Abstract

What Are Couples Saying About Relationship Education? A Content Analysis

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IMPLICATIONS FOR COOPERATIVE EXTENSION: Couple relationship education (CRE) is a service that couples either don’t know exists or is often misunderstood. The findings provided in this study offer valuable insight into the current perceptions of CRE, offered by a variety of couples at differing stages in their committed relationships. Practitioners and relationship education professionals may derive benefits from these results through a greater understanding of why couples may or may not be utilizing CRE services. The positive and negative themes discovered through the study’s procedure can be incorporated in current relationship education programs to enhance both its perception and value to couples who are looking to participate. Further clarification of CRE services to the public may be influential in level of public attendance, allowing their educational and preventative nature to become increasingly widespread.

Overview:
This study sought to examine couples’ current perceptions of couple relationship education (CRE) in order to develop new concepts for recruitment, marketing and program implementation tactics that would better serve the needs of the community.

Method:
*Sample & Procedure:* This sample was comprised of 99 couples, all of which were made up of heterosexual relationship partners in a committed relationship. Additionally, criteria stated that all couples must have been between the ages of 18 and 35, while the mean age of participants was found to be 23.9. A variety of participant demographic characteristics were also sought out, such as relationship type (i.e. dating, cohabiting or married), education level, income and ethnicity. All couples were recruited in Stillwater, OK and neighboring locations. Subsequent to obtaining informed consent, all couples took part in two video-recorded conversations. One of these 10 minute discussions was prompted by asking partners to consider the pros/cons of participating in CRE programming for their relationship.

*Measures:* Participants were asked to complete a demographic survey in order to gather detailed information regarding age, gender, income, relationship status, education and race/ethnicity.

*Findings:* Content analysis utilized to develop coding for conversations in the study identified three prominent categories in which to classify themes of discussion that arose among participants: overall pros to attending CRE, overall cons affiliated with attending, and a third category that accommodated conversation topics construed as either “pro” or “con” by participants depending on the
particular perspective of the couple in question.

The dominant themes observed in affiliation with “pros” to attending CRE were 1) relationship skills would be acquired or developed, 2) relationship quality would be improved, and 3) couples would derive a benefit from the overall atmosphere and focus of the CRE program. Beneficial competencies that couples perceived would be most frequently contrived from their attendance at CRE were communication and conflict resolution, while the concepts of managing finances and developing greater understanding of their partner were also deemed highly important. Participants noted that the time they devoted to participating in CRE could be a valuable opportunity to give concentrated attention to their relationship, and even “get away” to focus on one another. Finally, in correlation with the third “pro” theme, couples in the study stated interest in learning from the relationship experiences discussed by the other couples’ that were also in attendance.

Frequently emerging themes arising in couple discussion concerning potential negative aspects, or “cons” associated with attending CRE included 1) various barriers regarding program composition, 2) negative viewpoints of the program atmosphere and its related content, and 3) concerns about the relevance and overall influence of CRE. The structural barriers most regularly found to be influential of couples’ lacking desire to attend the program were the general cost of participation and the amount of time that would be required in order to attend. Couples were additionally concerned with the group environment aspect of the program, in which they would be expected to share personal information about their relationship aloud among other couples. Questions also arose regarding the experience and qualifications of the individual leading the program. Lastly, participants expressed worry that attending CRE would result in a negative influence on their current relationship by discerning variables of the partnership that were insignificant but could prove to be detrimental if brought up.

The final two themes arising as a result of either positive or negative perceptions were 1) CRE influencing the couple’s realization of incompatibility or leading to the termination of their relationship and 2) the program’s religious or spiritual focus. These topics appeared to have both opposing and affirming connotations when observed in the couples’ conversations, depending greatly on the existing characteristics of the relationship. For example, if religiosity already played a significant role in the participant’s relationship, they were found to be more inclined to approve of a religiously themed program. An additional topic worthy of recognition was classified as program focus unawareness, which analyzed the prevalence of unfamiliarity or unawareness of the nature and focus of CRE services among participants in the study.

Discussion:
By taking into consideration both the positive and negative commentary regarding CRE services, practitioners are able to appropriately reconfigure current facilities to better accommodate the needs of patrons interested in CRE. This reevaluation could draw couples in that may have not been initially interested in the service by alleviating their apprehension and working to tailor aspects of the program specifically to clients. For example, the program could expand their offerings to include individual sessions with the CRE leader for couples that express a discomfort in participating in the existing group session format. Due to frequent misconceptions about the nature and purposes of CRE, collaborative efforts should be utilized by program promoters and programmers to provide further clarification and awareness to the public. This increased knowledge is vital to shaping a more accurate social depiction of the roles served by relationship educators.
Overall, the findings of this study are representative of direct information from a target audience for services provided through CRE. Additionally, these results are the first to be derived from solely qualitative methods that evaluated couple perceptions of CRE in a specific discussion format, rather than having couples compare experiences to participation in a prior event. These components allow the obtained data to be applicable to a variety of professionals in the field of CRE who contribute to its promotion, recruitment and implementation efforts.