

# RESEARCH IN PREMARRIAGE EDUCATION

## INSTITUTE HOSTS ROUND TABLE

**T**he growing interest in supporting marriages and families via premarriage education programs received a boost last year with the release of the House of Representatives Standing Committee's (1998) report *To Have and To Hold*. The recent increases in funding to providers of marriage and relationship education programs have now been augmented by the Federal Government's National Families Strategy, and a voucher scheme to encourage participation in premarriage education is currently being piloted (see elsewhere in this issue for details).

However, the empirical evidence of the effectiveness of premarriage education programs, although generally supportive, remains inconclusive and many questions remain unanswered.

To examine what would be involved in evaluating the effectiveness of premarriage education in Australia, the Australian Institute of Family Studies and Australian Catholic University jointly hosted a round table discussion of research in premarriage education, held at the Institute on 9 September 1999. As part of the day's proceedings, Kevin Andrews, MP, addressed the assembled round table participants – Institute staff and visitors. His paper, 'Developing a National Family Policy', appears elsewhere in this issue of *Family Matters*.

The Acting Director of the Institute, David Stanton, and Institute Research Manager, Peter Saunders, welcomed 18 relationship professionals from across the country. Among those attending were academics, marriage counsellors, marriage education practitioners, representatives of the Department of Family and Community Services, and researchers.

The aim of the round table was to draw on the expertise of marriage practitioners and academics in shaping the framework for future research into premarriage education. The relatively informal discussions focused on three broad topics: the status of the existing research; frameworks for investigating premarriage education; and other related issues.



### **Status of premarriage research**

While numerous studies show gains for premarriage education participants in some relationship aspects (Bagarozzi and Rauen 1981; Sayers et al. 1998; Simons 1999), many researchers are yet to be convinced that the value of such preventive approaches, especially in producing enduring benefits to participants, has been clearly demonstrated in the research.

Round table participants identified a number of the major reasons for the lack of confidence in the research.

- The range of programs available for study – difficult to compare some programs due to variations in content,



### **How effective are premarriage education programs in**

### **promoting strong and stable marital and family relationships?**

**ROBYN PARKER reports on a round table held at the Australian Institute of Family Studies that examined the current status of premarriage research, and generated a framework for future research into programs designed to prepare couples for marriage and family life.**

orientation, duration, format and goals.

- Most courses within a program are conducted by a different individual or team of educators, making comparisons within programs as difficult as comparisons across programs. Little attention appears to be given to this fact in the literature.

- The cultural specificity of the research – it may be incorrect to assume a natural transfer of research knowledge and/or outcomes to Australian couples.

- Most studies are short-term and follow-up beyond two years is rare, so we have little idea as to how long any benefits are maintained.

- In some studies, program participants have been similarly highly satisfied and committed couples – research has tended not to deal explicitly with those who are less satisfied with, or committed to, their relationship.

- Few studies include valid comparison or control groups, and are often one-off studies intended to demonstrate the validity of a particular program. Questions about whether there are differences in marital quality and characteristics between premarriage participants and non-participants can not be adequately answered by these studies. However, it was noted that the use of random assignment to control groups would be unlikely to solve the problem of self-selection into premarriage groups.

- Programs often include engaged couples who are not living together, engaged couples living in a de facto relationship, and committed couples considering taking the step into either a marriage or de facto union. The disparate relationship histories of these groups of couples tend not to be acknowledged in previous research.

- 'Effectiveness' can be conceptualised and measured in a number of ways. The outcome measures employed need to be selected in the context of the goals, content and format of the various program types.

- Prior studies rarely have used the same outcome measures.

As one round table participant commented, discussing the flaws in prior research raises more questions about what could be investigated and how. The complexity of the field of premarriage education was highlighted by these exchanges.



### **Research frameworks**

Two main frameworks for studying premarriage education were considered by round table participants. One would involve assessing the overall effectiveness of programs by comparing participants with non-participants. The other would examine what is effective in the various approaches already in use.

Participants were more enthusiastic about the former framework mainly because of the difficulty of isolating the components of programs. It was noted that even the order in which individual topics are delivered can influence participants' responses, as would the interaction between the educator/s and the participants. Closer evaluation of program components was suggested as part of a larger study, or as a separate series of smaller studies, but the main concern was with the overall effectiveness of premarriage education.



### *Research design*

A preliminary design for actually conducting a project to comprehensively evaluate premarriage education was briefly outlined. Three main features were proposed: longitudinal design; inclusive of the range of programs available, based on their structure, commonality of components, and educative style (for example, didactic compared with experiential); and incorporating a detailed analysis of current programs.

### *Measures*

The kind of evidence required to establish that premarriage education programs are effective in attaining their goals and in helping to promote strong marital relationships generated a great deal of discussion. It was noted that broader social outcomes (for example, changes in the divorce rate) should be distinguished from individual and couple outcomes (personal growth, improvements in relationship quality). On a cautionary note, it was pointed out that

outcome measures would need to be selected in the context of the goals of each program.

What would need to be measured in a study of premarriage education? If premarriage education were effective, then short-term, medium-term and long-term differences between participants and non-participants would be expected on a number of variables. These could include:

- relationship satisfaction, quality, duration;
- knowledge of self, partner, subject matter, and services available;
- application of skills in daily life;
- emotional intimacy and support;
- individual partner wellbeing (psychological, physical);
- expectations of marriage (self and partner);
- relationship 'management' skills;
- destructive conflict; and
- capacity to form and maintain a long-term relationship, and adapt to life stressors (such as unemployment, arrival and departure of children).

Participants also referred to the need to measure individual characteristics such as values, expectations, risk indicators and risk factors prior to a couple's participation in premarriage education, and to monitor their effects across the course of the relationship. Further conversation about data collection touched on the possibility of gathering observational data of couples' interactions. This was regarded as feasible if the numbers were modest.



### *Related issues*

Aside from evaluating the effectiveness of premarriage education overall, two parallel issues of concern were discussed. One of these is whether current programs meet the needs of the various types of couples presenting. The salient issues here include whether separate programs should be designed for couples who cohabit with no intention of marrying, program options for older, long-term cohabiting couples, and how to help couples (of any type) to select the most appropriate course for their situation and needs.

Of equal concern is the dilemma of reaching those who are either unaware of premarriage education or choose to not pursue it. Diversifying the delivery of programs (for instance, using distance education models or Internet technology) would help to 'capture' these groups. Customised programs for particular groups (for example, particular ethnic groups) and promoting them via community leaders was also suggested. A lack of detailed knowledge about those who do participate in premarriage education was noted. This data no doubt exists within individual agencies, and some way of making use of the accumulated information could be explored. Developing a clear picture of past and present clients could help to target more effectively those who would benefit from premarriage education.



### *Outcomes*

In their closing comments, round table participants agreed that the discussions had been extremely valuable in identifying how far the field of premarriage education has progressed and how far it has to go to become more widely used and accepted by the general public.

The complexity of research in this field was highlighted in the exchanges, as was the need for a sensitive and collaborative approach embracing educators, administrators, and

couples. Participants were keen to see the rich interaction between practitioners and researchers maintained, and hoped to see the issues discussed during the day addressed in future research.

Prior to the round table, a literature review on the effectiveness of marriage education was prepared by the Institute's Family Information Centre and distributed to participants. An outcome of the round table was the establishment of the Marriage and Relationship Education (MARE) email discussion list to promote further discussion of marriage and relationship education. A further outcome is the publication of a briefing paper (Parker 1999) that examines the issues raised by the round table and suggests a framework for future research in premarriage education.

### *References*

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