

Toward Identification of Strategies to Strengthen the Family Unit

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This study compares levels of couple agreement about positive and satisfying features of their relationship as reported by a remarried sample (n = 70) couples and a more general sample of couples largely in their first marriage or committed de facto relationship (n = 100 couples). The ENRICH inventory (Olson et al., 1982) was used with the general sample and the ENRICH-Anew inventory (Schultz & Schultz, 1987) was used for the remarried sample, thereby providing the measures of positive couple agreement, which can in turn serve as indicators for strengthening family relationships. There were no statistically significant differences between the two samples, indicating commonalities in stresses and strengths experienced by the two samples. However, there are suggestions in the data that issues related to children and parenting were subject to lower levels of agreement for the remarried couples. The comparison couples produced lower levels of agreement in the areas of conflict resolution and relating to partner's family and friends.

Keywords: Stresses, strengths, couple relationships, remarriage, family well-being.

Since the Family Law Act 1975 came into operation at the beginning of 1976, Australian society has witnessed a large increase in the number and percentage of persons not only divorcing, but also reentering marriage as divorced grooms and brides. In the decade following the enactment of the Family Law Act 1975, there has been a 300% increase in the number of brides and grooms previously divorced. Whereas in 1971, 86.2% of all marriages registered in Australia were first marriages for both partners, fifteen years later the percentage of first marriages for both partners had declined to 66.7% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1987). In 1987, 21.6% of grooms and of brides were marrying after a previous divorce. Of the 47,385 previously divorced persons marrying again in 1987, 50.4% of males and 54.4% of females married a partner who had also been previously divorced. In recent years, almost one third of all marriages registered in Australia involve partners one or both of whom have been previously married. (ABS, 1987).

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Unfortunately statistics are not available on the number of previously divorced brides and grooms who are parents when they enter a second marriage. However, parental status for many is likely, given that divorces most frequently occur in the first 15 years of marriage - the childbearing years. For example, 67% of couples obtaining a divorce in 1985 had been married less than 14 years. Of the 32,022 divorces granted in 1985 to couples who had been married less than 20 years, 19,473 of those divorces involved children under the age of 18 years (ABS, 1985).

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Since persons who divorce tend to reenter marriage or a de facto relationship it may be assumed that many such marriages or relationships do involve children. In 1987, 70% of remarrying males and 63.7% of remarrying females had been divorced within the previous four years. What is apparent from these figures is that in spite of earlier divorce, marriage is still highly regarded. Furthermore, for a large number of couples entering a second marriage, there are children from a previous marriage involved in the reconstituted family.

Very little research has been undertaken in Australia into the experiences of couples in second marriages. Such research would seem to be of pressing importance in view of the high incidence of second divorces. For instance, within ten years of marrying for a second time, 21.4% of men and 31.8% of women have divorced again, compared with 18.7% of men and 18.5% of women who have divorced within ten years of marrying for the first time (McDonald, 1983). In 1985, 77% of the men and 76% of the women obtaining a second or subsequent divorce were doing so within the first nine years of the second marriage. Only 42% of the men and women obtaining a divorce for the first time in 1985 were married less than ten years (ABS, 1985).

Moreover, research is needed to ascertain the strengths and coping skills of couples in general, to identify factors which might serve to preserve marriages and to isolate the problem areas which precipitate marital breakdown (Craddock, 1988; Schultz & Schultz, 1987; Schultz, Schultz & Olson, 1990). Obviously, many first married couples are successful in achieving a satisfying relationship, as are others following an earlier divorce. Knowledge of the strengths and stresses which couples possess may encourage other couples to discover and develop their own relational strengths and work areas.

Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) described categories depicting former spousal relationships ranging from "perfect pals", "cooperative colleagues", "angry associates", "fiery foes", and "dissolved duos". It is not uncommon for couples, who at some stage "may contemplate murder but never divorce", to experience fluctuations between the perfect pals and fiery foes categories. Identification of problem areas will assist in the development of approaches designed to foster satisfying relationships, to strengthen family bonds, and to alleviate the effects of marital disruption on children (Ochiltree, 1988).

Well-established measuring instruments, which tap the unique and special needs and concerns of couples, whether married, remarried, in de facto relationships, or preparing for marriage, are now available to aid in this process of problem identification, whilst simultaneously providing a relationship profile which also reflects the positive features of the partnership. Examples of such instruments are PREPARE, PREPARE-MC (Marriage with Children) and ENRICH (Olson et al., 1977, 1982), and ENRICH-Anew (Schultz, 1986). The Schultz study contributed to Olson's recent revisions of PREPARE-MC (1986), making this instrument particularly pertinent for use in Australia.

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A recent study of remarried couples utilising the ENRICH-Anew instrument (Schultz & Schultz, 1987) found that sexual intimacy is a very strong resource for remarried couples. It was the area of their relationship which produced the highest levels of couple agreement as to this being a positive and satisfying feature of their relationship relative to eleven other

dimensions of relationship concern.

The dimension which produced the lowest levels of positive agreement was the Children and Parenting category, which is concerned with how partners view issues related to parenting in their reconstituted families.

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Schultz and Schultz commented that these findings indicate that the remarried couples "...had succeeded in giving priority to their own intimate relationship, achieving a high level of satisfaction in this area in spite of minimal agreement in the area of children and parenting" (1987, p.66). These results are consistent with those reported by Knaub, Hanna and Stinnett (1984) and Markman (1981). The aim of the present study is to compare the patterns of results obtained by Schultz and Schultz for remarried couples with a more general sample of couples which largely comprises couples in their first marriage or first committed de facto relationship.

This comparison is made with a view to providing a description of the similarities and differences between the two groups which might serve to illustrate both the unique and common areas of relationship strengths and stresses for married and remarried couples. Such data may be of value to couples themselves, to marriage and family counsellors and, in particular, to couples and helpers working in preventative enrichment programs or premarital preparation programs.

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METHOD

Subjects

The remarried group comprised 70 couples and was drawn from a study conducted in Melbourne, which examined relationship issues of couples in blended families (Schultz, 1986). The general comparison group was an Australia-wide sample of 100 couples chosen at random from the pool of couples who have completed ENRICH, the data being obtained from the central scoring and computing system used for this measuring instrument. Whereas the 70 Victorian couples were either from "simple" or "complex" stepfamilies (Spanier & Furstenberg, 1982), only 13% of the couples in the Australia-wide sample were formerly divorced, formerly widowed, married but separated, or other than first married/living together. The mean age for the remarried couples was 40.2 (SD = 8.57) and the mean number of children was 1.87. The remarried sample had a total of 111 subjects who were parents prior to the present relationship.

Materials and Procedure

Details of the procedure followed for collecting data on ENRICH-Anew from the remarried sample are to be found in Schultz and Schultz (1987), along with a brief description of the instrument. ENRICH-Anew was developed from ENRICH (Olson et al., 1982) which has been widely used for couple assessment of marriage or de facto relationships; ENRICH-Anew was developed from ENRICH (Olson et al., 1982) which has been widely used for couple assessment of marriage or de facto relationships; ENRICH-Anew was a modified version, designed to take into account the unique nature of stepfamilies. The modifications to ENRICH (eg, the subscale Marital Satisfaction was replaced by a new subscale Adjustments; subscales Marital Cohesion and Marital Adaptability were replaced by another new subscale Former Attachments), and revisions to items (e.g., substituting the word "stepparent" for "parent")

Table 1: Comparison on Couple Agreement Scores

Category		Remarried Group (n=70)	Comparison Group (N=100)	t	p
Personality Issues	Mean	5.21	3.25	0.870	ns
	S.D.	2.68	2.39		
Communication	Mean	5.34	4.10	0.543	ns
	S.D.	2.59	2.87		
Conflict Resolution	Mean	5.66	3.92	0.728	ns
	S.D.	2.93	2.78		
Financial Management	Mean	5.61	4.70	0.364	ns
	S.D.	3.20	3.04		
Leisure Activity	Mean	6.00	4.86	0.523	ns
	S.D.	2.46	2.29		
Sexual Relationship	Mean	7.61	5.38	0.961	ns
	S.D.	2.10	3.28		
Children & Parenting	Mean	3.73	4.55	0.349	ns
	S.D.	2.52	2.99		
Family & Friends	Mean	5.26	4.65	0.280	ns
	S.D.	2.50	2.23		
Equalitarian Roles	Mean	7.03	5.57	0.765	ns
	S.D.	1.69	1.95		
Religious Orientation	Mean	5.84	4.61	0.505	ns
	S.D.	2.75	3.19		

are fully documented elsewhere, including detailed information on subscales, reliability, and validity (Schultz, 1986). For details of ENRICH, see the PREPARE-ENRICH Counsellor's manual (Olson et al., 1982). Other dimensions common to the two instruments include Personality Issues, Communication, Conflict Resolution, Financial management, Leisure Activities, Sexual Relationship, Children and Parenting, Family and Friends, Roles, Religion and Values, and Idealistic Distortion.

Couples comprising the Australia-wide comparison sample elected to complete ENRICH to provide themselves with a basis for assessing their relationships. There are many couples throughout Australia who take advantage of this means of assessing their partnership. Generally, the administration of the instrument is a

private arrangement made through a fully qualified PREPARE-ENRICH administrator. Many Australian marriage celebrants now have this qualification. Both inferential and descriptive statistical analyses of the data were carried out, the latter providing the most interesting insights into the differences between the two samples.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although t-tests using the Cochran-Cox method demonstrated no statistically significant differences between groups for Couple Agreement scores on the Various dimensions (See Table 1), a comparison of the rank ordering of dimensions across the two groups provides an interesting description of similarities and differences (see Table 2).

Generally, the remarried sample shows higher means for Couple Agreement scores (Table 2) the only exception to this occurring on the Children and Parenting dimension. The higher the mean score, the higher the Couple Agreement; therefore, overall Couple Agreement tended to be greater for the remarried subjects than those in the comparison group. The one exception is reflected in the rank-ordering of the Children and Parenting dimension by the remarried subjects. In summarising literature on repartnering and stepfamilies, Ochiltree (1988) referred to the constraints where children are involved, which make these relationships quite different from first marriages. There seems little doubt that this is an area requiring close attention in order to diminish stresses and overcome the complexities involved.

More specifically, the profile of similarities and differences, which emerges from examination of the rankings based on mean couple agreement scores, can be summarised as follows: the categories of Leisure Activities, Personality, Communication, Sexual Relationship, and Equalitarian Roles receive similar rankings by both groups, with Financial management and Religious Orientation also being ranked similarly by both groups. Noticeable differences, however, occur on the dimensions of Children and Parenting, Family and Friends, and Conflict Resolution. Whereas there is less agreement between partners in the remarried sample on Children and Parenting and Family and Friends categories, the Conflict Resolution category elicits less agreement for the general sample couples. Thus, on the basis of this comparative study, these three areas contain issues which are the most likely to differentiate between the two groups.

The results further suggest that issues of common concern to both groups have to do with matters of personality, (e.g., "Sometimes my partner is too stubborn"; "Sometimes I have difficulty dealing with my partner's moodiness"), parenting, (e.g., "I am not satisfied with the way we

each handle our responsibilities as parents/stepparents"; "We agree on how to discipline our children/stepchildren") and communication, (e.g., "It is very easy for me to express my true feelings to my partner"; I am very satisfied with how my partner and I talk with each other").

The finding about communication fits with the subjective experience of those working with couples in identifying work areas for relationship-building. **Invariably, difficulties in communication are perceived as barriers to achieving a satisfying relationship.** The need for communication skill development is readily recognised, moreover, by couples who are eager to enhance their relationship.

It is interesting to note that the couples in both samples designated Sexual Relationship, Leisure Activities, and Equalitarian Roles as areas of relatively high couple agreement. Larsen and Olson (in press) found the latter two scales of the PREPARE premarital inventory were the most predictive of marital satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

The present data support the view that there are both commonalities as well as unique differences in stresses and strengths experienced by the two samples, which have been the focus of this investigation. The patterns described give some indication of issues that are likely to emerge as of considerable importance to couple relationships, irrespective of marital status. The study, furthermore, illustrates the resources available to both couples and professionals who wish to identify stresses and strengths in a relationship by means of reliable and valid assessment measures. In revisions made to PREPARE-MC (Olson, 1986), the subscale Realistic Expectations includes nine of the items from the ENRICH-Anew subscales of Adjustment and Former Attachments. The inclusion of ENRICH-Anew items, together with other changes made to PREPARE-MC, can be expected to strengthen its usefulness as a tool for marriage preparation. Moreover, as has been demonstrated, data obtained by these means provide a basis for the development of strategies designed to strengthen the family unit.

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Table 2 : Rank Order Comparison using Mean Couple Agreement Scores

Category	Group Rankings		Rank Difference
	Remarried	Comparison	
Personality	9	10	1
Communication	7	8	1
Conflict Resolution	5	9	4
Financial Management	6	4	2
Leisure Activities	3	3	0
Sexual Relationship	1	2	1
Children & Parenting	10	7	3
Family & Friends	8	5	3
Equalitarian Roles	2	1	1
Religious Orientation	4	6	2

Note: Spearman rank order correlation = 0.722, N=10, .01 < p < .05