Recruitment and Selection of Couples for Intervention Research: Achieving Developmental Homogeneity at the Cost of Demographic Diversity

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Demographic and relationship quality data were collected from 704 individuals recruited to participate in a randomized study of relationship enhancing interventions. Recruiting at bridal shows produced partners who were more satisfied, earlier in their relationships, and less likely to be parents, with a marginally higher proportion of Latino couples. Radio and television coverage produced more established couples with higher levels of relationship discord. Self-selection effects revealed that couples from demographic groups at greater risk for divorce (those who had not completed high school, those with children at marriage, and African American couples) were more likely to agree to participate. In contrast, imposing a set of common selection criteria served to exclude couples from demographic risk groups and selected for couples with higher marital quality. Implications for recruiting couples to participate in preventive interventions are outlined.

Keywords: marriage, intervention, recruitment, selection, diversity
effects of recruitment and selection criteria on sample diversity using data from 704 individuals recruited for a clinical trial of relationship enhancing workshops. We begin by exploring the effects of recruiting from different populations on the resulting sample characteristics. Following Karney et al. (1995), we predict that advertising in mass media (i.e., soliciting participants through newspaper, radio, or television coverage) will result in samples that tend to be lower in relationship quality. We then turn to the central question of how selection criteria commonly used in new-lywed research affect the resulting sample, exploring differences between researcher-selection effects (excluding participants on the basis of specific criteria) and self-selection effects. On the basis of Karney et al.’s (2004) findings, we test the specific hypothesis that requiring couples to be childless will reduce the number of African American couples eligible for the study. Following Sullivan and Bradbury (1997) and Halford et al. (2006), we also test the hypothesis that couples likely to be at elevated risk for later marital problems will select themselves out of the study.

Method

Participants

A total of 831 couples were recruited and screened for possible inclusion in a longitudinal efficacy study of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement (Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999) and the Compassionate and Accepting Relationships Through Empathy (Rogge, Cobb, Johnson, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2002) programs for preventing marital discord and divorce. From this sample, 704 spouses provided at least partial data during the phone screening process.2 Wives initiated contact in 86% of the interviews.3 Husbands averaged 32 (SD = 7.8) years of age and 14.8 (SD = 2.5) years of education; 7% were unemployed. Wives averaged 30 (SD = 7.3) years of age and 14.8 (SD = 2.2) years of education; 18% were unemployed. Couples had been married an average of 8.7 (SD = 4.4) months, and of the 630 couples who provided data on number of children, 212 (35%) reported currently having at least one child, with 101 of those couples indicating that the children were from previous relationships. Approximately 63% of the couples had cohabited before marriage.4 Of the 415 couples who provided racial data,5 56% of the husbands were Caucasian, 20% Latino, 10% African American, 8% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 5% other. Of the wives, 53% were Caucasian, 25% Latina, 10% African American, 8% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4% other. These proportions roughly correspond to the distribution of racial groups in Los Angeles County (49% Caucasian, 10% African American, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).6 Relationship satisfaction data indicate that the sample was relatively happy, averaging an estimated score of 115 on the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1999) but demonstrating a wide range of variance in satisfaction (SD = 18.5).

Procedure

Recruitment. A standard recruitment message was presented in a variety of formats (see Appendix) to three distinct populations of eligible couples: couples attending bridal shows (n = 339 couples), couples reading local newspapers (classified ads or feature story; n = 136 couples), and couples listening to local talk shows (radio and television; n = 116 couples). An additional 113 couples were recruited by strategies with minimal response rates (word of mouth, movie theater ads, referrals, e-mail mailing lists, and newsletters). Of the 339 couples recruited at bridal shows, 201 provided their contact information at the show as part of a raffle to win a gift basket valued at $80 (a 13.6% response rate from the 1,478 total couples in attendance) after being given brochures describing the study. Another 138 couples were recruited by sending an information letter, brochure, and a reply postcard to the remaining 1,277 couples that attended the shows (a 10.8% response rate). This represents a 23% overall response rate.

Interviews. Individuals contacting the lab or providing contact information were screened in a 30-min phone interview in which eligibility and demographic information were collected.7 One partner from each couple was interviewed. Of the 831 individuals interviewed, 127 (15%) declined participation after the details of the study were explained to them.8

Selection criteria. To participate in the study, both partners had to agree to participate; they were required either to be engaged to be married

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1 We would like to thank Dr. Scott Stanley for suggesting this particularly apt term.
2 The majority of callers provided complete background information in the phone screening process, but they occasionally terminated the phone screening interview upon learning that they were ineligible for the treatment study; consequently, the exact sample sizes for each background variable differ slightly (Table 1).
3 At the time of screening, 369 of the spouses were engaged to be married and were not yet technically husbands or wives. However, for the sake of simplicity we use the terms husbands and wives to refer to the male and female partners of the relationships throughout the article.
4 Length of cohabitation was reported in years, whereas couples provided an exact wedding date. Thus, to be conservative, couples were classified as premaritally cohabitating only if they reported living together a full calendar year longer than possible by the date of their wedding (i.e., if they reported cohabiting for 1 year and had been married at any point within the last 12 months, they were not classified as premarital cohabiters).
5 For the last 231 telephone interviews (of the 831 telephone contacts completed), data on ethnicity were collected as part of the initial phone screening process (for 116 callers—of those 231—who provided complete demographic information). However, for the first 600 spouses screened by telephone, the questions on race/ethnicity were not part of the initial interview, and so these data had to be collected in a second call, which yielded a 50% (n = 299) response rate. Analyses comparing couples who provided ethnicity data and couples who did not suggested that the subsample providing ethnicity data was moderately biased toward younger, happier couples who were more likely to meet eligibility requirements.
6 In our collection of racial information, Latin heritage was treated as a racial group, as individuals were forced to choose between discrete categories—one of which was Latino/Latina. In contrast, the U.S. Census splits this into two separate domains, race and ethnicity. Consequently, people are allowed to identify themselves as of any racial category and then identify their ethnicity as “Hispanic” or “non-Hispanic.” The differences in these operational definitions prevented a direct comparison between the 20% of husbands and 25% of wives identifying as “Latino” in our study and the 49% of census respondents self-identifying as “Hispanic” for Los Angeles County.
7 The telephone interview began with verbal informed consent. After the project had been fully described, respondents were asked if they and their partner might be interested in participating. Regardless of the outcome of that query, participants were then asked if they would be willing to provide demographic information for themselves and their partners. The demographic background questions ended with a three-item relationship satisfaction measure (measuring only the caller’s level of satisfaction). The analyses presented in this study are exclusively focused on the data collected in these telephone interviews.
8 Following the initial verbal informed consent, callers were specifically asked, “Does this sound like something you would be interested in doing?” and “Does this sound like something your partner would be interested in doing?” The phone screen interviews of the 127 callers who answered with a firm “no” to one or both of those questions were immediately terminated. For an additional 7 callers who indicated their ineligibility at this point, minimal data (e.g., gender of caller and reason for ineligibility) were collected prior to termination of the phone screen.
within the next year or to have been married fewer than 6 months. To avoid the confounding effects of a previous failed marriage, couples were included only if this was the first marriage for both partners. Participants were also required to be fluent in English. Finally, respondents demonstrating severe levels of marital discord that suggested a need for marital therapy (12 or fewer points on the Kansas Marital Satisfaction scale) were excluded and given appropriate referrals. Of the 704 couples who consented to at least a partial screening interview, 338 (48%) satisfied these selection criteria.

**Measures**

Marital satisfaction. Each respondent interviewed reported his or her own level of satisfaction on the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS; Schumm et al., 1986). The wording of the items was modified slightly in this study to make it appropriate for both married and engaged couples: “How satisfied are you with your marriage/relationship?” “How satisfied are you with [partner’s name] as a partner?” This rewording forced us to draw the third item from another brief satisfaction inventory: “I really feel like part of a team with my partner.” Responses yielded scores ranging from 3 to 21, with high levels of internal consistency in this sample (α = .85). To facilitate direct comparison of this study with a wider range of marital studies, we developed a regression equation to convert the less widely used KMS scores into estimates of respondents’ MAT (Locke & Wallace, 1959) scores. Using data from a sample of 56 newlywed couples who provided both KMS and MAT scores at eight different time points (see Rogge & Bradbury, 1999, for details on this sample), regressions generated an average intercept of 17.9 and an average unstandardized beta weight of 5.6 (p < .001, R² = .72). This equation suggests that the KMS cutoff score of 12 for severe marital distress used in this study would roughly correspond to a score of 85 on the MAT, a score well below the typical distress threshold of 100 (Rogge & Bradbury, 1999).

Background information. Spouses provided the following information about themselves and their partners: age, years of education, race/ethnicity, employment, number of children, prior couples counseling, wedding date, length of cohabitation, and number of previous marriages.

**Results**

**Effects of Recruitment Populations on Sample Characteristics**

The effects of recruiting from different populations were explored in three main groups: couples attending bridal shows, couples reading newspapers, and couples listening to local radio and television talk shows. Separate chi-square analyses and analyses of variance tested for omnibus differences across all these three recruitment populations on all demographic and marital quality indices. These analyses failed to demonstrate any significant differences in the rates of premarital cohabitation. The remaining omnibus results were followed up with appropriate pairwise comparisons.

Not surprisingly, recruitment of engaged couples at bridal shows elicited calls primarily from wives of couples earlier in their relationships with lower rates of parenthood at marriage, higher levels of marital quality, and correspondingly higher rates of eligibility (Table 1). What was not anticipated was that recruiting at bridal shows also selected for lower rates of unemployment and marginally higher rates of couples with at least one Latino spouse. Additional novel findings emerged for couples recruited through radio and television, resulting in a sample of more established couples with higher rates of parenthood and wives not finishing high school, markedly higher levels of marital discord, and a correspondingly lower likelihood of being eligible for the study. Thus, the populations sampled by recruitment efforts led to consistent differences in the resulting sample.

**Relative Independence of Selection Criteria**

We next explored the effects of commonly used selection criteria on the resulting demographics and marital quality of the sample. Although being childless was not a requirement for inclusion in this study, it is a commonly used criterion in longitudinal studies. Remarriages have been considered possible confounds to the homogeneity of a newlywed sample in both the treatment literature and the basic research on newlywed marriage. The primary reason for this concern is that, at a national level, remarriages have been shown to have higher rates of divorce than first marriages and divorce seems to occur more rapidly (Castro-Martin & Bumpass, 1989). This would suggest that couples in remarriage come into the marriage with additional vulnerabilities (or different attitudes) that make divorce a more probable outcome. Little is known about the exact nature of those vulnerabilities, and so newlywed marital researchers have often simply excluded remarriages from their samples to avoid the potentially confounding effects. We applied that same selection criterion in an effort to increase the developmental homogeneity of the sample. However, the logic of such a decision is certainly questionable, because of the biases demonstrated for this criterion in the current study and because it limits the range of the validation sample for these workshops—omitting an entire group of couples (remarriages) for whom the workshops could offer benefits.

We did not screen the partners of the individuals who were interviewed and deemed above the cutoff for marital distress, leaving open the possibility that some of these partners were very unhappy in their relationship.

Although the KMS was slightly modified in this study, the new item (“feel like a team with partner”) from the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton 1983) has consistently demonstrated strong loadings on relationship satisfaction factors. The addition of this item was therefore unlikely to change the nature of the construct measured despite the novel surface content added. However, given that the KMS items used in this study did not precisely match the KMS items used in developing the regression equation to MAT scores, we decided to use a very conservative operationalization for marital discord—a threshold of 85 on the MAT estimated scores rather than the more commonly used 100. Using this threshold also allowed us to retain couples with moderate to mild levels of discord for inclusion in the treatment study.

To maintain power and reduce the number of separate tests run, these analyses were restricted to the three populations that yielded the most success in the study’s recruitment efforts.

The methods of collecting contact information by means of raffles at bridal shows and mailing study information to bridal show contact lists ultimately yielded samples of respondents who were indistinguishable on the demographic and marital quality dimensions measured. Consequently, those two groups were collapsed in all remaining analyses.

Given the mixture of continuous and nominal data, it was less practical to use a multivariate analysis of variance framework to reduce the experiment-wide level of alpha error. Consequently, we focus our presentation on the findings across all groups that were significant at a p < .001 level.
studies of newlywed marriage and was evaluated. Of the 704 spouses who provided information, 338 couples (48%) were evaluated.15 Of the 704 spouses who provided information, 338 couples (48%) were evaluated.15 Of the 704 spouses who provided information, 338 couples (48%) were evaluated.15 Of the 704 spouses who provided information, 338 couples (48%) were evaluated.15 Of the 704 spouses who provided information, 338 couples (48%) were evaluated.15

Table 1
Characteristics of Samples Recruited From Three Populations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>3 largest recruitment populations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bridal shows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number recruited</td>
<td>704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital quality indicators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital satisfaction (estimated MAT scores)</td>
<td>642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markedly distressed couples (MAT &lt; 85)</td>
<td>641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous couples counseling</td>
<td>634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic indicators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband making initial contact</td>
<td>704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months since wedding(a)</td>
<td>610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband unemployment</td>
<td>634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife unemployment</td>
<td>646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband did not finish high school</td>
<td>513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife did not finish high school</td>
<td>518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couples with children</td>
<td>630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couples with children before marriage(b)</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband and/or wife Latino</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband and/or wife Asian</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband and/or wife African American</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible couples</td>
<td>704</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. MAT = Marital Adjustment Test scores, estimated from scores on the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale. Negative values on this variable indicate the length of time remaining before the wedding for engaged couples. Excludes couples married for longer than 6 months. The asterisks refer to pairwise comparisons between the three recruitment populations, identifying when a population is significantly different from all other groups on a indicator. * p < .05. ** p < .01.

Finally, of the 831 couples screened, 42% indicated that one or both partners were uninterested in participating. Spearman rho correlation coefficients between the exclusion criteria were generally low (ranging from .02 to .40, with an average absolute correlation of .13), suggesting only mild levels of systematic overlap. As a result, the criteria were evaluated independently.16

Effects of Self-Selection and Researcher Selection on Sample Characteristics

Examining possible self-selection effects revealed that couples from demographic groups at heightened risk for divorce (those lacking high school education, those starting marriage with children, and African American couples) were consistently more likely to agree to participate in the study (Table 2). Of note, couples with the highest levels of marital quality seem to have selected themselves out of the study initially.17 In contrast, the researcher-selection effects produced by applying selection criteria to the sample served to exclude couples from high-risk demographic groups. For example, limiting marriages to the first 6 months served to exclude couples with husbands or wives who had not finished high school and selected for higher marital quality. Similarly, excluding severe marital distress led to fewer couples with wives who had not finished high school and fewer couples starting marriage with children. Limiting marriages to first marriages also reduced the number of couples starting marriage with children, led to a 50% drop in the frequency of eligible couples with at least one African American spouse, and selected for higher levels of marital quality. Finally, requiring couples to be childless excluded couples who had not completed high school and couples with at least one African American spouse, and selected for couples with higher levels of marital quality. Requiring that couples be childless at the start of the study selected for marginally higher proportions of couples with at least one Asian spouse. The rationale for invoking the majority of these selection criteria is to assemble a relatively homogeneous sample of couples at similar developmental stages in life and in marriage. The results presented in Table 2 suggest that

15 This criterion is commonly used because it increases the developmental homogeneity of the sample and facilitates the study of the transition to parenthood.

16 Given the relatively low number of exclusions for the selection criteria of lack of English fluency and scheduling problems, the analyses of potential selection biases focus on the remaining exclusion criteria.

17 These results are based on the couples who provided the necessary phone screening data but ultimately declined participation. It was not possible to include the immediate decliners, as they did not provide marital quality data.
Table 2
Effects of Self-Selection and Researcher Selection on Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion criterion</th>
<th>Demographic indicators</th>
<th>Marital quality indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H did not graduate HS</td>
<td>W did not graduate HS</td>
<td>Children prior to marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-selection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>467 Both participated</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>351 At least one refused</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistic</td>
<td>$\chi^2(1) = 3.8^*$</td>
<td>$\chi^2(1) = 5.4^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Wedding this year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>603 Satisfied criterion</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83 Excluded</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistic</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Married less than 6 months</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>541 Satisfied criterion</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>152 Excluded</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistic</td>
<td>$\chi^2(1) = 5.4^*$</td>
<td>$\chi^2(1) = 9.6^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. First marriage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>549 Satisfied criterion</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>139 Excluded</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistic</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Not severely distressed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>582 Satisfied criterion</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59 Excluded</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistic</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>$\chi^2(1) = 12^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. No children$^a$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>412 Satisfied criterion</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>218 Excluded</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistic</td>
<td>$\chi^2(1) = 17^{***}$</td>
<td>$\chi^2(1) = 20^{***}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Dashes indicate comparisons that would be significant by definition. H/W did not graduate HS = husband/wife did not graduate high school. Children prior to marriage = rates of parenthood in engaged couples and couples married less than 6 months. H or W Af-Am = couples in which at least one spouse is African American. H or W Asian = couples in which at least one spouse is Asian or Pacific Islander. MAT = Marital Adjustment Test scores.

$^a$ Couples were not required to be childless for inclusion in the recruitment process described here, but this is a common selection criterion and is analyzed as a potential source of selection bias along with the other criteria.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. 

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these criteria might indeed be successful at homogenizing the developmental stage of the couples, but this homogeneity is accomplished at the cost of demographic and racial diversity, ultimately excluding some at-risk couples in need of intervention.18

Discussion

We examined how recruitment strategies and selection criteria affect the composition of samples used to examine preventative interventions for couples. Turning first to the decision of where to recruit participants, the results generally supported the findings of Karney et al. (1995) in that couples recruited through the media (newspaper, radio, or television) had lower levels of relationship quality than couples recruited through bridal shows. The results suggest that recruitment through bridal shows might be most productive for studies of primary prevention programs (relationship enhancement workshops), as this method draws couples earlier in their relationships with higher levels of relationship quality. However, for studies of secondary prevention programs (e.g., checkup interventions; see Cordova, Warren, & Gee, 2001) or marital therapy studies, recruitment through radio and television might be more productive.

Turning to self-selection effects, in contrast to the findings of Sullivan and Bradbury (1997) and Halford and colleagues (2006), we found that the couples who declined participation after responding to recruitment tended to have higher levels of relationship quality. Thus, self-selection occurring at this stage is not driven by a trend for high-risk couples to avoid workshops but possibly by relatively lower risk couples realizing that the costs of participating might outweigh the benefits, once they discovered the actual time and effort involved. We also found that couples from demographic risk groups (African American couples, couples lacking a high school education, and couples with children at marriage) were more likely to agree to participate. This is an encouraging result, as it suggests that at least a subset of higher risk couples both are interested in workshops and actively seek them out. Although these results contrast with those of Sullivan and Bradbury (1997) and Halford et al. (2006), given the differing designs of the studies, both trends of self-selection could be occurring at different stages of recruitment, ultimately excluding both extremes of the marital quality distribution.

The researcher-selection effects suggested that the selection criteria commonly used in marital research tend to restrict the demographic diversity and marital quality of the sample, preferentially excluding couples from demographic risk groups (those lacking high school education, those starting marriage with children, and African American couples) and selecting for happier marriages. Supporting the findings of Karney et al. (2004), our results suggest that requiring couples to be childless (and to a lesser extent requiring couples to be in a first marriage) reduced the frequency of African American participants by more than half. At the same time, the selection criteria as a set ultimately served to more than double the proportion of Asian spouses in the final sample. Given that many of these criteria are designed to capture couples at a similar developmental stage, namely the period surrounding the start of their marriage, these results suggest that the criteria are indeed effective in achieving that goal. However, there is a cost associated with that homogenization process—a loss of sample diversity. Thus, researchers should consider limiting their use of such selection criteria in intervention studies to preserve sample diversity.

Samples used in most prior long-term experimental studies of preventive interventions for couples have been low in sociodemographic diversity and fail to extend the application of their interventions to the populations at greatest risk for marital discord and divorce. As a result, these studies are limited in the claims they can make about whether adverse marital outcomes can be prevented across a wide range of couples. Do these problems arise because diverse, at-risk couples are failing to respond to recruitment invitations, or because they are responding but are then winnowed from the sample? The present findings address both possibilities, ultimately supporting the latter explanation. In this sample, African American couples, couples that had not completed high school, and couples starting marriage with children were significantly more likely to be interested in participating. This is consistent with the findings of a statewide survey on marriage in Oklahoma that indicated low-income couples, younger couples, and African American couples tended to be more interested in relationship education programs and more supportive of a statewide healthy marriage initiative (Johnson et al., 2002). We also found that couples with a wide range of backgrounds and relationships express an interest in psychoeducational interventions, and by collecting data on a large number of couples early in the process of recruitment, we have demonstrated that the methodological decisions made by experimenter serve to exclude many of those couples from intervention studies.

Interpretation of the present findings is limited by several factors. First, the sample was drawn from a large, ethnically diverse urban area in southern California, and the findings may not generalize to recruitment efforts in other areas of the country. Second, the recruitment efforts were geared toward obtaining couples for relationship enhancement workshops, and the findings may generalize only to other studies of similar interventions. Third, given the design of the study, we do not have direct information on the demographics of the couples who chose not to respond to our initial recruitment efforts, and as a consequence, that stage of self-selection cannot be assessed in the current study. Thus, we do not know how representative the current samples are of the populations sampled and cannot directly measure biases introduced by the specific recruitment methods used. Fourth, the process of recruiting and successfully engaging couples in research could have been affected by a number of factors specific to this study (e.g., skill of interviewers, frequency and quality of contacts), which would further limit the generalizability of the findings.

18 The problem of selectively excluding African American couples from marital research samples is further amplified by the fact that these couples also had higher rates of early dropout in the current study. Of the 155 couples who were eligible but failed to complete the initial assessment packet, 15% were couples with at least one African American spouse. In comparison, of the 183 eligible couples who completed the initial packet, only 6% were African American, $\chi^2(1) = 7.6, p < .01$. Thus, by asking couples to complete a set of questionnaires by mail before participating in the relationship workshops, we lost 67% of the eligible couples with at least one African American spouse (23 out of 34) in contrast to the general loss of 46% from the sample at that stage. None of the remaining demographic or marital quality markers displayed any significant biases in dropout at this stage.
Finally, data on ethnicity and race were collected in a second telephone call with a lower response rate biased toward happier couples. As a result, the analyses with those variables had lower levels of power to detect biases. Despite these limitations, we believe the results of this study contribute useful information to the marital intervention literature by revealing how methodological decisions can affect sample diversity.

References


(Appendix follows)
Recruitment Materials

All of the recruitment materials were written to convey the same basic message: that the project was offering free relationship enhancing workshops to engaged and newlywed couples with payments totaling $100 for completing follow-up assessments. The newspaper ads were run in classified sections of local newspapers and were therefore the most restrictive means of conveying the recruitment message, as the word limit prohibited a detailed description of the study and also prohibited a discussion of the risks for divorce and discord in the early years of marriage. All of the other modes of recruitment were able to incorporate those details. Thus, all couples recruited through bridal shows received copies of the brochure, and the remaining modes of recruitment (newspaper articles, radio interviews, and television interviews) closely mirrored the content of the brochures.

Newspaper Ad

The text of the ad, run in the classified sections, was as follows:

Engaged? Newlyweds? The UCLA Marriage Enrichment Study wants you! Learn skills to keep your marriage alive and fun. Receive a free workshop and up to $100 for participating. Call (310) 206-XXXX today!

Newspaper Feature Story

One interview of the principal investigator led to a feature story in the Los Angeles Times. The material presented in that article was restricted to the content of the brochure and information letter to avoid exposing potential participants to additional demand characteristics.

Information Letter

The letter read as follows:

Dear [Names],

I am writing you to let you know about an opportunity that is currently available to couples in the Los Angeles metro area through the UCLA Marriage Enrichment Project. This research project is testing the efficacy of several different workshops for couples to determine how best to strengthen relationships and prevent marital discord and divorce.

The project focuses specifically on couples like you, who are just starting their marriages. The workshops offered teach couples skills designed to help them keep their relationships happy and strong. Many couples find that taking the time to learn a few basic skills in these workshops can help keep small problems from becoming big ones.

Couples who participate in the study will receive a free relationship workshop and up to $100 in payments for completing follow-up questionnaires over the next three years. I’ve enclosed a brochure explaining the study further.

If you are interested in learning more about participating in this study, please feel free to call the project at (310) 206-XXXX or simply drop the enclosed response postcard in the mail and someone from the project will contact you. Thank you for your time.

Brochure

The text of the brochure was as follows:

DID YOU KNOW . . .

- About 90% of people will get married at some point in their lives
- About 50% of first marriages end in divorce
- The first 4 years of marriage are a high-risk period for discord and divorce
- Recent research suggests that marital discord and divorce can be prevented

ASK YOURSELF . . .

- Are you getting married soon or are you recently married?
- Are there problems in your relationship that you worry will become more problematic over time?
- Or, are you happy in your relationship and would like to ensure that your relationship is happy and fulfilling for years to come?
- Are you interested in learning new skills to help keep little problems from becoming big ones?
- If so, you may be eligible to participate in . . .

THE UCLA MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT STUDY

- GOAL: To prevent marital distress and divorce by teaching couples basic skills to resolve conflict and nurture intimacy at the beginning of marriage so that when problems arise, those problems won’t have a chance to tear marriages apart.
- 225 couples will be randomly assigned to one of five workshops supported by current research
- Workshops will consist of 5 sessions over 4 weeks and will be provided ABSOLUTELY FREE
- Couples will be asked to complete follow-up questionnaires 4 times over the next 3 years in order to determine which treatments were most effective
- Couples will be paid $25 for each set of follow-up questionnaires that they complete
- Couples will be free to discontinue participation at any time

ELIGIBILITY

- Couples must have set a date for marriage within the next year or be married less than 6 months
- It must be a first marriage for both partners
- Both partners must be willing to participate
- Both partners must be comfortable reading and writing in English

CALL 310-206-XXXX

Media Interviews of the Principal Investigator

These interviews were typically 5–10 min long, airing on local television and radio talk shows. The information presented in these interviews was purposefully restricted to the material covered in the brochure and information letter in order to avoid exposing potential couples to additional demand characteristics.

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