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Marriage Education with Hispanic Couples: Evaluation of a Communication Workshop

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ABSTRACT. The Hispanic population is the fastest growing ethnic group in the U.S. It is also a young population that faces a number of challenges including high rates of divorce and teenage pregnancy. Although marriage, or relationship, education is certainly not new, it is relatively unstudied among Hispanic couples. The Hispanic Active Relationships Project (HARP) was an initiative specifically designed as an outreach effort to Hispanic couples. This initiative was designed to provide participants with relationship and communication tools to increase relationship satisfaction, improve communication and conflict resolution skills, decrease negative interactions, and increase commitment to the relationship. The present study reports findings on the effectiveness of the HARP program based on data gathered from 550 individuals (275 couples) over a two and half year period. Participants were primarily Spanish speaking and at least half were first or second generation immigrants.

Introduction and Background

Recent research suggests the cost of divorce and out-of-wedlock births in this country to be at least \$112 billion (Scafidi, 2008). Based on data from the National Survey of Family Growth, which was obtained through interviews with more than 10,000 women age 15-44 years, Hispanics face a 34% chance that their first marriages will end in separation or divorce within 10 years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). For all women, the likelihood of divorce is increased by several factors, including marrying at a younger age, having a lower level of education, or having a child prior to, or within 7 months of, getting married. The Hispanic population comprises approximately 13% of the U.S. population, accounts for an increasing proportion of U.S. births (Saenz, 2006), and is growing faster than all other ethnic or racial groups in the U.S. (Haub, 2006). From 2000 to 2004, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated the Hispanic population increased by 49.2% compared to 18.5% for white non-Hispanics.

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Not only is the Hispanic population growing, but it is also a young population with high rates of fertility. Suro (2006) noted that among this population, there now exists “a huge second generation – about 12.5 million people, that is very young, with a median age of about 13” and, according to Camarillo and Bonilla (2001), the fertility rate of Hispanic women was 3.1 compared to the national rate of 2.1. Furthermore, while over one-third of births in the U.S. occur to unwed couples, the proportion of births occurring outside of marriage among Hispanics is 46% (Scafidi, 2008).

Compared to all other groups in the U.S., Hispanics have the lowest levels of education and the highest school dropout rates (Velez & Saenz, 2001). In 2000, among Hispanics 25 years and older, 43% had not obtained a high school diploma (Camarillo & Bonilla, 2001). Not only is education associated with relationship success but this becomes critically important since level of educational attainment is generally considered to be an important predictor of future employment and economic status. According to Camarillo and Bonilla (2001), 25% of Hispanics live in poverty compared to only 6% of non-Hispanic Whites.

In comparison, 38% of those 25 years and older in the Southwestern U.S. county in which this project takes place do not possess a high school diploma, with 24% not having reached the 9th grade. More than one-fourth (28%) of births are to unmarried women with a county birthrate of 108.7 per 1,000 compared to 75.4 of the state in which it rests. One-third (33%) of families and 63% female headed households with children under 5 lived in poverty.

Benefits of Healthy Marriages and Federal Initiatives

Numerous benefits to healthy marriages have been documented including decreased rates of disease and violence, increased rates of physical and mental health, and better child and family outcomes (Wilcox, et al., 2005). Experts on marriage and family recently summarized the benefits of healthy marriages for women, men, and children and found better relationship between parents and children, as well as numerous economic, physical health, and mental health advantages for both adults and children (Wilcox et al., 2005).

According to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF, 2006a), healthy marriages are “mutually enriching” and both partners “have a deep respect for each other.” Healthy marital relationships are beneficial to *all* members of the family – husband, wife, and children – and are “committed to ongoing growth, the use of effective communication skills and the use of successful conflict management skills.”

Recognizing the importance of encouraging stable, healthy marriages, the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) was created by the George W. Bush administration. The mission of this endeavor is:

To help couples, who have chosen marriage for themselves, to 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. (Administration for Children and Families, 2006a)

In order to meet the unique cultural needs that exist within various populations, the HMI included funding for demonstration projects through the African American, the Native American, and the Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiatives. The last, the Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative (HHMI) was born “to address the unique cultural, linguistic, demographic, and socio-economic needs of children and families in Hispanic communities” (ACF, 2006b). Of

the current 219 HMI programs, only 19 are dedicated to the HHMI. Hopefully, some of the research stemming from these inaugural programs will fill the glaring lack of research on relationship and marriage education that exists in the literature beyond that with primarily, white, middle-class populations (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Stanley, Allen, Markman, Saiz, Bloomstrom, Thomas, Schumm, & Bailey, 2005).

Inherent in all HMI programming is education to enhance the quality and longevity of couple relationships. Marriage education programs designed to improve current or future relationships are not new. In fact, a recent meta-analysis of 69 evaluation studies of marriage and relationship education found that such programs improve relationship quality and communication skills but the literature has yet to answer whether or not such programs work for economically and ethnically diverse populations (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). In addition, there is very little in the literature on whether the length of the workshop produces different outcomes, although a 2007 meta-analysis found that programs that were at least nine hours had better results than those that were shorter (Hawkins, Blanchard, Fawcett, & Jenkins, 2007). Since some states are now offering to waive marriage license fees for couples who undergo as little as eight hours of marriage education, further exploration of this issue is warranted.

The Active Relationships Center, or ARC, of Dallas, Texas received a HHMI demonstration grant to design and deliver marriage and relationship education to a primarily Hispanic population in one county in the Southwestern region of the U.S. The ARC established the Hispanic Active Relationships Program – hereafter referred to as HARP – to administer a variety of programs with different content foci (e.g., communication, money management, love, and romance) for the residents of the county. The present article examines the effectiveness of HARP at improving the quality of relationships of couples who attended one of 51 communication workshops, known as *Active Communication*, during the first two and half years of the project (October 1, 2006 through March 31, 2009). It also explores differences in outcomes between 8-hour workshops and those 9 hours or longer.

The *Active Communication* curriculum was developed by the Director of the ARC, a licensed marriage and family therapist, who contracted the authors to evaluate the project. *Active Communication* is one of several programs in the Active Relationships Mastery Series that seeks to improve the ability of couples to address the strains that naturally occur in relationships and family life, thereby building healthier, more stable relationships.

Methodology

Sample and Procedures

Participants in *Active Communication* workshops were recruited through a variety of means including announcements and flyers in local churches, billboard advertisements, and personal invitation by workshop leaders. Couples registered for workshops via telephone prior to the actual workshop date(s). With multiple facilitators and a variety of workshop times available in both Spanish and English, project staff were able to match participants with workshops that fit attendees' schedules and language preferences.

Prior to the beginning of the workshop, the workshop leaders, all of whom were recruited from the local community and trained in both the curriculum and the study protocol, obtained informed consent from all participants agreeing to complete surveys; informed consents were available in both Spanish and English. Data were gathered via self-report instruments that distributed at the beginning of the workshop (pretest) and at the conclusion (posttest). The instruments were available in both English and Spanish. Facilitators read aloud both the

informed consents and all items on the survey instruments for all workshops since the project team anticipated some literacy issues. Couples were instructed to sit apart from each other while completing questionnaires to increase comfort and likelihood of answering all items honestly. Completed surveys were placed into an envelope which was sealed in front of participants. Facilitators reported the surveys generally took 15-20 minutes to complete with the workshops themselves ranging from 8-16 hours.

Measures

In this evaluation, the effectiveness of the program was assessed in terms of the impact of the program on the participants' acquired knowledge in key content areas. The purpose of marriage/relationship education is to strengthen marriages (current or future) by reducing marital distress and negative interaction which lead to divorce. The goal of the evaluation was to determine whether participants believe they had acquired knowledge and skills from the *Active Communication* program to improve their relationships. The following five objectives were used to evaluate the program:

- Increased marital satisfaction
- Increased positive communication
- Increased ability to resolve conflict
- Decreased negative interaction
- Increased commitment to the current relationship

The program would be considered effective to the degree which the above objectives were achieved. The rationale for choosing these objectives and the measures used to assess them follows.

Marital Satisfaction. A classic study by Lewis and Spanier (1979) established marital satisfaction as a major component of marital quality. Since that time, marital satisfaction has become the most studied concept in the marriage field (see Fowers & Olson 1989 for a review of this research). Strong empirical justification exists to demonstrate that marital satisfaction is a prominent contributor to global satisfaction (Fowers & Olson, 1989) and that marital satisfaction indirectly predicts marital dissolution (Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Increased marital satisfaction should be one of the outcomes of any program designed to improve the marriage relationship.

The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) continues to be a widely utilized instrument with excellent reliability and validity in prior studies (Corcoran & Fischer, 2000; Stanley & Markman, 1992). A modified version (7 point in current study vs. 10 point in original) of the first item on the MAT was used to measure marital satisfaction. On this item, participants rated their level of agreement to the statement "Please rate how happy you are in your present marriage" on a 7-point scale from "extremely unhappy" to "perfectly happy". In a phone survey with over 900 participants, Stanley, Markman and Whitton (2002) took this same approach, using a version of the first item from the MAT as a means to assess relationship satisfaction. Kotrla & Dyer (2006) used a 10-point version of this item in a pilot study of marriage education programming among 177 Hispanics in Texas, and a 7 point- version in an evaluation study of a marriage education program with 25 military couples (Kotrla & Dyer, 2008). Individual scores alone were calculated in both of these studies. In the 2006 pilot study, *t*-tests indicated that participants' scores changed significantly ($p < .001$) from pretest ($m = 6.87$, $sd = 2.48$) to posttest ($m = 8.14$, $sd = 2.20$). In the 2008 military study, *t*-tests revealed that scores changed significantly from pretest ($m = 6.52$, $sd = 1.98$) to posttest ($m = 8.54$, $sd = 1.09$).

Positive Communication. Communication that is positive in nature leads to understanding and positive interaction and contributes to more rewarding interaction, greater likelihood of conflict resolution, and higher levels of intimacy and satisfaction with one's partner and the overall relationship (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Le & Agnew, 2001). In distressed couples, lack of marital satisfaction is associated with negative communication (Burleson & Denton, 1997).

ENRICH is a marital satisfaction inventory designed to help couples determine the strengths and work areas of their relationships. Based on research with over 20,000 married couples, the ENRICH Communication subscale has an internal consistency of .90 and a test-retest reliability of .87 (Olson, 2002). For the present study, participants rated their level of agreement on eight items of the ENRICH Communication subscale using a 5-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Example items included “I can usually believe everything my partner tells me” and “My partner is a very good listener.”

Conflict resolution. All couples experience conflict in their relationships; however, it is not the amount of conflict that is detrimental to the relationship but how conflict is managed. Couples experience distress when their attempts to manage conflict are unsuccessful (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). A marriage education program's success in teaching couples to manage conflict in ways that are not damaging to the relationship attest to its effectiveness.

The Conflict Resolution subscale of the ENRICH global marital satisfaction scale was used to assess this outcome; this subscale has an internal consistency of .84 and a test-retest reliability of .90. Participants rated their level of agreement on nine items of this scale, including “My partner and I have very similar ideas about the best way to solve our disagreements” and “My partner usually takes our disagreements very seriously.” The same 5-point disagreement/agreement rating scale was utilized for scoring.

Negative Interaction. Researchers have found that the ratio of positive to negative interaction in a relationship is a strong indicator of the stability of the relationship in that couples with higher levels of negative interaction experience more distress and are more likely to divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Stanley, Markman & Whitton, 2002). Criticism, rejection, contempt, defensiveness, and name-calling are examples of negative interaction. Effective marriage education programs should increase the ratio of positive to negative interaction in couple relationships.

This outcome was measured by a negative interaction scale that was successfully used in a study of marriage education with military families called Building Strong and Ready Families (BSRF) (Science Applications International Corporation, & PREP, Inc., 2004). Participants rated how often they and their partners experienced negative interaction on eight items. This instrument utilized the same 5-point disagreement/agreement scale already explained. Example items from the BSRF include “Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name-calling, or bringing up past hurts” and “My partner shouts or yells at me”.

The lead authors utilized this question in both the prior referenced pilot study with Hispanics in Texas (Kotrla & Dyer, 2006) and with military couples (Kotrla & Dyer, 2008). In the pilot study, results of *t* tests revealed that scores changed significantly from pretest ($m = 20.02$, $sd = 5.75$) to posttest ($m = 14.87$, $sd = 4.62$). In the military evaluation, *t*-tests revealed that scores changed significantly ($t(10.963)$, $p < .001$) from pretest ($m = 19.25$, $sd = 4.56$) to posttest ($m = 12.80$, $sd = 2.13$).

Relationship Commitment. In a survey of 2,300 divorced residents in Oklahoma, Stanley (2002) found that 85% of respondents believed “lack of commitment” was the major reason for divorce. Researchers widely accept that commitment is directly related to marital satisfaction and stability (Montgomery, 1981; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002).

To measure this concept, participants were asked in a single question how dedicated they were to staying in their present relationship; they responded on a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all committed” to “absolutely committed.” In evaluating the marriage education program with military couples, Kotrla and Dyer (2008) found participants’ scores increased substantially using this measure from pretest ($m = 8.48, sd = 2.04$) to posttest ($m = 9.11, sd = 1.26$).

Content Questions. HMI grantees are also expected to evaluate whether participants learned content delivered during the workshops (McGrouder, 2007). Therefore, four content-specific questions were added to the posttest to assess acquisition of workshop information. These items were:

- Investing time in my marriage is important.
- I can talk without fighting about issues that come up.
- Spending time having fun and being friends with my spouse is important.
- I have ideas for how to show commitment to my spouse.

Workshop participants rated responded to each of these items using a 5-point likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Analytic Approach

For responses to be included in the analysis, both partners had to attend the workshop together, agree to participate in the study by signing an informed consent, and complete both the pretest and posttest. A total of 275 couples ($N = 550$) attending one of the 51 *Active Communication* workshops over the first two and half years of the project met these criteria. Appropriate frequencies were calculated on background, demographic and content-specific variables. Prior to conducting inferential analyses on the five outcome variables described earlier, responses of individuals who attended as a couple were combined to create couple scores. To assess pretest to posttest couple score change on these measures, paired t tests were conducted. This approach has been suggested by others for use in program evaluations in which changes in participants scores on multiple measures are being assessed (Armitage & Berry cited in Carney & Buttell, 2006). Where significant changes were detected ($p < .05$), effect sizes were calculated to assess the magnitude of the change using the following formula (Cronk, 2006):

$$d = \frac{\overline{D}}{S_D}$$

Effect sizes were interpreted according to Cohen’s (1992) typology with .2 considered small, .5 moderate, and .8 or higher a strong effect. According to Coe (2000), it may be helpful when interpreting effect sizes to think of them in comparison to familiar differences. For example, an effect size of 0.2 would be similar to the difference in heights between 15 and 16 year old females in the United States, an effect size of 0.5 would be comparable to the variance in height between 14 and 18 year of girls, and an effect size of 0.8 would be analogous to the difference in the heights of 13 and 18 year old females.

Finally, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was calculated to determine if eight versus nine or more hours of programming impacted outcomes.

Results

Sample Characteristics

The majority of participants (82.0%, $n = 451$) were married at the time of program attendance. As seen in Table 1, participants were diverse but, on average, were 37.50 years old ($sd = 11.36$) and had been in their present relationship for an average of 15.33 years ($sd = 12.00$), with a range of zero to 41 years. Most attendees (83.3%, $n = 458$) reported having children; the average number of children reported was 2.83 ($sd = 1.71$).

Nineteen percent of the participants ($n = 103$) had no more than a junior high education, while 29.5% ($n = 162$) had some college or technical training, and another 18.6% ($n = 102$) had earned a four-year college degree or higher. In 76% of the couples, at least one spouse worked outside the home for three quarters of the sample (75.5%, $n = 415$). The most commonly reported annual household income range of participants was \$20,000-\$29,999 (17.3%, $n = 95$), followed by \$10,000 - \$19,999 (17.1%, $n = 94$).

Two-thirds of those attending *Active Communication* workshops (66.2%, $n = 364$) preferred to communicate in Spanish. Over half of the attendees were either first (30.2%, $n = 166$) or second generation (26.0%, $n = 143$) immigrants.

Table 1
Characteristics of HARP Sample

| Age | % | N = 550 |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|-----------|
| Less than 20 | 2.0 | 11 |
| 20-29 years | 24.2 | 133 |
| 30-39 years | 33.6 | 185 |
| 40-49 years | 23.6 | 130 |
| 50-59 years | 11.1 | 61 |
| 60+ years | 3.9 | 21 |
| <u>Missing</u> | <u>1.6</u> | <u>9</u> |
| Total | <u>100.0</u> | 580 |
| Length in Present Relationship | % | N = 391* |
| Less than 5 years | 15.2 | 58 |
| 5-10 years | 24.9 | 95 |
| 11-15 years | 22.3 | 85 |
| 16-20 years | 13.9 | 53 |
| 21-25 years | 8.4 | 32 |
| <u>26+ years</u> | <u>15.2</u> | <u>58</u> |
| Total | 100.0 | 381 |
| Highest Level of Education | % | N = 550 |
| Up to/through 8 th grade | 18.7 | 103 |
| Some high school | 12.2 | 67 |

| | | |
|--|-------------|----------------|
| Finished high school/GED | 15.6 | 86 |
| Some college/technical school | 29.5 | 162 |
| Four year college degree | 12.4 | 68 |
| Graduate/professional school | 6.2 | 34 |
| <u>Missing</u> | <u>5.5</u> | <u>30</u> |
| Total | 100.0 | 580 |
| Annual Household Income | % | N = 550 |
| \$9,999 or less | 14.2 | 78 |
| \$10,000 – 19,999 | 17.1 | 94 |
| \$20,000 – 29,999 | 17.3 | 95 |
| \$30,000 – 39,999 | 10.5 | 58 |
| \$40,000 – 49,999 | 5.5 | 30 |
| \$50,000 – 74,999 | 8.9 | 49 |
| \$75,000 – 99,999 | 3.6 | 20 |
| \$100,000 + | 2.9 | 16 |
| <u>Missing</u> | <u>20.0</u> | <u>110</u> |
| Total | 100.0 | 580 |
| First in Family to Move to U.S. | % | N = 550 |
| Self/Participant | 30.2 | 166 |
| Parents | 26.0 | 143 |
| Grandparents | 16.9 | 93 |
| Great-grandparents | 5.3 | 29 |
| Not sure | 12.7 | 70 |
| <u>Missing</u> | <u>8.9</u> | <u>49</u> |
| Total | 100.0 | 580 |

*Smaller N as this question not asked from beginning of project.

Program Outcomes

Marital satisfaction. Couple scores on the single MAT item increased from a mean of 10.64 ($sd = 2.85$) at pretest to a mean of 12.20 ($sd = 2.28$) at posttest. A paired sample t test revealed the change was statistically significant ($t(244) = -9.332, p < .001$). The effect size of this change ($d = .60$) was moderate. All outcome findings and effect size calculations are summarized in Table 2.

Positive communication. Couple scores on the ENRICH Communication subscale indicated improved couple scores from pretest ($m = 64.13, sd = 12.35$) to posttest ($m = 68.07, sd = 9.78$); the change was significant ($t(d.f. 240) = -7.786, p < .001$). The effect size was .50, which falls into the moderate range.

Conflict resolution. On the ENRICH Conflict Resolution subscale, scores rose from a pretest mean of 59.00 ($sd = 7.61$) to a posttest mean of 64.06 ($sd = 7.01$), a change that was statistically significant ($t(d.f. 220) = -9.871, p < .001$). The associated effect size of .67 is considered moderate.

Negative interaction. Couple scores on the BSRF Negative Interaction Scale also improved from pretest ($m = 44.50, sd = 13.17$) to posttest ($m = 35.94, sd = 13.52$); it is important for readers to recall that this is the only measure where a reduction in posttest scores indicates movement in the positive direction. Results of t tests revealed that couple scores changes were

statistically significant ($t(203) = 9.817, p < .001$); an accompanying effect size of $d = 0.69$ is in the moderate range.

Relationship commitment. On the question asking participants how committed they were to staying in their present relationship, couple scores rose from pretest ($m = 12.59, sd = 2.10$) to posttest ($m = 13.43, sd = 1.13$), an improvement which was statistically significant ($t(255) = -8.024, p < .001$). The effect size of .50 associated with this shift is moderate.

Table 2
Summary of Paired t test Results

| Measure | Pretest | | Posttest | | df | t value p level | Effect Size |
|--|---------|--------|----------|--------|-----|----------------------|-------------|
| | M | sd | M | sd | | | |
| Marital Satisfaction: Locke Wallace MAT item | 10.64 | 2.846 | 12.20 | 2.282 | 243 | -9.332 $p < .001$ | .60 |
| Positive Communication: ENRICH Communication subscale | 64.13 | 12.354 | 68.07 | 9.780 | 239 | -7.786 $p < .001$ | .50 |
| Conflict Resolution: ENRICH Conflict Resolution subscale | 59.00 | 7.614 | 64.06 | 7.005 | 219 | -9.871 $p < .001$ | .67 |
| Negative Interaction: BSRF Negative Interaction Scale | 44.50 | 13.169 | 35.94 | 13.518 | 202 | 9.817 $p < .001$ | .69 |
| Relationship Commitment: Commitment question | 12.59 | 2.099 | 13.43 | 1.129 | 255 | -8.024 $p < .001$ | .50 |

Content Questions

As seen in Table 3, participants also demonstrated positive learning on the four items designed to assess acquisition of workshop information.

Table 3
Program Knowledge Acquired

| Item | %/# Strongly Agree/Agree | %/# Disagree Strongly Disagree | %/# Neither Agree or Disagree | %/# No answer |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| Investing time in my marriage is important. | 98.0/539 | 0.6/3 | 0.7/4 | 0.7/4 |
| I can talk without fighting about issues that come up. | 94.3/519 | 1.1/6 | 04.2/23 | 0.4/2 |
| Spending time having fun and being friends with my spouse is important. | 97.8/538 | 0.7/4 | 1.1/6 | 0.4/2 |
| I have ideas for how to show commitment to my spouse. | 96.4/530 | 0.2/1 | 3.3/18 | 0.2/1 |

Program Outcomes by Workshop Length

The Communication Workshop was originally designed as a 16 hour program, but because attending for two full days was difficult for many people, some facilitators shortened the length of the workshop by eliminating some of the interactional aspects. Therefore, programs varied in

length from 9 to 16 hours. Later, when the state established a policy that gave couples a discount on their marriage license for attending 8 hours of marriage education that met certain criteria, the program was revised to meet these standards. None of the core educational content was eliminated in the revisions. Some role plays and other interactional exercises were eliminated or assigned as homework activities. Approximately half of the couples in the sample attended one of the workshops that varied from 9 to 16 hours and the other half attend workshops that lasted 8 hours. Only couples who completed the full workshop, i.e., they were in the workshop for all the hours for which it was designed and completed pre and post test, were included in the data analysis.

Eight hour workshops were attended by 144 couples (52.4%), while the remaining 131 couples (47.6%) participated in programs lasting at least nine hours. Differences in couple scores by workshop length are summarized in Table 3. A one-way MANOVA was calculated examining the effect of workshop length (eight versus nine or more hours) on the five outcome measures. A significant effect was found ($Lambda(5, 193) = .004, p = .000$). Follow-up univariate ANOVA indicated that marital satisfaction scores were higher for those attending longer workshops ($F(1, 197) = 4.08, p < .05$). However, further analysis revealed there was also a significant difference in the pretest scores of couples who attended longer ($m = 11.01, sd = 2.59$) versus shorter ($m = 10.32, sd = 2.96$) workshops ($F(1, 260) = 3.971, p < .05$).

Table 4
Outcomes by Workshop Length

| Measure | Pretest M(sd) | | Posttest M(sd) | |
|--|---------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|
| | 8 hours | 9+ hours | 8 hours | 9+ hours |
| Marital Satisfaction: Locke Wallace MAT item | 10.32(2.96) | 11.01(2.59) | 11.93(2.48) | 12.51(1.96) |
| Positive Communication: ENRICH Communication subscale | 61.71(12.71) | 65.20(12.65) | 66.62(10.89) | 69.08(8.43) |
| Conflict Resolution: ENRICH Conflict Resolution subscale | 58.21(7.06) | 59.52(8.23) | 64.25(7.53) | 64.25(7.53) |
| Negative Interaction: BSRF Negative Interaction Scale | 44.84(12.72) | 44.09(13.24) | 36.71(13.49) | 35.91(14.16) |
| Relationship Commitment: Commitment question | 12.38(2.14) | 12.77(2.07) | 13.33(1.22) | 13.48(1.16) |

Summary of Findings

Results of analysis indicated that the *Active Communications* program produced significant positive results at the $p < .001$ level for all five outcome measures assessed. Couple scores clearly improved from pretest to both posttest on all indicators, including the ENRICH Communication subscale, the ENRICH Conflict Resolution subscale, and the BSRF Negative

Interaction Scale, all of which have sufficient grounding in the literature. Considering the importance given to commitment in the marriage literature, significant change on this measure is also an important finding. Most of the couples were recruited through churches suggesting that their faith may have played a part in their commitment to marriage. Couples had strong commitment scores at pretest, and yet they indicated more commitment at the end of the workshop. In addition, all observed changes were accompanied by moderate effect sizes and participants demonstrated overwhelmingly positive knowledge acquisition as observed through analysis of posttest only items. These findings speak to the magnitude of the impact that the *Active Communication* curriculum had on the couples who attended these workshops.

Despite such strong findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. This was a self-selected sample and a large proportion of it was over the age of 30 and had at least some college education, making it distinctly different from the larger U.S. Hispanic/Latino population. An additional limitation is that data was only gathered before and after the workshops from those attending. A strong attempt was made to gather follow-up data at 3, 6, and 12 months after the workshops but returns were too low for meaningful analysis. Lack of follow-up data and a comparison or control group make it impossible to rule out other factors that might have influenced results. In light of these factors, the findings from this study are not generalizable beyond the sample itself.

Nonetheless, 20% of the sample had only an 8th or 9th grade education and almost half had an income of less than \$30,000 a year with an average of 3 children per family. This clearly puts a significant portion of the sample in the population that has been considered a hard to reach group for marriage education or for that matter any educational programming. In addition, over half are either first or second generation to live in the U.S. and prefer to communicate in Spanish. It also seems significant that 275 men from a culture often stereotyped by the term “machismo” agreed to accompany their wives to an educational program that focused on communication and the relationship between husbands and wives.

An attempt was made to assess the impact of the time spent in this marriage education program on outcomes. Results of analysis appear to indicate that spending more time did not produce more substantial outcomes than those spending only eight hours. This finding is different from previous research (e.g., Hawkins, Blanchard, Fawcett, & Jenkins, 2007) and may be good news for states trying to encourage premarital education. However, in this study, the length of the workshops varied considerably. With almost half of the couples attending workshops of various lengths (between 9 and 16 hours), findings may be good news for marriage educators who are struggling to recruit for and finance longer programs.

Implications for Future Research

This study makes critical contributions to the marriage education literature. The study is among the first to utilize a large sample that was predominantly Hispanic (96%). Furthermore, many of the participants in this study were first or second generation immigrants whose preferred language was not English. A sample with such characteristics is critical as it demonstrates the willingness of individuals who have recently migrated from other countries, many of whom are not fluent in English, to participate in programs that, to date, have primarily been conducted with mainstream American populations. As such, researchers should be encouraged by this study and be willing to undertake projects that involve research with new immigrant populations.

A key to recruiting participants for this study was the mechanism used – e.g., through church leaders. Although not formally assessed, it is believed that the use of trusted community

members was a critical factor in the recruitment of members of the Hispanic/Latino community, especially non-English speaking, first-generation immigrants, agreeing to participate in the program and to complete multiple survey instruments. Researchers planning studies with non-mainstream populations should consider enlisting the assistance of similar trusted community individuals, specific to the population of interest.

Further research that examines the long-term effectiveness of brief (e.g., eight hour) marriage and relationship education is needed. The field has generally considered 16 to 18 hour formats to be needed for effectiveness, but recruitment to longer programs has become difficult and the cost to participants or the sponsoring agency is high. Many HMI programs have set eight hours as the minimum length for programs they support, but data that supports this benchmark is essential.

Summary

Results of pretest/posttest data collected from 275 couples attending relationship education programming that the HARP *Active Communication* workshops were effective as demonstrated by statistically significant positive changes on a variety of outcome measures. No differences were found in outcomes based on the length of the workshop, but further study of this variable is warranted. This study was critical in demonstrating that first and second generation Spanish-speaking couples can be recruited, and benefit from, attending educational programs.

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