

# Adaptation

## Fatherhood, Individual, and Islamic Versions of PREP

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In this chapter we have two major aims. The first focus is to describe the development and evaluation of a version of the Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP) that is delivered to couples as well as individual members of a couple. Second, we'll provide our initial ideas about applying some of the core dimensions of PREP to Islamic cultures in general and Muslim couples in particular. Through both aims, we seek to confront the challenges of applying a research-based intervention to help couples in diverse populations and cultures.

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## The Reach of Marriage Education

One of the major challenges in the field of clinical psychology is getting empirically based interventions both in the hands of therapists and professionals and to the couples who need the services most, such as couples with financial hardship. It turns out that marriage education may be one of the best ways to reach underserved populations and diverse populations with research-based programs. For example, marriage education programs have been successfully delivered in prisons, high schools, the military, and to adoptive and foster parents, to name just a few (see Markman et al., 2006, for details).

In Oklahoma, where the state is using PREP in most of the settings listed above, about 122,000 citizens have taken part in a PREP-related program (Cox, 2008). Despite recent success with reaching out to diverse populations, there are many barriers to moving forward. One important barrier is the challenge of getting both partners in the room to learn relationship skills. In one large-scale U.S. study, 39% of couples did not show up for any of their scheduled sessions (Dion et al., 2006). However, the lack of participation is not usually due to a lack of interest. Data from Oklahoma (Dion et al., 2006) show that in a sample of adults, over 65% were interested in receiving services while 75% of lower income adults expressed such interest. However, logistical issues such as cost, lack of available childcare, and transportation remain barriers to attendance, even when workshops are offered in the community. In our work with low income couples, partners miss sessions for a host of other reasons as well, such as to attend job interviews or when a child gets sick—events that understandably take priority over coming to workshop classes. Another major barrier is that men seem to be less interested in marriage education than women. We believe that this is in part due to a lack of knowledge about what marriage education is and what it is not. It seems likely that there is still a prevailing sense that marriage education is like therapy, with participants discussing personal matters (e.g., their childhoods); and for many men, this idea is off-putting.

In PREP-related programs, we offer classes about relationships where participants are encouraged to talk to their partners but do not need to share with the group. In PREP classes for individuals, the focus is on learning skills, and participants are asked to pair up with other participants to practice using the tools. One of the accomplishments of organizations like the National Marriage Resource Center in the U.S. ([Healthymarriageinfo.org](http://Healthymarriageinfo.org)) and Smart Marriages ([smartmarriages.com](http://smartmarriages.com)) is getting the word out that marriage education involves taking classes, which are focused on education, rather than traditional therapy. It is important to note, however, that marriage education can be therapeutic and open the doors to seeking other services for issues that many participants are dealing with (e.g., aggression, infidelity, PTSD, depression, child problems).

In the next section we will briefly describe preliminary results from a project that evaluates a new version of PREP developed for couples with low incomes and examines the extent to which couples can benefit when only one member of the couple receives a PREP class.

## The FRAME Project

The Fatherhood, Relationship and Marriage Education (FRAME) project is supported by a grant from the Office of Research and Program Evaluation (ORPE), which is part of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Health Department. FRAME is a longitudinal, community-level research study using random assignment to investigate the effectiveness

and impact of this new relationship program. In order to qualify, couples must be involved in an ongoing committed relationship, live together, have at least one child (under the age of 18) together, and have combined family incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (e.g., \$35,200 for a three-person household; \$42,400 for a four-person household; \$49,600 for a five-person household).

Couples were recruited through a number of means: flyers, newspaper advertisements, media interviews, and collaboration with community leaders and organizations in the Denver area. Couples who called and expressed an interest in the study were screened to ensure they qualify for the study. Qualifying participants were clearly informed that 75% of couples in the study would be randomly chosen to participate in one of the intervention groups (traditional couples group, group for male partners only, and group for female partners only) and that 25% of couples would be assigned to a control group. Participants needed to agree to these procedures and agree that they would participate in any condition before being signed up for the study.

Participating couples completed an initial set of measures designed to assess individual and relationship functioning, parenting, and child emotional/behavioral functioning after which they were randomized to a group. They also completed the same set of measures immediately following the program, 6 months after the program, and once a year thereafter. Couples were compensated financially for completing the assessments (see Markman et al., in press, for details). Here we will summarize pre-post results for the first 104 (out of 300) couples.

### The Intervention

The FRAME program is based on the *Within Our Reach* (WOR) curriculum, which is a new adaptation of PREP, developed specifically to meet the needs of lower income and higher risk couples (Stanley, Markman & Jenkins, 2004). The curriculum is designed to build on the existing strengths of couples and add critical life and relationship skills that will help participants create safer, more stable couple relationships and better environments for their children. One of the overarching conceptual principles behind the curriculum is that individuals, marriages, and families thrive in the context of various types of safety (physical, emotional, commitment, and community) (see Stanley, Markman & Whitton, 2002; Stanley, Pearson & Kline, 2005).

Like PREP, *WOR* and therefore FRAME have a strong skill base rooted in research on how couples communicate and handle conflict. Curriculum adaptations from PREP include several new emphases such as helping couples to identify and plan for overcoming barriers to meeting their goals, and to discover new ways to cope with the specific stressors of economic strain, and also units designed to foster parenting skills, community connection and involvement, and thinking about the future. *WOR* and FRAME also incorporate more activities, discussions, and practice designed to teach skills and principles. Furthermore, FRAME uses a 14-hour version (FRAME for couples and FRAME for individuals) adapted from the 36-hour *WOR* program. The 14-hour version omitted certain modules and activities from *WOR*, reduced time on lectures, decreased redundant material, and shortened practice times. We also added materials on parenting and coping with economic stress, based on the work of Wadsworth and her colleagues and students (Raviv & Wadsworth, 2006; Wadsworth & Santiago, 2008). Fathers are explicitly targeted, and the intervention emphasizes the importance of fathers for child wellbeing as well as marital happiness.

We used the same materials and skills in FRAME for couples and for individuals (male- and female-only groups), with just slightly different presentation and practice techniques. For example, both groups were taught the speaker-listener communication technique; however, participants in the couples group practiced the skill by discussing a real issue about their relationship with their partner, while participants in the individual groups paired up with another group member. All participants were assigned homework after each session (e.g. practicing the skills learned in the session or going on a date with their partner). In addition, members of the male and female groups were instructed to talk with their partners about what they learned in the session.

Here we present data on satisfaction with the program, perceived helpfulness of the program and three specific research questions: 1) Do FRAME participants' communication styles improve following exposure to the intervention material (i.e., is there a decrease in negative and increase in positive communication)? 2) Do non-attending partners (who did not participate in workshops but whose partner did) change their communication styles? and 3) Are changes different for fathers as compared to mothers?

### Preliminary Findings

The findings presented here are based on 102 couples (African-American = 40.7%, Caucasian = 34%, Hispanic = 16.7%, Native American = 6.2%, Asian or other = 2.4%; average age males = 35.9, females = 32.4), who live together (68.8% married, 18.3% engaged, 12.9% dating) and meet guidelines for low income. All couples completed pre and post workshop measures that included assessment of negative and positive communication as well as a measure of positive bonding (fun, friendship, romance). These measures represent dimensions of a healthy marriage and assess, in particular, the dimensions that we expect to change in the program. These measures and others are available at [www.prepinc.com](http://www.prepinc.com).

In terms of data on who shows up to workshops, 18% of our participants do not attend any sessions. Broken down by group, 18% of the couples do not show up, 7% of the females in the female group and 35% of the men in the male group do not show up. However, among participants who attend at least one session, the overall rate of missing sessions is very low. Broken down by group, females only miss 2%, males only miss 5%, and couples miss 11% (Einhorn et al., 2008). We suspect that rates for couples are higher due to the increased challenges associated with getting two people in the room versus one. In sum, these figures tell us that fathers have a high initial no-show rate, but once they come in, they stay; mothers have both a very low no-show rate and low rate of dropping out of the program.

When asked about program satisfaction, the response to the workshop was very positive, suggesting that we can successfully tailor the program for individuals. We asked participants to rate the perceived helpfulness of the program ('Overall, I found the FRAME program helpful to my relationship') using a 7-point scale, in which a response of 1 means "*strongly disagree*," 4 is "*neutral*" and 7 means "*strongly agree*." The mean response for the overall sample was 6.06 ( $SD = 1.47$ ), indicating that most people found FRAME to be very helpful for their relationship. It should be noted, however, that on average, participants in the couples group found FRAME to be somewhat more helpful than the participants in the individual groups. For the individuals' groups, there was no significant difference between attending and non-attending partners

in regards to how helpful they found FRAME to be. Thus, very importantly, the non-attending males and females also felt it was helpful to them and their relationship, providing evidence of a transfer effect, especially among males who attended the workshops.

We also examined changes in self-reported negative and positive communication patterns from pre to post for members of the control group versus participants who attended the workshops together, attended individually, and did not attend but had a partner attend. The results showed a significant decrease in negative communication for members of the couples group, the individual participant group, and for non-attending partners; however, no significant change was found for control group members. There were no significant changes in positive communication (Mead et al., 2008). The finding that change occurred on negative but not positive communication is important because, as Notarius and Markman (1993) noted, “One zinger overwhelms 5-10 positive acts of kindness.” So it is possible that changing negative communication may have more far-reaching effects than changing positive communication.

To examine these same constructs by participant gender, paired samples t-tests were conducted separately for males and females. The pattern for change among females was the same as for the overall sample, with significant decreases in negative communication for all groups except controls. Although males in all intervention groups also showed decreases in negative communication patterns, the male-only workshop group is the only one that reached significance. Thus, the results of this study revealed that, although there was not a significant change in positive communication strategies for those who participated in the workshop, participants reported a decrease in negative communication patterns following attendance at workshops as either a couple or an individual, while members of the control group did not report such benefits. Interestingly, individuals who did not attend but had a partner who did also reported a decrease in negative communication, indicating a transfer effect where skills taught to one partner seem to benefit the couple. When examined by gender, it appears that this was especially true among women whose male partner attended workshops. Among males, the greatest benefit was reported by those who attended male-only workshops, possibly indicating a preference for single-gender workshops.

In sum, because of the challenges associated with getting both members of a couple together for such interventions, this study provides important preliminary findings indicating successful transfer of skills when working with one member of a couple. In addition, the findings on group and gender differences may impact future efforts to extend traditional couples-based marriage education programs, like PREP, to low-income couples and individuals. Since some benefits of the workshop, such as an increase in positive communication, may not be detected immediately following intervention, future studies will include follow-up data and will involve a larger sample to increase power to detect effects. As with any psychoeducational program, findings from our sample may not generalize to all populations since those who agree to participate in such programs are, presumably, already interested in improving their relationship.

We’d like to end this part of the chapter by providing some qualitative information from several research participants:

One father liked the time out technique (i.e., time away from positive reinforcement) from the parenting unit so much that he wasn’t just using it at home, but went as far as to build a bench to use as a place for the kids to sit when they were sent to time out.

One woman (the non-attending partner of a man in the male-only group) also saw a difference and felt FRAME was helpful for her partner. When filling out an evaluation she wrote, "Well I feel that it helped him a lot as a dad and husband. He listens more and seems more honest and thoughtful, so I am happy that we came to the FRAME project."

### Smalls Steps toward an Islamic PREP

The conference in London that was the basis of this book propelled us along a path we previously had taken only a few steps down: thinking about developing an Islamic version of PREP. A strength of PREP when it comes to adaptations for diverse populations and cultures is our model of dissemination (Markman et al., 2007), which is to work with experts to adapt versions of PREP for new populations and train leaders who are familiar with their audiences to deliver the intervention. If there is interest, we welcome the opportunity to work with policy makers in Qatar and members of the conference audience as we consider the development and evaluation of Islamic versions of PREP. Here we will examine some of the key challenges we see in developing an Islamic version of PREP and suggest how the PREP approach could respond to some of these issues.

One of the key challenges to applying a model of couples intervention developed in the West is the consideration of the complexities of male-female relations in Islamic culture as a whole. There are emerging calls for increased gender equality as seen by the Doha Declaration issued in 2004, and as noted in a recent report by the United Nations Development Programme, there are "...a growing number of individual women, supported by men, [who] have succeeded in achieving greater equality in society and more reciprocity in their family and personal relationships..., " (*The Arab Human Development Report*, 2006, p. III). Yet at the same time many woman are, for the most part, in marriages that are male dominant (*The Arab Human Development Report*, 2006). The cultural and legal history of Muslim marriages is both fascinating and complex (see for example, *Women's Rights in the Arab World*, 2004) and well beyond the scope of the current discussion. However, when we start the process of working with diverse cultures and couples, we partner with experts who know the complexities of the culture and who work with us to adapt the key skills and principles inherent in PREP to the couples with whom we will be working (Markman et al., 2007). We would plan to work with such experts in adaptations of PREP for Muslim couples.

A key strength of PREP in working with cultures and religions where there is dominance by one partner is our focus on separating couples' problem discussions from their solution finding. Here the focus is on understanding each other's perspective, rather than who makes decisions. In PREP we use our speaker-listener technique, which prescribes rules for good communication: one person speaks, the other listens and then paraphrases with the goal of understanding each other's position - - problem solving is banned (Markman, Stanley, Blumberg et al., in press).

There are also vast differences in the meaning of marriage and the experience of divorce in the U.S. where PREP was developed and evaluated compared to Islamic countries. In the United States, marriage is viewed primarily as a linking of two people into one life; however, in Islamic culture, marriage extends far beyond just the individuals in the marriage. Marriage is the coming together of two families, both with long-standing tradition and history. Although most people in the U.S. have either experienced divorce personally, within the family, or know

someone who has been divorced, this is not the situation in the Muslim world where divorce is uncommon and although allowed by Islamic law in certain circumstances, generally is culturally unacceptable. However, customary social practices often diverge from the traditional Islamic legal code, and there are growing trends to alleviate discriminatory customary family law practices (*Women's Rights in the Arab World, 2004*). States throughout the Arab world are invoking legislation in an attempt to empower women, and education amongst women is on the rise. In fact, in Jordan, primary education is now compulsory for both sexes; and women make up half of the university student population (*The Arab Human Development Report, 2006*). Consistent with such changes, and perhaps propelling them, is the Doha Declaration that emerged from a conference in 2004. One key declaration regarding marriage is to, "Take effective measures to strengthen the stability of marriage by, among other things, encouraging the full and equal partnership of husband and wife within a committed and enduring marital relationship" (Doha International Institute for Family Studies & Development, 2008, p. 2).

One way to achieve such equality is through education. A strength of applying the PREP model to Islamic cultures is its focus on education. Consistent with the Doha Declaration, one of the growing trends within Islamic societies is the education and empowerment of women, who, like in the U.S., may be more interested in programs like PREP than their husbands (*The Arab Human Development Report, 2006*). To the extent this is true, individualized versions of PREP as reviewed earlier might be very useful. Moreover, clinical experiences and the research reviewed above suggest that teaching couples PREP skills easily generalize to help partners parent better, fitting with the focus on the family inherent in Islam.

We anticipate that one of the biggest challenges for introducing PREP in Islamic cultures is that in many households, problems within a marriage are kept within the house and are not to be shared. This can be problematic if participation in a PREP education program is viewed by others as an indication that there is a problem with the marriage. Once again, our focus on education rather than therapy can be an advantage.

Finally we must take into consideration the growing divide between modern and traditional sectors of Islamic society. Within many countries throughout the Islamic world, there is great progress toward modernization and social equality, but alongside this progression is a growing separation between modern and economically well-off sectors of society and the traditional and poorer sectors of society. We must take into consideration how to access both segments of society and assume that an Islamic version of PREP, if developed, would more easily be accepted by couples who are less traditional in their beliefs and practices.

To conclude, while many issues must be considered in the adaptation of PREP and other marriage education programs to diverse populations, we are optimistic that such efforts can succeed. We look forward to continuing our efforts disseminating PREP in general and working in particular with the sponsors and attendees of the conference that was the impetus for this book.

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