

**MARRIAGE ENCOUNTER PROGRAM EFFECT ON MARITAL RELATIONS****Harry Becnel and Louis Levy, Southeastern Louisiana University****HISTORY**

Dramatic changes in the structure and function of the family in modern industrialized societies have been noted throughout the literature on the sociology of the family. Burgess, Locke, and Thomas suggest that the very nature of the family has been radically transformed. In their words, "The family has been in transition from an institution, with family behavior controlled by the mores, public opinion, and law, to companionship, with behavior arising from the mutual affection, equality, and consensus of its members" (1963 vii). This change in the nature of the family has had an impact on the ways in which couples define marital satisfaction. Moreover, the methods utilized to deal with marriages that are to some degree in jeopardy have paralleled the changing nature of the family. Thus there appears to have been a fundamental shift in the bases for determining marital satisfaction.

In preindustrial societies of the past, marriage and family were primary social institutions; the whole society revolved round the family. If society were to function, the family must function as an institution. Marital satisfaction involved macro-sociological issues. The interpersonal subjective dimension to marriages of the past was always subordinate to the functional dimension of marriage (Ragula 1975). In modern times, marital satisfaction has become more subjective in definition.

Marriage and family life in general in the 1960s and 1970s has become more an interactional network rather than an institutionalized set of roles. Roles within the modern family seem to be emerging attitudes toward family life and sex roles. Marital satisfaction is no longer based only on whether or not roles are performed but also involves the notion that interpersonal needs are central to a good marital relationship.

One facet of the interaction process that has come under increasing examination is the degree of communication between the members of the family. To enrich the quality and quantity of communication is a prime topic of concern for both researchers and practitioners in family

therapy. This general topic has been called marriage enrichment. Its primary purpose has been to make good marriages better (Mace, 1979). By far, the most popular of the enrichment programs has been the marriage encounter which was first developed in Spain by Gabriel Calvo S.J., with the help of the French depth psychologist, Paul Tournier (Bosco, 1973). Calvo brought the program to the United States and, with the help of Chuck Gallagher S.J., the program spread throughout the major cities in the late 1960s. However, the program split into two movements in 1975 — Worldwide Marriage Encounter and International Marriage Encounter (Genovese, 1975). We will address the Worldwide Marriage Encounter (WME) program.

WME is an attempt to enrich the marital relationship through having the partners experience new ways of relating to each other. The program encourages the sharing of feelings in dialogue during the weekend "retreat" (Otto, 1975). Through the dialogue, the couple is expected to become closer and more satisfied in their relationship (Gallagher, 1975).

As with marriage counseling, there have been very divergent evaluations of the typical outcomes of WME programs. "Overall, there are indications that enrichment programs can bring about immediate positive change in some aspects of the relationship" (Smith, Scott, and Schoffner, 1976). However, even this somewhat biased view in favor of marriage enrichment admits that there is a need for more empirical studies to determine the effectiveness of marriage encounter programs.

**THE WME PROGRAM**

Although marriage encounter is the fastest growing enrichment methodology, having been utilized ten times more than any alternate program there has been no published empirical research to account for its growth (Otto, 1975). Many books and articles are highly impressionistic pieces and are written by those involved in the WME movement (Durken, 1967; Gallagher, 1975). A few papers are more critical in their approach; for example, Doherty McCabe, and Ryder (1978) cite the

possible harmful effects of the program; these negative effects include the forced denial of differences between partners, the creation of partner dependency, the promotion of an "illusion-disillusionment" cycle, the experience of guilt or resentment by couples who do not practice dialogue, and finally, the isolation of couples within the movement from couples outside the movement. Much of the most promising material in this area, is aimed at model development and professional development (Mace, 1979; Genovese, 1975). One critical participant observation study of a marriage encounter weekend does call the claims of the WME program "questionable," but the paper offers no data other than observation.

Several unpublished dissertations relate directly to WME. Some show increases in relevant variables for WME couples as compared with controls. Other studies have concluded that WME does not have the predicted effects (Hawley, 1979). For example, Milholland (1979) found increased levels of trust and marital satisfaction but *no changes in self-disclosure*. Dempsey (1979) found the marital adjustment, marital communication, and *self-disclosure* increased after a WME weekend. None of these studies has explored focusing ability or sex role identity. Also, the results of these and other unpublished studies have varied with respect to self-disclosure.

The WME program itself usually takes 44 hours (a weekend) to complete. A "team" acts as a dialogue model for the participating couples. The team consists of three couples and a clergyman. The team acts as a facilitator by their modeling verbal behavior which tends to involve the self-disclosure of feelings.

First, there is a series of 15 team presentations. After each presentation, the team asks the participating couples to write for 10 to 20 minutes on a particular question pertaining to the presented topic. This writing behavior is thought to help the couples focus on feelings. A "growth" in the relationship is supposed to emerge from this procedure. Then there are dialogue exercises through which the couple breaks any resistance to "growth". Through this process, the couples are encouraged to disclose inner feelings and to avoid negative judgements. In so doing, the proponents of the WME program claim couples transcend sex role stereotypes increase self-disclosure ex-

pands the ability to focus on feelings (Calvo 1969, Gallagher, 1975, Ragula, 1975, Powell, 1974), and thus enhance marital satisfaction.

## METHODOLOGY

The total group subjects for this study consisted of forty self-selected couples. That is, all couples had registered for the WME weekend. The experimental group was composed of 20 couples randomly selected from the master lists of two separate WME weekends' subjects who had completed the WME program. The control group was composed of 20 prospective couples randomly selected from future WME weekends' master lists. The couples were assigned to the experimental and control groups based upon their ability to schedule the WME program. Hence, job responsibilities and other factors took precedence over a more powerful random assignment sampling model.

The participants and the teams were unaware of the research project during the WME program itself. Their cooperation in the research was voluntary and was in no way obligatory and this cooperation was gained after the weekend (for the experimental subjects). It was assumed and later established by test that there were no differences in the treatment program and outcomes for the two weekend programs for the experimental group.

The questionnaire used to measure sex role identity was the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974). To measure self-disclosure, the Partner's Affective Self-Disclosure Scale was used (Becnel, 1977). Focusing ability was measured with the Post Focusing Questionnaire (Gendlin, 1969; Van den Bos and Wolf, 1970). And to measure marital satisfaction, the Marital Need Satisfaction Scale (Stinnett, Montgomery and Collins, 1970) was administered. The questionnaires had adequate reliability and validity studies.

The questionnaire items were Likert type and were generally scored and scaled in a straight-forward procedure. The exception to this procedure was the Post Focusing Questionnaire. Raters or judges were trained for scoring the focusing responses through a process suggested by Van den Bos (1967). Four students with a demonstrated ability to focus were asked to read Gendlin's (1968, 1969) work on that topic. The raters then met with the senior investigator for 4 hours of practice. After

some trial protocols, 30 protocols were scored by the raters in a Likert scale of focusing ability. One rater was dropped because of low reliability. The remaining 3 were retested with more protocols. The inter-rater correlations between the student raters and an expert was .70 to .82. Subsequently, these 3 raters were used to score the focusing ability scale.

## RESULTS

The demographic variables for this study were as expected by the researchers. Participants tended to be in their 30's, married for a mean of 12 years, with two children, and 14 years of education. Sixty-nine percent of the participants were Catholic; this was expected because of the Catholic origins of the WME program and the fact that the program was announced in the local church bulletins in Eastern Kansas.

The most general finding of this particular research is that the very optimistic impressions vis-a-vis WME of those involved in the movement are largely in error. That is, there were very few significant differences (as measured by F-ratios) between the experimental groups' scores and the control groups' scores.

Sex role identity as well as self-disclosure and focusing ability were analyzed using the ANOVA technique to test for significant differences in scores. The independent variables were treatment group (experimental or control), the WME weekend attended (first or second), sex, treatment X weekend, treatment X sex, weekend X sex, and treatment X weekend X sex. For sex role identity, the only significance was for the independent variable sex ( $p < .01$ ). In both the expressive and the instrumental dimensions of the scale for sex role identity, these differences were indicated. Males tend to be more instrumental and females were more expressive relative to the scale. While it was expected that sex role identity would differ by sex due to the conservative attitudes of the treatment group in general, it was surprising that the WME program did not alter these findings. Hence, an increased incidence of androgyny was not produced in the subjects by the WME program.

Affective self-disclosure was submitted to the same analysis as outlined above for sex identity. No significant differences were found. For these subjects, treatment group, weekend,

sex, or any interactions did not seem to relate to self-disclosure.

On the other hand, focusing ability, while not significantly relating to weekend, sex, or any of the interactions, did relate to treatment group ( $p < .05$ ). Experimental subjects, as expected by the model, focused at a higher level than controls. Therefore, while the marriage encounter model did not explain the findings on the variables sex role identity and self-disclosure, the model did explain the findings on the variable focusing ability.

Most important, the variable marital satisfaction showed no difference by sex, weekend, treatment, or any of the interactions. This suggests that while the WME program may have had some effect on experimental subjects the ability to focus, these effects did not appear to translate into increased levels of marital satisfaction. However, if the ANOVA alpha had been lowered to the .10 level, the "finding meaning in life" dimension to the marital satisfaction scale would have differed by treatment group. But, the other dimensions of the marital satisfaction scale such as love, personal fulfillment, respect, would not have been significantly different by treatment groups.

## IMPLICATIONS

The theory of the WME movement does not seem to coincide with the empirical findings. Treatment does produce changes in the focusing ability of experimental subjects. Also, the program may increase the "meaning of life" for these subjects. Nevertheless, correlations by sex between focusing ability and finding meaning in life are weak. The program seems to result in "focusing" and "meaning" increases in an independent manner. Thus, rather than increase marital satisfaction, the WME program may yield more global changes in psycho-social functioning. Also, because the program has some religious dimensions, the "meaning" increase may be as a result of a spiritual experience. While these changes are not necessarily those predicted by the model, they may nevertheless be important to a complete understanding of the attraction of the WME movement.

Supporters of the WME movement could certainly argue that the lack of relevant significant findings in this study may be a consequence of the methods of evaluation available

for use in human relationship disciplines and marriage encounter programs. Outcome research in this area is new and the sensitivity of our instruments as indicators of private, affective feelings could be questioned. More research, using actual behavior rather than questionnaires, is needed. Thus, it may be too soon to disregard the manifest consequences as claimed by proponents of the WME program; a premature burial is not suggested by our research. But, the data from this and other studies using various measuring devices and methods of collecting data does indicate that measured outcomes do not support the movement's ideology.

Furthermore, a very important outcome of this research is that there was no significant decrease in the variables studied for experimental and control groups indicating that marriage encounter does not have a negative effect on marriages as some researchers have claimed (DeYoung, 1979, Doherty, McCabe, Ryder 1978).

Also, more research is needed to clarify the focusing ability and the meaning in life findings. It seems clear that focusing ability can easily be enhanced; judges or raters were trained and treatment related to focusing scores. Also, this program, and others like it, could have important latent existential consequences to increase meaning in life that are reasons enough for their existence. Also, it will be interesting to see the results of completed longitudinal follow-up studies. With these studies, we should be able to assess whether or not focusing and meaning in life scores for the experimental group attenuate over time.

By the same token, a more critical model of the WME effects needs to be constructed and validated. It appears from prior research that there is an initial high which lasts for several days after the end of the program. This stage may be followed by an "overly critical" stage in which the learned techniques are incorporated into the life of the individual. After the creative synthesis of program and life space, there is adjustment with the help of follow-up sessions and review. Testing this or any other "effects" model would again require longitudinal data.

The theory and ideology and the research methodology of marriage enrichment programs such as WME is in dire need of refinement. The need for defining or refining affective constructs with an emphasis on behavioral components is suggested in order to measure such components operationally.

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**Concluded on Page 28**

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## BECNEL &amp; LEVY From Page 22

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