

General Information about ARC Research

Active Relationships Center in Dallas, Texas developed, piloted and researched relationships skills curricula to present tools and skills to couples that would improve communication to respond and cope effectively with stressors that often accompany relationships and family life. Evaluation by Baylor University's School of Social Work indicated that Active Relationships curricula had the potential to be an effective mechanism for providing low income couples, and couples with lower educational levels, with successful methods for cultivating healthy, long lasting marriages.

HMI (ARC/HARP Project Research) Subject Numbers

With the awarding of a federal healthy marriages initiative (HMI) grant (2006-2011), Active Relationships Center's curricula were researched in low income populations. Programs under research included marriage education and relationship education workshops to 699 youth, 401 engaged couples, 1,892 married couples, 514 married individuals and 527 singles including fathers, through March 2011.

Although the 5th year evaluation has not yet been completed, the available data show that the "project has reached its "target population" and the "workshops are effective in bringing about positive changes in attitudes, knowledge and skills as indicated by positive statistically significant change between pre- and post-tests."

Evidence-based Theory

The theory, skills and tools presented in the Active Relationships programs were derived from research on predictors of marital success (Jefferey Larson), predictors of divorce (John Gottman), work on emotion and trigger management (Steven Stosny), and healthy and respectful speaker and listener conflict resolution techniques proven to be effective (Lori Gordon, Scott Stanley, Howard Markman). The concrete information and practical skills offered in the pre-marital course called *Active Choices* and the marriage education course called *Active Marriage and Best Practices* have proven appropriate for individuals and couples at any stage of relationship, from interest in marriage, to dating to married.

Other Projects Using ARC Curricula

Active Relationships courses have been successfully utilized by the YWCA, Head Start and Refugee Resettlement and projects funded by DHHS for HMI initiatives and by the U.S. Department of Defense for military troops and families since 2004.

Baylor University's 3,500 Participants

In the first four years of the ACF-funded HARP project alone, the Baylor research team gathered data from over 3,500 participants (some did not fill out evaluations) attending Active Choices, Active Communication/Active Marriage and Best Practices, Active Money Personalities, Active Romance workshops, Active Adults for fathers and for single adults (including in incarcerated settings) and Active Relationships for Young Adults (high school).

Demographics of the Baylor University Research

Participants in the Baylor University HARP study are predominantly Hispanic **over 95%** with approximately one fifth having been previously married. **One third** of those attending have not completed high school, and **approximately 40% report annual household incomes of less than \$20,000**. Participants overwhelmingly report that they have acquired skills and knowledge that will be beneficial for their relationships and over 97% state that they would recommend the workshops to others. Findings indicate the appropriateness of the proposed approach in terms of the target population, the level, content, and language of the materials to be used, the cultural adaptations incorporated into the program, the relevance of the subject matter.

Research Measures

Curricula were assessed in terms of the impact of the program on the participants' acquired knowledge in key content areas relationship skills including (but not limited to) positive thinking, anger/emotion management, budgeting.

In addition, the purpose of marriage/relationship education is to strengthen marriages (current or future) by reducing marital distress and negative interaction that lead to divorce. The goal of the evaluation was to determine whether participants believe they had acquired knowledge and skills from the *Active Communication or Active Marriage and Best Practices* to improve their relationships. The following five objectives were used to evaluate the program:

(1) Increased marital satisfaction (2) Increased positive communication
(3) Increased ability to resolve conflict (3) Decreased negative interaction (4) Increased commitment to the current relationship.

(1) Increased marital satisfaction should be one of the outcomes of any program designed to improve the marriage relationship.

The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) continues to be a widely utilized instrument with excellent reliability and validity in prior studies (Corcoran & Fischer, 2000; Stanley & Markman, 1992). A modified version (7 point in current study vs. 10 point in original) of the first item on the MAT was used to measure marital satisfaction. On this item, participants rated their level of agreement to the statement "Please rate how happy you are in your present marriage" on a 7-point scale from "extremely unhappy" to "perfectly happy".

(2) ENRICH is a marital satisfaction inventory designed to help couples determine the strengths and work areas of their relationships. Based on research with over 20,000 married couples, the ENRICH Communication subscale has an internal consistency of .90 and a test-retest reliability of .87 (Olson, 2002). For the present study, participants rated their level of agreement on eight items of the ENRICH Communication subscale using a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Example items included "I can usually believe everything my partner tells me" and "My partner is a very good listener."

(3) A marriage education program's success in teaching couples to manage conflict in ways that are not damaging to the relationship attest to its effectiveness.

The Conflict Resolution subscale of the ENRICH global marital satisfaction scale was used to assess this outcome; this subscale has an internal consistency of .84 and a test-retest reliability of .90. Participants rated their level of agreement on nine items of this scale, including "My partner and I have very similar ideas about the best way to solve our disagreements" and "My partner usually takes our disagreements very seriously." The same 5-point disagreement/agreement rating scale was utilized for scoring.

(4) Criticism, rejection, contempt, defensiveness, and name-calling are examples of negative interaction. Effective marriage education programs should increase the ratio of positive to negative interaction in couple relationships.

This outcome was measured by a negative interaction scale that was successfully used in a study of marriage education with military families called Building Strong and Ready Families (BSRF) (Science Applications International Corporation, & PREP, Inc., 2004).