Incorporating a Discussion of Equality
In Couple Education Programs

Karen R. Blaisure
Julie M. Koivunen
Western Michigan University

ABSTRACT

Many couples face changing gender roles, balancing paid work and family life, and conflict over decision making. This paper reviews research on relationship equality that family life educators can incorporate into existing couples education programs. Informed by feminist and gender perspectives, five aspects of equality are highlighted: consequences of inequality, benefits of equality, definitions of equality, models of equality-based relationships, and steps in developing equality. Recommendations about group facilitation, an outline of the content, and couple and group activities are provided.

Clinical and empirical data document the struggles around fairness, and equity couples in heterosexual relationships encounter (Hare-Mustin, 1991; Hochschild, 1989; VanVoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989). Based on her research and observation of clients in three countries, Rabin (1996) states that the majority of heterosexual couples in the western world are experiencing the frustration, complexity, and confusion resulting from a contradictory blend of gendered role expectations and egalitarianism. She argues "that women's anger and disillusionment is the major universal dynamic underlying marital distress. Women's continued attempts to make things right, their frustration at their partners' avoidance of conflicts and their increasing sense of having other options to marriage is the major predicament brought to relationship therapy" (p. 15). If a goal of premarital and couple education is to provide couples with the perspectives and skills necessary to thrive in their relationships and avoid needing therapy to rescue their relationships, then educators are called on to address issues of gender and power (Horst & Doherty, 1995).

Key Words: equality, family life education, gender perspective, marriage education, premarital counseling
The purpose of this paper is to offer research information on equality in heterosexual couple relationships that has been incorporated into presentations for premarital or couple/marriage education programs. Five content areas (i.e., costs of inequality, benefits of equality, what is equality, types of relationships, and developing equality), group and couple activities, and considerations for family life educators in presenting this information are reviewed. An outline of the content (in Appendix A) can be duplicated for overheads or handouts. Descriptions of couple and group activities are described in Appendix B.

Much of the content presented here derives from a rich tradition of feminist research on and analysis of heterosexual relationships (Baber & Allen, 1992; Okin, 1989; Thorne, 1992) and from the use of a gender perspective to understand interpersonal interactions (Ferree, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). A feminist perspective on marriage highlights the need for women and men to "adopt different self concepts and behaviors in order to sustain high-quality marriages" in the face of changing gender roles and economic realities (Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989, p. 136). Additionally, a gender perspective compels a "deeper look into the processes through which couples make the decisions that result in women's economic marginalization and women's 'second shift' in the household" (Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiege, & Hall, 1996, p. 91). Feminist and gender perspectives on relationships reveal how partners are increasingly called upon to have the interpersonal skills and emotional availability necessary to develop and maintain emotional closeness and to monitor and adjust their own relationship contributions for the benefit of both partners (Blaisure & Allen, 1995; Vannoy, 1991).

While some family life educators might maintain that addressing fairness and equity does not fit the relationship goals of many traditional couples, evidence suggests that these couples are not immune from disagreements and disappointments regarding these issues. For example, some men who attend Promise Keepers rallies do so out of their own and their wives' dissatisfaction with the men's low level of involvement in family life (Walcheski & Blaisure, 1999). Additionally, in a survey of 494 Dutch couples, researchers noted that traditional couples withdrew from conflict around division of labor, concluding that peacefulness of traditional marriages might be bought by avoidance (Kluwer, Heesink, & Van De Vliert, 1997). Avoiding conflict as a relational strategy can lead to dire health and relationship consequences (Gottman, 1994; Mintz & Mahalik, 1996; Mirosky & Ross, 1989).

Whether family life educators discuss equality or not in their couple programs, they are taking an ideological stand. Ignoring power differentials in relationships reinforces imbalances through a passive acceptance of a status quo of inequality—certainly a value-laden position for an educator to assume (Knudson-Martin, 1997). Addressing these stressors frankly in an education program can normalize tension and provide couples with alternative ways of thinking about gender in couple relationships and resolving conflict (Kluwer, Heesink, & Van De Vliert, 1997).

The following five sections contain the content that has been shared with couples in educational settings. Family life educators and family therapists may find the information useful as a supplement to their current couple
education materials. The sections below could be presented at separate times and in a different order than given here. Notes to educators about presenting the content or incorporating a group or couple activity are given at the beginning of each section.

COSTS OF INEQUALITY

Note to educator: Whichever section is chosen as the first, a warm-up exercise is recommended. The activity, "Where Do I Stand," can accomplish this goal as it allows all the group members an opportunity to move around and to share their thoughts with one another (See Appendix B). Studies on relationship equality reviewed here have tended to use white, middle class, dual-income samples, although some diversity in ethnicity and socioeconomic background is found. For example, Rabin (1996) interviewed couples in Israel, United Kingdom, and the United States who varied in race, class, and income. Educators are encouraged to learn from group members as they may have experiences and issues that vary from those reflected in the research.

In Europe and the United States, a majority of divorces are initiated by women (Ahrons, 1994; Amato & Rogers, 1997; Rabin, 1996). Researchers conclude that women are less willing to endure miserable marriages than in the past (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997) and want equality and equity in their marriages (Fowers, 1991; Gottman, 1994; Hochschild, 1989; Mirowsky & Ross, 1989; Zuo, 1997).

Traditional gender arrangements are based on power differentials (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998; Okin, 1989; Rabin, 1996; Thompson, 1991), and the negative results of this differential are well documented for women (Chafetz, 1990; Gottman, 1994; Hochschild, 1989; Mirowsky & Ross, 1989; Rabin, 1996; Schwartz, 1994; Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989). Inequality in decision making and lack of shared parenting is related to wives' depression (Gottman, 1994; Mirowsky & Ross, 1989; Rabin, 1996). Lower marital satisfaction increases the risk of immune dysfunction in women (Gottman, 1994). After reviewing the research on gender, marital status, and reported illness, Gottman (1994) concluded that "women are at greater health risk in unhappy marriages than men" (p. 254).

Research is also identifying negative results of traditional gender arrangements for men. Inequality lowers husbands' perceptions of marital quality as well as those of wives (Amato & Booth, 1995; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998; Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989). Men report becoming bored or overwhelmed with responsibility in traditional marriages (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994; Rabin, 1996; Schwartz, 1994). Gottman (1994) concluded that husbands' participation in housework and childcare reflects their engagement in the marriage and ability to handle wives' anger and negative affect. For women and men, imbalance of influence in their intimate relationship is related to depression, although couples typically balance their relationship in favor of giving the husband more power (Mirowsky & Ross, 1989).

Men's attitudes toward gender roles greatly influence their view of family roles. Role-sharing husbands view wives' interests as equal to their own and have less traditional attitudes about marriage (Mirowsky & Ross, 1996). Traditional husbands experience greater power, and competitive as compared to role-sharing husbands. These characteristics are connected with less feelings of depression and anxiety (Mintz & Kelman, 1989).

The major benefits of marriage occur when partners have considered, caring, love, equity, and commitment. Happy, anxious partners than marriages characterized by consideration and caring (Mirowsky & Ross, 1996). At least amount of violence (Babcock, Waltz, & Johnson, 1997). At the conclusion of their book documenting the well-being of couples and their children, provided five recommendations to strengthen marriages and promotion of gender equity within families.

BENEFITS OF EQUITABLE RELATIONSHIPS

Note to educator: couples can often gain strength from each other which they could do as individual couples, in the group, or as married couples.

In addition to the reasons noted above, there are reasons why couples may wish to consider the "divorce-proofing" of their marriage and promoting friendships.

DIVORCE-PROOFING


In their longitudinal study, Amato and Booth (1995) documented the benefits of equality-based relationships ("divorce-proofing" marriages and ensuring durable relationships (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998).

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DIVORCE-PROOFING

and have less traditional attitudes about male authority (Mintz & Mahalik, 1996). Traditional husbands experience greater pressure to be successful, powerful, and competitive as compared to role-sharing and participant husbands. These characteristics are connected with less capacity for intimacy and greater feelings of depression and anxiety (Mintz & Mahalik, 1996).

The major benefits of marriage occur for those in good relationships (Horwitz, White, & Howell-White, 1996). Marriages characterized by consideration, caring, love, equity, and communication have less depressed and anxious partners than marriages characterized by conflict, inequity, and lack of consideration and caring (Mirowsky & Ross, 1989). Democratic homes have the least amount of violence (Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993; Gelles, 1997). At the conclusion of their book documenting a 12-year longitudinal study of the well-being of couples and their children, Amato and Booth (1997) provided five recommendations to strengthen families, one of which was promotion of gender equity within families.

BENEFITS OF EQUALITY

Note to educator: couples can often generate their own list of benefits, which they could do as individual couples, in small groups, or as a large group.

In addition to the reasons noted above, studies reveal two compelling reasons why couples may wish to concern themselves with equality: divorce-proofing their marriage and promoting friendship in their marriage.

DIVORCE-PROOFING

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, studies began documenting the existence of couples with congruent ideology and practice of marital equality (Altrocchi & Crosby, 1989; Blaisure & Allen, 1995; Goodnow & Bowes, 1994; Hochschild, 1989; Rabin, 1996; Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998; Schwartz, 1994; Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989). These studies have documented the benefits of equality-based relationships, namely the benefits of "divorce-proofing" marriages and ensuring deeply satisfying, intimate, couple relationships (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998).

In their longitudinal study, Amato and Booth (1995) noted that increases in egalitarianism were associated with declines in marital problems, disagreements, and divorce proneness. Schwartz’s (1994) interviews with 56 peer couples revealed that “[t]he shared decisions, responsibility, and household labor were in the service of an intimate and deeply collaborative marriage. I call this kind of marriage peer marriage; it is a marriage of equal companions, a collaboration of love and labor in order to produce profound intimacy and mutual respect” (p. 2, emphasis added).

In a study of 10 couples who identified as feminists (Blaisure & Allen, 1995), partners described their relationships as “expanding,” and their partners as “a soul mate,” and “a friend.” A belief in equality guided their construction of satisfying marriages that they considered superior to traditional ones. Feminist
beliefs of equality "upgraded" marriage for women and brought men closer to their family members.

"A BEST FRIEND"

Many studies are revealing couples' desire for relationship equality (Blaisure & Allen, 1995; Hochschild, 1989; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998; Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998; Schwartz, 1994). Individuals often express the goal to marry "a best friend" (Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 1994; Notarius & Markman, 1993). Gottman (1994) concluded from his longitudinal research of over 700 couples that the way to a satisfying and stable marriage is through "profound friendship." Friendship is one close relationship in western society without institutional role expectations and is built on mutuality, ongoing choice, fairness, and a sense of equality (Rabin, 1996).

However, not every gender arrangement promotes friendship. In Rabin's (1996) interviews with 70 couples from Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States, men reported wanting a best friend and acknowledged the potential of the separate spheres arrangement (i.e., he is in charge of income and she is in charge of family life typical in traditional marriage) to inhibit friendship. In Risman and Johnson-Sumerford's (1998) postgender marriage study in which couples had nontraditional gender arrangements, almost all of the 30 partners, in individual interviews, noted that their partner was their "very best friend, irreplaceable, and precious. The relationships of these couples seem embedded within the framework of a valued, intimate companionship" (p. 35, emphasis added).

WHAT IS EQUALITY ANYWAY?

Note to educator: After presenting the information in this section, couples could do the "Our Blender" activity (see Appendix B) in which they determine how they wish to blend the types of equality (i.e., the 50/50 rule, the proportional equity, and need equity). Couples could also brainstorm strategies that cover up equality and strategies that promote equality. See Appendix C for a handout that lists these strategies.

The term, equality, as used here, refers to both belief in the inherent equality of women and men that is carried over into a committed relationship and behaviors that mirror that belief. Some family life educators and couples might prefer to use the terms, egalitarian, instead of equality. A group discussion of these terms would be one way to introduce the topic. Ask the group members to brainstorm what they think of when they hear the terms, equality and egalitarian. After acknowledging the range of thoughts and reactions to these terms, offer the following understanding of equality.

Through her research and therapeutic practice, Rabin (1996) has identified three ways couples define equality. First, equality is defined as subjective appraisal by a partner. In this definition, couples rely on three justice rules to determine whether their relationship is based on equality. When applying the 50-50 Rule, individuals' contributions and rewards are divided half and half, or "down the middle." This rule is impersonal and rule-bound. To feel cared for, this simple rule should vary, in order to communicate an ongoing need. Given the danger of turning a relationship into the 50-50 Rule, couples typically employ the Proportional Equity Rule, an amount of responsibilities and effort given. In a relationship, the more of the relationship rests on the "50-50 Rule, the less you feel cared for." When applying the Need Equity Rule, resource distribution is according to individual need or desire. For example, financial support for additional education is one of the resources.

A second way to define equality is through the "enabling the other person to expand their freedom" (Rabin, 1996, p. 53). Empowerment within a relationship and expands choices. Gottman (Rabin, 1996), and men learn to be influential partners. Couples may respond positively to power as "an enable the other person to expand their freedom" (Rabin, 1996, p. 53). Empowerment within a relationship and expands choices. Gottman (1994).

When discussing a power definition program, the first author has found it helpful to introduce the analysis of power in marriage, as described by Risman and Johnson-Sumerford (1998). The following definitions are short and put into everyday language and are used to generate reflection on power in marriage. Latent power is the ability to influence one's partner's choices, which include the needs and wishes of the partner. When discussing power, one-way couples state their needs and wishes without raising an issue or offering a suggestion and their partner states their needs and wishes. Functioning as a meta-relationship rule, power is measured and can be visible to both partners.

"Invisible power extends beyond the roles and can be measured easily" (Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998). Examples of this type of power are one-sided coercion.

"Latent power, however, is more insidious and keep issues from even being raised. Latent power arises because the needs and wishes of the partner are easily taken from everyday life. Individuals have a list of examples of when they consciously raise an issue or offer a suggestion and their partner's response. Functioning as a meta-relationship rule, power identification of times it is in effect. "Invisible power extends beyond the roles and can be measured easily" (Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998)."
A second way to define equality is equal power in the relationship. "Power determines who does what, who decided who does what and how decisions about who does what get made" (Rabin, 1996, p. 45). U.S. couples typically make the covert deal that husband's income gives him more power. Yet, wives earning more than husbands typically don't "buy out" of household chores. Feeling entitled affects women's ability to increase personal power in a relationship.

Couples may respond positively to the idea of empowerment, that is, "enabling the other person to expand their range of choices and personal freedom" (Rabin, 1996, p. 53). Empowerment allows for two strong leaders within a relationship and expands choices. Women learn to assert themselves (Rabin, 1996), and men learn to be influenced by their female partners (Gottman, 1994).

When discussing a power definition of equality in a couple education program, the first author has found it helpful to describe Komter's (1989) analysis of power in marriage, as described by Risman & Johnson-Sumerford (1998). The following definitions are shown on an overhead during an educational program and are used to generate discussion regarding how each form of power is and is not present in couples' relationships.

"Manifest power is the ability to enforce one's will against opposition and can be measured easily" (Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998, p. 33). Examples of this type of power are one-sided decisions, physical abuse, and coercion.

"Latent power, however, is more insidious and reflects the force to keep issues from even being raised. Latent power exists when conflict never arises because the needs and wishes of the more powerful are anticipated and met" (Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998, p. 33). Examples of this type of power are easily taken from everyday life. Individuals could be asked to develop a list of examples of when they consciously and unconsciously decide not to raise an issue or offer a suggestion and their reasons behind this self-monitoring. Functioning as a meta-relationship rule, latent power could also inhibit identification of times it is in effect.

"Invisible power extends beyond the harboring of even latent grievances and depends on the systematic differentiation between groups that are so embedded in practice and persons that male privilege is perceived as legitimate, even by women" (Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998, p. 33). An
example of invisible power is assuming the man’s paid work takes precedence over the woman’s paid work (e.g., in determining where the couple lives, how their family time is organized, who stays home with sick children).

A third definition of equality is sharing household and parenting tasks. A series of research studies have documented that the happiest couples learn to share tasks without much conflict or “fuss” (Blaisure & Allen, 1995; Goodnow & Bowes, 1994; Hochschild, 1989; Rabin, 1996; Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998; Schwartz, 1994). “Once equality is habitual, calculation and comparison are no longer necessary” (Thompson, 1991, p.188). In Goodnow and Bowes’ 1994 study of 50 Australian couples and in Rabin’s international study of 70 couples, the “nasty tasks” were divided equally, while the remaining tasks were divided proportionally.

TYPES OF COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Note to educators: As the following information is presented to couples, they will identify with one or more of the types. It is important to convey empathy and understanding, not judgment, on any type of couple. Most couples want to be in a peer or equal partner marriage but probably are in a near peer or transitional relationship. Normalizing the stress while also providing hope and ideas for change are critical. For educators with advanced training, using the genogram activity (see Appendix B) can assist couples in understanding their current dilemmas within a context, thereby reducing blame of self and other. Couples can easily get stuck in blame rather than getting on with making necessary changes.

The studies reviewed below were chosen to share with couples for two reasons. First, they document the possibility of developing and maintaining equality while also documenting the larger group of couples who wish to do so but experience obstacles. Second, the results are easily transferable to practical suggestions for couples. The two studies (Rabin, 1996; Schwartz, 1994) are already in book form available to couple educators.

In the Peer Marriage study, Schwartz (1994) interviewed 56 peer couples, 22 near peer couples, and 22 traditional couples from 6 different U.S. cities. Rabin interviewed 70 couples from three countries (i.e., Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States), and labeled couples practicing equality, Equal Partners. Both researchers also identified couples who were struggling with issues of equality (i.e., transitional couples), and traditional couples.

Couples in Peer Marriages (Schwartz, 1994) or Equal Partner Marriages (Rabin, 1996) believe in the importance or relationship equality and are dedicated to establishing fairness and collaboration within their relationships. They describe an intense companionship and sharing in the tasks of child raising, decision-making, and housework. These couples consider peer marriage or equal partnership salvation from instability. “They believe that the only way to maintain a lifetime together is to create an irreplaceable and interdependent union of equals” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 2). They practice equality by flexibly blending the various ways of defining equality that are noted above.
The Near Peers (Schwartz, 1994) and Transitional Couples (Rabin, 1996) believe in equality but are unable to practice it. These couples constitute a large portion of Western world. Relationship dissatisfaction and instability result as couples attempt to meld companionship with hierarchy. However, without friendship and equality, recent increases in women's power results in increased conflict. Rabin identified two sub-groups of couples who become stuck: those who live parallel lives, and those who engage in ongoing, open conflict.

In Parallel Lives Couples, the men withdraw from strong women because the men have no model of equality to follow. The women fear domination and lack a vision of intimacy that does not compromise independence. Emotional closeness becomes scary for the men because of increased conflict, which triggers aggression and/or a desire to flee. They then tend to use rational arguments to define reality for the couple. Emotional closeness is scary for the women for fear of falling into a traditional female role. These fears are founded. In parallel couples there is evidence of men trying to dominate because of having little to no experience of equality with women, thereby falling into traditional interactional styles. These couples need a vision of cooperation beyond the restricted and narrow definitions afforded by traditional gender roles.

Open Conflict Couples engage each other in conflict. They tend to be younger couples than Parallel Couples. The men may avoid direct conflict, and the women may ignore changes men have made. Rabin suggests that such couples need to decrease proportional equity, increase need equity, and value the feminine (i.e., they both need to nurture the relationship and appreciate the importance of nurturing).

Traditional Couples divide male and female roles into separate spheres. Final authority rests with men who make the major life decisions while women deal with daily family problems. These couples tend to sacrifice goals of intimacy, deep friendship, and mutual respect. Inequality ranges from subtle to moderate to overt and severe. In such relationships, unique personalities become distorted because they are gender bound. If these couples seek therapy, “change is usually germinating in wife” and her anger is hidden in symptoms. Often her anger is denied, and part of therapeutic treatment is nurturing a sense of entitlement (Rabin, 1996, p.136).

DEVELOPING EQUALITY IN COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Note to educator: The “Encouraging Empathy” activity (see Appendix B) can promote the attitude of respect for the changes couples are making, as well as enhance individual couples’ feelings of closeness. Solid group facilitation skills are critical to the success of this activity. Also, educators could use group discussion to help couples attending a program recognize and personalize issues of entitlement, and personal definitions of fairness. Couples could also present to the group their own work pattern of sharing responsibilities. However, if this activity is chosen, it is recommended that couples do not evaluate each other’s plans. Beyond increasing awareness of
inequalities, couples should learn specific skills in communication and conflict management techniques.

The models for developing equality within a couple relationship share similar characteristics. They note the critical role of friendship, in addition to experiencing similar worlds based on sharing responsibilities, monitoring one's own contributions, learning communication and conflict management, and sharing a common ideology.

FRIENDSHIP/PEER MARRIAGE MODEL

The interactional elements of deep friendship include demonstrating understanding of the other with tolerance and respect. Partner's inhabit shared worlds so they experience similar frustrations and joy. They cultivate the ability to negotiate differences, and balance togetherness with privacy and separateness. No more than a 60/40 split of household duties and child raising exists. Partners share equal influence over important and disputed decisions, and have equal control over family economy and access to discretionary funds. Also, each person's work carries equal significance.

The rewards of Peer Marriage include experiencing the primacy of the relationship and each partner's commitment to the relationship. Intimacy is based on knowledge of other. Costs associated with Peer Marriage include betraying tradition and career advancement (Peer Couples put their relationship quality ahead of career and therefore will pass by advancements or raises if it means less family time). Some partners experience costs related to not carrying out traditional gender roles and must reconstruct a personal identity not based on a gender stereotype. Peer Couples maintain such a close friendship that they often will transition through a time of learning how to experience passion free of hierarchy and power dynamics. Peer Couples can become so close that others become excluded. Finally, Peer Couples typically must take time and energy figuring out the right mix of equity and equality.

EQUAL PARTNERS MODEL

Rabin (1996) identified four conditions necessary to establish an Equal Partnership: friendship, shared power, bridging the gender gap in communication, and developing a shared ideology. First, friendship survives within "an atmosphere of equality," implying mutual concern and respect and lack of domination. Friendship is created by inhabiting shared worlds, and not allowing gender to separate partners into "her" and "his" worlds. Equal partners share in financial, emotional, housework, and childrearing dimensions of life. They know each other's daily life and so can empathize easily. They share themselves as whole persons, not restricted by gender scripts. "Couples who shared their lives developed the essential empathic attachment that underlies friendship: the friend's needs are perceived as influential, as they are felt as compellingly as one's own. This mutual identification results in a willingness to sacrifice for the other's development, and an awareness of the requirements for the other's well-being....These are aspects of friendship that women have traditionally offered to their partners, but have been "returned" (Rabin, 1996, p. 64). Friends also model relationship rather than focusing on what they argue and convince during conflict. Sharing power in decision-making typically offers learned submissiveness and self-deprecating arguments as alternatives. Women also accept and embrace women's anger. Both parties are typically labeled women's work or feminized nurturance relationships, appreciating beauty, values, and tasks.

Overcoming a gender gap in communication is an avoidance of conflict, enhance self-disclosure that is not limited from their wives. Women learn to invest in, not accept partners celebrate individual differences, as they celebrate differences in the relationship, and consider disagreements as acceptable. Equal partners share a shared ideology regarding reasons for establishing the relationship. Relationship quality prevails as each person's self-concept is developed in a larger community and belonging often provides.

FEMINISTS AND MARRIAGE MODEL

This model stresses the importance of monitoring of equality within and outside of a relationship. Allen, 1995, p.10). Couples engage in five acts typical of traditional marriage that involves the same activities by caring for children, bringing dinner to their partners, participating in public acts of equality (e.g., couples filing taxes under the wife's name), and addressing conflict and nurturing the relationship, beliefs as providing guidance for moving towards a traditional marriage model offers.

SUMMARY

Issues of equality and couples' beliefs appear central to the lives of many couples. As part of this information in her couple education information as a whole to counseling students experiences, the following suggestions are offered to equality, power, and gender.

First, convey a deep respect for her, attempted to respond to such a confusing social
traditionally offered to their partners, but have rarely received themselves in return" (Rabin, 1996, p. 64). Friends also monitor their own contributions to the relationship rather than focusing on what they are getting.

Sharing power in decision-making typically requires women to shrug off learned submissiveness and self-deprecating behaviors and to learn how to argue and convince during conflict. Sharing power requires men to learn to accept and embrace women's anger. Both partners need to learn to honor what has typically been labeled women's work or feminine, such as caring for others, nurturing relationships, appreciating beauty, valuing home life, and doing daily tasks.

Overcoming a gender gap in communication requires that men reduce an avoidance of conflict, enhance self-disclosure, and become willing to learn from their wives. Women learn to invest in, not criticize, their partners. Both partners celebrate individual differences as bringing strength to their relationship, and consider disagreements as acceptable. Finally, couples foster a shared ideology regarding reasons for establishing and maintaining an equal partnership. Relationship quality prevails as a shared value. Couples involve themselves in a larger community and benefit from the social support such belonging often provides.

FEMINISTS AND MARRIAGE MODEL

This model stresses the importance of vigilance, the "attending to and a monitoring of equality within and outside of [a couple's] relationship" (Blaisure & Allen, 1995, p. 10). Couples engage in five processes of vigilance. Both the wife and husband note and critique gender injustices in social and personal experiences. By doing so, husbands validate wives' experiences of differential treatment and communicate their dedication to equality in general. Couples also participate in public acts of equality (e.g., wives not changing their last names, couples filing taxes under the wife's name). Third, husbands support wives' activities by caring for children, bringing dinner to her place of work, or sharing space in the home for her project. Partners also monitor their own contributions to their relationship and to family life, and are emotionally responsible for addressing conflict and nurturing the relationship. Feminist couples see their beliefs as providing guidance for moving towards something better than what a traditional marriage model offers.

SUMMARY

Issues of equality and couples' beliefs and practices in these areas appear central to the lives of many couples. The first author has incorporated parts of this information in her couple education programs and has presented the information as a whole to counseling students and their partners. Based on these experiences, the following suggestions are offered for addressing issues related to equality, power, and gender.

First, convey a deep respect for how individuals and couples have attempted to respond to such a confusing social time. Acknowledge the power of
social scripts that most of us followed with little choice. Cast a discussion of these issues as an opportunity to consider what has worked for the couple and what has outlived its usefulness. By relying on studies, the first author has found less defensiveness on the part of couples than if such ideas are promoted without connection to research results.

Regardless of the identified benefits of equality and the potential for couples to experience greater intimacy and satisfaction, many couples experience tension around changing their gender arrangements toward more equality. The couples who experience the joy and deep satisfaction of equality-based relationships are those in which the partners share an ideology and practice of equality (Blaisure & Allen, 1995; Rabin, 1996; Schwartz, 1994; Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989). It appears that traditional gender arrangements prevent intimacy between partners (Horst & Doherty, 1995). If a man holds onto traditional gender expectations, increases in sharing power and household labor are associated with decreasing satisfaction and increasing relationship tension (Hochschild, 1989; Rabin, 1996). Addressing both gender beliefs and behaviors in education programs, therefore, is important.

Individual, relational, and societal factors make addressing gender and power in relationships a source of discomfort and fear for both partners (Rabin, 1996). Bringing up these topics in an educational program could tap that discomfort and fear. However, many of the couple education programs of which we are aware (i.e., Couples Communication, Preparation and Relationship Enhancement Program, Relationship Enhancement), are already “tampering” with familiar gender roles by encouraging, for example, the acquisition of communication and conflict management skills. Through the use of such skills, men are learning to become more emotionally open and remain engaged in a conflictual interaction, and women are learning how to argue their points. It is within reason to suggest that such skills, if used, could assist couples in practicing more equality in their relationships. For example, emotional availability of both partners is central to couples’ experience of equality (Blaisure & Allen, 1995; Rabin, 1996; Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989). It is recommended that the information presented in this paper be paired with skills training in communication and conflict management. Adding a focus on equality may make a couple education program longer by approximately four hours.

Second, be sensitive to one’s own gender, especially if female. Female family life educators can overcome possible participant defensiveness by empathizing with the confusion and frustration resulting from the changing expectations for women and men in intimate relationships. Highlighting the changes that have occurred in marriage helps set a tone of optimism and appreciation for changes men have made. Again, by referring to research, educators can avoid sliding into generalizations while also recognizing that gender does matter in relationship quality.

Third, discomfort, anxiety, fear, or embarrassment can appear in the form of joking (e.g., “now we know who wears the pants,” “that’s just like a man”). Ignore those jokes and move the group ahead. If the jokes become plentiful or seem to hinder the group process, note that jokes indicate discomfort and ask what is uncomfortable about the content (in a way that communicates a gentle curiosity and a seriousness about what joking could serve to keep the status quo in topics to emerge). Such an intervention may make the group process more productive.

Anger is another common response that occurs in the conversation, not listening to other participants from conversation. At the first sign of anger, workshop, identify and normalize possible reactions like the following could be said, “It is in our human reactions to others normal to what we will cover today. If we can recognize and identify what is going on today is to recognize our reactions.” This intervention can also be used to encourage process reactions (e.g., challenge our own beliefs, provide stress releasers). We are all on a journey together that they are strong and satisfying. This journey may not be easy. The path is long. We all need to make our journey more satisfying.” It might be useful to add a workshop with a deep breathing exercise.

Fourth, it is highly recommended that more research be done in family life education, marriage and family health degree; or substantial experience and education should have engaged in extensive experiential practice of equality, power, and communication and conflict resolution concerning these issues is instrumental in growth in these areas.

Finally, couple education programs can be designed to embrace conflict as a positive force in their relationships. It is more likely that men to raise points of their partners’ entitlement increases the movement toward more equality-based relationships. The couple education programs promoting equality that can be used as an opportunity to influence these issues is instrumental in growth in these areas.

Research is needed to discover if couples who have engaged in extensive experiential practice of equality, power, and communication and conflict resolution concerning these issues is instrumental in growth in these areas.

Research is needed to discover if couples who have engaged in extensive experiential practice of equality, power, and communication and conflict resolution concerning these issues is instrumental in growth in these areas.
curiosity and a seriousness about what is under discussion. Such kind of joking could serve to keep the status quo intact, that is, not allow necessary topics to emerge. Such an intervention moves a group to another level of reflection and self-awareness.

Anger is another common response (and could be mirroring the anger that occurs at home). Some physical signs of anger are raised voices, dominating the conversation, not listening to other participants, interrupting, and withdrawal from conversation. At the first sign of anger, or even at the beginning of the workshop, identify and normalize possible reactions to the content. Something like the following could be said, "It is important to note that a variety of reactions are normal to what we will cover in our time together. What we are invited to do today is to recognize our reactions, consider what these reactions mean for us and our relationship, and choose constructive means to handle those reactions (e.g., challenge our own beliefs, practice couple skills, identify useful stress releasers). We are all on a journey to transform couple relationships so that they are strong and satisfying. This journey is not without its detours and road repair. Our partner and ourselves need to know that we are committed to this journey of equality and committed to learn and practice the skills that will make our journey more satisfying." It might be helpful to begin and/or end the workshop with a deep breathing exercise.

Fourth, it is highly recommended that educators have an advanced degree in family life education, marriage and family therapy, or a related mental health degree; or substantial experience and training in these areas. Educators should have engaged in extensive experiential learning in the areas of gender, power, and communication and conflict management. Self-awareness concerning these issues is instrumental in successfully facilitating couples’ growth in these areas.

Finally, couple education programs highlight the necessity of couples to embrace conflict as a positive force in their relationship, and since women are more likely than men to raise points of relationship dissatisfaction and women’s growing sense of entitlement increases the possibility of conflict (Gottman, 1994), it is possible that many couple education programs are improving women’s relationship satisfaction by indirectly addressing issues of equality. However, we know of no evaluation study of couple education programs that has considered satisfaction with division of labor and decision making as outcome variables.

Research is needed to discover if couple education programs result in movement toward more equality-based relationships. To what extent are marriage education programs promoting equality-based relationships? To what extent are they reinforcing the status quo of traditional gender roles? Evaluative research should not only consider couples’ perception of marital satisfaction and the process of decision making, but also the outcome of decision making (Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiege, & Hall, 1996). How often is the chosen decision the one initially advocated by one partner or the other? How often is the chosen decision something beyond what the couple began with? Who does the decision benefit the most?
Working with couples in education programs is quite rewarding. However, couples face numerous challenges in the building a relationship responsive to each partner’s expectations of fairness and intimacy. Family life educators can respond to the tension experienced by many heterosexual couples and assist them in developing the beliefs and behaviors that enhance relationship satisfaction and stability.

REFERENCES


Appendix A: Outline of Content

Costs of Inequality
- Divorce Rate
- Depression
- Lower Marital Quality
- Traditional Male Gender Role
  - Lower Capacity for Intimacy
  - Depression and Anxiety
- Subtle to Overt Misuse of Power

Benefits of Equality
- Divorce-Proofing
- Getting a "Best Friend"

What Is Equality Anyway?
- Subjective Appraisal Based on Three Justice Rules
  - 50/50
  - Proportional
  - Need
- Equal Power or Empowerment
- Forms of Power
  - Manifest
  - Latent
  - Invisible
- Sharing Household and Parenting Tasks

Types of Couple Relationships
- Peer Marriages or Equal Partners
- Near Peer Marriages or Transitional Couples
  - Parallel Lives
  - Open Conflict
- Traditional Couples

Appendix B: Activity Where Do I Stand?

In this activity, individuals are asked to respond to a question by moving to a part of the room. There are two groups. Members of each group discuss their responses (e.g., agree or disagree) or three (e.g., strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) responses based on group's development, lead with less controversial ones that help the group to get to know one another. If the group is comfortable with one another, the leader generates the questions.

Sample Questions
- Those with at least one parent still living on that side.
- Those who do not have children on this side.
- Couples in their relationship for more than 10 years on this side.
- Do you think equality is possible in couples no on this side.
- Do you know of a couple with an equal relationship on that side.
DEVELOPING EQUALITY IN COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Friendship/Peer Marriage Model
- Primacy of Relationship
- Intimacy Based on Knowledge of Other
- Shared Worlds
- Dedicated Time to Relationship

Equal Partners Model
- Friendship
- Shared Worlds
- Respect and Lack of Domination
- Shared Power
- Communication Skills
- Shared Ideology

Feminists and Marriage Model
- Critique Gender Injustices
- Public Acts of Equality
- Support of Wives’ Activities
- Monitoring Own Contributions
- Emotionally Responsible for Addressing Conflict and Nurturing Relationship

APPENDIX B: ACTIVITIES

WHERE DO I STAND?

In this activity, individuals are asked to respond to a statement or question by moving to a part of the room. The room could be divided into two responses (e.g., agree or disagree) or three (e.g., agree, disagree, and unsure) or four (e.g., strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). If used early in a group’s development, lead with less controversial statements/questions, such as ones that help the group to get to know one another better (e.g., location, years together). If the group is comfortable with one another, group members could generate the questions.

Sample Questions
- Those with at least one parent still living on this side; those without a parent living on that side.
- Those who do not have children on this side; those who have children on that side.
- Couples in their relationship for more than 10 years on that side; less than 10 years on this side.
- Do you think equality is possible in couple relationships? Yes on that side, no on this side.
- Do you know of a couple with an equal relationship? Yes on this side, no on that side.
- Is equality a necessary ingredient for a successful relationship? Yes on this side, no on that side.
- Is a 50/50 split of household labor the best way to ensure marital happiness? Yes on that side, no on this side.
- Is friendship an integral part of equality-based relationships? No on this side, yes on that side.
- Can friendship thrive in a traditional gender arrangement? No on that side, yes on this side.

GENOGRAM

Master's level training in couple and family therapy or family life education is highly recommended. See McGoldrick, Gerson, and Shellenberger's (1999) *Genograms: Assessment and Intervention* book.

Have couples create a three generation genogram and trace what was taught to them about couple relationships. Ask couples to consider the following questions. What types of couple interactions are represented on your genograms? What legacies have three generations of family given to you as a couple? What did you learn about the value of women? The value of men? What did you learn about dividing household tasks? Sharing based on needs and wants? Sharing decision-making?

CIRCLES WITHIN CIRCLES

Invite first one gender to sit in a circle, around which is a larger circle of the other gender. Ask the inner circle to discuss what encourages equality in their relationships and then the challenges that lure them away from enacting equality in their relationship. Switch genders. This activity succeeds when an atmosphere of curiosity without judgment is established. After each gender has talked, ask participants to reflect on what they learned and in what ways they have gained greater empathy.

OUR BLENDER

Additional reading may be helpful to facilitate this exercise. See Rabin's (1996) *Equal partners--good friends: Empowering couples through therapy* book.

Invite individual couples to discuss between themselves what areas of their life fall within the three justice rules: the 50/50 Rule, the Proportional Equity Rule, and the Need Equity Rule. Ask them to discuss how they perceive the other person empowering them (e.g., she describes how she perceives him as empowering her, then he describes how he perceives her empowering him).

ENCOURAGING EMPATHY

Ask the group to brainstorm some deal with in their relationships. With the group turned into a role play (e.g., arguing about what the couple agreed to was okay group into women and men. Each group would be for a woman or a man. Ask each group to choose one person who will then play the scenario. Run the scenario for approximately 10 minutes.

Ask each participant in the role play to reflect on what they wanted or did not want among themselves about what the person feeling, thinking, wanting. Give the role-play the feeling. Ask the woman's group if they have anything to say about the man feeling/thinking. Ask the man who did the role-play to disclose the man's group if they have anything to say about the scenario. The goal of this activity is to promote each to hear the other sex being empathic. Make sure to have the role-play participant to talk and to each group.

APPENDIX C: STRATEGIES THAT COVER

Strategies that mask inequalities are used by couples. By learning to notice them and reflect, we can move closer to establishing equality in our relationships.

THE ARGUMENT OF FAIRNESS

Resorting only to a feeling of “right or equal.” Equal partner relationships as equitable (Regan & Sprecher, 1995) do not necessarily feel like he is doing more than she is doing less than she should even though a person is used to doing only 25% of the work like 80%. Also, equal influence in decision-making.
ENCOURAGING EMPATHY

- Ask the group to brainstorm some typical issues that women and men deal with in their relationships. With the group’s help, choose one that could be turned into a role play (e.g., arguing about money—-one person spending more than what the couple agreed to was okay to spend individually). Divide the group into women and men. Each group will discuss what a “typical” response would be for a woman or a man. Ask each group to come up with typical behaviors, sentences, attitudes, and feelings associated with the scenario. Then, each group chooses one person who will then participate in a role-play based on the scenario. Run the scenario for approximately 5 minutes.

- Ask each participant in the role play to silently consider how she/he is feeling, and what they wanted or did not want to happen. Ask each group to talk among themselves about what the person from the other group is probably feeling, thinking, wanting. Give the role-play participants and the groups a few minutes to talk. Start with one of the groups, let’s say the men’s group. Ask them what they think the woman is feeling/thinking/wanting from the interaction. Ask the woman who did the role-play to disclose her feelings/thoughts/wants. Then ask the women’s group if they have anything to add. Then ask the women’s group what they think the man is feeling/thinking/wanting from the interaction. Ask the man who did the role-play to disclose his feelings/thoughts/wants. Then ask the men’s group if they have anything to add.

The goal of this activity is to promote empathy for one another and for each to hear the other sex being empathic. Make sure equal time is given to each role-play participant to talk and to each group to talk.

APPENDIX C: STRATEGIES

STRATEGIES THAT COVER UP INEQUALITY

Strategies that mask inequalities are often employed unconsciously by couples. By learning to notice them and refusing to consider them valid, couples can move closer to establishing equality in their relationship.

THE ARGUMENT OF FAIRNESS

Resorting only to a feeling of fairness to determine the status of equality in a relationship typically masks inequality (Hochschild, 1989). Couples can fail to recognize gender biases built into what they feel or sense is “right or equal.” Equal partner relationships may not perceive their relationships as equitable (Regan & Sprecher, 1995) due to gender socialization. He may subjectively feel like he is doing more than the woman, and she may feel like she is doing less than she should even though they are dividing tasks equally. If a person is used to doing only 25% of the work of the home, doing 50% may feel like 80%. Also, equal influence in decisions may not be seen as fair because
couples may assume higher earnings should result in greater say in decision-making.

THE STRATEGY OF COMMUNICATION

This strategy is insidious, especially given the focus on communication skill development in couple education programs. If wives participate in discussion regarding a decision, they will determine the outcome is fair, even if outcomes benefit husbands. Wives will go along with husbands’ ideas as long as the process is a joint one and theoretically the couple could have decided differently (Thompson, 1991).

“Although the distribution of outcomes is unfair, women may not sense the injustice because they accept as appropriate the participatory process by which the outcomes were created. Komter (1989) would say that this is the result of husbands’ latent power. No grievances or complaints occur because wives anticipate the needs and wishes of their more powerful husbands” (Thompson, 1991, p.193).

BENIGN FRAMING/RATIONALIZATION

Knudson-Martin & Mahoney (1998) identified at least seven different ways to justify an unequal situation: differences in skills, labeling situation as natural, inequality as choice, not minding discrepancy, understanding the other’s behavior, other’s behavior is really one’s fault, and inequality as circumstance. Such justifications reinforce the status quo because they remove the possibility of and responsibility for change from the partners.

IGNORING LATENT POWER

Ignoring the long-term consequences of power differentials, especially the use of latent power stresses a relationship and the partners. (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998). Such hiding of issues limits the potential helpful conflict the couple can experience. Sometimes, responsibility for change is placed on the woman to “get help” for her dissatisfaction or depression.

RATIONALIZED POWER IMBALANCES

Closely following benign reframing is rationalizing inequality through personal characteristics (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994; Hochschild, 1989; Thompson, 1991): lack of attentiveness (e.g., “What dirt?”), willing but incompetent (e.g., “I’m just no good at...”), out-waiting the other partner’s patience until she does the task herself, inexperience or clumsiness, tiredness, niceness (e.g., “I don’t want to disturb him”), not brought up to do whatever, and impossibility of change (e.g., “You don’t teach old dogs new tricks”).
Sometimes couples cast work of the home as providing more enjoyment or pleasure for women than for men. However, women report much family work as “tiresome, menial, mindless, repetitive, and lonely” (Thompson, 1991, p. 184). Some research suggests that men find family work more desirable than women. When women request “help,” family work has become their personal need. Also, when women are the ones to determine the “standard,” they then become, ipso facto, the one with the need to have family work done at a particular level.

**WITHIN-GROUP AND BETWEEN-GROUP COMPARISONS**

When men are compared to each other or to their fathers (i.e., within-group comparisons) they often appear superior (e.g., “John does more around the house than Joe does. And he certainly does more than his father ever did.”). Or if women compare themselves to other women they may conclude they have a better situation. However, a conclusion about how much a man contributes to family work may differ greatly if his comparison group changes from other men to women (i.e., between group comparison) (Thompson, 1991).

**LACK OF ENTITLEMENT**

Women demonstrate a lack of entitlement in at least two ways: by believing and trying to “do it all,” (i.e., superwoman), or by denying personal needs (e.g., for sleep, good nutrition, exercise, personal time) in order to accomplish or attempt to accomplish the work, responsibility, and nurturing of the family. “One person should not be more privileged than the other: should not, for instance, be ‘waited upon’ by the other. These occasions, reminiscent of relationships between superiors and inferiors, or customers and people paid to serve, are, again, sharp reminders of inequality, blowing away the surface story of equality and mutual caring” (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994, p. 189-190).

**STRATEGIES THAT PROMOTE EQUALITY**

Couples could be asked to reflect on their lives if they practiced the following strategies. Examples for each one could be generated by the participants.

**RECOGNIZE ENTITLEMENT**

Family work is no longer a woman’s own particular problem (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994). “Persons of high self-esteem expect more equal relationships. Especially in women, lowered self-esteem may result in settling for a less equitable relationship” (Rabin, 1996, p. 25).
DON'T RELY ON GENDER

Negotiate specific tasks without resorting to gender as a reason for assuming/assigning a specific task (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994).

DESIGN OWN WORK PATTERN

Take into account couples' definition of fair, practicality, pleasant place to live, good relationship, and reasonable lifestyle. Consider each person's preferred jobs. Resolve differences in standards by changing standards, compromising, or living with difference. Avoid "your job, my way" (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994).

COUNTER RATIONALIZATIONS

Greet justifications and rationalizations "with the skepticism and the humor they deserve" (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994, p.182). For example, when someone says, "I don't know how," respond with, "You've got to be kidding," or "Let me show you." When someone is learning a job, don't rescue them, but be sure to give them reinforcement for trying. Also, employ humor and consider areas in which both persons are novices and can learn together.

CONFRONT DILEMMAS

Couples must be willing to engage in conflict negotiation, that is, a shared willingness to work through an issue until it is resolved (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998). Fighting reflects a willingness to raise issues but it is less mutual than negotiation. Power struggles are less direct, and occur when partners are unwilling to accommodate, and are bogged down in gender roles.

CHALLENGING INEQUALITY

Identify inequalities in a relationship. Do not allow power differentials to be framed as wives' personal lack of assertiveness. They must also consider husbands' need to be more accommodating. Focusing exclusively on women's need to change reveals power differentials (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998).

COMMENTS FROM OTHERS

Comments from others about the oddity of equality-based relationships violate a couple's assumption of equality (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994). Common comments from others include: "He'll leave you for another woman;" "You're under her thumb;" "Aren't you lucky;" "I wish my husband was like that." These comments can have an unstated portion to them, such as "don't be like this," or "change back to the [unequal] way you were."

Possible responses to such comments are: "I don't worry about what my [male] friends think" (i.e., let them think what they will); "It's their generation (i.e., do not accept their problem as your own; or note the unfair treatment of others with a polite, regretful, or direct response: "Yes, I am lucky" or "I'm lucky to have him, and lucky to have each other." A comment that expounds that anyone thinks of it as lucky, I think it is for everyone." And finally, a direct challenge works and could save your marriage" (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994).

REFERENCES FOR STRATEGIES

others with a polite, regretful, or direct response. A polite response could be, “Yes, I am lucky” or “I’m lucky to have him, and he’s lucky to have me. We’re lucky to have each other.” A comment that expresses regret is, “I think it is sad that anyone thinks of it as lucky. I think it is something that should happen to everyone.” And finally, a direct challenge would be, “Sharing is a good idea, and it could save your marriage” (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994, p. 171-178).

REFERENCES FOR STRATEGIES HANDOUT


