

**A qualitative study of couples' experience of the
Preventative and Relationship Enhancement Program**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experience of couples, married five or more years, of the Preventative and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). This study examined specific skills the couples' gleaned from the workshop, as well as, the relational impact that PREP had on the couples' marriage. Six couples were surveyed, ranging in age from mid-forties to mid-fifties and ranging in years married from 8.5 to 29 years. Content analysis was employed to examine the data. Two themes emerged—motivation and impact, and results were organized under these themes. Clinical implications were identified concerning working with couples married five or more years in therapy and future research is discussed.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The Problem and Setting

The institution of marriage has changed over the last five decades. Marriage is still a part of American society, however, it holds a different place than it previously did. In the past, American society was organized around the institution of marriage, now it no longer is (Nock, 2005). In recent years the debate regarding marriage has moved to the center of social, religious and even political movements, while the whole concept of what marriage means to American society still lacks a clear definition (Nock, 2005). The young adults of the 21st century are at greater risk for marital failure than previous generations, as many have not had the personal example of a stable marital relationship (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2001). The government reports that young couples marrying for the first time face roughly a 40-50% chance of divorce (National Center for Health Statistics, 2009).

Regardless of these trends, Americans still hold marriage in high regard (Popenoe & Whitehead, 1999). Research says that 93% of Americans rate having a happy marriage as an important goal (Waite & Gallagher, 2000) and that 81% of men and 86% of women will marry by the age of 40 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2009). Of those Americans that do divorce, the majority remarry within three years. Some research has reported that married people live happier, healthier lives (Popenoe & Whitehead, 1999). In fact, more and more evidence suggests that the nurturing base offered by close relationships protects us from physical and emotional disease and improves resilience (Taylor, 2002). People who are married typically have fewer cases of illness, less depression, anxiety and suicide, fewer problems with alcohol and substance abuse, greater financial well-being, lower rates of partner violence and lower mortality rates. Children that grow up with married parents have better physical and mental

health, less physical, emotional and sexual child abuse, higher educational levels, less criminal behavior, more stable marriages in adulthood, and more career success in adulthood (Glenn & Nock et al., 2002; Popenoe, 1993; Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Understanding the value to and benefit of marriage has led to an investigation of deteriorating marriages. The National Center for Health Statistics reports that the current marriage rate is 7.5 per 1000 total population while the divorce rate is 3.6 per 1000 total population (National Center for Health Statistics, 2009). Some family researchers agree that the negative long-term consequences of divorce are especially detrimental to children (Amato, 2003). Marriage educators, researchers, social scientists, scholars, community leaders and government officials (Glenn et al., 2002; Popenoe & Whitehead, 2001; Stanley et al., 1995; Waite & Gallagher, 2000) have expressed concern that during no other time in civilization has there been a stronger need to address the generational problems of inadequate marriage preparation and education. The United States government introduced the Healthy Marriage Initiative in 1996 with the hopes of addressing this emerging issue with marriages and the family. The Healthy Marriage Initiative's mission statement is to help couples, who have chosen marriage for themselves, gain greater access to marriage education services, on a voluntary basis, where they can acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Marriage education has been shown to provide effective interventions for the prevention of marital distress (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

A question often studied question in research is 'what distinguishes a happy marriage from an unhappy one' (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Marital satisfaction is an important factor both in research and in marriages. In this culture of fleeting commitment and high divorce rates,

it's interesting that some couples do in fact stay happily married, and that being happily married continues to be an important goal for many in our culture (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

A variety of studies show that certain premarital (or early marital) variables can differentiate between couples who will do well and those who will not do well with 80% to 94% accuracy (e.g. Clements, Stanley & Markman, 2004; Fowers, Montel & Olson, 1996; Gottman, 1994; Rogge & Bradbury, 1999). Various studies of this type have illuminated key risk factors for marital success and failure. The factors that predict marital failure range from relatively static dimensions (e.g. history of marital divorce and differences in religion) to more dynamic dimensions (e.g. communication and conflict management patterns) (Stanley, 2001). In knowing what puts couples at risk, there is hope for helping couples overcome the odds.

Significance

One way in which couples can try to combat the odds of divorce is by continually working on their marital relationship. One way to work on the marital relationship is to attend a marital education course. While marriage education is not a replacement for marital therapy (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Lewis, 1986), it can compliment marital therapy. Marriage education courses can be viewed as educational endeavors and not as therapeutic interventions, thus couples may be more willing to attend. This study explored six couples' experiences through the process of one particular marriage workshop, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), and the influence of their experience on the marital relationship.

Rationale

One of the ways in which couples stay satisfied in their marriages is by continually working on their relationship. Marriage workshops are one avenue to accomplish this. Because

little research has been done on the effect that PREP has had on couples married more than five years, this is an important question for researchers to explore.

In this study, an open-ended written survey was employed to try to provide a rich, vivid look into married couples' experience of PREP and how they used the tools from the PREP workshop.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by phenomenological theory, which is a tradition within the social sciences concerned with understanding the social actor's frame of reference (Boss, Dahl & Kaplan, 1996). Phenomenology is concerned with the meaning attached to one's experience in an effort to gain an understanding of the experience of the participant.

Phenomenological framework is shaped by various philosophical assumptions. One such assumption is that the researcher is not separate from the phenomena they study. Subjectivity is recognized as the researcher's reality rather than reaching for objectivity. Thus, the researcher becomes part of the study and so the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of the researcher also become part of the data and need to be noted. The researcher's thoughts, feelings and beliefs also inform the research questions and the very lens through which the research is being conducted. Also to be noted is that bias is inherent in this sort of study regardless of the method being employed. Another philosophical assumption of phenomenology is that truth is seen as being socially constructed and relative rather than absolute. Participants being studied are seen as the expert of their experiences. Thus, meaning questions guided the research—trying to understand the social construct of the subjects experience—objects, experiences and situations can mean a variety of things. So, the researcher must be careful to understand what the subject's construct is—what language they use and the meanings they attach to it (Boss et al., 1996).

In phenomenology, the philosophical assumptions influence how research is conducted. Since the subject is seen as the expert of their own experience, the researcher must observe the subject in their own natural setting as much as possible. The researcher must be careful to observe the whole of what is being studied. One perspective in the family is not enough if the researcher is interested in the family experience. Enough questions need to be asked so that differing perspectives may be seen (Boss et al., 1996). Given that, in this study the couple is being examined and so both the male and female perspectives must be fully explored. Finally, phenomenology indicates that the boundary between doing research and doing therapy is more blurred than in other research perspectives. However, careful attention to the fact that this boundary is blurred is important so that the research may speak for itself and that the subjects are protected from the researcher's potential conflicts of interest (Boss et al., 1996).

Overall, phenomenology provides an appropriate structure for the proposed study. As phenomenology guides this study, the researcher hopes to gain a rich, in-depth look into a couples' experiences of the PREP workshop and how PREP influenced the marital relationship.

Purpose of the Study

Using a qualitative design involving six couples, married five or more years, this study will begin to explore the couples' experiences of the PREP workshop. The key research question addressed in this study is: How do the couples' experiences in the Preventative and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) influence their marital relationship? Specifically, what components were helpful—how were/are they incorporated into their current relationships?

Chapter II: Literature Review

Research will be reviewed in the area of marital satisfaction and marital education and then a closer look will be taken at one marital education program—the Preventative and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) and what the research reveals about this program and its influence on the marital relationship.

Marital Satisfaction

The first study on marriage was conducted in 1938 by Terman, Butterweiser, Ferguson, Johnson and Wilson (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). The question that these researchers focused on was “what is fundamentally different about happily and unhappily married couples?” (Gottman & Notarius, 2002, p. 159) Terman et al. found no evidence to support a personality profile for a happy marriage. People unhappy in their marriages tended to complain about a wide variety of issues.

After this study for the next thirty years research was conducted on variants of Terman et al.’s question. Research began to explore how personality related to marital satisfaction but little advances were made in personality correlates of marital satisfaction until the researchers began asking each spouse to describe the personality of their partner. Up until then, all research had been self report (Gottman & Notarius, 2002).

From the 1950s to the 1970s marital research evolved. Research went from looking at broad trends in marital satisfaction to looking from a more interactional and systems perspective—looking more closely at the interactional patterns in marriage. Burgess and Wallin (1953) found that, for most couples, marital satisfaction is highest right after marriage and begins to decline in a slow yet steady rate after that. Also, with the addition of children, marital satisfaction often decreases (Belsky & Kelly, 1994). Bateson, Jackson, Haley and Weakland

(1956) conducted the first study from the interactional perspective and began to explore the repetitive patterns of interaction. They found that these patterns had profound implications for dysfunctional schemas of thought. Research began to focus on the process and on cognitive and interactive behavior. In 1968 Bertalanffy proposed a new interactional perspective—general system theory. This theory put forth that social interaction was very rich but could be dismantled and understood by examining its components. With the advent of this perspective research began to show that dysfunctional patterns of behavior could be broken down and replaced with functional patterns of behavior (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). In the 1970s, researchers began to study the context in which interaction was taking place and began to break down interactions. Researchers also began to understand that it was not only behavioral interactions (albeit dysfunctional or functional) but affect that needed to be considered, as well. The ultimate finding of all of this research was that affect or emotion needed to enter into marital therapy to help couples with dysfunctional behavior patterns or marital dissatisfaction.

Not long after the introduction of affect into marital research, longitudinal studies began to be conducted with couples. Research began to explore what factors or patterns of interaction may have an influence on which couples get divorced and which couples stay together. Many studies began to explore couples over time and through developmental stages and the effect those stages had on marriage relationships. Gottman and others began to explore marriages over time and what factors had an effect on their marital satisfaction (Gottman & Notarius, 2002).

Gottman and Krokoff (1989) conducted a longitudinal study in 1989 with 25 couples regarding the couples marital interaction and satisfaction. The most striking finding with regard to marital satisfaction was that a different pattern of results predicted concurrent marital satisfaction than predicted change in marital satisfaction over time. Couples may pay a price for

engaging in conflict with regard to their concurrent marital satisfaction but the strife may pay off with regard to longitudinal marital satisfaction (as long as the conflict didn't evoke stubbornness, defensiveness or withdrawal) (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Another key finding of this study was that over time couples that report high rates of marital satisfaction were conflict confronting but in a way that allows the partners to vent disagreement and anger but doesn't result in whining, stubbornness, withdrawal from interaction or the defensiveness of both partners (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989).

Levenson, Carstense, and Gottman (1993) studied long-term marriage with the hopes of learning what those marriages are like and perhaps discovering some of the secrets to their longevity. Levenson et al. point out that past studies have suggested that marital satisfaction appears to follow a curvilinear path over the course of marriage—starting high, dropping sharply after the birth of children, reaching an all-time low when children are adolescents, and then increasing as children leave home and couples retire. Positive interaction follows a curvilinear path, as well—highest in young couples, lowest in middle-aged couples and intermediate in older couples. In contrast, negative affect or sentiment decreases linearly with age. Levenson et al. point out the gap in the research for marriages in middle and late life. Because most of the data collected is cross-sectional, it cannot be determined if the improvement of marital quality in later life means that marriages become happier over time or simply that unhappily married couples divorce and are no longer represented in these such studies. Levenson et al. (1991) also suggest that there have been no studies conducted with older married couples that recruited both satisfied and dissatisfied couples, as happily married couples are much more likely to volunteer for studies rather than unhappily married couples which can result in a view of marriage that is quite skewed. However, they also explored ten different areas for sources of conflict compared to

sources of pleasure and how that affected marital satisfaction. The areas explored were money, communication, in-laws, sex, religion, recreation, friends, alcohol and drugs, children, and jealousy. Levenson et al. found that marital satisfaction was strongly related to the amount of disagreement couples reported in these areas. This finding is consistent with previous findings that the single most determining factor of marital satisfaction is a couple's ability to resolve conflict. On the other hand, the unsatisfactory resolution of important issues plays a major role in the erosion of marital stability over time (Levenson et al., 1993).

Burleson and Denton (1997) conducted a study exploring the relationship between communication skills and marital satisfaction. Burleson and Denton highlight that past research suggests that conflicts frequently arise directly from lack of communication skills on the part of one or both partners. However, they also highlight that in past research a clear and linear relationship has been established between communication and marital satisfaction. Burleson and Denton's findings suggest that the relationship between communication skills and marital satisfaction is quite complex.

In yet another study, Russell-Chapin et al. (2001) explored the relationship of conflict resolution styles and certain marital satisfaction factors to marital distress. Russell-Chapin et al. (2001) found that the factors contributing to marital dissatisfaction were multiple and complex. The greatest predictor of marital distress is conflict over childrearing. They also found that quality time spent together was essential to marital satisfaction and also suggest that time alone for couples is the beginning of prioritizing the couple as one of the most important aspects of marriage. Gottman and Silver (1999) also emphasize the importance of having enough time to have shared meanings and a culture where dreams are honored. If the couple can spend quality time together and be one another's intimate friend, marital distress will decrease.

As indicated in the research, two factors that greatly effect marital satisfaction are the couples' ability to confront and resolve conflict without damaging one another (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Levenson et al., 1993) and the couples' time spent together creating shared experiences and meaning in the couple relationship (Russell-Chapin et al., 2001; Gottman & Silver, 1999). Research is also clear that marital satisfaction is strongly related to how much disagreement occurs in ten key areas (money, communication, in-laws, sex, religion, recreation, friends, alcohol and drugs, children, and jealousy) (Levenson et al., 1993) and that there is a complex and not easily understood relationship between communication and marital satisfaction (Burleson & Denton, 1997). Clearly there is no specific formula for what makes a couple happy in their relationship, just clear indicators of what has an influence on creating a satisfied marriage.

Marital Education

Marital education was born out of the research that proved that marital interaction did indeed have an affect on marital satisfaction and that help with communication and quality time spent together could increase the quality of one's relationship.

The rationale for relationship enhancement is a desire to combat the high level of distress found in many relationships, and the accompanying high divorce rate in our society. Not only is there a high divorce rate but numerous couples remain in stable but distressed relationships, living among varied degrees of stress over time. Mace and Mace (1980) suggested that among marriages that *do not* end in divorce, less than 50% are truly happy marriages. The high distress and divorce rates lead to an increasing amount of distress, disruption, and dislocation of lives, susceptibility to physical and mental disorders, and growing stress on social institutions (Markman et al., 1986). Divorce is a societal issue that has not been fully dealt with and most

approaches to marital distress occur after the problems have already developed when there has been a negative effect on spouses and children (Bloom, 1985). Marital education attempts to preempt those issues that can arise in the marriage. If marriage education is focused on prevention, then couples can learn new skills before destructive patterns of behavior and interaction have become established. Studies have shown that couples that have participated in a marital enrichment program are better off than those who do not participate in one (Giblin, Sprenkle, & Sheehan, 1985) and that certain prevention programs provide promise for couples in enhancing competence, relationship satisfaction and reducing distress, divorce and violence (Silliman, Stanley, Coffin, Markman, & Jordan, 2002).

Although research is clear about a few factors that influence marital satisfaction, there are numerous factors that can increase the risk of marital failure or divorce. The factors are indeed plentiful but a few are as follows: dissimilar interests in activities and sexual relations, premarital cohabitation, parental divorce, communication withdrawal and invalidation, dissatisfaction with partners' personality and habits and religious dissimilarity. Stanley (2001) writes "among such a plethora of targets, it makes sense to focus prevention efforts on risk factors that are relatively more dynamic and changeable versus those that are more static and less likely to change" (Stanley, 2001, p. 276). He goes on to say that "current research suggests that a number of dynamic variables that are associated with risk (and make plausible targets for prevention) such as negative interaction, conflict management, dysfunctional attitudes and expectations, the preservation of friendship and commitment beliefs and dynamics" (p. 276). In direct contrast to these dynamic variables are static variables, such as personality, which won't likely change. However, it is useful to help a couple discover that if their partner is rather neurotic, for example,

they may have certain tendencies and how those tendencies which can affect interaction during conflict.

Studies have shown that the prediction of marital distress and divorce have pointed to the quality of the interaction of the partners as highly predictive of future outcomes. With this in mind, the interaction between two partners appears to be dynamic and changeable. Marital education and therapy have focused on the aspects of the marriage that can be changed to ultimately increase relationship satisfaction and try to evade divorce (PREP, 2009).

Various types of marriage education programs exist that offer couples help with their relationships. Four of these programs are: the Marriage Builders couples workshops created by Dr. Willard Harley; the Art and Science of Love Workshop created by Dr. John Gottman; various marriage workshops offered by the Family Dynamics Institute; and finally the Preventative and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) created by Drs. Markman and Stanley.

The Marriage Builders workshops are built on Dr. Harley's basic concepts, which focus on resolving marital conflict and restoring love to the marital relationship. The idea is that the couple is given an assignment to complete at home, then they are able to discuss issues or questions with other couples on the forum on the marriage builders website. Finally if the couple needs assistance, phone counseling is offered to help couples create and implement the plan to help save their marriage (www.marriagebuilders.com). Through research conducted at his institute, Dr. Gottman has shown that couples who attend The Art and Science of Love Workshop strongly benefit from this workshop (Ryan & Gottman, 2003) especially when followed by multiple sessions of marital therapy. The Art and Science of Love Workshop is a two day workshop that focuses on giving couples new insights and research-based relationship

skills that can dramatically improve the intimacy and friendship in the relationship and help resolve conflict in a healthy, productive way (www.gottman.com). The Family Dynamics Institute offer four different courses to help improve the marital relationship. They vary from a three day seminar to a twelve week follow up class. These courses focus on various different specific topics, however, they all focus on improving the marital relationship with the hope of evading divorce and helping couples build a lasting, strong relationship bond (www.familydynamics.net).

Preventative and Relationship Enhancement (PREP)

Another marriage education program that aims to decrease divorce and increase marital satisfaction and longevity is the Preventative and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP).

PREP was developed by Drs. Markman and Stanley and is one of the most comprehensive researched marriage enhancement programs in the world. PREP is a skills and principles-building curriculum designed to help partners communicate effectively and increase their connection with each other. PREP focuses on prevention of marital distress (PREP, 2009). Markman, Floyd, and Dickson-Markman (1982) discuss three classifications typically applied to the definition of prevention: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary prevention refers to programs designed for populations not currently in need of intervention and focus on providing resources or tools to prevent problems from developing in the future. Secondary prevention works with couples at risk for difficulties as indicated by screening. And finally, tertiary prevention works with folks who have already experienced difficulties (Renick et al, 1992).

In the 1990's the most common approach to treating marital distress was psychotherapy (tertiary prevention). While the research indicated that couples became less distressed as a result of therapy, they did not necessarily become happier (Renick et al., 1992). The primary

prevention of marital distress differs from therapy in that it is based on the identification and intervention of variables most predictive of later distress. The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) assumes such a primary focus. Renick et. al. (1992) point out that “the central messages in PREP are that constructive handling of disagreements can prevent later distress and that couples can change their communication behavior and take control of their conflicts, instead of their conflicts controlling them” (Renick et al, 1992, p.142).

The PREP model was designed to teach relationship skills and ground rules for handling conflict and promoting intimacy. PREP is used for the prevention of marital distress and divorce (Renick et al., 1992). The program targets enhancement of protective, positive, aspects of relationships, however, research also indicates that it is most crucial that couples learn ways to handle differences and negative affect constructively (Stanley et al, 1995). The core interventions of PREP are along the behavioral and cognitive lines. Couples are taught very specific behavioral interventions for effective communication and problem solving (e.g. the speaker listener technique is taught to let the couple know who has the floor and who is listening and to teach the couples to be able to slowly and effectively communicate). PREP also uses many types of cognitive interventions (e.g. couples are educated about one’s tendency to distort perceptions) (Stanley et al, 1995). In a study assessing thirteen marital enrichment programs, including PREP, Jakubowski et al. (2004) found PREP to be an efficacious marriage enrichment program with longitudinal data available to demonstrate the effectiveness of this program.

Beginning in the early 1980s, researchers at the University of Denver’s Center for Marital and Family Studies conducted a longitudinal study of the development of marital distress and its early identification, as well as, the short-term and long-term effectiveness of PREP. The researchers recruited 135 couples that were preparing for marriage for the first time. Of those

135 couples, 85 were invited to participate in a PREP program (33 completed it, 43 declined and 9 partially completed the intervention) and 50 were used as control couples. In 1992, 83 couples were still participating in the longitudinal study. The measures used in the study were both self report measures (i.e., Locke & Wallace marital adjustment test, the relationship problem inventory, conflict tactics scale and sexual satisfaction measure) and communication measures (i.e., assessment of couple's communication on both microanalytic and global coding systems, communication box and a communication skill test). The couples were asked to complete a series of questionnaires and to engage in videotaped interaction tasks. The couples participated in each of the following research sessions: preassessment (before PREP program), postassessment (immediately following the PREP program) and 1.5, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9-year follow ups. This study found that couples that participated in the PREP program when compared to control couples: had more stable relationships, improved communication in the short-term, improved or maintained a high level of relationship satisfaction in the long term, exhibited lower levels of negative communication, had fewer instances of negative communication and husbands reported greater relationship satisfaction (Markman, Floyd, Stanley & Storaasli, 1988; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley & Clements, 1993).

In 2001 Stanley et al. completed another study looking at the dissemination of the PREP program within religious organizations. The subjects were 138 couples planning marriage for the first time in the Denver Metro area. The couples average ages were in the mid-20s. They used both pre- and post-intervention assessments including self report measures, and a taped interview—including a problem-solving discussion and a discussion of the couples top problem area for 10 to 15 minutes. The findings were that clergy and lay leaders were as effective in the short run as university staff in implementing the PREP program, couples taking the more skills-

oriented intervention showed advantages over couples receiving naturally occurring services on interaction quality and couples reported that the communication skills components of premarital education were the most helpful (Stanley et al., 2001).

Schilling et al. (2003) conducted a study examining whether skills acquired during a weekend PREP program had an effect on future marital satisfaction. Sixty-five couples marrying for the first time in a south-eastern United States college town were recruited. However, four did not end up marrying, and nine did not provide follow-up data, thus, the studies conclusions are based on 39 women and 38 men. The couples completed pre-assessment and post-assessment measures. The couples completed these questionnaires before, as well as, after the PREP program, beginning 1.5 years following their participation in the program and concluding by 5.5 years after the program. The couples also completed two 10-minute communication tasks. The results for males (were as expected) were that pretest to posttest increases in male positive communication and decreases in negative communication decreased the likelihood of distress onset in future years. For females, pretest to posttest increases in positive communication predicted an increased risk of distress onset for both genders. The self-reported mutual avoidance of problem discussion helped to explain the effect of female positive communication on distress onset. Additionally, the results suggested that overall couples benefited when men acquired positive communication skills. Schilling et al. (2003) suggest that the data indicated future need for clarification within PREP research about who does and who does not benefit from this intervention program.

In a widely disseminated survey research initiative, Stanley, Amato, Johnson and Markman (2006) examined premarital education, marital quality and marital stability. The couples were recruited as part of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative Statewide Baseline Survey

with 2,323 adults from Oklahoma, along with 1,021 adults living in Arkansas, Kansas, and Texas completed phone interviews. The overall response rate was 58%. The data were analyzed on the basis of education, race, gender and age. Although the study was based solely on self-report measures the findings were consistent with previous PREP studies: participation in premarital education was associated with higher levels of satisfaction and commitment in marriage, lower levels of conflict and also reduced the odds of divorce compared to pre and post test data????.

This suggests that premarital education is generally beneficial for a wide range of couples (Stanley, Amato, Johnson & Markman, 2006).

PREP Content

The core content of PREP includes two key areas—lowering risk and raising protection. The factors that are focused on lowering risk are as follows: interaction danger signs, communication, key issues and conflict management, problem solving, expectation clarification, and forgiveness—making it happen. The factors that are focused on raising protection are as follows: commitment, priorities and sacrifice, preserving friendship, keeping fun alive, sensuality and sexuality, spiritual and religious intimacy and core belief exploration. The goal of PREP is to lessen vulnerability and risk in marriage by strengthening protective factors (Stanley, 2001; PREP, 2009).

The Preventative and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) has created fourteen lessons in which to cover all of the factors listed previously. The fourteen lessons are listed in the table below.

Table 2.1:
*PREP lessons**

Lesson	Major Content
Lesson One: Foundations for the Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk factors for marital distress

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Danger signs in relationship • Discussion of goals • Time out procedure
Lesson Two: Safety, Structure, and Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps to establish safety in the relationship • Speaker/listener technique
Lesson Three: Filters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Filters—helps to understand the intent of a message vs. the impact and helps them see that anything from inattention to self-protection can be a filter through which one part of the couple is hearing communication
Lesson Four: Events, Issues, and Hidden Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Events (the day-to-day happenings of life) • Issues (the more important areas of life that couples have to cope with—money, sex, and communications) • Hidden issues (issues not being talked about openly and constructively. Key hidden issues that often get lost in arguments—power, caring, recognition, commitment, integrity, and acceptance)
Lesson Five: Expectations in Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectations- similar vs. different or unclear, unreasonable, or unspoken expectations • HW given-complete the expectations workbook exercise
Lesson Six: Getting to the Point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps breakdown what's happening in communication with one another and how to make it different • Addresses mind reading, anger-producing ways of raising a concern and helps couples learn to raise concerns in a more positive way • Teaches the XYZ statement (when you did X, in situation Y, I felt Z) • Sample feeling words given to try to help understand own feelings, as well as, communicate those feelings to partners
Lesson Seven: Keeping Fun Flowing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages the couple to have fun and to be sure to set aside time to have that fun as a couple
Lesson Eight: Solving Problems as a Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solve problems as a team by having a

	<p>discussion about the problem and a possible solution to the problem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem discussion step—hear and validate one another, as well as, try to use that speaker/listener technique they were taught in lesson two • Problem solution step—set an agenda, brain storm, agree and compromise, find a trial compromise and then follow up on that trial solution to see if it might need to be changed
Lesson Nine: Foundations for Friendship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes importance and recognition to the friendship aspect of the relationship and ideas of ways to engage with one another on that level
Lesson Ten: Ground Rules for Protecting Your Relationship	<p>Ground rules-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When conflict is arising, a time out will be called and the couple will try to come back together to communicate using the speaker/listener technique 2. The couple will try to use the speaker/listener technique when they have difficulty communicating 3. When dealing with important issues, the couple will completely separate problem discussion from problem solution 4. Any issue can be brought up at any time, but the listener can say that “this is not a good time” and a future time to talk about this issue is established 5. The couple will have regular times set aside to deal with issues (not on a date night but a specific, set aside time to deal with ongoing issues) 6. The couple will make time for fun, friendship and sensuality
Lesson Eleven: Core Beliefs Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps explore own core beliefs and values and how differences could affect the relationship. • HW given—complete and discuss the core beliefs and expectations workbook
Lesson Twelve: The Sensual/Sexual Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on the sexual and sensual aspects of the relationship helping the couple to try to understand both their own and their partner’s beliefs and

	helping them have a conversation around it
Lesson Thirteen: Working Through Forgiveness When it's not Easy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on helping the couple forgive one another even when it's not easy • Forgiveness structure—set an agenda, explore the pain and concerns, have the offender ask for forgiveness, have the offended agree to forgiveness, agree to a positive commitment to change and trying to move forward.
Lesson Fourteen: Commitment: Walking the Talk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps the couple try to put into practice what they've learned, with the awareness of how hard this can be

(*Information adapted from the PREP Couples Manual, 2006)

Some of the key techniques taught during PREP include the speaker/listener technique; XYZ statements; time outs; and joint decision making/problem solving. The speaker listener technique establishes a way of communicating when the couple is dealing with a difficult topic or when understanding each other is especially important. PREP establishes specific steps around giving each partner a turn to have the 'floor' (a chance to speak to their partner uninterrupted). It also establishes specific rules about being respectful of one another during this technique, as well as, paraphrasing back what was heard. XYZ statements are taught to help the couples slow down communication and to focus on their own feelings rather than blaming or assuming the feelings of their partners. The XYZ statement is specific—*When you did X, In situation Y, I felt Z.* Time outs are another specific tool taught to help couples take a break (a planned one) or switch gears when their conversation has become too heated and one or both of the couple has become too overwhelmed to continue. The time out can be called by either partner and both partners must respect it by either deciding to drop an issue for the time being (further skills are taught to help the couple come back to the issue at a later time) or shifting to a safer way to communicate (like using the speaker/listener technique). Joint decision making and

problem solving is taught to help couples navigate tough decisions. This skill is broken down into problem discussion and problem solution. PREP teaches specific steps to go through and rules to follow to help the couple slowly and effectively move through a problem and then come up with a trial solution for a decided upon period of time, (PREP Couples Manual, 2006).

While the structure of the PREP workshop can vary from one full day or weekend to 6 two-hour sessions, these lessons provide the structure and basis for the PREP instructors to deliver this curriculum. Each instructor attends a PREP training that usually consists of three full days of instruction in order to become a PREP leader. The instructors are also given an instruction manual and DVD vignettes to exemplify the concept being taught (PREP, 2009).

Summary

PREP research has suggested the effectiveness of increasing positive communication, lowering divorce rates and greater likelihood of maintaining relationship satisfaction for premarital couples into early marital couples, compared to control couples. However, since PREP is aimed at prevention, very little research has been done with PREP participant couples who have been married for five or more years, even though couples that fit into this category have and continue to participate in PREP workshops. Thus, this study aims to explore how couples' who have been married for five or more years experience the PREP workshop and how it influences the marital relationship.

Chapter III: Methods

Design of the Study

This study was designed to take an in-depth look at the couples' experience of the PREP workshop and the effect PREP had on the marital relationship. The use of qualitative methods was intended to provide a rich view into the couples' experiences.

Study Participants

Six couples participated in this study. The eligibility criterion for participation was that (1) the couple had participated in a PREP workshop within the last two years, and (2) the couple had been married for five or more years. The initial recruitment consisted of contacting therapists who teach the PREP couples workshop. Specifically, information about this study was emailed to therapists registered with the PREP website (www.prepinc.com) both in Northern Virginia, as well as in other states. A total of 746 PREP leaders were emailed in an effort to gain access to couples that had attended those leaders' PREP workshops. A secondary part of recruitment included personal appeal. Specifically, the researcher attended the closing session of a PREP workshop and spoke directly to participants about the study. Combined, this recruitment strategy resulted in six couples: two recruited via email and four recruited in person at the closing session of a local PREP workshop.

See below for two tables describing the demographic information of the couples that participated:

Table 3.1
Husband and Wife Demographic Information

	HUSBAND	WIFE
Age*	Ranged from 44-54 years old	Ranged from 45-51 years old
Race/Ethnicity*	All Caucasian	All Caucasian

Highest Level of education completed*		
High school	1	0
Technical College	0	1
Associates Degree	1	1
College	0	2
Masters	3	1
PhD	0	0

*No demographic information was collected on these questions from one of the six couples.

Table 3.2
Couple Demographic Information

Religious affiliation *	None 1 Christian 3 Roman Catholic 1
How long married	Ranged from 8.5 -29 years married
How long together	Ranged from 10-31 years together
Number marriage	3 1 st marriages 2 2 nd marriages 1 marriage where it was 1 st for wife and 2 nd for husband
State of Residence	5 in VA and 1 in OH
Date PREP workshop was completed	Couple #1 March 2009 Couple #3 May 2009 Couples #2, #4, #5, #6 May 2010

*No demographic information was collected on these questions from one of the six couples.

As illustrated in tables one and two above, the sample consisted of couples ranging in age from 44-54. All participants were Caucasian; 60 % were college or higher educated. Most were Christian affiliation with a mix of other religious affiliation (in this sample, all couples had the same religious affiliation as their spouse). Couples ranged in years married from 8.5 to 29, with almost half first and half second marriages (three couples married for the first time, two were

married for the second time, one couple it was first marriage for the wife and second for the husband). Five out of the six couples resided in Virginia.

Procedures

After informed consent was obtained (See Appendix I for the informed consent) via email or US mail, the researcher contacted the two couples recruited via email and informed them of the process for completing the online written survey. An informal screening process to determine eligibility for the study took place during the initial contact with the research participants.

The other four couples, recruited locally, were given a letter (See Appendix II for the letter) explaining the research process. The researcher also explained the research process in person at the final PREP class the researcher attended.

Upon completion of the informed consent, participants were given the option of completing the written survey online or in paper/pencil format. Surveys were returned electronically or via US mail.

Measures

The couples completed a written survey, either online or on paper, of questions regarding their experience of PREP and its influence their marital relationship (see Appendix III for the written survey). The written survey included questions regarding their general experience of the PREP workshop, as well as more specific questions regarding what the couples' hoped to gain from the workshop they attended, what specific tools they gleaned from the workshop and what sorts of tools they continue to use in their relationship following the workshop. After the written survey was completed, the researcher followed up with the couples to obtain further

demographic information that was not contained in the original written survey (see Appendix IV for the demographic table).

Analysis

Content analysis was used to explore the themes and patterns that emerged from the data (Boss et al., 1996, p. 90). Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within text from which inferences are drawn. Content analysis can provide new insights, and increase understanding of a particular phenomena. The framework for content analysis begins with a text and a research question that is being examined. Then, inferences, backed by validating evidence, intended to answer the research question are drawn out (Krippendorff, 2004).

To begin, all of the six transcripts were read several times in their entirety. Then, the first transcript was re-examined again to begin identifying major concepts. Next, these concepts were verified and expanded via reading all of the subsequent transcripts. This continually deepened the researcher's understanding of the data. As concepts began to emerge, they were given definitions and organized into themes. Trustworthiness and credibility were established via cross-coding with another team member (Krippendorff, 2004).

Chapter IV: Results

In this section, the two major themes that were identified from the data, motivation and impact, will be discussed and participants' quotes that illustrate these themes will be provided.

It should be noted that although the content of the PREP workshop is standard, facilitators may vary in how they choose to implement the materials. This could include, for example, number and length of the sessions. For this reason, we asked participants to briefly comment on the structure/format of their particular workshop. Four of the six couples were drawn from the same group, so their experience was obviously similar:

“(the format) consisted of a couple leading the class through the material and shared personal examples from their own marriage with the class. We broke out into coaching sessions where we practiced various techniques in communication. There was reading and exercises assigned for homework.”

The remaining two couples were drawn from different PREP workshops. Their comments about format suggest a very similar design—the format of their PREP workshops were “*organized*”, included “*informal lectures*”, “*videos of case studies*”, “*class or small group discussion*”, and “*exercises where we practiced the techniques being discussed.*”

Motivation

Within the theme of motivation, three categories were evidenced: (1) most couples (4 out of 6, or 66%) were seeking fundamental communication and relationship skills (e.g. respect and ways to nurture their marital relationship), (2) two couples reported that they thought their experience of this workshop differed as a result of being married several years prior to participating, and (3) Most couples (83%) reported that they would attend another PREP workshop.

Because PREP is primarily aimed at premarital couples and prevention, it was important to understand what made the couples attend. Thus, the couples were asked why they sought out PREP and what they hoped to gain. Sixty-six percent of the couples reported seeking fundamental communication skills, respect and other ways to nurture their marital relationship. A few couples said that “*a counselor*” had recommended that they go. More than half of the couples said that they hoped to learn how to “*communicate*” with one another or that they hoped their communication would improve as a result of attending PREP. Other couples said that they hoped they would learn how to “*be able to hear and be heard and be able to listen and be listened to*” and were hoping to have “*renewed energy*” in their marital relationship after attending the workshop. Some wanted to learn “*how to fix ‘all’ our problems (which of course was an unrealistic expectation).*” And one of the couples sought out PREP because they were “*having difficulties and on the verge of divorce.*” Couple #2 said that they attended PREP:

“To nurture our marriage. So many people take extra courses and seminars to improve their productivity and work experience. We found that it made sense to invest in a course for our marriage. Rather than a weekend seminar, we really wanted to improve our communications skills and create a safe environment for each other. We wanted to improve our intimacy.”

Couple #6 said that they attended because they

“...wanted to learn ways to make decisions as a couple. (We have a child with special needs and have lots of tough questions/decisions to make).”

In addition to reporting what they hoped to gain from the PREP workshop, the couples were also asked about whether they thought their experience of this workshop differed as a result of being married several years prior to participating. Two couples wrote that their experience of

PREP now differed from if they had attended as a premarital couple because of the intimacy that exists in their relationship, as well as the realism and lack of idealism they now shared.

Couple 3 said,

“...Yes I think it is different than premarital couples. Mainly because we have so much history together –good and bad. Also, I think intimacy is the absolute key. Young couples often associate intimacy with only sex. Although this is rightly a key component, true intimacy is grown thru consistent sharing of each other's hearts, minds, and souls - to come to truly know your spouse.”

Couple 5 said,

“This differed from if it was premarital in that we were much more aware of the gravity of good communication and the lack of it in our relationship. During premarital time there is way too much idealism (as there should be) and after 10 years of marriage there is lots of hard reality in our lives.”

It was important to understand if the couples would consider attending another PREP workshop to explore whether they thought the workshop could continue to be a useful tool for their marital relationship. The majority (83%) of the couples said that they would be interested in attending PREP again to continue to work on their relationship and improve their use of the communication skill tools. This might indicate that the influence of PREP is useful with couples married five or more years and so helpful that those couples would attend the PREP workshop again. The couples that said they would attend another workshop said they would because they would want to *“continue to practice the speaker/listener technique”* and another couple said they would attend again if PREP extended the curriculum to *“include the topic of initiating communications in a ‘conflict avoidant’ relationship.”* Couple 2 said,

“Marriage and communicating are hard work. You really have to want to improve and do well. You have to make yourself vulnerable to intimacy rather than flitting through a relationship...It’s the slowing down part that really works. As suggested in the course, our minds are so busy posturing our next defense that we don’t really listen and comprehend the other person.”

Couple 3 said,

“Yes. Because although we are now well on our way to enjoying the type of marriage God meant for us to have we can never take our relationship for granted but must be willing AND enthusiastic about putting work into it.”

Couple 4 said,

“Yes!! We were so excited about it that we teach it now. We love how teaching it keeps it fresh in our minds!!”

Impact

Within the theme of impact, five categories emerged: specific tools, respect, priorities, longevity and adaptation.

Specific Tools

In order to better understand what components of the workshop the couples found to be useful, the couples were asked what specific tools they gleaned from the PREP workshop, as well as how they incorporated these components into their marital relationship. Four of the six couples reported that the speaker/listener technique was poignant for them and was still used (by most). Others said the *“time out has benefited us greatly”*, *“we are benefiting...from the XYZ statements, joint brainstorm/decision making”* and the *“problem solving technique continues to*

help us several times a year.” Another couple said that “learning techniques for listening and paraphrasing what the other person said without emotional reactions is very helpful.”

Respect

While some couples reported specific techniques that helped them in their relationship, others wrote about the influence that PREP had on their marital relationship. The couples reported that what was most beneficial for them was learning to respect one another, to have a deeper understanding of one another and the importance of nurturing the marital relationship. One of the couples said that they learned to “*slow down and be more respectful of each other’s feelings.*” Couple 5 said that

“the biggest thing that stood out for us was the break out sessions we had with our coach. This gave us the opportunity to practice the techniques being taught, and most importantly, for the coach to critique our techniques and refine our methods.”

Couple 3 said they thought the “*section on family history was very poignant. I came to a deeper appreciation of the ‘baggage’ both me and my spouse brought to our marriage.*”

Priorities

Another couple reported that they realized through the PREP workshop that their marital relationship should be a priority and making it such was an important part of nurturing their relationship.

Couple 4 said,

“another thing that stands out is the reminder of how important it is to have fun together and nurture our relationship. Now if we are feeling distant, we stop to think whether we have been making time for each other or not.”

Longevity

What the couples reported as being useful during the workshop (speaker / listener technique, XYZ statements, time outs, joint decision making and problem solving, listening and paraphrasing) and what the couples reported as skills they continue to use were the same. This suggests that those skills were useful for them in communicating with their partners and that the couples were actively integrating those skills into their relationship.

Adaptation

Couples were also asked if they had adapted any of the PREP tools to make them “more their own” and if so, in what way. While many couples reported still using specific PREP tools—the speaker/listener technique, joint brainstorming and decision making, and XYZ statements—some couples said they had adapted some of the PREP tools to better suit their relationship.

Couple 4 said,

“We often use speaker/listener in a more unstructured way. My husband often paraphrases me when I am feeling emotional or having a problem. Previously, he had tried to ‘fix’ me. Now he’s learned that paraphrasing and really trying to understand me is just what I need to ‘fix’ me. It speaks my love language when he paraphrases and tries to understand. Paraphrasing has been a huge tool for us!”

Another wife said that she has “*learned/decided to trust what my husband says to me is true (vs. assuming he may be saying what he says to just make the peace or make me happy.)*”

In summary, the couples in this study, reported that they were motivated to attend a PREP workshop to learn fundamental relationship skills, and that they thought their experience

of PREP differed as a result of having more history together as a couple and more realism existing in the marital relationship. These couples also reported that they would attend another PREP workshop, if given the opportunity, to continue to work on their relationship. The couples reported that the impact of the PREP workshop was multi-faceted. First, couples reported specific tools as being useful. Second, couples commented on the influence that PREP had on the marital relationship. These included learning to respect their spouses, prioritizing the marital relationship and spending time nurturing it. Finally, these couples reported that they continue to use specific and adapted tools learned during their PREP workshop. Although PREP is aimed at prevention and working with premarital couples, the couples who have been married for five or more years that participated in this study reported that as a result of attending a PREP workshop they learned how to better communicate and listen to one another, have more respect and learned to take time to nurture their marital relationships. Thus, this data suggest that PREP may be useful with a wider range of couples.

Chapter V: Discussion

This study explored six couples' who have been married for five or more years experience of PREP (Preventative and Relationship Enhancement Program). The focus of this study was to explore what made the couples attend this marital workshop, what the couples found useful during the workshop and finally what the couples continued to use after the workshop was over.

PREP research has shown the effectiveness of increasing positive communication, lower divorce rates and greater likelihood for maintaining relationship satisfaction for premarital couples into early marital couples. The overall findings from the present study suggest that couples married five or more years also reported that they found it beneficial to learn fundamental communication and relationship skills, and are motivated to continue to use these basic relationship skills after attending PREP.

Markman et al.'s (1993) found that, in the short-term, among premarital couples, PREP improved the level of communication. Similarly, in this current study, all of the techniques that the couples reported as being helpful are meant to improve communication. Four of the six couples from this present study reported that what was useful for them from the PREP workshop was the speaker/listener technique—a technique that is taught during PREP to help couples slow down their conversation around difficult topics to try to communicate more effectively and be able to reflectively listen to one another. Other couples from this study reported that the XYZ statements—a technique taught to help the couples again slow down communication and focus on communicating their own feelings, as opposed to trying to “mind read” what their partner is feeling and that the joint brainstorming and problem solving technique—a tool, taught with very specific steps, with the goal of trying to help the couple understand one another and to be

understood, as well as, to help the couple talk through a problem, and find a “trial” solution to put into place for a period of time were helpful. In addition to these techniques, couples reported that time outs—a technique taught to help couples take a break when one of them is angry or overwhelmed and then helps the couples come back to that topic to try and have a more productive conversation rather than fighting about it—were also helpful for them.

Findings from this study are also consistent with the Stanley et al. (2001) study as couples reported that the communication skills component (i.e. even specifically the speaker/listener technique) of the premarital education was most helpful. In the present study four of the six couples reported that the speaker/listener technique stood out for them and most of those couples continue to use the speaker/listener technique in their relationship after the PREP workshop to help with communication.

Stanley et al. (2006) suggested that premarital education was beneficial for a wide range. While couples in this current study reported specific tools as being helpful, they also reported other areas of the workshop that were useful. The couples in the present study demonstrated an appreciation for the family history section because it helped them understand what “baggage” both partner’s bring to the relationship and that they felt they learned how to slow down and be more respectful of one another. Additionally, couples in this study reported that they learned the importance of having fun and spending time nurturing their marital relationship. From these reports, it is clear that the couples, married five or more years, reported that a workshop aimed at premarital education was beneficial for them.

Limitations

Recruiting issues

When I began the research for my thesis, I was hopeful that I would be able to conduct in-person interviews with the couples. Although I had contact with a few couples that said they would be willing to participate, none actually followed the process through to completion. This waning interest may have been due to the time commitment. The interview was estimated to take forty-five minutes to one hour, which had to be coordinated for a specific time, so that I could conduct the interview in real time either in-person or on the phone. It may also be that the couples felt that it was an invasion into their privacy and they did not want to share such personal experiences with a stranger. Given this difficulty, I submitted an amendment to the Institutional Research Board (IRB) in April to add the ability to conduct a written survey or the interview that I had originally submitted. The written survey was met with more of a positive response from couples. All of the six couples that participated chose to do the online (or paper) written survey, as opposed to the interview.

Four of my six couples were recruited via personal appeal. Specifically, I attended the closing session of a local PREP workshop and spoke directly to participants about my study. This may have been helpful because I had the endorsement of the PREP workshop facilitator. It may also have been successful because participants were able to meet me in person. An additional possibility may be that because these couples have just completed the PREP workshop, they may have been excited about what they just learned, thus being more willing to participate in a study exploring this experience and more optimistic about what skills they would be using in their relationships.

Finally, perhaps part of the issue with recruiting this sample was that it is a heavily researched population. They are not an unheard population. Much research has been conducted in the area of couple's experience of marriage workshops/marriage education.

Theoretical Framework

The original design of this study was to use the phenomenological theory to guide the research. Because a written survey was used as the methodology to collect data instead of an interview, the phenomenological theory became less helpful in guiding the study. The written survey negated interaction between the researcher and the participants that would have occurred in an interview setting. Nonetheless, phenomenology was helpful in assuming that the participant is the expert of his/her own experience. To this end, this current study did seek to understand the participant's experience of the PREP workshop.

Data Collection

All of the couples that participated in this study completed the written survey. The benefits to the written survey are that the data can be coded exactly as it is—there is nothing lost in transcription because the participants wrote the responses. More protection with respect to anonymity was provided by the online written survey. The participants were given the choice of whether or not to complete the contact information. Thus, they had control of whether or not I knew their names and direct contact information. It is important to note that only one of the couples chose not to complete the contact. Another benefit to the written survey was that the couples could complete the written survey whenever it was convenient for them. Unlike the interview, no exact time or date had to be set to complete the written survey which could have made the written survey more appealing than the interview.

On the other hand, because the couples all chose to do the written survey rather than the interview, I may have missed some of the richness of responses that could have occurred in an interview. Most of the couples wrote very succinct answers for the written survey and because I was not sitting in front of the couples conducting an interview, I was not able to go back to them

to ask any follow-up or clarifying questions about their experiences in the moment. Tone, emphasis and couple interaction were not possible to infer from participants' written comments, which would have also added to the richness of the material. I suspect that the research process was much less interactive as a written survey than it would have been as an interview.

Another aspect to the written survey was that the couple was asked to either fill out the written survey together or to have a discussion and then have one partner fill out the written survey. Although the goal of the study was to explore the experience of both spouses, the spouse filling out the survey could have more heavily reported their own experience, rather than a balanced view of both partners' experience.

Clinical Implications

According to what the couples in this current study reported, the clinical implications from this study suggest that couples married several years may indeed need help with fundamental communication and relationship skills.

Couples may need help learning to slow down and hear one another (speaker/listener technique), as well as learning specific ways to regulate their affect and be able to communicate with one another regarding an emotional issue (time outs). Couples may also need a gentle reminder that it is important to spend time nurturing and developing the friendship side of the relationship and also that both respect and listening to one another are important building blocks for a healthy marriage.

In summary, it seems important to let the couple ask for what they need in therapy and not to assume that because they have been married more years that they need help with more complex issues. The caution here is to not oversimplify what couples need from one another in therapy either. While couples that participated in this study reported that participation in a

couples workshop that uses cognitive and behavioral interventions was helpful, couples may also need additional skills.

Recommendations for Future Research

While couples that participated in this study reported that they benefited from attending a premarital workshop, many questions remain. Future research is needed to explore the mechanisms of change in PREP for this population in order to understand what these couples specifically benefit from, as opposed to, what premarital couples benefit from. Additionally, future longitudinal research is needed to explore whether as a result of learning new communication techniques during the PREP workshop, that couples who have been married five or more years experience an increased levels of satisfaction and commitment and decreased levels of conflict. Furthermore, research needs to also explore if couples married five or more years show an indication of future marital satisfaction as a result of attending the PREP workshop.

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Appendix I: Informed Consent for Research Project

Project Title: A qualitative study of couples' experience of the Preventative and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP)

Researcher: Kara Bath, M.S. Candidate, Department of Human Development
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

What is the purpose of this study? The purpose of this study is to explore your experience of the Preventative Relationship and Enhancement Program (PREP) workshop.

What will I be asked to do? You will take part, as a couple, in a 45-60 minute interview or complete an online survey. Both the interview and the survey are aimed at exploring your experience of the PREP workshop and its influence on your marital relationship. At the end of the interview or survey some demographic information (age, race, education etc.) will be collected. There may be some questions asked during the interview or in the survey that cause you to feel uncomfortable. If, at any time, you do not feel comfortable answering any of the questions you may choose to not answer. The interview will be audio-taped, so that the researcher may be sure to fully understand what was said. You may be contacted via phone or email for a follow-up interview or online survey. You may, however, decline to answer at any time, as any follow-up requests are voluntary.

Where there be any risks to me? The researcher anticipates very low risk to you, as your confidentiality will be upheld to the highest standard. You may choose to not answer any question you feel uncomfortable answering. If at any time, you feel that you may need further work with your partner on certain issues, a list of local counseling agencies will be provided to participants upon request.

Are there any benefits to me? As a result of participating in this study you may feel a sense of satisfaction knowing you participated in a study that will benefit society and the institution of marriage. You also may find that you enjoy sharing this experience with your spouse or partner and it may spark new and different conversations in your relationship.

Am I kept confidential? Every effort will be made to ensure that your responses are kept confidential. Your name and any other identifying information will not be reported.

If you are deemed a threat to yourself or others, or there is suspect of child or elder abuse it will be reported to the appropriate authorities, without your consent. Mental health professionals have a moral and legal obligation to report this information.

Do I have the freedom to withdraw? You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time or to refuse to answer any questions.

Participant's Permission

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have read and understand the conditions of the informed consent. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my consent to participate in this project by signing on the line below. I realize that although I chose to participate right now, I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If I have any questions about this project or its conduct, I can contact any of the following: Dr. Angela Huebner, Principle Investigator (703-538-8491) or Dr. David M. Moore, Chair of the Virginia Tech IRB (540-231-5281).

Participant's Printed Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Kara Bath Co-Investigator's Signature _____

Appendix II: Recruitment Letter for Local PREP Class

My name is Kara Bath and I'm a current graduate student at Virginia Tech, in their Marriage and Family Therapy Program in Falls Church, Virginia. I'm working on my thesis. I want to explore the components of PREP (Preventative and Relationship Enhancement Program) that influence marital satisfaction among those participants married 5 or more years.

The inclusion criterion for my research project are as follows:

- you have participated in a PREP workshop (in the last 2 years)
- you have been married for 5 or more years

If you are interested in participating in my research study, you have 3 ways of doing so:

1. Fill out the survey attached (on the paper provided) sign and date the informed consent and send it all via US mail in the self-addressed envelope attached.*
2. Fill out the same survey online (email me at kbbath@vt.edu and I will send you the link to the online survey). I will also need a signed informed consent for this which can be emailed to me at the above address, mailed via US mail in the self-addressed envelope attached or faxed to my attention at 703-538-8465.*
3. Set up a time to do an in-person interview with me where I will ask you the same questions from the survey, but in interview form. I can collect your signed informed consent from you when I meet with you to do the interview or you can send it via US mail in the self-addressed envelope attached.*

***Both husband and wife need to sign and date a separate informed consent. Two copies are provided.**

If you have any questions at all about my thesis project, please feel free to contact me via email (kbbath@vt.edu) or phone (703-405-5600).

Thank you!

Kara Bath

Appendix III: Survey Questions

This survey is part of a thesis research project being conducted by Kara Bath, M.S. Candidate, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

The purpose of this study is to explore your experience of the Preventative Relationship and Enhancement Program (PREP) workshop. Thus, in this survey you will be asked about your experiences of the PREP workshop.

PREP has done extensive research with premarital into early marital couples. However, little research has been done looking at how couples married five or more years experience PREP. Thus, this study hopes to explore your experience of the PREP workshop and its influence on the marital relationship.

The researcher anticipates very low risk to you, as your confidentiality will be upheld to the highest standard. You may choose to not answer any question you feel uncomfortable answering. If at any time, you feel that you may need further work with your partner on certain issues, a list of local counseling agencies will be provided to participants upon request.

The benefits to you are that as a result of participating in this study you may feel a sense of satisfaction knowing you participated in a study that will benefit society and the institution of marriage. You also may find that this survey may spark new and different conversations in your relationship.

Every effort will be made to ensure that your responses are kept confidential. Your name and any other identifying information will not be reported.

This survey should take 30-45 minutes to complete.

Prior to completing the survey, please have a conversation with your spouse about the PREP workshop, so that you can be sure to include the couple experience of the workshop NOT just your own experience OR please fill the survey out together, as a couple.

In the following questions, please be as specific as possible and give examples, if you are comfortable. Your answers will be combined with others' answers in order to try to understand the overall experience of PREP.

The questions are very open-ended with the hope of giving you the opportunity to share about YOUR experience of the PREP workshop.

(If you need more room to answer any question, you can use the blank sheet of paper at the end of the survey).

1. After being married for 5 or more years, why did you decide to participate in the PREP workshop? What made you sign up for the PREP workshop?
2. What did you hope to get out of the workshop? How did your experiences in marriage over the past five years (or more) influence your expectations of the workshop?
3. Tell me about the format of the workshop?
4. What stood out for you about the workshop?
5. What tools or skills that you learned in the PREP workshop did you bring home (or do you hope to bring home) to use in your relationship? Did this differ from what you might have brought home if you had attended as a premarital couple? In what way? (Again, please be specific).
6. Which specific tools or skills have you adapted (or do you think you will adapt) to make your own?
7. Would you attend another PREP workshop? How come?
8. How long have you been married?
9. How long have you been together?
10. Is this your first marriage? (If not, what number is it?)
11. State of Residence

If you are willing to let the researcher contact you with any questions (or clarification needed) regarding your responses, please leave your name and phone and/or email below. Thank you!

Name

Phone number and/or email

Appendix IV: Follow-up Demographic Information

	<i>HUSBAND</i>	<i>WIFE</i>
Age		
Race/Ethnicity		
Highest Level of education completed		
Religious affiliation (if none, please write <i>none</i>)		