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**A Study Examining Changes in Relationship Satisfaction  
of Couples Participating in a  
Marriage Preparation Programme**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

In response to the growing number of divorces amongst its members, the Catholic Church in Cape Town is promoting marriage preparation in an attempt to prevent marital breakdown. The researcher, who is also the coordinator of these programmes, wanted to examine this service so as to determine whether engaged couples experience changes in the quality of their relationships, and to ascertain the duration of these changes.

Premarital preparation is presented in this study as a process that begins in childhood, is fostered in adolescence and young adulthood, and continues throughout the developmental stages families go through. The researcher proposes that this gradual, consistent and continuous nurturance of relationships over a lengthy period of time strengthens family relationships, and in so doing has the potential to reduce the incidents of marital breakdown.

A literature survey reviews the field of marriage preparation and identifies several research areas. The purpose and value of marriage preparation are highlighted, and the findings of several South African studies are presented. Gender differences in couples' experiences of satisfaction, as well as the short-term effectiveness of premarital preparation are discussed.

The Evenings for the Engaged is a programme that combines a religious base with a skills base, both of which aim to enhance relationship satisfaction, and which form the basis of the marriage preparation programme.

The single group time series design is used to measure the relationship satisfaction of seven couples at one pre-test and four post-test measures over 14 months. A longitudinal approach is utilized in order to test two hypotheses, namely that couples experience an increase in

relationship satisfaction when they prepare for marriage, and this increase lasts less than 12 months.

The researcher combines two research methodologies. Changes in relationship satisfaction are measured quantitatively by means of the Index of Relationship Satisfaction (IRS), whereas a qualitative evaluation is utilised to collect information on how the respondents view their relationships.

The hypotheses are supported both by the quantitative data and the respondents' descriptions of their relationships in the qualitative data, and the results of the research are presented in several tables and time series graphs. There is indication that the positive effect of marriage preparation on relationship satisfaction is short-lived.

Despite some methodological weaknesses, such as a small sample size, and certain data limitations, the researcher is of the opinion that the results are strong enough to support a number of recommendations.

The specific contribution that this study makes is in its understanding of 'marriage preparation'. The strong indication emerging from the study is that the positive effects of marriage preparation on relationship satisfaction are of a short duration which suggests that it is merely the starting point and initial phase in a series of stages.

A pertinent recommendation is that there is the need for marriage enrichment programmes to be offered throughout various developmental stages of marriage in parallel with the life cycle requirements of the couple and family.

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The views expressed in this study are those of the researcher alone and not necessarily those of the Catholic Church or any other organisation.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Orientation to the study and its context

### 1.1 Introduction

This first chapter orientates the reader to the study and its context by explaining a number of terms, describing the background to the project and its aims, and giving a brief insight into the research methodology and its outcome.

The rate at which marriages are breaking down is a matter of deep concern in secular and religious fields both within South Africa and internationally. In 1990 there were 45 600 marriages in the white population group. In the same year 20 031 couples divorced, involving 24 266 children (Central Statistical Services: Marriages and Divorces, 1991:8). In Britain two-fifths of all marriages end in divorce (Evening Standard, 25 July 2000:3). Among the reasons for this could be inadequate premarital preparation, and the lack of sustained care for the relationship after the wedding and throughout the lifespan of the marriage.

Concern for the state of marriage is widespread and common to government departments, Non Governmental Organisations, Christian and Protestant churches, as well as Jewish and Moslem organisations. For the purpose of this study, the researcher regards the divorce rate amongst Catholics as similar to that of the general population

as there appears to be no documentation to contradict this.

## **1.2 Background to the study**

In 1994, in response to the escalating incidence of marital disruption and divorce, the Catholic Archdiocese of Cape Town decided to promote marriage preparation as a method of primary prevention for Catholic families. That is, it is meant to strengthen marital relationships and in this way help families to deal with the problems they encounter. Preparation for the various stages of marriage was seen as a way of strengthening marital and family relationships and in this way preventing the escalation of problems that lead to marital breakdown and the disruption of families. Various types of marriage preparation programmes have been offered annually since then.

In the Western Cape about 850 couples annually marry in the Catholic Church (Duncan 1997:3). Approximately half this number prepare themselves for marriage by participating in one of three programmes: the Evenings for the Engaged, the Catholic Engaged Encounter Weekend, or the PREPARE programme. The remaining couples are aided in their preparation by the priest or deacon who conducts the wedding service (Duncan 1998:3). The respondents in this study participated in the Evenings for the Engaged programme which is outlined in chapter three.

Since 1994 the researcher has been aware of the need for a formalised assessment of the Catholic Church's marriage preparation programmes. In the current light of budgetary restriction and demand for accountability, the researcher would like to ascertain whether the preventive service offered and supported by the Catholic Church in Cape Town, is

effective.

### **1.3 Aims of the study**

Given the Church's commitment to marriage preparation, it becomes essential to establish, in a systematic way, how effective these programmes are, not in terms of the quality of input, but rather in terms of **outcome** or **desired change** (Hudson 1995:3; Rossi & Freeman 1998:49-50 own emphasis). In contrast to the view of effectiveness that focuses entirely on what practitioners do, that is their input, a second and entirely different view of effectiveness is one that focuses on outcomes. Effectiveness is therefore defined here as 'detectable or measurable change' (Hudson 1995:3, quoted in De Vos 1998:373).

The aim of this research is to measure changes in relationship satisfaction experienced by engaged couples in the months prior to their weddings and when they participated in a marriage preparation programme, and to determine the period for which these changes endure.

### **1.4 The researcher's interest in the subject**

The researcher has a personal and professional interest in this topic. She is a social worker who has worked in the field of marriage and family life since 1982. One of her responsibilities is to coordinate the Catholic Church's marriage preparation and marriage enrichment programmes in the Western Cape, hence her desire to know how these programmes affect the relationships of the participants.

As a professional marriage counsellor the researcher has worked with several newly married couples who, within months of being married, expressed dissatisfaction with their relationships. This exposure to the problems of newlyweds, has alerted the researcher to two things: Firstly, that premarital couples are often living in a dream-world, and may continue to do so for at least a few months after the wedding. The awakening to reality, which may be quite painful, and for that reason a highly teachable moment, usually comes somewhere during the first year. Secondly, patterns of communication in a marriage are founded and take shape during the first year, and usually decide the future course of the marriage, in the direction of ongoing growth or progressive deterioration. Therefore they are faced not only with the need for preparation during the period of engagement, but also for a follow-up which will include at least the first few years of marriage.

## **1.5 General explanation of terms**

A general explanation of terms used in this study is now presented in order to establish clarity of meaning.

### **1.5.1 Preparation for marriage**

If one views the premarital relationship as a period of testing for suitability and compatibility for marriage, then such a conceptualization implies that the development of the premarital relationship serves as the first stage in the sequence of events known as the family life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick 1989:221).

Preparation for marriage is therefore presented in this research project as a process that

unfolds gradually, consistently and continuously over a lengthy period of time. It includes three main stages: remote, proximate and immediate preparation (John Paul II 1981:121).

**Remote preparation** begins in childhood, in family experiences that, hopefully, lead children to discover themselves as persons with rich and complex psychologies, and personalities with their own individual strengths and weaknesses. It is a period when positive regard for authentic human values can be instilled in children, both in their interpersonal and social relationships, with all that this signifies for character formation.

On this basis the **proximate preparation** is subsequently and gradually built up. This takes place in the high school years before marriage is contemplated, and involves a more specific preparation for the sacraments (see 1.5.3) that inform Catholic spirituality. For example, this religious education of young people preparing for marriage is necessary in order that the sacrament may be celebrated and lived with meaningful moral and spiritual attitudes. This preparation presents marriage as an interpersonal relationship of a man and a woman that has to be continually developed throughout the entire life-span of the marriage. It also encourages those concerned to acquire communication and conflict-resolution skills, and to study the nature of sexuality, as well as responsible parenthood.

The **immediate preparation** for the celebration of the sacrament of marriage takes place in the months and weeks immediately preceding the wedding. This is regarded as 'last minute instruction' (Wrenn 1983:227). In the researcher's view, this final stage of

preparation for marriage should be complete at least three months prior to the wedding (Duncan 1998:2).

References to 'marriage preparation' in this study pertain to the above-mentioned stage of immediate preparation, whereas the post-wedding preparation for every new stage of the marital relationship is referred to as *marriage enrichment*.

### **1.5.2 Relationship satisfaction**

Spanier & Lewis (1980:825) define marital satisfaction as

'... a state of satisfaction with one's marriage, defined by an intrapersonal conceptualization (subjectively experienced reaction) or an interpersonal conceptualization (marital satisfaction as the consequence between one's expectations and another's behaviour). The focus of marital satisfaction may be satisfaction with leisure, decision-making, income, life-style, communication, sex, or friends'.

Couples who feel dissatisfied with their relationship lack these positive qualities or seldom experience them.

The measuring instrument used in this study, the Index of Relationship Satisfaction (IRS) was designed to measure '... the degree of satisfaction' that couples have in their relationship (Appendix 1). Hudson and Faul point out that the IRS does not measure the relationship as a single entity, but measures both satisfaction and dissatisfaction that is felt or perceived by one or both partners (1997:24). These authors contend that it is

possible for one partner to have high IRS scores, indicating high relationship dissatisfaction, while the other partner may have a lower score, indicating more relationship satisfaction relative to the partner.

Since this research project took place within a Catholic framework, it is useful to understand what is meant by the sacrament of marriage and the vocation of marriage.

### **1.5.3 Sacrament of marriage**

The concept of the sacrament of marriage is a deeply spiritual reality for Catholics<sup>1</sup>. For Christians, getting married in the Church opens up a new spiritual way of life. Catholics believe that God calls a couple to be a sign of love to each other and to the world through their commitment and dedication.

### **1.5.4 Vocation of marriage**

In the Catholic Church marriage is valued as a true vocation. It is a stable and permanent way of life. The vocation of married couples is their dedication to their own marriage, hence living this vocation is a life-long process of human development and Christian formation. Couples are called to love God through the love that they have for each other and for the sake of their future children.

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<sup>1</sup> Within Catholicism the sacrament of marriage is regarded as a manifestation or sign of Christ in contemporary times. During His life-time men and women came into contact with Christ in the flesh, whereas now people encounter Him through various signs that represent Him. In the sacraments, such as the sacrament of marriage, couples would thus encounter Him in each other, and jointly in their relationship. When a couple stands at the altar to recite marriage vows they not only show human love, but become channels of God's love to one another. The words they speak are the signs and gifts of love to one another and of the love that unites Christ and his Church.

### **1.5.5 Prevention of marital breakdown**

Mace (1983:18) describes various types of prevention:

The **Primary prevention** of marital breakdown is viewed as the best approach to marriage preparation. Marriage preparation is regarded as a way of preventing divorce in as far as it lays the foundation for a couple's future life together. It means using positive early intervention to enable the couple or family to avoid the kinds of problems that might otherwise be very damaging. Marriage preparation is not expected to eliminate the possibility of marital breakdown. One of its purposes is to prevent any pending marriage that is clearly doomed and to give the couple a chance to think twice about any aspect of the relationship that they feel unhappy about. In addition, it helps them to anticipate common problems, to recognize them early on, and to intervene effectively at an early phase of the marriage (Dominion 1984:169).

**Secondary prevention** takes place when it is too late for primary preventive measures to be put in place. The family members are already in trouble, but the situation has not yet reached crisis proportions. It involves identifying and responding to marital difficulties early in their development, while they are acute, that is, prior to the complete disintegration and termination of the relationship.

**Tertiary prevention** refers to a situation where the family has serious interpersonal problems. A major crisis has developed and there is a real danger of marital break-up.

To some extent primary, secondary and tertiary preventive processes overlap, and cannot

be precisely distinguished from one another. What is significant about marriage preparation programmes is that they try to provide couples with the knowledge, the tools and the skills that are necessary to fulfil the reasonable hopes and expectations of their relationship as early as possible.

### **1.6 Research methodology**

The methodology used to carry out the research is outlined in chapter four. The study measured the changes in the relationship satisfaction of seven engaged couples who participated in the Evenings for the Engaged marriage preparation programme. The measuring instrument used was the Index of Relationship Satisfaction (IRS), which measures relationship satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

A longitudinal approach was needed to adequately test two hypotheses, namely that: couples experience an increase in relationship satisfaction when they prepare for marriage, and that this increase lasts for a short time, that is, less than 12 months. The entire project spanned 14 months.

The quantitative method was used and the research was conducted in five stages: The initial pre-marriage preparation programme assessment (pre-test) of the relationship satisfaction of the respondents was regarded as a single, raw baseline measure. Four post-test measures were then obtained: post-test 1 immediately after the completion of the seven-week programme, post-test 2 seven weeks later, post-test 3 six months after the couples completed the programme, and post-test 4 thirteen months after the completion of the marriage preparation programme.

The qualitative part of the research design took place after the post-test 3 measures had been obtained. The respondents completed a qualitative evaluation of their relationships in the researcher's presence. As a 'participant observer' the researcher gathered additional data by interacting with the respondents (Schurink 1998:280).

Chapter three gives an overview of the Evenings for the Engaged programme, which was the intervention used in this research project.

The results of the research are presented in chapter five. They are set out in seven tables and eight figures. These results are then discussed, and the research findings are related to marriage preparation in the following chapter. A number of practical recommendations are made and topics for future research are proposed.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

Marriage preparation is presented in this research project as a form of primary prevention of marital breakdown. It is a vital stage in a long-term process of formation for life in marriage and the family that lays the foundation for a couple's future life together.

In the researcher's view, there is a need for such a preventive approach to marital distress and the breakdown of family life in the Catholic Church in Cape Town. In other words, the causes of marital failure need to be identified and dealt with before the wedding and in the early years of the marriage.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of relevant literature

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter gives a review of relevant literature on the research topic.

#### 2.2 Purpose of marriage preparation

*We are prepared to spend considerable effort and money on the wedding, which is over in a few hours; yet we complacently leave to chance the outcome of the marriage, which is expected to last a lifetime ... (For) all our proud boasts that we live in an era of rationality, we do nothing of the sort (Mace 1992:9).*

These profound words by David Mace bring the purpose of this research project into sharp focus. In order to do something about this general tendency to leave the outcome of marriage to chance, the concept of marriage preparation has been developed. Drawing on knowledge of the factors that cause marriages to fail, and tracing those factors back to their origins, researchers such as Gottman (1998:22) and counsellors, such as the researcher, have discovered that many problems could have been avoided if the couple had been educated, early in their relationship, to recognize the initial signs of deterioration in the relationship and to take the appropriate steps in response.

Marriage preparation programmes are designed to help couples foster their premarital relationship and to promote the individual personal growth of the participants (Duncan 1995:5). The couples are encouraged to focus on the strengths of their relationship as well as on areas requiring growth. They learn to discuss with each other the behaviours they desire and value, as well as those that arouse negative emotions. The Evenings for the Engaged programme (see Chapter 3) aims to help engaged couples to develop communication and conflict-resolution skills that can lay the foundation for a long-term relationship together. It can also help them to become more aware of the effects of their behaviours on their partners, to increase their intimacy, and to anticipate and deal constructively with the stresses and problems they are likely to experience. Hence couples can experience an increase of relationship satisfaction when they participate in this particular marriage preparation programme.

Bagarozzi and Rauen (1981:26) point out that the aim of marriage preparation is to increase marital satisfaction and avoid divorce. In addition to being a source of deep satisfaction in its own right, and helping to lay the foundation for future marital satisfaction, a strong premarital relationship can serve as a primary ingredient in the individual psychological well-being and personal growth of each of the partners (Clinebell 1975:18). In these ways the Evenings for the Engaged programme represent a potentially significant programme of a preventive nature.

Marriage preparation does not always increase a couple's sense of satisfaction with one another and the relationship. In about ten per cent of cases, the experience of exploring the relationship leads couples to cancel their wedding plans and terminate the

relationship, or to seek couple therapy (1996: Personal communication, Family Life Centre, Johannesburg).

Mace (1992:101) supports this view in proposing that one goal of marriage preparation is to prevent potentially unsuccessful marriages from occurring. In other words, individuals decide not to marry their partner due to new insights gained at a premarital programme.

The Evenings for the Engaged programme is viewed as a way of teaching and giving couples hands-on experience of the complex and practical interpersonal skills they need to enhance their present relationship and to increase potential for growth in their future marital relationship. If a couple can learn communication and conflict-resolution skills to help them establish a meaningful and satisfying relationship prior to marriage, this could increase the possibility for a marriage and family that functions successfully (Mace 1992:70).

### **2.3 South African studies of marriage preparation**

There are three significant South African studies of marriage preparation. Kromker evaluated a premarital programme for Trinity Baptist Church, whereas Goldman evaluated specific aspects of the Jewish Family and Community Council's marriage preparation programme. Alpaslan wrote a resource manual for use by practitioners involved in marriage preparation and marriage guidance.

Firstly, Kromker (1994:120) found that the programme enhanced couples' knowledge

about marriage, which in turn helped them to develop more realistic expectations of marriage.

Secondly, Goldman (1991:120) evaluated a marriage preparation programme and made several important findings: that a marriage preparation course increases couples' 'realism of marriage'; the participants acquired factual knowledge and information about sex, the legal and religious implications of marriage; the programme helped the couples to become more aware of how they communicate and solve problems; further, that the couples found the programme to be valuable and continued to perceive it as valuable for at least five months after the programme.

Thirdly, Alpaslan, (1997: introduction) takes the view that,

'... engaged couples should prepare themselves thoroughly with a view to their intended marriage, while newlyweds can be assisted by means of marriage guidance (programmes) to deal with critical transitional growth points after the wedding'. Further, that '... the married couple should persevere in applying the relationship skills acquired during preparation for marriage and marriage guidance, **because the development of a satisfying marital relationship is not a foregone conclusion**' (researcher's emphasis).

The researcher supports the above view that couples at different stages of relationship development need different approaches and resources so as to create and maintain satisfying relationships.

## **2.4 The value of marriage preparation**

A recent study on marriage preparation in the Catholic Church, which considered the relationship between marriage preparation and relationship satisfaction, is found in the Creighton University research on the value of marriage preparation (1995:19). This study found that the vast majority of individuals who participated in marriage preparation programmes viewed the experience as valuable early in their marriage. Thus the question can be raised about the value of continuing the support and resources available for later marital satisfaction.

Another significant aspect of marriage preparation, emanating from the above research, is the perception that the value of marriage preparation declines significantly over time. By the eighth year of marriage, only 47.4 per cent of respondents in the Creighton University study agreed that marriage preparation was a valuable experience. The implication here is that marriage preparation has a restricted 'shelf- life'. The reasons for this view are not clear from the study, suggesting a useful direction of future research to discover why the perceived value of marriage preparation declines over time. There are a number of additional studies that have found premarital preparation to be of value to couples (Bader et al 1980:178; Silliman & Schumm 1992:199).

Ginsberg and Vogelsong (1977:269) point out that in the 1960s and 1970s there was more literature and research on divorce and divorce counselling than there was on premarital relationship development and enhancement. It appears that the bulk of the literature written at that time was about premarital relationships in general and came from family sociology. However, recent years have witnessed an explosion of research

on romantic love and relationships indicating a greater appreciation of its value and importance (Shaver & Hazen 1988:473).

Guldner (1971:118) found that premarital work and counselling of couples married for one month was less valuable than work with couples who had been married for six months. Hence he proposes post-marital programmes as an alternative to pre-marital work. He found that couples who were married at least six months were more open to an honest exploration of their relationship than couples married one to three months. The reason for this is that by the time six months had passed an agenda of real problems had been established. The couples were ready to look at current problem areas and also to talk seriously about other areas of marriage that could become problematic in the future.

Although Mace (1992:112) supports the view that marriage preparation can be helpful, he asserts that it is of very limited value. He goes on to say that the best kind of help for engaged couples is not instruction, but communication. They need to 'talk to each other!' He encourages couples not simply to prepare themselves for marriage, but to use the first critical year of marriage to adapt to the relationship.

### **2.5 Relationship perceptions before and after the wedding**

A study by Kelly, Huston and Cate (1985:167) examines the connection between the way in which partners relate to and feel about each other before marriage and their feelings after they have been married approximately two-and-a-half years. These researchers link the subjective and interpersonal features of relationships before marriage to later outcomes. They find that couples who have a low sense of relationship satisfaction and

experience conflict before the wedding tend to continue to fight once they are married. Kelly et al also found that the more premarital conflict particularly during the period after the partners have committed themselves to marriage, the less 'in love' the wife is at the follow-up. Premarital conflict was also strongly correlated to the wives' sense of dissatisfaction with their marriage. The correlations between premarital conflict and the husbands' feelings about their marriage partners were less strong.

Markham (1979:746, 1981:761) linked the ways courting couples perceived their relationship and interacted with each other to their subsequent marital satisfaction. It was found, firstly, that negative interactions early in a relationship appear to influence relationship satisfaction rather than the reverse. Secondly, the way in which dating partners evaluate each other's communications appears to predict their level of satisfaction with their relationship several years later.

## **2.6 Gender and relationship satisfaction**

A consistent finding in research is that, contrary to cultural stereotypes, men tend to be more romantic than women. For example, men score higher on scales that assess romantic beliefs about love, such that love happens swiftly without warning, comes only once in a lifetime and lasts forever (Dion & Dion 1973:56; Frazier & Easterly 1990:333; Knox & Sporakowski 1968:641). Women, on the other hand, tend to be more pragmatic in their orientation to relationships, believing that love is a slowly developing process that can happen between many different people. In addition, men tend to be more romantic in the sense that they fall in love more quickly and see fewer problems in their relationships than women do (Hill et al 1976:161; Rubin et al 1981:826).

These gender differences are often explained by the fact that, in our culture, women have traditionally had to be more economically dependent on their male partners than men on women. That is, because cultural norms encourage women to marry both a partner and a provider, they need to be more practical, cautious and realistic in their choice of partners. In short, according to this perspective, women do not have the 'luxury' of being romantic (Dion & Dion 1973:56; Hill et al 1976:167; Knox & Sporkowski 1968:639; Rubin et al 1981:834).

Various authors hold the view that women are economically dependent and more emotionally dependent on romantic relationships than men are because it is more important for them to marry, and they attach greater significance to relationships; therefore it is more important for them to choose more cautiously and wisely (Kanin et al 1970:64; Knox & Sporkowski 1968:642).

A third reason why women are thought to be more pragmatic in their approach to love is that they are the 'social-emotional specialists' in relationships. In other words, because women are generally more socially attuned, they may also be more sensitive than men to the quality of their relationships. As a result, women may evaluate their experience of relationship satisfaction more carefully and pragmatically (Hill et al 1976:167; Rubin et al 1981:833).

## **2.7 The short-term effectiveness of relationship enhancement and marriage preparation programmes**

Senediak (1990:26 ) noted that premarital programmes have limited value. She points out that there is little evidence that premarital preparation reduces the incidence of separation and divorce, nor that it prevents bad marriages.

A number of studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of relationship enhancement programmes for married and premarital couples. They showed that the programmes increased the premarital couples' empathy and self-disclosure skills and also increased their positive feelings about the relationship (Avery et al 1980:23; Ginsberg & Vogelsong 1977; Most & Guerny 1983:70; Ridley et al 1981:23). However, a six-month follow-up of couples in Ridley's research showed that most of the skills persisted even though they dropped considerably after the programme was completed.

The short-lived effects of marriage preparation are emphasised in a longitudinal research project by Sullivan and Bradbury. These researchers found that couples who participated in premarital programmes did not have better marital outcomes than couples who did not participate (1997:25).

A significant study in the area of premarital work was done by Bader et al (1980:171). They developed a programme that encouraged couples to learn conflict resolution skills. The research demonstrated that these skills are trainable and do persist over a one-year period. More importantly, the difference between the couples who had taken the

programme and the control group became more dramatic after one year.

It appears that the first year of marriage is the critical time for most couples (Bader & Sinclair 1982:77). Once they have settled down together, the couple establish the interaction patterns that decide how well, or how badly, they manage their future relationship. Up to the time of the wedding, they tend to cling to the romantic dreams that all couples have when they first fall in love. However in the day-to-day life of a shared home, they are faced with the reality of who they really are, and of how their attitudes, values and ways of behaving affect each other. This experience may be stressful and hence result in a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the partner, self and relationship.

The early onset of marital problems is confirmed by several studies. Some research found that half of all newlyweds reported having immediate and significant marital problems. The key reason for this was the unexpected change in their relationships and lives (Arond & Pauker 1987:311; Quinn & Odell 1998:114).

Mace points out firstly, that most couples, by the sixth month after the wedding, are ready to reach out for the help that they would have rejected in the premarital period. This seems to indicate that relationship dissatisfaction begins to increase soon after the wedding. Secondly, he refers to a major study of divorced couples in Britain, which found that one-third of them had already been in serious trouble by the time they celebrated their first wedding anniversary (1992:111).

Another significant study that demonstrates the frequency of early marital disruption was conducted by Olson and Fowers (1986:403). They compared the expectations of each spouse three to four months before the wedding and the state of a couple's marriage two to three years later. In his follow-up of the 164 engaged couples whom he had surveyed, Olson found that 52 couples had delayed or cancelled their wedding plans, and of those who married, 31 couples had either divorced or separated. Twenty two couples said they were dissatisfied with their marriages.

## **2.8 Contra-indications to relationship satisfaction**

Researchers such as Arond and Pauker (1987:11) show that the following factors tend to reduce relationship satisfaction: Cohabitation prior to the wedding, premarital pregnancy, a previous marriage, and the presence of children in a new marriage.

These factors are taken into consideration in this research project for the following reasons:

### **Cohabitation**

Arond and Pauker (1987:11) note that living together is not as much preparation for marriage as couples may think. The findings of their research show no relationship between whether or not a couple live together and how easily they adjust to marriage, how happy they are in marriage, or how satisfied they are with their sexual relationship in marriage. In fact, a study undertaken by DeMaris and Leslie (1984:83) found that couples who lived together before marriage had significantly lower marital satisfaction than those who did not cohabit before the wedding.

Various studies show that there are many and varied reasons why cohabiting unions appear to be less stable than those that begin as marriages. From the literature it is clear that there is little evidence to suggest that cohabitation that progresses to marriage strengthens the marriage bond, and ample evidence to suggest that a strong association exists between pre-marital cohabitation, relationship dissatisfaction and marriage dissolution (Bennett, Blanc & Bloom 1988:136; Bumpass & Sweet 1991:921; McRae 1997:270; Teachman & Polonko 1990:217).

The researcher is not aware of any research that shows an increase in relationship satisfaction after the wedding due to the experience of cohabitation. In fact research indicates the opposite to be true.

### **Premarital pregnancy**

Research has also identified a consistent relationship between premarital pregnancy and dissatisfaction with the relationship. Premarital pregnancy is said to affect relationship satisfaction adversely because couples find it difficult to adjust to the new interpersonal relationship as well as develop new parental roles.

Bader and Sinclair (1998:82) point out that,

‘Special problems can emerge if the newly married couple are either quite young, pregnant, or financially dependent on their families. When two or three of these conditions are present, the difficulties facing the couple will be extreme ...’.

Premarital pregnancy is therefore considered a problematic reason for marriage. For

example, couples who, prior to pregnancy, had not yet decided to marry, but decide to do so because of pregnancy, are likely to have an unstable relationship (Kurdek 1991:44; Norton & Moorman 1987:12; Teachman 1983:124; Teti & Lamb 1989:211).

### **Previous marriage and children**

Tanfer (1987:483) notes that cohabitants are more likely to have been married before and are more likely to have children at the beginning of marriage. Both these factors may lead to feelings of dissatisfaction early in the relationship. Tanfer (1987:494) shows that a previous marriage and the presence of children at the beginning of marriage lead to an increased risk of marital disruption. The reasons for this lie in the additional stresses these couples are exposed to, and hence the greater difficulty they are likely to have in adjusting adequately to the new marriage.

### **2.9 The family is a developing system**

The family is a living and developing system whose members are interconnected. A systems perspective on family life assumes that an individual is connected to others by relationships. Guernsey (1982:67) defines a system as

‘ anything that constitutes a cluster of highly interrelated parts, each responding to the other while at the same time maintaining itself as a whole even when there is incessant internal change’.

The three parts of Guernsey’s definition of a system are: the parts are in relation to one another; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and, the whole is able to continue and change in response to itself and to its environment.

Family relationships follow set rules that establish roles and patterns of interaction, and these in turn determine whether the family's functioning promotes or hinders the personal development of its individual members. These roles and patterns of interaction are rooted in one's family of origin.

Different kinds of change are also part of every family's life. Any change in the family, or in a family member, or in a family's environment affects the life and functioning of the family and each of its members. Likewise, as families grow and develop, and encounter events such as birth, adolescence, marriage, and death, they face predictable and unavoidable periods of transition. Arond and Pauker (1987:9) note that their research confirms that marriage is a developing process which involves change, adjustment and growth. The ways in which a family responds to these challenges influence the degree of success or struggle it is likely to experience in subsequent points of transition in its life cycle.

### **2.10 Family development theory and the family life cycle**

Family development theory is a helpful way for understanding how families change over time. Mattessich and Hill (1987:438) note that the family development perspective has been an important one in sociology of the family for many years. It means seeing families in the context of their own development over time. Duvall and Miller (1985:21) point out that 'the concept of the family life cycle is a fundamental concept in understanding how families change over time'. These authors outline the stages of family life as follows: the addition and subtraction of family members through birth, death, and leaving home; the various stages the children go through, and changes in the family's

connection with other social systems such as retirement from work.

These stages of the family life cycle succeed one another in an orderly progression and have their requisite 'developmental tasks,' that is, the activities required by or characteristic of each stage. If the developmental tasks of a particular stage of the family life cycle are not successfully completed, adjustment in the next stage will be affected.

For example, a newly married couple should separate from the family of origin and establish a home of their own. Kurdek (1991:27) refers to the wedding as a 'developmental milestone' in the life cycle of the individual.

Lewis (1972:17) suggests a developmental model and framework to encompass much of the literature on the premarital dyad. It is clear from Lewis' analysis that communication is a consistent and necessary component of the development from the premarital to the marital relationship. The importance of communication continues into marriage and throughout the lifespan of the marriage. Providing the premarital couple with skills of effective communication, therefore, would seem an important task in preparing couples for a satisfying relationship.

John Paul II (1981:120) recognises the developmental perspective on family life in his exhortation that 'The Church's pastoral action must be progressive, also in the sense that it must follow the family, accompanying it step by step in the different stages of its formation and development'.

## **2.11 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a brief overview of several significant research areas for this project. It shows that education and preparation at the beginning of a long-term relationship helps couples to anticipate changes and to respond to the challenges they will face.

The South African studies note that marriage preparation programmes enhance couples' knowledge about marriage, they improve the extent to which they develop realistic views of marriage, and promote awareness of communication and conflict resolution styles. Alpaslan makes an important observation when he points out that '... the development of a satisfying marital relationship is not a foregone conclusion' (1997:introduction).

The literature shows that marriage preparation is generally viewed as being of value early in the marriage, however its value declines significantly over time. Due to its short-term effectiveness, it is proposed that pre-marital work be limited and more time and effort be invested in work with couples who have been married for at least six months because this is the 'teachable moment,' whereas engaged couples are too 'starry-eyed' to benefit from marriage preparation.

A further important aspect highlighted is that men and women experience relationship satisfaction differently. Women tend to evaluate their relationship experiences more carefully and pragmatically, whereas men see fewer problems in their relationships than women do. It is therefore expected that men will be more satisfied with their relationships than women.

Several research studies have also shown that relationship satisfaction decreases and marital disruption is more likely to occur when couples have lived together prior to the wedding, when there is a premarital pregnancy, a previous marriage, and the presence of children in a new marriage.

The following chapter gives an overview of the Evenings for the Engaged marriage preparation programme in which the research subjects participated.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Evenings for the Engaged: A Marriage Preparation Programme**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter will give an overview of the Evenings for the Engaged marriage preparation programme as it is implemented in the Catholic Church in Cape Town.

#### **3.2 Objectives of the programme**

The leaders' guidebook for the Evenings for the Engaged programme emphasises the following objectives: to increase couples' capacity to respond to their vocation of marriage; to present the Church's teaching on the sacrament of marriage and how it can be lived; to demonstrate the importance of the permanence of marriage in religious and emotional terms (Dahl et al 1974:4).

#### **3.3 Aims of the programme**

The Evenings for the Engaged programme aims to help couples deepen and strengthen their relationship. It emphasises the importance of marriage for the couples themselves and the Church. The programme also tries to motivate couples to strive for a satisfying marriage as they observe and learn from the example of the presenting couples who strive to live the sacrament of marriage. The programme further aims to enable engaged couples, through couple-to-couple sharing in groups, to witness marriages that are loving

and tender, open and honest, healing and forgiving. Through their contact with the presenting couples the participants are exposed to the vocation of marriage, which may help them to experience the love and support of the Church. The entire programme has the potential to enrich the engaged couples' relationships, and to have a containing function.

In the group settings couples learn to communicate thoughts and feelings clearly and accurately and to respond with understanding and acceptance. This experience tends to bring couples closer and it promotes deep and intimate communication, which can result in an increase in relationship satisfaction.

The programme also aims to promote additional aspects of relationship satisfaction through individual, couple and group interaction. It endeavours to help the participants to develop communication and conflict resolution skills which lay the foundation for a long-term relationship. It also helps them to become more aware of the effect of their behaviours on their partners, to increase their intimacy, and to anticipate and deal constructively with the stresses and problems they are likely to experience.

### **3.4 Procedure for each evening**

The programme consists of six or seven weekly sessions, each dealing with a specific area of a couple's relationship: looking at marriage together; ways to communicate love; images of God and married love; sexual expression of married love; the sacrament of marriage; the journey ahead: directions and detours. Each of the sessions is scheduled for approximately one and a half to two hours. The agenda is as follows:

**Review (30 mins)** The couples discuss the past week's experience of trying to put into practice the concepts they learned in the previous session. They then discuss the next section in the couple pack, which is the couples' homework assignment for the coming week.

**Presentation (20-25 mins)** The team members introduce the topic for the evening and present their personal experiences.

**Written exercise (10 mins)** Each person, including the team leaders, works privately on the written exercise for that evening.

**Couple discussion (25 mins)** Each couple exchanges what they have written and discusses their relationship. This stage of the evening, where the partners talk to each other about their relationship, is the most important of all.

**Group discussion (25 mins)** All the couples get together and discuss the topic of the evening.

**Wrap up (5 - 10 mins)** The team summarizes the evening and encourages the couples to complete the homework exercises that are contained in the couple pack during their time together in the coming week. Each couple pack has three readings that develop the concepts presented in the session. Each reading is followed by an exercise for the couple first to do individually, then exchange and discuss in depth.

### 3.5 Outline of the programme: Topics

The programme is as follows:

Couple pack 1	<b>First evening</b>	<b>Looking at marriage together</b> Looking at love and marriage. Love as a decision. Romance. Also: Family of origin, changing roles of the sexes, healthy relationships, and money matters.
Couple pack 2	<b>Second evening</b>	<b>Ways to communicate love</b> Love as communication. Self-disclosure. Feelings. Listening. Being listened to. Also: spousal abuse, child abuse, and anger.
Couple pack 3	<b>Third evening</b>	<b>Images of God and married love</b> Differences. Closeness. God's plan for us. Living as God asks. Choosing how to live one's marriage. Also: Past relationship with God.
Couple pack 4	<b>Fourth evening</b>	<b>Sexual Expression of Married Love</b> Sex as activity. Disillusionment. Sexuality in God's plan. Day-long lovemaking. Life-giving love. Children. Also: AIDS. Frequency of sexual intercourse. Natural Family Planning. Intimacy.
Couple pack 5	<b>Fifth evening</b>	<b>The sacrament of marriage</b> Marriage. Sacrament. Christ and the Church. Loving as Jesus loves. Sacraments for others. The vocation of marriage. Also: Fidelity. Permanence. Forgiveness. Catholic marriage.
Couple pack 6	<b>Sixth evening</b>	<b>The journey ahead: directions and detours</b> Divorce. Mixed marriage. Wedding plans. Honeymoon. Church wedding. Also: Cohabitation. Consumerism. Taboo subjects.

### 3.6 How the programme works

The programme combines a religious base with a skills base. The participating couples are challenged to deepen their communication in all areas of their relationship by talking to each other and the other members of the group.

In each session the sharing of the team is followed by carefully prepared questions that

provide the engaged couples with the opportunity to deepen their relationship in a particular area. How the engaged couples respond to these questions is up to them. They are asked to answer them privately as individuals, to share their answers with each other, and then to spend time in discussion. Afterward, all the members of the group come together to discuss the topic. The discussion provides an opportunity for further discovery, always respecting the privacy of the participants.

At the end of each session the engaged couples are asked to set aside at least one hour a day on three separate days the following week. Using additional readings and exercises from the couple packs, they are to work on their relationship. These homework assignments reinforce what they have learnt in the previous session, they also add to and structure the communications skills. The hours they spend alone talking to each other about themselves and their relationship are often more important than the time they spend talking at the sessions.

It has been found that with sufficient motivation and encouragement, engaged couples respond favourably to having the sessions weekly for six or seven weeks, and to working through the couple packs during each week. The motivation begins when the priest and/or team couple tells the couples about the sessions. Contacts by letter and telephone help to encouragement the engaged couples.

### **3.7 For couples, not singles**

This programme is for engaged couples who want to enhance their relationship, to learn new communication skills and to grow spiritually. This does not mean that some couples

do not need 'gentle urging', but they are not forced to attend against their will. The priest and/or team couple stresses the importance of pre-marital preparation, but no compulsion is imposed on the participants.

Another important aspect of this programme is that it is designed for engaged couples. Should a situation arise where only one partner is able to attend, the couple will not receive the full benefit of the programme. However, there have been cases in which one person has attended and then, through daily written correspondence and cassette tapes, shared the programme with the partner. The benefits derived by one partner affects the other, hence it is better that one attends than none at all! This notion is informed by general systems theory, which holds that the couple system is composed of two individual sub-systems, the man and the woman. This theory asserts that any experience that affects one of these sub-systems will affect the entire system (Sager 1981:122). Hence, the participation of one of the partners in a marriage preparation course is likely to benefit the couple.

The researcher has worked with couples who were highly motivated and committed to the relationship, but whose marriages did not last. They intended to have long-lasting marriages, however they discovered that they were not committed to each other for life, and separated or divorced within a year after the wedding. At times a priest or team members are aware that two motivated people are not ready to make a lifetime commitment to each other. This recognition, which may not be certain, is a difficult and sensitive matter to act on. However, such impressions should be shared with the priest who has agreed to marry the couple, when the team report to him after the completion

of the programme.

Sometimes the couple can be convinced to reconsider their decision to marry, but usually they cannot. In fact they tend to reject advice to wait or to reconsider and they can become resentful about the programme.

In this programme engaged couples are helped to examine themselves in depth. They are also exposed to the realities and challenges of a dedicated love relationship as lived by the team couples, as well as of the other engaged couples. These two factors may help some engaged couples to realise spontaneously that they are not ready or willing to enter into a life-long commitment and they may decide not to marry.

### **3.8 Meeting in the home**

In order to provide the engaged couples with a relaxed environment in which they can best experience the married couple and the priest, as well as deepen their own relationship, the small-group meeting in a home is encouraged. A warm home environment can be conducive to intimate discussion which may help couples to deepen their relationship and hence increase their feelings of satisfaction with their partner and the relationship.

Having several engaged couples meeting in the home of a married couple combines a warm personal atmosphere with group interaction. The programme can be presented to as few as two couples and to as many as six. A larger number decreases the participation of each of the engaged couples and makes it more difficult to build an atmosphere of

openness. In a small group everyone can get to know and trust one another in a relatively short time. In fact, by the final evening a real sense of the Church community can be achieved.

Cartwright and Zander (1960:72) define group cohesiveness as 'attraction to the group'. This concept refers to the dynamics that bind the group members to each other and to the group. Group cohesiveness has a number of benefits. The more the group is attractive to its members, the more it has the ability to bring about a change in attitudes, opinions and behaviour in the group and the greater the influence on its members. Group cohesiveness has another value. The members may disagree with each other, but they also tend to find solutions to problems and conflicts more easily (Northen 1969:46). The group provides a role model for the individual couples to orientate themselves on in terms of finding solutions to their own issues. The married couple can also form a relationship with each engaged couple that could and should last long after the couple is married. The seeds that are planted with engaged couples in these sessions provide the strong possibility of deepening the involvement of newly married people in the Church.

### **3.9 Creating a supportive environment**

When it happens that a couple misses a session because of illness or an emergency, the team leaders ensure that they get the homework assignment before or at the next session. Because every session is important, it is suggested that once a series of evenings has begun, new couples should not be brought into the programme, and experience has shown that they usually have a difficult time feeling comfortable with the community that is already forming.

The programme can be given in a parish facility that provides a warm and intimate atmosphere as was the case in this study, however the married couple's home provides several important benefits. The engaged couples experience not just the married couple but the entire family unit in its natural environment. There are likely to be interruptions, either from the children or otherwise, but these can be handled or disruptions can be avoided, for example, by turning off the television and by using a telephone answering machine.

The engaged couples may more readily feel trust and openness when they see that the married couple is genuine and honest, supportive but not patronising. The same is true for their experience of the priest. In the couple's home they will listen to what the priest has to say and begin to see that they and their future marriage are important to the Church. The experience of genuine acceptance can be affirming for the participants and, in turn, have a positive affect on their mutual acceptance of one another. The participants may experience less dissatisfaction with their relationships in this emotionally supportive environment.

### **3.10 Witnesses to the sacrament of marriage**

This programme aims to share with engaged couples what Catholic marriage would like to promote in terms of relationship satisfaction. For example, it invites the couples to learn to communicate as they discover more about themselves as well as about sexuality, Natural Family Planning, and financial management, among other aspects.

The programme approaches marriage by presenting a living experience of the sacrament

of marriage. In this sense the married couple leading the engaged couples is the major part of the content of the programme. They act as examples, rather than teachers of the sacrament. They prepare for a session by asking themselves what the theme of the particular session means to them in their own marriage. Then they share their reflections and their experiences with the group. One of the most important things an engaged couple can get from this programme is the modelling of a married couple.

Also presenting the programme with the couple is a priest or deacon. As a team, the husband and wife and the priest or deacon provides the engaged couples with an experience of the love, care, and concern that the Catholic Church has for them and their future marriage. It is hoped that through them the engaged receive, 'a preparation for life as a couple' (John Paul II 1981:122). They will learn not only answers, but questions to ask themselves.

### **3.11 A realistic approach**

The Evenings for the Engaged programme is challenging. It presents marriage as a living, positive reality, made up of individuals who love each other deeply, who share a common desire to grow closer and to achieve growth through the difficulties and struggles they experience.

This marriage preparation is approached, not with the purpose of telling the engaged couples how to be married and how to avoid problems, but of providing a positive environment in which the engaged couples gain awareness of how to build and achieve an intimate, lifelong union. It is hoped that through Evenings for the Engaged, engaged

couples will begin to experience their relationship as one in which they can share with each other their deepest thoughts, feelings, dreams, attitudes, and expectations. It aims to make the engaged couples aware of their commitment and love for each other and how they will live out that love now as an engaged couple and later as husband and wife.

### **3.12 The team couple: Qualifications**

The required qualifications are as follows:

The **first qualification** of the couple giving this programme is to believe in themselves and their love for each other. This programme requires honest, authentic and down-to-earth people, couples who love, fail and pick themselves up, couples who have faith in God and believe that their love for each other is a special gift to be shared with others.

The **second qualification** is that they make a commitment to continue to discover more of each other. The couples commit themselves to making their relationship with each other a priority in their lives. They do not **give** the programme but **live** it.

The **third qualification** is to show genuine care for the engaged couples. Care about how much they love each other, treat each other, and how open and honest they are together. The married couples are encouraged to build a personal relationship with the engaged couples that may continue well beyond the programme.

The **fourth qualification** is that they be willing to share who they are, what they have experienced with each other, and what their goals and desires are for their life together.

The **fifth qualification** is that the programme presenters represent the Church and its teachings. This programme is a gift from the Catholic Church to the engaged couples. As married couples presenting the programme, they are representing not just themselves but the Church of which they are a part.

### **3.13 Leadership style**

One of the most critical aspects of marriage preparation, and one that unfortunately receives little attention in the Church, concerns the couples' generalized use of skills following the programme. In many human development programmes, the leaders play an active teaching role throughout the programme. When this happens, the couples frequently becomes dependent on the leaders for guidance and reinforcement. Unfortunately when the programme comes to an end, the couples have difficulty learning to take responsibility for monitoring and managing their skills. In the Evening for the Engaged programme, however, although the leaders give guidance and reinforcement to the couples when appropriate, they emphasise the encounter between the partners and the experiential aspects of couple dialogue and couple-to-couple interaction. In this way, the couples may be better prepared, both from a skill and confidence standpoint, to utilize the skills successfully following the programme.

### **3.14 Limitations of the Evenings for the Engaged Programme**

The researcher has several concerns about the programme.

Firstly, the presenters use their own experience to illustrate how they deal with various problems and situations in their relationships. This may not be relevant nor helpful to

engaged couples who need to identify their own issues and find ways of dealing with them.

Secondly, when the presenting couples tell the stories of their own marriages, the assumption is that they have discussed which aspects of their relationship to disclose and how this will be done. This demands deep communication, trust and confidence in one's partner. The researcher knows from personal communication with couples that this is an affirming experience that strengthens the relationship. However, the converse is also true. When one partner speaks publicly on behalf of the couple without the full consent of the other, it undermines their relationship. There is a delicate balance between effective self-disclosure and that which is detrimental to the relationship.

Thirdly, with a high divorce rate for new marriages, the engagement process and premarital preparation should be rigorous enough that weak relationships break up before the wedding, not afterwards. The researcher is concerned that the warm and caring community of presenting team and engaged couples may help some participants to successfully hide their relationship inadequacies.

### **3.15 Conclusion**

The chapter has shown that the Evenings for the Engaged programme combines a spiritual perspective with an enrichment approach to marriage preparation. It has noted that equipping couples to deal with their own issues and helping them to develop a spiritual relationship is more useful to them in the long run than merely instructing them, or providing them with information and advice on how to live their married lives.

The main aims of the programme are to enhance the couples' commitment, communication and skills in conflict resolution, and to provide couples with an experience of intense dyadic interaction and communication within a group setting. The programme therefore has the potential to have an enriching influence and a positive effect on the levels of satisfaction and contentment the participants experience.

The researcher's question is: Does the Evenings for the Engaged programme contribute to an increase in the degree of satisfaction that couples experience in the months prior to the wedding and during the course of the programme, and for how long does this effect last? The research methodology described in the following chapter endeavours to answer this question.

# **CHAPTER 4**

## **Research Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter will discuss the research methodology and design utilized in the study.

The researcher combined two approaches, the quantitative and qualitative methods. Firstly, a quasi-experimental design (De Vos 1998:129) (which is also referred to as the quantitative-descriptive method) was used to determine the extent to which engaged couples experienced changes in their relationship satisfaction before and after they participated in the Evenings for the Engaged programme, and in the event of any such changes in the quality of their relationship, to ascertain the duration of these changes.

Secondly, a qualitative method was used to collect information on how the respondents viewed their relationships by asking them to describe their experiences and what they felt about their relationship six months after the marriage preparation course (post-test 3) (see Appendix 2).

### **4.2 Pilot study**

On 9 and 11 April 1999, the researcher conducted the pilot study at an Engaged Encounter Weekend, in which six couples participated. The Index of Relationship

Satisfaction (IRS) was administered before and after the marriage preparation course.

The data was analysed by computer and shows an increase in relationship satisfaction for all respondents. No statistical analysis was done.

#### **4.3 Overview of the research design**

The single group time series design (or one-group pre-and-post-test design) was used to measure relationship satisfaction prior to the marriage preparation programme. After the pre-test score had been obtained, the respondents were exposed to the Evenings for the Engaged programme. In other words the intervention was introduced. This was followed by four post-tests at selected time intervals. The pre-test measurement of the dependent variable (relationship satisfaction of engaged couples) was used as a basis of comparison with the four post-test scores (De Vos 1998:129).

The dependent variable was relationship satisfaction, whereas the independent variable was the time that had lapsed since the marriage preparation programme. The effect of marriage preparation was evaluated through analysis of repeated measures of the relationship satisfaction. The design, in which a pre-test precedes the introduction of the intervention and a series of post-tests follow, was used to measure changes in relationship satisfaction, and to ascertain the period for which these changes endure.

There was no control in the research design, although the pre-test score was the frame of reference. The research subjects served as their own control, inasmuch as past experiences and individual differences were considered to have been held equal in the

context of the research project (Fitz-Gibbon & Morris 1987:58; Polansky 1975:267).

Since it was not possible, within the limits of this research project, to measure *every* aspect of change as experienced by engaged couples in the months prior to the wedding and after they participated in a marriage preparation programme, the researcher regarded relationship satisfaction to be representative of the changes that must occur in order to indicate the successful accomplishment of the intervention goals (Polansky 1975: 375).

On the one hand, the researcher anticipated that the presence of one or more factors such as cohabitation, premarital pregnancy, a previous marriage, or children (as outlined in 2.8 above) in the sample group was likely to bring about a decrease in relationship satisfaction prior to the programme. In other words, their initial scores were likely to be higher, indicating relationship dissatisfaction, than those of couples unaffected by the factors. But, on the other hand, these very couples in struggling or stressful relationships were expected to have a greater capacity to benefit from the programme than couples who were blinded by their 'in-love-ness'.

Polster and Lynch (1981:375) point out that the emphasis in single-subject designs is not proof or disproof of these hypotheses, but the observation and analysis of the effects of interventions, such as a marriage preparation programme, on specific target behaviours, such as relationship satisfaction.

Two research questions were posed in this study: Do couples who participate in the Evenings for the Engaged marriage preparation programme experience a change in

relationship satisfaction? In the event of such changes occurring, for how long do they endure?

Two hypotheses were formulated. The researcher's own clinical work with engaged couples and experience as a coordinator of marriage preparation programmes motivated the formulation of two hypotheses. Firstly, couples who participate in the Evenings for the Engaged programme experience a change in relationship satisfaction. Secondly, these changes are of a short-term nature, this is, they endure for less than 12 months.

The second hypothesis was based on the researcher's view that marriage preparation programmes cannot realistically be expected to prepare couples for all stages of the marriage and family life cycles which may span about sixty years. This is neither its ideal nor its goal. At best, all marriage preparation can do is teach couples some basic skills, and lay the foundation by preparing them for the initial emotional adjustments and developmental tasks they are likely to face in the first few months of marriage. It cannot address the complex and multiple challenges they will unavoidably encounter beyond the initial stage. Marriage preparation is merely a preventive service, albeit a vital one, to help couples get their marriage off to a good start. This rationale is supported by Alpaslan (1997: introduction) who points out that engaged couples ought to prepare themselves for their intended marriage, whereas newly married couples are faced with the critical transitional growth points of marriage.

#### **4.4 Criteria for sample selection**

One experimental group was used. The sample was drawn from a group of 14 engaged

couples who registered for an Evenings for the Engaged programme, and planned to marry in the Catholic Church. The researcher chose to conduct the study at the marriage preparation course which was held in the Cape Town suburb of Athlone. This programme was selected merely because the commencement date was convenient for the researcher's own time-frame.

Although 14 couples registered for the course, 13 couples arrived for the first session. One couple withdrew from the programme due to illness. Since 7 of these couples indicated their willingness to voluntarily participate in the project, they constituted the experimental group. They were not recruited from a clinical population and could not be described as being distressed.

The researcher decided against eliminating couples who qualified in terms of the factors mentioned in 2.8 above: cohabitation prior to the wedding, premarital pregnancy, a previous marriage, and children being brought into the new marriage, because this would be discriminatory.

#### **4.5 Data collection procedures**

Three methods of data collection were utilized in this study. Quantitative data was collected at five stages (one pre-test and four post-tests), whereas qualitative data was obtained by means of a qualitative evaluation that the subjects responded to in writing after they had completed the third post-test questionnaire. Data was also acquired by means of participant observation, that is, by talking to the respondents and observing them in interaction with one another. Schurink (1998:277) refers to participant

observation as one of the '... most important data collection methods available to the qualitative researcher'.

#### **4.6 Quantitative data: Questionnaire**

##### **Pre-test data collection**

The researcher met with all 13 couples on the first evening before the programme started. She introduced herself as the researcher and clearly explained that she was not part of the team presenting the programme. The researcher then explained the research plan: to examine the extent to which the quality of satisfaction couples experience in their relationships changes when they participate in a marriage preparation programme, and secondly, to find out for how long these changes are sustained. The seven couples who volunteered to participate in the project filled in the Index of Relationship Satisfaction (IRS) questionnaire for the first time, thus creating the pre-test measure.

##### **Post-test data collection**

After the completion of the last session of the seven-week Evenings for the Engaged programme, the respondents filled out the IRS for the second time (post-test 1). Seven weeks after the completion of the programme the subjects filled out the IRS for the third time (post-test 2). Six months after the completion of the marriage preparation programme, irrespective of the wedding dates, the respondents completed the IRS questionnaire for the fourth time (post-test 3). Thirteen months after the completion of the marriage preparation course the research subjects filled in the IRS for the fifth and last time (post-test 4).

#### **4.6.1 Introduction to the Clinical Measurement Package**

The Clinical Measurement Package (CMP) is outlined by Hudson (1982), and Hudson and Faul (1997). These texts are the basis for the content of this section.

The Index of Marital Satisfaction (IMS) is one of nine short-form measurement scales designed in the 1970s by Walter Hudson and his associates at the School of Social Work, Florida State University<sup>2</sup>.

Hudson describes the scales as simple, but very powerful devices, that are capable of revealing both minor and serious problems that people have in several areas of personal and social functioning (1982: ix).

They were designed as an aid for clinical practitioners to use repeatedly to monitor and evaluate clients' progress in therapy. The nine scales measure the severity of problems clients have with (1) depression, (2) self-esteem, (3) marital or relationship dissatisfaction, (4) sexual discord, (5) parent-child relationships as seen by the parent, (6) as seen by the child in relation to the mother, (7) as seen by the child in relation to the father, (8) intra-familial stress, and (9) peer relationships. In 1982 the IRS was modified, '... in order to make it more appropriate for use with unmarried as well as married partners' (Cheung & Hudson 1982:102).

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<sup>2</sup> In the Hudson text the scales are collectively referred to as the 'Clinical Measurement Package' or CMP scales (Hudson 1982:viii), whereas in the text by Hudson & Faul (1997:4) they are referred to as the 'Walmyr Short-Form Assessment Scales' (WAS) after the Walmyr Publishing Company that holds the copyright.

The IRS, which was used in this study, is a premarital version of the Index of Marital Satisfaction (IMS). It was adapted by the Perspective Training College in Pretoria specifically for this research project. The questionnaire was revised so that it would read appropriately for unmarried couples. For example, the name of the inventory was changed from *Index of Marital Satisfaction* to *Index of Relationship Satisfaction*, and item 18, which read 'I feel I should never have married my partner' was altered to 'I feel that I should not marry my partner'.

The IRS was designed to measure the degree of satisfaction and dissatisfaction that one or both partners may experience in the relationship. It does not assess the relationship as a single entity, but measures the magnitude of satisfaction that is felt or perceived by each partner. It is therefore possible that one partner has a high IRS score while the other partner's score is lower. High scores indicate high dissatisfaction, whereas low scores signify satisfaction with the relationship.

Hudson & Faul 1997;24) do not make a distinction between the concepts of relationship dissatisfaction and relationship discord, hence for purposes of evaluating and interpreting the IRS scores in this study, these two concepts are equated. The IRS is not a relationship adjustment measure. A couple may have a well-adjusted relationship in the sense that they have arrived at some satisfactory arrangement for living and working together, however they may display a high degree of relationship dissatisfaction.

#### **4.6.1.1 The short-form assessment scales**

The CMP scales were developed and validated by Hudson and his associates for use in

monitoring and evaluating clinical practice. They are designed as assessment tools administered at various time intervals to determine if and how change has taken place with respect to the aspect the researcher wants to measure. The resulting scores are then used to draw up a time-series graph, which indicates, for example, whether a couple's relationship has improved, has experienced little or no change, or might even have deteriorated.

#### **4.6.1.2 Self-report measures**

The IRS is a paper and pencil, self-report questionnaire. It is a twenty-five item scale that measures the feelings of the respondent about a number of aspects, behaviours and events that characterize the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction in a relationship. Approximately half the items consist of positive statements about the spouse and the relationship, and the remaining items measure similar content but are negatively worded. These items were divided as half positive and half negative in order to reduce response set by respondents. The IRS is self-administered, contains minimal instructions, consists of a single page with items in English and Afrikaans, and can be completed in three to five minutes. A copy of the IRS is presented in Appendix 1.

#### **4.6.1.3 Psychometric characteristics**

When the CMP scales were developed it was recognized that any measurement tool that is used to characterize human problems or to make decisions about them must have at least two psychometric characteristics, in other words, it must be reliable and valid. The IRS has both these qualities (Hudson & Glisson 1976:309). However, if a scale is to be used repeatedly with the same client to monitor and evaluate the severity of the client's

problem, it must have a number of other characteristics as well: it must be short and easy to administer, easy to score, understand and interpret, and it must not suffer response decay when used repeatedly.

Hudson and Faul (1997:5) note that each of the scales meets all of these psychometric requirements. Each scale has a reliability of .85 or better, and all have good content, concurrent, factorial, discriminant, and construct validity.

#### **4.6.1.4 Scoring the IRS scale**

The researcher obtained the Perspective Assessment Scales for Windows (PASWIN) from the Perspective Training College. This computer programme scored each of the IRS questionnaires and provided 'group reports' on the assessment of each respondent. Faul and Hanekom (1999:19) note that

'a group report means that the computer programme will calculate a mean score of all the data on the database and generate a report on the scores'.

These figures were used in this study to create time series graphs for each of the seven couples. The combined scores of the males and females, as well as the whole sample were compared on a separate graph.

The Statistical Package for the Personal Computer (SPPC) was used to conduct a statistical analysis of the information contained in the group reports. The programme provided the researcher with summary statistics that showed which results were statistically significant and which were not.

#### **4.6.1.5 Score ranges**

The scoring formula produces for each questionnaire a score that has a range from 0 to 100. Although the scoring procedure has a minimum possible score of 0, such a score does not indicate that the respondent is free of relationship problems. Every relationship has problems. Hudson and Glisson (1976:309) point out that a score of zero may mean that the stresses in the relationship are either minor or they fall within areas of the relationship that are not referred to by the items on the IRS scale. These authors also note that low scores may mean that the respondent was not willing to disclose the presence or severity of a relationship problem.

The clinical cutting score is the point above which scores give clear evidence of affective problems, relationship difficulties or relationship dissatisfaction.

#### **4.6.1.6 Item omissions**

Research by Hudson and Faul (1997:8) and their clinical experience with the IRS indicates that if a client agrees to complete one or more of the scales, it is rare that more than five items will be omitted. Moreover, the omission of five or fewer items on any of the scales has a negligible effect on the reliability and validity of the scales.

#### **4.6.1.7 Interpreting the CMP scale scores**

The CMP scales were conceived and constructed as measures of the degree, severity or magnitude of personal and interpersonal relationship problems and not as measures of health or well-being. There are two reasons for this. First, it is difficult to define and quantify the concept of health directly. It helps little to define health as the absence of

such problems. If health is defined as the absence of personal and interpersonal relationship problems, emphasis is shifted to improving health and not towards the elimination, reduction, alleviation or solution of problems. This leads to the second reason for structuring CMP scales as measures of personal and social problems. That is, almost all forms of therapy and service delivery are primarily motivated by problem solving. Clients are accepted for treatment almost exclusively because some personal or interpersonal problem is identified as the focus of treatment, and the CMP scales were designed to measure and characterize the degree of such problems. Thus, in using the scales, a high score is always taken to indicate a more serious problem than a lower score.

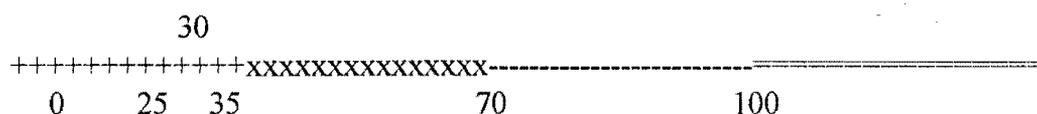
#### **4.6.1.8 Clinical cutting scores**

If a person scores above the cutting score, they usually manifest a clinically significant problem, whereas scores below the cutting score are generally found to be insignificant scores.

Hudson and Faul (1997:9) point out that the clinical cutting score is useful for two reasons. Firstly, it enables the practitioner to use the scales as rough diagnostic tools or indicators. Secondly, it represents a useful treatment criteria. As a diagnostic tool, any one of the scales may be used as screening devices to determine whether a person has a clinically significant problem in a specific area, and how serious that problem is. None of the scales were designed to shed light on the source of the client's problem.

#### 4.6.1.9 Clinical cutting score interpretation line

Apart from a few exceptions most of the scales have a clinical cutting score of 30. The clinical cutting score interpretation line for these scales can be interpreted as follows:



The four symbols above (+ x - =) can be interpreted in the following manner:

+ = **Optimally activated:** indicates reliable proof that the client does not have a problem in that area justifying clinical intervention.

x = **Uncertain area:** This is the clinical cutting score range where it is uncertain if the client has a clinical problem justifying therapeutic intervention. The client and other sources must provide information to decide whether the client falls in the optimal activated area or the over activated area.

- = **Optimal activated area:** There is reliable proof that the client has a clinical problem justifying therapeutic intervention in the area being measured.

= = **Over activated area:** There is reliable proof that the client has a clinical problem justifying therapeutic intervention in the area being measured. The problem is so severe that such a high scoring client may attempt violence against him/herself or others.

#### **4.6.1.10 Interpreting extreme scores**

A score of 70 or higher on the IRS alerts the practitioner to the possibility of extreme behaviour. There is the distinct possibility that such high scoring clients may attempt violence against themselves or others. There is also the potential for spouse or partner abuse which means that a divorce or separation may occur.

#### **4.7 Collection of quantitative data**

Every effort was made to protect the identity of the research subjects. A code was used in place of their names to ensure that the respondents remained anonymous. The seven couples were randomly coded from 1 to 7.

There were five stages in the research design: the initial assessment consisted of a single baseline score obtained prior to the commencement of the programme (pre-test); the first follow-up was done immediately after the completion of the programme (post-test 1); the second follow-up took place 7 weeks later (post-test 2); the third follow-up was conducted 6 months after the completion of the programme (post-test 3), and the fourth post-test measure was obtained 13 months after the respondents had completed the programme (post-test 4). The entire study was conducted over a 14-month period.

**The pre-test measure:** The researcher met with 13 couples on the first evening prior to the commencement of the programme. After a brief introduction to the research project, 7 couples volunteered to participate in the research project.

The researcher introduced herself and the research project as follows:

*Good evening! My name is Suzanne Duncan. I am doing research on the changes that couples experience in their relationships when they take part in marriage preparation programmes. I would like to ask whether you would be willing to participate in my project. I need your voluntary cooperation. If any couple does not wish to participate, please feel free to say so, because no one is under any obligation to take part in this research. Before you commit yourselves, let me tell you what is involved:*

*I need to meet with you five times. On each of these occasions I will ask you to complete a questionnaire. You will complete the questionnaire this evening, and again after the last session; the third meeting will be here at this venue at the end of July; we will meet again early in December. I will post letters to you to confirm the time, date, and venue. The fifth meeting will be in a year's time. Should any couple who wants to participate in this research miss any of these meetings, I will make an arrangement to meet separately with them to give them the opportunity to complete the questionnaire.*

*The information you give me will be kept strictly confidential. Each couple will be allocated a code. Your names will not be used so as to protect your identity. The information you give me will only be used for research purposes. I will give you a few minutes to turn to your partner to check whether you want to participate (3 minutes).*

The researcher distributed questionnaires to 14 individuals (7 couples) who indicated their willingness to participate. They filled out the IRS questionnaire without

reference to their partner while the rest of the group sat in silence.

#### **4.8 Collection of qualitative data**

##### **Self-report**

The researcher compiled a question that each subject was expected to respond to in writing in the researcher's presence after the post-test 3 IRS questionnaire had been completed. The researcher decided to collect the qualitative data after the post-test 3 measure because the respondents were expected to be experiencing high levels of relationship satisfaction. The qualitative evaluation was introduced at this stage to give the researcher insight into what the couples were experiencing. The last post-test measure, which was to be administered in July 2000, was expected to show an increase in relationship dissatisfaction because by then all the respondents would have been married for about six months, and were likely to have experienced disappointments and stresses related to the adjustment to a new and unfamiliar stage in the relationship.

##### **Participant Observation**

The researcher spent about half an hour with each couple when they completed the qualitative evaluation so as to get a first-hand impression of them, their relationship and their experience of the marriage preparation programme.

## **4.9 Conclusion**

The research methodology described in this chapter made use of both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The researcher wanted to make an empirical study of the changes couples experienced in their relationships in the months prior to their weddings because this would indicate, in statistical terms, the degree of change that occurred over time.

The qualitative evaluation helped the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the research subjects' personal experience of the quality of their relationship satisfaction as expressed in their own words. The combination of the quantitative and qualitative methods gave the researcher a broad perspective on respondents' experiences.

The longitudinal approach adopted in this study has also been discussed in this chapter. The researcher planned the study to span 14 months so that a sense of change over time could be achieved.

## CHAPTER 5

### Presentation and discussion of results

#### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter the results obtained from the quantitative measures are presented in a number of tables and time series graphs. An analysis of the qualitative data is also presented and discussed. It consists of the subjects' individual responses, and a comparison of themes within and across couples. All tables and figures relate to the two questionnaires that were administered (Appendices 1 and 2).

#### 5.2 Tables

<b>Table 1</b>					
<b>Relationship satisfaction scores of all individuals in the sample</b>					
<b>Experimental group</b>	<b>Pre-test 4 May 1999</b>	<b>Post-test 1 15 June 1999</b>	<b>Post-test 2 27 July 1999</b>	<b>Post-test 3 7 December 1999</b>	<b>Post-test 4 15 July 2000</b>
<b>Couple 1 - male DOB: 23.02.1975 Met: June 1992 Wedding: 21.08.1999</b>	1	0	0	0	4
<b>Couple 1 - female DOB: 11.05.1975</b>	0	0	0	4	0
<b>Couple 2 - male DOB: 17.09.1974 Met: May 1995 Wedding: 27.11.1999</b>	14	14	6	0	2
<b>Couple 2 - female DOB: 29.10.1973</b>	18	14	7	0	0
<b>Couple 3 - male DOB: 11.05.1976 Met: Feb 1987 Wedding: 31.07.1999</b>	24	16	12	32	22

<b>Couple 3 - female</b> <b>DOB: 19.01.1977</b>	17	16	14	22	36
<b>Couple 4 - male</b> <b>DOB: 04.12.1965</b> <b>Met: March 1986</b> <b>Wedding: 28.06.1999</b>	25	14	24	10	18
<b>Couple 4 - female</b> <b>DOB: 26.07.1967</b>	26	14	7	8	10
<b>Couple 5 - male</b> <b>DOB: 06.02.1972</b> <b>Met: June 1993</b> <b>Wedding: 25.09.1999</b>	14	8	6	8	6
<b>Couple 5 - female</b> <b>DOB: 18.10.1973</b>	25	15	16	9	4
<b>Couple 6 - male</b> <b>DOB: 19.11.1966</b> <b>Met: Dec 1996</b> <b>Wedding: 28.08.1999</b>	16	4	16	5	5
<b>Couple 6 - female</b> <b>DOB: 03.04.1962</b>	8	11	6	5	6
<b>Couple 7 - male</b> <b>DOB: 10.02.1969</b> <b>Met: June 1993</b> <b>Wedding: 24.09.1999</b>	29	22	19	18	22
<b>Couple 7 - female</b> <b>DOB: 08.02.1969</b>	14	16	16	15	18

	<b>N</b>	<b>Pre-test mean score</b>	<b>Post-test mean score</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b>f-ratio</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Pre-test+Post-test 1</b>	14	16.50	11.71	4.79	3.36	0.01
<b>Pre-test+Post-test 2</b>	14	16.50	10.64	5.86	3.63	0.00
<b>Pre-test+Post-test 3</b>	14	16.50	9.71	6.79	2.79	0.01
<b>Pre-test+Post-test 4</b>	14	16.50	10.93	5.57	4.01	0.06

With regard to the whole sample, the above table indicates that there was a statistically significant increase in relationship satisfaction from the pre-test score to each of the four post-test scores. These findings are supported by studies cited above that found that premarital preparation was of value to couples because improved communication skills and newly acquired knowledge can help couples to feel more satisfied with each other

and their relationship (Creighton University study 1995:19; Bader et al 1980:178; Silliman & Schumm 1992:199).

Experimental group	Pre-test 14 May 1999	Post-test 1 15 June 1999	Post-test 2 27 July 1999	Post-test 3 7 December 1999	Post-test 4 15 July 2000
All males	17	11	11	10	11
All females	15	12	9	9	10

	N	Pre-test mean score	Post-test mean score	Difference	f-ratio	p
Pre-test+Post-test 1	7	17.57	11.14	6.43	3.72	0.01
Pre-test+Post-test 2	7	17.57	11.86	5.71	3.07	0.02
Pre-test+Post-test 3	7	17.57	10.43	7.14	2.29	0.06
Pre-test+Post-test 4	7	17.57	11.29	6.28	10.15	0.02

With regard to the male sample, the above table indicates that there was a statistically significant increase in relationship satisfaction from the pre-test score to each of the four post-test scores. These results are supported by research that found that men see fewer problems in their relationships than women do (Hill et al 1976:161; Rubin et al 1981:826). This statistically significant increase is supported in other research that found Men to be more romantic than women, and score higher on scales that assess romantic beliefs about love. Men are also less critical and more satisfied in their relationships than women are (Dion & Dion 1973:56; Frazier & Easterly 1990:333, Knox & Sporkowski 1968:641).

	<b>N</b>	<b>Pre-test mean score</b>	<b>Post-test mean score</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b>f-ratio</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Pre-test+Post-test 1</b>	7	15.43	12.29	3.14	1.42	0.20
<b>Pre-test+Post-test 2</b>	7	15.43	9.43	6.00	2.15	0.07
<b>Pre-test+Post-test 3</b>	7	15.43	9.00	6.43	1.61	0.16
<b>Pre-test+Post-test 4</b>	7	15.43	10.57	4.86	0.80	0.59

With regard to the female sample, the above table indicates that although there was an increase in relationship satisfaction from the pre-test to the first three post-test scores, this change was only statistically significant from the pre-test to the second post-test score. The increase in relationship satisfaction from the pre-test to the first, third and fourth post-test scores was not statistically significant. The lack of statistical significance indicates that the females as a group experienced less satisfaction than did the male subjects. These gender differences are well documented in the literature. Research has found that women need to be economically dependent on men, they are emotionally dependent on romantic relationships, and they are more sensitive to the quality of relationships than men are, hence they tend to feel less satisfied with relationships than men do (Dion & Dion 1973:56; Hill et al 1976:167; Kanin et al 1970:64; Knox & Sparakowski 1968:639; Rubin et al 1981:834).

	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean scores: Males</b>	<b>Mean scores: Females</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b>f-ratio</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Pre-test</b>	7	17.57	15.43	2.14	0.43	0.68
<b>Post-test 1</b>	7	11.14	12.29	-1.14	-0.32	0.75
<b>Post-test 2</b>	7	11.86	9.43	2.43	0.62	0.55
<b>Post-test 3</b>	7	10.43	9.00	1.43	0.28	0.78
<b>Post-test 4</b>	7	11.28	10.57	0.71	0.01	0.90

The above table indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between males and females regarding the increase in relationship satisfaction from the pre-test to each of the four post-test times of measurement. This may be due to the small sample size. These results are not supported by the literature which indicates that there are gender differences in experiences of relationship satisfaction (Hill et al 1976:161, Rubin 1981:826).

### 5.3 Thematic analysis of qualitative data

The data obtained from the subjects' written responses to the qualitative evaluation of their relationships is as follows.

#### 5.3.1 Qualitative analysis: individual responses

<b>Table 7</b>							
<b>Themes mentioned by couples in qualitative evaluation of relationship satisfaction</b>							
	Love	Communi- cation	Friendship	Development and growth	Positivity for the relationship	Commit men	God
Couple 1 - male	1		1	1		1	
Couple 1 - female	1	1	1		1		
Couple 2 - male							
Couple 2 - female	1	1		1	1		
Couple 3 - male		1		1			
Couple 3 - female		1					
Couple 4 - male	1				1		
Couple 4 - female	1	1		1	1	1	
Couple 5 - male				1	1	1	
Couple 5 - female	1		1	1		1	1
Couple 6 - male	1			1		1	
Couple 6 - female				1			
Couple 7 - male		1	1	1	1	1	
Couple 7 - female				1		1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>

The following themes emerged from the subjects' written responses to the qualitative

evaluation:

**Love:** includes reference to intimacy, feeling accepted and loved, and belonging.

**Communication:** includes openness, expression of feelings, and conflict resolution.

**Friendship:** includes support, trust, close relationship, and understanding.

**Development and growth:** reference is made to noticeable development in the relationship and changes that are hoped for.

**Positivity for the future of the relationship:** the respondents referred to having no regrets, good decision to marry, 'the future looks good'.

**Commitment:** reference is made to permanence in the relationship; seeing the relationship as long-term; dedication to one another, and the desire to make the marriage work.

**God:** mention of having God in one's life and turning to Him.

### **5.3.2 Qualitative analysis: Comparison of themes within couples**

#### **Couple 1**

Both partners mentioned **love and friendship**. In addition, he mentioned **development and growth and commitment**, whereas she referred to **communication and positivity for the future of the relationship**. Neither mentioned **God**.

#### **Couple 2**

This couple submitted a joint response to the question. They mentioned **love, communication, development and growth, and positivity for the future of the relationship**. They did not refer to **friendship, commitment or God**.

### **Couple 3**

Both partners mentioned **communication**. In addition, he referred to **development and growth**. She did not mention any other themes. Neither partner referred to **love, friendship, positivity for the relationship**, nor to **God**.

### **Couple 4**

Both mentioned **love** and **positivity for the future of the relationship**. He did not highlight any other themes. She mentioned **communication, development and growth** and **commitment**. Neither partner referred to **friendship** nor to **God**.

### **Couple 5**

Both partners mentioned **development and growth** and **commitment**. In addition, he mentioned **positivity for the future of the relationship**. She mentioned **love, friendship** and **God**. Neither partner referred to **communication**.

### **Couple 6**

Both partners mentioned **development and growth**. In addition, he mentioned **love** and **commitment**. She did not highlight any other themes. Neither partner referred to **communication, friendship, positivity for the future of the relationship**, nor to **God**.

### **Couple 7**

Both partners mentioned **development and growth** and **commitment**. In addition, he referred to **communication, friendship** and **positivity for the future of the**

**relationship.** She did not highlight any other themes. Neither partner referred to **love** or to **God**.

### **5.3.3 Qualitative analysis: comparison of themes across couples (sample)**

From amongst the seven couples there were thirteen responses, as one couple submitted a joint response. The respondents referred to **development and growth** ten times, that is, more frequently than any of the other six categories which could mean that they were aware of the challenges they face at the beginning of their lives together. The themes of **love** and **commitment** were referred to seven times, whereas **communication** and **positivity for the future of the relationship** were each mentioned six times. **Friendship** was highlighted by the couples four times, whereas reference to **God** came up once.

### **5.4 Time series graphs**

In the researcher's opinion, time series data can best be examined when presented graphically. For this reason separate graphs were drawn for each of the seven couples. Another graph was drawn so as to compare three sets of scores: all males, all females, and the scores of the whole sample. The following steps describe the graphing procedure used in this study:

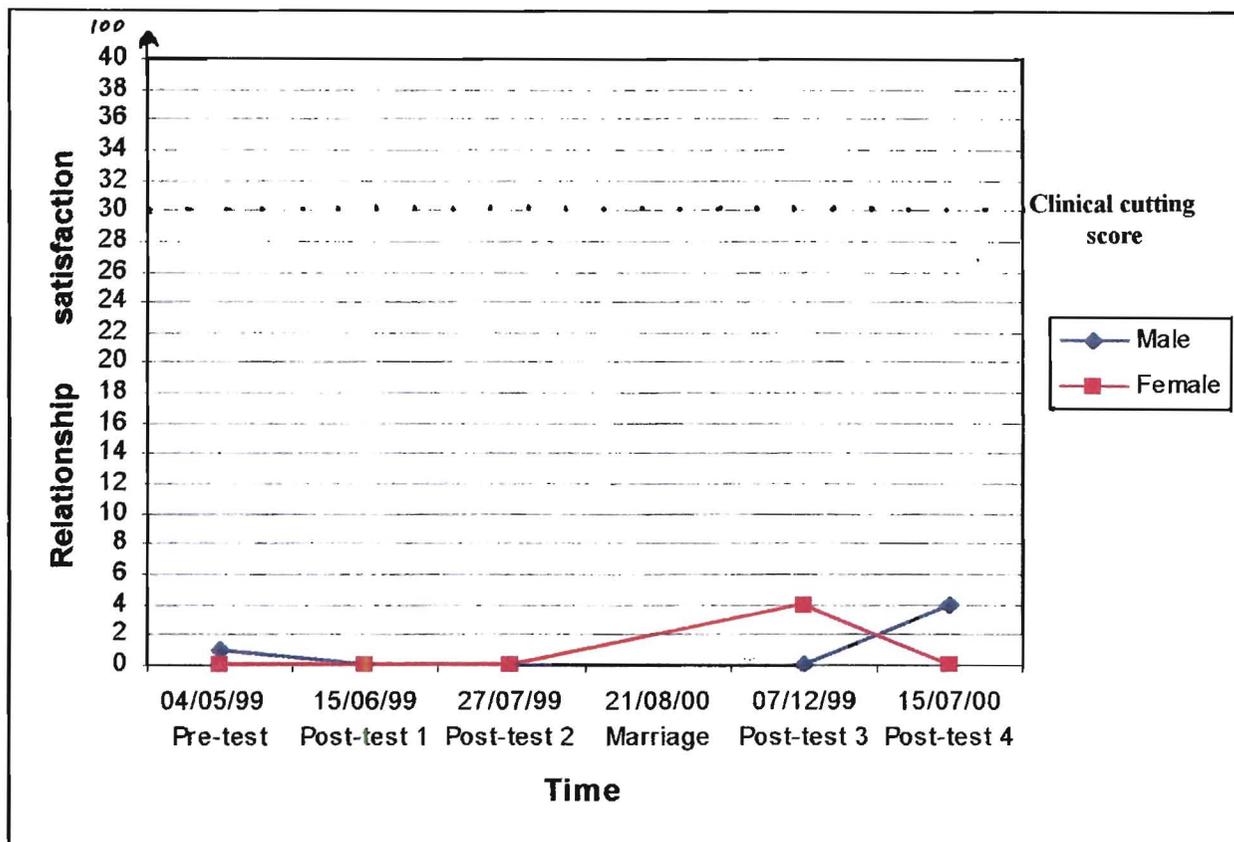
For each set of scores collected during one time interval, a summary statistic was computed. Each couple was regarded as a single unit. A graph was then drawn on which the vertical axis represented scores on the outcome measure which is relationship satisfaction, and the horizontal axis represented the various time intervals, one pre-test and four post-test measures. The time intervals at which the IRS was administered were marked at definite intervals along the horizontal axis. The beginning and end of the

programme, and each couple's wedding dates, were clearly marked on each graph. In order to interpret the results, an intervention trend-line was drawn through the five relationship satisfaction scores.

The researcher would like to make the reader aware that the lower the IRS score the better the relationship satisfaction. Scores of relationship satisfaction between 0 and 30 are not clinically significant. In other words, although scores less than 30 may reflect some dissatisfaction with the relationship, they do not necessarily signify relationship problems. The respondents in this study are clinically not known to have relationship problems.

## 5.5 Quantitative and qualitative data

### COUPLE 1



**Figure 1. Scores of relationship satisfaction for couple 1**

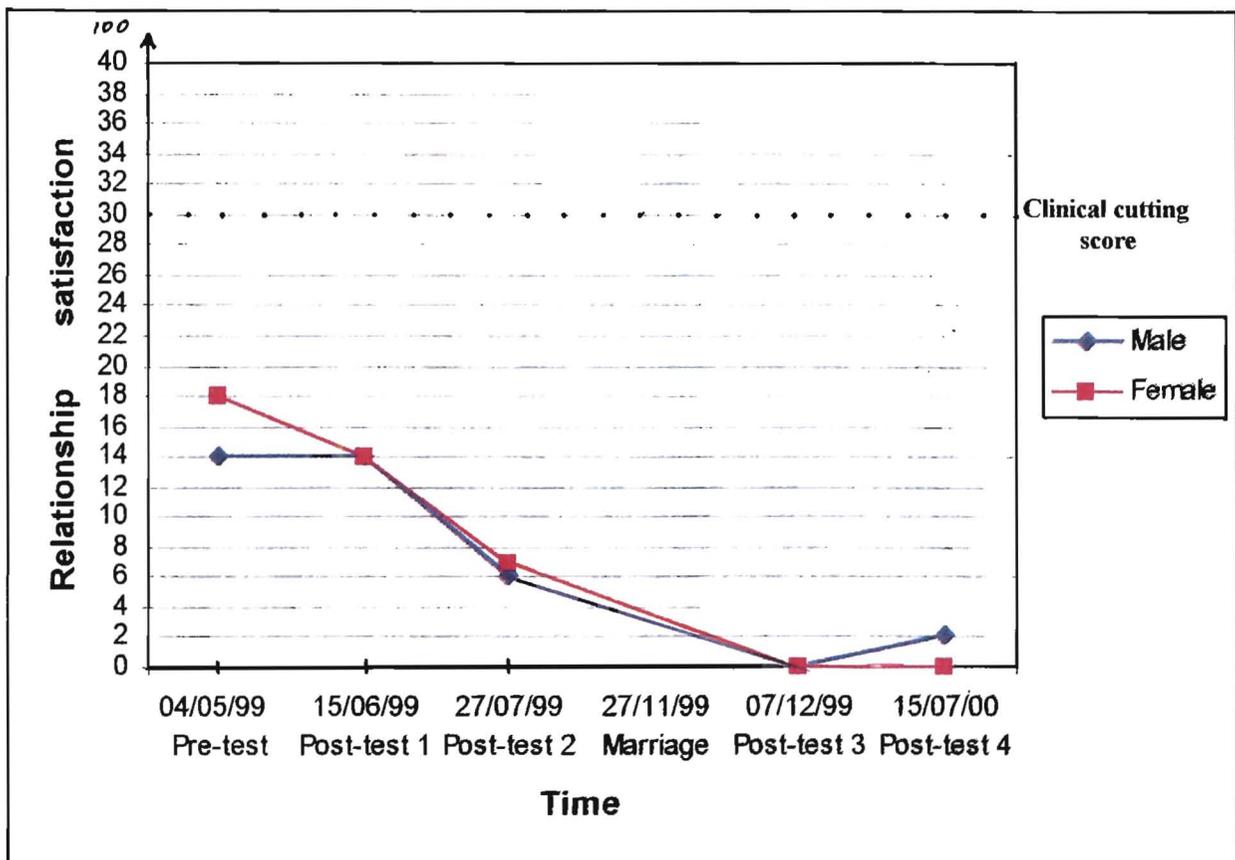
The male's pre-test to post-test 4 score increased by three points in relationship dissatisfaction, whereas the female's score increased from a pre-test of zero to four points four months after the wedding, but then decreased to zero at post-test 4, indicating that both partners experienced high sense of satisfaction with the relationship. Out of ten possible scores, couple 1 jointly had seven zero scores which means that they were both very happy with each other and their relationship.

This couple's low IRS scores may mean there are only minor relationship problems, but

it could also mean that they are, for some important reason, not willing to disclose the presence or severity of problems that cause dissatisfaction between themselves (Hudson & Glisson 1976:309). This is understandable because couples in new and insecure relationships would tend to be hesitant to reveal their true negative feelings for fear of the partner's response. In the researcher's view the couple may have been exhibiting 'demand effects', that is, they may have responded in such a way so as to make a positive impression on the researcher. This observation is based on the researcher's impression of the couple when in conversation with them when they completed the qualitative evaluation. They seemed intent on making a very good impression.

This couples' positive description of their relationship confirms the high satisfaction scores obtained from the IRS questionnaire. For example, the male wrote that he experiences the relationship as '... very loving and caring ... it is stable and a pillar of strength for me ...'. The female notes that the past few months were '... the best for me, ever ...'.

## COUPLE 2



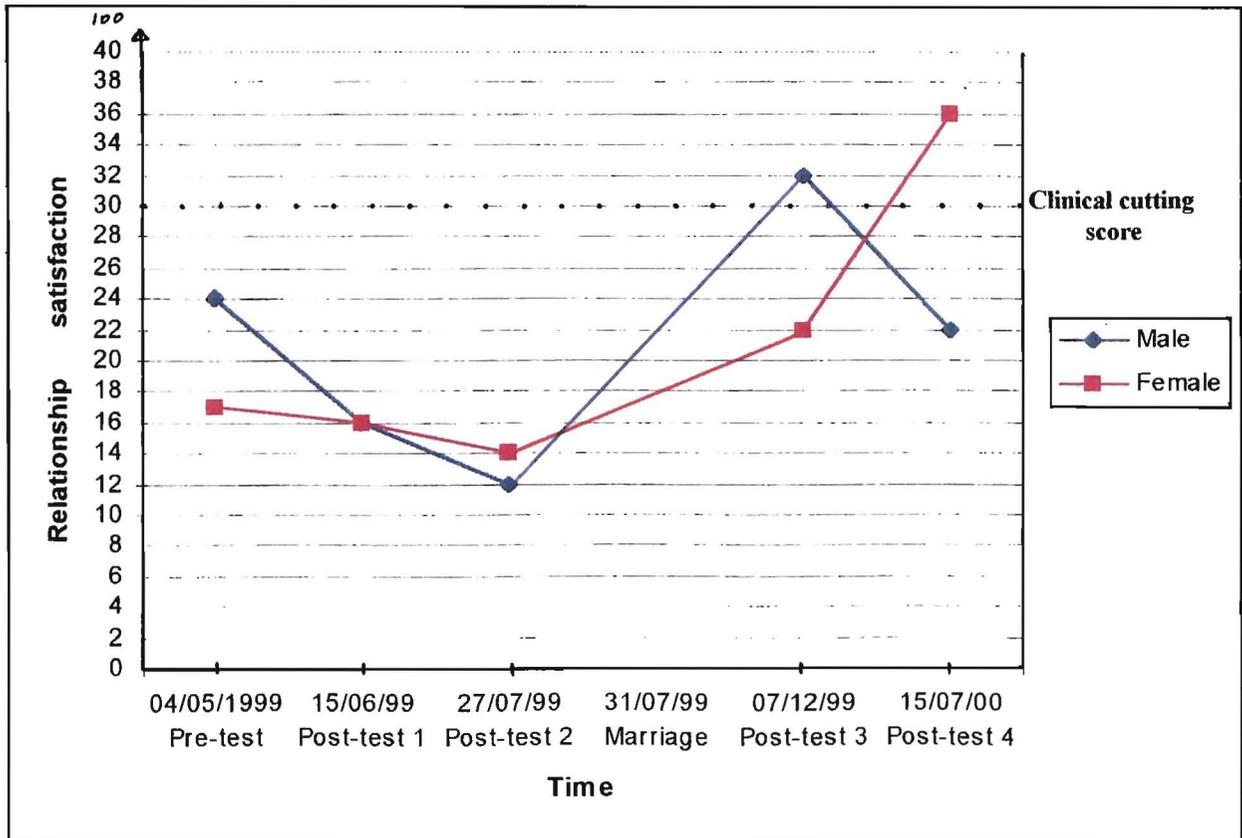
**Figure 2. Scores of relationship satisfaction for couple 2**

The male's scores of relationship satisfaction decreased from 14 points at the pre-test to 0 at post-test 3 and to 2 points at post-test 4, whereas the female's scores decreased from 18 at the pre-test to 0 at post-test 4. This indicates that both partners experienced an increase in relationship satisfaction. However eight months after the wedding the male's scores increased by 2 points, indicating a slight rise in his feelings of dissatisfaction with the relationship.

This couple's combined written response supports the outcome of the quantitative data.

They note that their relationship satisfaction has ‘... improved’, and that they have become ‘... more intimate’. They also stated that their love has ‘grown deeper’.

### COUPLE 3



**Figure 3. Scores of relationship satisfaction for couple 3**

The male and female scores point to a general increase in the degree of satisfaction with their relationship from the pre-test to post-test 2. However about four months after the wedding both partners’ scores rose to new levels of dissatisfaction which exceeded their pre-test scores. The male’s pre-test score increased from 24 to a post-test 3 score of 32, which is marginally above the clinical cutting score, possibly indicating a relationship

problem at that time. His score decreased to 22 points at the post-test 4 measure.

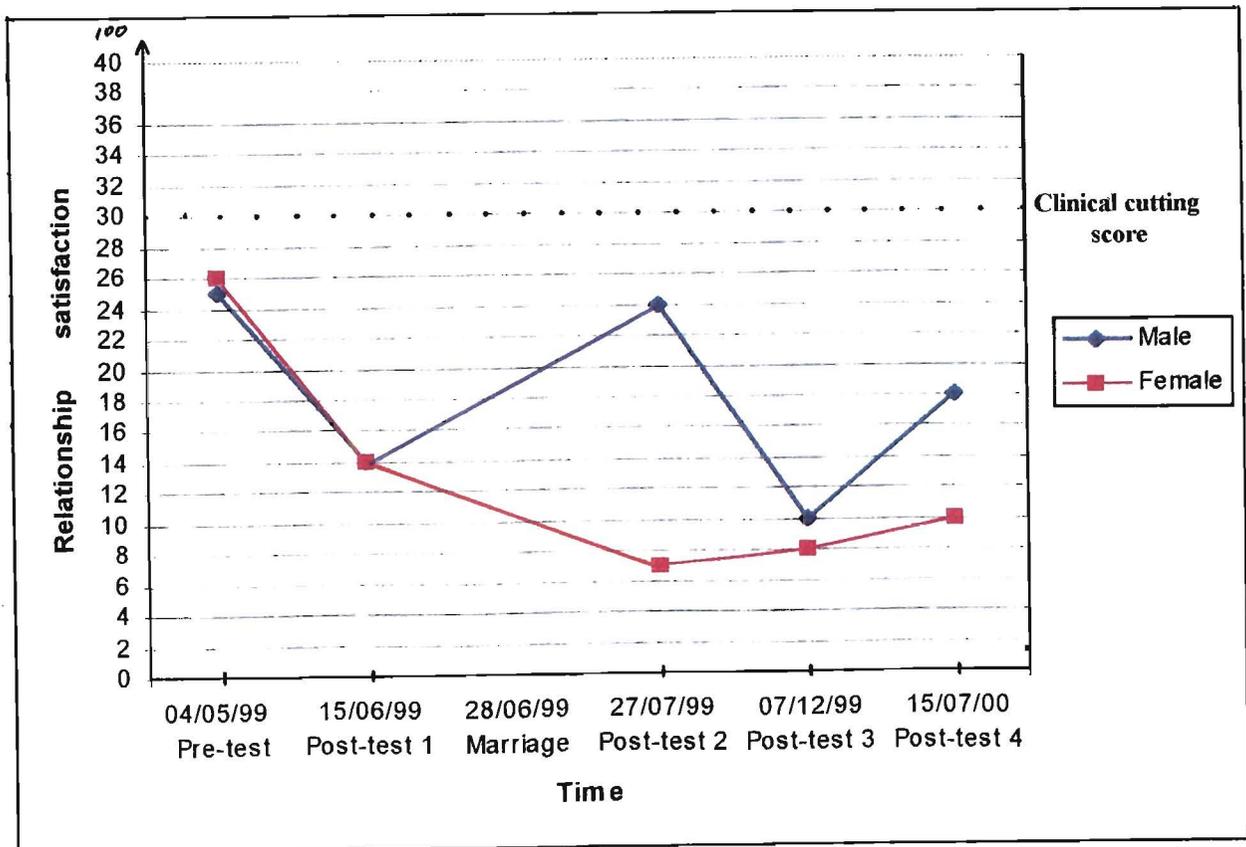
The female's scores decreased slightly from a pre-test score of 17 to a post-test 2 score of 14 points, indicating a slight increase in satisfaction with the relationship. Four months after the wedding her score increased to a high of 36 at the post-test 4 stage which is above the clinical cutting score of 30 as was the case with her husband. This indicates that the couple were experiencing more dissatisfaction in their relationship than they had previously.

In their qualitative responses both the male and female referred to the positive effect the marriage preparation programme had on their relationship. He wrote that 'Before the classes I was like all the guys who are rude and don't want to think they are wrong. Guys who don't care what the woman thinks or feels'. The woman wrote that '... the classes taught us a lot how to handle problems and how to respect each other'. The programme seems to have helped them to improve their communication and conflict-resolution skills. He wrote that he could 'now ... stay and talk to my wife. When we argued I walked out, now I sit down and talk it out'. She also confirmed this in her response. 'We can't just walk away when we have problems. We have to stay to sort things out. Talking brings us closer together'. The researcher's assumption here is that being brought 'closer together' would result in an increase in relationship satisfaction. Nevertheless the couple's scores reflect high levels of dissatisfaction which indicates that there may be stressful factors unknown to the researcher that affect their relationship.

The researcher visited the couple at a relative's flat where they rented a room. Their low

socio-economic living conditions may have had a negative impact on their relationship. In the researcher's opinion lack of adequate accommodation probably did not give the couple the privacy they needed to separate from the family of origin and establish an independent relationship.

#### COUPLE 4



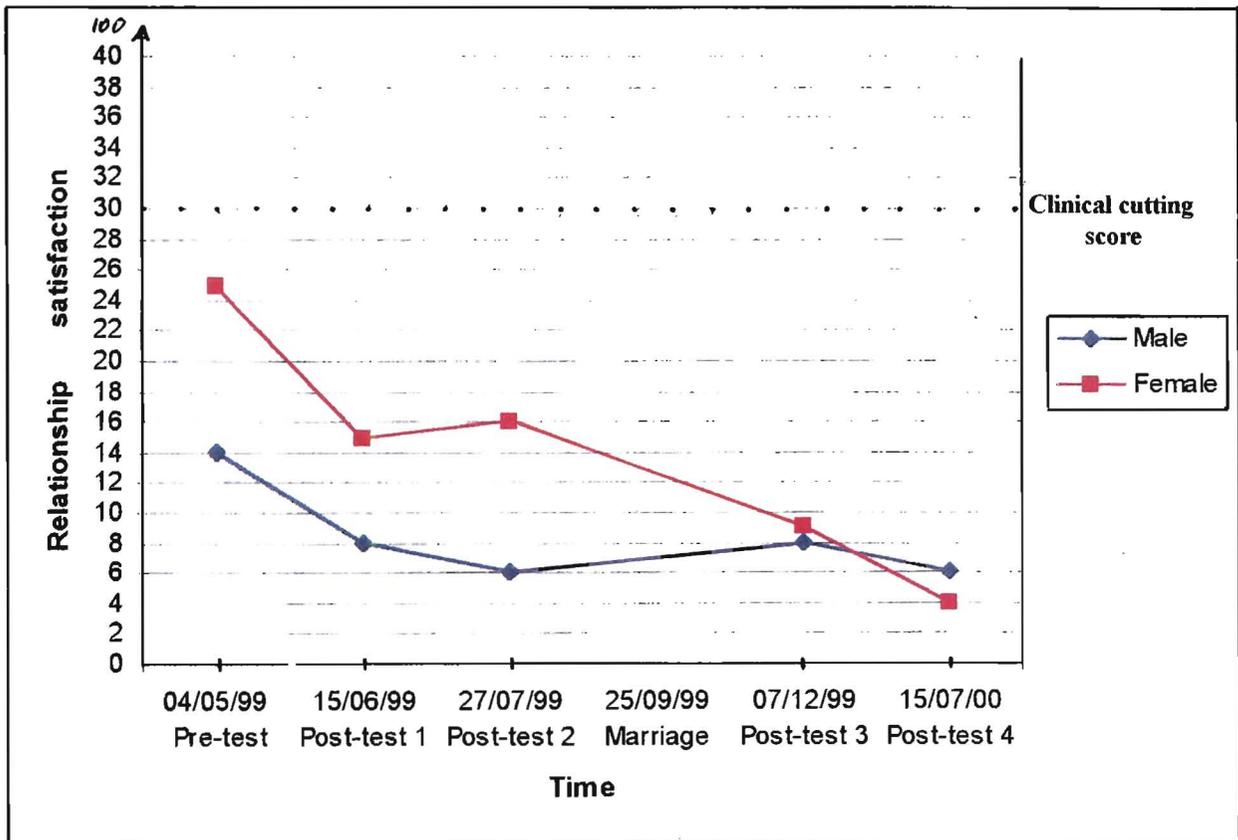
**Figure 4. Scores of relationship satisfaction for couple 4**

The increase in this couple's relationship satisfaction was almost identical for the pre-test through post-test 1. However, a month after the wedding the male's scores increased from 14 points at post-test 1 to 24 at post-test 2, indicating less satisfaction with the

relationship, whereas the female's scores continued to drop from a pre-test score of 26 to a post-test 2 score of 7, indicating more satisfaction with the relationship. The male's scores subsequently decreased by 14 points from post-test 2 to post-test 3, and then increased slightly as did that of his partner. The increase in the male's feelings of dissatisfaction at the post-test 2 measure occurred a month after the wedding, whereas his partner's score decreased to 7 points, her lowest score. The reasons for the increase in the male's feelings of dissatisfaction around the time of the wedding were not discussed at the home visit and are therefore not known to the researcher.

Part of the male's written response to the qualitative evaluation after post-test 3 was 'I have loved her for 15 years and I'm looking forward to the next 50'. The female made an indirect reference to the positive influence of the programme in her comments that '... we tend to disagree and argue, however our apologies have become easier and therefore arguments and disagreements are easier to resolve'.

## COUPLE 5

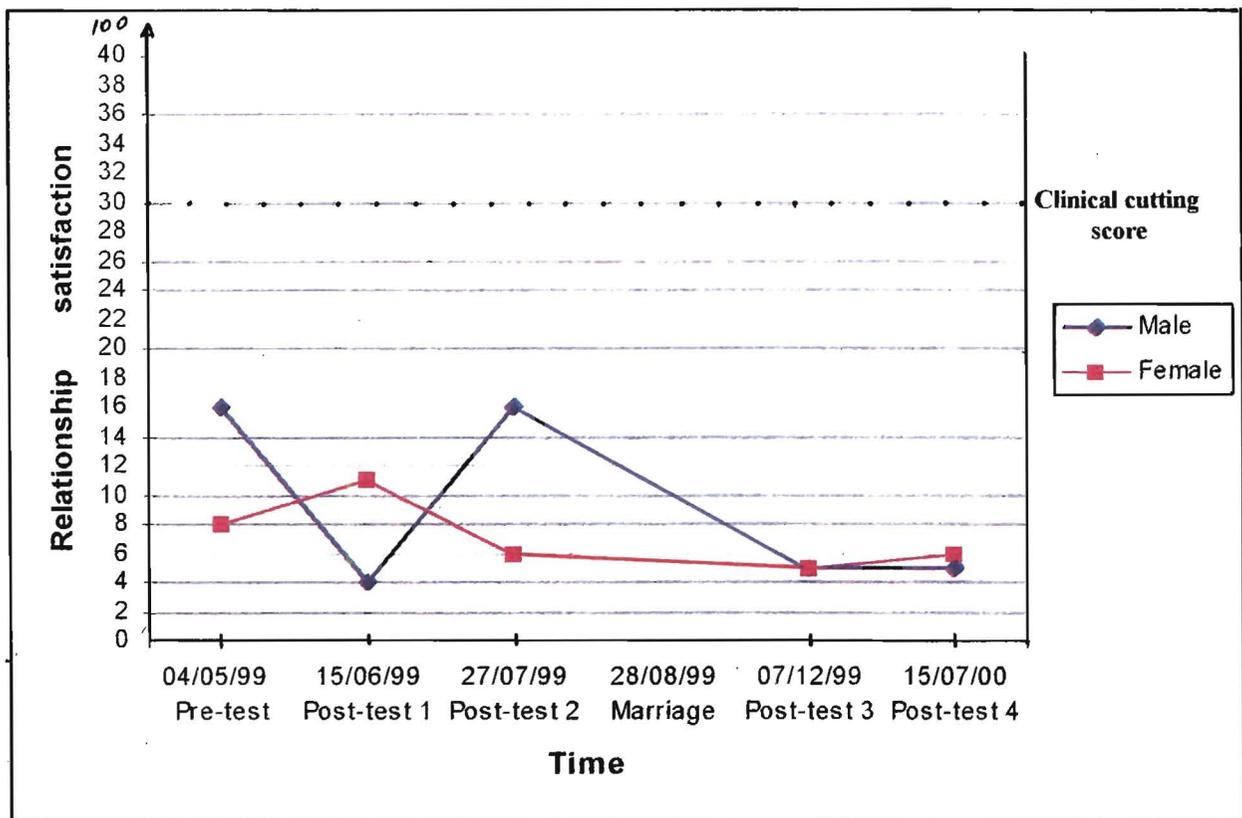


**Figure 5. Scores of relationship satisfaction for couple 5**

Couple five's scores have a different pattern to those of the other six couples in that for both partners there is a steady increase in the degree of satisfaction they experienced in their relationship over the fourteen month period. The male's highest dissatisfaction score of 14 at the pre-test decreased to 6 at the last post-test measure, whereas that of his partner decreased from a pre-test high of 25 points to 4 points at the post-test 4 measure. These scores mean that both partners became more satisfied with their relationship over time. Couple 5's scores do not support the hypothesis that relationship satisfaction begins to wane about 12 months after marriage preparation.

This couple's mutual experience of a steady increase in relationship satisfaction over the 14-month period is reflected in their written responses. He wrote that he is very confident about their life together. Amongst other things the woman noted that their relationship has become stronger and more satisfying which is supported by the quantitative data.

## COUPLE 6



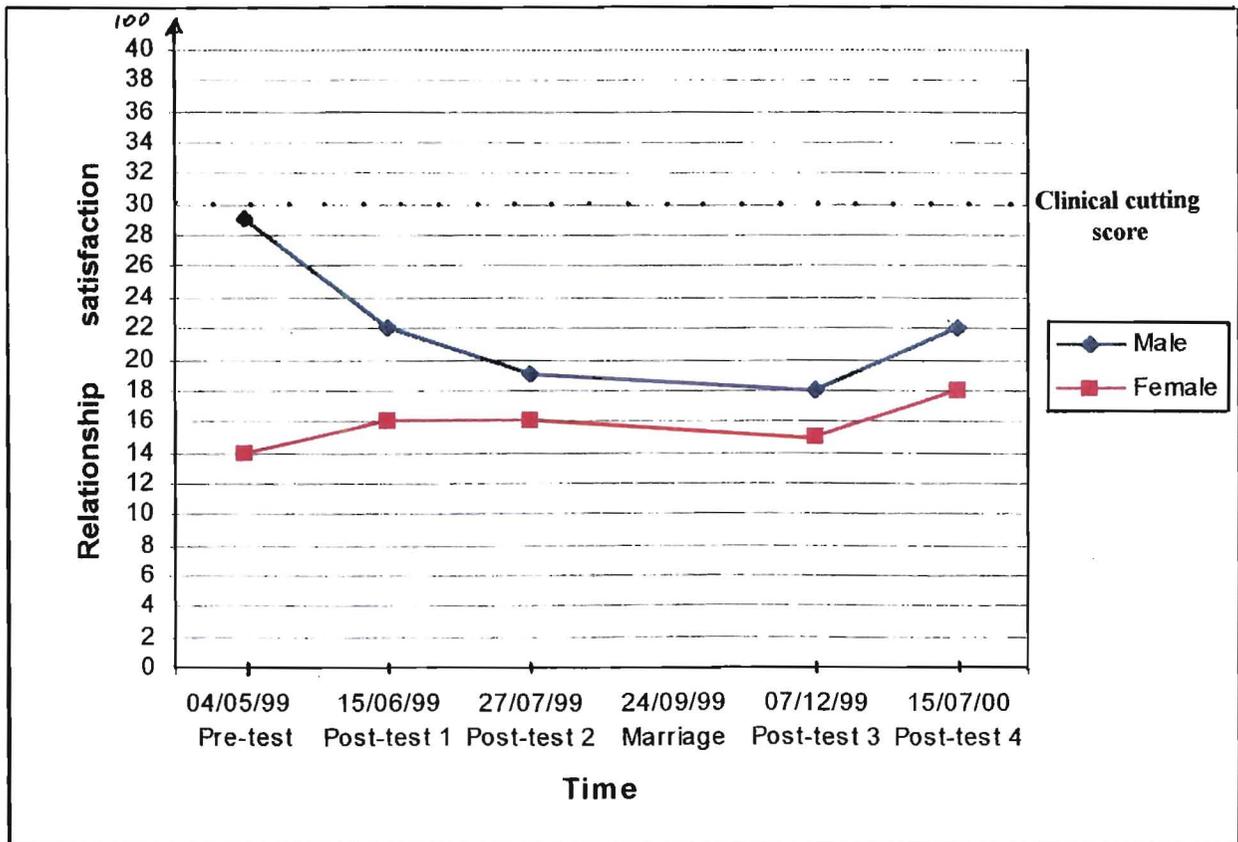
**Figure 6. Scores of relationship satisfaction for couple 6**

The decrease in the male's score from 16 points at the pre-test to 4 points at the post-test 1 measure indicates that he was more satisfied with the relationship after the programme than he was before it. His score reverted to 16 points at post-test 2 which was a month

prior to the wedding. At post-test 3 and 4 his sense of satisfaction increased to 5 points. The female's scores increased from 8 points at the pre-test to 11 points at post-test 1. She was one of two respondents who experienced more dissatisfaction with the relationship after the programme than before. The other is the female partner in couple 7. The researcher assumes that factors such as exploration of the relationship, or stresses around wedding arrangements may have been difficult experiences for her causing an increase in her feelings of dissatisfaction with the relationship. There may have been additional factors unrelated to the programme that account for increased dissatisfaction, that the couple chose not to disclose to the researcher. However, from her written response it appears that she liked the programme very much. This was followed by a increase in her feelings of satisfaction with the relationship from the post-test 1 score through post-tests 2, 3 and 4.

In their responses to the qualitative evaluation both partners referred to the Evenings for the Engaged programme. He wrote 'The marriage preparation which the Church offered us is something we have both found invaluable. 'Thanks to you and all the others who have offered us help and support during this exciting time in our lives'. The woman wrote that 'The marriage preparation course was an excellent grounding to the beginning of our lives together'.

## COUPLE 7

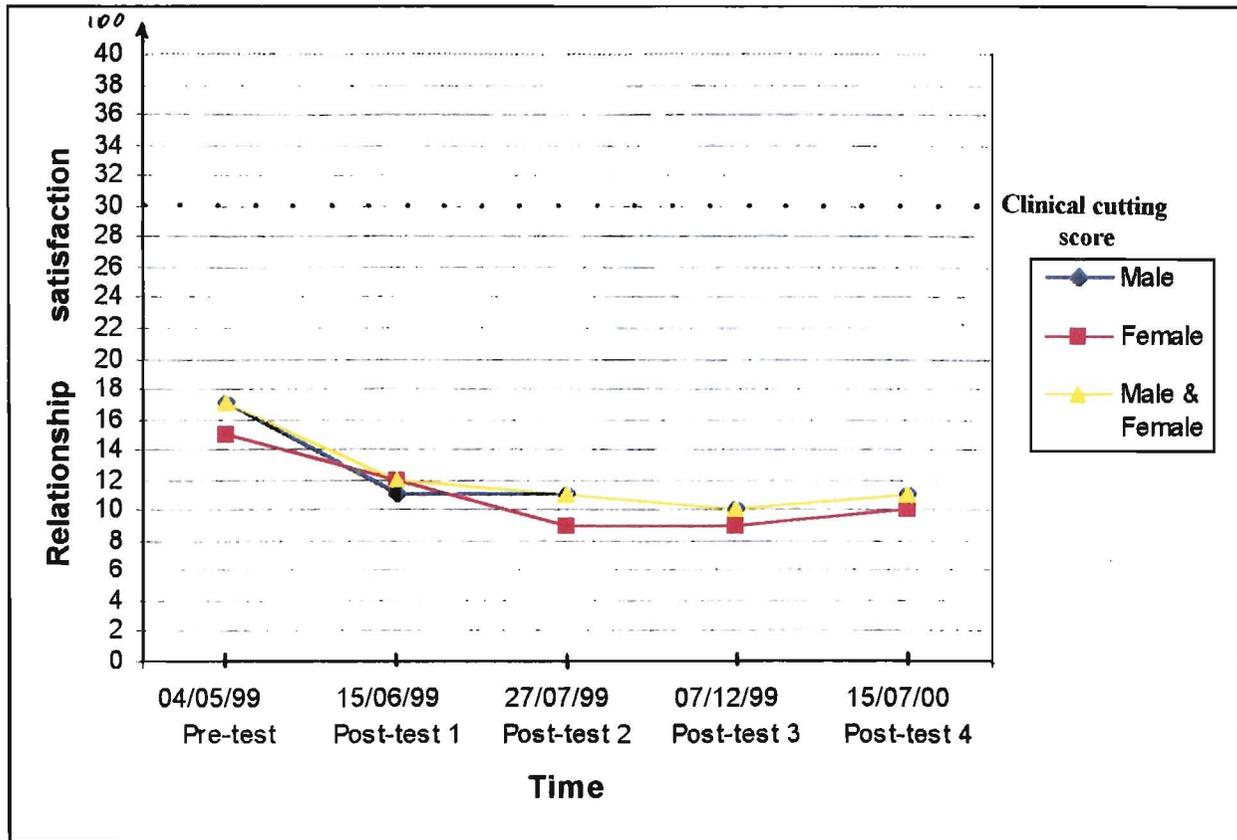


**Figure 7. Scores of relationship satisfaction for couple 7**

The male's scores decreased from a pre-test high of 29 points to a post-test 3 score of 18 which was two and-a-half months after the wedding and the birth of the couples' child. This indicates that he experienced better relationship satisfaction over time. The female's scores increased from a pre-test score of 14 and continued to increase through to a post-test 4 score of 18 points. The stresses related to pre-marital pregnancy and the birth of this couples' child shortly after the wedding may account for this steady rise in her feelings of dissatisfaction, although her husband showed more satisfaction with the relationship until the last post-test measure in which he scored 22.

In her written response to the qualitative evaluation she notes that '... marriage takes getting used to,' and 'I have become we, and I have to start thinking, speaking ... in these terms. It's scary ...'. The levels of dissatisfaction that the woman experienced may be symptomatic of problems other than the affective or relational component of the marriage, such as, adjustment to premarital pregnancy, financial strain or health problems. This general increase in relationship dissatisfaction is supported by research. Bader and Sinclair note that problems arise when couples are simultaneously faced with the adjustments to the new marriage and the transition to parenthood early in their life together (1998:82). The male partner wrote that he hopes that he and his wife can '... go forward caring and sharing with each other our joy and pain and open up emotionally to each other'.

## COMBINED SCORES



**Figure 8. Scores of relationship satisfaction: combined males' versus combined females' and all couples' scores**

Although all the scores may not be statistically significant, the three trend lines in figure 8 indicate a general increase in relationship satisfaction from the pre-test measure to post-test 3, by which time all the couples were married. The post-test 4 measure, which was taken 13 months after the respondents completed their marriage preparation, shows a slight increase in their feelings of dissatisfaction. Hence the data gives support to the hypothesis that engaged couples experience an increase in relationship satisfaction as they prepare for marriage, and that this positive experience lasts for a short time, that is, less than 12 months. This suggested trend, which is not entirely statistically significant, may be due to the small sample size and other factors unknown to the researcher.

The researcher cannot help wondering what these 7 couples' scores might be at post-test 5 in 12 months time!

## **5.6 Difficulties encountered in the study**

### **5.6.1 Client factors**

The exclusion of couples from the sample on the basis of variables such as cohabitation, premarital pregnancy, a previous marriage or children brought into the new marriage, is a difficult ethical issue.

The researcher could not introduce these matters because such action was regarded as judgemental and condemning. In the researcher's opinion, the extent to which the subjects, affected by these factors, benefitted from the programme may not have been significantly lower than that of the other subjects. On the contrary, it is possible that the increase in relationship satisfaction experienced by these couples may have been greater than that of the other couples not affected by these factors. The stresses experienced by these couples may have had the effect of raising their awareness, whereas the other couples may have been blinded by their 'in-love-ness'.

### **5.6.2 Difficulty in selecting a research design**

The researcher experienced significant problems regarding the research design early in the project. Initially, a single-subject repeated measures (time series) design was thought to be the best method to collect and analyse the quantitative data.

From the beginning of the project the researcher anticipated that it would be difficult to

analyse and interpret the data because it was not possible to follow the procedure for single-subject designs. This occurred because most of the research subjects registered for the programme sporadically during the fortnight prior to its commencement. For this reason the researcher did not have enough time to administer the questionnaire three times prior to the commencement of the programme as had been planned. A minimum of three data recording sessions before the programme started was regarded as necessary to indicate a durable and stable trend. The researcher realised that a stable baseline trend would not have been established, and the value of the study would have been significantly diminished. The researcher's inability to record sufficient data to establish a stable baseline trend meant that the comparison between intervention and baseline trends probably would not have shown discernable differences, and consequently no conclusions could have been drawn. For these reasons the researcher selected a comparison group post-test-only design. However, this design was also changed because the researcher decided to extend the duration of the original project to include four post-test measures making it possible to return to the initial idea of a one-group pre-test-post-test design.

## **5.7 Strengths of the research**

### **5.7.1 Pre-standardised questionnaire**

Standardisation refers to the extent to which researchers use the same measures when studying the same concepts (Grinnell 1981:248)<sup>3</sup>. This standardisation in measurement was the researcher's rationale for using an already existing measure. Specifically, the

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<sup>3</sup> The second and third editions of Grinnell's book have been cited because there are sections in the second edition that have been excluded from the later edition.

researcher utilised the pre-standardised IRS instrument to measure relationship satisfaction. It was standardised for use in the United States society, but it has not been specifically standardized for South African circumstances. However, for the purposes of this research, Cape Town is regarded to have enough Western characteristics to be considered an industrialised, Western society.

### **5.7.2 Validation of the IRS**

The IRS has documented levels of validity and reliability (Hudson & Glisson 1976:309; Hudson & Faul 1997:5), however it has not been re-validated for South African conditions. In 1976 it was validated in the United States of America for Western-oriented society. As this research took place in Cape Town, an urban and industrialised area, the researcher is of the opinion that the IRS is valid for this specific project. The research subjects live a distinctly Western lifestyle. However, the IRS cannot be said to be generally valid for conditions throughout South African society.

### **5.7.3 Commonality**

A further positive feature of this research is that there were a number of commonalities amongst the respondents. The average age range was from 23 to 35 years; the couples lived in Cape Town and its suburbs; they were middle-class working people; they lived in a distinctly Western-oriented society and followed a Western lifestyle; they were conversant in English, and they were all Christians who intended to marry in the Catholic Church.

#### **5.7.4 Combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches**

The advantage in the combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies is that the subject being researched, changes in relationship satisfaction, is examined from an objective and statistical point of view as well as from the personal and subjective opinions of the couples themselves. The combination of these two approaches gives a rich and varied perspective on the couples' experiences of their relationships. Because the IRS was not standardised, an additional source of information was regarded to be necessary and of value. Although there was limited data contained in the subjects' responses to the qualitative evaluation, it was still felt that it added important information and complemented the quantitative data.

#### **5.7.5 Loyal sample**

A further strength of this study lies in the high response rate of the subjects. The respondents consistently responded to each of the five questionnaires and filled in the questionnaires fully, that is, there were no item omissions (Hudson & Faul 1997:8). However, in the qualitative evaluation, couple 5 chose to compile a combined response to the question instead of responding individually. The high response-rate was also made possible by the researcher's insistence in having the questionnaires promptly returned. When this was not done within a few days the researcher collected them personally.

#### **5.7.6 Number of post-test measures**

The four follow-up post-test measures give a sense of change over time in the data. This longitudinal aspect adds strength to the data.

## **5.8 Weaknesses of the research**

### **5.8.1 Sampling method and sample size**

The non-probability sampling procedure used in this study is known to be the least desirable way of gathering samples which are representative of the population (Grinnell 1981:92). A further weakness of this study lies in the small clinical sample, as most of the respondents were non-clinical subjects. The respondents were engaged couples preparing for marriage, not couples seeking couple therapy. Therefore some uncertainty regarding the general application of the findings arises.

### **5.8.2 Subject-related distortions**

The questionnaire was open to the biases common to self-report measures, such as subject-related distortions. The respondents may have tried to give the impression that the level of their relationship satisfaction was high. Couple 1, for example, seem to have fallen prey to 'demand effects'.

### **5.8.3 No controls**

One of the difficulties of a repeated measures design, which has no control group, is that it is not possible to know what results may have occurred without the intervention. Because this study has a limited baseline measure, the initial score recorded before the subjects were exposed to the programme (pre-test measure) cannot be used to project the results expected had the subjects not been exposed to the programme.

Due to the nature of this research project it was neither possible for the researcher to control nor to diminish the effect of non-intervention factors on the target behaviour,

relationship satisfaction. Grinnell (1984:398) points out that 'failure to control for stability of the environment greatly reduces the strength of conclusions that can be drawn from the study'. In this study it cannot be assumed that the environments in which the respondents lived over the 14 months during which they participated in this project remained unchanged, except for the intervention (marriage preparation programme).

#### **5.8.4 The limitations of self-report**

Self-report measurement devices have a number of inherent weaknesses that cannot be ignored. The acceptance of participants' self-reports as valid indicators of relationship satisfaction made it difficult to ascertain with any degree of certainty the real effect of the programme. Was there some other change at or about the same time as the programme that could have caused the changes in relationship quality? There may be other causes that account for the changes. The extent of their contribution to the outcomes needs to be taken into consideration, and the effect of the factors mentioned above needs to be kept in mind. Could it be that the results reflect some cyclical pattern affecting the sample, rather than the impact of the programme? The results seem to be too unstable to permit conclusions to be drawn.

The research may have been strengthened had a qualitative evaluation regarding relationship satisfaction been posed at the pre-test phase as well as at post-test 3 as a complementation to the quantitative data. The question that the respondents answered at the post-test 3 stage could also have included a request for a description of the effect of the programme on their relationships.

### **5.8.5 Limited internal validity**

This one-group pre-post-test design has a lesser degree of internal validity than experimental designs. The reason for this is that quantitative-descriptive studies have a lesser degree of control over potentially relevant variables (Tripodi 1969:36).

### **5.9 Critique of psychometric testing**

Psychometric tests are well refined forms of researcher-administered questionnaires that have several advantages over questionnaires because they are validated, standardized, and checked for reliability (Mitchell & Jolley 1988:457). Although strong arguments can be advanced in favour of the use of psychometric testing, this approach to data gathering has a number of inherent limitations that are summarized by Wohl (1969:17). It has a restricted view of where data is to be found and of what it consists; it has a narrow conception of a test; it eliminates sources of information about the researcher; its statistical conception of personality is less useful in interpreting and applying test results than some non-statistical methods, and it pays insufficient attention to cultural factors, language, the researcher and the testing interaction.

### **5.10 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the results of the quantitative data in several tables and time series graphs, and the analysis of qualitative data was analysed in terms of individual responses and comparisons of themes within and across couples. Several strengths and weaknesses of the research were outlined.

The researcher's hypothesis that relationship satisfaction increases when couples prepare

for marriage is supported both by the quantitative data and the respondents' descriptions of their relationships in the qualitative data. The trend line in figure 8 indicates that these gains are short-lived. One reason for this decrease in relationship satisfaction following the programme is that it is difficult to maintain skill-levels achieved during the emotional 'high' immediately following an experiential programme such as the Evenings for the Engaged. Nevertheless, the application of communication and conflict-resolution skills to current relationship issues in an ongoing relationship is the essential first step in preventing a decrease in couples' experiences of satisfaction with their partners and relationships.

In spite of the weaknesses of this study and although the data obtained has limitations, the researcher is of the opinion that it is strong enough to support the recommendations that are made in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **Summary of findings, recommendations and topics for future research**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

This research project is significant from several points of view. It marks the first attempt to evaluate the Catholic Church's marriage preparation programmes in Cape Town, albeit in a limited way. The study highlights the importance of longitudinal research and, perhaps more significantly, the need for additional longitudinal investigations of the changes that take place in couples' relationships over time.

#### **6.2 Findings**

This study shows firstly, that couples in this sample experienced an increase in relationship satisfaction when they prepared for marriage and they maintained functional relationships for about twelve months after having completed their premarital preparation. However, at the last post-test measure the samples' scores indicate a trend towards less relationship satisfaction. This finding supports the hypotheses that the initial increases in relationship satisfaction, experienced by the couples when they prepared for marriage, are short-lived. This finding is supported by Bader and Sinclair (1983:82) and the Creighton University study (1995:19) that found that marriage preparation is a valuable experience early in the marriage and that its usefulness diminishes with time.

Senediak (1990:26) also speaks of the limited value of marriage preparation, whereas Mace (1992:112) notes that marriage preparation has very little value if it is not followed up with marriage enrichment programmes in the first year of marriage. Mace refers to British research on divorced couples, one third of whom reported having serious relationship problems before they celebrated their first wedding anniversary. The view that marital problems arise early on is supported in research by Arond and Pauker (1987:311), Quinn and Odell (1998:114)), and by Olsen and Fowers (1986:403).

Research has consistently demonstrated that the problems couples encounter during engagement are carried over into marriage (Kelly, Huston & Cate 1985:167). In addition, they develop new problems as they adjust to each other and to the experiences of married life. Therefore, this study shows that unless newly married couples learn ways of effectively dealing with their current problems, they will continue to develop more problems in their marriage and may eventually feel overwhelmed and unable to cope. In the researcher's view, the Evenings for the Engaged programme has the potential to help couples to learn important relationship skills which may give them the resources and tools they will need now and will require for later stages of their lives together.

At post-test 4 the trend-line shows less relationship satisfaction which indicates that, on the whole, the sample were beginning to experience deeper feelings of discontent with their relationships. In spite of this reality which emanated from the quantitative data, all the couples described their relationships in positive terms. Bader and Sinclair (1998:78) point out that in the pre-wedding stage and possibly for a few months after the wedding some couples may hold on to their dream of an ideal spouse and relationship. They avoid

facing their own limitations and those of their partner. They seemed unable to assess their relationships in objective terms. The saying 'love is blind' is indeed applicable here. They have a naive idea of love - love without doubt and effort. On the whole they have unrealistic expectations about their relationships and seem to think that whatever disagreements and stresses they have will go away after the wedding. As a result, they do not sufficiently appreciate the value of spending time on relationship issues. One or both partners are afraid to challenge or discuss issues because this might threaten the partner and possibly become serious enough to destabilize the relationship. This may have been the case with couple 1 - it is easier to let sleeping dogs lie!

It is therefore the researcher's view that the period of a few months before the wedding is not the most teachable moment. Once couples have settled down to the realities of marriage they may be more open to developing relationship life-skills. The researcher is not suggesting that marriage preparation before the wedding should be replaced by post-wedding preparation for the marriage. On the contrary, pre-wedding sessions are crucial in laying the foundation for a long-term relationship and may even motivate and encourage couples to seek support and follow-up sessions sometime after the wedding. In other words, there are various points in time, not merely one, at which marriages can benefit from preventive services such as marriage preparation.

These findings need to be considered in the light of several limitations. Firstly, the researcher is uncertain whether the changes in relationship satisfaction were entirely due to the programme or would have occurred anyway as the couples happily involved themselves in the pre-wedding arrangements and anticipated a life together with the

partner of their dreams with joy. There may have been other variables, such as, contextual factors, for example, the encouraging support of family and friends.

Secondly, the reasons for the decrease in the samples' relationship satisfaction about 12 months after marriage preparation is not clear from this study. The data does however show a steady decline in relationship satisfaction. Further research is needed to determine whether the results reported here may be replicated with different samples. Unfortunately, the relatively small sample size limits the generalizability of the present findings, and the results should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

Thirdly, the sample was biased toward couples who volunteered themselves as research subjects. This indicates that they may be compliant persons or couples who were confident enough in their relationships to want to make a good impression on the researcher.

These findings have implications both for conceptualizations of marriage preparation and for marriage enrichment programmes that are designed to enhance marital functioning.

### **6.3 Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made against the background of a specific understanding of 'marriage preparation'. Rather than being an isolated event that occurs shortly before the wedding, every new stage of development in the life cycle of a couple and family needs to be anticipated and prepared for. This reality points to the need for marriage enrichment programmes throughout the various developmental stages of

marriage. The Church needs to make these preventive services available and to be proactive in supporting its members throughout the marriage and family life cycles. This needs to be in place before a decline in the rate at which marriages and families disintegrate becomes evident.

The strong indication that an increase in relationship satisfaction is short-lived, suggests that marriage preparation is merely the starting point and initial phase in a series of stages. This finding makes an important contribution to the development of a comprehensive preventive approach to marriage and family life. The research reported here is a first step in that direction.

The research project has drawn attention to the need for ongoing investigation into the pastoral care of marriage and family life in the Catholic Church in Cape Town. In an attempt to begin this process the researcher wishes to make the following recommendations:

Firstly, one of the main goals of marriage preparation is to provide couples with the opportunity to examine themselves, their partner, and their relationship in order to re-evaluate and confirm that this is the person they want to marry. This is not intended to be a 'waiting period' but rather one of reflection and personal preparation. For this to happen pre-marital preparation needs to take place **before** couples make a firm commitment to marriage, that is, when they are seriously considering marriage. Intense preoccupation with the wedding arrangements, reception and honeymoon can make it difficult for a couple to benefit fully from the premarital programme. Thus it is highly

desirable for couples to complete their marriage preparation at least three months prior to the wedding (Duncan 1998:3). In the event that the preparation reveals problems or obstacles to the marriage, this time frame gives the couples time to address their differences or difficulties.

Secondly, this study has shown that marriage preparation serves a useful purpose for couples preparing for a life-time commitment, hence it should continue to receive the support and the resources of the Church, which is concerned with enhancing and strengthening marital and family relationships. However in the light of literature and the findings of this study that confirms that the value of marriage preparation declines significantly over time, the researcher proposes that the greater emphasis should be on work with couples who have been married for less than 12 months because this is the teachable moment, without losing sight of the needs of couples at the later stages of development.

Thirdly, how couples live their first year of marriage can mean the difference between a marriage that flourishes or falters. The process of becoming a couple is a slowly evolving one that takes time, effort and dedication. To help newly married couples maintain their relationship through the critical first year, marriage enrichment opportunities are recommended. These can take various forms. Monthly or bi-monthly groups can guide them through the initial adjustments. These may be discussion or encounter groups in which they share their experiences with others and get their support, help and encouragement. These sessions could concentrate on issues such as: the transition from being single to being married; separation from family of origin in terms

of finding the right distance and closeness; negotiating differences in personality, lifestyle and values; establishing decision-making patterns; communication and conflict-resolution; negotiating roles and tasks; methods of money management; balancing career and relationship needs; intimacy in terms of nurturing a mutually satisfying emotional and sexual relationship; developing a couple spirituality based on the sacramental relationship, and reviewing friendships with individuals and couples. Discussion and sharing with like-minded couples on these topics may create a firm foundation for a lasting relationship that both partners would want to nurture.

Fourthly, support structures such as parish-based marriage enrichment groups for couples at every further stage of marriage are also recommended. Couples need to prepare themselves for the birth of their first child and the transition to parenthood, and for the time when they are middle-aged parents with adolescent children and aging parents. Retirement and old age are inescapable realities that also need to be anticipated.

Fifthly, within the structures of the Church, inter-diocesan cooperation is also recommended. Each diocese under the auspices of the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC) should have a Family Life Office to attend to the pastoral needs of the families in its area, and to promote the values of Catholic marriage and family life. One of these offices could coordinate family life initiatives, such as marriage preparation and marriage enrichment, on behalf of the SACBC.

Sixthly, a further recommendation the researcher wishes to make is that in order to impact on society and therefore effect a more favourable climate for marriage

preparation and enrichment, the Church needs to move beyond its own sphere of influence. Networking with persons and groups that have similar interests such as the spiritual Movements within the Church, other denominations and religious organisations, various professional associations, the Family and Marriage Society of South Africa (FAMSA), the Family Mediators' Association of the Cape (FAMAC), the Independent Mediation Service of South Africa (IMSSA), and other professional and community-minded organisations.

#### **6.4 Topics for future research**

To increase confidence in the results of this study, subsequent research should consider more broadly representative samples. As discussed above, the researcher cannot be sure that the perceived increases in relationship satisfaction are *only* due to the influence of the Evenings for the Engaged programme.

The relative rise in relationship dissatisfaction of the whole sample 12 months after their marriage preparation suggests that the direction of future research is to discover why the effectiveness of marriage preparation declines over time. Is it simply that memory fades over time? Is it that the benefits derived from marriage preparation erode with time? Is it that marriage preparation equips couples for the developmental tasks they face early in marriage but not for the tasks they face later? If the latter is the case, and the researcher hypothesises that it is, at least in part, it implies the need for follow-up programmes throughout the various developmental stages of marriage. The restricted shelf-life of marriage preparation must be acknowledged by the Church, and additional intense and proactive support should be provided to couples for at least the first eight

years of marriage, and thereafter at strategic stages of the marriage and family life cycles, such as when middle-aged and menopausal parents are faced with severe challenges from their adolescent children; when young adult children leave home, and when the couple face retirement.

A follow-up of this research is envisaged. The seven research couples would be invited to participate in a marriage enrichment programme at twelve monthly intervals and the IRS would be administered to measure their relationship satisfaction before and after these programmes. The researcher would expect relationship satisfaction to increase as a result of enrichment programmes.

Another area that needs to be researched is why the perceived value of marriage preparation declines over time.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

The findings of the present study are of special significance. The results of this study suggest that the Evenings for the Engaged programme may have made a contribution to the increase in relationship satisfaction experienced by the respondents, albeit in the short-term.

Will better marriage preparation slow down the divorce rate? The researcher does not think so! If there is to be a real impact on the divorce rate, marriage preparation must not be an isolated event nor must it be seen as an end in itself. What is needed is a total programme of remote, proximate and immediate preparation as well as follow-up

throughout the marriage and family life cycles, such as that recommended above. To have any impact at all this needs to be part of a coordinated and comprehensive pastoral plan for marriage and family life that has the full support of the Church and its members.

The more the implications of the ministry to the engaged are explored, the more the horizon widens - a horizon that points to an urgent need for support systems for couples and their families throughout their lives. The researcher gratefully acknowledges that the Catholic Church in Cape Town has made resources and personnel available to attend to the pastoral needs of its members. However, there is a pressing need that these scarce resources be utilized in ever more helpful ways, echoing the challenge issued by John Paul II 'The Church must promote better and more intensive programmes of marriage preparation in order to eliminate as far as possible the difficulties married couples find themselves in, and even more in order to favour positively the establishing and maturing of successful marriages' (1981:121).

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Index of Relationship Satisfaction (IRS)**

# INDEX OF RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION (IRS)

This questionnaire is designed to measure the degree of satisfaction you have with your present relationship. It is not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. Answer each item as carefully and as accurately as you can by placing a number beside each one as follows:

Hierdie vraelys is ontwerp om die mate van tevredenheid wat u tans in u verhouding ervaar, te meet. Dit is nie 'n toets nie, dus is daar nie regte of verkeerde antwoorde nie. Beantwoord asseblief elke item so noukeurig en akkuraat moontlik deur een van die volgende nommers langs elkeen te skryf:



My partner is affectionate enough.	1	My maat is liefdevol genoeg.
My partner treats me badly.	2	My maat behandel my sleg.
My partner really cares for me.	3	My maat gee regtig vir my om.
I feel that I would not choose the same partner if I had to do it over again.	4	Ek voel ek sou nie weer dieselfde lewensmaat gekies het as ek weer die kans sou kry nie.
I feel that I can trust my partner.	5	Ek voel ek kan my maat vertrou.
I feel that our relationship is breaking up.	6	Ek voel ons verhouding verbrokkel.
My partner really doesn't understand me.	7	My maat verstaan my regtig nie.
I feel that our relationship is a good one.	8	Ek voel ons het 'n goeie verhouding.
Ours is a very happy relationship.	9	Ons verhouding is baie gelukkig.
Our life together is dull.	10	Ons lewe saam is oninteressant.
We have a lot of fun together.	11	Ons het baie pret saam.
My partner does not confide in me.	12	My maat neem my nie in sy/haar vertroue nie.
Ours is a very close relationship.	13	Ons verhouding is baie intiem.
I feel that I cannot rely on my partner.	14	Ek voel ek kan nie op my maat staat maak nie.
I feel that we do not have enough interests in common.	15	Ek voel dat ons nie genoeg belangstellings deel nie.
We manage arguments and disagreements very well.	16	Ons hanteer argumente en verskille baie goed.
We do a good job of managing our finances.	17	Ons bestuur ons finansies baie goed.
I feel that I should not marry my partner.	18	Ek voel ek behoort nie met hom/haar te trou nie.
My partner and I get along very well together.	19	My lewensmaat en ek kom baie goed oor die weg.
Our relationship is very stable.	20	Ons verhouding is baie stabiel.
My partner is a real comfort to me.	21	My maat is 'n groot troos vir my.
I feel that I no longer care for my partner.	22	Ek voel ek gee nie meer om vir my maat nie.
I feel that the future looks bright for our relationship.	23	Ek voel ons verhouding het 'n rooskleurige toekoms.
I feel that our relationship is empty.	24	Ek voel ons verhouding is leeg.
I feel there is no excitement in our relationship.	25	Ek voel daar is geen opwinding in ons verhouding nie.

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## **Appendix 2**

### **Qualitative evaluation**

