

New Directions. Toward the Prevention of Marital and Family Stress

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The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, I will briefly overview our work on the prevention of marital and family distress as well as a new study designed to test the extent we can disseminate the results of a divorce prevention program that has shown promise in a series of University based trials. Then I will comment from this prevention perspective on preceding chapters in this section Finally, I will briefly consider a number of challenges that face the field of prevention science as we move forward.

The Social Costs of Divorce and Marital Distress

Although divorce rates have decreased throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, couples marrying for the first time continue to face a 50% chance of divorce during their lifetime. Partners who divorce remarry at very high rates yet these new relationships are at just as high risk (or in some cases, higher risk) for divorce as first marriages (National Center for Health Statistics, in press). Wertlieb in the preceding chapter has elaborated in detail on both the short-term and long-term implications of *strained* marriage and divorce for the children involved—including difficulties with intimate relationships, committing to marriage and remaining married. Yet, divorced partners do not appear to be "learning from their mistakes," and countless other couples never divorce but remain in distressed and/or abusive relationships (Notarius & Markman, 1993).

Destructive Relationship Conflict: A Generic Risk Factor

As highlighted in a recent National Institute of Mental Health (NIIMH) report on prevention, marital distress and destructive marital conflict (rather than divorce, per se) are major generic risk factors for many forms of dysfunction and psychopathology (Coie et al., 1993). In particular, marital distress has been linked to higher rates of depression in adults, especially women (Coyne, Kahn & Gotlieb, 1987), and to conduct disorders in children (Fincham, Grych & Osborne, 1993). Moreover, the destructive effects of marital distress on physical health (Kiecolt-Glasser et al., 1993) and decreased work productivity (Forthofer, Markman, Stanley, Cox, & Kessler, 1996) have recently been demonstrated.

Recent evidence suggests that *destructive conflict* is the key mechanism through which the effects of divorce and marital distress are transmitted to spouse and children (Fisher & Fagot, 1993; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Howes & Markman, 1989, Volling & Belsky, 1992). Destructive marital conflict is one of the leading risk factors for future divorce and marital distress. For example, future divorce and marital distress could be predicted with over 90% accuracy in at least two separate investigations based on how couples handle conflict, i.e., deficits in conflict management predict divorce (Gottman, 1994; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993), and we have identified four stable patterns of destructive arguing (escalation, invalidation, withdrawal, and pursuit withdrawal) that place a couple at risk for future marital problems. Longitudinal studies have found that it takes some time for these patterns to take their toll on marital happiness through the active erosion of love, sexual attraction, friendship, trust and commitment (Stanley, Markman, El Peters, & Leber, 1994a). These positive elements of relationships do not naturally diminish over time but are corroded by destructive arguing (Notarius & Markman, 1993).

The marital distress and divorce prevention program we have developed (PREP, Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) targets destructive conflict as one of the key patterns to correct and prevent. The key ingredient of our program is teaching couples skills for the constructive management of conflict. In addition, the program targets the enhancement of the positive aspects of relationships (commitment, friendship, fun, sensuality) as protective factors for relationships. However, as suggested by our model of marital discord, it is the negative factors, not the positive factors, that strongly predict outcomes (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994). A detailed presentation of our affect management model is found in Lindahl & Markman (1990). The two key points of our model are that partners need to learn how: 1) to express their own negative emotions constructively and 2) to listen well to their partner's expression of negative emotions.

Possibilities for the Prevention of Marital and Family Distress

The need for well-designed and empirically validated interventions to prevent marital distress is evident from the above review. Dysfunctional communication patterns are recognizable in premarital interaction (Stanley, et al., 1995), and once formed, such patterns are difficult to modify (Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974). Despite these facts, the primary method of intervention is to treat relationship problems after they have become severe enough for the couple to seek therapy, usually after there have been negative effects on spouses and children (Hahlweg & Markman, 1988). Moreover, with a few exceptions (including our current research program), previous research evaluating divorce prevention programs (e.g., Avery, Ridley, Leslie & Mulholland, 1980; Wampler & Sprenkle, 1980) has failed to demonstrate that the programs prevent distress and divorce because prior evaluations have relied on before-after- or short term follow-up (i.e., 1 year)- designs. In addition, few studies have used a comparison group that controls for attention and expectations.

The rationale for divorce and marital discord prevention is similar to that for other forms of prevention: efforts are directed toward modifying risk factors and enhancing protective factors that are associated with and predictive of successful adjustment before problems develop (Coie, et al., 1993; Felner & Jason, 1983; Muehrer, et al., 1993; Sandler, et al, 1992). We intervene during the "planning marriage" period because, during such transitions, motivation to learn new skills is relatively high, and destructive interaction patterns have not yet solidified (Bloom, 1985). We attempt to provide couples with foundations to build successful marriages and to prepare for and withstand the groundswells of marriage. Yet this is also a time of idealism, and happy couples do not feel the same type of motivation to seek intervention as distressed couples do. For this reason, it is critical to deliver preventive programs to couples in their community context, which for the majority of marrying couples is their religious organization. Given the impact of destructive marital conflict on children, successful preventive interventions for couples should decrease the likelihood of mental health problems for children. This is an empirical question that we will be addressing in our current research program.

PREP is designed to teach couples to handle differences constructively (Markman, Floyd, Stanley & Storaasli, 1988; Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992). The results of a series of studies evaluating the PREP intervention are promising: Intervention couples have lower rates of relationship breakup and divorce, higher rates of marital satisfaction, and lower rates of physical violence during the early stages of marriage (Stanley et al. 1995). Further, results indicate that couples can learn conflict management skills during the program (Floyd & Markman, 1981) and continue to use the skills over a 10 year period (Stanley et al., 1995). New data indicate that the degree to which couples learn the skills is associated with positive changes in satisfaction over time (Stanley et al., 1995).

In addition to the studies conducted in our lab, there have now been a number of other controlled intervention trials with PREP (see Renick et al., 1992, for a review). For example, we have been evaluating a German version of PREP that is being offered in some of the Catholic churches in Munich and Bavaria (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). The results indicate that PREP couples showed significant gains in communication and conflict management skills from pre- to post- test (compared with control couples who received the typical intervention) and maintained these gains at the 1- and 3- year follow-ups (compared with their pretest scores and with controls). Moreover, PREP couples were significantly more satisfied with their relationship at the 3-year follow-up than controls (Thurmaier, et al. 1993). Similarly, in a large-scale study with an Australian sample of high-risk couples (e.g., children of divorce), Behrens & Halford (1994) have shown that PREP couples increased their use of conflict management skills from pre- to post- intervention compared with a randomly assigned information-only control group.

Building on these findings we are now moving to the next stage of our overall prevention research program: to evaluate the intervention with a large, well described population-- i.e., couples planning marriage in religious organizations (ROs)-- that provides a test with couples more representative of our ultimate targets.

Why Religious Institutions?

To fully realize the goal of preventing marital distress, we not only must have sound, tested interventions, these interventions must also make it into the hands of those motivated and capable of delivering them. For a number of reasons, the single largest array of institutions in our culture that are interested in preventing marital breakdown and capable of delivering interventions such as PREP are religious organizations:

1. Since 75% of couples get married in ROs (National Center for Health Statistics, in press), ROs represents a logical and natural access point for the delivery of premarital services to the majority of couples.
2.) ROs need no convincing regarding the importance of the task (Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch, 1985)

3. For the most part, Ros are already heavily involved in the delivery of premarital training programs (e.g., Trathen, 1992) and therefore have a natural affinity for prevention-oriented services.

4. ROs have a tradition and structures for service delivery of premarital programs (Trathen, 1992).

5. ROs are deeply embedded in their respective cultures; Cultural resistances and barriers that other institutions (e.g., the mental health system) may encounter are likely to be greatly lessened (Bloom, 1985).

A major advantage of using ROs for recruiting couples is that clergy are a major conduit of contact and influence with members of ethnic minorities. As described later, this project developed out of a series of meetings with community leaders, including the minister of the largest local church that serves predominantly African-Americans and the minister of a large church that serves predominantly Hispanics. Indications of support are illustrated by contacts with the Black Church Initiative (funded by the Denver-based Peton Foundation) and other community leaders, and an initial survey has shown high levels of interest in the project from ROs that serve minority communities.

In sum, by targeting ROs, we can readily widen the potential impact of our intervention program by reaching large numbers of couples and reducing costs of the service. Couples will receive the program for free, and clergy and lay leaders will deliver the program as part of the services typically offered in the RO. The key questions for this next stage of our research are (a) how best to train clergy to deliver PREP without substantially reducing the effectiveness of the program, (b) how we can increase rates of marital satisfaction beyond those achieved by existing programs, and (c) how PREP program is ultimately accepted into the RO. Hence, we will focus on both the effectiveness of dissemination of the intervention in religious institutions (compared with a control group of couples who receive standard premarital services without PREP) and the advancement of our understanding of the effectiveness of the intervention. To the extent that we can institutionalize a successful program for divorce and distress prevention in the community, we can have a major impact on the high rates of destructive marital conflict and divorce and their associated negative effects (e.g., on child and adult mental health).

Re Working Wives and Single Parents

The continuing high rates of divorce and marital distress that focuses my research team are only one of several profound changes in family structure in North America that have important implications for programs designed to enhance family stability. Increases in and implications of women working outside the home comprise a second and related change. Increases in mating and childbirth without marriage comprise a third.

Women working outside the home. Rates of women working outside the home and rates of divorce have been linked because when women work outside the home, economic dependence on husbands decrease, thereby increasing the possibility for changes in relationships, including divorce. In fact, one of the best predictors of increases in divorce rates in cross-national studies in one generation is the number of women who go into the workforce in a previous generation. At the same time women working outside the home increases the need for partners to negotiate issues concerning who does what inside the home, including raising the children and who does what around the house (e.g., division of labor). In traditional marriages (father working outside the home; mother being a full-time homemaker), decisions in these areas were not often necessary: The default option was that the wife did it. In essence, one can express the changes in the American family over the last several decades by saying that we've gone from relationships in which very little was negotiable to relationships in which nearly everything is negotiable (Notarius & Markman, 1993). However, there has not been a concomitant increase in skills provided to couples to enable them to negotiate the differences that have emerged. Thus it is not surprising that rates of marital distress and divorce have increased along with the need for prevention programs like PREP. However, the papers in this section provide some exciting empirical bases for future directions that prevention programs for couples and families can follow.

One of the major findings is that wives' work complexity seems to have a much stronger effect on the home environment (and by implication, child functioning) than husbands' work complexity. Specifically, women with low work complexity were part of families that provided less stimulating home environments for children. Further, women working outside the home, in general, are continuing to do most of the housework-- resulting in high levels of disagreement over who does what inside the home and high levels of mental health problems among women (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994). Thus, in future prevention efforts we need to target the partner and child interactions of working women to reduce the risk of child mental health problems, mental health problems of women, and divorce or marital distress. Menaghan's work, for example, suggests that interventions that increase male involvement in homes should reduce family stress

In addition, Menaghan finds that the wives' work is "spilling over" to home, while the husbands' work is not. In contrast, we are finding that conflict at home predicts lost productivity at work for the husbands, but not for the wives (Forthofer et al., 1996). Thus one interesting hypothesis to elaborate and test in future research is that there is more spillover from home to work for husbands, but more spillover from work to home for wives. Avison's chapter raises the issue of how the stresses and strains that single parents experience may spill over to their children. To the extent that work stress spills over to children, then preventive interventions for families need to be extended to include how to deal with such stresses. Further, employers might well be interested in providing services to workers with families, since problems at home often spill over to work (see Forthofer et al., in press, for details. These interventions in the workplace ought to be developed and/or expanded to include families or couples (e.g, PREP) as well as single parents.

Single parents. Single parents have emerged as an alternative family form associated with high exposure to stress, as documented by Avison's work. His excellent chapter builds on other findings to show that single parents and children growing up in single-parent homes are at an increased risk for numerous problems. The major conclusion from Avison's chapter is that a single parent's risk appears to be due more to exposure to stress than to personal vulnerabilities. Wertlieb's discussion of mediating mechanisms, on the other hand, not only recognizes 'the variety of traumatic or challenging events and experiences faced by a child' as parents divorce and 'the frequent decline in socioeconomic status and resources', but also 'the dysfunctional learning experiences and impaired parental attention and supervision that affect socialization.' In terms of intervention, increasing personal strengths through individually oriented interventions is still a viable strategy, as is reducing life stressors through 'programs that support and supplement the care of single parents' (e.g., quality day care programs).

It is important to note that the majority of the single-parent families in Avison's (1996) Canadian sample emerged from the breakup of unmarried couples, not from mothers who were never emotionally involved with the child's father. Thus Avison's sample consisted of mothers who, without the benefit of a formal marriage, were in a long-term relationship, broke up, and probably suffered the same kinds of negative consequences that people in a traditional marriage suffer if their relationship ends.

When we work with single parents or single individuals who are about to become parents, we find that about 60% of those parents-to-be are in a partner relationship (St. Peters & Markman, 1995), as is the case, for example, in studies of African-American families (Brooks Gunn, personal communication, November 1995). At one point in that study, about 60% of the single parents were in important relationships. Thus the term "single parent" may be misleading in that the majority of non-married parents appear to be in a partnered relationship.

Further, many teen mothers are co-parenting with their own mothers. It is very interesting to note that when family researchers from the NIMH family research consortium watched taped interactions between teen mothers and their parents in African-American families and compared the interaction patterns with those of Anglo married couples, they observed the same types of constructive and destructive patterns of communication and conflict management.

Thus, in future prevention efforts we need to expand target populations for decreasing mental health risks faced by parents and their children to include people (a) co-parenting in a relationship without marriage and (b) co-parenting with mother's mother. The skills taught in programs like PREP should be tested with unmarried parents and their co-parenting partners.

In addition, building on Avison's finding concerning non-marital breakup as a significant pathway toward single parenthood, future prevention efforts might target non-marital couples and provide training in communication skills and conflict management. In addition to improving the family environment for children, such intervention efforts might improve couple satisfaction, increase commitment and increase the chances of marriage.

Clearly, religious organizations would not be the best target for such efforts. However, we have been successful in reaching mothers-to-be during the transition to parenthood through healthcare agencies (Clements & Markman, 1995; St. Peters & Markman, 1995).

A further aim of future work in our program is to try to increase the number of single parents getting married and having happy relationships, and to protect and preserve marriages when they do occur.

Finally, as noted by Avison (1996), all parents can benefit from training in parenting and relationship skills; I agree with his recommendation that we should not point to single parents as uniquely deficient in such skills.

Issues Faced by the Field of Prevention Science

The preceding chapters, indeed the whole volume on social conditions, stress, resources and health, nicely illustrate several important issues now facing the field of prevention science.

Dissemination Issues

A big issue is dissemination of intervention programs that have been shown to be effective in university-based clinical trials. As clearly noted by Muehrer and colleagues (1993), too often we stop after such trials and do not devote enough effort to placing these programs in the hands of service providers (including those who are not in the mental health field, such as health care workers and clergy) positioned to reach the families who are most at risk.

Common Ingredients Across Successful Interventions

Most successful prevention programs are likely to have common ingredients. Four such commonalities might well provide foci for future research:

1. They focus on modifying personal relationship (Emde, 1995),
2. They provide active suggestions, skills, and activities for participants
3. They provide a sense of efficacy or mastery (Notarius & Venzetti, 1993)
4. They focus on anticipating predictable stressful life events.

Men and Women in Families

Family problems cannot be understood or prevented without a clear understanding of how men and women handle conflict and intimacy. However, most discussions on this topic generate more heat than light. Both the popular and scientific literature often converge on the simplistic and I believe wrong, conclusions that usually "blame" either men or women (often men!) for family problems and suggest that women (and not their partners) are interested in preventive interventions. Space does not permit me to offer my perspective on these important issues (see Markman & Kraft, 1989; Notarius & Markman, 1994;), but I am optimistic that men and women can work things out and that both men and women are interested in participating in low-cost skills-based prevention programs delivered in community or work settings.

Large vs. Small Studies

There is a need for bridges between large-scale epidemiological studies relying on self-reports (represented by Avison's and Menaghan's studies) and smaller sample observational studies (represented by my own work) that sacrifice large sample sizes for increased richness and understanding of process and mechanisms. Finally, more opportunities are needed to brainstorm possible preventive implications of outstanding research programs like those of Avison and Menaghan.

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