MARRIAGE ENCOUNTER WEEKENDS: COUPLES WHO WIN AND COUPLES WHO LOSE

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This study examined interview and essay data for 50 married couples who had the most positive or most negative reactions in a larger sample of participants in Marriage Encounter weekends. We were interested in describing the experiences of couples who years later believed they were strongly helped by the program or who believed their marriages deteriorated because of the program. Content analysis of interview transcripts and written essays indicated that 7 couples experienced highly positive changes apparently related to Marriage Encounter, and that 9 couples experienced significant negative changes apparently related to Marriage Encounter. The other 34 couples were equally divided between "somewhat positives" and "neutrals." Retrospective analysis of the condition of marriages prior to the Marriage Encounter weekend revealed that both the highly positives and the negatives were likely to report grave marital distress prior to the weekend. Based on the findings reported here, the authors suggest that distressed couples who attend Marriage Encounter weekends are susceptible to serious further deterioration. The paper concludes with recommendations for clinicians in treating Marriage Encounter casualties, and for the Marriage Encounter organization in screening participants and modifying the program to diminish the likelihood of program-induced deterioration.

This study is the fourth in a series of reports on potential hazards of Marriage Encounter, a Church-sponsored marriage enrichment program whose leaders claim has enrolled more than one million couples since its inception in 1967. In the first paper, Doherty, McCabe and Ryder (1978) noted that Marriage Encounter is responding to important needs in many couples for greater marital closeness and that many couples testify to very positive experiences with the weekend program. At the same time, the authors faulted the program's emphasis on marital unity, emotional "highs," ideological purity, and authoritarian methods. This paper also discussed the authors' personal and professional concerns about the ideology and methods of Marriage Encounter.

The second report, by Doherty and Walker (1982), analyzed 13 clinical examples of couples whose therapists believed had been harmed by participation in a Marriage Encore.
Encounter weekend. Based on case report information from these couples’ therapists, Doherty and Walker proposed that the most problematic aspect of Marriage Encounter is its intensity. They observed that the program is designed to bring about rapid change in the couples’ communication patterns and expectations for their relationships. Data provided by the therapists revealed three different harmful consequences of this intensity: (a) increased marital conflict centering around Marriage Encounter and the changes it brought to the relationship; (b) avoidance of necessary conflict out of fear of being hurt again by self-disclosure or because of Marriage Encounter’s strong emphasis on positive feelings; and (c) marital enmeshment or the couple’s over-involvement with each other to the exclusion of the children.

In the third study, Lester and Doherty (1983) conducted a ten-year retrospective survey of 129 randomly selected graduates of National Marriage Encounter weekends. The authors used a questionnaire asking couples to identify positive, neutral, and negative effects of the program on various aspects of their relationship. The questionnaire was approved in advance by a local Marriage Encounter organization. Results indicated that, while a great majority of couples reported a totally positive experience with Marriage Encounter, nearly one in ten couples reported three or more negative effects of the program on their relationship. The highly positive couples most frequently reported feeling more trusting and more satisfied; the negative couples most frequently reported more frustration because of newly identified needs and more conflict subsequent to their Marriage Encounter experience.

The present study was designed to provide in-depth qualitative data about the couples at both ends of the continuum in the Lester and Doherty study, i.e., the most positive couples and the most negative. Specifically, this follow-up study was conducted for two reasons: first, to validate by interview and essays the questionnaire results from the earlier study; second, to obtain a closer look at the couples who seemed to benefit greatly from the Marriage Encounter program or who seemed to be harmed significantly. Because of the use of a retrospective design and qualitative data, results of this study can only be viewed as suggestive.

The next section of the paper will give background information on Marriage Encounter. After the study methods and results are presented, we will conclude with a discussion of several theoretical and clinical issues that have emerged from our research on Marriage Encounter.

BACKGROUND ON MARRIAGE ENCOUNTER

Marriage Encounter is a 44-hour marriage enrichment weekend program founded in Spain by Gabriel Calvo, a Roman Catholic priest. The program attempts to teach God’s plan for marriage—marital unity—based on the biblical injunction of “two in one flesh” (Calvo, 1975; Gallagher, 1975). It is designed for “good marriages” but no screening process is in general use, and we know distressed couples who have been actively recruited (Doherty & Walker, 1982).

There are two rival branches of Marriage Encounter—National and Worldwide—each claiming to be the “true” Marriage Encounter (Doherty, McCabe, & Ryder, 1978). We have observed, participated in, and interviewed couples from both flavors of Marriage Encounter, and find them more alike than different. However, an examination of internal documents reveals Worldwide to be more doctrinaire and manipulative during the weekend. Although Worldwide has been contacted to participate in our research projects, they have so far refused.

Both the structure and content of the weekend have been described elsewhere (DeYoung, 1979; Doherty et al., 1978). Briefly, the couples are given a series of talks presented by a team of lay people and clergy. (There are Catholic, Protestant, Jewish,
and non-denominational weekends, and religious belief is not a prerequisite for participating.) During the first part of the weekend, couples are taught the concept of "spiritual divorce," a phenomenon purported to occur in all marriages when the illusion phase (honeymoon) turns to disillusion. Spiritual divorce eventually leads to a relationship of "married singles," which is an empty shell marriage. Some suggested symptoms of spiritual divorce are feelings of disillusionment, lack of tenderness, a superficial life, and nagging.

Once spiritual divorce has been presented as a universal threat to the marital relationship, couples are taught the dialogue technique to counteract this destructive trend. The dialogue technique consists of assigning the couple a topic to discuss, having them reflect on it individually and write their feelings about it for ten minutes. Spouses are then instructed to exchange notebooks and discuss their feelings with each other. The emphasis of the discussion is upon feeling aspects of the topic; problem solving is discouraged. All the dialoguing on the weekend is between husband and wife, with little group sharing or opportunity for questions or comments about the presentations. Couples are told that daily dialogue will reverse the trend toward spiritual divorce and lead to the biblical ideal of total marital unity.

After being introduced to the mechanics of the dialogue technique, the couples practice dialoguing on questions such as, "Which events in our lives have united us the most?" As the weekend progresses, the questions become more intense and probing. On the final day couples are asked to do a complete marital evaluation which takes 90 minutes to write and 90 minutes to discuss. The National Marriage Encounter Manual (Calvo, 1975) offers couples 54 questions from which to choose, including: "What are my reasons for wanting to go on living?" and "What is my main failing as a husband (wife)?" and "What do I dislike the most in you?" The weekend concludes with a ceremonial renewal of marriage vows and testimonials from the participants about how the experience has affected them.

After the weekend, couples are invited to attend monthly follow up meetings designed to support them in their continued marital renewal and their use of the dialogue. Usually couples do not attend these meetings with others from their original weekend, but rather with couples who live in their geographical area. The follow-up meetings are conducted by untrained leaders and emphasize group sharing, in addition to couple dialogue.

As noted earlier, Marriage Encounter emphasizes the feeling aspects of communication rather than problem-solving skills. This reflects roots in the encounter movement of the '60s. Gray (1976) compared Marriage Encounter to more generic encounter groups and identified a goal common to both: the development of human potential through self-revelation. Although Marriage Encounter is more structured than usual encounter groups, Gray viewed confrontation as an essential ingredient to both. In Marriage Encounter, according to Gray (1976), "The prying up of tight lids is accomplished by the dialogue technique rather than by the group's intransigent persistence towards the individual" (p. 211). Because of some similarity in philosophy and techniques then, Marriage Encounter may be subject to risks similar to those of encounter groups.

There is little doubt that many couples believe they have benefited significantly from their Marriage Encounter experience, as evidenced by the numerous testimonials published in the writings of Marriage Encounter leaders (Gallagher, 1975; Demarest, Sexton & Sexton, 1977). However, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the program is scanty. The one published controlled outcome study (Milholland & Avery, 1982) reported short-term gains in couples' levels of trust and marital satisfaction but not of self-disclosure. The handful of theses and dissertations on the subject have been plagued by methodological problems, brief follow up periods, and inconsistent findings (French, 1976 Huber, 1976; McCabe, 1978; Samko, 1976). Aside from Lester and Doherty (1983),
existing outcome studies do not report examinations of deterioration in individual couples.

METHOD

This study was designed to provide qualitative follow up information on the extreme respondents from Lester and Doherty's (1983) sample. For that study, we conducted a retrospective survey of couples who completed a National Marriage Encounter weekend during a ten-year period (1970–1980) in eastern Iowa. A random sample of 200 couples was drawn from the population of 672 couples who had completed a weekend; current addresses were available for 166 couples. Each couple received a letter from National Marriage Encounter of Eastern Iowa announcing the study and lending support to the project. Couples were then telephoned to gain consent and to further explain the study. Consenting couples were mailed two questionnaires and given telephone reminders until they mailed them back. Contact was made with all 166 couples and questionnaires were returned by 129 couples (all but 17 returns included both spouses), resulting in a 78% response rate. Lester and Doherty (1983) summarize the sample characteristics in detail. Generally, they were a white, middle class, mostly Catholic group averaging 12.5 years of marriage. The average couple had attended a Marriage Encounter weekend four years prior to the initial study, and about five years before the interviews.

Couples in the present study constituted the extreme groups on the questionnaire data which ranged from highly positive to highly negative. Specifically, we selected the 25 couples with the highest positive scores on the quantitative parts of the questionnaire and the 25 couples with the most negative scores. Open-ended essay data were available on the same questionnaire for all 50 couples. We contacted these couples by telephone to invite their participation in a follow-up interview. Of the 25 couples in the positive group, 15 interviews were completed; 1 couple refused, 7 had moved, and 2 were excluded because they were Marriage Encounter Board members who had read the findings of the original study. Of the initial 25 negatives, 16 interviews were completed, 7 refused and 2 had moved or were unavailable. Unfortunately, four tapes (2 positives and 2 negatives) were lost in the mail while being shipped from the interviewer to the research team. Thus, the final interview count was 13 positives and 14 negatives. For couples whom we could not interview or whose tapes were lost, we relied on essay responses. Therefore, the results presented here will be based on the available qualitative data from 25 positive couples and 25 negative couples.

The Interview Structure

Each couple was interviewed at home by one of two trained assistants using a semi-structured interview format. Each spouse was interviewed separately. Interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes and covered a range of material including the initial reason the partners went to a weekend, their reaction to different aspects of the experience, and their perception of the short-term and long-term impact of the program on their relationship. Examples: "What was the best feature of the weekend for you; how did that affect your marriage?" "What was the worst feature of the weekend; how did that affect your marriage?" In some questions we explicitly gave the respondent a range of alternatives in order to elicit honest responses, e.g., "People report different kinds of emotional reactions during the weekend, ranging from euphoric to highly positive to neutral or even negative reactions. What kind of emotional reactions did you have during the weekend?" We posed some questions in this way because several respondents to our questionnaire had indicated in written comments that they "knew" we wanted to hear positive things about Marriage Encounter. We assume that this bias occurred because our study had been endorsed in a letter from National Marriage Encounter.
The interviewers asked the same questions in the same sequence but were trained to use follow-up questions to clarify or elicit more information. The interviews were audio tape-recorded and then transcribed. Two of the three investigators separately content-analyzed the transcripts. The key item in the coding system concerned long-term changes in the marital relationship attributable to the Marriage Encounter experience: “highly positive” changes, “somewhat positive” changes, “neutral” or “no” changes, or “negative” changes. For a couple to be included in the “negative” category, clear evidence of deterioration (increased negative conflict or dissatisfaction) was required in the interview or questionnaire. Similarly stringent criteria were used for the “highly positive” category: the couple must have reported substantial beneficial changes related to Marriage Encounter. For this global effect content category the two raters had 85% agreement. Disagreements were resolved in joint discussion with the third researcher. Initially we distinguished a category for the respondent’s perspective on the overall effect of the program as distinguished from the coder’s inference drawn from the available information. We found agreement between these two approaches on the presence of strongly positive or negative reactions in all but two cases in which the respondent reported negative impact short-term but neutral impact long-term (claiming, for example, that the divorce would have occurred later anyway), while the coders found evidence of both short-term and long-term deterioration due to the Marriage Encounter experience. Results presented here will be based on the coders’ evaluations.

**Essay Data**

Essay data were coded for global impact of the program. The essay items accompanying the structured questionnaire items asked for elaboration of quantitative responses, e.g., “Please state specifically what you did like about the Marriage Encounter experience;” “Please describe in your own words how the use of the dialogue technique has affected your marriage.” The two raters achieved 90% agreement on the ratings of the four categories of long term program impact based on the essay data. Disagreements were resolved in the same way as for the interview ratings.

Finally, the results also will include discussion of a one-item marital happiness scale from the original questionnaire. Couples were asked to retrospectively rate their marriage prior to their Marriage Encounter weekend, using a scale ranging from 1 (“very unhappy”) through 7 (“extremely happy”), with 4 representing “happy.”

**RESULTS**

Results will be presented in the following format: first, findings for the lasting impact of the program on the participants’ marriages; and second, profiles of couples in the two outcome categories of major interest, namely, “highly positive” and “negative.” To conserve space, “somewhat positive” and “neutral” couples will not be discussed in this paper, but their profiles are available from the authors. In general, program effects on these couples were mild.

**Ratings of Long-Term Impact the Marriage Encounter Experience**

The majority of couples fell into the “somewhat positive” category ($N = 17$) and the “neutral” category ($N = 17$), while 7 couples were found in the “highly positive” group and 9 couples in the “negative” group. Since the 50 couples constitute extreme groups on the questionnaire, it is likely that all the highly positives and all the negatives from the random sample of 129 couples have been counted, whereas the numbers of somewhat positives and neutrals no doubt would be increased if we had used the entire 129 couples. Thus, we estimate that 5.4% of the total sample experienced highly positive effects of Marriage Encounter, and 6.9% experienced negative effects.
Highly Positive Couples

Four of the 7 highly positive couples were experiencing serious difficulties prior to participating in the Marriage Encounter weekend. Three of these 4 indicated that Marriage Encounter had saved their marriage. After stating that the program made him and his wife feel more comfortable in dealing with each other, one of the husbands said: "If we kept going the way we were, we wouldn’t be here right now; we would be divorced. In that respect, for a problem marriage it was a good thing, even though that is one of the things that they say Marriage Encounter is not for—a problem marriage.”

In the fourth couple, the wife reported that the husband was going through unspecified “personal turmoil” that was hurting the marriage. The husband reported: “About the same time we went to Marriage Encounter, my wife and I gave our lives to the Lord. This coupled with Marriage Encounter had a profound effect on our lives.”

For these distressed couples, the weekend was experienced as a painful but growth-producing experience. One husband said: “It made me look at myself and see what I was doing wrong and I wasn’t improving the marriage that much by my actions.” In some cases the couple wanted to leave before the weekend was over: “I wanted to go home and quit Saturday afternoon . . . the pain I felt. I see now that it was part of the reconciliation but I was unprepared for it.” Although these couples described the experience as intense and overwhelming, they apparently were able to absorb the impact:

I definitely benefited from it (the intensity). I think it was good . . . I think we had a lot better understanding of each other. How the other one felt about a lot of things that we had not ever really talked about . . . It helped our marriage tremendously.

For these couples, then, the impact of the weekend was immediate and dramatic in fostering trust and opening blocked channels of communication. In addition, like the other couples in the highly positive group, the 4 distressed couples attended follow-up meetings regularly, thereby extending the immediate impact of the weekend. One wife summed up her experience this way: “We were on the verge of divorce. If it had not been for Marriage Encounter, who knows how long we would have gone on like that. The benefits were just so immediate.”

The other 3 couples in the “highly positive” group fit more closely the image that Marriage Encounter projects: a basically satisfying marriage that improved markedly for the spouses. However, none of them had retrospective marital happiness scores greater than 5 on the 7-point scale. (The average score for marital happiness among the 7 highly positive couples was below the “happiness” level of 4 (mean = 3.22), with 9 of the 14 spouses checking ratings toward the unhappy end of the 7-point continuum.) An example of the moderately satisfied group was a couple married 20 years for whom the weekend facilitated greater openness with their feelings, more satisfaction generally, and an improved sexual relationship. The husband also became more involved with the family. These changes were enduring seven years after the weekend. The wife: “I felt more satisfied with my marriage. I was surprised because I thought we didn’t have anything to improve.” When asked whether Marriage Encounter had made any lasting changes in the marital relationship, she replied: “Oh, I would definitely say—being personal—the bedroom scene. I would say that I understand a man—a husband’s feeling of affection a whole lot better than I did before.”

Negative Couples

Couples in this group were judged to have lasting negative effects from their Marriage Encounter experience. Unlike the highly positives where we obtained questionnaires and/or interviews with both partners, we obtained information from all 9 wives but only 3 husbands in the negative group. In general, the state of their marriages prior to the weekend resembled that of the highly positive group: an average marital
happiness score below “happy” (3.54), no score higher than 5, and 8 out of 12 respondents rating their marital happiness as “less than happy” prior to the weekend. Three of the negative couples were divorced at the time of the interview.

For all but one of the couples in this group, at least one spouse recognized that there were problems in the marriage before the weekend. Most of the couples also had at least one spouse (usually the wife) who entered the weekend with high hopes: “I was just hoping that we would get so much out of it.” Generally, the wives hoped that the weekend would bring more openness and sharing of feelings with their husbands. In two cases the husband was reluctant to attend but did so after considerable pressure from his wife. According to the wife of a third husband who declined an interview: “His reason for going was not to try and renew our marriage but he was afraid to say ‘no’ to the couple who invited us—he’d give anything a try but (said) nobody could help us.” Even when husbands apparently went willingly to the weekend, they typically were described by their wives as “unwilling” or “unable” to share their feelings. One husband told his wife (according to her report) that “they were his own feelings and it wasn’t anybody else’s business.” Four wives whose husbands did participate actively in the dialogue claimed that their husbands used it as an opportunity to be ruthlessly honest: “The dialogue he used as a dumping ground by telling me all my faults . . . I felt depressed. I didn’t think I was going there to be told how bad I was.” Another wife wrote on her questionnaire that the negative impact of the weekend’s dialogues occurred later: “My spouse kept bringing up what I had pointed out that bothered me about him. He kept bringing up we had been to the Encounter and therefore I should show more and better improvement than I was portraying.”

A universal theme among the negative couples was increased awareness of problems in their marriage because of the weekend experience. When asked if the weekend brought about a new awareness of needs, one wife responded: “Definitely. Your deep down feelings . . . I think I’m more dissatisfied.” One husband said: “It brought up too many bitter things in the marriage.” His wife responded with the statement: “I think a lot of times some things are better left unsaid. Maybe being too honest is not the best answer either.” The increased awareness of problems and unmet needs was related in every case to a decrease in marital satisfaction, especially for wives. One woman who divorced seven years after the Marriage Encounter said:

The reason I feel the Encounter had a negative effect was that my husband indicated that he was not interested in working on any of the areas. This really made me question the stability of our marriage. I felt very upset because I began to wonder how I could survive knowing there would be no changes, and wondering if I could accept this and live this way.

Several wives left the weekend feeling quite high and optimistic, but, as one said: “It was a let down after a few months because I didn’t see much of a change.” Another said, “I think I lived with the disappointment.”

Social comparison seemed to accentuate the painful awareness of problems during the Marriage Encounter weekend. Although the questionnaire did not address this issue, the majority of those interviewed spontaneously reported sad or jealous feelings related to other couples on the weekend:

I remember being really sad because it seemed like—the renewal of marriage vows—that was really tough I guess because I felt like a lot of people were getting together and you could see that everybody was so happy. I felt bad for us.

Another wife tearfully reported: “I felt rather jealous of the better relations most of the other couples had. I felt we had failed in some area, so this made me feel guilty.”
For the majority of negative couples the fallout from the weekend experience became worse over time. One husband initially thought it was “the greatest thing since sliced bread,” and he and his wife even made presentations promoting Marriage Encounter. Later he developed a negative reaction: “I think the danger has happened to us. We had too high expectations. I think it can be detrimental to some types of people. I guess maybe I’m one of those.” When asked how this change in attitude towards his Marriage Encounter experience came about, he responded: “I guess the understanding I have is that she sees all the other people and it’s all great. But ours isn’t quite that way, so she thinks that we are failing. I’m not so sure we are.”

Several couples did not go through this initial positive period that grew into disillusionment. For them it was an immediate negative reaction: “It was hell for six months,” and “The communication area had always been a problem. After the Encounter it was more of a problem and caused a number of arguments. We really had a miserable weekend with many disagreements, and many discussions were left undone.”

Interestingly, only two spouses blamed Marriage Encounter or were angry at the program. Most blamed their spouses for the marital deterioration; some blamed either themselves, alcohol, or stress. Their explanations took this direction: Since Marriage Encounter is such a good program for so many couples, the blame for my own negative experiences must lie elsewhere. Even a wife who explicitly blamed Marriage Encounter for creating and exacerbating problems in her marriage ended with a note of self-recrimination. “I’m perfectly aware that we could improve the quality of our lives by a great deal, and I don’t know why I can’t do it... perhaps it was my lack of cooperation... I’m the culprit.”

DISCUSSION

According to our findings, about 1 in 8 couples (12.3%) were strongly affected by Marriage Encounter, with about half of this number harmed and half helped; the majority of those strongly affected either way were distressed prior to the weekend. Beyond that, the rest of the couples experienced moderately beneficial weekends or no effect at all.

These findings temper the questionnaire results reported by Lester & Doherty (1983). Lacking detailed information on the couples, Lester & Doherty reported an overall 79.5% positive effect rating and a 9.3% negative effect rating. Interview follow-up combined with essay information allows us to sort out the “strongly positive” group (5.4%) from the other positives and to reduce the number of negatives (from 12 couples to 9 couples—6.9%) by moving into the “neutral” category 3 couples who merely had complaints about the program or who were temporarily harmed but did not seem to experience lasting deterioration. The other correction the present study provides on the Lester & Doherty article is the addition of a large “neutral” group. Sample rates for this group and the “somewhat positives,” however, cannot be estimated from these data on extreme groups.

There is reason to believe that our findings underestimate the true rate of negative effects from Marriage Encounter. First, we were unable to obtain the names of couples who prematurely left the weekend and therefore could not be included in the original study. Marriage Encounter leaders estimated that at least a dozen couples walked out of weekends during the ten-year sample period. Some left for reasons of illness or emergency, while others were obviously upset. The latter group were not followed-up by group leaders.

Second, fully 1 out of 5 spouses interviewed, spontaneously reported that they had seen other couples who were visibly distressed during the weekend. These observer reports are especially noteworthy since they came from couples who had both good and
bad experiences with Marriage Encounter, and because we did not ask any questions about their observations of other couples. Distressed behavior included crying continually, yelling at each other, and in one case, a couple shouting and throwing things at each other in the bedroom next door to one of our respondents. Third, the refusals of negatively affected couples to participate in the follow-up interviews causes us to wonder how many negative couples found it too difficult to answer the original questionnaire, especially if they believed the study to be sponsored by Marriage Encounter because of the organization's endorsement.

As we examined the interview and essay data for the distressed couples in the "highly positive" and "negative" groups, we were unable to detect differences that would help us predict how Marriage Encounter would affect them. In other words, these 12 distressed couples sounded remarkably alike as they described their unsatisfying relationships prior to the weekend. Overall, we conclude that distressed couples are ripe for very positive or very negative experiences when they participate in a Marriage Encounter weekend, and that most other couples experience mildly positive or neutral impacts.

Before interpreting these conclusions, we acknowledge several important limitations of this study. The data are based on retrospective self-reports and thereby are subject to faulty memory and other distortions. In addition, the study lacked control groups of couples experiencing a different kind of marital intervention or no intervention, and the results may generalize only to National Marriage Encounter weekends as practiced in the 1970's in eastern Iowa. For some couples we had only essay data, whereas for others we also had interview transcripts. However, the number of couples with each type of data were similar across the groups and therefore group comparisons were probably not affected. The principal reasons for non-interviews, however, differed between the groups in a way that may have influenced the results: "positives" had moved away and "negatives" understandably were reluctant to participate further in an activity related to Marriage Encounter. On the other hand, the study design's strengths complement its weaknesses: long-term follow up data from an initially random sample and in depth information about individual couples.

Three reports on related literature can serve to place our findings in perspective. First is the classic study of encounter groups by Lieberman, Yalom & Miles (1973). They found that casualties occurred in about 8% of the participants. Four factors accounted for most of the negative impact: attack or rejection by the group leaders or participants, unrealistic expectations that could not have been met by the group goals, coercive expectations to move to deeper levels of intimacy, and input overload due to the emotional intensity. Although we would not expect any form of attack by Marriage Encounter leaders on participants, the spouses are vulnerable to attack by each other. Several people reported that their spouses used the opportunity to "dump" on them. It is possible that the other three factors also are present in the Marriage Encounter experience: the unrealistic expectations, coercion to be open and intimate, and input overload. The rate of negative effects identified in the present study of Marriage Encounter is strikingly similar to Lieberman et al.'s data in both rate and hypothesized causal factors.

Second, although Marriage encounter has never claimed to provide "therapy," the encouragement of major marital change and the use of a strong emotional technique of communication (dialogue) introduces an element of similarity to marital and family therapy. Gurman and Kniskern (1978) in their review of marriage and family outcome studies reported a deterioration rate between 5 and 10%, a rate similar to the one found in this study.

A third article bearing on this study is Powell and Wampler's (1982) summary of the levels of marital satisfaction of marriage enrichment participants across a wide range of studies. The authors conclude that, contrary to the assumption that marriage enrichment participants are happily married couples in search of even better marriages,
these couples tend to be less satisfied with their marriages than are nonparticipants. Although Powell and Wampler point out that mean marital satisfaction scores of marriage enrichment participants are generally higher than those entering marital therapy, the distribution of scores for enrichment groups is likely to reveal a minority of couples who are as distressed as many of the therapy couples. In other words, we argue that the presence of distressed couples at a Marriage Encounter weekend is not likely to be unique to our sample.

Why does Marriage Encounter have an intense impact on certain couples? Our answer simply stated: because it is powerful medicine delivered rapidly to the marital system. The weekend is crammed with intense experiences of self revelation, partner revelation, and leader self revelation. The Marriage Encounter literature is replete with terms like “born again” and “crash course in communication.” The program aims, during one weekend, to move couples from the “spiritual divorce” state to “Marriage in the Plan of God.” Spouses are instructed to open up to each other in a way they never have before, and to raise their expectations for marriage to the heights. The leaders, though well-intentioned, are quite adept at manipulating both positive and negative emotions.

An example of manipulating positive emotions comes from the Worldwide Marriage Encounter leaders manual (Marriage Encounter, 1978). After spelling out the restrictive rules for the weekend (responding to bells, not much recreational time, etc.), the leaders are instructed to tell the couple participants the reason why they are being asked to comply with these regulations: “Preferably, the husband on the team should be the one to say ‘We love you, because people aren’t used to hearing men express their feelings in the modern world” (p. 19–20). An example of manipulating negative emotions comes from the same manual, during the “Encounter with Self” part of the weekend. One of the leaders gives a talk on the “masks” that people wear: “rigid patterns of conduct that we think will make us successful.” The guidelines for this talk state: “We want each person to be upset, to squirm, to see that there’s something wrong with the way they’re acting. The point is not to get them to like themselves better, but to realize that they don’t like themselves, and that’s why they wear a mask” (p. 23).

Marriage Encounter, then, can be a very powerful experience, especially, as our data indicate, for troubled couples who are looking for an answer to their problem. If their marital system is in disequilibrium, they are ripe for an infusion of new information and new energy. Some distressed couples in our sample were able to absorb the impact of the weekend, continue in follow-up groups, and integrate the Marriage Encounter approach into their daily lives. The majority of distressed couples in our sample, however, experienced serious negative side effects from Marriage Encounter’s medicine—immediately in some cases, or over time with other couples. For many of this group, the despair at not achieving a “Marriage Encounter” marriage was palpable in the interview.

Although we did not directly assess psychological distress or deterioration in this study, it seems reasonable to speculate that the intense pressure of Marriage Encounter weekends can be unsettling to individuals who are psychologically fragile.

It can be argued that therapy itself is powerful medicine and that deterioration rates for marital therapy are similar to those of Marriage Encounter (Gurman & Kniskern, 1978). A difference, however, is that therapists are trained to assess couples before intervening, to diagnose trouble when it occurs in therapy, and to respond by trying to prevent further deterioration. Marriage Encounter, on the other hand, provides no systematic way to detect or deal with marital distress before, during, or after the weekend, other than telling couples they are free to talk to the clergyperson during the weekend. One other contrast is equally important: therapists dispense powerful medicine but ethically may not actively recruit individual clients, whereas Marriage Encounter vigorously recruits couples for the weekend programs, presumably on the assumption that it might not help but certainly cannot hurt. We believe that the results of our
studies raise a serious ethical issue for Marriage Encounter: either to make changes that reduce the likelihood of creating marital deterioration, or to provide an informed consent warning to couples who are considering participation in the program.

Recommendations for Marriage Encounter

We offer recommendations for how Marriage Encounter could prevent or alleviate casualties from the program:

1. Marriage Encounter should establish a screening device to discourage people with psychiatric conditions and marital distress from attending the weekend. Along with another colleague we have developed an instrument which asks about use of therapists, psychiatric disorders, mood disturbances, and marital distress. Another simpler, and potentially effective, device is employed by the Couples Communication Program, namely, a “contracting” interview by the group leader with each couple prior to registration. The leader can explicitly ask how each spouse evaluates the state of the marriage and what each expects of the Marriage Encounter weekend. We believe that this latter procedure would have picked up most of the highly distressed couples in this study, and might be more acceptable to Marriage Encounter than our questionnaire, which has been criticized by some Marriage Encounter leaders as too “negative.”

2. During the weekend, increased emphasis should be placed on problem solving as a means of strengthening the marital relationship; current emphasis is on emotional expression without problem solving.

3. Fewer topics should be covered in more depth. Adequate time should be allowed for couples to complete their discussion before introducing another topic. This could also allow more free time for other couples to be alone, exercise, or seek out team members for questions. These changes would reduce the intensity of the weekend.

4. Couples should be permitted to question and discuss the ideas and recommendations presented by the leaders. Currently, no such responses are permitted during the sessions.

5. During the weekend, couples should be told of “danger signs” that indicate that therapy is appropriate: rapidly increasing personal or marital tension, inability to meet needs identified on the weekend, coercion on the part of one spouse to get the other to meet these needs, or prolonged inability to solve problems.

6. At least one person on the leader team should be trained in marital crisis intervention. Because couples will need adequate time to deal with troublesome issues raised during the weekend, this team member should be available at all times and be free of other duties.

7. Marriage Encounter should establish a referral source for people who experience harmful effects during the weekend or afterwards.

8. Follow-up meetings should be structured to avoid unsupported self-disclosure and coalitions of group members with one spouse against the other, a pattern for which we have anecdotal evidence.

9. The final recommendation is more general and least likely to happen without changing the nature of Marriage Encounter: The leaders should abandon their goal of producing rapid conversions in couples during a short period of time. The goal should be enrichment, as proposed by Mace & Mace (1974), rather than rebirth.

Recommendations for Clinicians

Based on our research and our clinical experience with graduates of Marriage Encounter weekends, we suggest that therapists be alert to three marital dynamics associated with a negative response to Marriage Encounter. First, one or both spouses may hold unrealistic expectations for complete marital unity—expectations that they believe have been endorsed and confirmed by their religion. The couple will readily
admit that they do not live up to this ideal, but they may be reluctant to modify their expectations. They may be asking the therapist for help in becoming more harmoniously enmeshed without doing the necessary work of individuation.

Second, pinpointing Marriage Encounter's contribution to their problems can be difficult because many negatively affected couples will not be disloyal to Marriage Encounter. They tend to blame themselves, perhaps out of reluctance to criticize a church-sponsored organization. (Parenthetically, this phenomenon may help explain why there has not been more public criticism of Marriage Encounter.) Therefore, these couples initially may tell the therapist that the weekend was a wonderful experience; only by probing about subsequent events in the marriage can the therapist uncover the impact of the Marriage Encounter experience.

Third, although problems with parenting did not emerge as an important concern in this non-clinical sample, our clinical experience and that of the therapists whose cases were described by Doherty and Walker (1982) suggest that therapists should be alert to possible problems with children that stem from drastic changes in the marital relationship. For example, in one clinical family, the symptomatic children complained that they felt “orphaned” because their parents became so intensely involved with each other after the Marriage Encounter weekend.

CONCLUSION

The issues raised in this paper extend beyond Marriage Encounter to the general field of marriage enrichment and family life education. In our view, a long-standing assumption among therapists and researchers has been that these programs either do good or make no impact at all. Supporters tout the “good” while detractors are skeptical that education and enrichment do much at all. Our research and our clinical experience suggest that negative effects indeed are possible, and in the case of Marriage Encounter, even common. With 1,000,000 couple participants, even a 5% deterioration rate would amount to 50,000 couples harmed by Marriage Encounter during its brief history. Rather than being shocking or provocative, this estimate should be sobering for a field that is trying to find its mature place in the spectrum of family interventions. The possibility of harm goes hand in hand with the significant benefit that Marriage Encounter has been for many couples. Marriage Encounter and other enrichment programs have been willing to take responsibility for the benefits but not for the side effects. In fairness, it should be noted that family therapists have taken their time getting around to studying negative effects of family therapy interventions; such self-scrutiny is painful to any helping professions.

We hope that our work hastens the end of the age of innocence for Marriage Encounter and other programs that work with families. Innocence becomes culpable, in our view, when it denies the possibility of damage from well-intentioned efforts. The following quote from an interview with Father Chuck Gallagher, leader of Worldwide Marriage Encounter, illustrates Marriage Encounter's past unwillingness to admit the possibility of negative effects:

The worst thing that can happen to a couple that comes on the forty-four hour weekend is . . . that nothing happens, that they go away as they came. On the other hand, there is the possibility that a whole new world will open up. It's a gambler's bet—but who can afford not to take it? (Interview in Marriage Encounter, 1982, p. 7) (Break in sentence 1 is in the original text).

Our research strongly suggests that the “gambler's bet” in Marriage Encounter is not without risk. The truth is that we can all do harm to people who come to us for help,
and it behooves us to look carefully at whom we harm, how we harm them, and what we can do about it.

REFERENCES


