Who Will Attend? Characteristics of Couples and Individuals in Marriage Education

MICHAEL LANE MORRIS
Department of Management, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA

HEATHER S. McMILLAN
Department of Management and Marketing, Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, Missouri, USA

STEPHEN F. DUNCAN and JEFFRY H. LARSON
School of Family Life, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, USA

There are two purposes of this marriage education marketing study: (1) to compare the self-reported intra- and interpersonal qualities of 121 married couples (n = 242 individuals) attending a marriage education program with 46 married couples (n = 92 individuals) who were contacted through marketing promotional materials to attend the program but did not participate and (2) to determine if intra- and/or interpersonal qualities would predict the likelihood of marriage education attendance versus nonattendance. Results showed that compared with program nonparticipants, program participants reported lower levels of self-esteem, marital communication quality, marital commitment, marital satisfaction, family strengths, less consensus and intimacy, less fulfillment of marriage expectations, and increased levels of marital conflict. Levels of religiosity and fusion were the same for participants and nonparticipants. Wald logistic regression analysis indicated communication was the only significant predictor of marriage education participation. Implications for marriage education programming and practitioners are outlined.
INTRODUCTION

The marriage education (ME) movement has emerged in response to the many challenges facing marriage and families today (Hunt, Hof, & DeMaria, 1998; Larson, 2004). Although a growing percentage of couples report interest in attending workshops designed to strengthen their marriage and family (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004; Johnson et al., 2002), the best reported rate is still well below the majority of eligible couples. This is so despite research showing that marriage education significantly benefits participants (Hawkins, Blanchard, Balwin, & Fawcett, 2008). In fact, Giblin, Sprenkle, and Sheehan (1985) reported that the average person who participates in ME is 67% better off than those who do not participate. Most ME programs available today are primary prevention in focus, designed to assist reasonably well-functioning individuals and couples at a modest level of risk for relational breakdown experience greater individual and relational growth (Garland, 1983; Hof & Miller, 1981; Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995). Although technically all couples are at risk, there is a growing interest in reaching those who are at highest risk for marital disruption (e.g., DeMaria, 1993, 2005; Jacobson & Addis, 1993).

ME programs use a diverse array of theoretical foundations, program content, group size, leadership facilitation styles, and program delivery schedules to teach couples intra- and interpersonal skills like increasing awareness and self-disclosure techniques that foster insight and behavioral change (Halford, 2004; Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Although most research in ME assesses outcomes, greater attention is needed on better understanding the characteristics of the target audience (DeMaria, 2005; Duncan, Holman, & Yang, 2007). Marketing research emphasizes the understanding of target audiences as a prelude to or concomitant with program development in the effort to tailor programs to meet audience needs (Duncan & Goddard, 2011; Katz, 1988).

Twenty years ago Guerney and Maxson (1990) noted that marketing research in ME was almost nonexistent, calling on the field to identify ways ME might be better marketed. Two decades later, marketing research in ME continues to face several challenges as numerous empirical questions remain unaddressed or have received limited attention (Duncan & Goddard, 2011; Hunt et al., 1998). Some recent analyses (Morris, Cooper, & Gross 1999; Roberts & Morris 1998) have explored numerous social marketing factors (e.g., attendance anxiety, purpose of ME, participant satisfaction) associated with ME. These studies, however, focused on the broader dimensions of the social marketing mix model (i.e., simultaneous examination of price,
product, place, people, and promotion) rather than on specific elements of
the marketing mix (i.e., in-depth examination of one factor like “people”).
The current study extends earlier research by focusing only on the intra-
and interpersonal characteristics of ME participants.

Arcus (1995) has challenged family life educators to answer important
questions, such as what programs and learning conditions best serve pro-
spective family life educator audiences. Marketing research in ME needs to
help answer questions about the suitability of various programs for people
with varying degrees and types of relational challenges, intra- and interper-
sonal conditions and traits, and social and demographic characteristics
(Duncan & Goddard, 2011; Gilley, Eggland, & Gilley, 2002; Powell & Cassidy,
2001). Such information would be useful for customizing curriculum to better
meet the learning transfer needs of prospective ME participants (Halford,

Using a sample of individuals who made decisions about whether or not
to attend a ME experience, this study sought answers to the following two
questions: (1) how do the intra- and interpersonal traits of ME participants
versus nonparticipants compare? (2) How do specific intra- and interpersonal
traits predict ME attendance versus nonattendance?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Decisions to attend ME are not simply made randomly. Duncan and Goddard
(2011) correctly noted that theoretically based approaches for developing
social marketing messages and research for family life educators, more
specifically ME, are nonexistent; however, theories used in the field of health
and social behavior can provide an ample basis. Our research questions were
guided by Ajzen’s (1991) theory of planned behavior, which asserts that
intention is the strongest predictor of behavior. Behavioral intention is a
function of three major factors: one’s attitude toward the behavior, subjective
norms about the behavior, and perceived behavioral control. A person’s
attitudes toward a behavior reflect the individual’s beliefs about the likely
positive and negative consequences for performing a behavior. Subjective
norms involve an individual’s beliefs about what significant others think
about the behavior and how motivated they are to live up to their expecta-
tions. Perceptions of behavioral control involve an individual’s view of
whether or not they have the ability to actually perform the behavior.

As applied to decisions to attend or not attend ME, clientele might be
expected to attend if they perceive by doing so they will experience
improved relational consequences, such as improved communication and
intimacy, that outweigh potentially negative ones, such as feelings of
discomfort in making the needed changes. They are more likely to attend
if they perceive a need for involvement if in doing so it promises positive
consequences they are not already currently experiencing. If close friends have participated and reported their marriage is better as a result or if important significant others, such as trusted clergy, recommend it, they will be more likely to attend. Based on the theory of planned behavior, the concepts of volition and intention seem particularly relevant to the question of whether or not an individual will participate or not participate in ME programming. Specifically, if given the opportunity to attend, what dispositional and relational factors of prospective ME participants might influence an attendance decision?

**COMPARING PARTICIPANTS AND NONPARTICIPANTS IN MARRIAGE EDUCATION**

Research suggests that an important challenge to consider in evaluating the potential effectiveness of ME programs to reach targeted populations is determining if there are intra- and/or interpersonal differences between ME program participants (attendees) and nonparticipants (DeMaria, 2005; Hof & Miller, 1981; Hunt et al., 1998; Powell & Cassidy, 2001). From our theoretical perspective, various intra- and interpersonal factors likely lead audiences to foresee consequences of involvement in ME differently, resulting in differing levels of intention. Unfortunately, few studies have explored this unique and complex question. Most ME studies (e.g., Halford, O’Donnell, Lizzio, & Wilson, 2006; Hill, 1991; Krug & Ahadi, 1986; Powell & Wampler, 1982) have compared the characteristics of participants from the population-at-large through various sampling procedures (e.g., control group, waiting-list control, or no-treatment control) rather than comparing individuals who were first informed and then made personal decisions about participating or not participating in a ME experience. It is possible that participants randomly assigned to a control group hold similar interests in ME as do participant groups and would elect that intervention if research protocol allowed them to do so. Intentionality to attend among these audiences has not been assessed.

In addition, few studies have compared program participants with those who made personal a priori informed choices not to participate in a ME program. As a notable example, Roberts and Morris (1998) found no differences between ME participant and nonparticipant groups on measures of satisfaction, marriage and family strength, and commitment to change. Nonparticipants were significantly more satisfied than participants with their abilities to communicate, and the nonattending wife’s self-esteem was also higher.

However, a limitation of this and other earlier research involves the breadth of comparisons that have been made between participants and nonparticipants. To date, most studies (e.g., Malcom, 1992; Spoth, Redman, Hockaday, & Shin, 1996) have compared individual differences on a narrow
range of intra- and interpersonal characteristics (i.e., 2 or 3) rather than on a broader set of characteristics (i.e., 8 to 10). As examples, in a meta-analysis of 85 studies of premarital, marital, and family enrichment, Giblin, Sprenkle, and Sheehan (1985) reported that individuals and couples with different personality types may be more likely than others to volunteer for ME. Similarly, compiling information from a diverse number of studies, Powell and Wampler (1982) found ME participants were less satisfied in their marriages than nonparticipants. However, ME couple participants are more satisfied than couples pursuing marriage counseling or therapy. However, these studies only compared participant differences on a few select variables (e.g., marital satisfaction). Thus, there is a greater need for marriage education research that systematically and simultaneously compares program participants on a broader array of different types of intrapersonal (e.g., emotional health) and interpersonal (e.g., communication skills) qualities (Hunt et al., 1998) that represent a fuller consideration of the most important contexts for marriage.

An additional research question in this study was to determine if the intra- and/or interpersonal characteristics of prospective participants predicts participants’ decisions to attend versus not attend marriage education. Among marriage preparation audiences, Duncan, Holman, and Yang (2007) sought to identify the individual, couple, family, and social context characteristics that distinguished couples who do and do not participate in marriage preparation. They found that the individual characteristics of valuing marriage; being kind, considerate, and mature; and the couple characteristic of perceived relationship problems predicted involvement, whereas none of the family or social context characteristics did. Similarly, a significant marketing issue worthy of research attention among married couple audiences is the important need to determine the attendance characteristics and motivations of individuals as expressed through their perceived personal and relational qualities. Larson (2004) noted a vast array of motivational factors and processes (e.g., program cost, time involvement, awareness of program availability, fear, stigmatization, willingness of other spouse, personal/interpersonal characteristics) influencing the decision of participants to attend ME. Hunt et al. (1998) suggested that most attendance decisions are voluntarily made by individuals based on their self-assessment of their relationship situation, an understanding or interest in the topic(s) being covered, and with a belief that the content is relevant or capable of meeting their individual or relational needs or distresses. Taken together, these studies identify factors that may translate into “felt needs” (Arcus, 1993; Powell & Cassidy, 2001) of a ME audience, leading to increased intentionality of ME involvement.

In consideration of this prior research and in determining what broad and more comprehensive set of variables should be considered in attempting to predict involvement or noninvolvement in ME programs, a review of intended ME program antecedents and outcomes seemed relevant.
This review identified a blend of marital adjustment and dynamics variables like intimacy and fusion, individual personality variables like self-esteem and religiosity, perceptions of spouse, and relationship skills variables like communication and conflict resolution that all contribute to positive and healthy marital outcomes (DeMaria, 2005; Elin, 1999; Stahman & Salts, 1993). Specifically, our intent in this study was to compare two groups, ME participants versus nonparticipants, on several individual and relational characteristics (marital fusion/individuation, self-esteem, marital and family strength, dyadic consensus, intimacy, marital satisfaction, communication skills, marital conflict, marital expectations, religiosity, and relational commitment) to determine if self-reported dispositions and relational characteristics would predict their program attendance.

METHODS

ME Program Description

Survey data were collected from couples invited to participate in the Building and Enriching Stronger Tennessee (BEST) Families program in eight community workshops over a 9-month period. The BEST program is a training series of prevention-based family life education seminars focused on marriage, parenting, and the family (for an expanded description of the program, see Morris & Roberts, 1997) and conducted in a wide variety of community settings (e.g., workplace, church, community centers) with a cost of $30 dollars per couple to cover the expenses associated with workshop program materials, refreshments, lunch, and so on. The BEST program series is consistent with many of the qualities (e.g., setting, timing, content, methods, cost, schedule and format) of other effective ME training programs (Hawkins et al., 2004; Hunt et al., 1998).

The BEST Families marriage education program used in this study involved seven highly interactive lecture sessions on topical content like “enriching communication,” “juggling work and family life,” and “enhancing relational intimacy.” The BEST Families marriage education program is similar to many other ME programs emphasizing the need to promote positive communication, work–life balance, and interpersonal intimacy in improving the quality and satisfaction of the marriage relationship (e.g., Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Decades of research show these topics are desired by prospective participants and are appropriate for assisting individuals and couples to ameliorate the effects of select patterns of negative and unhealthy interaction (e.g., Bray, Williamson, & Malone, 1984; Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Hawkins et al., 2004; Karney & Bradbury, 1995).
Each of the sessions from the BEST program was supplemented by structured learning experiences and self/partner awareness assessments designed to enhance individual/couple/group discussion and facilitate reflection, experimentation, application, and generalization of the structured learning experiences. Workshop participants especially were challenged to consider areas in their personal life (e.g., work–life conflict, enriching communication) they desired to improve in developing more positive and healthier relationships.

Sample

The sample consisted of 167 married couples (334 individuals), of which 121 married couples participated in the program and 46 married couples did not participate. As part of the assessment process, individual participants and nonparticipants were asked to provide general demographic information and background data. Presentation of individual demographics are divided into program participants and nonparticipants.

Concerning program participants, the average age of participant husbands was 40.96, whereas the average age of participant wives was 39.27. Regarding ethnicity, 96.7% of husbands were White, whereas 97.5% of wives were White. Concerning marital status, 91.7% of husbands reported they were in their first marriage, whereas 87.6% of wives reported they were in their first marriage. The average length of the current marriage was 15.21 years. Male and female participants reported similar levels of education until the postgraduate level, with 15.7% percent of females and 12.4% of males completing high school, 28.9% of females and 21.5% of males obtaining a bachelor’s degree, and 10.7% of females and 30.6% of males completing a postgraduate degree. Regarding religious denomination, 91.5% of husbands and 97.5% of wives reported being Protestant. Finally, regarding employment demographics, 93.4% of husbands were employed full-time, working an average of 47.5 hours per week in predominantly professional roles (77.7%). Alternatively, 45.5% of wives were employed full-time, working an average of 32.75 hours per week in predominantly professional (35.5%) and clerical (24.8%) roles.

Regarding nonparticipants, the average age of nonparticipant husbands was 38.11, whereas the average age of nonparticipant wives was 37.09. In terms of ethnicity, 100% of husbands and wives were White. Concerning marital status, 97.8% of husbands reported they were in their first marriage, whereas 91.3% of wives reported they were in their first marriage. The average length of the current marriage was 12.40 years. Male and female nonparticipants were overall more educated than participants, with 6.5% of females and 6.5% of males completing high school, 41.3% of females and 50% of males obtaining a bachelor’s degree, and 34.8% of females and 32.6% of males completing a postgraduate degree. Regarding religious denomination, 95.7% of husbands and 96.6% of wives reported being Protestant. Finally,
regarding employment demographics, 93.5% of husbands were employed full-time, working an average of 45.8 hours per week in predominantly professional roles (76.1%). Alternatively, 60.9% of wives were employed full-time, working an average of 37.03 hours per week in predominantly professional roles (71.8%).

Concerning couple dyads, sociodemographic information provided by program participant and nonparticipant couples was compared and found to be similar in all but two demographic categories. As shown in Table 1, mixed-race couples were only present in the program participant group. Second, first-time marriages for married partners were more prevalent in nonparticipant couples than in participant couples. Analyses examining potential significant differences among these demographic variables are discussed later.

**Instruments**

Each couple partner in this study separately and independently completed 11 scales that measured intra- and interpersonal characteristics. Each of the 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1 Couple Demographic Indicators by Participation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographic indicator</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Difference&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital status&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of current marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious denomination&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction w/life insurance&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction w/health insurance&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction w/savings&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction w/retirement&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial comparison with parents&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial comparison with others in church&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial comparison with others in profession&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

SD, standard deviation.
<sup>a</sup>Absolute difference in couple partners’ ages.
<sup>b</sup>Categorical variable (1 = same response for couple partners, 2 = different response for couple partners).
<sup>c</sup>Categorical variable (1 = first marriage for both partners; 2 = one divorcee, one first marriage; 3 = both partners divorced; 4 = other).
<sup>d</sup>Categorical variable (1 = both employed, 2 = one partner unemployed, 3 = both partners unemployed, 4 = other).

<sup>*</sup><i>p</i> ≤ .05, <sup>**</sup><i>p</i> ≤ .01.
scales was selected because of its previously demonstrated psychometric properties (e.g., reliability, validity, practicality) as well as its relevance to this study’s research questions. Specifically, the scales measure the individual’s level of self-esteem, the degree that an individual operates in a fused or individuated manner in their relationships, the degree of intimacy in the marital relationship, the quality of communication in the marriage, relational commitment, degree of conflict, perceived level of marital and family strength, dyadic consensus, expectations of spousal behavior, level of marital satisfaction, and level of religious influence on daily activities.

The 11 scales were as follows:

- **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)**: A 10-item scale of perceived self-concept that assesses the positive and negative attitudes one has toward him- or herself. Higher aggregate scores on the RSE indicate a greater feeling of positive self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965). Research with of the RSE scale indicates acceptable reliability with reported coefficient alphas ranging from .72 to .88 (Gray-Little, Williams, & Hancock, 1997). In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha for RSE was .89.

- **Spousal Fusion/Individuation Scale (SPFUS)**: A 19-item subscale of the Personal Authority in the Family System Questionnaire (PAFS-Q) that assesses family processes based on intergenerational family theory (Bray et al., 1984). Higher aggregate scores on the SPFUS indicate an individual’s tendency to act or make decisions independently from his or her spouse. The SPFUS has demonstrated excellent internal consistency and adequate test-retest reliability, with coefficient alphas ranging from .74 to .96 for the SPFUS (Bray et al., 1984). In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha for SPFUS was .65.

- **Spousal Intimacy Scale (SPINT)**: A nine-item subscale of the PAFS-Q that assesses an individual’s perceived level of satisfaction and intimacy with his or her partner (Bray et al., 1984). Higher aggregate scores on the SPINT indicate greater satisfaction and more intimacy with one’s partner. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha for SPINT was .88.

- **Marital Communication Inventory (MCI)**: A 46-item scale that assesses an individual’s ability to listen, understand, and express one’s self (Bienvenu, 1970). Higher aggregate scores reflect greater perceived levels of communication ability. The reported Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .93 (Bienvenu, 1970). In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha for MCI was .94.

- **Commitment Scale**: A five-item scale that assesses relational commitment (Sabatelli, 1984). Higher aggregate scores reflect an individual’s greater commitment to his or her relationship. Cronbach’s alpha for this study was .80 and is consistent with other studies (Sabatelli, 1984).

- **Kansas Marital Conflict Scale**: A 37-item scale that assesses patterns of conflict management (Eggeman, Moxley, & Schumm, 1985). Higher aggregate scores reflect a greater ability to constructively manage conflict. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha for conflict was .95.
Strong Marriage/Family Scale (SM/FS): A two-item scale that assesses an individual’s perceived marital and family strength (Roberts & Morris, 1998). Higher aggregate scores reflect greater marital and family strength. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha for SM/FS was .89.

Dyadic Consensus Scale: A 13-item subscale of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale that assesses those facets of a relationship that deal with the individual’s perception of the couple’s agreement or disagreement on a variety of basic relationship issues (e.g., finances, recreation, religion, friends) (Spanier, 1976). Higher aggregate scores indicate a greater perception of consensus in the relationship. Spanier (1976) reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .90 for this subscale. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .88.

Marital Comparison Level Index (MCLI): A 10-item scale that assesses an individual’s perceptions of the ability of their marital relationship to meet their personal expectations of what is acceptable marital behavior (Sabatelli, 1984). The MCLI was designed to provide researchers with a measure of marital complaints by focusing on the contrast between couples’ marital experiences and expectations. Higher aggregate scores indicate an alignment between an individual’s expectations and perceived reality in the relationship (Sabatelli & Cecil-Pigo, 1985). Sabatelli (1984) reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .93 for the MCLI. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha for MCLI was .86.

Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS): A three-item scale that assesses an individual’s level of marital satisfaction (Mitchell, Newell, & Schuem, 1983). Higher aggregate scores reflect greater levels of marital satisfaction. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha for KMS was .96.

Religiosity Scale: A two-item scale that assesses the importance of religious beliefs in everyday activities. This scale was adapted from Blanding’s (1995) demographic questions regarding perceived religious importance. Higher aggregate scores indicate a greater level of perceived importance of religion in daily activities. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .66.

Respondents also were asked to provide sociodemographic information that included age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, length of present marital status, educational attainment, denominational affiliation, profession, employment status, income, and financial situation.

Procedure

The BEST Families workshops were led by the same facilitator at eight different community settings in Tennessee. The facilitator possessed a doctorate with professional qualifications in marriage and family therapy and had considerable experience in facilitating marriage education workshops. Workshops were conducted in an intensive weekend format involving 10 to 12 hours of information exchange, skill-building techniques, modeling, and
participant practice. The average workshop size consisted of 18 married couples (36 individuals). The program was advertised through brochures, fliers, and referrals as an opportunity to enhance and develop a satisfying marriage through increased communication skills and relational intimacy. Participants were self-selecting, voluntarily having a choice to attend or not to attend the seminars rather than recruited and offered reimbursement for attending. Before the workshops data were collected individually from these couples before discussing or participating in structured learning experiences that would enhance or enrich their marital relationships. Husbands and wives were asked to complete the 11 instruments separately and independently of each other to protect their confidentiality.

Approximately 1 week after the seminar, a random group of other married couples from these settings was selected. Random selection of nonparticipant couples was accomplished through membership lists (e.g., Sunday school roster) provided by the sponsoring hosts of the marriage enrichment workshops. Nonparticipant couples acknowledged they knew about the marriage education seminar via the marketing and promotional efforts, had considered attending, but communicated they had elected not to attend for one reason or another (e.g., personal choice, transportation, scheduling conflicts). Nonparticipant married couples were mailed a questionnaire containing the same 11 scales completed by the marriage education workshop participants. Similarly, husbands and wives from these married couples (i.e., nonparticipants) were requested to complete the same 11 instruments independently to protect their confidentiality and individual privacy. Multiple return envelopes were supplied in the original mailings to these couples for this purpose.

The response rate for the couples participating in the marriage education seminar was 100%, and the response rate for the couples not participating in the seminar was 68%. Nonresponse bias was examined by comparing sociodemographic indicators of participants, nonparticipants, and area demographic. No issues emerged in this examination, and nonresponse bias was determined to not have occurred. The sample was divided into two groups based on participation versus nonparticipation in the marriage education workshops. Because of the blend of measures used in this study involving perceptions of self, marriage, and relationship characteristics, the unit of analysis in this study was mixed. For most demographic variables, combined data were coded based on congruence in responses; for example, if partners independently indicated the same race, the resultant coding was 1, whereas if a mixed-race couple was indicated, the coding was 2. Four deviations to this method were used to deal with length of marriage, job status, marital status, and age of couple partners. For length of marriage, the actual length of marriage was used. For job status, couples were coded as 1 if both partners were employed at least part-time, 2 if one of the partners was employed at least part-time and the other unemployed, 3 if both partners were unemployed, and 4 for other statuses (generally retirement). For marital status, couples were
coded 1 if this was the first marriage for both partners, 2 if one partner had been divorced and it was the first marriage for the other partner, 3 if both partners had been divorced, and 4 for other statuses (e.g., widowhood). For age, the absolute age difference in the couple was determined. Regarding scales, similar to age, the absolute difference in scale scores was used for analysis. Because the two sets of responses for each couple were collapsed into a single response, independent sample *t*-tests were still appropriate for analysis.

**RESULTS**

**Preliminary Analyses**

Before beginning the main analyses, a series of *t*-tests were run to determine homogeneity between participant and nonparticipant couple groups. *t*-Tests were conducted to test for statistically equivalent mean responses for each demographic indicator. Results showed that ME participant couples were significantly more likely to be in a mixed-race relationship and to have been previously married (see Table 1). These variables served as control variables in subsequent analyses of couple differences.

**Assessing Couple and Individual Differences Between Participants and Nonparticipants**

A series of analysis of covariance procedures was conducted to determine differences in intra- and interpersonal marriage characteristics based on participation in marriage education. As a reminder, marriage characteristic scores were calculated by taking the absolute difference in scores from each partner in the couple. Therefore, closer scores were indicative of a greater congruence in perception of the marital characteristic in question. To isolate true differences based on participant status, the significantly different demographic characteristics (i.e., ethnicity, marital status) identified above and in Table 1 were used as covariates, with the resulting estimated marginal couple means for each marriage characteristic compared by participation (Coleman & Pulford, 2008). As shown in Table 2, couples participating in the marriage education workshops reported significantly closer scores in three areas as compared with nonparticipant couples: (1) religiosity (EMM<sub>Participants</sub> = 0.90, EMM<sub>Nonparticipants</sub> = 1.78, *F* = 6.661, *p* = .01); (2) marital communication (EMM<sub>Participants</sub> = 11.16, EMM<sub>Nonparticipants</sub> = 18.06, *F* = 5.68, *p* = .05); and (3) marital consensus (EMM<sub>Participants</sub> = 6.16, EMM<sub>Nonparticipants</sub> = 9.62, *F* = 3.806, *p* = .05). In this case the data indicated that couples who attended marriage education were more alike (e.g., congruent) in their perceptions of their marital condition (e.g., whether good or bad) than nonparticipants.

To further identify participant and nonparticipant individual differences in intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics variables, a series of *t*-tests
were conducted. As seen in Table 3, 9 of 11 marriage characteristic variables were significantly different, with nonparticipants reporting significantly higher levels of self-esteem, intimacy, marital communication, marital consensus, relational commitment, conflict resolution skills, marital satisfaction, marital expectations, and marital strength than their ME attendee counterparts. The magnitude of those significant differences was greatest for communication and conflict. There were no significant differences between

**TABLE 3**  t-Test of Individual Participant Differences on Marriage Characteristic Variables

| Instrumentation variable | Nonparticipants  
<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 92 individuals)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>7.42 (.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>33.87 (4.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusion</td>
<td>53.11 (6.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>38.06 (4.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>109.01 (16.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>140.80 (23.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>9.07 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus</td>
<td>49.60 (5.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>39.64 (5.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>18.00 (3.80)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01.

Nonparticipant n = 91.

**TABLE 2** Analysis of Covariance Results of Couples’ ME Participation on Marriage Characteristic Variables

| Instrumentation variable | Nonparticipants  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 46 couples)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>1.78 (.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>5.55 (.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusion</td>
<td>8.80 (1.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>5.06 (.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>18.06 (2.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>3.28 (.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>25.61 (3.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Strength</td>
<td>1.42 (.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus</td>
<td>9.62 (1.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>7.00 (.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.52 (.60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a Estimated mean controlling for ethnicity and marital status.

*p < .05, **p < .01.
participant and nonparticipant individuals regarding religiosity or marital fusion.

Predicting Couple Involvement in ME

Finally, similarly to Halford et al. (2006), a forward stepwise Wald logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine if a couple's attendance at the marital education program could be predicted using the 11 instrumentation variables. Additionally, for couple participation prediction, the demographic variables of ethnicity and marital status were included, because they were significantly different between participant and nonparticipant couples. Lower levels of marital communication were identified as the sole predictor of attendance in the marital education seminar. In contrast, higher levels of marital communication resulted in a lower likelihood to participate in marriage education. The Hosmer and Lemeshow goodness-of-fit resulted in a chi-square $= 13.17$, $df = 8$, $p = .11$, indicating a good fit. Simonoff (2003) indicated that unlike traditional $p$-value interpretations, a high $p$-value is desired in the Hosmer and Lemeshow chi-square test because it examines the hypothesis that no other model fits better. Therefore, the higher the $p$-value, the better the fit of the model. The final prediction equation is as follows:

$$\text{Participation} = 1.41 - 0.03(\text{marital communication})$$

DISCUSSION

Our first research question asked how the intra- and interpersonal traits of ME participants versus nonparticipants compared with one another. Results suggested that participants attending ME programs possess different levels of intra- and/or interpersonal qualities when compared with nonattending individuals. The findings of this study are consistent with a number of scholarly predictions and findings about program attendees (e.g., DeMaria, 2005; Halford et al., 2006; Thomas, Schvaneveldt, & Young, 1993). An important finding of the study program attendance or nonattendance occurred independently of demographic factors, such as age, ethnicity, and income. In contrast to nonparticipants, ME participants scored significantly lower on 9 of 11 variables (i.e., self-esteem, marital communication, relational commitment, marital conflict, marital strength, marital consensus, intimacy, marital expectations, and marital satisfaction). Thus, consistent with our theoretical perspective, couples who attend ME may perceive greater intrapersonal and interpersonal needs in their marriage and intentionally seek out services that can lead to enhanced relational benefits.

For example, previous research has shown that individuals with lower self-esteem often experience a heightened need for affection, greater
sensitivity to criticism, and greater vulnerability to rejection (Hof & Miller, 1981). In this study, individuals participating in the ME experience may have felt the need to develop more self-esteem and become less sensitive to their partner's behavior. In terms of marital communication, many researchers have suggested that married individuals who do not effectively communicate face challenges in developing close, intimate relationships (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994). Because communication is strongly related to marital satisfaction, individuals who chose to attend the ME experience in this study may have assessed their relational situation, especially regarding communication, and as a result wanted to improve the quality of their communication by learning and practicing new skills, as emphasized in some of the content of the BEST program.

In terms of relational commitment, Stanley and Markman (1992) noted that commitment reflects a personal dedication and intrinsic desire to improve and invest in the relationship. Lower levels of relational commitment are evident in the continuing high level of divorce (Stanley, 2005). In making the decision to attend the ME experience, individuals in this study may have felt the need to develop greater commitment in their relationship. Concerning conflict, Gottman (1994) noted that elevated levels of negative affect produce emotional withdrawal and eruptions of negative affect reciprocity in couples, leading to marital disruption and possible dissolution. Although marital conflict is inevitable, individuals attending the ME experience in this study may have been looking for more productive and constructive ways to manage their conflict. Previous research has shown marital strengths serve as a reservoir or pool of resources that can be drawn from during times of difficulty or stress (Stanley et al., 1995). In this study individuals electing to attend the ME experience may have performed a relational audit and determined that their reserves had become depleted by the wear-and-tear of daily relational stresses. In terms of dyadic consensus, participating individuals in this study may have realized that some interactions within their relationships were below the threshold of their own subjective standards they hold as meaningful to their marital satisfaction and were seeking ways to improve their levels of agreement on basic relationship issues.

Previous research on intimacy has suggested that it serves as a major bonding force within the marriage relationship. Intimacy is the core of a loving relationship (Heller & Wood, 1998) and depends on empathy for each other's experiences. Individuals attending the ME experience in this study might have been looking for opportunities to increase their own and others' awareness regarding the role of intimacy in their relationship (Hunt et al., 1998). Couples who experience less than they expect in marriage may feel disappointment (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001) and may see ME as a way to narrow the gap between expectations and reality.

Finally, in terms of marital satisfaction, Fincham and Bradbury (1987) have indicated that marital satisfaction is a significant characteristic of marital
quality. In this study, individuals participating in the ME experience may have desired to improve their overall feelings about their marriage relationship. Given that increasing marital satisfaction is a key goal in ME, this result is not surprising.

Our second research question asked whether specific intra- and interpersonal traits predicted attendance versus nonattendance in ME. Of the variables measured in this study, results suggested that the probability of program attendance could be predicted only by marital communication. In fact, the margin between raw scores differentiating participating and nonparticipating groups were by far the widest on the communication variable, also supportive of earlier research (Roberts & Morris, 1998). Findings in the current study suggest that odds are strongest for attending ME if individuals perceive lower quality communication in their relationship, more than any other interpersonal or intrapersonal variable. The identification of relationship problems, including communication, was also a lead interpersonal factor predicting involvement in marriage preparation programs (Duncan et al., 2007). Participants may perceive ME involvement as a key to maximize marital benefits, such as enhanced relationship satisfaction, obtainable through improved communication. Research shows that quality communication is inextricably linked to relational health and marital satisfaction (e.g., Gottman, 1994).

Occasionally, marriage education is accused of only reaching audiences of relatively low need (e.g., Halford et al., 2006). Although risk levels of any of the intra- and interpersonal variables were not assessed in this study, it is clear that those who participated in this ME program scored significantly lower in areas typically targeted for marriage education. Thus, the audience attending the BEST program in this study could be said to be at greater need for marriage education than nonparticipants. Those who did attend were, on average, less well off intrapersonally and interpersonally than nonparticipants and sought intervention in an area in which they had the lowest score and, perhaps, the greatest perceived need: communication.

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study that should be considered relevant for future marketing research studies. First, this study explored a ME service that was designed and marketed, in part, to improve marital communication, with the intent of recruiting participants who needed that skill. Thus, the finding that the sole significant predictor for participation in BEST was lower communication may come as little surprise. The finding may be simply a function a match between audience characteristics and products. Additional study is needed among other ME programs to assess whether communication is a major predictor of involvement among them, as well.

Another limitation was that this study’s sample was fairly homogeneous in terms of age, ethnicity, education level, and denominational affiliation.
Until recently (Duncan, Hawkins, & Goddard, 2011), lack of sample diversity in program participation and studies has been a consistent limitation in the ME literature except in a few cases (e.g., Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; DeMaria, 2005; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Therefore, these findings may be only relevant to relatively well-functioning marital audiences. Generalizations from this study to other populations should be made with caution.

A further limitation of the study involved the sole use of individual self-reports of intra- and interpersonal characteristics. Without other data from observer ratings, self-report measures may include, to some extent, levels of common method response bias (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, as Conway and Lance (2010) have noted, beliefs about common method bias in self-report measures, especially in regards to self-report studies that involve measuring constructs of “perceptions” of private events like those included in this study (e.g., personal attitudes or subjective feelings), may have been overstated. This study tested for common method bias by examining the presence of correlations between independent variables. Spector (2006) notes that when common method bias exists, all the relationships among variables should be significant. Without full relationship significance, common method bias is so small it can be considered meaningless. Approximately 68% of the correlations were not significant, providing no indications of common method bias. However, future research should attempt to incorporate other multilevel methods (e.g., observation, interviews) to reduce the potential for response biases in determining influences on ME attendance.

A final limitation inherent in this study was that the data do not reveal how many nonparticipants wanted to attend the ME workshops but were unable to attend due to personal barriers (e.g., program costs, lack of childcare) that interfered with their participation. Based on the theoretical tenets guiding this study involving reasoned action and planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein, 1980), just because individuals and/or couples wanted or intended to attend the ME workshops does not mean they were sufficiently motivated to actually attend the ME workshops. Future ME studies should explore constructs examining attendance motivation.

Notwithstanding these limitations, a primary strength of this study was that it is one of the few to compare a unique sample of ME program participants and nonparticipants who were offered the same program. We also uniquely examined multiple factors and predictors affecting the decision to be involved in marriage education. Thus, we have helped to narrow a gap noted earlier by ME scholars (Arcus et al., 1993; Roberts & Morris, 1998).

Programming Implications and Recommendations

It is clear from our findings that of the variety of intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that could distinguish participants from nonparticipants and predict
attendance, interpersonal factors are of far greater importance. Emphasizing intrapersonal positive consequences such as enhanced self-esteem would not be as effective in its appeal as emphasizing interpersonal benefits such as improved communication, better handling of conflict, and greater intimacy.

A second recommendation is that these findings should not be used to draft negative ME marketing messages that suggest individuals who attend ME are always less satisfied or possess lower self-esteem than those who did not attend. In no way should these findings imply that the individuals choosing not to participate would not have benefited from the educational experience. In fact, in working with married persons with low or poor self-esteem, marital satisfaction should also be assessed, because they are highly related and that couple approaches to increasing self-esteem in programs like the BEST Families program should be considered in addition to individual approaches, like self-help books and psychotherapy. ME marketing messages to prospective audiences should positively embrace and celebrate an individual or couple’s voluntary decision to invest their resources, time, and energy toward proactively taking actions that are intended to enhance the quality of their personal and relational lives. For too many years the common belief within prevention circles has been that “only the healthy and well patients go to the doctor.” Our results suggest that less healthy patients also go to the doctor. In earlier research this audience has been depicted as less likely to attend ME. Less healthy individuals may perceive ME as less threatening, costly, and lengthy than marital therapy and thus may select it as a first response to marital problems (Larson, 2004).

A third recommendation is that marketing research involving ME should be extended to other community and corporate settings like those used in this study. A majority of ME settings have included retreat centers, college campuses, hotels, and community agency settings that are affiliated with faith-based communities (Hawkins et al., 2004). Researchers have recommended that ME settings that are supportive, positive, comfortable, adult-like, and free from distractions would be conducive for ME workshop settings (e.g., Morris et al., 1999). With the rapidly expanding emphasis of work–life policies and programs among many corporations, future ME workshops should be able to secure a place within corporate employee support programs for work and family (Apgar, Riley, Eaton, & Diskin, 1982).

A final recommendation reflects on the marketing efforts used in this study. Morris et al. (1999) and Duncan and Goddard (2011) have advocated that marriage educators should engage in responsible marketing efforts to make sure that the educational product or service being promoted and delivered is capable of reaching the “correct target audiences.” Responsible marketing and delivery of prevention services is an ethical endeavor, and family life educators should make every effort to avoid misleading and/or manipulating prospective participants of their services (e.g., suggesting that ME is only for healthy couples).
REFERENCES


