served groups in ways that are not identified as 'relationship education' per se, but embedded in other educative programs or in other family relationship support services such as counselling or family skills training. It may also be the case that, with respect to some of these under-served target groups, the situation has improved somewhat in the intervening years. However there is a lack of published information about these efforts. The forthcoming reports of services and client characteristics based on data collected via the FaCSLink⁶ system will, to some extent, clarify the picture with respect to which previously identified gaps in service provision are being redressed – but only for programs funded through the Family Relationships Services Program.

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Clearly, much greater emphasis needs to be placed upon documenting programs and practices in ways that allow for dissemination across the sector, so that more providers have access to resources that facilitate the development and delivery of programs across a wider area (Catholic Welfare Australia & Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006; Simons & Parker, 2002). More attention to applying research in program content and processes, and to conducting program research and evaluation is also required if the marriage and relationship education sector is to realise its potential to contribute to the health and wellbeing of Australians (Halford, 1999). However, these activities do not occur in a vacuum and require additional resources and infrastructure, as well as inter-agency cooperation and collaboration, to allow research and evaluation activities to become an integral part of program design and delivery.

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⁶ For more information go to www.facsia.gov.au/frsp

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Further information

For information and contact details for marriage and relationship education programs and providers in your area, contact the relevant organisation.

Industry representative bodies

Relationships Australia: www.relationships.com.au

Relationships Australia is one of Australia's largest community-based organisations providing relationship support to people regardless of age, religion, gender, cultural or economic background. Most clients seek their services to help strengthen and build relationships or resolve relationship breakdown issues. These services are provided through education programs, counselling programs, primary dispute resolution services and children's services.

Family Services Australia: www.fsa.org.au

Family Services Australia is the largest national Industry Representative Body and member association of providers of family relationships and other family support services. It has over 85 member organisations across Australia in receipt of Commonwealth funding to provide services under the Family Relationships Services Program.

Catholic Social Services Australia: www.catholicwelfare.com.au

Catholic Social Services Australia is the Catholic Church's peak national body for social services in Australia. The 62 member organisations provide social services to over a million Australians a year, delivering services in local communities in metropolitan, regional and remote Australia.

Marriage Education Associations

Catholic Society for Marriage Education: www.csme.catholic.org.au

Marriage and Relationship Educators Association of Australia: www.mareaa.asn.au

Australian Government resources

Family Relationship Services Program: www.facsia.gov.au/frsp

Family Relationships Online: www.familyrelationships.gov.au

Marriage Celebrant Program: www.ag.gov.au/www/agd/agd.nsf/Page/Marriage_Becoming_acelebrant_Becomingacelebrant

Research-related resources

The AFRC website (www.aifs.gov.au/afrc) provides a number of resources related to marriage and relationship education, including a bibliography (www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/bibs/marriageeducation.html).

Several of Professor Kim Halford's publications are available online at the Griffith Psychological Health Research Centre: www.gu.edu.au/centre/gphrc. The GPHRC researches psychological health. The broad goal of the GPHRC is to conduct research that assists in the development and dissemination of evidence based psychological interventions that promote psychological health. This will include research on basic psychological therapies for people with significant distress and mental health problems and early interventions to promote psychological health and prevent psychological health problems.

International Association for Relationships Research: www.iarr.org

The International Association for Relationship Research (IARR) seeks to stimulate and support the scientific study of personal relationships and encourage cooperation among social scientists worldwide. IARR sponsors two journals, *Personal Relationships* and the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, a book series called *Advances in Personal Relationships*, a newsletter, a biennial conference, and annual workshops and specialty conferences.

Some strategies for adapting Western marriage and relationship education programs to benefit Asian couples:

- Use the parent–child relationship as an introduction to addressing the couple relationship.
- Focus on the educative nature of programs.
- Use honouring, non-shaming concepts such as emotional intelligence as a means of exploring feelings.
- Discuss findings from modern “brain sciences” to highlight capacity for change.
- Enhance rapport by learning some basic phrases in the couples’ language and using culturally appropriate illustrations.
- Integrate empirical research and theories into programs.
- Stress the importance of maintaining healthy boundaries.
- Be aware of cultural blindspots – for example, behaviours considered acceptable based on Western theories may not be acceptable to people from Asian societies. Similarly, a relationship considered healthy in the West may be seen as unhealthy from an Asian perspective.
- Assess whether clients have more traditional or more modern views of couples and families.
- Be aware that some Western teachings may result in increased risk of harm for some participants and may need to be reframed. For example, assertiveness can be re-framed as a path to greater harmony; listening skills for men can be re-framed as a crucial leadership skill and a path to greater intimacy.

Source: Huang, W. (2005). An Asian perspective on relationship and marriage education. *Family Process*, 44(2), 161–173.