

BABEȘ–BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
Department of Reformed Theology and Music
Ecumene Doctoral School

PREMARITAL PREPARATION AND MARITAL ENRICHMENT
THEORY AND PRACTICE

THESYS
SUMMARY

SCIENTIFIC CO-ORDINATOR
DR. PROF. MOLNÁR JÁNOS
DR. HABIL. LÉSZAI LEHEL

DOCTORAL STUDENT
PÁL TÜNDE

Cluj
2022

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PREMARITAL PREPARATION AND MARITAL ENRICHMENT THEORY AND PRACTICE

Background to the Topic

In the six years of premarital preparation and the one-year follow-up exercise we have developed, it has become clear that regarding the issue of family and relationships it is now appropriate to formulate real problems and new proposals, because although we recognise and hold on to the values of marriage and family, we must recognise that these cannot be taken for granted in every life situation, as the quality of relationships is influenced equally by personal, interpersonal, family and social factors.

Positive change can be expected from the durability of marital relationships, their increased stability, and the appreciation of marriage as an institution. Increasing the durability and stability of marriages and reducing the incidence of divorce can only be an achievable social goal if the quality of marriages improves. The impact of the 2019 started pandemic - Covid19 - on marriages and family life has already been measured by several studies, and the results show that in well-functioning marriages, satisfaction increased, and maladaptive patterns decreased, while in dysfunctional marriages, dissatisfaction increased, and maladaptive patterns intensified. This confirms the earlier international finding, which is slowly gaining ground in domestic research, that there is a need to develop and operate preventive programmes to strengthen marriages in order to increase the quality and stability of marriages.

In this paper we present a premarital preparation and marriage strengthening programme we have developed, which deals with the healthy functioning of the family and marriage. The programme is based on the principles of prevention and progressive care and aims to provide participating couples with the tools to build lasting, satisfying relationships and increase the chances of maintaining a family unit based on these. We do this because, wherever dysfunction in the family system occurs, it is most often due to the dysfunctional marital relationship functioning, a relationship which is the basis of family life. Therefore, the primary need is to understand and help the functioning of couple relationships in order to maintain and strengthen marriages and thus the institution of the family.

The dissertation consists of three chapters.

In the first chapter of the dissertation, the biblical, theological and psychological concepts of marriage and family, their functions, development and functioning, as well as the objective (gender, age, family life cycle) and subjective (religiosity, personality traits, coping style, attachment style, maladaptive patterns, self-esteem) aspects of relationship satisfaction in marriages and relationships, and the issue of commitment are reviewed, highlighting the role of religiosity in strengthening and maintaining relationships. In the second chapter, we review the nature, history and planning of premarital preparation and marital enrichment, and the secular,

ecclesial services related to marriage. In the third one, the preventive importance of premarital preparation and aftercare in marital relationships and the theoretical background of family therapy are presented, as well as a practical, methodological description of the premarital preparation and aftercare developed by us.

1.The Concept of Marriage and Family

In the first chapter we reviewed the biblical, psychological concept of marriage and family.

Although the socio-cultural differences between the biblical tradition, the family model of the Old and New Testaments and the family model of our time are insurmountable, this tradition defines the image of Christian marriage and family, since marriage is a moral subsystem of the whole human reality, determined by the functioning of the family of origin and determining the functioning of the nuclear family. The Bible sets out theological teachings of a theological nature that are always valid even for today's man, without claiming to be exhaustive: the divine image, the responsibility to carry on with life, to which man and woman together are called to, caring for family members, respect for parents, which teaches us solidarity, the richness and importance of human relationships, the evangelical teaching of love. All this is also true in today's emotion-centred world of marriages and families, especially when compared with today's scientific view of marriage and the family.

According to the latter, the conjugal relationship is a socially recognised union with moral content, a psychosocial, sexual bond, the defining feature of the family's relational system. Its functioning influences the optimal functioning of the other subsystems, its physical, mental and spiritual well-being and its healthy development. Its quality affects all aspects of life, is linked to life satisfaction, is essential for achieving life goals, its self-fulfilment, increasing the capacity to struggle, positive attitudes and adaptability, and for creating and maintaining an inner/outer balance. Effective communication within the couple, flexible adaptability, and a balance between autonomy and belongingness together contribute to balanced couple and family functioning and satisfaction.

It is on this relationship that the family is built, a system of relationships that helps humanity to survive; a universal institution that exists in every society and culture, in constant contact with the ever-changing natural, social and cultural environment that surrounds it. Adaptation to change determines its function, its size, the permeability of its boundaries and its hierarchy. The family of our time is an open system of interacting, emotionally and materially interdependent persons whose basic task is to ensure permanence, change and development.

The constructs that determine the success of marriages are quality and stability. Stability is determined by the level of relationship satisfaction and commitment. Relationship satisfaction and quality are shaped by the interaction of objective and subjective predictors. The objective predictors, demographic data such as gender role, educational level, occupational status, age at marriage, time spent together, family of origin; the subjective factors: the personality type of the individuals forming the couple, coping styles, resilience, self-esteem, attachment style, relationship structure, maladaptive patterns influencing thinking, religiosity; the combined effect of these can strengthen or weaken couple functioning. The functionality and healthy functioning

of the family is determined not only by the success of the relationship but also by the successful coping with the challenges of individual and family life-cycle transitions and by family rituals. We felt it important to highlight that religiosity and its associated rites, through secular rites, give meaning to the marriage and life of family, placing it within the experiential reality of an encounter with the sacred.

2.Premarital Preparation and Marital Enrichment

In the second chapter, the condition, history of premarital preparation and marital enrichment, the secular and ecclesial services related to marriage, and a planning framework for premarital preparation and marital enrichment programmes were presented.

Premarital counselling and marital enrichment is a relationship-building, psychoeducational, preventive practice at the frontiers of psychology and practical theology that is gaining increasing attention worldwide and is suitable for reducing marital crises, managing crises, preventing divorce, strengthening families.

These prevention initiatives, proven to be effective in preventing marital problems and divorce, are supportive interventions that meet technical, scientific and ethical standards. By informing, educating, outlining options, facilitating participants' autonomous choices, they help those who are about to marry or are married to look at themselves, to take control of their own emotional life, to recognise how they are present and functioning in their own lives, respectively to be able to commit, to develop good, truly intimate relationships, to break down communication barriers and to acquire practised skills for married and family life according to their own life situation. The programme achieves these goals by identifying and working with areas of growth and challenges in relationships before problems become entrenched and destructive.

Marital preparation and marital enrichment programmes involve the acquisition of knowledge, the exploration of attitudes and values, and the development of skills, on the assumption that individuals and couples can learn to optimise their relationships, acquire specific skills to improve their relationship. Accordingly, premarital preparation and marital enrichment (hereafter PPME) programmes focus primarily on the dynamics of selected relationships - marital, parental, etc. - that benefit the partners and, on the relationships, they wish to maintain

Premarital preparation programmes were developed in the 1930s, and relationship development programmes in the early 1950s, on European initiatives in America, with the aim of strengthening the marriages of several couples at once. There are now hundreds of internationally recognized, multi-disciplinary, mostly religiously based, non-profit relationship-enriching and educational programmes for couples to strengthen and renew relationships. Most marital education programmes are based in some way on research conducted mainly by psychologists over the past thirty years, which highlights the central role that couples' interaction processes, communication patterns and problem-solving behaviours play in the stability of family relationships.

We have described the best available evidence-based programs, all of which (1) are theory and research based; (2) the programmes are evidence-based; (3) the programme is designed and implemented to meet the needs of participants; (4) includes a wide range of couples; (5) offers programmes at life-cycle transition points; (6) encourages early acknowledgement and assumption of relationship problems; and (7) enables accessibility. We have also outlined a useful logic model that systematically outlines the linkages between programme purpose, content, audience reached, and expected outcomes, providing a pattern for developing such programs. The planning framework outlined for the development and implementation of PPME programmes requires establishing the relevance of the programme, clarifying the objectives, identifying the resources, activities and target audiences needed to implement and sustain the programme, as well as identifying the intended impacts of the programme. Based on the logic model outlined, the overall framework for premarital preparation and aftercare includes the following three key areas:

(1) content, which has three sub-dimensions: skills, knowledge, observation attitudes, (2) the domain of motivation, values, virtues, (3) methods, which includes goal setting, personal strength of the person responsible for assisting, learning styles, follow-up and the short-, medium- and long-term impact of the programmes.

We have also sought to provide a thorough insight into the conceptual and methodological issues involved in evaluating and implementing such practices by presenting programmes that meet the needs of family life cycles.

3.Family Therapy Trends in the Context of Premarital Preparation and Marital Enrichment - Theory versus Practice

In chapter three, we reviewed the family therapy models that are behind the Three Ropes Family Centre's programmes.

From the psychodynamic viewpoint, we have incorporated primarily the object relations theory approach and the systemic approach to interpersonal relationships; from the transgenerational model, family systems theory and elements of contextual family therapy; from the experiential family therapy model, W. Satir's methods for communication and self-esteem enhancement , as well as elements of S. Johnson's emotionally focused therapy; from the structural model, the role of structures in determining family transactions; from the strategic model, family rules and relationship patterns; from the Milano model, the understanding of each other's perspectives, positive redefinition and the use of rituals; from the cognitive-behavioural model, cognitive restructuring, the interruption of negative patterns; from narrative therapy, the beneficial rewriting of the story line of their individual lives and relationships.

After an overview of family therapy models, the last section of the Three Ropes Family Centre's programmes introduced the Harmonizing – Premarital Preparation, an own integrative model designed to improve the relationship skills and quality of couples preparing for marriage. In the

six years since the programme was launched, 71 couples have attended the sessions and were not followed up for research, but all of them said at a family visit a year later that participation in the programme had helped their marital relationship to develop. The programmes were developed by combining the tools and techniques of pastoral care (prayer, Bible reading, forgiveness, ritual-ceremonial acts) and family therapy (discussion guidance and questioning techniques, genogram, behaviour-oriented exercises, externalisation, etc.).

In the theological part we have highlighted three aspects on which the human image of our helpers is based, since the helper's faith, his image of man, influences the outcome of the helping process: man is (1) a being created in the image of God, with individuality, with the power, freedom and responsibility to think and act; (2) capable of change, of perfection through the recognition of his fragility, thus having the possibility to realize his divinity; (3) through love in action. The Harmonizing – Premarital Preparation consists of five meetings with the couple and ten group meetings with no more than seven couples, divided into two sessions. The aim of the meetings with the couple is to raise awareness of intra-psychic conflicts, to help separation from the family of origin, to explore transgenerational patterns, relationship ethics and intergenerational missions, and to understand the marriage contract. Group sessions aim to understand gender and family roles, to recognise their communication style, conflict management techniques, to build secure emotional attachments by recognising and changing negative interaction patterns, to balance boundaries between subsystems, to discuss individual and common goals, and in addition to these, breaking negative patterns, learning new relationship skills, transferring skills, knowledge and values necessary to run satisfying relationships.

Summary

By creating the Three Ropes Family Centre, we try to respond to the challenges of the transformation of marriages and religiosity. Romania's family policy, although reference is made to the importance of the family in the introduction to the government programme, is limited to the definition of social support. There is no interest on the part of the political authorities in premarital preparation, counselling and marital enrichment programmes and services, so that in Transylvania family support and strengthening programmes have fallen within the competence of the churches. So far, however, there has been no formal effort to develop a highly professionally premarital preparation and aftercare framework to integrate the conceptual framework. In Sfântu Gheorghe, we have been working on setting up such a service, with the support of the municipality from 2021. We are convinced that the family is the most suitable institution to transmit values and build society. Extensive research has shown that the spiritual, moral, religious and social norms represented by the family determine the health and well-being of the individual, but also influence the development of identifiable values in society and the functioning of society. With this in mind, our aim was to develop a new service model that could strengthen families so that spirituality can be experienced within the family.

Our future task will be to develop and use web-based programmes based on our experience during the Covid19 outbreak, to raise awareness of the preventive nature and strength of these

programmes, and to investigate whether children of couples participating in PPME programmes benefit in the areas of life quality and life management.

Keywords

marriage preparation, marriage enrichment, marriage stability, marriage quality, life cycle, metodological issues of marriage preparation, practical theology, reliogisity, marriage therapy