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Reasons for Divorce and Recollections of Premarital Intervention: Implications for Improving Relationship Education

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Abstract

The study presents findings from interviews of 52 divorced individuals who received the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) while engaged to be married. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study sought to understand participant reasons for divorce (including identification of the “final straw”) in order to understand if the program covered these topics effectively. Participants also provided suggestions based on their premarital education experiences so as to improve future relationship education efforts. The most commonly reported major contributors to divorce were lack of commitment, infidelity, and conflict/arguing. The most common “final straw” reasons were infidelity, domestic violence, and substance use. More participants blamed their partners than blamed themselves for the divorce.

Recommendations from participants for the improvement of premarital education included receiving relationship education before making a commitment to marry (when it would be easier to break-up), having support for implementing skills outside of the educational setting, and increasing content about the stages of typical marital development. These results provide new insights into the timing and content of premarital and relationship education.

Keywords

divorce; relationship education; couples; premarital; prevention

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Scott M. Stanley and Howard J. Markman own a business that develops, refines, disseminates, and sells the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). Galena K. Rhoades has co-authored curricula that are based on PREP and receives royalties on the sale of those curricula.

Divorced individuals, compared to their married counterparts, have higher levels of psychological distress, substance abuse, and depression, as well as lower levels of overall health (Amato, 2000; Hughes & Waite, 2009). Marital conflict and divorce have also shown to be associated with negative child outcomes including lower academic success (Frisco, Muller, & Frank, 2007; Sun & Li, 2001), poorer psychological well-being (Sun & Li, 2002), and increased depression and anxiety (Strohschein, 2005). Given these negative outcomes of marital conflict and divorce, the overarching goal of premarital relationship education has been to provide couples with skills to have healthy marriages.

The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010) focuses on teaching appropriate communication and conflict skills, and provides information to help couples evaluate expectations, understand relationship commitment, and enhance positive connections through friendship and fun (Ragan, Einhorn, Rhoades, Markman, & Stanley, 2009). Most research indicates that compared to control groups, PREP helps couples learn to communicate more positively and less negatively (e.g., Laurenceau, Stanley, Olmos-Gallo, Baucom, & Markman, 2004; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993), increases satisfaction, and reduces risk for divorce in the years following the program (e.g., Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998; Hahlweg & Richter, 2010; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Stanley, Allen, Markman, Rhoades, & Prentice, 2010). A few studies have shown more mixed or moderated results (e.g., Baucom, Hahlweg, Atkins, Engl, & Thurmaier, 2006; van Widenfelt, Hosman, Schaap, & van der Staak, 1996; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, & Peterson, in press). In an evidence-based tradition, the growing knowledge base can and should be used to generate insights about how to refine future efforts (Stanley & Markman, 1998). One methodology that could improve PREP is to interview divorced individuals who participated in the program about their reasons for divorce and premarital education experiences in order to understand if the program covered these topics effectively.

Few studies have directly examined retrospective reports of reasons for divorce, particularly within the past two decades (see Bloom, Niles, & Tatcher, 1985; Gigy & Kelly, 1992; Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Thurnher, Fenn, Melichar, & Chiriboga, 1983) and no study, to our knowledge, has examined reasons for divorce in a sample of individuals who participated in the same relationship education program. Within a sample of divorcing parents, Hawkins, Willoughby, and Doherty (2012) found that the most endorsed reasons for divorce from a list of possible choices were growing apart (55%), not being able to talk together (53%), and how one's spouse handled money (40%). Amato and Previti (2003) found that when divorced individuals were asked open-endedly to provide their reasons for divorce, the most cited reasons were infidelity (21.6%), incompatibility (19.2%), and drinking or drug use (10.6%). A statewide survey in Oklahoma found that the most commonly checked reasons for divorce from a list of choices were lack of commitment (85%), too much conflict or arguing (61%), and/or infidelity or extramarital affairs (58%; C. A. Johnson et al., 2001). International studies have found highly endorsed reasons for divorce to be marrying too young, communication problems, incompatibility, spousal abuse, drug and alcohol use, religious differences, failures to get along, lack of love, lack of commitment, and childlessness, to name a few (Al Gharaibeh & Bromfield, 2012; Savaya & Cohen, 2003a, 2003b; Mbosowo, 1994).

In sum, across studies some consistency exists regarding the importance of issues such as communication, incompatibility, and commitment as reasons for divorce, while other issues seem to vary across samples. Thus, it would be helpful to understand the reasons for divorce in former PREP participants in order to highlight specific areas that the program could have addressed better and in order to improve that program's effectiveness. In addition, no study, to our knowledge, has asked divorced participants who all participated in the same premarital program to provide suggestions for improving relationship education programs based on their own experiences in the program and considering that their marriages ended in divorce. These results could be valuable for practitioners to consider in order to improve the PREP model specifically and relationship education efforts more generally. The current study qualitatively interviewed individuals who had completed PREP and later divorced about their premarital education, including what they wished would have been covered, as well as their marital experiences, particularly regarding their reasons for divorce. Therefore, this study sought to understand both participants' reasons for divorce as well as how they thought relationship education could have better addressed their needs. The ultimate goal of the current study was to provide new knowledge on potential ways to help relationship education best prevent marital distress and divorce.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from 52 individuals who received PREP premaritally but subsequently divorced at some point in the following 14 years. These individuals were all initially participants of a larger study of the effectiveness of premarital education ($N = 306$ couples; Markman et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2001). All participants in the current study either received PREP through the religious organization ($n = 24$) that performed their weddings or PREP through a university ($n = 28$). The sample included 31 women and 21 men. Of these, 18 men and 18 women had been married to each other (we were unable to assess the former spouse of the other 16 individuals). At the first time point of the larger study (i.e., the premarital assessment), these participants were 25.4 years old on average ($SD = 6.67$), with a median education of 14 years, and median income of \$20,000–29,999. At the time of the post-divorce interview, the average age was 37.2 ($SD = 6.5$), the median education level was 16 years, and 32 of the participants (61.5%) had a least one child. The average number of years since premarital intervention to the post-divorce interview was 12.2 years, and the average number of years from finalized divorce to participating in the interview was 5.2 years. The sample was 88.2% Caucasian, 5.9% Native American, 3.9% Black, and 2.0% Asian; 1 participant did not report race. In terms of ethnicity, 84.3% of the sample identified as Non-Hispanic and 15.7% as Hispanic.

Procedure

Couples ($N = 306$) were recruited for the larger study through the religious organizations that would later perform their wedding services. At the initial wave of the study in 1996, participants were required to be planning marriage with someone of the opposite sex and needed to participate as a couple. As mentioned earlier, they were assigned to either receive PREP through the religious organization, PREP at a university, or naturally-occurring

services. Throughout the duration of the larger study, participants were asked to complete annual assessments that included questionnaires and videotaped discussions. If a participant expressed that he/she was divorced or currently divorcing throughout the larger study, this information was recorded. From 2010–2012, we attempted to contact all divorced participants ($n = 114$ individuals) to ask if they would participate in the current study. Of these individuals, we were unable to contact 35 participants, 18 declined an invitation to participate, and 1 participant was deceased. Participants who divorced and had received naturally-occurring services ($n = 8$) were excluded from these analyses because we could not know exactly what premarital services they had received. There were no significant differences between divorced individuals who participated in this study compared to divorced individuals who did not participate across age at marriage, ethnicity, personal income, or relationship adjustment at the premarital assessment ($ps > .05$).

All participants completed an individual 30-minute audio-recorded interview over the phone about their divorce and their recollections of their premarital intervention. They received \$50 for participating in this interview. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analyses. All study procedures were approved by a university Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Reasons for divorce—Using items from a previous survey on reasons for divorce (C. A. Johnson et al., 2001) participants were asked to indicate whether or not each item on a list of common problems in relationships was a “major contributor to their divorce” (“yes” or “no”). These items included lack of commitment, infidelity/extra-marital affairs, too much arguing or conflict, substance abuse, domestic violence, economic hardship, lack of support from family members, marrying too young, little or no premarital education, and religious differences.

Qualitative feedback on progression of divorce—If participants indicated any of the reasons for divorce, they were subsequently asked to elaborate on how this problem progressed to their eventual divorce by the questions “Considering the problems you were telling me such as [the major reasons for divorce the participant listed], how did they move from problems to actually getting a divorce?” and “You said that [cited reason] was major contributor to the divorce. Can you tell me more about that?” We will only present detailed results from this qualitative feedback on reasons for divorce that were endorsed by at least 20% of participants.

Final straw—Participants were also asked if there was a “final straw” to their relationship ending, and to expand on that reason if there was one.

Who should have worked harder?—Participants were asked two questions (C. A. Johnson et al., 2001): “Again looking back at your divorce, do you ever wish that you, yourself, had worked harder to save your marriage?” (with response options of “Yes, I wish I had worked harder” or “No, I worked hard enough.”) and “Do you ever wish that your spouse had worked harder to save your marriage?” (with response options of “Yes, I wish my spouse had worked harder.” or “No, my spouse worked hard enough.”)

Qualitative feedback on PREP—Participants were asked to report and elaborate on what they remembered, found difficult, or wished was different about their premarital education experience in an open-ended format. Example questions from the interviews include “What do you remember about the premarital preparation or training you and your ex-spouse took part in?” and “Based on your experience in a marriage that didn’t work out as you planned, do you think there is any kind of information or education that would have made a difference in how things turned out?”

Analytic Approach

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were utilized to address our research questions. For the first phase of analysis, answers were counted for close-ended questions, such as the list of major reasons for divorce (see Table 1) and if there was a “final straw” (yes or no). For open-ended questions, we followed a grounded-theory methodology (Creswell, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For the first phase of coding, after repeated readings of the transcripts, two coders, including the first author and a research assistant from the larger project, followed a grounded-theory methodology to generate common themes related to participants’ recollections of their premarital education and reasons for divorce (from open-ended items; Creswell, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The two coders then met repeatedly to compare results and to establish consistency. If the coders disagreed across codes, they discussed their codes with the second author to come to a conclusion. Next, axial coding was used to analyze how different codes vary in order to create specific categories of the individual codes (Creswell, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, axial coding involved examining how respondent reports of general themes (e.g., communication problems) varied in their presentation (e.g., communication problems throughout the relationship vs. communication problems only at the end of marriage).

The final stage of coding included selective coding in which categories were refined and relationships between concepts were noted, such as how reasons for divorce related to difficulties utilizing PREP skills. Once all codes were determined, the first author and a new coder, another research assistant on the project, coded all transcripts with the established coding system. Codes were counted for all individuals, as well as couples as a whole (partner agreement on the same code) and couples in which only one partner from the relationship reported a specific code (partner disagreement on the same code). The average Cohen’s Kappa (per code) was .71 ($SD = .28$) and the median was .80.

Analyses are presented at the individual level by using data from all 52 participants, as well as at the couple level by using data from the 18 couples ($n = 36$) in which both partners completed interviews.

Results

Reasons for Divorce

Table 1 presents the “major contributors for divorce” list. Overall, the results indicate that the most often cited reasons for divorce at the individual level were lack of commitment (75.0%), infidelity (59.6%), and too much conflict and arguing (57.7%), followed by

marrying too young (45.1%), financial problems (36.7%), substance abuse (34.6%), and domestic violence (23.5%). Other problems, such as religious differences, were endorsed less than 20% of the time. The order of these rankings was essentially identical at the couple level, although rates of endorsement increased because both partners were reporting. The following provides qualitative elaborations by participants on these specific reasons for divorce.

Commitment—Results indicated that the most common major contributing factor to divorce reported by participants was *lack of commitment*, reported by 75% of individuals and by at least one person in 94.4% of couples. Of the couples in which at least one partner mentioned commitment as a problem, 70.6% represented couples in which both partners agreed that lack of commitment was a major reason for divorce. Some participants reported that commitment within their relationships gradually eroded until there was not enough commitment to sustain the relationship, while others reported more drastic drops in commitment in response to negative events, such as infidelity.

“I realized it was the lack of commitment on my part because I didn’t really feel romantic towards him. I always had felt more still like he was a friend to me.”

“It became insurmountable. It got to a point where it seemed like he was no longer really willing to work [on the relationship]. All of the stresses together and then what seemed to me to be an unwillingness to work through it any longer was the last straw for me.”

Infidelity—The next most often cited major contributing factor to divorce was *infidelity*, endorsed by 59.6% of individuals and by at least one partner in 88.8% of couples. Of those couples who had a least one partner report infidelity as a reason for divorce, only 31.3% represented couples in which both partners agreed that infidelity was a major contributor to the dissolution of their marriage. Thus, the majority of couples with apparent infidelity in their relationships only had one partner mention it as a contributing factor to their divorce. Overall, infidelity was often cited as a critical turning point in a deteriorating relationship.

“It was the final straw when he actually admitted to cheating on me. I kind of had a feeling about it, but, you know, I guess we all deny [because] we never think that the person you are married to or care about would do that to us.”

“He cheated on me [...] Then I met somebody else and did the same thing. [...] And when he found out about it we both essentially agreed that it wasn’t worth trying to make it work anymore because it just hurt too bad.”

Conflict and arguing—*Too much conflict and arguing* was endorsed by 57.7% of individuals and 72.2% of couples had at least one partner report that was a major contributor to divorce. Of these couples, 53.8% of couples agreed that too much conflict and arguing was a contributor to divorce. Overall, participants indicated that conflicts were not generally resolved calmly or effectively. Respondents also reported that such communication problems increased in frequency and intensity throughout their marriages, which at times, seemed to coincide with lost feelings of positive connections and mutual support. By the end

of the marriage, these respondents indicated that there was a significant lack of effective communication.

“I got frustrated of arguing too much.”

“We’d have an argument over something really simple and it would turn into just huge, huge fights [...] and so our arguments never got better they only ever got worse.”

Marrying too young—*Getting married too young* was reported as a major contributing factor to divorce by 45.1% of individuals and by at least one partner from 61.1% of couples. Both partners mentioned this reason in 27.3% of these couples. Participants who endorsed this item were an average of 23.3 years old at the time of marriage ($SD = 5.5$) and participants who did not endorse this item were 29.2 ($SD = 6.7$). In commenting about this issue, some participants reported that they had only known their partners for short periods of time before their marriage and/or that they wished they had dated their partners longer in order to either gain a better perspective on the relationship or to make a more rational decision as to whom they should marry. Additional comments about this issue included reports that participants were too young to make mature objective decisions regarding their marriage decisions.

“The main reason [we divorced] was because of our age. I think that being 19 at the time we got married, it just didn’t take. I think that we didn’t take anything as seriously as we should have.”

“I wish that we wouldn’t have [...] gotten married so young. I wish we would have waited a little bit longer before we actually got married.”

Financial problems—*Financial problems* were cited as a major contributor to divorce by 36.7% of participants and by at least one partner from 55.6% of couples. Of couples who had at least one partner endorse financial problems as a contributor to divorce, 50% represented couples in which both partners agreed that financial problems were a major reason for divorce. In elaborating about this issue, some participants indicated that financial difficulties were not the most pertinent reason for their divorce, but instead contributed to increased stress and tension within the relationship. Other participants also expressed that some financial difficulties were linked to other problems (e.g., health problems, substance abuse).

“I had a severe illness for almost a year and I was the only employed person [before that] so obviously money ran very short.”

“The stress of trying to figure out the finances became a wedge that was really insurmountable.”

Substance abuse—*Substance abuse* was reported as a major contributing factor to divorce by 34.6% of participants, and by at least one partner in 50% of couples. Of these couples, only 33.3% of partners agreed that substance abuse was a major contributing factor to divorce. Thus, similar to reports of infidelity, the majority of couples who listed substance abuse as a reason for divorce had only one partner cite this reason. Generally, participants

expressed that the severity of the substance abuse problem in their relationship was either minimized over the duration of the relationship, or if attempts to address the problem were made, the partner with the substance abuse problem would not improve and/or seek help. After several attempts to address the problem, the relationship finally ended.

“I said ‘absolutely no more bars’ and as soon as I found out he was back in them, I asked for [a divorce].”

“He never admitted that he even drank. It wasn’t me against him. It was me against him and the disease.”

Domestic violence—*Domestic violence* was cited as a contributing factor to divorce by 23.5% of participants and by at least one partner from 27.8% of couples. Of those couples in which one partner listed domestic abuse a major contributor to divorce, 40.0% of partners agreed that it was a major contributor to divorce. Elaborations of this item included descriptions of both physical and emotional abuse. Participants often expressed how the abuse in their relationship developed gradually, with intensified cycles of abuse and contrition, until the severity of the abuse intensified to insurmountable levels.

“[There was] continuous sexual abuse and emotional trauma which only got worse over time.”

“There were times that I felt very physically threatened. There was a time that there was a bit of shoving. I got an elbow to my nose and I got a nose bleed. Then there was another time that he literally just slid me along the floor. [...] We’d work on it. It would happen again.”

Final Straw

After assessing participant major reasons for divorce, we were interested to see if participants indicated a single event or reason that constituted a “final straw” in the process of their marriage dissolution. Overall, 68.6% of participants and at least one partner in 88.9% of couples reported that there was a final straw leading to the end of their marriage. General themes of final straw issues were generated through qualitative methods for participants who reported a final straw. Of the individuals who indicated that there was a final straw involved in ending their marriages, the most common cited reason was infidelity, which was reported by 24% of these participants, followed by domestic violence (21.2%) and substance abuse (12.1%). At the couple level, no couples (0%) had both partners report the same reason for the final straw. Participants expressed that although these final straw events may not have been the first incident of their kind (e.g., the first time they realized their partner had a substance abuse problem) an event involving these behaviors led to the final decision for their relationship to end. Also, there were some situations in which individuals expressed that these three issues may have interacted with one another or other relationship issues.

“[My ex-husband] and I both had substance abuse problems which led to infidelity [...] which also led to domestic violence”.

“Along with him having alcohol and drug issues as well as infidelity issues [and] the stress, came the physical and verbal abuse.”

Who is to Blame?

Considering that infidelity, domestic violence, and substance abuse were the most often endorsed “final straw” reasons for divorce, we were interested in deciphering which member of the relationship participants saw as responsible for these behaviors. In examining participants’ elaborations of infidelity, substance abuse, and domestic violence, we found that 76.9%, 72.2%, and 77.8%, respectively, described these events in terms of their partner engaging in these negative behaviors, and only 11.5%, 11.1%, and 0%, respectively, volunteered that they engaged in the behavior themselves.

Furthermore, when participants were asked if their partner should have worked harder to save their marriages, 65.8% of men and 73.8% of women believe that their ex-spouse should have worked harder to save their marriages. Conversely, when participants were asked if they, personally, should have worked harder to save their marriages, only 31.6% of men and 33.3% of women expressed that they, personally, should have worked harder. Further, at the couple level, 70.6% of couples showed a pattern in which the women believed their ex-husbands should have worked harder to save their relationships while their ex-husbands did not believe they, themselves, should have worked harder. Only 11.7% agreed that the husband should have worked harder and 11.7% had the husband endorse that he should have worked harder with the wife disagreeing. Conversely, only 35.3% of couples displayed the pattern in which the men blamed their ex-wives for not working harder while their ex-wives, themselves, denied that they should have worked harder. Only 11.7% agreed that the wife should have worked harder and 17.7% had the wife endorsed that she should have worked harder with her husband disagreeing. Further, 35.3% of couples agreed that the wife had not needed to work harder to save the marriage, while only 5.9% of couples agreed that the husband had not needed to work harder. Thus, most participants believed their ex-partners should have worked harder, but at the couple level, there were more couples in which both partners agreed that the wife did not need to work harder than there were couples in which both partners agreed the husband did not need to work harder. When asked who filed for the divorce, 63.5% of participants indicated that the woman filed for divorce and only 25% participants indicated that the man filed for divorce.

Feedback on PREP

Next, we provide the findings on the most commonly cited qualitative feedback reported by participants regarding how to improve premarital education. The following results and percentages refer to counts of qualitative codes created by the research team based on common themes in the interviews.

Learning more about one’s partner—Results show that 42.3% of participants and 77.8% of couples expressed that they wished they had known more about their ex-spouse before they were married. Of these couples, 28.6% of partners agreed. These statements included desires to understand their partner better in order to improve their communication and better prepare for the marriage, or conversely, information that would have led them to

never marry one's partner in the first place. Indeed, 30.8% of participants specifically mentioned that they wished they had recognized "red flags" to leave the relationship before they entered their marriage.

"I think the only information that could have [helped] would've been information that might have led me to not marry him."

"I probably wish that we would have had more premarital counseling and had somebody tell us we should not be getting married."

Participating in the program before constraints to marry—Twenty-five percent (25.0%) of participants specifically reported that they were influenced by constraints to stay in the relationship already in place during the program. Example constraints included having become engaged, set a wedding date, sent out invitations, or purchased a dress, which made it difficult for participants to objectively reconsider if they were marrying the right person through the educational experience. Thus, a large portion of participants expressed that receiving PREP just before marriage made it difficult for them to seriously considered delaying their wedding plans in order to make more objective decisions about the relationship.

"It was one of those things where you're like, 'Well, I already have the dress. We're already getting married. We already have all the people. Everything is already set up and we bought the house.' And you just kind of think, 'Well you know I'm sure things will get better.' You see the red flags but you kind of ignore them."

"I just didn't have the guts to say, 'You know what, I understand the dresses have been paid for. The churches have been booked. The invitations have gone out. But I don't think I want to do this.'"

Improved support for ongoing implementation—Thirty-one percent (30.8%) of individuals and 38.9% of couples had at least one partner express that, although they found PREP skills helpful during the duration of the program, they had difficulty using these skills in their daily lives outside of their premarital education classes. Of these couples, 42.9% of partners agreed that they had difficulty implementing program skills in their marriage. In general, these participants expressed that, in the heat of the moment, it was hard to utilize their communication skills, such as staying calm, actively listening, working toward the problem as a team, or taking "time outs" as suggested in PREP. Other participants simply expressed that it was hard to remember and perfect their skills after the program ended because they did not practice them regularly.

"I think that the techniques [...] were helpful. I just think it mattered if you were going to apply the principles or not. And I don't think a lot of them were applied."

"It helped with discussion and listening tools. I think, it's just the follow through, you know. We didn't remember those things when it came down to it."

"He tried to use it at the beginning, but it was just the continual using of the techniques that were given to us."

Education regarding the realities of marriage—In addition to not knowing enough about one’s partner, 48.1% of participants and 72.2% of couples expressed that they did not know enough about the realities or stages of marriage after participating in the program. Of these couples, 38.5% of partners agreed. These comments included surprise that their partners changed over the course of the marriage, as well as trouble facing new problems when they emerged (e.g., lack of attraction/connection, decreases in commitment and satisfaction, and new abuse problems).

“Premarital counseling teaches you how you get along, and that you should communicate, but it doesn’t really talk about the phases of a marriage over time.”

“[I wish I had learned] that the biggest area in life in an ongoing relationship is knowing that things are going to come up that aren’t perfect. That after the wedding day, and the build up to the wedding day, real life is going to kick in and you have to really have some tools to deal with it.”

Discussion

The goal of this study was to increase understanding of divorced individuals’ perspectives on whether their premarital education prepared them for marriage and how relationship education could be modified to better address couples’ needs. Thus, among individuals who received PREP premaritally and later divorced, this study addressed reasons for divorce as well as ideas for what else would have been helpful in relationship education. It is the first study to qualitatively assess divorced participants’ recommendations for relationship education services. Given the small sample and qualitative nature of the reports, the implications discussed below ought to be considered preliminary.

We asked about reasons for divorce to know whether PREP addressed the kinds of problems that couples who went on to divorce tended to experience. The most commonly cited reason for divorce was lack of commitment, followed by infidelity and too much conflict and arguing. These top rated major reasons for divorce noted here are similar to those found in large random surveys of divorced participants (cf. C. A. Johnson et al., 2001; Hawkins, Willoughby et al., 2012). Overall, these findings support the importance of covering communication and commitment in premarital education programs to help foster successful marriages; however, in light of participant feedback on PREP, the program may have been able to cover these and other topics more effectively.

Whereas issues like communication and commitment overlap with core content in PREP and other programs (see Markman & Rhoades, 2012), a substantial portion of responses suggested that, although the skills taught in PREP may been helpful, they did not implement them in real-life situations, particularly during heated discussions. Research indicates that commitment and conflict management are related in that commitment helps partners inhibit negative behaviors and engage in more positive behaviors at critical moments (Slotter et al., 2012); thus, the issues of commitment and conflict management are likely intertwined in important ways. Further, consistent with other research on a German version of PREP (Hahlweg & Richter, 2010), participants also reported that they forgot some of the communication skills over time.

These findings highlight a key question for the couple research field regarding how to enhance couples' ability to use beneficial strategies when they are most needed. One solution could be to increase the time couples spend in premarital education in order for them to master essential skills and to help them become more likely to constructively derail negative processes as they emerge. At the same time, the version of PREP that these couples received was 12 hours long, which is both on the long end of what most couples receive in premarital education ($Mdn = 8$ hours; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006) and in the range of what tends to be the most effective dose (Hawkins, Stanley, Blanchard, & Albright, 2012). Longer curricula do not seem to lead to stronger effects (Hawkins, Stanley et al., 2012), but future random-assignment studies could address this question better.

With most premarital education services, including PREP, couples are not provided opportunities to practice new skills or receive coaching while they are upset or experiencing a difficult disagreement. A group or workshop format likely inhibits such real-world discussions. It could be that couples would benefit from new program content that helps them practice their skills better when they are having trouble. Couples may also benefit from additional opportunities to perfect the use of program strategies after the intervention has ended, such as through booster classes or individual meetings with coaches. Research indicates that such boosters may be effective (Braukhaus, Hahlweg, Kroeger, Groth, & Fehm-Wolfsdorf, 2003). New technologies now offer innovative ways to deliver such boosters, such as through online training or smart phone applications.

Content Considerations for Premarital Education

Introducing new content on the issues that participants identified as final straws in their marriages may also be beneficial. These issues were infidelity, aggression or emotional abuse, and substance use. Addressing these behaviors directly in relationship education raises some questions regarding which couples relationship education providers might seek to help stay together as opposed to help break-up. We believe premarital education should serve as a prevention effort to help healthy and happy couples stay that way and that keeping distressed, abusive, or otherwise unhealthy couples together would not be a positive outcome. Research on the development of these "final straw" behaviors seems particularly important in the future. A limitation of the current study is that the pre-intervention assessment did not include the kinds of measures necessary to determine the extent to which couples in this study presented with these problems before marriage. Thus, future research is needed to investigate whether premarital education can help *prevent* couples from developing some of these "final straw" behaviors and whether it may help some couples with problems such as aggression or substance abuse either get the additional help they will need to change these behaviors or break up. We discuss preliminary ideas about whether/how premarital education might cover each of these final straw issues below.

Infidelity—Over half of all participants cited infidelity as a major reason for divorce and infidelity was the most often endorsed "final straw" reason. Infidelity is not a major focus in PREP, though the curriculum does address the importance of commitment, including protecting one's relationship from attraction to others. Based on participants' reports from

this study, it may be that premarital programs could be improved by more directly addressing how to reduce the potential for extramarital involvement.

If providers or programs choose to address infidelity explicitly, Markman (2005) provides useful guidelines for covering the topic. These recommendations include informing participants that there are specific situations and developmental time periods within relationships with increased risks for engaging in extramarital relationships (e.g., transition to parenthood, close relationships with attractive alternatives, significant drinking). Furthermore, participants could be informed that the risk for extramarital relationships may increase during stressful times—such as when partners are separated for long periods by work demands or experiencing low marital satisfaction—and this information could be shared with participants. Partners could also be given structure to talk with each other about expectations for fidelity, management of relationships with friends or co-workers who could be attractive alternatives, and boundaries for their relationship. However, one barrier to increasing a focus on the prevention of infidelity in premarital education is that relationship commitment and satisfaction is highest right before marriage (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006), so engaged couples may not be receptive or eager to directly address the possibility of future extramarital affairs during this time (Allen et al., 2005).

Substance abuse—Substance abuse also appeared to be a prevalent problem at least for half of divorced couples in this sample. Overall, reports indicate that although substance abuse problems may have developed gradually throughout these relationships, this issue constituted the final straw to end the relationship for a number of individuals once the situation was perceived as insurmountable. Substance abuse is not currently addressed in PREP except that all couples attending PREP are provided with information on how to get more help for a range of problems, including substance abuse.

Premarital programs may benefit from educating participants on how substance abuse is not uncommon as a reason for divorce in an effort to encourage participants to address substance abuse problems as early as possible. Such program additions could also include how to recognize and get help for substance abuse and could encourage partners to discuss their expectations for substance use in the relationship. Partners may also benefit from discussing how to support each other in seeking help, should the need ever arise. Furthermore, couples could be taught that if a substance abuse develops in the relationship, there is often a discrepancy between partners regarding perspectives on the extent of the problem, which is evident by this study's findings.

Domestic violence—Domestic violence was cited by over a quarter of couples as a reason for divorce. When asked to elaborate, some described verbal abuse, while others described physical aggression. Often participants explained that they initially believed they could work through the problem, but later found it unbearable, as some participants considered an act of physical aggression as the final straw in their relationship. As others have suggested (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003), premarital education programs may benefit from teaching participants about recognizing, preventing, and getting help for aggression in relationships. In current models of PREP, all participants learn that aggression is unacceptable and they all receive basic information on ways to get help (e.g., through

shelters), as to not put particular couples or individuals in awkward or unsafe circumstances in class. Still, more could be done.

The field continues to debate how to best address this issue, as different types of violence and couples of varying risk may warrant different approaches. M. P. Johnson (1995) distinguishes between situational couple violence and intimate terrorism. Specifically, situational couple violence tends to be much more common and represents aggression that comes out of conflict. It is typically initiated by either partner while intimate terrorism encompasses more controlling, threatening behavior, typically by the male partner.

With 36% of unmarried couples having experienced some form of physical aggression in the last year (Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010), relationship education programs should take care not to scare couples who have experienced aggression away from seeking help. As is done routinely in PREP, it seems necessary in relationship education that providers and program content emphasize to all participants that any aggression is unacceptable and also suggest specific, local ways to seek help for problems with aggression. To develop further content, an understanding of the literature on aggression and violence, including men's vs. women's roles, and the different type of violence, is likely particularly important, as recommendations may be different for different kinds of problems. For example, recommendations for situational couple violence might include couple and/or individual therapy focused on intensive skills to help better manage negative affect and conflict effectively whereas intimate terrorism would most likely call for referrals to shelters or law enforcement. For further recommendations regarding domestic violence and relationship education, see suggestions by Derrington, Johnson, Menard, Ooms, and Stanley (2010).

Financial hardship—Financial hardship was cited as a major reason for divorce that provided stress on their relationship by over half the sample. Although PREP helps couples learn communication skills to discuss stressful topics in general, it is worth considering whether specific content on money and economic stress is warranted. Participants could be asked to more directly share expectations about finances and learn coping skills for times of significant financial strain. They could also be provided with appropriate community resources to improve or stabilize their financial situations or these resources could be incorporated into relationship education efforts.

Marriage expectations—Almost half of interviewees commented that they did not know enough about the typical course of events in marriage. PREP typically addresses expectations by encouraging participants to recognize and discuss their own expectations for marriage (Markman et al., 2010), but it does not provide explicit information about how marriages and families tend to develop over time. More content on normal marital development could be helpful. For example, information could be provided about how satisfaction typically drops and conflict tends to increase during the transition to parenthood (e.g., Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009b) and about the course of attraction and sexual desire in relationships.

Previous research has shown that couples who develop serious difficulties, and eventually seek help, usually do so long after the problems have become deeply entrenched (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009a). Thus, relationship education programs may benefit from providing guidelines regarding when to seek professional help and even have couples practice these difficult conversations to encourage them to seek help early and at times when changes are easiest to make. There is survey evidence that premarital education is associated with being more likely to use services later in the marriage (Williamson, Karney, Trail, & Bradbury, 2012), but more direct content on how and when to seek help may be warranted.

This point about seeking help early is complicated by the fact that the majority of participants saw their partner as primarily responsible for participating in the “final straw” behaviors (infidelity, domestic violence, and substance use) and for not working hard enough to save the marriage. Most participants also believed that they, personally, should not have worked harder to save their marriages. Therefore, premarital education may need to focus on encouraging help seeking behaviors in couples with the understanding that most individuals may see their partners as primarily responsible for their difficulties, and therefore, may not feel personally responsible. In addition, the majority of couples displayed a pattern in which the women blamed their ex-husbands while their ex-husbands did not see themselves as responsible. Interestingly, as has been found elsewhere (Amato & Previti, 2003; C. A. Johnson et al., 2001), women in this sample were also more likely to eventually file for divorce than men. Thus, it may be especially important that husbands and wives develop realistic expectations about seeking help together, so that they later do not disagree about what circumstances might constitute a need for help.

The Timing of Premarital Education

Our findings show that a considerable number of participants wished that they had known more about their partner before marriage, saying they would have either learned how to handle differences better or left the relationship. Many others believed they had married too young. Also, a portion of participants mentioned that they participated in PREP during a time when the constraints of wedding plans made it more likely for them to ignore factors that may have otherwise ended their relationship. These participant comments highlight the difference between when couples might ideally benefit from premarital education compared to when couples typically seek it. One of the potential benefits of relationship education is that it can help some couples on an ill-advised or premature path toward marriage to reconsider their plans (see Stanley, 2001); however, couples typically participate in these programs close to their wedding dates, a time when ending the relationship may be especially difficult.

A potentially stronger overall prevention strategy is to reach people earlier in their relationships, before constraints to marry are in place, or even before individuals enter relationships (Rhoades & Stanley, 2009). Early, individual-oriented relationship education can help individuals develop and practice healthy relationship skills and also help them end unsafe or unhealthy relationships (Rhoades & Stanley, 2011). One recently-developed relationship education curriculum designed for individuals, *Within My Reach* (Pearson, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2008), has shown success in teaching these skills and helping

individuals reach their personal relationship goals (Antle, Karam, Christensen, Barbee, & Sar, 2011). Thus, future research may wish to consider how to encourage individuals and/or couples who have yet to make commitments to marry to participate in relationship education programs, as well as how and when these programs should advise individuals to leave damaging relationships.

Conclusions and Limitations

This study provides new information regarding the reasons for divorce and possible improvements to relationship education programs based on feedback from divorced individuals who participated in PREP premaritally. Although the study focuses on improving the PREP model specifically, relationship education programs working with premarital populations may also find value in our findings, particularly regarding how to cover specific topics deemed important by our participants. Other programs may also benefit from suggestions to provide relationship education earlier and to provide services to help couples master their skill development over time.

This study also has several limitations that warrant discussion. First, respondent reports of their progression toward divorce and premarital education experiences were retrospective and may therefore be biased by the passing of time. Future studies may wish to evaluate relationship problems and reasons for divorce closer to the couple's decision to divorce. Second, the sample was mostly White and only included participants in heterosexual relationships who married within mostly Christian-based religious organizations. Therefore, future studies are needed to examine whether these findings would be replicated with other groups or cultures. A third limitation is the lack of a comparison group of couples who participated in PREP but did not divorce. As a result, it is not clear whether or not the problems and recommendations these participants identified are specific to this divorced sample, or would translate to couples who remain married. Finally, all participants in this study received PREP when they were engaged to be married so research is needed to evaluate reasons for relationship dissolution and how to improve programs that target individuals and couples in different relationship stages (e.g. dating or married). Nevertheless, this study provides new insight in potential improvements to the content and timing of relationship education.

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Table 1

List of Major Reasons for Divorce by Individuals and Couples Who Participated in PREP

Reason for divorce	Individuals (N =52)	Couples (* N = 36)	Couple Agreement
Lack of commitment	75.0	94.4	70.6
Infidelity or extramarital affairs	59.6	88.8	31.3
Too much conflict and arguing	57.7	72.2	53.8
Getting married too young	45.1	61.1	27.3
Financial problems	36.7	55.6	50.0
Substance abuse	34.6	50.0	33.3
Domestic violence	23.5	27.8	40.0
Health problems	18.2	27.8	25.0
Lack of support from family	17.3	27.8	20.0
Religious differences	13.3	33.3	0.0
Little or no premarital education	13.3	22.2	25.0

Note. The *individuals* column reflects the percentage of individuals in the total sample who said yes to each reason. The *couples* column reflects the percentage of couples who had at least *one* partner say yes to each reason. The *couple agreement* column represents how many couples had both partners cite each reason out of the couples that had a least one partner mention that reason.

* Refers to individuals. *N* = 18 for couples.