

COUPLE RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION CONTENT:  
WHAT WE HAVE AND WHAT WE ARE MISSING

By

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COUPLE RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION CONTENT:  
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Abstract: Through an inductive content analysis of 15 different Couple relationship education (CRE) programs, this study explored various content categories and themes that are common across programs. Analysis found four common themes across programs: relationship skills and abilities, the self in the relationship, partner bonding, and relationship motivations. These findings suggest a primacy of teaching relationship skills and abilities within CRE, though other themes are also taught in various programs. To increase efficacy of CRE, expansion into individual and relational contextual factors, relationship interaction patterns, and relationship virtues and flourishing are warranted based on recent and historical research.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Couple relationship education (CRE) programs have been an important part of relationship science for many years and are one valuable method of disseminating research findings to the public. Programs encourage relationship enhancement and enrichment and have shown to help improve relationship outcomes, resulting in decreased breakup or divorce and a reduced likelihood of intimate partner violence (Moore et al., 2018). Attending CRE is correlated with couples having positive attitudes towards and more willingness to seek out professional services (e.g., couples therapy) in the future (Doss et al., 2009; Williamson et al., 2018; Williamson et al., 2014). CRE programs are one mechanism through which couples can receive both knowledge and resources to better their relationships. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen what aspects of CRE are most beneficial for improving relationships.

Much research has been conducted on best practices for CRE programs. Stanley and colleagues' (2020) review of multiple studies on CRE programs outlined current best practices in areas such as format, dose, approach, training of educators, recruitment, overcoming barriers, etc. Each area contributes to robust programs that are able to reach the greatest number of people with the greatest efficacy and long-term benefits. However, not all CRE programs are created equally, and many teach different areas of content, though the majority teach some form of communication skills (e.g., listening and problem solving; Stanley et al., 2020). Within the field

of relationship science, much is known about what makes relationships healthy or unhealthy, so helping couples learn and apply aspects of healthy relationships could help increase relationship stability and satisfaction. As content can determine much of what couples learn from CRE programs, understanding what programs teach is an essential part of refining current and future programs. Based on current efficacy studies, calls for new direction in CRE have arisen (see Fawcett et al., 2010; Hawkins et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2020), which begs for greater understanding of what is already being taught.

The aim of this study is to determine what common and unique concepts and strategies are taught in a variety CRE programs. This study uses qualitative inductive content analysis to examine similarities and differences in content taught across programs, looking for common categories and themes. This analysis will provide insight into areas of relationship functioning that are consistently focused on and other areas that, given more contemporary foci in the literature, may require greater attention.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

CRE programs have been present in secular society for nearly 100 years with government and community support dating back to the 1950s (Hawkins et al., 2016). Throughout research on CRE, important areas studied have included effectiveness, format, dose, training for facilitators, recruitment, gains over time, mechanisms of change, etc. (see Hawkins et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2020). This literature review will outline the effectiveness of CRE programs, proposed mechanisms of change, debates surrounding these proposals, and end with a focus on why educational content matters for CRE programs, outlining the importance of the current study.

#### **Effectiveness of CRE**

There is empirical evidence, across many studies and multiple meta-analyses, that CRE programs can positively benefit individuals in couple relationships, resulting in improved communication outcomes, greater relationship stability and satisfaction, and better individual and couple functioning (see Arnold & Beelman, 2019; Blanchard et al., 2009; Fawcett et al., 2010; Fincham & Beach, 2010a; Halford & Simons, 2005; Hawkins & Erickson, 2015; Hawkins et al., 2004; Hawkins et al., 2008; Markman & Rhoades, 2012; Spencer & Anderson, 2021; Stanley et al., 2020). Couples that are considered at-risk (including low SES, familial instability, infidelity, cohabitation before commitment to marriage, etc.) can benefit the most from CRE (Stanley et al., 2020) and, as such, the purpose of CRE is different for different groups (Wadsworth & Markman, 2012). A focus on relationship skills to prevent events such as domestic violence or divorce is

helpful for high-risk groups while low-risk groups benefit more from education that aims to prevent relationship deterioration over time (such as a focus on relationship awareness; Wadsworth & Markman, 2012). CRE programs can benefit couples in both high- and low-risk groups, potentially leading to lower relationship dissolution (Moore et al., 2018).

Multiple formats of CRE have demonstrated empirical support, with recent research highlighting the efficacy of online programs, convenient for groups with accessibility barriers due to childcare, work constraints, etc. (Spencer & Anderson, 2021). Traditional in-person formats as well as mixed formats with effective facilitator involvement and self-directed modalities have also shown to benefit couples in multiple countries and allow for programs to reach a wider audience (Bradford et al., 2012; Duncan et al., 2009; Halford et al., 2010; McAllister et al., 2012; Zemp et al., 2017). Though some programs rely on court- or government-referred participation, couples who self-refer have an increased likelihood of retaining gains from CRE over time (gains persisted until the 3.5-month follow-up for self-referred couples; Conradi et al., 2018).

Though research has supported the efficacy of CRE programs, the field of relationship education remains, however, unresolved. Though many studies show support for individual or couple change related to CRE attendance (Stanley et al., 2020), other studies have found that programs have little to no impact on the individuals or couples that attend (Hawkins & Erickson, 2015; Rhoades, 2015). Suggestions for why programs lack efficacy include decreased focus on communication compared to other programs (Rhoades, 2015) as well as curricula failing to address specific group needs (e.g., low-income couples; Hawkins & Erickson, 2015). One of the most notable developments in the uncertainty of the effectiveness of CRE programs is the government-funded Building Strong Families (BSF) initiative (Wood et al., 2014). These programs failed to obtain their central objectives and, in some instances, even led to negative effects with their desired outcomes (Wood et al., 2014). However, a meta-analysis on the very same programs (combined with the Supporting Healthy Marriages initiative) found small but

statistically significant changes in improved communication skills, increased marital satisfaction, and decreased relationship aggression (Hawkins & Erickson, 2015). Thus, uncertainty on effectiveness of CRE programs abounds, even when looking at the same programs.

It is also hypothesized that the positive effects found in meta-analyses of CRE programs over-estimate effects due to publication bias; published articles often show greater effect than unpublished articles, though both are important to the current understanding of the effects of CRE programs (Hawkins et al., 2008). A final issue with CRE programs is the tendency for samples to over-represent White, heterosexual, middle-class couples with little understanding of how such programs impact minority, LGBTQ+, or low-income couples, though the latter group consistently show lower healthy relationship outcomes and higher levels of dissolution (Johnson, 2012). These conflicting research findings beg for continued research on CRE and how they can become more effective for attendees. Findings also suggest that a better understanding on how diverse couples' function in diverse circumstances (e.g., collectivistic vs. individualistic cultures, different SES groups, etc.) is needed in order to update and better tailor curriculum to the specific needs of those who participate.

### **Mechanisms of Change**

Along with uncertainty about the effectiveness of CRE programs, the mechanisms of change have long been investigated in the field. In looking at aspects of CRE that contribute to improved outcomes, studies have shown that multiple factors are important. To begin with, a healthy alliance between instructors and couples aids in increased positive communication and dedication as well as decreased negative communication (Quirk et al., 2014). One study found that having multiple facilitators, with at least one male and one female of similar education level to participants is most beneficial for couples and resulted in higher assessment of facilitator quality (Bradford et al., 2012). Further, in group formats, a group alliance helps to increase

dedication due to a healthy social support and in-group interaction (Quirk et al., 2014). Relationship hope is also linked to improved outcomes from CRE programs (Hawkins et al., 2017). Those who showed the most improvement in interaction skills compared to pre-intervention assessment often began with the lowest levels of hope, indicating that CRE can increase skills which can increase relationship hope (Hawkins et al., 2017). Moreover, as CRE programs often teach couples how to better interact with one another, improved dyadic coping also contributes to better relationship adjustment, which can enhance relationship functioning post-intervention (Mitchell et al., 2015). Individual factors such as personal extroversion also contribute to increased outcomes with CRE whether programs are in-person or self-directed (Duncan & Rogers, 2019).

Research on mechanisms of change in CRE has also included various moderators including participant characteristics, couple risk dynamics, and external contexts (Duncan & Rogers, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2015; Wadsworth & Markman, 2012). According to one study, relationship education is most beneficial for women who have higher relationship dissatisfaction at the beginning of a program (Carlson et al., 2017) and, in another, for distressed couples (Bradford et al., 2017). These findings suggest that improvements related to CRE are more likely when participants have current deficits in their relationship or more to gain in skills, attitudes, motivations, etc. Overall, multiple mechanisms of change and moderators, which influence outcomes, have been suggested, with research pointing to various characteristics of the individual and the couple.

### **Competing Frameworks**

When looking at the mechanisms of change as well as the effectiveness of certain techniques within CRE, a foundation of both is the content that programs teach to participants. Research from nearly 20 years ago suggests three main areas that relationship education programs

focus on: relationship skills, awareness/knowledge/attitudes, and motivations/virtues (Hawkins et al., 2004), though most current programs consistently focus on communication skills and processes (Stanley et al., 2020). Stanley and colleagues (2020) suggest that both research in the field and participants of CRE support an emphasis on communication, expectations, and commitment, though many programs include content in a variety of other areas. Additional research suggests that communication and problem-solving skills are necessary to CRE programs due to the relationship between communication skills and relationship outcomes (Fawcett et al., 2010). Furthermore, a meta-analytical study found that communication skills appear to improve more than relationship quality as a result of CRE programs, with minimal diminishing effects at 3- and 6-month follow-ups, leading the investigators to conclude that changes in communication may not be a reliable predictor of changes in relationship quality. (Hawkins et al., 2008).

While many programs teach relationship skills (such as communication and conflict resolution; Hawkins et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2020), whether skills-based learning is effective and necessary for CRE programs is still unclear. For example, in a study of three different CRE programs, it was found that the skills-based programs and relationship awareness programs (which promote consistent monitoring of the relationship) contributed to similar, lower rates of dissolution than no-intervention groups (Rogge et al., 2013). Rogge and colleagues (2013) suggest that some CRE programs have unintended consequences such as highlighting relationship skill deficits to individuals and couples which could incite doubt in the relationship and in relationship maintenance behaviors. However, other studies have shown that CRE programs are, indeed, effective in teaching skills such as communication and problem-solving (Blanchard et al., 2009; Hawkins et al., 2008). Whether those new skills are the mechanism of change and lead to more relationship stability is uncertain as some programs do not end up altering the behaviors that were the targets of change (Rogge et al., 2013). Nevertheless, some believe that improved

communication leads to changes in other family processes (alliance, closeness, cohesion, etc.) which may be subsequent mechanisms of change (Wadsworth & Markman, 2012).

An alternative perspective suggested by Rogge and colleagues (2013) is that CRE programs raise relationship awareness, which results in greater focus on the relationship including improved relationship maintenance. It is hypothesized that this enhanced awareness is ultimately the way to prevent relationship deterioration over time (Rogge et al., 2013). Other experts suggest that increasing positive interactions and decreasing negative interactions leads to couples having a greater motivation to stay in their relationship, which, in turn, leads to couples rating higher relationship satisfaction due to the increase in commitment (Rauer et al., 2014). The effectiveness of communication skills in CRE (specifically the speaker-listener technique) was studied by Owen and colleagues (2013), and results indicated that couples who were taught specific communication skills had increased positive communication even six months later.

Though most CRE programs do focus on communication skills, multiple programs have intentionally incorporated other unique elements. For example, ELEVATE, a fairly new program within the field, has an emphasis on self-care due to its well-studied influence on relationships (McGill et al., 2021). Further, content specific to blended or stepfamilies added to programs targeting these groups allow for greater program efficacy among participants (Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2012). Halford and colleagues (2008) have also extended the call to adapt CRE content to address couples' needs across various life stages, but whether programs have been successful in doing that is lacking in the research.

Though some break from the communication model typical of CRE programs, emphasis on other topical areas is especially important for diverse groups. Researchers have called for broader content focus for increased efficacy (Rauer et al., 2014) while others claim that the diversity in content is positive in some ways while also noting that diverse programs are often not

grounded in theory or research (Markman & Rhoades, 2012). As such, it is suggested that CRE content expansion be grounded first in theory then in research for greatest efficacy based on the current understandings of relationship science and trends (Rauer et al., 2014).

Specific research on theories that CRE programs are based on is limited, though some theories are used across multiple programs. Behavioral theory of change and social learning theory are two theories that aspects of CRE have worked from, either intentionally or unintentionally (Hawkins et al., 2017; Rauer et al., 2014). As most CRE programs teach skills in an attempt to change relationship behaviors, it is clear that researchers have been at least partially successful in working from a behavioral model, as improved relationship skills (i.e., increased positive behaviors and decreased negative behaviors) have, in many cases, facilitated increased commitment and improved outcomes (Rauer et al., 2014).

A final competing framework is a focus on relationship flourishing (e.g., meaning, relationship giving, etc.) and virtues (e.g., forgiveness, sacrifice, etc.; Fincham & Beach, 2010b; Fowers, 2000). Although a strong exposition of the theoretical underpinnings of the flourishing movement is still being developed (Fowers & Owenz, 2010), Fowers and colleagues (2021) proposed a theoretical model on relationship virtues that provides guidance for future studies. Key to this framework is the understanding that virtues and flourishing provide vitality to individuals and relationships that supersedes a narrow focus on the traditional variables of satisfaction and stability (Fowers et al., 2021). Considering other well-established social science theories or frameworks as well as more recent research in the field when developing or managing CRE could benefit the recipients.

### **Current Study**

Overall, research on CRE programs is unclear as to their effectiveness, though many mechanisms of change and competing frameworks have been presented in previous research.

Recent trends in relationship science beg for greater efficacy of CRE in order to benefit individuals and couples that partake in programs, though a continued focus on communication skills may not be as efficacious as originally hypothesized. Multiple areas of CRE require further research and understanding, but this study aims to fill the gap of research on content of CRE programs by clarifying which content is or is not being widely utilized.



## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this content analysis was to discover what couple relationship education programs teach and what is missing from the programs. In doing so, the authors followed Mayring's (2000) approach to inductive content analysis which includes three steps: 1) determine the material to be analyzed, 2) narrow content down to categories, and 3) establish themes. Inductive content analysis allows for categories and themes to be drawn directly from the data instead of from pre-conceived categories and themes from other literature or research (Cho & Lee, 2014).

Following step one of Mayring's (2000) approach, this content analysis obtained curriculum from 23 different CRE programs. Programs were found through Google and Google scholar searches, Smart Marriages' "Directory of Programs," and through contacts with CRE experts. The instructional and/or curriculum materials for all programs were purchased, generously donated by authors, and/or found online for free.

For the purpose of this study, programs were included if they have had any peer-reviewed research performed on them, though some programs which did not have completed research were not necessarily excluded. This inclusion criteria allows the analysis to focus on those programs that have been given attention in the literature, which often represents programs that researchers of CRE are most often aware of. Additionally, programs were excluded if they did not have

training or manuals for facilitators. The purpose of this exclusion criteria is to focus on facilitated programs because they are more frequently adopted by groups aiming to impact relationships, have a longer history within relationship science, and are often more researched than other programs. Although online courses are becoming more common (Spencer & Anderson, 2021), they have not represented the last 50 years of relationship education that this study seeks to evaluate. Further, other self-help programs including books, articles, and websites are beyond the scope of this type of study.

From the 23 initial programs identified, this inclusion and exclusion criteria narrowed the focus of this research down to 15 programs. Table 1 shows the programs included in this study, listed authors, whether the programs have had peer-reviewed research articles, and the intended dosage of each program. It is worth noting that intended dosage impacts the amount of material that each program can teach to participants. A 12-hour program has the ability to go through much more content than a 4-hour program, though these dosage differences are not mentioned throughout the rest of the analysis.

Once the programs were obtained, university graduate and undergraduate research assistants (reviewers) were recruited to review and collect data on the content of the programs. Within each program, assistants identified what content was to be taught, including key concepts, skills, abilities, and attributes as well as definitions for these items in the various programs. Different sections of each program were analyzed individually as some CRE programs contain material across many topics. These collections of data were later reviewed by the first author for consistency and quality to control for differences in program reviewers. Secondary reviews by the first author were conducted for programs and sections that were missing details from the reviewers' data collection process.

Following this gathering and narrowing of program content, the first author met with three graduate-level research assistants (analysts; none of which had participated in the data collection) and instructed them on the open coding inductive method to be used for analysis. Through open coding, the large amount of data can be narrowed down to common categories (Crowley & Delfico, 1996) which meets the goal of this content analysis. The three analysts then individually read through the collected data to determine labels for emergent categories (step two; Mayring, 2000) discussed across programs and were instructed not to communicate with each other about what they found.

Upon individually identifying labels, the three analysts met in a group with the first author to discuss their individual categories and category labels. The analysts and author then compared the analysts' results and categories with one another to find the most consistent and accurate category labels across the CRE programs (e.g., "love exchange" is listed below as a content category though one assistant initially labelled it as "love bank", another as "need fulfillment", and the third as "expression of love"). Combining categories allowed the analysts and author to decide on categories that were logical to all four individuals and were more succinct than the analysts' original labels.

Upon deciding on the combined category labels, the three analysts went through a list of all of the categories found and determined categories that connected to one another. These connected categories then became the coherent, common themes (step three; Mayring, 2000) that are present in the next section. Finally, theme titles were decided on to encompass the categories and connections between categories. These titles were discussed by the analysts and authors until an agreement was reached as to the best way to summarize the categories within each theme. Category labels and theme titles were later defined or operationalized by the first author and are presented in the next section.

## **Trustworthiness**

Although specific measures of trustworthiness are not universally given for qualitative analysis, this study utilized methods to ensure trustworthiness of the results throughout the research process. The use of multiple reviewers throughout the data analysis process allowed individuals to cross-check their analysis with others and, together, determine categories and themes. This use of multiple reviewers addresses the need for credibility of data (Cho & Lee, 2014). Further, the researchers openly discussed their own biases and previous experiences with the relationship education programming.

One notable bias of the authors is the belief that CRE should expand to include additional areas beyond skill-building such as flourishing, virtues, and individual functioning. Overall, authors see CRE as something to be expanded to be theoretically rich and to encompass diverse groups and individuals. The main way that this bias was managed was by having non-author reviewers and analysts participate in the bulk of the data analysis. This allowed the categories and themes to not be impacted by the author bias.

Reviewers and analysts within the data analysis process had minimal experience with CRE programming, though all have varying educational experience within family and relationship sciences. All analysts and authors have studied Marriage and Family Therapy and were either current master-level students or professors within a Human Development and Family Science department.

## CHAPTER IV

### DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The results of this study suggest that CRE programs focus on four main thematic content areas including skills and abilities, the self in the relationship, partner bonding, and relationship motivations. Each section below outlines each theme and includes categorical descriptions of material taught within various programs, though not all programs with content in each category are included in the narrative. Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 detail all programs included within each theme and category.

#### **Theme One: Skills and Abilities**

All 15 programs analyzed contained various skills and abilities. A skill or ability within CRE can be defined as capacities that can be learned by couples or individuals to maintain the health of the relationship. Categories within this theme include conflict management, communication, problem-solving, and dyadic coping. Table 2 shows all the programs that included each category within skills and abilities.

Conflict management, ways that couples are able to notice and healthily respond to coming and/or on-going conflict both behaviorally and emotionally, included different elements in 14 programs. PREP teaches about communication danger signs and time-outs. PAIRS teaches constructive conflict, emotional stages of conflicts, and time-outs. Couple LINKS discusses managing resentment towards one's partner. Couples Connecting Mindfully teaches conflict patterns, self-regulation, and time-outs. ELEVATE discusses navigating emotions during conflict,

body responses to conflict threats, and compromise. Hold Me Tight teaches de-escalation techniques for current, past, and future arguments.

Communication skills, tools, and abilities were also taught in 14 of the programs analyzed. Couple CARE teaches about identifying one's own communication patterns and self-disclosure. Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work discusses Gottman's Four Horseman, body language, and repair. Safe Conversations: The Toolbox for Couples describes the importance of respecting partner's boundaries during communication, taking turns during discussions, using I-statements, paraphrasing, and mirroring. Couples Communication, a communication skills-based program, teaches communication styles and the awareness wheel as important foundations for healthy communication. Relationship Enhancement: A Program for Couples describes empathetic listening skills as a way to have healthier communication. PREP and Couples Coping Enhancement Training both teach the Speaker-Listener Technique as a way for couples to consistently navigate healthy communication.

Problem solving, defined as overcoming disagreements in the relationship, was evident in Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, Couples Coping Enhancement Training, and Couple Communication. Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work discussed compromise and processing grievances as ways to solve solvable problems. Couples Coping Enhancement Training discusses focusing on facts and solutions, perspective-taking, communicating needs, willingness to compromise, and justice and fairness as important aspects of problem-solving and provides steps for efficiency.

Finally, dyadic coping was included in PREPARE/ENRICH and Couples Coping Enhancement Training, both describing how couples can cope with life stressors together as a partnership. Overall, relationship skills were discussed in each program, verifying the primacy of skills-based training within current CRE programming.

## **Theme Two: Self in the Relationship**

All 15 programs also incorporated programming on the self in the relationship. In this case, the self in the relationship is defined as fixed or flexible elements that an individual brings to the relationship. Categories within this theme include expectations, emotional intelligence, family of origin, personality, self-care, mindfulness, personal strengths, and stress management. Table 3 shows all the programs that included each category within this theme.

Expectations, in six different programs, included instruction in various areas of understanding and managing expectations. Hold Me Tight emphasizes identifying reasonable expectations to create a secure attachment with one's partner. SYMBIS discusses expectations in multiple contexts, including what individuals can and cannot expect from partners regarding change, rules and roles, and dependence on partner. Couple CARE's first lesson is on expectations and includes information on how expectations can come from previous relationships. Couple LINKS discusses how expectations shape the way that we rely on each other within relationships.

Emotional intelligence training is included in Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, PAIRS, ELEVATE, and Relationship Enhancement: A Program for Couples. Training includes information on how couples can regulate emotions, manage emotionally charged interactions, how the brain governs emotional responses, how body language influences the ways that others interpret emotions, etc.

Family of origin was discussed in four separate programs. PREPARE/ENRICH discusses family maps and how families deal with separateness/togetherness, stability/change, disconnection/connection, flexibility/inflexibility. Safe Conversations: The Toolbox for Couples includes an entire session on understanding the past and looks into how childhood plays a role in relationships and what individuals look for in relationships. SYMBIS discusses multiple aspects

of family of origin including how familial patterns impact division of household labor and how in-law relationships can impact the couple bond. Finally, PREP discusses how events from family of origin can impact current relationship experiences.

A number of categories within this theme were included in only 2-3 programs. Personality included a personality assessment in PREP, SYMBIS, and PREPARE/ENRICH, allowing couples to see how their personality tendencies compare with their partner's. Self-care, including elements on caring for individual physical and mental health as a way to reduce individual and relational stress, was included in Couple's Coping Enhancement Training and ELEVATE. Mindfulness, in Couples Connecting Mindfully and ELEVATE, described mindfulness techniques including deep breathing exercises, staying present in the moment, and mindful noticing of mind and body experiences. Personal strengths in The Marriage Garden and PREPARE/ENRICH discussed cultivating personal strengths (physical, mental, and emotional) to improve relationship outcomes as well as the importance of knowing and integrating one's own strengths and one's partner's strengths. Individual stress management was included in PREP and Couple's Coping Enhancement Training and included instruction on managing stress through understanding where stress comes from and learning to control responses. Vulnerability, in ELEVATE and Relationship Enhancement: A Program for Couples included information on being open with one's partner. Additional potential categories, though only present in one program each included gender (SYMBIS), self-awareness (SYMBIS), spirituality (SYMBIS), intentionality (The Marriage Garden), and differentiation (Couple CARE)

### **Theme Three: Partner Bonding**

11 programs also instructed couples on different elements of bonding between partners. Partner bonding can be defined as actions that partners do or activities that they participate in to contribute to the closeness or connection in their relationship. Categories include a love



exchange, sexual intimacy, rituals, fun and friendship, and community involvement. Table 4 shows all the programs that included different aspects of partner bonding.

The love exchange, actions partners do to express feelings of love in the relationship, was included in eight different programs. PAIRS describes it as a love bank that one deposits positive words, gifts, time, etc. into to support the other person and express love. SYMBIS explains love styles and learning to give and receive love across different styles, especially when partner styles do not match. Couples LINKS describes need fulfillment and being reliable to one's partner. Seven Principles for Making Marriage work also includes an emphasis on the emotional bank account and both partners contributing consistently.

Sexual intimacy was included in six different programs. Couple CARE encouraged exploration around ideas about sex including debunking myths, assessing communication about sex, and managing differences in sexual desires. Hold Me Tight describes different types of sex and ways to achieve connective sex. Couples Connecting Mindfully describes different types of touch and how sexual touch can be improved.

Fun and friendship, included in PREP, The Marriage Garden, Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, and Safe Conversations: The Toolbox for Couples, includes instruction in how having fun as a couple can bring pleasure and happiness as well as the importance of making time for fun.

Rituals, consistent events that foster belonging and connection, was included in Hold Me Tight, Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, and The Marriage Garden. Community involvement as a way for couples to connect to each other in caring for others was included in ELEVATE and The Marriage Garden. Attachment (Hold Me Tight), quality time (ELEVATE), shared meaning (Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work), and teamwork (Seven Principles

for Making Marriage Work) were content topics that fit within this theme, though each were only included in one program, so none became common categories.

#### **Theme Four: Relationship Motivations**

Ten CRE programs contained instruction on relationship motivations. Motivations are defined here as driving factors that encourage positive behaviors that contribute to the longevity of a relationship. Categories within this theme include commitment, positive regard for partner, trust, and forgiveness. Table 5 shows all the programs that included each motivation.

Commitment, the most frequently used category within this theme, was taught in six separate programs. Couple Communication describes commitment as a choice that is supported by other actions. Couple LINKS explains commitment in the context of a larger Relationship Attachment Model (RAM). ELEVATE describes commitment as a choice which requires consistent effort and helps to maintain a healthy relationship. The Marriage Garden also teaches commitment as a choice as well as an investment for the future of the relationship. PREP includes an entire lesson on commitment and includes instruction on different types of commitment (dedication and constraint).

Positive regard, consistently striving to see one's partner and relationship as good and worthwhile, was included in five different programs. Hold Me Tight encourages avoiding seeing a partner as "the bad guy" and seeing your partner as an equal. Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work describes the importance of developing fondness and admiration for a partner. Safe Conversations: The Toolbox for Couples uses positive regard in tandem with talking to one's partner and expressing compliments to the partner.

Trust, confidence in a partner's reliability, is evident in Couple LINKS and ELEVATE. Both describe ways to intentionally build trust with one's partner. Forgiveness, releasing a feeling of resentment toward one's partner, was present in Hold Me Tight and The Marriage Garden. A

number of additional potential categories (resilience in SYMBIS, healing in Hold Me Tight, positivity in The Marriage Garden, fairness in Couples Coping Enhancement Training, and relationship vision in PREP) were only present in one program each and, though notable, did not meet criteria to be categories within this theme.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

CRE programs teach a wide variety of different topics to help individuals and couples in their partnered relationships. Throughout time, relationship skills have been an important part of CRE programs and have connection to positive relationship outcomes though expanded programs often include other important elements (Fawcett et al., 2010; Hawkins et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2020). In this inductive content analysis, four themes emerged from the 15 CRE programs included in the study: skills and abilities, the self in the relationship, partner bonding, and relationship motivations.

#### **Common Themes Across Programs**

As predicted by Hawkins et al. (2004) and Stanley et al. (2020), the most common theme across programs (included in each of the 15 programs) was skills and abilities, with communication and conflict management each being present in 14 of the 15 programs. Ultimately, the frequency of this theme validates the primacy of skills and abilities within CRE programming and within the larger field of study on couples and prevention or intervention work as well as the logic that improved communication will lead to improvements in other areas (e.g., problem solving, intimacy, satisfaction). This foundation of skills and abilities begs the question whether this focus is merited due to individuals and couples benefitting from this training or whether participants simply believe the cultural notion that healthy skills make relationships worth staying in.

The long-held notion that communication predicts satisfaction has been called into question in recent years, with research finding that communication does not consistently predict self or partner relationship satisfaction nor that satisfaction strongly predicts communication (Lavner et al., 2016). Further, Fowers (2000) suggests that individualistic cultures view relationships as a system of payoffs and rewards, which potentially leads to a narrow view on relationships as an alliance for social exchange rather than a mutual partnership of shared meaning and goals. Although skills and abilities are still primarily taught in CRE, research has shown the importance of other factors (e.g., commitment, shared meaning, rituals) as contributing to healthy, stable relationships. These findings lend credence to the other themes present in the programs analyzed and to the growing body of research on relationship flourishing (see Fowers et al., 2021).

Consistent with a growing emphasis in relationship science on individual characteristics in relationships, the next most common theme, the self in the relationship, was also included in all 15 programs. The content in this theme was spread between nine different categories, with programs including focus on up to four different categories. Understanding how individual expectations, mental and emotional health, personality, family of origin, etc. can contribute to relationship outcomes is essential for relationships that often include individuals who are very different from one another. In some programs, more understanding of one's own and one's partner's individual contributions to the relationship can help provide a foundation of understanding for differences at the onset of a relationship and, in other programs, can contribute to additional insight into consistent or long-term patterns of interaction.

Further, as the field has expanded to better understand how individual well-being can contribute to relationship quality, and vice versa (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad 2017, Marshall & Kuijer, 2017; McGill et al., 2021), the continued expansion of programs into this area is essential. Nevertheless, there should be caution in suggesting that CRE should primarily focus on

individual context or functioning as this could reinforce individualistic notions of relationship functioning that undermine a focus on the primary relationship patterns that couples are dealing with (Doherty, 2013). Thus, CRE programming should carefully connect self-focused material to relationship patterns.

Partner bonding, the third most common theme, describes ways for couples to connect with one another through shared activities. Though not mentioned as an essential element of CRE according to syntheses of CRE programming (see Hawkins et al., 2004; Stanley et al, 2020), this element was found in 11 different CRE programs. Given the focus of partner bonding at the onset of relationships (such as partnered activities during early dating phases), this focus is unsurprising for couples that want to learn to manage their connection in long-term relationships. Gottman and colleagues (2005) have often studied the importance of friendship as foundational to relationship health and, in a comparison of a conflict management intervention and a friendship intervention, found that the latter had a greater impact on reducing negative communication within their study. Further, Doherty (2013) has emphasized rituals of connection as essential to helping couples maintain their long-term connection. The second most frequent category in this theme, sexual intimacy, was potentially not included in enough programs given the research that finds that sex accounts for 15-20% of relationship satisfaction (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2003). Due to the positive impact that time together can have on relationship satisfaction (Flood & Genadek, 2016), the emphasis on partner bonding is an important foundational factor to relationship health in long-term partnerships.

The final theme, relationship motivations, has been outlined as an important element of CRE programs across multiple decades (see Hawkins et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2020) and categories were included in the majority of programs analyzed. Extensive research on commitment in relationships validates the importance of a focus on this category, given that multiple types of commitment often act as the glue that holds relationships together when things

are rocky or difficult (see Stanley et al., 2010). Research on other virtues (e.g., forgiveness and sacrifice) highlights the importance of these areas for couples to maintain healthy relationships (see Fincham & Beach, 2010b). Though it was suggested by Hawkins and colleagues (2004) that relationship virtues and motivations are an essential cornerstone of CRE content, this theme was not present in all programs and only four categories were found. It could be that many programs emphasize skill-building due to the often-visible changes that can be implemented while increasing or changing motivations may be more difficult to facilitate or observe.

### **What Is Still Missing**

Though CRE programming has expanded throughout the years to include multiple areas beyond just skills and abilities, there are still unaccounted for content categories and themes that participants could benefit from. From the authors' perspective, the biggest missing piece of CRE programming is that of context. Though a few programs do talk about family of origin and one mentions spirituality as individual contextual factors, even a mention of societal context, socioeconomic status, racial and/or ethnic diversity, sexual orientation, etc. was so rare that these context pieces did not become categories or themes within this analysis. This finding supports the notion that more research on diverse populations, challenging conditions, and unique needs could guide the development and integration of specific concepts into CRE programs and thereby increase efficacy of CRE programming (see Bradbury & Lavner, 2012; Carlson et al., 2020; Perez et al., 2013). Initiatives to expand contextual focus have been made but do not appear widespread nor well-implemented (Carlson et al., 2020). Carlson and colleagues (2020) clarify the importance of making this expansion by noting the historical context of the majority of CRE programming being created by White, non-minority, educated, and middle-class individuals and groups, likely resulting in some bias regarding content and mechanisms of change.

Though the 15 programs analyzed did not include sufficient contextual pieces, a number of programs and groups have attempted the suggested expansion. A program from the Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative includes additional modules to address elements of culture, gender, and communication specific to Latino culture (Hawkins & Ooms, 2012). One study on CRE among Latino populations added elements on gender and machismo due to their cultural relevancy, which participants found to be useful and directly applicable (Perez et al., 2013). Huang (2005) suggested that adapting Western CRE programs to Eastern cultures will require a greater focus on children and family as couples are often more likely to attend parenting-based over couples-based programs. These examples are a few ways that CRE programming can be adapted to meet individual, couple, and group contextual differences and help couples know how to navigate these elements in their relationship.

Given the use of systems theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1968) within the greater field of relationship science and relational therapy, another element missing from current CRE programming is that of interaction patterns. A deepened focus on skills and behaviors within CRE has, in the authors' view, not given sufficient attention to the reality that these skills and behaviors (whether positive or negative) exist within relationship patterns that couples, to their benefit or detriment, continually exhibit. Tomm (2014) succinctly outlines common patterns that couples are stuck in (e.g., pursuing-distance, criticizing-defending, controlling-resisting) with the goal of helping couples and practitioners understand and alter negative patterns. This understanding remains absent from CRE programming and, despite the worry some may have for dipping into a clinical or therapeutic domain, it remains important to at least educate couples about interaction patterns from a preventative standpoint.

It is worth noting that CRE programs will not remove the need for clinical intervention. The goal of CRE is to help couples learn about healthy relationships and how to implement different aspects to their relationships. Clinical or therapeutic intervention are necessary for



couples needing additional help or outside insight that CRE programming cannot and should not strive to provide. In many of these programs, facilitators are instructed to refer couples to therapists or counselors when couple issues appear to reach a clinical level, and this is essential given that the majority of facilitators likely do not have clinical training or expertise.

From the authors' perspective, a next step within CRE is the establishment of a theory that expands beyond content categories and themes and, instead, gives couples a holistic way to look at their relationship. This holistic view could include CRE aiding couples in looking at themselves, their backgrounds, their partners, and their relationships, and then helping couples make decisions toward a healthy, holistic relationship despite the complexity. Couples who could identify the various influences on their relationship and the various options they can use to achieve the outcomes they desire would be best equipped to maintain relationship health and flourishing over the long-term. Karney and Bradbury (2020) suggest that teaching couples about relationship dynamics (e.g., dyadic interaction, stress management) could more successfully help couples improve their patterns and, therefore, their relationship satisfaction. Though it may still be important to teach couples healthy skills, behaviors, and attitudes, couples could also learn to alleviate constraints related to themselves and their relationships, access readily available resources, and, therein, change the dynamics of their relationship as desired.

Given the constant stream of varying sociocultural and family of origin influences regarding relationships, couples need to learn about what the latest relationship sciences indicates makes up healthy relationships, then learn ways to adapt that to themselves and their unique relationships. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to relational health and adapting CRE programming to individual and couple needs is important for continued expansion. With the potential for unique programming, Lucier-Greer and colleagues' (2012) call for assessment of needs and fitting individuals or couples to appropriate programming is an important next step in helping individuals and couples benefit as much as they can from CRE. For example, those

without positive skills could be taught the skills that they lack as a way to change negative interaction patterns while those with a foundation of healthy skills could be taught more about interaction patterns or ways their individual contexts impact their relationship.

These ideas are not to suggest that current content is unimportant but, rather, that expansion into what will benefit different couples in different phases as well as a focus on relationship flourishing and virtues is the next stage within the field of relationship education. As such, variability in programming is currently and will continue to be important given the differences from couple to couple based on the individuals and contexts within which they reside. Along with content expansion, it will be important for future programs and facilitating groups to work on more fully engaging couples that can benefit from CRE. A focus on creative incentivizing (e.g., targeting families in transition or continued efforts to have CRE be a prerequisite for marriage licenses) could help draw in the individuals and couples that need CRE the most.

### **Limitations**

This study analyzed 15 different CRE programs though there are dozens upon dozens of programs that individuals and couples can participate in. It is possible that other programs not included in this study (including self-led, online programs) represent the important movement toward unique programming for diverse couples and individuals, so it is worth acknowledging that there are efforts being made to contemporize CRE programming. Though scope is a limitation of the research, the 15 programs included were intentionally selected based on the aforementioned inclusion and exclusion criteria. It is likely that these programs are consumed more often than one-off programs and that government-funded outreach projects use these programs analyzed due to their prestige within the field.

As with all research, certain biases are included due to the values, biases, and research questions of the researchers. Each author, reviewer, and analyst is part of the Human Development and Family Science at Oklahoma State University and, as such, has a vested interest in helping couples and families. We acknowledge the ways that our lived experiences have shaped this research, research analysis, and the presentation of the research in this manuscript.

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APPENDICES

Table 1

<b>Program</b>	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Peer-Reviewed Research</b>	<b>Intended Dosage</b>
<b>Couple Communication</b>	Drs. Sherod Miller, Phyllis Miller, Elam Nunnally, and Daniel Wackman	Yes	11 sessions (hours not listed)
<b>Couple LINKS</b>	Dr. John Van Epp	Yes	5 lessons (~10 hours)
<b>Couple CARE</b>	Dr. W. Kim Halford	Yes	6 units (~12 hours)
<b>Couples Connecting Mindfully</b>	Drs. Julianne McGill, Scott Ketring, and Francesca Adler-Baeder	Yes	6 sessions (9-12 hours)
<b>Couples Coping Enhancement Training</b>	Drs. Guy Bodenmann and S. D. Shantinath	Yes	5 modules (hours not listed)
<b>ELEVATE</b>	Drs. Ted G Futris, Francesca Adler-Baeder, Scott Ketring, and Thomas Smith	Yes	7 principles (8-12 hours)
<b>Hold Me Tight</b>	Dr. Sue Johnson	Yes	8 sessions (16-24 hours)
<b>PAIRS</b>	Lori H. Gordon	Yes	3 sessions (~9 hours)
<b>PREP</b>	Drs. Scott M. Stanley, Howard J. Markman, Natalie H. Jenkins, Jeff Erlacher, Miranda Eggar, and Lawrence Ramos	Yes	12 modules (12+ hours)
<b>PREPARE/ENRICH</b>	Drs. David Olson, Amy Olson, and Peter Larson	Yes	Flexible (depends on couple)
<b>Relationship Enhancement: A Program for Couples</b>	Drs. Robert F. Scuka, William J. Nordling, Bernard G. Guerney, Jr	Yes	10 topics (14-20 hours)
<b>Safe Conversations: The Toolbox for Couples</b>	Drs. Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt	No	6 sessions (~6 hours)
<b>Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work</b>	Drs. John Gottman, Julie Gottman, and Nan Silver	No	12 lessons (6-24 hours)
<b>SYMBIS</b>	Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott	No	7 sessions (4-8 hours)
<b>The Marriage Garden</b>	Drs. H. Wallace Goddard and James P. Marshall	No	6 lessons (hours not listed)

Table 2

<b><u>Skills and Abilities</u></b>	<b>Conflict Management</b>	<b>Communication</b>	<b>Problem Solving</b>	<b>Dyadic Coping</b>
<b>Couple Communication</b>	X	X	X	
<b>Couple LINKS</b>	X			
<b>Couple CARE</b>	X	X		
<b>Couples Connecting Mindfully</b>	X	X		
<b>Couples Coping Enhancement Training</b>	X	X	X	X
<b>ELEVATE</b>	X	X		
<b>Hold Me Tight</b>	X	X		
<b>The Marriage Garden</b>	X	X		
<b>PAIRS</b>	X	X		
<b>PREP</b>	X	X		
<b>PREPARE/ENRICH</b>	X	X		X
<b>Relationship Enhancement: A Program for Couples</b>	X	X		
<b>Safe Conversations: The Toolbox for Couples</b>		X		
<b>Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work</b>	X	X	X	
<b>SYMBIS</b>	X	X		
<b>Totals</b>	14	14	3	2

Table 3

<b><u>Self in the Relationship</u></b>	<b>Expectations</b>	<b>Emotional Intelligence</b>	<b>Family of Origin</b>	<b>Personality</b>
<b>Couple Communication</b>				
<b>Couple LINKS</b>	X			
<b>Couple CARE</b>	X			
<b>Couples Connecting Mindfully</b>				
<b>Couples Coping Enhancement Training</b>				
<b>ELEVATE</b>		X		
<b>Hold Me Tight</b>	X			
<b>The Marriage Garden</b>				
<b>PAIRS</b>	X	X		
<b>PREP</b>	X		X	X
<b>PREPARE/ ENRICH</b>			X	X
<b>Relationship Enhancement: A Program for Couples</b>		X		
<b>Safe Conversations: The Toolbox for Couples</b>			X	
<b>Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work</b>		X		
<b>SYMBIS</b>	X		X	X
<b>Totals</b>	6	4	4	3

Table 3 Continued

<b><u>Self in the Relationship</u></b>	<b>Mindfulness</b>	<b>Self-Care</b>	<b>Personal Strengths</b>	<b>Stress Management</b>	<b>Vulnerability</b>
<b>Couple Communication</b>		X			
<b>Couple LINKS</b>					
<b>Couple CARE</b>					
<b>Couples Connecting Mindfully</b>	X				
<b>Couples Coping Enhancement Training</b>				X	
<b>ELEVATE</b>	X	X			X
<b>Hold Me Tight</b>					
<b>The Marriage Garden</b>			X		
<b>PAIRS</b>					
<b>PREP</b>				X	
<b>PREPARE/ ENRICH</b>			X		
<b>Relationship Enhancement: A Program for Couples</b>					X
<b>Safe Conversations: The Toolbox for Couples</b>					
<b>Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work</b>					
<b>SYMBIS</b>					
<b>Totals</b>	2	2	2	2	2



Table 4

<b><u>Partner Bonding</u></b>	<b>Love Exchange</b>	<b>Sexual Intimacy</b>	<b>Fun and Friendship</b>	<b>Rituals</b>	<b>Community Involvement</b>
<b>Couple Communication</b>					
<b>Couple LINKS</b>	X	X			
<b>Couple CARE</b>	X	X			
<b>Couples Connecting Mindfully</b>		X			
<b>Couples Coping Enhancement Training</b>					
<b>ELEVATE</b>		X			X
<b>Hold Me Tight</b>		X		X	
<b>The Marriage Garden</b>	X		X	X	X
<b>PAIRS</b>	X				
<b>PREP</b>	X		X		
<b>PREPARE/ENRICH</b>					
<b>Relationship Enhancement: A Program for Couples</b>					
<b>Safe Conversations: The Toolbox for Couples</b>	X		X		
<b>Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work</b>	X		X	X	
<b>SYMBIS</b>	X	X			
<b>Totals</b>	8	6	4	3	2

Table 5

<b><u>Relationship Motivations</u></b>	<b>Commitment</b>	<b>Positive Regard</b>	<b>Trust</b>	<b>Forgiveness</b>
<b>Couple Communication</b>	X			
<b>Couple LINKS</b>	X		X	
<b>Couple CARE</b>				
<b>Couples Connecting Mindfully</b>			X	
<b>Couples Coping Enhancement Training</b>				
<b>ELEVATE</b>	X		X	
<b>Hold Me Tight</b>		X		X
<b>The Marriage Garden</b>	X	X		X
<b>PAIRS</b>				
<b>PREP</b>	X	X		
<b>PREPARE/ENRICH</b>	X			
<b>Relationship Enhancement: A Program for Couples</b>				
<b>Safe Conversations: The Toolbox for Couples</b>		X		
<b>Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work</b>		X		
<b>SYMBIS</b>				
<b>Totals</b>	6	5	3	2

VITA

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Master of Science

Thesis: COUPLE RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION CONTENT: WHAT WE HAVE  
AND WHAT WE ARE MISSING

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