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THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF PRE-MARRIAGE COUNSELLING IN HUNGARY

A Flexible Model

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The article offers an overview of the obstacles, challenges and opportunities of pre-marriage counsellor and facilitator training in Hungary. It presents the first institutionally affiliated pre-marriage counselling program and the corresponding facilitator training. It summarises the feedback from the test course participants (eight couples and nine priests), and reviews options for development.

Keywords: premarital counselling, skill-based program, facilitator training, marriage

Herausforderungen der vorehelichen Beratung in Ungarn und die Vorstellung eines flexiblen Modells: Der Beitrag gibt einen Überblick über die Herausforderungen, Schwierigkeiten und Möglichkeiten der Ausbildung der vorehelichen BeraterInnen und ProzessbegleiterInnen. Das erste institutionsgebundene Ausbildungsprogramm für voreheliche BeraterInnen und die damit verbundene Ausbildung für Prozessbegleiter werden vorgestellt, die Rückmeldungen der Teilnehmer, d.h. der acht Ehepaare und der neun Priester werden zusammengefasst, sowie die Möglichkeiten der Entwicklung werden überlegt.

Schlüsselbegriffe: voreheliche Beratung, kompetenzorientiertes Programm, Ausbildung der Prozessbegleiter, Ehe

1. Introduction

The desire for a happy and enduring marriage is strong and almost universal, despite the general weakening of values associated with marriage. Moreover, studies con-

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firm that an intimate and supportive marital relationship enhances well-being and health (RYFF 1995). The functioning of marriage and the family seemed to be simpler while supported by stronger and clearer rules, definite roles and strong external expectations, but the marital relationship has in recent times become more complex: rules and roles have become vaguer, and it is now the couple's task to define them. As a result, couples often need pre-marriage counselling to help them find their way in the relationship, handle tensions and build a satisfying and stable relationship with joint effort.

The necessity of pre-marriage counselling is recognised worldwide, along with the fact that it requires both the development of well-structured programs adjusted to the complexity of marital relationships and the education or training of facilitators to lead those programs (HALFORD 2004; CARROL & DOHERTY 2003). The first programs were primarily concerned with behavioural changes, and the facilitators were poorly trained lay people and priests. However, recent programs aim not only at behavioural changes but also at modifying deeper motivations and the nature of relationship dynamics, increasing positive and decreasing negative interactions, and mobilising the resources of the relationship. They put more emphasis on inner factors of behaviour motivation such as trust, respect towards the partner, support of the partner's development and change. These aims are more difficult to achieve, but they make the programs more effective, and their effects also last longer. At the same time these programs require well-trained facilitators.

2. Obstacles and challenges of pre-marriage education and facilitator training in Hungary

Following World War II, the oppression of the churches and a crackdown on priests' community building activities stifled the possibilities of pre-marriage education, especially in the group format and with psychological content. The recommended or, in certain parishes, required short-term counselling was almost exclusively theological in content and provided by priests.

Nowadays more and more parishes offer marriage or pre-marriage counselling with psychological content for couples preparing for a church wedding. More and more priests providing pre-marriage counselling recognise the need for relationship education and the limitations of their own competence in the field. The first step towards a solution was to ask religious psychologists and psychiatrists for opinions whether a couple is rightly matched or is suitable for marriage. Next, experienced couples in stable marriages from the parish were asked to take part in pre-marriage counselling. Through the involvement of married couples, engaged couples are offered knowledge not only about the theological background of and religious practices in marriage, but also on how relationships function, what problems might arise and how to solve them. The participating older couples, self-educated in pre-marriage counselling, usually invite the engaged couples in their own homes for a personal

conversation. Large parishes have also formed teams for pre-marriage counselling where it is possible to share the tasks and experiences. They also organise lectures where couples present topics thought to be important to marriage, giving examples from their own marriage experience. In some places, mostly in big cities where it is easier to find married couples of religious therapists or psychologists, these lectures are given by professionals. However, no systematically developed and institution-affiliated pre-marriage counselling program with an accompanying facilitator training existed in Hungary before.

Studies on the effectiveness of internationally known pre-marriage counselling programs show that one of the key elements of the course's success is the facilitator's quality, that is, his or her attitude and training in the field (OOMS & WILSON 2004; CARROL & DOHERTY 2003). Most scholars agree that well-structured trainings are needed, where content and method are adjusted to the aim of the pre-marriage counselling program, with regard to the characteristics of the target group (STANLEY et al. 2004).

The launching of an institution-affiliated facilitator training was hindered by several obstacles in Hungary. While the first pre-marriage counselling programs and facilitator training programs were developed by teams consisting of psychologists, couples therapists and priests throughout the world, in Hungary the cooperation between theologians and psychologists was impeded by a distrust of psychology among church leaders and priests responsible for pre-marriage counselling. The distrust is rooted in Freud's antireligious position and the prevalence of psychoanalytic therapy in Hungary that disregards the patient's religiousness or even considers it a factor destructive of health. The poor psychological education of priests, or the complete lack thereof, presented another obstacle, leading many to identify psychology with psychoanalysis and declaring it the devil's work. The cooperation between psychologists and theologians finally became possible through the appearance of the psychology of religion in Hungary in the 1990s, through the work of religious psychologists and therapists, and through the psychological education of priests as well as a growing interest, on their part, in bio-psychosocial-spiritual methods of helping people.

3. Challenges

The development of an appropriate pre-marriage counselling program and an accompanying facilitator training program presents challenges since the content and methods of the program have to meet several requirements.

3.1. Development of a nationally valid standard

One of the important challenges is whether to develop a nationally valid standard or

to adjust the program to the needs of couples with diverse educational, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The history and present situation of pre-marriage counselling in Hungary, the lack of systematically developed and well-structured programs and facilitator training show that there is a great need for an evidence-based program; a program with a recognisable core to offer guidance in the face of diversity and one that provides facilitators with theoretical and methodological knowledge of leadership.

At the same time, the one-size-fits-all model presented by HALFORD and SIMONS (2005) is no longer viable. Instead, there is a need for programs that can be adjusted and for facilitators who can adapt to the necessities of the couples. The solution we propose is to preserve the stability of the program while also aiming at flexibility: in the course of their training, facilitators should be prepared to meet the specific needs of couples, and they should be able to choose different pre-marriage counselling methods for different couples.

3.2. The professional status of participating experts

The professional status of those participating in relationship education still presents an important challenge: should they be professional couples therapists or trained paraprofessionals? In the early days of pre-marriage counselling, relationship education had two roots: couples therapy practice and short-term couples counselling offered by the churches. Since the 'gold standard' for therapists was behavioural therapy at the time, psychoeducational programs also emphasised behavioural change and the practice of using problems as a starting point. Even in 2002, Gottman recommended at a conference that relationship education should only be offered by highly qualified mental health professionals and couples counsellors because this service was used by individuals with a high degree of pathology (cited by MARKMAN et al. 2006, 421). By this time pre-marriage counselling (originating in short-term counselling) had already put the emphasis on prevention but was still problem centred, concerned with reducing the risk factors of divorce, placing communication and conflict resolution in the focus. As a result of conceptual changes and the increasing heterogeneity of participants, differences between the two approaches increased. Therapists increasingly turned to work with high-risk couples, whereas conceptual changes in relationship education led to a new emphasis on the educational nature of the programs and to a new focus on discovering and strengthening the resources that play an important role in the quality of marriage (empathy, commitment, caring for the spouse).

Nowadays family scholars declare more and more explicitly that pre-marriage counselling is not a therapy and does not require professional training (LAURENCEAU et al. 2004). The boundaries are becoming clearer between the two approaches, drawn along the qualifications of therapists and facilitators, the length of the programs and the psychological condition of the couples who take part in the program. The methods they use are still the same or very similar to each other.

3.3. The length and depth of the training

Most facilitators used to be (and in Hungary still are) lay people with a minimum level of training, relying mainly on their own experiences. A minimum level of training was thought to be sufficient by most scholars (STANLEY et al. 2004), and studies showed no difference in the effectiveness between facilitators with a minimal level of training and facilitators trained in and practicing family science (LAURENCEAU et al. 2004).

However, couple relationship education (CRE) has become more complex in content, with more systematic programs (SILLIMANN & SCHUMM 2000). Most professionals in pre-marriage counselling now agree that the facilitator's work does not require qualification in professional counselling but still needs a well-structured, evidence-based training (e.g., CARROL & DOHERTY 2003; OOMS & WILSON 2004; BRADBURY & LAVNER 2012).

3.4. The homogeneity or heterogeneity of participants

Pre-marriage counselling programs have been developed for healthy, highly educated middle-class religious couples all over the world. These couples consider marriage important and are motivated to take part in pre-marital relationship education. However, the question arises whether these programs can be applied, or are effective, in populations different from that described above.

Most of the CRE literature regards the relationship education of very heterogeneous, diverse groups as a great challenge, but there are only proposals and no well-developed solutions for this challenge. According to VATERLAUS and colleagues (2012), more studies are needed to find appropriate answers.

In present-day Hungary there are three groups that present a challenge for relationship education: disadvantaged couples, couples with increased stress, and Gypsy couples who are significantly different from a cultural point of view. However, there are other challenging groups that can be included in the programs despite their differences, and facilitators can be trained to meet their specific needs in relationship education. In our experience, these groups include couples cohabiting without commitment, couples with divorce in the family, and couples with low commitment to the church who still want to have a sacramental marriage for certain reasons. It seems obvious that in pre-marriage counselling groups where the majority of participants come from families with divorce, or cohabit without commitment, more time should be spent on acknowledging the heritage of the family of origin to decrease its negative effects or the 'cohabitation effect' (RHOADES et al. 2009).

4. The possibilities of pre-marriage counselling and facilitator training

The emergence of the psychology of religion in Hungary, studying topics at the inter-

face between religion and psychology, as well as the growing weight of psychological education in priests' formation have built a strong bridge between psychologists and theologians. This bridge made cooperation between the two fields possible in many areas, and finally gave us an opportunity to develop and test a standard pre-marriage counselling program and an accompanying facilitator training.

Our pre-marriage counselling program and facilitator training are held within church settings, and they integrate a short theological instruction by a priest on the importance and sacramental nature of marriage, and a psychological approach to helping the relationship. The aim was to develop a standard for pre-marriage counselling programs in Hungary as well as to build and test a facilitator training curriculum for those who lead pre-marriage counselling programs.

Our first task was to develop the standard for a pre-marriage counselling program. A review of the literature shows a rich variety of such programs. They seem to fall into one of two main types, both supported by effectiveness studies. One is the inventory-based counselling/education that first assesses the relationship state, the strengths and weaknesses of the couple, then a trained professional gives feedback to the individual and the couple. The best-known and most often used program of this form is the PREPARE developed by OLSON and colleagues (2012), also introduced but not widely spread in Hungary. The other form is the curriculum or skill-based program, a shorter or longer training with several engaged couples participating, thus providing a chance for learning from each other. The best-known model of this format is the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), developed by MARKMAN and colleagues (2010). The PREP places the emphasis on improving the skills necessary for a well-functioning marriage through exercises, and on recognising and understanding key aspects of relationship dynamics. Thus the program combines didactic-informative and skills development approaches. Contentwise it focuses on two important fields, the reduction of risks and the enhancement of protective factors (STANLEY 2001; MARKMAN et al. 2010). The program has been used for thirty years in the USA and in fourteen other countries, and is continuously tested for its effectiveness. Although the contents of the two programs mentioned above are very similar, they differ in the way they practice skills. Both formats are accompanied by a facilitator training program.

In developing our own pre-marriage counselling program, we relied on our theoretical knowledge about marital relationship, on our experience in pre-marriage counselling, couples counselling and adult education as well as on the review of the literature. We were looking for a pre-marriage counselling program that was based on studies, employed training methods, was supported by effectiveness studies, and could be used within church settings. Those requirements were mostly met by the PREP program. In our own PREP-like program the core topics included in every relationship education package have been extended to include contents and methods adjusted to the needs of Hungarian participants, such as knowledge of the self and the partner, accepting differences, working on the heritage of the family of origin, questions of commitment and intimacy, and caring for the spouse and for the marriage. We

developed structured modules for each topic, including theoretical knowledge, short questionnaires facilitating thinking, skills practice, discussion and sharing.

5. The training of facilitators

Although CRE experts say that the facilitator is a key factor in the effectiveness of relationship education, studies are rare in the field, and only recommendations have been put forward concerning the facilitator's personality, attitudes and behaviour towards participants. In a survey of participants in pre-marriage counselling, HIGGINBOTHAM and MYLER (2010) found that their most important expectations of the facilitator were his/her relationship status, positive communication, and the quality of working alliance. On the basis of their experience, HAWKINS and colleagues (2004) find it beneficial that the program is led by a married man and a married woman, not necessarily a couple, who belong to the same ethnic group or culture as the participants. OOMS and WILSON (2004) considered marital status, the capacity to function as a realistic role model, and a shared cultural background to be the most important requirements for the facilitator, whereas OWEN and colleagues (2011) emphasised positive communication and working alliance.

Building on Hungarian traditions, our training was offered to married couples already working in pre-marriage counselling who can become influential role models and are able to share their own experience in couple relationship, and discuss it from the point of view of a wife or husband. Corresponding to expectations, these couples were mostly highly qualified lay people with strong religious commitment and the same ethnic and socioeconomic status as the participants. Some of them had already received some training from the pre-marriage counselling teams in their parishes while others were only self-educated volunteers for pre-marriage counselling work. In addition to lay couples, priests were also welcome to join the group, but experience in pre-marriage counselling was not required of them. Priests are in a strategic position concerning pre-marriage counselling, they control its organisation and content as well as the selection of participating couples, thus we considered it important that priests become acquainted with, accept and use the program.

5.1. The content and form of the facilitator training

The training is based on the previously developed pre-marriage counselling program, and participants go through the program to experience it and to familiarise themselves with the contents. The program is augmented with a separate module that prepares future facilitators for group leadership tasks.

The facilitator training is a curriculum and skill-based program; participants are thus provided with information on the functioning, psychodynamics, risks, care, and resources of marriage. However, to become a facilitator requires more than learning

the curriculum since facilitators should also be prepared for various other tasks such as moderating a group, creating a suitable learning environment for the group, being able to step out of the expert's role, and sharing their own relationship experience in the right moment and situation.

5.2. The testing of the facilitator training; implications of participants' reflections

The training consisted of six sessions and was sixty hours long. It was led by two psychologists experienced in pre-marriage counselling and couples therapy while the theology module was taught by an expert on the theology of the family. Participants included eight couples who had been married for more than ten years, and nine priests aged 30 to 55 years. Participants were asked to submit their reflections after each session about the contents, the group leaders' functioning and the usefulness of the methods.

Despite the small size of the sample, these reflections helped to revise parts of the program and raised some questions that are still to be answered. Participants found the topics of the program relevant, with the exception of conflict resolution, which was thought to be too early in pre-marriage counselling. Conflict resolution has always been part of relationship education, and is strongly related to marital satisfaction and the risk of divorce. However, both our pre-marriage counselling experience and empirical studies confirm that non-cohabiting couples preparing for marriage are not open to discussing conflicts (WHYLER & CHRISTENSEN 2002).

Concerning methods, reflections show that games and drawing activities used for icebreaking and building confidence in the group proved to be frustrating for those who had not taken part in training-like programs before. Many participants always found the discussions following the exercises too short; thus it seems that more time is needed for discussing the functions, possible effects, and applications of the exercises. Participants' opinion on the role of lectures in the program changed dramatically in the course of the training. Based on their previous experience of learning, they expected to listen to lectures and take notes, and were missing that after the first occasion. However, by the end of the training they had discovered that lectures were not effective in pre-marriage counselling, except in the case of certain topics such as sexuality or various theological issues.

As for our dilemmas about diversity, it is important to note that participants were concerned about religious differences, the problem of high-risk and cohabiting couples, but they did not miss the issue of disadvantaged or poorly educated couples. We suspect that these important questions were either not significant in their personal praxis, or they were able to handle these problems in private conversations.

In line with the literature, the feedback from participants underlined the importance of the presence of facilitator couples in the group as role models. It had also proved useful to have participants go through the entire pre-marriage counsel-

ling program since it helped them recall personal experiences in each module and strengthened in them a sense of the importance of sharing experiences and of the significance of skills training.

Despite their resistance to training methods at the beginning of the program, participants began to discover their community building effects. However, they felt unsure whether they were sufficiently prepared to lead similar training groups. In the future, more emphasis should be placed on the development of facilitators' leadership competencies. Although the number of young people preparing for marriage is too low in villages to form groups for them, pre-marriage counselling is probably more effective in groups in larger parishes, especially because there is a growing tendency of religiousness among highly qualified young people in towns and cities (TOMKA 2010).

The fact that priests and lay people took part in the program together was useful mainly for the priests. It confirmed for them the necessity to involve laity in pre-marriage counselling.

6. Conclusion

On the basis of our experience, the training program for facilitators in pre-marriage counselling is also suitable for facilitators in marriage strengthening programs, offering a solution to a dilemma which is also described in the literature (BRADBURY & FICHAM 1990). The training of facilitators for the two different relationship phases can be contracted, but the counselling programs for the two phase groups should be kept separate.

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