

# Preparing for Married Life

***Pathways to Marriage: Learning for Married Life in Australia***, by Michele Simons, Roger Harris, and Peter Willis, Centre for Research in Education and Work, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 1994. (202 pages)

The notion that people need to be educated for successful married life is also acknowledged to be one of the constraints to participation in pre-education programs, according to the authors of a recent book on couples' and marriage celebrants' views on the role of pre-marriage education. Ingrained in the general community is the belief that marriage is a 'natural and normal' process that can be achieved by two people 'in love' without any help or special skills acquired in a formal organised manner.

However, if couples who attend courses gain greater insight into the nature of marriage and acquire skills to cope with concerns that may arise in the relationship, the assumption is that pre-marriage education programs may contribute to the prevention of marriage breakdown.

Previous research by the authors and a colleague<sup>1</sup> found that couples who attend pre-marriage education courses or engage in personal pre-marital dialogue with a marriage celebrant are usually planning a

church wedding and have some affiliation with a church. This is not surprising since, if a church wedding is the couple's choice, a celebrant is likely to encourage or even insist on the preparation. However, whether or not these couples were enthusiastic volunteers or reluctant participants 'commanded' by their marriage celebrant to attend, the majority had been pleased with the experience and felt they possessed a greater awareness of marriage as a serious as well as a romantic commitment.

But what about couples not planning a church wedding? Are they interested in pre-marriage education programs, and would they find it a valuable experience? And what of non-religious marriage celebrants - would they be willing to act as referral agents?

*Pathways to Marriage* is the report of a study designed to ascertain factors affecting couples' decisions about participating in pre-marriage education, and the role of marriage celebrants in referring couples to

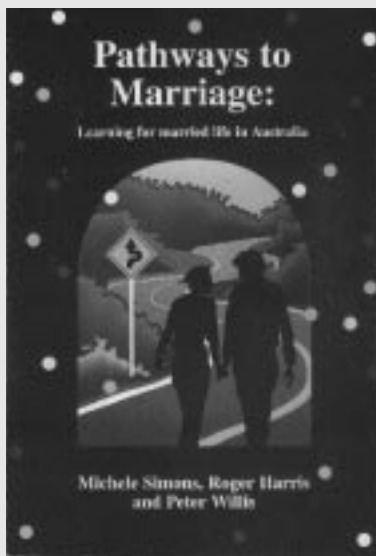
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pre-marriage education. A total of 547 celebrants and 563 couples were included in the analysis.

### ***Participation***

Lack of awareness and lack of available programs are often cited as reasons why young people do not attend pre-marriage education. But contrary to this expectation, the study found that nearly three-quarters of the respondents knew about such programs, although only about one-quarter made a decision to attend. If those who did not know about the programs are included, only 17 per cent of those marrying in Australia in a given year attend a pre-marriage education program.

Those most likely to participate can be described as being young, in clerical or trade occupations, having trade or school-level



education, having a tertiary degree, having a religious affiliation, and having lived at home prior to marriage. Those likely not to attend had the opposite characteristics: they were older, tertiary educated, non-religious and had cohabited before marriage.

Although some couples mentioned external factors as barriers to participation (finances, time, transport, location, cost), the authors conclude that intrinsic factors, or personal attitudes, values and beliefs about marriage and relationships were the significant determinants of participation.

Celebrants, particularly civil celebrants, were more inclined to mention external barriers as the reason they did not refer couples. For example, nearly half of the civil celebrants (particularly those in smaller towns) and 41 per cent of religious cele-

brants said they did not refer couples because of a lack of programs in their area. Nonetheless, like the couples who had not attended a pre-marriage course, it was the intrinsic element rather than external factors that influenced non-referring celebrants' attitudes to pre-marriage education.

### ***Perceptions of relevance***

Just as most respondents who had attended a pre-marriage education program had found it useful, the perception that such programs were not relevant dominated the responses of couples who did not attend. Many felt that because they had been living together they already had an understanding of marriage and already knew their partner well enough. Some couples considered that their religious beliefs provided an adequate foundation for marriage, and related to this was the perception that programs were for those who, unlike themselves, were having problems in their relationship. There was also the belief that a relationship is something to be negotiated between the couple rather than discussed with others.

Couples expressed ambivalent feelings about the intensity they desired in a program; while nearly one-third indicated they were unlikely to attend a program conducted by a psychologist or counsellor, interest was also expressed in adding more in-depth discussion of issues (perhaps on a one-to-one basis) to the group discussion format. Nearly three-quarters of couples preferred larger groups - perhaps, as the authors suggest, because they felt that this might reduce the pressure on them to participate and share. Couples were also less interested in topics emphasising negative aspects of marriage - divorce, domestic violence, the Family Law Act, and pre-nuptial contracts.

The authors observe: 'It underlines the point that minimising external barriers will not necessarily increase participation to any degree unless there is an accompanying focus on marketing the *value* of attendance at such programs.'

### ***Program providers***

As mentioned, the majority of pre-marriage education programs are church-affiliated, and concerns that programs would adopt a religious approach deterred a proportion of couples. More than half of non-attending couples said they would prefer programs to be conducted by a community centre or tertiary institution like TAFE; however, two-thirds of these men and women also reported that they would attend a church-affiliated program. The authors observe that a positive response to the question may not reflect a preference, but rather an acceptance that attendance at a course is necessary to secure a church wedding.

The celebrants, too, were divided in their views of the providers of programs; 88 per cent of religious celebrants compared with 30 per cent of civil celebrants agreed that they would feel comfortable recommending couples to attend a church-run program. Conversely, 68 per cent of civil celebrants compared with 46 per cent of religious celebrants were comfortable asking couples to attend a community-run course. The authors conclude that a broad base of program providers is critical if programs are to appeal to more than those couples wanting a church wedding.

### ***Role of celebrants***

Forty-three per cent of couples said they would have been more likely to attend a program if a marriage celebrant had rec-

commended attendance. The majority of civil celebrants believed that pre-marriage education programs could prevent problems in marriages and that cohabitation did not diminish the need for education. However, 71 per cent of civil celebrants responded that they did not encourage couples to attend pre-marriage courses and 49 per cent of civil celebrants did not provide any form of pre-marriage education. In 1991, civil celebrants performed 32 per cent of all weddings in Australia.

The authors point out that the Attorney-General's Department issues to all celebrants *The Handbook for Marriage Celebrants*, which states: 'An authorised celebrant shall, as soon as practicable after receiving the notice [of intended marriage] ... give to the parties a document in the prescribed form outlining the obligations and consequences of marriage and indicating the availability of marriage education and counselling'.

The reasons given by civil celebrants for not referring couples or providing education personally often mirrored those given by couples. Many civil celebrants agreed that asking couples to attend programs would be an imposition - an invasion of a couple's privacy - and that it was outside their role to recommend attendance. Inadequate training was also a consideration.

The authors raise the question of what expanded role civil celebrants could play in promoting or, perhaps, providing aspects of pre-marriage education in the context of their contact with couples.

### **Structure and content of programs**

Couples who had benefited from a program said there had been the opportunity to gain communication and conflict resolution skills, to achieve a deeper understanding of their

partner, and to confront issues that hitherto had not been considered or had been avoided.

Couples who had not found programs helpful observed that the issues raised were just 'common sense' and not new to them. Associated with this was the perception that the programs were designed for younger, less experienced couples. (The religious element was also a detraction for some - and its neglect a loss for others.)

Those who had not participated made similar comments about the need for a *variety* of programs, suggesting that they should have relevance for a range of ages and experiences - older couples, those who had lived together, previously married couples, couples of similar cultural or ethnic backgrounds, younger couples.

### **Program information**

Although three-quarters of non-attending couples indicated that the provision of additional information about programs would not influence their decision, such a response should be interpreted in the context of the nature and format of the information presented. The authors suggest that attention be given to a range of ways that information about the benefits of pre-marriage education can be made relevant and available to couples who are diverse in their needs and circumstances.

In the same vein, the National Council for the International Year of the Family 1994 (see review elsewhere in this issue of *Creating the Links: Families and Social Responsibility*) recommend that the government support a national marriage relationship and parenting education program to support relationships. Such a program should encompass 'community education activities, videos and the use of other media, innovative delivery of

programs via mobile units and 008 information lines, programs in schools and workplaces, as well as individual and group programs'.

The importance of appropriate training for providers of pre-marriage education in its many possible forms and an emphasis on the quality of programs should not be underestimated.

**I**n a lucid and candid style, the authors of *Pathways to Marriage* blend statistics with respondents' comments to provide an understanding of why people attend or do not attend pre-marriage education programs. Like marriage itself, pre-marriage education cannot be viewed as an uncomplicated one-dimensional process. The authors are aware that contemporary relationships exist in a changed social context of diverse values and expectations encompassing the roles of men and women, the nature of work and family, and the disparate pathways to family formation involving choices that require ever-increased skills to weigh and evaluate. Pre-marriage education must respond to and reflect these complexities. This book provides some signposts for all concerned with preventing family breakdown and enhancing family life.

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<sup>1</sup>*Love, Sex and Waterskiing: The Experience of Pre-Marriage Education in Australia*, by R. Haris, M. Simons, P. Willis and A. Barrie, published in 1992 by the Centre for Human Resource Studies, University of South Australia, was reviewed by Ilene Wolcott in the December 1992 issue of *Family Matters* (no.33, pp.48-50).

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