

Outcomes of a Multiyear Multicounty Marriage Celebration

Abstract

Couples often seek marital education to strengthen their relationships. This article explores the program effectiveness of a multiyear, multicounty marriage enrichment event. Analysis of retrospective "pre-then-post" evaluations across 2 years of the event ($N = 480$ in 2015; $N = 554$ in 2016) suggests that participant knowledge increased but that middle-aged participants showed lower levels of perceived knowledge following program participation as compared to younger and older attendees. Future researchers may consider exploring the trend of younger and older audiences reporting higher levels of knowledge following such events. Overall, we determined that practitioners should consider date night events to be an effective channel for relationship education.

Keywords: [relationship education](#), [marriage](#), [healthy relationships](#)

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Introduction

The desire for relationship and marriage education (RME) has increased in the United States since the 1950s, resulting in proliferating RME programs (Cowan & Cowan, 2014; Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010). This increase may be attributed, in part, to the high financial and psychological costs of divorce for individuals, children, and society (Fagan, Patterson, & Rector, 2002). In addition to multiple personal and family struggles created by the erosion of relationships (Fagan et al., 2002), one researcher estimated that divorce costs American taxpayers \$33.3 billion annually (Schramm, 2006). In contrast, strong, healthy marriages are associated with multiple positive outcomes, especially for children (Adam & Sawhill, 2002; Amato, 2001). Marriage confers a number of economic, childbearing, psychological, and social benefits, among others (Huston & Melz, 2004). Extension professionals involved in providing relationship education must understand the varied RME events that can help couples strengthen their unions. Providing events such as the Northern Utah Marriage Celebration is one of myriad ways Extension can promote healthy marriages.

Many couples seek RME to enhance their current relationship or to obtain guidance for addressing relational distress (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013). Results from meta-analyses (Cowan & Cowan, 2014; Halford & Bodenmann, 2013) have shown that these programs contribute small but statistically significant impacts on marital quality, as indicated through self-reports. Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, and Fawcett (2008) found that RME programs effect small to moderate gains in relationship skills such as communication. RME has greater

short-term effects for those in immediate distress and greater long-term effects for those in a preventative position (Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2009). This finding suggests that the impact of RME may differ for those in troubled relationships as compared to those in healthy relationships aiming to bolster good relational practices.

RME experts have identified various effective settings and delivery modes (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Futris, Bloir, & Szu-Ying Tsai, 2005; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004) and discussed the importance of using a variety of delivery methods to match participants' learning styles (Hawkins et al., 2004). Additionally, Wilcox and Dew (2012) connected "date night" events to positive relationships and qualities associated with increased relationship satisfaction, such as enhanced communication, commitment, and time together, although they also suggested that additional research is needed to understand the full impact of these events on couples.

Weber County Marriage Coalition, in conjunction with Utah State University Cooperative Extension, hosts the Northern Utah Marriage Celebration, a date night enrichment event intended to help couples strengthen their relationships. The event occurs annually on a Friday in February from 4:00 to 9:30 p.m. and includes four 50-min workshops and an entertaining keynote speaker. Each workshop session offers participants information on topics identified through prior program evaluations. Although topics vary from year to year, most fit into the popularly requested themes of communication, conflict resolution, staying connected (fun), intimacy, parenting as a couple, finances, and protecting relationships. The event is marketed in the county and surrounding communities. Most participants are couples, but the target audience includes any individual or couple interested in acquiring abilities supporting healthy relationships.

To answer the call from Halford, Markman, and Stanley (2008) for research on outcomes of couples' relationship education, we explored whether the Northern Utah Marriage Celebration manifests positive effects for couples similar to those indicated by previous research (Wilcox & Dew, 2012), whether results were similar for cohorts across 2 years of the event, and whether results differed for members of various age groups. Generally speaking, we assessed the validity of RME events for improving relationship quality. How common such date night programming is elsewhere remains unknown, but the Northern Utah Marriage Celebration event has occurred for a number of years, beginning well before our study.

Research Questions

Our primary goal for the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Northern Utah Marriage Celebration in building participants' knowledge of relationship skills, as indicated by participant self-reports. Further, although the format and themes of the RME remain consistent from year to year, the presenters and specific content of the informational sessions vary, meaning that program effectiveness could vary from year to year. Therefore, we wanted to identify differences in perceived knowledge acquired relative to year of attendance for the 2 years we studied, 2015 and 2016. Finally, to inform programming for future iterations of the event, we wanted to examine differences in perceived knowledge acquired relative to participant age.

These goals led to the following research questions:

- Question 1—Does participant knowledge of relationship skills increase through participation in the event?
- Question 1a—Does participant knowledge of relationship skills gained from the event vary relative to year of participation?

- Question 2—Are there differences in knowledge of relationship skills gained from the event relative to participant age?

Methods

To determine the impact of the event, we gave pen-and-paper evaluations to participants in their packets at the beginning of the night. Door prize tickets were attached to the evaluations, and participants were encouraged to complete and return their evaluations and door prize tickets just prior to the keynote session of the event, which is the final session of the evening. Ideally, evaluations would be collected at the end of the event; however, the logistics of doing so were prohibitive in terms of receiving a satisfactory number of evaluations. As a result, participants were encouraged to turn in evaluations immediately following the workshop sessions and before the keynote presentation. Door prize tickets were separated from the evaluations and then used for prize drawings at the end of the evening. The evaluation tool included questions eliciting feedback on the presenters, a retrospective "pre-then-post" questionnaire, demographic questions, and open-ended questions (Marshall, Higginbotham, Harris, & Lee, 2007). We selected this design because of ease of administration with a large group of participants in a limited amount of time (Davis, 2003).

Measures

This article addresses data from the retrospective pre-then-post evaluation presented to participants. The questionnaire used was the Perceived Relationship Knowledge Scale (PRKS) (Bradford, Stewart, Higginbotham, & Skogrand, 2015), a six-item measure used to assess understanding of various relationship skills, such as communication, problem solving, and relationship strengthening. The six PRKS items were used to create an average scale for assessing participant knowledge. Participants rated their knowledge levels for the six relationship skills (e.g., effectively communicating with a spouse/partner, settling disagreements well) using a rating scale ranging from *poor* (1) to *perfect* (5). Participants were asked to retrospectively evaluate their knowledge before engaging in the programming for the evening (pre) and their knowledge after engaging in the programming (post).

Cronbach's coefficient alpha measure of internal consistency (Cronbach & Shavelson, 2004) for our study participants' knowledge before the program and after the program was good ($\alpha = .88$ and $.87$, respectively). We used the PRKS in methods similar to those of Bradford et al. (2015), who viewed the scale as categorical. Initial validation of the measure by Bradford et al. (2015) resulted in similar reliability (.83–.88).

Participants

The number of attendees was 625 in 2015 and 700 in 2016. We collected evaluations from 480 attendees in 2015 and 554 attendees in 2016, for response rates of 77% and 79%, respectively. Our study participants—those who submitted evaluations—were, on average, 41 ($SD = 10.9$) years of age, and approximately half were males and half females (48% and 52%, respectively). Table 1 shows specific demographics for each year. The sample of participants was representative of the northern Utah married population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015) in terms of sex, age, and ethnicity.

Table 1.

Sample Demographics for Northern Utah Marriage Celebration

Participants

Year	Responses to item #	Participant sex		Participant age	
		Male % (#)	Female % (#)	<i>M (SD)</i>	Range
2015	400	47.3% (189)	52.8% (211)	40 yrs. (10.7)	19–70
2016	500	48.4% (242)	51.6% (258)	41 yrs. (11.1)	19–74

To examine differences in perceived knowledge relative to participant age, we clustered participants to yield balanced groups for analysis as has been done with other measures (e.g., dosage) (Payne & McDonald, 2014). Age groups were as follows: 18–25 ($n = 83$), 26–30 ($n = 102$), 31–35 ($n = 134$), 36–40 ($n = 179$), 41–45 ($n = 168$), 46–50 ($n = 112$), 51–55 ($n = 107$), 56–60 ($n = 81$) and 61 or older ($n = 33$).

Results

The results addressing the first research question indicate a significant ($p < .001$) and positively correlated ($r = .456$) increase in participants' perceived knowledge from before to after program participation across both years of the event. We performed a paired-samples t -test using SPSS software, and Table 2 shows t -test statistics, mean scores, and significance.

Table 2.

t -Test of Perceived Relationship Knowledge Scale
Results, All Years

Category	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>
Perceived knowledge preprogram	3.3 (.62)	863	154.4***
Perceived knowledge postprogram	4.1 (.50)	807	231.0***

*** $p < .001$.

To address the "differences in perceived program knowledge" aspect of the first research question (part 1a), we performed analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests. This analysis allowed for the determination of differences in participant perceived knowledge relative to the year of the event. Results indicated no difference in perceived preprogram knowledge relative to year; however, participants perceived postprogram knowledge was significantly different between 2015 and 2016, with participants in 2016 having more perceived postprogram knowledge ($F = 5.4, p < .05$) (see Table 3).

Table 3.

Analysis of Variance for Perceived Relationship Knowledge
by Year of Participation (2015 and 2016)

Category	<i>F value</i>	Direction of difference
Perceived preprogram knowledge	3.6	<i>ns</i>
Perceived postprogram knowledge	5.4*	2015 < 2016

* $p < .05$.

With regard to the second research question, results indicated that there were no differences relative to age in participants' reported preprogram knowledge levels ($F = 0.98, p < .45$) but that there were differences relative to age in their reported postprogram knowledge levels ($F = 2.33, p < .02$), with younger participants having more perceived postprogram knowledge than older participants (see Table 4). We also found, more specifically, that participants in the middle years showed the smallest postprogram perceived knowledge levels relative to the other groups (see Figure 1).

Table 4.

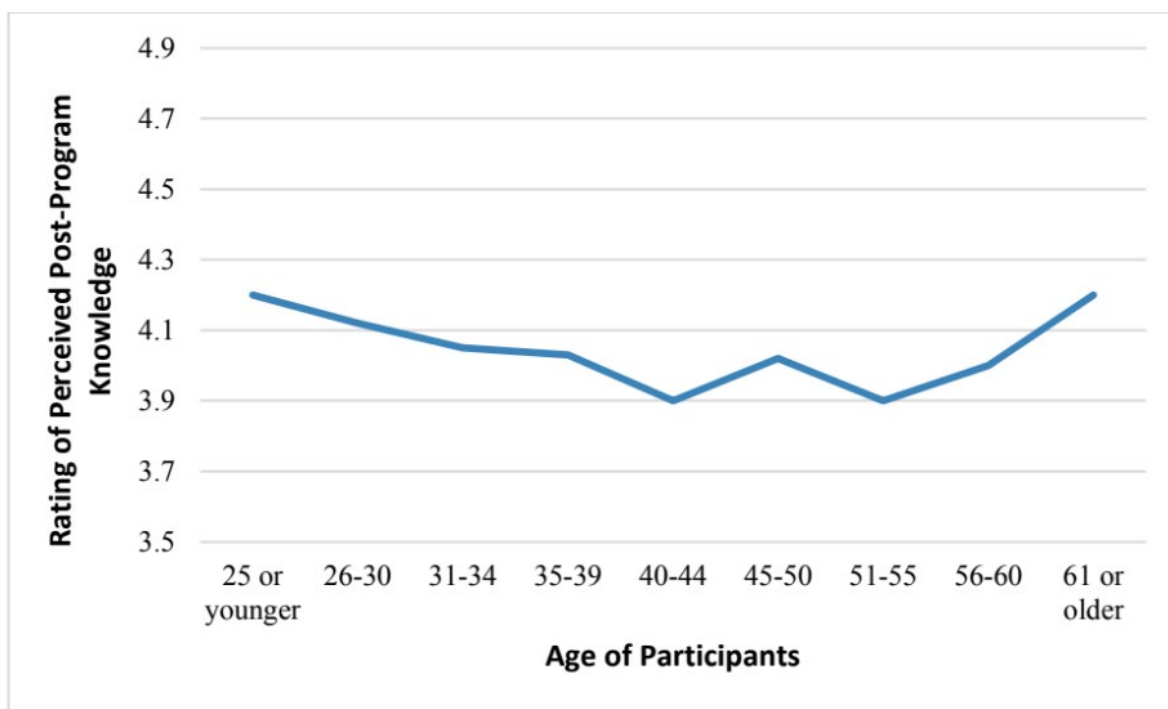
Analysis of Variance for Perceived Relationship Knowledge
by Participant Age

Category	F value	Direction of difference
Perceived preprogram knowledge	.978	<i>ns</i>
Perceived postprogram knowledge	2.33*	Younger > older

* $p < .05$.

Figure 1.

Participant Postprogram Perceived Knowledge Levels, by Age



Discussion and Implications for Extension

The results of our study indicate the effectiveness of Northern Utah Marriage Celebration date night events in several domains of RME and for multiple audiences. Our findings have implications for both future research and practitioners.

Researchers should consider the circumstance of younger and older participants potentially having more knowledge following large RME events than middle-aged participants. Perhaps members of the group in the middle attend for reasons other than to gain knowledge or hope to achieve other intended outcomes; however, more research and data are needed to explore that possibility.

As Extension professionals work in the field using RME, it may be important to target specific demographics (i.e., age) to ensure that all target populations are reached. Perhaps future RME events need to involve focused recruitment of participants, as those who need the skills the most may not be individuals who would self-select participation. Although we addressed participant age, years of marriage may be a more informative indicator that could be investigated in future work; however, such information was not collected as part of the Northern Utah Marriage Celebration.

Dosage is another consideration that does matter (Payne & McDonald, 2012; Payne & McDonald, 2014), and findings from previous research have suggested that larger doses lead to greater effects (Hawkins et al., 2008). At present, we have not studied Northern Utah Marriage Celebration participants long enough to examine whether greater dosages of RME in this format (achieved through attendance over multiple years) yield greater perceived relationship knowledge. Payne and McDonald (2014) indicated that effective dosage tops out at 10–12 hr of coursework. However, it is unknown whether attendance over several years has such threshold effects. Future research on dosage as applied to date night events such as the Northern Utah Marriage Celebration would be fruitful for understanding retention and long-term gains from RME events.

Although our results suggest positive implications and the Northern Utah Marriage Celebration is an annual event that Weber County Extension and Utah State University plan to continue, it is important to continue exploring the outcomes of such programs to gain insights that can be useful to Extension professionals across programs and regions.

Conclusion

Our study and others (e.g., Brower & Payne, 2018) have shown that even brief educational opportunities focused on enhancing relationship skills can affect participants' relationship knowledge. Given this finding, Extension and community agencies need to continue to promote both short- and long-term events that may improve relationship knowledge. Events where participants learn from experts may increase the amount of information received to promote healthier family functioning. Our results indicate that a threshold effect may apply for various age groups and that participants at different life stages may need differential levels of information from community events. Overall, our results indicate that the Northern Utah Marriage Celebration event has positive implications for many participants.

Author Note

Pamela Payne is now an assistant professor in the Departments of Human Development and Family Studies and Cooperative Extension at the University of Nevada, Reno, in Reno, Nevada.

Recommendation for Further Reading

For more details of the methods and process used in organizing the Northern Utah Marriage Celebration and information about how to organize a similar event, see "Lessons Learned from Organizing a Multi-County Marriage Celebration Event," by N. Brower and P. B. Payne, 2018, *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, 6(1), 125–140.

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