SOCIAL WORK & CHRISTIANITY

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

VOLUME 35, NUMBER 3 • 2008

ARTICLES

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REVIEWS

PUBLICATIONS

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ISSN 0737-5778

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Social Work and Christianity (SWC) is a refereed journal published by the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW) to support and encourage the growth of social workers in the ethical integration of Christian faith and professional practice. *SWC* welcomes articles, shorter contributions, book reviews, and letters which deal with issues related to the integration of faith and professional social work practice and other professional concerns which have relevance to Christianity.

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SOCIAL WORK & CHRISTIANITY

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

FALL 2008
VOLUME 35, NUMBER 3
ISSN 0737-5778

CONTENTS

ARTICLES

How 35 Congregations Launched and Sustained Community Ministries
Diana R. Garland, Terry A. Wolfer, and Dennis R. Myers 229

Religious Characteristics of Government-Funded Faith-Related Social Service Organizations
James R. Vanderwoerd 258

Using Marriage Education to Strengthen Military Families: Evaluation of the Active Military Life Skills Program
Kim Kotrla and Preston Dyer 287

Lessons from Our Past: African American Christian Women and the Integration of Faith and Practice
Kesslyn A. Brade 312

PRACTICE NOTES

An Introduction to Practice Notes
Mackenzi Huyser 324

Considering the Human Consequences of Policy-Level Changes: The Impact of The Ryan White HIV/AIDS Treatment Modernization Act
Allison Pizzi *325*

REVIEWS *335*

PUBLICATIONS *349*

HOME STUDY *354*

Social Work and Christianity is published quarterly by the North American Association of Christians in Social Work, 21 Turkey Roost Rd., Sandy Hook, Connecticut 06482. Periodicals postage at Newtown, CT and additional mailing offices.
ISSN 0737-5778

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to NACSW, PO Box 121; Botsford, CT 06404.

Using Marriage Education to Strengthen Military Families: Evaluation of the Active Military Life Skills Program

Kim Kotrla and Preston Dyer

In addition to challenges all couples face in their relationships, military couples encounter difficult stressors unique to life in the armed services. Marriage education programs have the potential to provide military couples with the tools necessary to build healthy marriages. This exploratory study examines the effectiveness of the Active Military Life Skills Program (AMLS) in improving marital satisfaction, hope for success of and commitment to the relationship, communication and conflict resolution skills, and the ratio of positive to negative interactions. Results of analysis of data gathered from 23 Air Force personnel and their spouses/partners indicates the AMLS program was largely successful in meeting each of these objectives. Data analyses of measures for each program objective, as well as implications for social work practice, are discussed.

In the story of King David and Bathsheba found in II Samuel 11 (New International Version), Uriah was called back from the front lines of war so that David could conceal his impregnation of Uriah's wife. Although unaware of this, Uriah refused to go home and be with his wife. Instead, he chose to sleep at the entrance of the palace. Verses 10 and 11 read:

> When David was told, "Uriah did not go home," he asked him, "Haven't you just come from a distance? Why didn't you go home?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open fields. How could

Social Work & Christianity, Vol. 35, No.3 (2008), 287-311
Journal of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work

I go to my house to eat and drink and lie with my wife?
As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!"

Many American soldiers, similar to Uriah, are unable to return home fully, even after being released from duty. Guilt and stress from war and other service-related experiences prevent them from fully reengaging in the relationships they had prior to separation or deployment. Military families can be strengthened through the use of marriage education programs designed specifically for couples in the military. These programs can be made accessible through collaboration of the military leadership, social workers and chaplains, as well as civilian social workers working with local congregation.

Background and Purpose

Factors that contribute to divorce vary. Some experts believe that individuals whose occupations expose them to danger and trauma, such as police officers and firefighters, have a higher risk of divorce (Columbia University Mailman School of Mental Health, n.d.; Rawles, 2003). Women and men in the military, especially in times of war, can be included in those occupations that risk danger and trauma (Miles, 2005). It may be years before the full impact of current military service on marriages and families is seen.

According to an extensive review of the literature on marriages in the military for the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, almost 700,000, or 50%, of the country's armed forces are married and many of these couples will face difficulties exclusive to military life, such as deployment and combat stress (Hull, n.d.). During times of conflict, couples often must cope with multiple deployments. Long and frequent deployments are associated with loss of emotional support, disconnected relationships, and increased caretaking and household responsibilities for the non-deployed spouse, all of which create stress beyond the departure itself (Kelley, 1994). Military spouses may also experience loneliness, depression, anxiety, anger, and physical illness (Bey & Lange, 1974; Blount, Curry, & Lubin, 1992; Wood, Scarville, & Gravino, 1995). The distress of the separation during times of deployment can be even greater for those couples whose relationships are characterized by poor communication (Blount et al., 1992).

Another issue for military families is multiple moves to locations away from extended family and from the couple's church home. Families

who move frequently are generally less likely to get connected with a local congregation and are certainly disconnected from their home churches. This is an issue both for the families that return to their home communities during the deployment and those who stay in the community from which deployment took place.

Some research indicates lower rates of divorce and better adjustment to separation among military couples who felt good about their marriage prior to deployment (Rosen, & Durand, 1995; Schumm, Silliman, & Bell, 2000). Such findings suggest there may be ways to strengthen marriages among couples in the armed forces.

The military is beginning to recognize this need and has started to offer programming designed to help military couples strengthen their relationships. According to Miles (2005), the Army utilizes the Building Strong and Ready Families program, which focuses on improving communication skills, as well as the P.I.C.K. a Partner Program (Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge) program, which aims to assist single soldiers in making good mate selection choices. Couples in the Marine Corp can take advantage of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) which focuses heavily on effective communication and conflict resolution. Marriage Enrichment Retreat, the current program of choice by the Navy, is of similar content to PREP. The Air Force does not have a specific service-wide marital support program at this time, although various programs are offered at various bases, including the Active Military Skills Programs (AMLS), which is designed to improve the ability of military couples to address the stressors of daily life through better communication skills, conflict resolution skills, management of emotional triggers, and awareness of financial responsibilities. These programs designed for military couples are a good beginning, but existing research on their effectiveness is mixed and more is needed (Hull, n.d.).

The purpose of the present study was to examine the effectiveness of the Active Military Life Skills (AMLS) program at improving the quality of military couple relationships (Simpson, 2003). The AMLS program was developed by Kelly Simpson, LMFT, and founder of the Active Relationship Center in Dallas, Texas and was recently piloted in the Air Force.

The Active Military Life Skills Program (AMLS) is designed to be delivered in a two-day seminar but can be delivered in other formats. The author has developed a facilitator's manual and a participant's

guide. Facilitator training is required to be able to lead AMLS. (For information on facilitator training, see the Active Relationship Center website at www.ActiveRelationships.com) The program is divided into six sections as follows:

1. Establishing Successful Habits (e.g., communication, positive interaction, emotional intelligence).
2. Managing Your and Your Family Member's Emotions (e.g., emotional triggers, anger, power).
3. Money Personalities-Understanding Yours and Managing for the Future (managing different money styles, financial planning).
4. Conflict Resolution Skills.
5. Interacting with Family (disciplining children, responsibilities and chores).
6. Wise choices for Relationships and Love (e.g. growing healthy relationships, biology of love, discussing needs and desires).

The facilitators use short lectures, group discussions, individual and couple exercises, and inventories to present the program.

Methodology

Recruitment and Study Design

A self-selected sample of active duty United States Air Force (USAF) couples stationed at a base in Europe was recruited through radio spots and brochures advertising a workshop retreat for couples. In addition, workshop information was distributed through vital United States Air Force (USAF) community networks, including the "key spouse" and First Sergeant networks. Each squadron in the USAF has at least one key spouse who is responsible for maintaining contact with, and providing information to, other spouses in the unit. Each squadron also has a First Sergeant who is responsible for disseminating information to its members.

As designed, the AMLS program can be delivered as a weekend seminar or over a longer period of time. The program that was evaluated used a weekend retreat format that occurred over a Saturday and Sunday. The United States Air Force in Europe provided funding for much of the workshop, including two nights in a hotel and five meals for the couples. The participants were responsible for the cost of travel, incidentals, and childcare.

This study utilized a pretest, posttest, 2-month follow-up design and all participants signed informed consent authorizations prior to completing self-report survey instruments. A University Human Subject Research committee reviewed and approved the research design, informed consent statements, and inventories. Participants rated how they felt their relationships were at the present time on pretests. Posttest responses reflected how participants "thought" their relationship would be changed or impacted by the workshop in the coming weeks, while follow-up responses reflected how participants perceived their relationship actually had changed two months after the workshop.

The workshop facilitator, who is the author of the Active Military Life Styles program, provided instructions to participants on completing the instrument and used sample questions to ensure that participants understood the answer keys. Spouses/partners sat apart from each other while completing the surveys to ensure confidentiality and to increase the honesty of responses.

A total of 25 active duty Air Force personnel and their spouses/partners attended the AMLS workshop retreat. However, since one of the primary objectives of the evaluation was to assess change in marital satisfaction, data from 2 couples were removed from analysis, since at least one partner indicated the couple was not currently married.

All 46 participants completed pretest and posttest surveys. Follow-up data was collected from 35 participants (17 couples plus one individual) two months after the workshop. A two-month follow-up was used because of the transitory nature of military life. Despite complications such as deployment that impacted collecting follow-up data, 76% of the original sample completed surveys at this stage.

Description of the Sample

The original sample (N = 46) was 50% male (n = 23) and 50% female (n = 23). On average, couples reported relationships of 7.78 years (*sd* = 5.47), with a range of 2 to 25 years. The couples indicated having an average of 1.26 (*sd* = 1.24) children living with them at the time of the study. This was the first marriage for 78.3% (n = 36) of the original sample. All respondents in both samples were married.

The follow up sample (N = 35) was 49% male (n = 17) and 51% female (n = 18). These couples reported relationships of 8.69 years (*sd* = 5.97), with the same range as above and an average of 1.23 (*sd* = 1.26) children living with them. This was the first marriage for 74.3% (n =

26) of participants in the follow-up sample.

Table 1 contains the ethnicity, age, education, and income distributions of both samples. Both samples were predominately Caucasian (76% original, 71% follow-up). Just over one-third of the original sample was between 20-25 years of age, while just less than one-third of the follow-up sample was 36-40 years old. Over 60% of both samples reported having at least some college or technical training, with an additional 13% of the original and 11.5% of the follow-up sample reporting at least a four year college degree or higher. Respondents indicated a wide range of incomes, with none reporting annual incomes below $10,000.

Table 1
Characteristics of the Sample

	Original		Follow-up	
Variable	**%**	**N = 46**	**%**	**N = 35**
Ethnicity				
African-American	10.9	5	14.3	5
Asian-American	2.2	1	2.9	1
Caucasian/White	76.1	35	71.4	25
Hispanic/Latino	4.3	2	5.7	2
Mixed	6.5	3	5.7	2
	100.0	46	100.0	35
Age				
20-25 years	34.8	16	22.9	8
26-30 years	23.9	11	25.7	9
31-35 years	10.9	5	11.4	4
36-40 years	23.9	11	31.4	11
41+ years	6.5	3	8.6	3
	100.0	46	100.0	35
Education Level				
Junior High	4.3	2	2.9	1
High School/GED	17.4	8	22.9	8
Some college/technical	65.2	30	62.9	22
Four year college	10.9	5	8.6	3
Graduate/professional	2.2	1	2.9	1
	100.0	46	100.0*	35
Income				
10,000-19,999	8.7	4	8.6	3
20,000-29,999	26.1	12	25.7	9
30,000-39,999	21.7	10	20.0	7
40,000-49,999	6.5	3	8.6	3
50,000-74,999	17.4	8	14.3	5
75,000-99,999	15.2	7	17.1	6
100,000+	2.2	1	2.9	1
Missing	2.2	1	2.9	1
	100.0	46	100.0*	35

*Numbers reported are based on SPSS output

Program Objectives and Outcome Measures

The evaluation focused on the impact of the program on the participants' marital relationships rather than their acquisition of specific program content. The goal of marriage education is to reduce marital distress and divorce; therefore, the evaluation focused on objectives and measures that reflected whether participants believed their ability to communicate and resolve conflict had improved and if satisfaction with their marriage had increased. Based on the literature (see below) and expertise of marriage educators, the program would be considered effective if it (1) increased overall marital satisfaction; (2) increased hope for the success of the current relationship; (3) increased positive communication; (4) increased ability to resolve conflict; (5) decreased negative interaction; and (6) increased commitment to the current relationship. The paragraphs that follow outline the rationale for choosing these objectives and the means by which they were measured.

Objective 1: Increase marital satisfaction

Marital satisfaction is one of the most studied concepts in the marriage field. An early study by Lewis and Spanier (1979) offered one of the first and frequently cited theoretical frameworks for explaining marital satisfaction. Their study provides evidence that satisfaction is an important component of marital quality. Over the past several decades there has been a proliferation of research on marital happiness and stability (see Fowers & Olson, 1989; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Spanier & Lewis, 1980 for a review of this research). Interest in marital satisfaction has received empirical justification that demonstrates that marital satisfaction is the most prominent contributor to global satisfaction (Fowers & Olson, 1989; Olson, et al., 1983). More recently, Karney and Bradbury (1997) found that initial levels of marital satisfaction predict marital dissolution indirectly. Therefore, a successful marital education program should increase the marital partners' overall satisfaction with their relationship and predict increased marriage stability.

Life Innovations' ENRICH Martial Satisfaction Scale (Fowers & Olsen, 1989) was selected to measure this concept. This scale has an alpha reliability of .86; the test-retest reliability score is also .86 (Olson, 2000). On this scale, respondents rate their level of agreement using a 5-point scale ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") on 35 items, such as "I am happy with most of my partner's personality characteristics or personal habits" and "I am happy with our communication and feel

my partner does understand me." This scale also consists of several subscales, including communication and conflict resolution.

Two other items measured this objective. The first item, a single measure of marital satisfaction, asked participants to rate their level of happiness in their present relationship, on a 10-point scale ("very unhappy" to "perfectly happy"). This item was similar to the version of the initial statement from the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) used by Stanley, Markman, and Whitton (2002) to assess marital satisfaction in a national survey of U.S. couples.

Additionally, at posttest and follow-up, participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale ("less true" to "more true") how true the statement "I will spend more time having fun and being friends with my partner" was for them. This is an important concept discussed in the AMLS program, but is a content specific question, so was only asked at post-test (Authors' note: Please be aware that these same 5-point and 7-point scales will be referenced throughout the remainder of the paper.)

Objective 2: Increase hope for success of present relationship

Westerop (2002) identifies the ability to desire, imagine, and be committed to a future as a marital dyad (i.e. hope) as an asset of healthy marriages. Generally, couples do best if they have a clear sense of a future together (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Waite & Joyner, 2001). Stanley (2002) proposes that there are two components to commitment: personal dedication and constraint. One of the four components of personal dedication is a desire for a future together. Westerop (2002) found that hope in the future of the relationship could be nurtured. A measure of success for a marriage education program should then be its ability to increase hope for the future success of the relationship.

To assess this objective, participants indicated on a 10-point scale ("unlikely" to "most definitely") how strongly they believed that they (he/she and partner) would be together in 10 years.

Objective 3: Increase positive communication

The use of communication skills that lead to positive interaction is a compelling indicator of a satisfying relationship (Canary & Cupach, 1988). Communication that is positive in nature and leads to increased understanding 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. An

individual's ability to understand his or her partner's experience and perspective is critical for relationship contentment and stability (Le & Agnew, 2001). The concept of sharing daily trivia is an essential emotional aspect of the relationship and provides a foundation for relationship maintenance (Gilbertson, Dindia, & Allen, 1998; Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998). Conversely, communication problems, defined as expression of negative intentions as opposed to skill, have been found to be associated with lack of marital satisfaction among distressed couples (Burleson & Denton, 1997).

The ENRICH Communication subscale, with an alpha reliability of .82 and test-retest reliability of .90 (Fowers & Olson, 1989), was the outcome measure chosen for this objective. Participants rated their level of agreement using a 5-point scale on nine items about different aspects of communication with their partner. Example items included "I can usually believe everything my partner tells me" and "My partner is a very good listener."

Objective 4: Improve conflict resolution skills

The inability to manage anger and constructively resolve conflict that produces the anger is a leading risk factor for marital distress (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004; Gottman, 1993; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). Couples experience distress when their attempts to manage conflict are ineffective (Koerner & Jacobson, 1994). Gottman (1993) and other researchers (Jones & Gallois, 1989) concluded that how conflict is handled in a relationship is a more important determinant of marital distress than the amount of conflict. Therefore, successful marriage education programs should increase the couple's ability to manage conflict in ways that are not damaging to the relationship.

The ENRICH Conflict Resolution subscale was the outcome measure chosen for this objective. This subscale has an alpha reliability of .84 and a test-retest reliability of .90 (Fowers & Olson, 1989). Participants rated their level of agreement using a 5-point scale on 10 conflict resolution items. Example items included "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."

Objective 5: Decrease negative interaction

Numerous studies suggest that the quality of the interaction between partners is predictive of marital distress or divorce (Gottman

& Levenson, 1992; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). Couples with more negative interactions than positive ones experience higher levels of marital distress and are more likely to divorce. Rook (1984, cited in Krause & Shaw, 2002) defines negative interaction as "unpleasant social encounters characterized by rejection, criticism, competition, the violation of privacy and the lack of reciprocity" (p. 339).

Mathews and associates (1996) conclude, "The weight of the evidence, then, suggests that the quality of marital interactions, whether warm and supportive or hostile and negative, relates to risk for marital distress and even dissolution of the relationship" (p. 643). More recently, negative interaction was linked to males' divorce potential and females' decrease in positive connection to their spouse (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Successful marriage education programs should improve couples' ratio of negative to positive interaction.

The Negative Interaction Scale, which was used in a major study of marriage education with military families (Building Strong and Ready Families) that demonstrated generally positive outcomes was selected to assess this objective (Science Applications International Corporation, & PREP, Inc., 2004). Participants rated how often they and their partner experienced various forms of negative interaction on a scale of 1 to 3 (1 = almost never or never, 2 = once in a while, and 3 = frequently). Example items included "Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name-calling, or bringing up past hurts" and "My partner shouts or yells at me." In addition, posttest and follow-up surveys included the content-specific question "I have the tools to talk without fighting about issues that come up."

Objective 6: Increase commitment to present relationship

Although there is some disparity among researchers as to the precise definition and nature of commitment, it is widely accepted as essential and directly related to marital satisfaction and survival (Montgomery, 1981; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). One survey of 2,300 divorced residents in Oklahoma found that 85% of respondents believed "lack of commitment" was the major reason for divorce (Stanley, 2002).

The dedication subscale of Stanley's Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992) was chosen as a measure for this objective because of its high internal consistency (.95). Because of concern that some negatively worded statements might be misunderstood, such questions were reworded into positive statements with permission from the author.

Participants were also asked to respond to a single question, on a 10-point scale, ranging from "not at all committed" to "absolutely committed," inquiring how dedicated they were to staying in their present relationship. Furthermore, at posttest and follow-up, participants rated the following content-specific statements: "I will invest more time in our relationship" and "I have new ideas for how to show my commitment to my partner."

Summary of Program Objectives and Measures

Table 2 summarizes the six program objectives and the scales and/or questions chosen to measure them.

Table 2
Outcome Objectives and Measures of AMLS

Objective	Measure(s)
1. Increase marital satisfaction	a. ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale b. Happiness with present relationship question c. Spend more time being friends with spouse/partner question
2. Increase hope for success of present relationship	a. Believe still be together in 10 years question
3. Increase positive communication	a. ENRICH Communication Subscale
4. Improve conflict resolution skills	a. ENRICH Conflict Resolution Subscale
5. Decrease negative interaction	a. Negative Interaction Scale b. Have tools to talk without fighting question
6. Increase commitment to present relationship	a. Stanley's Commitment Inventory b. Commitment to present relationship question c. Time investment in relationship question d. New ideas to show commitment question

Results

Data Analysis Procedures

For questions asked only at posttest and follow-up, means and SD or frequency distributions and percentages are reported. To assess whether the differences between pretest, posttest, and follow up responses (e.g., change in scores) were significant, repeated measures

ANOVA tests were conducted. When statistical significance was detected ($p < .05$), protected t-tests were conducted using paired sample t-tests and a significance level of .017 (.05/3) to address the issue of possible inflated Type I errors (Cronk, 2006). These tests also revealed the times where significant changes occurred (e.g., pretest to posttest, posttest to follow-up, pretest to follow up) and whether those changes were in the desired direction. Effect sizes (Cohen's *d)* were calculated where statistically significant positive changes ($p < .017$ in the desired direction) were detected using the following formula (Cronk, 2006):

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

Effect sizes were interpreted according to Cohen's (1992) typology: .2 was considered small, .5 medium, and .8 or higher large.

Analysis of Program Objectives

Objective 1: Increase marital satisfaction

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA comparing the participants' scores on the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale at the three time points was significant ($F(2,40) = 72.538$, $p < .001$). Follow-up protected *t*-tests revealed that scores changed significantly from:

- pretest (m = 110.72, sd = 15.78) to posttest (m = 149.52, sd = 14.71)
- posttest (m = 149.52, sd = 14.71) to follow-up (m = 140.96, sd = 19.43) and
- pretest (m = 110.72, sd = 15.78) to follow-up (m = 140.96, sd = 19.43).

Results of ANOVA analysis comparing the participants' scores on how happy they were in their present relationships at the pre, post, and follow-up were also significant ($F(2,68) = 20.555$, $p < .001$). Follow-up protected *t*-tests revealed that scores changed significantly from:

- pretest (m = 6.52, sd = 1.98) to posttest (m = 8.54, sd = 1.09) and
- pretest (m = 6.52, sd = 1.98) to follow-up (m = 8.54, sd = 1.54).

When asked if they would spend more time having fun and being friends with their partner, the mean response at posttest was 6.61 (sd = 0.75) and 6.37 (sd = 0.81) at follow-up.

Objective 2: Increase hope for success of present relationship

At pretest, when asked how strongly these couples believed they would still be together in 10 years, the mean response was 8.63 (*sd* = 2.67) compared to 9.58 (*sd* = 0.87) at posttest and 9.34 (*sd* = 1.14) 2 months later. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA examining participants' scores at these three times was not significant ($F(2,66) = 1.892$, $p > .05$).

Objective 3: Increase positive communication

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA comparing the participants' scores on the ENRICH Communication subscale at the three points was significant ($F(2,64) = 88.426$, $p < .001$). Follow-up protected *t*-tests revealed statistically significant change in scores from:

- pretest (*m* = 32.89, *sd* = 5.64) to posttest (*m*= 43.80, *sd* = 4.00),
- posttest (*m* = 43.80, *sd* = 4.00) to follow-up (*m* = 40.57, *sd* = 6.49), and
- pretest (*m* = 32.89, *sd* = 5.64) to follow-up (*m* = 40.57, *sd* = 6.49).

Objective 4: Increase conflict resolution

Results of ANOVA analysis comparing participants' scores on the ENRICH Conflict Resolution subscale at the three time points was significant ($F(2,64) = 72.262$, $p < .001$). Follow-up protected t-tests revealed statistically significant change in scores from:

- pretest (*m* = 31.27, *sd* = 5.22) to posttest (*m* = 40.52, *sd* = 4.60) and
- pretest (*m* = 31.27, *sd* = 4.60) to follow-up (*m* = 38.46, *sd* = 5.23).

Objective 5: Decrease negative interaction

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA comparing the participants' scores on the Negative Interaction Scale at the three time points was significant ($F(2,66) = 45.354$, $p < .001$). Follow-up protected *t*-tests revealed that scores changed significantly from:

- pretest (*m* = 19.25, *sd* = 4.56) to posttest (*m* = 12.80, *sd* = 2.13),
- posttest (*m* = 12.80, *sd* = 2.13) to follow-up (*m* = 15.21, *sd* = 4.18), and
- pretest (*m* = 19.25, *sd* = 4.56) to follow-up (*m* = 15.21, *sd* = 4.18).

When asked if they had the tools to talk without fighting (on scale of 1 to 7), the mean response at posttest was 6.57 (*sd* = 0.66) and at follow-up was 6.09 (*sd* = 0.85).

Objective 6: Increase commitment to present relationship

Results of ANOVA analysis comparing the participants' scores on Stanley's Commitment Inventory at all time points was significant ($F(2,66) = 6.985$, $p = .01$). Follow-up protected *t*-tests revealed scores changed significantly from pretest ($m = 70.33$, $sd = 10.19$) to posttest ($m = 76.36$, $sd = 7.30$).

Participants were also asked to rate how committed they were to staying in their present relationship. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA comparing the participants' scores at pretest, posttest, and follow-up was significant ($F(2,68) = 7.034$, $p < .01$). Follow-up protected *t*-tests revealed statistically significant change in scores from:

- pretest ($m = 8.48$, $sd = 2.04$) to posttest ($m = 9.48$, $sd = 1.70$) and
- posttest ($m = 9.48$, $sd = 1.07$) to follow-up ($m = 9.11$, $sd = 1.26$).

When asked if they would invest more time in their relationship (on a scale from 1 to 7), the mean score at posttest was 6.65 ($sd = 0.64$) and 6.34 ($sd = 0.97$) 2 months later. When asked if they had new ideas to show commitment, the posttest and follow-up mean scores were 6.61 ($sd = 0.61$) and 6.17 ($sd = 0.91$) respectively.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

Participants rated several items about the future of their relationships and the skills they had learned using a 7-point scale at posttest and follow-up. Table 3 shows that the scores on these questions were high at both posttest and follow-up, although follow-up scores did tend to drop slightly. Since participants had just completed the workshop, it is possible that they may have had inflated expectations of how the knowledge they had just acquired would transfer into their daily, routine (military) lifestyles.

Table 3
Mean Scores of Posttest and Follow-up Questions

Question	Posttest mean sd	Follow-up mean sd
Spend more time being friends with partner	6.61 0.75	6.37 0.81
Have tools to talk without fighting	6.57 0.66	6.09 0.85
Time investment in relationship	6.65 0.64	6.34 0.97
New ideas to show commitment	6.61 0.61	6.17 0.92

As seen in Table 4, ANOVA analyses indicated that change was significant ($p < .05$) on seven of the eight outcome measures on which data was gathered at all three time points. Change was not significant on the question that asked participants if they believed they would still be together in 10 years.

Table 4
Outcome Measures: Means, Standard Deviations, and ANOVA Findings

Outcome Measure	Pretest mean (sd)	Posttest mean (sd)	Follow-up mean (sd)	df	ANOVA
ENRICH Marital Satisfaction	110.72 (15.783)	149.52 (14.708)	140.96 (19.429)	2,40	72.538***
Happy with present relationship	6.52 (1.975)	8.54 (1.089)	8.54 (1.540)	2,68	20.555***
Believe be together in 10 years	8.63 (2.670)	9.58 (0.866)	9.34 (1.136)	2,66	1.892
ENRICH Communication	32.89 (5.638)	43.80 (4.003)	40.57 (6.491)	2,64	88.426***
ENRICH Conflict Resolution	31.27 (5.224)	40.52 (4.598)	38.46 (5.226)	2,64	72.269***
Negative Interaction Scale	19.25 (4.555)	12.80 (2.125)	15.21 (4.176)	2,66	45.354***
Stanley's Commitment Inventory	70.33 (10.185)	76.36 (7.302)	73.971 (9.073)	2,66	6.985**
Commitment to present relationship	8.48 (2.041)	9.48 (1.070)	9.11 (1.255)	2,68	7.034**

** $p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

While this was encouraging, it was necessary to closely examine the time points (pre to post, post to follow-up, and pre to follow-up) at which the significant changes occurred and whether or not the differences were in the desired direction. Therefore, subsequent paired sample t-tests were conducted on those seven measures.

Table 5 reveals that of the 16 time points for which the AMLS program produced significant results ($p < .017$), 12 of these were in the desired direction. These findings alone offer encouraging evidence that the AMLS program was effective with this group of participants.

However, the significant findings in the direction opposite of hoped for cannot be ignored. As indicated by the "nos" in Table 5, significance was achieved in an unanticipated direction on 4 occasions. While follow-up scores were lower in all four cases than posttest, the follow-up scores were better in all cases than at pretest. Furthermore, in three of the four instances, there was statistically positive change from *both* pretest to posttest and pretest to follow-up. Therefore, while it seems clear that positive learning and change occurred as a result of AMLS, it is possible that the time between the end of the workshop and follow-up may have tempered some participants' inflated expectations about what they had learned and/or how they would be able to apply it in their relationships. It is also possible that a "booster" session or some other type of reinforcement of the learning would be helpful to maintain the level of change that had been achieved at posttest. Future studies should attempt to resolve this question.

Table 5
Summary of Paired *t*-test Results

Outcome Measure	Significant time frame	Desired direction?
ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale	pretest-posttest*** posttest-follow up** pretest-follow up***	yes no yes
Happiness with present relationship	pretest-posttest*** pretest-follow up***	yes yes
ENRICH Communication Subscale	pretest-posttest*** posttest-follow up** pretest-follow up***	yes no yes
ENRICH Conflict Resolution Subscale	pretest-posttest*** pretest-follow up***	yes yes
Negative Interaction Scale	pretest-posttest*** posttest-follow up*** pretest-follow up***	yes no yes
Stanley's Commitment Inventory	pretest-posttest***	yes
Commitment to present Relationship	pretest-posttest*** posttest-follow up**	yes no

** $p < .01$, ***$p < .001$,

Effect Sizes

Finally, to further assess the magnitude of the changes that occurred, effect sizes were calculated at all points for which statistically significant positive improvements were detected. These findings are seen in Table 6.

Table 6
Effect Sizes for Significant Positive Score Changes

Outcome Measure/Change Point	Cohen's d
ENRICH Overall Marital Satisfaction Scale/pre-post	2.40
ENRICH Overall Marital satisfaction Scale/pre-follow-up	1.95
Happiness with present relationship question/pre-post	1.14
Happiness with present relationship question/pre-follow up	.71
ENRICH Communication Subscale/pre-post	2.19
ENRICH Communication Subscale/pre-follow up	1.54
ENRICH Conflict Resolution Subscale/pre-post	1.72
ENRICH Conflict Resolution Subscale/pre-follow up	1.54
Negative Interaction Scale/pre-post	1.48
Negative Interaction Scale/pre-follow up	1.00
Stanley's Commitment Inventory/pre-post	.73
Commitment to present relationship question/pre-post	.75

An effect size of .2 was considered weak, with a finding of .5 considered moderate, and .8 or larger interpreted as strong (Cohen, 1992). All 12 effect sizes were at least moderate, with 9 meeting the criteria of strong. These findings speak to the magnitude of the impact that the AMLS program had with the military couples who attended this marriage/relationship retreat.

Program Objectives

What do these findings suggest in relation to the program objectives? Objective 1 was to increase marital satisfaction, which would be measured by the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale, the "happiness with present relationship" question, and whether or not couples would spend more time being friends. In addition to indicating that they would likely spend more time being friends with their partners, analysis of both other measures for this objective indicated statistically significant

positive change immediately after the workshop, as well as from before the workshop to two months later. Effect sizes assessing the magnitude of these changes were also quite strong. Taken together, these findings suggest that the AMLS program was largely successful in increasing participants' marital satisfaction.

The second objective was to increase hope for the success of the present relationship. The measure (believe still be together in 10 years assessed on a 10 point scale) did not achieve statistical significance. However, both posttest (9.58) and follow-up (9.34) mean scores were higher than pretest (8.63). With such a high pretest mean, the bar was set high for achieving statistical significance, although the authors might argue the difference was substantively significant since high pretest scores are an indication that these couples already had hope in the future of their relationships.

The third goal of the AMLS program was to increase positive communication. Analysis of responses on the ENRICH communication subscale indicated that participant scores improved significantly between pretest and both posttest and follow-up, with the magnitude of change quite strong as measured by effect size statistics. Despite a decrease in scores from posttest to follow-up, findings suggest that participants did show some improvement in their communication skills.

Fourth, the program strove to improve conflict resolution skills. Statistically significant improvement on the ENRICH conflict resolution subscale from pretest to both posttest and two months later, with accompanying strong effect sizes, suggest this objective was sufficiently met.

Fifth, this program aimed to decrease negative interactions between couples. Significant score improvement was seen from both pretest to posttest and pretest to follow-up on the Negative Interaction scale, despite an increase (indicating more negative interactions) in follow-up scores compared to posttest. Effect sizes of both positive findings were strong. Findings suggest there was progress made in decreasing couple negative interactions.

Finally, AMLS intended to increase the commitment of participants to their present marriages. Scores on Stanley's Commitment Inventory increased significantly from pretest to posttest, and although not significant, the follow-up mean was quite similar to that at posttest. There was also significant improvement between before and after workshop scores on how committed participants said they were to their current relationships. Effect sizes for both the Commitment Inventory and the

commitment question were moderate, bordering on strong. Additionally, after attending the AMLS, participants agreed they would invest more time in their relationships and that they had new ideas to show commitment to their partners. Taken together, there is moderate support for the achievement of this objective.

Limitations

Although these study findings were generally positive, some limitations must also be noted. The sample was self-selected and non-random, neither of which are optimal when evaluating marriage education programs. Participants had an appealing incentive for participating since they received a relatively free weekend get-away courtesy of the Air Force. This may have slightly decreased the negative effects of a self-selected sample in that some participants may have chosen to participate not to help their marriage, but for the weekend retreat. It is also not known whether the fact that these military couples were not living in separate geographical locations affected the findings in some manner.

The active military personnel were members of only one branch of the United States Armed Forces—the Air Force. The sample was also predominantly Caucasian and fairly educated. Furthermore, although data was gathered at three different time points, the follow-up period was shorter than desired, but seemed necessary given the population. Furthermore, data was only collected from the study group itself. There was no comparison or control group. In light of these factors, the findings from this study are not generalizable beyond the sample itself and it would be prudent to study the AMLS program with a wider sampling of military couples and in other military branches. The small sample size also makes subgroup comparisons impractical.

Finally, as indicated by pretest commitment scores, the military couples who attended the AMLS retreat were already committed to their relationships. Generally speaking, participants did not have "troubled" marriages. On the other hand, the fact that multiple, positive statistically significant changes were achieved among already solid relationships may be an indicator of the power of AMLS. Marriage education programs are not designed to rehabilitate failing marriages; they are not marriage therapy. The programs are designed to provide couples with knowledge and skills to build better marriages and to avoid marriage breakdown; they are preventative rather than rehabilitative.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Social work practice with military populations, including dealing with soldiers returning from war, is certainly not new. Social work practice in this arena has been extensive and includes parent support groups, linking those who remain at home with needed resources, addressing issues mental health issues of soldiers in combat and providing training to others on recognizing symptoms of post-traumatic stress (DeAngelis, 2003). Social workers in the military can also be key players in helping couples build, strengthen, and maintain healthy relationships.

Social workers in the military need to advocate for continued or expanded access of soldiers and their spouses/partners to programs designed to prevent marital breakdown. This is particularly true in the Air Force, where no uniform marriage education program currently exists. Social workers, knowledgeable about group processes and counseling, should become trained to facilitate such workshops. Recognizing that times of separation can intensify problems being experienced by a couple, as well as create new stressors, social workers should advocate for policies that make marriage education workshops more readily available to couples and make such workshops a part of pre-deployment training. Finally, social workers in the military must recognize that many couples are not taking advantage of programs currently offered by the military (WKRN, 2007). Thus it becomes necessary to assess the barriers to attendance and become creative in making the workshops more appealing to soldiers and their spouses/partners.

For community practitioners who wish to reach out to the military community, offering workshops on enhancing relationships with invitations to the military community are certainly feasible. Perhaps partnering with a military social worker or chaplain for such an endeavor would help to ensure that the most convenient and effective times for soldiers and their spouses/partners are offered. Such partnerships seem vital for both recruiting participants and in disseminating information about workshops through key military networks.

Finally, unique opportunities exist for churches to support military couples whose relationships face challenges that many people cannot imagine. Certainly, churches in military communities could host these marriage or relationship workshops for military couples. Some military couples may feel more comfortable away from the base with non-military couples and a civilian facilitator. One self-proclaimed "military brat"

commented, "Our family was like any other family, but separated by distance. So relating to persons not in the military was sometimes a joy rather than a negative" (Helen Harris, personal communication, December 28, 2007).

Experience in marriage education with non-military couples has shown that providing child care for couples during workshops and events is an essential ingredient for recruitment and attendance. Many churches have childcare facilities and paid or voluntary staff. Churches might offer marriage education programs free of charge to couples attending and provide childcare, which would be particularly helpful to couples in the lower ranks of the military, whose salaries do not leave them with extra spending money.

In addition to workshops, other creative opportunities exist for congregations. As more churches seek ways to involve their members in community ministries, congregants can be introduced to a ministry that focuses on marriage education with a special emphasis on military couples. Some clergy or couples might want to be trained to be facilitators, as both can learn to lead AMLS and other evidenced based marriage education workshops. Church couples can also be trained to serve as marriage mentors for military couples. Several studies have shown positive outcomes in churches that have implemented marriage-mentoring programs (Life Innovations, 2008). As a result of such ministries, not only do younger couples receive valuable support and encouragement from the couples serving as role models, but also the mentor couples report improvements in their own marriages. Furthermore, marriage-mentoring programs can be a means by which churches can expand the relationship support ministries both to their members, as well as the larger community.

Social workers spend a great deal of their professional time dealing with crisis situations, putting out fires, and picking up pieces. Seldom do social workers have the opportunity to be involved in activities that prevent fires or broken pieces. Both children and adults are negatively affected by divorce and experience long-term negative consequences. Social workers often find themselves picking up the pieces of destroyed families in schools, mental health agencies, residential care facilities, and churches. This study suggests that if social workers became more proactive in providing evidence-based relationship education programs such as AMLS, particularly to at-risk couples like those in the military, the number of people affected by family breakdown might be reduced. Churches are ideal locations for providing these programs and social

workers of faith who truly believe in the sanctity of marriage are ideal facilitators and advocates of such programs. (For additional information on marriage education programs see www.Smartmarriages.com)

Summary

Results of data collected from 46 Air Force personnel and their spouses/partners and 35 of this same group at 2 months later indicate that the Active Military Life Skills program had a strong impact on relationships among military personnel and their spouses/partners. Study findings indicated that after participating in the Active Military Life Skills workshop, program participants reported greater happiness in their relationship, increased confidence in the future of their relationship, and improved communication and conflict resolution skills. In addition, participants reported having new skills and ideas for improving their relationship, as well as a greater willingness to invest more time in it. Taken together, these results offer evidence that the AMLS program is a promising mechanism for improving the quality of military couple relationships, thus enhancing their long-term viability. ❖

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Key Words: Marriage Education, Military, Relationship Education, Program Evaluation, Armed Forces

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