Research and evaluation in marriage and relationship education

Researching and evaluating their marriage and relationship education programs present challenges for practitioners. But the process is not necessarily as onerous as might be thought.

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Marriage and relationship education has been available, in some form, in Australia for more than half a century. Although the first funding for marriage education activities was provided in the 1960s, financial support remained meagre through the 1970s and much of the 1980s (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998). Since the early 1990s marriage and relationship education has evolved into a complex field encompassing a wide range of programs focusing on various types of relationships and relationships issues that occur across the lifespan.

Funding for marriage and relationship education, via the Family Relationship Services Program administered by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services, has increased steadily throughout the 1990s, spurred on by developments initiated largely from within the field (House of Representatives 1998). Government funding for marriage and relationship education programs in 2003-2004 was $3.9million (Urbis Keys Young 2004).

In recent years, the availability of funding for marriage and relationship education programs and the need for accountability that accompanies such funding, have helped to engender a greater focus on two related aspects of service delivery. These are: *research*, in its broader sense of seeking new information or facts (for example, why do cohabiting couples decide to marry?); and, second, the more specific research activities of *assessment* and *evaluation* of programs – that is, changes in clients' knowledge, skills, or abilities and whether and how those are transferred into clients' "real world", identification of program characteristics associated with those changes, and client perceptions of and satisfaction with a range of aspects of service delivery (Simons and Parker 2002).

These are issues that must concern the wider field, not just those in receipt of government funding. Debate and discussion about research, assessment and evaluation activities (hereafter called "research and evaluation") are currently taking place among practitioners, academics, funding bodies and policy makers. This is the case especially in the United States where the "marriage movement" has helped stimulate interest and investment not only in marriage promotion and education activities but also in program effectiveness. Discussion in Australia has been more low-key, but with research and evaluation becoming an integral part of funded programs, marriage and relationship education in Australia may be approaching a key point in its evolution.

Thus this seems an opportune time to review recent research and evaluation activities, and discuss other options available to practitioners in conceiving, designing and conducting research and evaluation in their own marriage and relationship education programs.

What is marriage and relationship education?

Marriage and relationship education programs are provided by secular, church-based and church-affiliated providers who employ a range of modalities and techniques in delivering services to a diverse client base (Simons and Parker 2002). The diversity of the field makes devising a single definition of marriage and relationship education quite difficult, but its common aim is to assist men and women in building healthy, stable relationships with their partner or family. Programs can encompass a range of life events and stages, and target a range of client groups. Their content will almost always include communication and conflict resolution skills, supplemented by other topics consistent with the professional, pastoral and personal characteristics of the provider and the intended client group. Relationship issues may be the sole focus of the program, or they may be embedded within another program, focused on, for example, parenting or assertiveness (Simons and Parker 2002).

Conducting research and evaluation: Recent developments

For a time during the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a great deal of attention directed towards marriage and relationship education from outside of the field, and specifically at the need to know more about who does it, how it is done, how it works, and who it works for.

The 1998 inquiry into aspects of family services, conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs reported on ways in which relationships can be supported, with an emphasis on prevention strategies. The Committee made a number of recommendations relating to marriage and relationship education, including clear recognition within the Family Relationship Services Program of prevention programs as distinct from counselling, mediation and therapy in both its objectives and funding mechanisms, and in the training and continuing accreditation of educators. However, no recommendations were made specifically pertaining to research and program evaluation.

In an attempt to raise the profile of the role of research and evaluation in the marriage and relationship education field, the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Australian Catholic University co-sponsored a roundtable discussion of issues in pre-marriage education. The proceedings are reported in *A framework for future research in pre-marriage education* (Parker 1999).

A major outcome of that discussion was the acknowledgement of how the considerable variation in programs, clients, and educators creates a level of complexity that makes it difficult in practical terms simply to conduct research and evaluation studies within a given agency or organisation, let alone attempt to investigate differences across types of programs or providers. For example, programs may vary in their structure, content, mode of delivery, and educational goals. Within and across agencies and organisations, educators differ in terms of their educational background and qualifications, their ability to facilitate groups, their personal philosophies about relationships, and the training they have received. Clients have different motivations for attending a program, different demographic profiles, and different levels of commitment to engaging in the program. Each of these dimensions – the program, the educator, and the client – must be taken into consideration when designing and conducting studies in which the effects of different programs are being compared.

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At the same time as the roundtable discussions were held, Professor Kim Halford of Griffith University was contracted by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services to conduct a review of the marriage research literature and develop a set of proposals that would enhance access to and effectiveness of marriage and relationship education (Halford 1999).

Halford reviewed the extensive marriage and relationship research literature and highlighted the attributes and interactions that characterise strong and stable couple relationships. He also reviewed current marriage and relationship education activities and made four suggestions for moving the field forward, through: the promotion of programs for which there is empirical evidence of positive effects – that is, skills-based programs; the development and evaluation of flexible ways of delivering programs; the improvement of access to programs for couples who are under-represented as users of these services (such as those at high risk of relationship problems, couples from culturally and linguistically-diverse backgrounds, and Indigenous couples); and the conduct of randomised controlled studies.

Halford (1999) also described how each of these proposals might be put into action, including timelines and suggestions for measures of relevant or appropriate factors or outcomes, and pointed to training and resource requirements.

Three years later the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the University of South Australia were contracted by the Department of family and Community Services to conduct a survey of Australian relationship education activities and devise a way of categorising programs that would help to distinguish between the wide range of services subsumed under the catch-all phrase "relationship education" (Simons and Parker 2002).

Four primary types of programs were identified, distinguishable on the basis of their cost, certain content areas, and target client group. The report also discussed at length the need for ongoing research and, in particular, program assessment and evaluation, commenting on the difficulties in conducting these activities in the service provision environment highlighted by researchers in the child abuse prevention field (Tomison 2000). The author recommended engaging service providers in discussion and debate as to how program evaluation might be conducted within the field in systematic, cost-effective and realistic ways.

Little published Australian data exist about the effects of marriage and relationship education programs on couple outcomes. The data that have been collected are often at the level of client satisfaction with the program rather than systematic evaluations of the effects of programs on couple satisfaction or stability (Halford and Simons 2005). Past research suggests that, for most participants in Australian programs, the program was a satisfying experience and increased the likelihood of them seeking help at a later time (Harris, Simons, Willis and Barrie 1992), and that the majority believed that what they had learned was of lasting value (81 per cent). Participants have also reported changing their behaviour as a result of the program (Keys Young 1997), although in one study less than half (42 per cent) reported that the program brought about insights into the need to invest in the relationship (Harris et al. 1992). As Halford (1999) notes, these kinds of findings can be helpful but are inadequate indicators of program quality or their long-term benefits.

From a scientific perspective much of the existing marriage and relationship education research, Australian or otherwise, seems to be characterised by some rather critical flaws. The best way to identify whether a program is effective involves the use of control and comparison groups and random assignment to treatment and non-treatment groups. Control and comparison groups demonstrate the effect of *not* participating in the intervention group, and random assignment ensures that couples receiving the intervention are comparable to those not receiving the intervention (Halford 1999). However, in marriage and relationship education research and evaluation, these methods are rarely employed (Larson 2004). The reason for this may be that they are difficult to implement and replicate. It can also be difficult to identify which components of a program contributed to its "success" (Tomison 2000).

Confounding factors such as self-selection – wherein any positive effects are actually due to the propensity of couples who choose to do a particular kind of relationship education program being likely to do well anyway, regardless of the intervention – can still threaten the integrity of the study (Halford 1999), as can environmental influences (Tomison 2000).

Furthermore, despite their status as the "gold standard", using rigorous experimental methods is problematic in the "real world" of service provision (Tomison 2000). As touched on earlier, there are considerable practical, financial and ethical challenges to designing and conducting research and evaluation in marriage and relationship education. In practice, research and evaluation can draw precious resources away from service provision. Observation of couple interaction, either *in situ* or by video, may provide the best data but it is impractical to attempt this for every couple in every program (Halford 1999). The cost, logistical factors and training required would be considerable, and some clients may refuse to participate in such procedures. Research and evaluation efforts can also be complicated by clients with complex needs and there are ethical issues specific to randomised, controlled trials of intervention programs. Adhering to the need for random allocation of participants to the control, comparison and treatment groups necessarily means that a potentially helpful service is withheld from some clients.

Alternative ways of conducting research and evaluation

Clearly, other ways of thinking about research and evaluation are required. To a degree, much of what providers need in order to conduct sound empirical research and evaluation is already close to hand. As argued, it is not essential, nor feasible, that studies comprise only large scale, randomised control trials and complicated statistical analysis. As Tomison (2000) points out, experimental rigour is less critical than the methodological rigour that arises from a comprehensive and systematic approach to evaluation (and by extension, research).

Research and evaluation do not necessarily require the development of completely new ways of gathering data. Teaching tools that providers already use could double as research or evaluation measures.

For example, action research methods offer a variety of alternative ways of conducting research and evaluation. Information and assistance in identifying and implementing an appropriate research or evaluation design is available through the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (formerly known as the Stronger Families Learning Exchange), housed at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. The Clearinghouse provides a repository of knowledge and expertise regarding planning, conducting, and analysing action research that can assist service providers in setting up projects that fit the provider's needs and capacities, either within a single agency or among a group of (local) providers (Branigan 2002).

Alternatives also exist in terms of the type of data collected. Much of social research involves gathering quantitative data wherein numerical values are assigned to various responses, as in survey data or ratings of skills, and the numerical data statistically analysed. However, qualitative methods can provide excellent, in-depth information that can be immediately accessible to individual service providers and can also be combined for analysis with data collected from other groups, programs or agencies. Qualitative data typically comprise verbal or written responses. If designed well, and incorporated as part of the teaching methods employed in the program, a small set of open-ended questions to which clients provide written responses could be used in two ways.

First, as a research tool this method could be used throughout the implementation of the program to gather data about participants' attitudes and beliefs about marriage, commitment, gender roles, or any other aspect of relationships under discussion. This information would inform not only the content of the program and thus become part of the ongoing review process, but also add to the general knowledge base about relationships.

Second, such an instrument could be employed as part of the evaluation process at the end of the program. Participants could be asked to indicate what they feel they had learned or what changes they had observed in themselves and their partner – their attitudes or behaviour – in various aspects of their relationship since the beginning of the program, and how the program may have helped bring those changes about. The responses could provide the basis for a discussion of the program before it ends, as well as collected and analysed. Responses could also form the basis of follow-up interviews, perhaps conducted by phone, at certain intervals after the completion of the program. Qualitative methods may not be suitable for some situations and some programs. They also require more time for data analysis. Used alone or in conjunction with quantitative measures such as ratings scales, however, the quality and richness of the data that qualitative measures can generate are well worth the investment.

Research and evaluation do not necessarily require the development of completely new ways of gathering data. Teaching tools that providers already use could double as research or evaluation measures. If standardised across a number of programs or providers, they can increase the amount of data collected. There should, of course, initially be some consideration of whether those existing tools are the best way to measure the outcome of interest, whether attitudes, knowledge or the achievement of other specific program objectives.

Implementing research and evaluation activities

While there are a number of ways in which research or evaluation may be conducted, there remains the issue of implementation. It is likely that many program managers or coordinators either have the necessary expertise themselves, or have access to the expertise among their staff, but not the time and resources required to design and implement their own studies. However, it may be possible to develop a small research and evaluation project within a network of agencies/providers, pooling the expertise as well as spreading the costs. External assistance might be obtained to discuss the design, assist with the measures to be used, and advise on or even conduct the statistical or thematic (in the case of qualitative data) analyses, but there is a low cost alternative. Finding participants for their research is a perennial problem for postgraduate students. In return for access to clients who have consented to participate (with appropriate privacy protocols in place), a postgraduate student may agree to co-design a project that meets their own and the provider's needs, and report their findings directly to the agency via a professional development workshop, a conference presentation, or a written report. Centacare in Melbourne has success with this approach.

Within the bounds of ethical and privacy constraints, the student gains data and exposure to the providers' experience with, and knowledge of, their client base, while the agency gains useful information about couples or their program and further exposure to research and evaluation processes that they may ultimately be able to implement themselves. Drawing on existing links and developing new connections with relevant university departments offers the potential for access to a range of resources, including assistance with research and evaluation.

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Another way to obtain assistance with conducting research and evaluation might be through offering an internship to students enrolled in a relevant tertiary degree. Depending on their skills and interests the interns' duties could include designing and helping to conduct a small research project, or reviewing the literature on program evaluation to identify ways of measuring program outcomes. The interns gain experience in a workplace setting of interest to them, and the study or literature review, which becomes a resource for the agency, could become part of their assessment or even eventually be published as a report or article.

If expertise in research and evaluation is limited within an organisation, or within the field in general, then the state and national marriage and relationship education conferences provide a mechanism by which research and evaluation skills can be acquired. Conference programs could include workshops on basic research and evaluation within the marriage and relationship education context, or provide opportunities for groups of providers with similar needs, interests, and capacities to meet and begin collaborating on a project. Dissemination of these projects, whether about the outcomes of the project or the experience of the research and evaluation process, is crucial. Articles could be submitted to a range of publications including *Threshold* and *The Educator*. Again, conference workshops could be conducted to help to improve practitioners' skills in writing their research or evaluation activities.

Concluding comments

The implementation of any of the above activities will create additional burdens on the managers and coordinators of marriage and relationship education programs. Such new responsibilities might include the need for formal agreements or contracts with other collaborating providers or universities, the need to obtain clearance with the provider organisation's management and/or ethics committee, or the need for office space and administrative support. Even the implications for insurance or occupational health and safety matters would need to be considered. All of these are processes and activities that require time and expertise to navigate and manage effectively.

However, attracting and maintaining ongoing funding for service provision from any source is increasingly likely to require such investment, and there is little point in funding or conducting programs that fail to meet their objectives. There is a range of research and evaluation techniques and procedures suited to the circumstances and purposes of particular service providers (Tomison 2000). These enable the comprehensive and continuing monitoring and improvement of the effectiveness of programs. They also increase the knowledge base on which such programs are founded. Such ongoing and systematic monitoring of programs is essential for clients, their families, and the community.

This article is far from a complete discussion of how providers might go about doing their own research and evaluation, and it is acknowledged that, regardless of how it is done or who actually does it, research and evaluation increase the workload of program managers and practitioners. But the marriage and relationship field has already demonstrated its readiness to explore and take on developments in other aspects of service provision (for example, in recognising and promoting the value of adult education principles and the development of educator competencies). Initiating research and evaluation strategies from within the field follows on this tradition.

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