



Barriers to providing marriage preparation

The costs of divorce and the association of marriage with social good in America (Wilcox et al., 2005) have made healthy marriages an increasingly popular topic among scholars, politicians, bureaucrats, and churches. For example, the Bush administration's Healthy Marriage Initiative was authorized to spend \$150 million a year on programs and research designed to promote healthy marriages. A smaller-scale, multidisciplinary effort to strengthen marriages and prevent divorce is the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, a public/private partnership launched in 1999 (Johnson et al., 2002).

Governmental involvement in this arena often has been prompted by economic concerns. However, serious social and spiritual costs that are more difficult to quantify have provided additional impetus to focus new attention on relationship education. One focus of these marriage-strengthening efforts has been premarital education, an intervention of particular relevance to churches. Consistent with the literature, the terms premarital education and marriage preparation will be used interchangeably in this article to refer to any intentional effort delivered prior to marriage that is designed to help couples form and sustain healthy marriages.

Well-constructed premarital education programs can have a significant effect on behaviors related to marital satisfaction (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Reardon-Anderson, Stagner, Macomber, & Murray, 2005). A random survey of 3,000 households in Oklahoma, Kansas, Arkansas, and Texas (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006) found that couples with premarital education experienced a 30% decline in the



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likelihood of divorce over five years. Two observations from this study are particularly noteworthy for this article. First, the vast majority of premarital education was provided by clergy (90% in Oklahoma). Second, the study did not investigate the content or quality of premarital education; presumably, some forms of marriage preparation would have been more effective than others.



Clergy occupy a strategic position in making premarital education available, whether by providing the program directly or by serving as gatekeepers whereby couples are referred to other providers (Fournier & Roberts, 2003; Stanley et al., 2001). Although anecdotal evidence suggests an increase in the proportion of civil marriage ceremonies (Grossman & Yoo, 2003), clergy continue to provide the majority of premarital education in the United States (Murray, 2005; Stanley, 2001). Advantages for clergy as providers of premarital education include their access to and influence with couples, a belief in the value of marriage, a strong educational tradition, and an institutional base of operations (Stanley, Markman, Peters, & Leber, 1995).

In response to the belief in the salience of clergy interventions, groups of clergy in more than 200 cities and towns in 43 states have established Community Marriage Policies® setting minimum standards for marriage preparation (McManus, 2008). An evaluation of these programs suggests that counties with a Community Marriage Policy® have a decline in the divorce rate nearly twice that of control counties (Birch, Weed, & Olsen, 2004).

Not only is marriage education generally effective, but also the public seems to recognize its potential value. Fournier and Roberts (2003) found that the premarital stage is clearly the most socially acceptable time for couples to receive relationship education. Approximately two-thirds of Oklahoma residents surveyed said they would consider using relationship education, such as workshops or classes, to strengthen their re-

lationships (Fournier & Roberts, 2003; Johnson et al., 2002). Of those who have attended classes, more than 70% reported having had a very good to excellent experience, and almost 90% would recommend premarital education to engaged couples they know (Fournier & Roberts, 2003).

Stanley et al. (2001) determined that clergy and lay religious leaders who were trained in presenting PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program), a program designed to prevent marital distress and divorce, were as effective in the short run as university staff. However, information on the effectiveness of clergy without such intensive training is unknown, and some have questioned the availability or effectiveness of premarital education provided by most churches (McManus, 1995; Stanley et al., 2001). This study explores the perception of clergy about hindrances that keep them from implementing effective marriage education.

HINDRANCES TO PROVISION OF MARRIAGE PREPARATION

General systems theory provides the primary conceptual framework for this study. Marriage preparation, the ultimate focus, is

conceptualized as system output, specifically as information produced by the “marriage preparation system” under investigation. All of the complex, open subsystems comprising the larger interactive system directly or indirectly relate to the production of marriage preparation. The clergyperson, the unit of analysis, is viewed first of all as an individual subsystem with system properties, including information-processing strategies and boundary permeability through which information flows between the individual clergyperson and other subsystems in the system. In addition, the clergyperson is viewed as being embedded within several of the subsystems under consideration. The identified subsystems include the clergyperson individual system, the clergy marital system, the religious denomination system, the local congregation system, the community system, the engaged couple system, and the engaged couple’s family of origin system. Each of these interdependent subsystems can facilitate or hinder marriage preparation.

Systems theory applied to families allows clinicians and researchers a variety of constructs to better understand relational dynamics. This article is based primarily on the ideas of equifinality, multifinality, and pattern. Since complex systems are capable of a wide range of responses to situations, it is always curious when observed behavior is limited to a small number of redundant patterns that are unique to the system being evaluated. In theory, underlying structures reduce the likelihood of potential responses. For example, church-based couple mentor programs can be very successful. However, if mentor couples struggle with their own financial matters and avoid discussing finances with premarital couples that clearly need to discuss money, the systemic notion of a redundant pattern (avoiding money discussion) sets limits to the helpfulness of responses in couple

mentoring situations.

This pattern that limits responsivity becomes a “barrier” to successful mentoring. Barriers are hypothesized to be structural patterns, based on past experience, that limit the ability of a service provider to fully respond to clients. The application of this awareness of barriers to premarital education can be used to identify education, skill-building, and decision-making interventions that can maximize the impact of marriage programs.

Breunlin’s (1999) theory of constraints suggests that “...the most straightforward and efficient approach to problem resolution is the removal of the obstacles to solving the problem” (p. 366). Thus, identifying hindrances should be an appropriate strategy for interventions intended to maximize the potential effectiveness of clergy in preparing couples for marriage. The theoretical model suggests that effectiveness is influenced by the relationships of the clergyperson to each subsystem in the marriage preparation suprasystem.

Community influences tend to be indirect, interacting with other systems to create an environment that enhances or constrains marriage preparation. Two possible domains for this interaction are community atmosphere (Macomber, Murray, & Stagner, 2005) and community marriage initiatives (Doherty & Anderson, 2004).

In addition, clergy marriages are prone to vulnerabilities such as role overload (Beck, 1997; Crouter, Bumpus, Head, & McHale, 2001) that might indirectly affect the ability of clergy to provide effective marriage preparation.

Although some research directly relates the congregational system to clergy involvement in marriage preparation, the literature most often identifies indirect factors as potential hindrances, such as administrative role expectations (McKown, 2001), congregational

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size (Beck, 1997), boundary issues, and constraints related to insufficient time and money (Barlow, 1999; Morris & Blanton, 1994).

The literature implies that the denomination influences marriage preparation through quality of life factors (Morris & Blanton, 1994), resources, and expectations (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1987) and through training as a function of the relationship between the clergy and the denomination with which he or she is affiliated (Barlow, 1999; Buikema, 2001).

Hindrances associated with the couple occur because premarital couples are typically idealistic relative to the challenges associated with marriage. In addition, couples may be so focused on the wedding that they have difficulty devoting attention to marriage preparation (Fournier & Olson, 1986; Olson, 2006).

Murray (2005) notes that cultural and family attitudes, such as the belief that families solve problems without outside help (Fournier and Roberts, 2003), may discourage participation in marriage preparation. It also is possible that the relationship between the clergy and the parents could influence the process and content of marriage preparation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the theoretical model and the findings pertaining to the subsystems, three research questions addressed hindrances to effective marriage preparation:

- First, how is the clergyperson's perception of marriage preparation effectiveness related to each individual hindrance and to each subsystem in the model?
- Second, how do denominational groups and denominationally related hindrances influence clergy perception of effectiveness?
- Finally, what is the relative importance of each hypothesized hindrance to the clergyperson's perception of effectiveness?

METHOD

Participants

The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative provided funding for this study, which influenced the decision to limit the survey to Oklahoma clergy. Based on the available data (Association of Religious Data Archives, 2002) showing the religious distribution of Oklahoma residents [evangelical Christian (68.3%), mainline Christian (21.6%), Roman Catholic (8.0%), Orthodox Christian (0.01%), and Other (1.9%)], the researchers limited the population of interest to evangelical Christian, mainline

Christian, and Roman Catholic Christian groups, as defined by the Association of Religious Data Archives. A sample of 2,501 Oklahoma churches was randomly selected from a commercial list of all churches in Oklahoma. Two identical waves of questionnaires were mailed to the entire list approximately two months apart. Of the responses returned, 425 (17%) were usable for data analysis.

To determine how accurately the responses reflected the religious population of Oklahoma, the mean size of active membership for each denominational group was multiplied by the number of respondents for each group, and the percentage of the total active members was calculated for each group and compared to the Oklahoma distribution described in the previous paragraph. Percentages of active members represented by each group were 4.4% for Roman Catholics ($n = 18$; mean of active membership = 1360.28), 71% for evangelicals ($n = 291$; mean of active membership = 199.09), and 24.6% for mainline ($n = 101$; mean of active membership = 309.38).

The 425 clergy who responded to a mailed survey were predominantly male (93.4%), married (90.8%), in a first marriage (76.4%), evangelical (69.6%), and senior pastors (90.8). Mean age was 51.6 ($SD = 10.58$), the mean number of years in ministry was 22.1 ($SD = 11.59$), and the mean tenure in the current

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Table 1

Clergy Reports of Hindrances and Perception of Effectiveness (N = 425) and Perceived Effectiveness Regressed on Linear Combination of Hindrances

Variables	Descriptive Statistics				Regression Analysis ^a				
	Mean	SD	Range	α	Zero-order correlation ^b	B	SE B	β	Sig. of Change
Perceived Effectiveness of Marriage Preparation	14.64	2.89	2-20	.64		17.774	.559		.000
Hindrances ^c	49.74	14.63	17-136	.83	-.373				
Couple factors ^d	15.19	5.26	4-32	.70	-.287				
Denominational factors	12.28	4.86	4-32	.58	-.362				
Congregational factors	10.55	4.58	3-24	.58	-.267				
Community factors	6.74	3.39	2-16	.77	-.012				
Couples focus on wedding	4.32	2.06	1-8 ^e		-.298**	-.222	.102	-.158	.030*
Engaged couples do not value	4.09	1.79	1-8		-.258**	-.025	.127	-.016	.843
Couples still have problems after prep.	3.95	1.63	1-8		-.184**	-.131	.100	-.072	.190
Inadequate training	3.79	1.81	1-8		-.307**	-.259	.098	-.159	.009**
Unaware of available resources	3.77	2.05	1-8		-.243**	-.136	.084	-.097	.107
Not enough time	3.74	2.04	1-8		-.164**	.065	.082	.046	.424
Church finances are limited	3.73	2.24	1-8		-.128**	.028	.076	.021	.711
People of community do not value	3.71	1.95	1-8		-.048	.006	.101	.004	.955
Parents make the process more difficult	3.49	1.77	1-8		-.036	.145	.095	.087	.127
Other clergy in community do not value	3.04	1.72	1-8		.022	.301	.107	.182	.005**
Congregation does not value	3.04	1.86	1-8		-.271**	-.253	.097	-.161	.010*
Not convinced programs effective	2.86	1.98	1-8		-.126**	.021	.078	.014	.791
Couples more difficult to work with	2.83	1.60	1-8		-.242**	-.183	.105	-.100	.083
Lack of denominational encouragement	1.87	1.42	1-8		-.240**	-.259	.115	-.126	.025*
My own marriage has problems.	1.43	.80	1-8		-.151**	-.144	.186	-.040	.439

^aDependent Variable: Perceived Effectiveness ^bAll variables correlated with Perceived Effectiveness.

^cMean substituted for missing data. ^dRemaining variables listed in order of size of mean.

^e1 = strongly disagree; 8 = strongly agree
 $p < .05$; $p < .01$ **

position was 8.35 years ($SD = .53$). Although the mean number of active congregational participants was 281.1 ($SD = 460.31$), the median was only 140. The mean number of weddings performed in the most recent year was 3.39 ($SD = 4.74$), and the median number was 2.

Measures

Because no suitable instrument was discovered in the literature, a four-page, 178-item, self-report questionnaire was created for this study based on a review of the literature and a small preliminary qualitative study. To assess face validity, the instrument was presented to scholars in the field and to a panel of clergy from a representative cross section of denominations. Minor changes were made in the instrument in response to recommendations. The instrument included eight sections: demographic, requirements, content, risk factors,

resources, hindrances, attitudes, and Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. The hindrances section, of particular relevance for this study, included 17 Likert-type items "seeking [clergy] ideas about factors that might hinder clergy from providing effective marriage preparation" (Chronbach's $\alpha = .84$). Five respondents (1.2%) suggested other hindrances. The range for each item was 1 – 8, with a potential range of 17 – 136 for the scale.

The Hindrances to Clergy Involvement Scale included the following subscales based on the theoretical model: *Clergy Marriage Problems*: My own marriage has too many problems. Community Factors (Chronbach's $\alpha = .77$): (1) Other clergy in my community do not seem to value marriage preparation; (2) The people of this community do not seem to value marriage preparation. *Congregational Factors* (Chronbach's $\alpha = .58$): (1) My

congregation does not recognize the value of marriage preparation; (2) Church finances are limited; (3) I have too many responsibilities and not enough time. *Denominational Factors* (Chronbach's alpha = .56): (1) My denomination does not encourage marriage preparation; (2) I do not think that I have received enough training to provide effective preparation; (3) I do not know what resources are available to assist me; (4) I am not convinced that these types of programs are very effective. *Couple Factors* (Chronbach's alpha = .70): (1) Couples are so focused on the wedding they cannot focus on marriage preparation; (2) Engaged couples do not think marriage preparation is valuable; (3) Too many couples still have problems after marriage preparation; (4) Couples are much more difficult to work with than individuals. *Family-of-origin Problems*: Parents often make the preparation process more difficult.

An objective measure of how effective clergy are in providing marriage preparation is beyond the scope of the self-report mail survey used in this study. Therefore, a three-item scale was used to measure the perception of clergy regarding their effectiveness: (1) I think that I generally do a good job preparing couples for marriage; (2) I think couples have benefited from the marriage preparation I provided in the past; (3) Effectiveness now compared to five years ago. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for variables used in the data analysis.

Data Analysis

To explore the first research question, a Pearson product-moment correlation was cal-

culated between perceived effectiveness and each scale or subscale intended to measure hindrances associated with various systems in the theoretical model. The significance level was set at .005 to compensate for the multiple correlations using the same set of values.

The second question examined whether denominationally related hindrances and denominational groups influenced perceived effectiveness. A 2 x 2 ANOVA tested whether clergypersons' perceived effectiveness varied as a function of low and high levels of denominational hindrances (range = 4 - 28; low = 4 - 15; high = 16 - 28) and denominational group (evangelical and mainline). Roman Catholic clergy were omitted from this analysis because of the small sample (n = 18). Significance level was set at .05.

To assess how each variable within the hindrances to clergy involvement scale individually contributes to the prediction of perceived effectiveness, perceived effectiveness was regressed on the linear combination of the variables from the hindrances to clergy involvement scale, using an ordinary least squares multiple regression analysis. Significance level was set at .05. The analysis omitted the "Individual Clergy Factors" subscale, primarily because of problems with multicollinearity among variables in the subscale and the dependent variable.

RESULTS

Research Question 1

Consistent with the theoretical model, perceived effectiveness was significantly cor-

TABLE 2
Means of Denominational Group Perception of Effectiveness by Level of Denominational Hindrances

	Denomination Group	
	Mainline	Evangelical
Low	15.88 (SD = 1.93; n = 33)	15.35 (SD = 3.02; n = 99)
High	12.64 (SD = 3.11; n = 33)	13.85 (SD = 2.82; n = 75)
Overall	14.26 (SD = 3.04; n = 66)	14.69 (SD = 3.02; n = 178)

related with the Hindrances to Clergy Involvement Scale ($r_{XY} = -.37; p < .001$), which indicates that clergy who perceive a higher level of hindrances to effective marriage preparation are less likely to believe that the preparation they provide is effective. Significant correlations also were found between perceived effectiveness and premarital couple factors ($r_{XY} = -.29; p < .001$), denominational factors ($r_{XY} = -.36; p < .001$), congregational factors ($r_{XY} = -.27; p < .001$), and clergy marriage problems ($r_{XY} = -.16; p < .001$). There was no relation between perceived effectiveness and either community factors subscale ($r_{XY} = -.01; p = .81$) or family-of-origin problems ($r_{XY} = -.04; p = .40$).

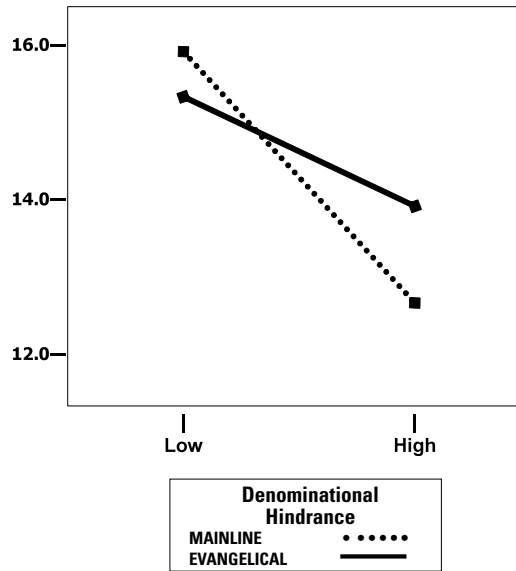
Research Question 2

The 2 x 2 ANOVA, shown in Table 2 revealed a significant interaction effect of denomination group x level of denominational hindrances on perceived effectiveness ($F = 4.47; df = 1; p = .035$). Tests of main effects were significant for denominational hindrances ($F = 33.418; df = 1; p < .001$) but not for denominational group ($F = .699; df = 1; p = .40$). Examination of the graph (Figure 1) suggests a meaningful difference as a function of denominational groups in the way clergy perceive denominational hindrances to constrain their ability to provide effective marriage preparation.

Research Question 3

The final question explored how clergy perceived specific hindrances to be related to effective marriage preparation. Perceived effectiveness was regressed on the linear combination of the variables from the Hindrances to

FIGURE 1: Interaction of Denomination Groups and Denomination-related Hindrances



Clergy Involvement Scale, with change in the R-square value of the equation significant at a probability of .05. Table 1 shows the standardized and unstandardized betas and the significance level of change in the F value when each variable was added to the equation.

Five variables added significant change in variance: other clergy in community do not value ($p = .005$), inadequate training ($p = .009$), congregation does not value ($p = .01$), lack of denominational encouragement ($p = .025$), and couples focus on wedding ($p = .03$). Two of these five variables (inadequate training and lack of denominational encouragement) were associated with the denominational subsystem. Other subsystems represented were community factors (other clergy in community do not value), congregational factors (congregation does not value), and engaged couple factors (couples focus on wedding).

DISCUSSION

Research Question 1

Consistent with the systems model of constraints on clergy provision of marriage preparation, hindrances associated with five of the seven subsystems were significantly related to clergy perception of effectiveness. As expected,

attitudes and priorities of the premarital couple are perceived to be a major influence on the effectiveness of marriage preparation (Fournier & Olson, 1986; Olson, 2006). If the couple does not consider marriage preparation valuable, if they are so focused on the wedding that they do not attend to marriage preparation, or if the clergy person perceives couples hard to work with, it is reasonable to expect that marriage preparation programs will be less effective if they occur at all.

Factors related to the local congregation also are perceived to be a hindrance to effective marriage preparation. The relationship between effective marriage preparation and the value the congregation places on marriage preparation confirmed the implication that administrative role expectations might affect the effectiveness of marriage preparation (McKown, 2001). Two items measured the effect of inadequate resources (time and money) that were identified in the literature as potential constraints (Barlow, 1999; Morris & Blanton, 1994).

The lack of correlation between the community subsystem and perceived effectiveness is surprising in light of the reported effectiveness of a Community Marriage Policy® (Birch, Weed, & Olsen, 2004) and the efforts to promote community marriage initiatives (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). The findings also did not indicate that attitudes of the extended family interfere with marriage preparation (Fournier and Roberts, 2003; Murray, 2005).

*Research Question 2:
Denominational Factors*

The literature suggests several reasons that denominations might influence whether a clergy person might believe his/her efforts at marriage preparation are effective, including setting expectations and providing resources (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1987) such as training (Barlow, 1999; Buikema, 2001). The ANOVA not only confirmed that the degree of perceived denominational hindrances is related to perceived effectiveness but also found a significant interaction effect between denomination

group and level of denominational hindrances on perceived effectiveness. The data suggest that evangelical clergy, compared to mainline clergy, perceive their effectiveness to be more independent of denominational influences.

*Research Question 3:
Relative Importance of Individual Variables*

Although the community subscale is not correlated with perceived effectiveness, regression analysis indicates that the attitude of other clergy in the community is the most powerful predictor of whether a clergy person believes he/she provides effective marriage preparation, information consistent with the findings of Birch, Weed and Olsen (2004). Examination of the regression model also reveals the importance of denominational factors for perceived effectiveness. Of the five variables that added significant variance to the equation, two of them (inadequate training and lack of denominational encouragement) were denominational factors. In summary, the findings suggest that the factors identified as potential hindrances are perceived by clergy to constrain their effective provision of marriage preparation. The exception is the premarital couples' families of origin.

IMPLICATIONS

Christian clergy provide a vast majority of premarital education in the United States. Research indicates that their efforts make a positive impact on marriages, but there is also reason to believe they could be more helpful. The results of this study have several implications for maximizing the effectiveness of marriage preparation provided by clergy.

Particularly encouraging is the recognition that some of the most powerful constraints can be addressed through specific, targeted interventions. A long-term strategy for increasing effectiveness of marriage preparation should direct efforts toward denominational leadership, with goals of improving seminary training, continuing education, program resources, and the perception that the denomination values marriage preparation. The study also suggests that it may be especially beneficial for mainline

denominations to focus on providing education and other resources to clergy.

Clergy often identify inadequate training as a hindrance to their effectiveness. Although the literature identifies denominations as having primary responsibility for training clergy and providing educational resources (Barlow, 1999; Buikema, 2001), these needs can be addressed in other ways. For example, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative provides free training in the use of PREP, a research-based relationship education program. Also, community marriage initiatives have been established in more than 200 cities, and these groups often organize training opportunities (McManus, 2008). Because most clergy perform no more than two weddings a year, training to use an educational approach that focuses on individual couples may be more appropriate than group-based interventions. Examples of such individualized programs are curricula utilizing a premarital inventory and programs that involve mentor couples.

The best way to maximize the contributions of some clergy may be to encourage them to utilize community resources such as those described by Doherty and Anderson (2004) and Birch, Weed, and Olsen (2004). For example, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative has begun to focus on developing sites statewide, including churches, where relationship education will be available for individuals and couples at convenient times throughout the year. Clergy could utilize such programs for much of the marriage preparation they believe themselves to be ill-equipped to provide. This study also indicates that the attitudes of other clergy in the community influence the perception of effectiveness, thus affirming the appropriateness of efforts by the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative to promote the value of marriage preparation among the



state's clergy (Johnson et al., 2002; Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, n.d.).

Clergy tend to believe that couples are so distracted by preparation for the wedding that the effectiveness of their marriage preparation is compromised. Although this hindrance may be difficult to eliminate, its effect may be diminished by beginning premarital education as soon as possible.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DECISIONS

Though the findings are important, especially in light of the gap that exists in research on clergy involvement in marriage preparation, caution must be exercised when generalizing from this study. Although the respondents appear to represent clergy in Oklahoma fairly accurately, the population of Christian Oklahoma clergy probably differs from clergy from other religious groups or in other parts of the United States. A 17% response rate is not uncommon for mailed surveys of clergy, but it is not possible to know all the ways in which the respondents

may have differed from the non-respondents. One of the limitations of the current study was the inability to measure outcome rather than the clergy's perception of effectiveness. Objective measurement of actual clergy effectiveness could be approached through longitudinal studies utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods, including analysis of marriage duration, marital conflict, and seeking of additional marital counseling. More precise scales should be developed to measure each of the dimensions in the model. For example, only one item was used to measure hindrances from two systems. Reliability estimates on some of the subscales point to the need to do more work building accurate scales.

Further studies should compare these findings with conditions in states besides Oklahoma and among faith groups other than Protestant and Catholic Christian churches, with an eye to issues of gender and racial/cultural diversity. The relatively low response rate leaves questions unanswered about subjects who did not respond. It would be helpful to conduct studies utilizing telephone, Internet, and mailed surveys with more exhaustive follow-up efforts.

CONCLUSION

This study looks at a group of individuals who have access to couples at a developmentally critical moment, who already help couples prepare for marriage, who recognize they can be more effective, and who are willing to receive training. These would seem to be ingredients for making a major difference in the stability and quality of marriages. Though previous studies suggest that clergy provide a positive influence on the outcomes of marriages, research in this area is remarkably rare, and no previous study asks clergy about what hindrances they believe keep them from being more effective. This exploratory study provides information that can help design interventions that will promote relationship stability and satisfaction by reducing hindrances to effective marriage preparation.

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ENDNOTE

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