

Marriage and Relationship Education: Do Facilitator Characteristics Matter?

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Introduction & Purpose

- The literature on change across time in Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) programs has typically been lacking in the area of diversity. Most samples are minimally diverse, comprising middle-class participants who are not representative of minority populations (Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008).
- Typically, outcomes have been assessed without regard for facilitator characteristics and abilities. Assessing the impact of facilitator characteristics and homogeneity/heterogeneity between facilitator and participant demographic characteristics on program outcomes is supported by studies of therapeutic interventions (e.g., Flicker et al., 2008; Mamodhousen et al., 2005).
- Although the value of facilitator/participant similarity in MRE has been speculated (e.g., Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004), there is only one published study to date addressing facilitator/participant characteristics as factors impacting satisfaction with MRE program participation (Higginbotham & Myler, in press).
- This study extends the findings of the previous study by examining an in-depth model for predicting MRE program outcomes based on facilitator abilities and facilitator/participant demographic similarity.

Method

Sample

$N = 760$ (67.1% female, 32.9% male); 54.2% attended with a partner
61.4% were married; 38.6% were in a non-married couple relationship
58.1% are African American; 38.2% are European American; 3.7% are Latin American, Asian American, Native American, or marked "other."
Age: Mode of 25 years old (12.1% were 18-24; 19.7% were 25-30; 28.8% were 31-40; 22.2% were 41-50; and 17.2% were over 51)
\$25,000 or less (41.8%), \$25,000-\$74,999 (43.2%), Income > \$75,000 (15%).
Education levels: HS or less (40.7%), some college or a 2-year technical/college degree (38.5%), 4-year college degree (13%), more than 4 years of college (7.8%)

Procedure

Four, research-based relationship education curricula were implemented throughout Alabama by community-level relationship educators as part of a US DHHS/ACF funded healthy marriage demonstration project. All curricula contained seven core relationship skills training components. Community educators were trained by the authors of each curriculum to ensure curricular fidelity. Participants provided pre- and post- program evaluations, including demographic data and ratings of facilitator and program quality

Measures

- Participant-facilitator match on sex, ethnicity, and education level
- Intermediate outcomes: facilitator ability (measured by clear explanation of course material, effectiveness in encouraging participation, caring/support for group members, good management of time/session, and drawing on own experiences usefully), a global indicator of overall facilitator quality, and one of overall program quality.
- Final outcomes were change scores (difference between post-test mean and pre-test mean) on Couple Quality (taken from Norton, 1983), Confidence/ Dedication (from Stanley & Markman, 1992), and Individual Empowerment (Shirer & Adler-Baeder, developed for study).

Results

Analysis and Results

- A structural equation model was fit to examine the relationship between participant-facilitator match of sex, ethnicity, and education and the change in Couple Quality, Confidence/Dedication, and Individual Empowerment. Intermediate outcomes of Facilitator ability and facilitator and program quality were also addressed. Simultaneous models were fit for men and women (due to the use of dependent data). In order to test for equivalence between men and women, a series of nested models were fitted in which regression weights were constrained to be equal for men and women. $\Delta \chi^2$ tests were conducted to compare models. Equivalent estimates were retained in the final model.
- Model fit indices suggest a good fit ($\chi^2 = 660.68$, $df = 289$, $p < .05$ [χ^2 / df ratio = 2.29]; TLI = .945; CFI = .955; RMSEA = .048, $p = .721$).
- In the structural model, the only regression weight differences between men and women were those of Facilitator Quality on Abilities and Program Quality on Abilities, where paths were statistically significant for men, but not for women.
- A significant path was identified for the effect of participant-facilitator match in sex on reports of perceived Facilitator Ability ($\gamma = -.222$, $SE = .115$, $p < .05$), in which participants perceived greater ability among facilitators when they were of opposite sex than the participant.

- There was also a significant effect for the change in Confidence/ Dedication regressed on participant-facilitator match in sex ($\gamma = .276$, $SE = .143$, $p < .05$), where participants reported increased change in relationship Confidence/Dedication if they matched with at least one facilitator on sex. Additionally, there was a significant effect of participant-facilitator match in education on change in reported Individual Empowerment ($\gamma = .218$, $SE = .089$, $p < .05$), in which participants whose education matched at least one facilitator reported greater change in scores on Individual Empowerment.

Summary of Findings & Discussion

- Participant-facilitator match on demographic characteristics were significantly, but minimally related to program and facilitator quality.
- Results indicated that participants rate their facilitator's abilities higher if their facilitators are a different sex; however, this effect was minimal (3% of variance for males and 0% for women).
- It appears that of the demographic factors examined, only participant-facilitator match on sex are predictive of participants' ratings of facilitator ability.
- For men, reported perception of facilitator abilities was significantly related to reports of overall program ($R^2 = 33.8\%$) and facilitator quality ($R^2 = 36.2\%$). Of note, however, is that this finding was not applicable to women in the study.
- This study tested the paths from facilitator abilities to facilitator and program quality, and the paths from facilitator and program quality to change in relational and individual outcomes. It is possible that participants rate the quality of a program and facilitator based on their satisfaction with attaining personal goals of attendance (i.e., positive changes in relational outcomes), which would suggest the need to investigate reciprocal paths.
- Tests of direct effects of participant-facilitator characteristic match on program outcome indicated that participants with a facilitator of the same sex report greater gains in Confidence/ Dedication (i.e., increased commitment and relational efficacy). This suggests that there may be something to gain from a same-sex facilitator, possibly in terms of understanding self and gender dynamics.
- Similarly, participants who matched a facilitator's education level reported greater gains in levels of Individual Empowerment. MRE Facilitators are often viewed as relational mentors, and it is possible that having a mentor who has had similar experiences and can be viewed as a peer increases participants' own sense of empowerment.
- 3.4% of the variance in outcomes was explained by characteristic match. If there is a meaningful relationship between facilitators and program outcomes, it is possibly due to the participant-facilitator relationship. Therapy literature has estimated the "alliance" between therapist and client to be responsible for approximately 1/3 of change in therapy (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). It is possible that change in MRE programs follows similar trends.
- This study has informed several potential research questions and suggests considerations in practice regarding similarity of facilitator to participants. Future directions should examine the direction of effects between program outcomes and ratings of facilitator and program quality.

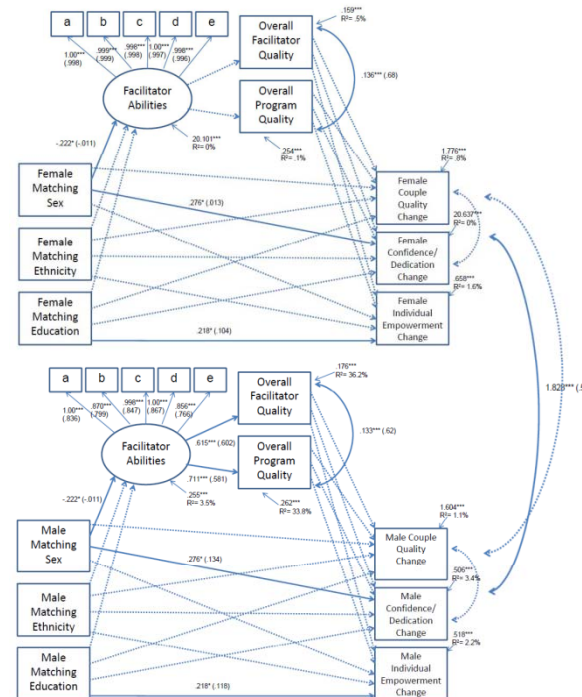


Figure 1. Fitted path diagram for female and male participants (top and bottom, respectively) with unstandardized regression coefficients (and standardized estimates in parentheses). $N = 760$. Note: All hypothesized paths are presented but only significant paths are solid and include estimates.

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