Premarital counseling: An assessment of the readiness of social workers to promote an approach to divorce prevention

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Definition of Premarital Counseling

- Knowledge and skills-based training that provides couples with information on ways to sustain and improve their relationship once married (Senediak, 1990)

- Not therapy

- Not designed to tell couples if they should get married or not
The promise of Premarital Counseling

• “If all clinicians devoted a quarter of their time to premarital counseling, they could make a greater impact on the health of the country than through all of their remaining activities.” Rutledge, 1966, p. 135

• Premarital counseling is effective prevention (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Stanley et al., 2006; Williams et al., 1999)
Effectiveness of PMC

- 1st studies done in 1977 by Gurman & Kniskern

- Giblin, Sprenkle & Sheehan (1985) reviewed 85 programs/3000 couples

- Carroll & Doherty (2003) concluded that the avg person who participates in PMC is significantly better than 79% of people who did not.
Effectiveness, Pt 2

- Stanley, Amato, Johnson & Markman (2006)
- 4 states (Oklahoma, Kansas, Arkansas, Texas)
- 3000 adults; attention given to race, income, education
- PMC associated with higher marital satisfaction
Promise Unfulfilled

• Less than 1/3 of engaged couples attend premarital counseling (Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997)
• Reaches only a minority of engaged couples (Halford, Lizzio & Wilson, 2006)
• Surveys of clergy have revealed discomfort and lack of training as providers of premarital counseling (Babb, 1992; Ipes, 1993; Manley, 2006)
Opportunity for Social Workers

- Although clergy are predominant providers of premarital counseling (75%) – Silliman & Schumm, 1999
  - In one study of clergy, 91% supported collaboration with a counselor
Overall Research Question

- What is the level of readiness of social workers to promote the utilization of premarital counseling as a way to reduce divorce?
Research Questions – Readiness of Social Workers?

• How frequently are social workers providing premarital counseling?
• What methods, practices, or programs are being used by social workers who provide premarital counseling?
• What is the level of willingness of social workers, whether or not they currently provide premarital counseling, to employ a variety of strategies to promote the usage of premarital counseling?
Research Questions - Continued

- What do social workers, whether or not they currently provide premarital counseling, believe about the effectiveness of premarital counseling?

- Are social workers willing to cooperate with clergy to provide premarital counseling?
Notes on Premarital Prediction

- Early writers include Adams, Burgess, Terman, Oden & Wallin (1939-47)

- Spanier & Lewis (1980) discussed: homogamy, similar emotional/personal resources, parental models, and support from significant others.
Contemporary Premarital Literature

- Longitudinal studies
- Key elements (timing, duration, methods, topics, settings)
- Variety of theoretical approaches
- Variety of evaluation approaches
- Use of scales, inventories
Major programs

- PREP
- RELATE
- FOCCUS
- PREPARE
Major Programs, Pt 2

- Engaged Encounter – Originally developed by Fr. Calvo in 1967; Rogerian principles; weekend retreats, lay couples.


- PAIRS – Practical applications of Intimate Relationship Skills (Lori Gordon)

- IMAGO – Hendrix (imagorelationships.org)
Methods

- Web-based survey (surveymonkey.com)
- NASW members in New Orleans and Baton Rouge regions
- Invitation letter sent to sample
- Survey items adapted from Ipes (1983); incorporated readiness concepts/prevention research
- 34 items
Results – sample characteristics

- 183 surveys completed over 8-week period
- 86% women; 14% male
- 67% white; 31% black
- 71% New Orleans area; 23% Baton Rouge area
- 61% married; 38% single
- 43% ever divorced
- 62% LCSW; 70% clinical training; 69% direct services; four-decade range of experience
Findings from a small sample

- Social workers in the greater New Orleans and greater Baton Rouge areas are infrequent providers of premarital counseling.
  - 78% of sample reported that they did not provide it; 19% reported they provide a little; 2.8% provide a lot.

* Social workers who do provide premarital counseling are not likely to use a structured program.
Findings – Part II

- A statistically significant relationship was found between social workers who are comfortable doing premarital counseling and willingness to provide it.

- A statistically significant relationship was found between the belief that premarital counseling helps and the belief that divorce is a major problem.
Findings – Part III

- A statistically significant relationship was found between willingness to collaborate with a church/house of worship and race.

- Gap between willingness and self-reported preparation (training, presentations, discussions).
Lessons for the future

- Documents willingness of social workers to participate with churches/houses of worship

- Clearly defines opportunity for training of social workers
Recommendations

1) Replicate with other social work populations

2) In-depth study of social workers who are providers of premarital counseling

3) Dynamics of partnerships between social workers and houses of worship
Limitations of Study

- Non-generalizable; only 2 urban/suburban communities; response rate
- Disadvantages of survey method (reactivity, snapshot)
“A quarter of our time”

“If all mental health clinicians spent a quarter of their time providing premarital counseling, that it would do more for the health of the country than any other activity” (Rutledge, 1966)
THE END – CONTACT INFO

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