

Can Couples Assessment and Feedback Improve Relationships? Assessment as a Brief Relationship Enrichment Procedure

Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Michael E. McCullough, Joianne L. Shortz, Erica J. Mindes,
Steven J. Sandage, and Judy M. Chartrand
Virginia Commonwealth University

Many counseling psychologists provide marital assistance to couples who have relationship problems and those who seek to enrich their relationships. The authors investigated the effects of individualized relationship assessment and feedback in relation to merely completing written questionnaires about the relationships on couples' satisfaction and commitment. Student couples ($N = 48$; 26 married, 15 cohabiting, 7 engaged) participated either in (a) 3 sessions of assessment feedback ($n = 28$) or (b) written assessment only ($n = 20$). Assessment-feedback couples improved more over time than did written-assessment-only couples. The authors concluded that assessment and feedback produce small positive changes in already well-functioning relationships. Those changes may account for a substantial proportion of the changes produced by relationship enrichment programs.

Many couples seek assistance with their relationships from counseling psychologists (see Gelso & Fretz, 1992, for a review). In one survey of counseling psychologists, over 50% conducted marital or family therapy, and more than three fourths of graduate students in counseling psychology wanted to counsel couples and families when they graduated (Fitzgerald & Osipow, 1988). Directors of training in counseling psychology view couples and family work as an important part of a counseling psychologist's professional identity (Schneider, Watkins, & Gelso, 1988). Couples counseling is generally more in line with counseling psychology than is family therapy; in one study, almost two thirds of counseling psychologists reported working with couples, but fewer than half reported working with families (Watkins, Lopez, Campbell, & Himmell, 1986).

Whether couples are troubled and need help or want enrichment to prevent problems or promote more positive relations, counseling psychologists must try to provide interventions that are both effective and cost-effective. This is especially important in the days of increasing managed mental health care (Lipchik, 1994; Wylie, 1994). Brief interventions are increasingly consistent with psychotherapy practice (Koss & Shiang, 1994; Lipchik, 1994; Wylie, 1990, 1994). In psychotherapy in general, most clients expect short treatments (Beutler, Machado, & Neufeldt, 1994; Garfield, 1994). Practitioners are being moved by societal pressures toward briefer therapies (Austed & Hoyt, 1992).

In any therapy, regardless of how brief or prolonged, time will inevitably be spent in (formal or informal) assessment.

This is especially true of brief, solution-focused therapies being proposed and practiced today (e.g., deShazer, 1985; deShazer et al., 1986; Weiner-Davis, deShazer, & Gingerich, 1987). It is prudent to investigate the therapeutic effects of assessment in psychotherapy, couples therapy, and family therapy and in enrichment interventions with individuals, couples, and families. In the present article, we focus on interventions with couples.

Assessment in Marital Therapy

Couples therapists almost universally agree that conducting good couples therapy depends on having completed a good assessment. Beyond that agreement, divergence ensues. Some therapists advocate informal, ongoing assessment throughout couples therapy, allowing couples' reactions to interventions or directives to become assessment information that then guides future interventions and directives. Other therapists, such as cognitive social learning marital therapists (e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990)—after which the assessment in the current study is patterned—believe that assessment is necessary throughout therapy but suggest that a three- (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979) to four-session (Dattilio & Padesky, 1990) assessment module should be conducted prior to beginning therapy, which may last from 6 to 20 sessions. Advocates of assessment modules stress the benefits of preassessment: promoting a collaborative set, informing the therapist about the nature and severity of the problems, revealing relationship strengths, promoting agreement on treatment goals (through providing feedback to the couple), and providing an objective standard against which to measure progress.

Assessment in Relationship Enrichment

Related to therapies, but different in philosophy and clientele, are growth or enrichment programs. Given the his-

Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Michael E. McCullough, Joianne L. Shortz, Erica J. Mindes, Steven J. Sandage, and Judy M. Chartrand, Department of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Department of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University, 808 West Franklin Street, P.O. Box 842018, Richmond, Virginia 23284-2018.

toric emphasis counseling psychologists place on normal development, prevention of problems, and promotion of positive mental and physical health (Gelso & Fretz, 1992), counseling psychologists should be especially interested in such programs.

Various models exist to enrich romantic relationships. Some conceptualize relationship enrichment as preventing problems (Hahlweg & Markman, 1988); others conceptualize it as promoting higher quality relationships (Guerney, 1977). Most couples enrichment programs are conducted in groups that provide information, support from other couples, or both (Doherty, McCabe, & Ryder, 1978; Guerney, 1977; Mace & Mace, 1975; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Lewis, 1986; Miller, Wackman, Nunnally, & Miller, 1988). Information may be largely verbal, or it may involve demonstrations, role playing, rehearsal, and feedback. Although most relationship enrichment takes place in groups, not all of it does. L'Abate (1985) has counselors—often trainees who have not yet received their master's degrees—meet with couples, assess them, and provide them with information about their relationship. Furthermore, in the field, much marriage enrichment occurs in religious settings involving a member of the clergy and a couple.

Relationship enrichment has small but consistently positive effects for most couples. Hahlweg and Markman (1988) found that, of seven programs reviewed, the mean number of sessions was six, each lasting between 2.5 and 3 hours. Despite being aimed at preventing problems in the long-term, these programs had short-term positive effects (mean effect size = .79) for behavioral measures. Self-report measures yielded weaker outcomes than did behavioral measures. Alexander, Holtzworth-Munroe, and Jameson (1994) reviewed marital enrichment programs, including more recent research than Hahlweg and Markman (1988) reviewed, and found mean effect sizes ranging from .27 to .51 for published research.

What causes these small but positive effects? One hypothesis is that merely participating in research affects the relationship. Bradbury (1994) found a small positive effect in many couples that was attributable merely to completing questionnaires or engaging in videotaped conversations. Another hypothesis is that couples may obtain feedback about their relationship from participating in assessment. The feedback may entail information gleaned from assessment instruments and from the assessor's observation of the couple, and the partners may thus decide to work toward improving their relationship on the basis of that feedback. When personal feedback is given by an assessor, couples may, in part, respond to the assessor's personal characteristics as well as to the information that is fed back to the couple.

The present study was conducted to investigate whether relationship assessment and feedback, such as that done in cognitive-behavioral couples therapies, has a beneficial effect (beyond completing questionnaires) for couples who are not self-identified couples therapy clients. The dependent measures were dyadic adjustment and commitment.

We hypothesized that assessment plus feedback would be superior to written assessment only in increasing dyadic adjustment and commitment in well-functioning couples.

Furthermore, client perception of the competence of the therapist has been related to outcome in counseling (Heppner & Claiborn, 1989). In addition, Gurman and Kniskern (1981) have suggested that therapist control over the conduct of therapy predicts effective couples counseling. Little attention has been given to what predicts therapist competence and control. In the present study, we examined whether gender of the partner, perception of dyadic adjustment prior to assessment feedback, and therapists' counseling experience predicted client perceptions of therapist competence and control.

Method

Participants

Couples. Couples ($N = 48$) volunteered from classes in introductory psychology with their partners to participate in a study that assessed their marriage ($n = 26$), cohabitation relationship ($n = 15$), or engagement relationship ($n = 7$). Participants were screened for appropriateness (not currently in therapy; no severe self-assessed problems) and were randomly assigned to either an assessment-feedback ($n = 28$) or a written-assessment-only condition managed by one of the assessors ($n = 13$) or by the professor ($n = 7$) who provided clinical supervision for the assessors. The partner (within each couple) who was a student received credit toward his or her research requirement. Credit was .25% of the total grade.

Couples did not complete a demographic information sheet. However, in the assessment-feedback condition, all reports contained a relationship history. For the 28 couples in that group, 15 were married (range 3 months to 19 years), 8 were cohabiting (2 months to just over 3 years), and 3 were engaged and not living together (1 month to 19 months). Three married couples cohabited before marriage; however, we could not discern from available data how long those married couples cohabited prior to marriage. We did not solicit ages of participants, although the assessors of 15 couples in the assessment-feedback group reported it (mean age for men = 25.6 years; mean age for women = 23.2 years). For the written-assessment-only group, no demographic data were available. (Participants were assigned randomly to group, suggesting that it is unlikely that there were systematic differences in demographics, but we cannot assume that differences did not exist.)

Couple assessors. Couple assessors were 14 graduate students in a class in couples therapy. Of the students, 1 had her PhD degree and state license in counseling psychology; 6 had their master's degrees in clinical or counseling psychology and were enrolled in an American Psychological Association-accredited doctoral program; 7 were students who had not yet completed the requirements for the master's degree in one of the two programs, although 1 of those had an MDiv. Only 1 student had less than 1 complete year of graduate training.

Design

The study used an experimental design. Couples were randomly assigned (with the stipulation that one couple had to be assigned to

each assessor each semester) to either an assessment-feedback group or a written-assessment-only group.

Assessment feedback. Assessment feedback occurred in three sessions—two assessment sessions and one feedback session. Participants completed the Couples Pre-Counseling Inventory (Stuart, 1983; Stuart & Stuart, 1983), the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976), the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR; Schaefer & Olson, 1981), and the Commitment Scale (Stanley & Markman, 1992) at the first session prior to their first meeting with the couple assessor. Couples met for 1 hour and discussed their objectives in attending the assessment sessions, evaluation of the status of the relationship, and relationship history. The assessor gave particular encouragement to discussions of the strengths of the relationship. One week later, the assessor met with the couple again, asked them about their week, and had the couple discuss a topic about which they often disagree. In that discussion, the assessor left the room, and the discussion was videotaped for later analysis by the assessors. When the assessor returned, he or she asked the couple to evaluate the discussion they had just completed concerning its similarity to discussions of the topic they had had at home. The assessor then asked about the typical communication patterns within the couple. Next, the couple's use of their time was assessed by having each partner describe a typical day—hour by hour—which allowed an estimate of type and extent of intimacy. Finally, participants assessed their sexual relationship and discussed their satisfactions or sexual difficulties.

The following week, the assessor met with the couple to provide feedback about the relationship. The assessor gave each partner a copy of a two-page, single-spaced assessment report that began with a summary of individual characteristics of the partners and then described the relationship history. Typically, the report outlined the strengths of the relationship and summarized areas for potential change. In all cases, relationship strengths were described in at least as much detail as were the weaknesses. The report suggested general and specific ways that couples could improve the quality of their relationship, and it suggested (usually) two pertinent books on romantic relationships targeted at the particular couple. After the assessor discussed the written feedback with the couple, he or she ended the session, and couples completed the DAS and the Commitment Inventory.

Four weeks after the completion of the feedback session, couples were mailed the same two questionnaires as a follow-up. They either dropped off the completed questionnaires in a faculty mailbox in the Department of Psychology or mailed the questionnaires to Everett L. Worthington, Jr. (A "treatment" manual, describing the assessment and feedback sessions and the style of the written report, is available from Everett L. Worthington, Jr.)

Written assessment only. Thirteen couples in the written-assessment-only condition were yoked to 13 of the 14 couples in the assessment-feedback condition in timing of written assessment with the three administrations of the questionnaires on dyadic adjustment and commitment. The first two administrations were completed in the clinic and the follow-up administration was completed at home, similar to the administration schedule for the assessment-feedback couples. Following completion of the follow-up administration, couples who desired attended one assessment and one feedback session, as they had been promised at the beginning of the study, but they completed no additional written assessment material.

Seven other written-assessment-only couples were yoked to 7 of the 14 other assessment-feedback couples; however, those 7 couples completed each of the three administrations of questionnaires

at home and mailed them to the experimenter. For those couples, no promise was made of future couples assessment.

Measures

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). The DAS is a 32-item paper-and-pencil instrument that measures the degree of dyadic consensus, affectional expression, dyadic satisfaction, and dyadic cohesion in couples. In the present research, each subscale was analyzed separately. According to Spanier and Filsinger's (1983) summary, the DAS has a total score internal consistency of .96, as measured by Cronbach's (1951) alpha (Spanier, 1976). The DAS was found to have adequate content, criterion, and construct validity (Spanier, 1976). It has been evaluated as one of the best choices for measuring marital adjustment (Cohen, 1985), comparing favorably to the Locke-Wallace (1959) Marital Adjustment Scale. Internal consistency estimates were calculated on the present sample for each of the subtests of dyadic adjustment at each time (preassessment, postassessment, and follow-up). Mean (for the three time periods) Cronbach's alpha for dyadic consensus was .81; for affective expression, .67; for dyadic satisfaction, .75; and for dyadic cohesion, .59.

Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992). The Commitment Inventory has ten 6-item subscales. Stanley and Markman suggested that the subscales could be arranged into a constraint scale, which measures feelings of commitment as a consequence of feeling one is constrained from breaking away from the relationship, and a personal dedication scale, which measures commitment because the person wants to remain in the relationship. We have used those two subscales in the present research. In Stanley and Markman's (1992) research, all 10 smaller subscales had internal reliabilities greater than .70. The Commitment Inventory had concurrent validity at predicting a variety of other measures of commitment. Construct validity was investigated by finding differences between men and women and differences across levels of relationship development. Internal consistency estimates were calculated on the present sample for commitment at each time (preassessment, postassessment, and follow-up). Mean (for the three time periods) Cronbach's alpha for personal constraint was .73 and for personal dedication was .91.

Client's rating form. Clients rated their assessor's competence on six 7-point Likert-like items (1 = *not at all*; 4 = *moderately*; 7 = *extremely*) that measured (a) effectiveness, (b) willingness to work with the counselor if you were going to attend counseling, (c) willingness to carry out specific suggestions, (d) competence, (e) appearance that the counselor knew what he or she was doing, and (f) knowledge about couples counseling. Ratings were summed to yield a measure of perceived assessor competence. Assessor control was measured by summing two 7-point Likert-like scales on (a) the degree that couples thought the assessor exerted control and guidance and (b) how fair and balanced their counselor seemed.

Assessor's self-report of experience. Assessors reported their experience in terms of the total number of adult individual, adolescent, child, and family therapy cases they had counseled and the number of couples they had counseled.

Couples Pre-Counseling Inventory (Stuart, 1983; Stuart & Stuart, 1983). The Couples Pre-Counseling Inventory (Stuart, 1983) is a revision of the Marital Pre-Counseling Inventory (Stuart & Stuart, 1973). It has 13 sections that assess general and specific happiness with the relationship, caring behaviors, communication, conflict management, moods and management of personal life, sexual interaction, child management, willingness to change, mar-

ital history, goals of counseling, personal and relationship change goals, other changes, and general commitment to the relationship. Many responses are open-ended. Because the inventory was not used in the analyses, its psychometric properties are not summarized in the present article. In the present research, the Couples Pre-Counseling Inventory was completed by couples who received assessment and feedback but not by written-assessment-only couples. Although the inventory is an excellent counseling instrument and provides a wealth of information to the assessor, it does not readily lend itself to statistical analyses.

Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR; Schaefer & Olson, 1981). The PAIR is a 36-item self-report inventory that measures ideal and realistic intimacy in five areas: emotional, social, sexual, intellectual, and recreational intimacy. The instrument was positively correlated with the Locke-Wallace (1959) Marital Adjustment Scale and the Waring Intimacy Questionnaire (Waring & Reddon, 1983). Internal consistency estimates were at least .70 for each subscale. In the present research, the PAIR was completed by couples who received assessment and feedback but not by written-assessment-only couples. The PAIR was not administered to all couples because the focus of the intervention was on the satisfaction and stability of relationships, which Lewis and Spanier (1979) take to be the fundamental characteristics of a relationship. The PAIR assesses intimacy, which is clinically useful but not a direct measure of satisfaction or stability.

Procedure

Clients were recruited from large classes in introductory psychology to participate in an assessment of their ongoing relationship. The study was open to married couples and couples who were currently cohabiting (engaged or not) or engaged but not cohabiting. Screening by phone, we ascertained that couples were not currently in therapy and that they did not believe themselves to have any couples concerns that were severe enough to merit seeking therapy. Both partners agreed to participate in all sessions and to complete all questionnaires. There was no attrition throughout the study. Couples who served in the written-assessment-only condition were offered an abbreviated (one session plus feedback) face-to-face assessment after the follow-up questionnaires were complete.

In the fall semester, 27 couples volunteered to participate. Couples were randomly assigned to assessment-feedback or written-assessment-only conditions with the stipulation that 14 couples would be seen for assessment feedback. Each assessor met with 1 couple for three 1-hour sessions to conduct the personal assessment and the feedback. Each assessor (except one) managed a yoked written-assessment-only couple simultaneously. In the spring semester, only 21 couples volunteered to participate. Again couples were randomly assigned to assessment-feedback or written-assessment-only conditions with the stipulation that 14 couples would be seen for assessment feedback. Each assessor met with 1 couple for assessment and feedback. The control couples were managed by Everett L. Worthington, Jr. Because a mail-in procedure was used for these 7 written-assessment-only couples, it made little sense to assign the couples to seven separate assessors. No promise of face-to-face assessment was made.

Analysis of Data

We analyzed the data using a one-way (assessment feedback or written assessment only) multivariate analysis of variance

(MANOVA) with repeated measures, in which the repeated dependent measures were dyadic adjustment (dyadic consensus, affectional expression, dyadic satisfaction, and dyadic cohesion) and commitment (personal constraint and personal dedication). Significant multivariate effects were followed by univariate analyses of variance, and significant univariate effects were followed by simple main effects analyses using Tukey's test.

The second analysis used hierarchical multiple regression statistics, in which gender, initial marital functioning as assessed by the preassessment DAS total scale score, assessor experience, and change in marital functioning as assessed by the change in total scale score for the DAS (Spanier, 1976) from pre- to postassessment were regressed on ratings of the assessors by couples who attended the assessment-feedback sessions. Separate multiple regression equations were used to predict assessor competence and control by the assessor. The rationale for the order in which variables were entered in the hierarchical multiple regression is as follows. Participant gender, a subject demographic variable that was not subject to change, was entered at the first step. At the second step, initial DAS score, reflecting the relationship adjustment of the partner prior to the intervention, was entered. At the third step, the experience of the assessor was entered under the assumption that assessor experience was not subject to change and was more likely to directly affect ratings of the assessor than were the two previous variables. At the final step, change in DAS score was entered under the assumption that such change was (to some degree) a product of the assessor-couple interaction and was most likely to affect each partner's perceptions of the assessor.

Results

Validity Checks

Managed written-assessment versus mailed written-assessment couples. In all analyses, we analyzed individuals' scores rather than a combination of individual partners' scores. A one-way (type of written assessment) MANOVA, using the four subscales of the DAS and the two subscales (constraint and dedication) of the Commitment Inventory at pretest as six dependent variables, was conducted to test whether the two control groups were comparable. The multivariate F was estimated by Wilks's test, as with all of our multivariate analyses. Individuals from the two types of written-assessment-only couples differed, multivariate $F(6, 33) = 2.52, p < .05$. Univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) showed that the locus of the effect was completely within one variable: Participants who were waiting for assessment were higher in personal constraint ($M = 120.1$) than were those who were not on the waiting list ($M = 105.6$), $F(1, 38) = 14.28, p < .001$. On all other variables, means of the two groups did not differ. We decided that the two written-assessment-only groups were similar enough to collapse into a single control group.

Married versus not-married couples and gender. As a preliminary analysis, we conducted a three-way (Assessment-Feedback Versus Written-Assessment-Only Couples \times Married Versus Not-Married Couples \times Time [within-subjects]) MANOVA with repeated measures, using the four subscales of the DAS and the two subscales of the Commitment Inventory as dependent variables, to deter-

mine whether individuals in married and cohabiting couples were comparable. The individuals did not differ, multivariate $F(6, 66) = 1.06, p = .4$. Neither were there any significant interactions with marital status of the couple. No further differentiation was made according to whether individuals were married.

Similarly, as another preliminary analysis, we conducted a three-way (Assessment-Feedback Versus Written-Assessment-Only Couples \times Gender \times Time [within-subjects]) MANOVA with repeated measures, using the four subscales of the DAS and the two subscales of the Commitment Inventory as dependent variables, to determine whether men and women were comparable. There was no main effect of gender, multivariate $F(6, 66) = .66$. Neither were there any significant interactions with gender. No further differentiation was made according to whether individuals were male or female.

Means and standard deviations for assessment-feedback and written-assessment-only individuals on the six dependent measures at preassessment, postassessment, and follow-up are summarized in Table 1. An intercorrelation matrix of the variables is given in Table 2.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Assessment-Feedback and Written-Assessment-Only Participants on Dyadic Adjustment and Commitment at Three Times

Time/scale	Assessment feedback		Written assessment only	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Preassessment				
Dyadic Consensus	48.7	7.1	48.9	6.4
Affectional Expression	8.7	2.0	8.5	1.9
Dyadic Satisfaction	39.9	4.3	39.6	4.8
Dyadic Cohesion	17.5	2.9	16.9	2.8
Constraint	111.8	15.6	110.7	13.4
Dedication	213.9	18.6	208.3	22.1
Postassessment				
Dyadic Consensus	50.5	5.4	50.5	5.5
Affectional Expression	8.7	2.1	8.7	1.9
Dyadic Satisfaction	41.0	3.6	39.8	4.6
Dyadic Cohesion	17.0	2.6	17.2	2.4
Constraint	108.9	14.9	108.8	13.2
Dedication	220.7	21.1	209.0	20.2
Follow-up				
Dyadic Consensus	50.4	6.0	50.8	5.4
Affectional Expression	8.8	1.9	9.2	1.6
Dyadic Satisfaction	41.6	4.3	40.8	3.9
Dyadic Cohesion	16.6	2.3	17.3	2.2
Constraint	106.5	15.0	109.1	15.6
Dedication	217.6	21.2	210.0	19.3

Note. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) consists of four subscales: Dyadic Consensus (range = 0–65), Affectional Expression (range = 0–12), Dyadic Satisfaction (range = 0–50), and Dyadic Cohesion (range = 0–24). The Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992) has two scales: Constraint (range = 24–168) and Dedication (range = 36–252).

Effects of Assessment Feedback Over Time in Relation to Written Assessment Only

A two-way (Assessment-Feedback Versus Written-Assessment-Only Couples \times Time [within-subjects]) MANOVA with repeated measures, using the six subscales of dyadic adjustment and commitment as dependent variables, was performed. There was no multivariate effect of type of assessment, multivariate $F(6, 68) = 1.09, p < .38$. There was a significant multivariate effect of time, multivariate $F(12, 62) = 3.13, p < .01$. There was also a significant interaction between type of assessment and time, multivariate $F(12, 62) = 1.96, p < .04$.

Univariate analyses of variance were performed to reveal the locus of the significant effects. For dyadic consensus, there was a significant univariate main effect for time, $F(2, 81) = 5.70, p < .005$. Linear contrasts revealed that consensus changed between preassessment ($M = 48.8$) and postassessment ($M = 50.5$), $F(1, 83) = 11.96, p < .001$, but did not change between postassessment and follow-up ($M = 50.6$), $F(1, 83) < 1$.

For dyadic satisfaction, there was a significant univariate main effect for time, $F(2, 77) = 8.7, p < .001$. Couples changed between preassessment ($M = 39.8$) and postassessment ($M = 40.5$), $F(1, 79) = 14.97, p < .001$, and also continued to improve between postassessment and follow-up ($M = 41.3$), $F(1, 79) = 4.12, p < .05$. The main effect must be qualified by a significant interaction, $F(2, 77) = 3.37, p < .04$. Simple main effects comparisons revealed that the assessment-feedback participants gained in dyadic satisfaction between pre- and postassessment ($p < .001$) but not between postassessment and follow-up ($p < .5$); written-assessment-only participants did not gain in dyadic satisfaction from pre- to postassessment ($p < .1$) but did become more satisfied between postassessment and follow-up ($p < .05$).

For personal constraint, there was a significant univariate main effect for time, $F(2, 75) = 3.20, p < .05$. Participants felt less constraint at postassessment ($M = 108.9$) than at preassessment ($M = 111.4$), $F(1, 77) = 6.42, p < .01$. Feelings of constraint did not change between postassessment and follow-up ($M = 107.6$), $F(1, 77) < 1$.

For personal dedication, there was a significant univariate main effect for time, $F(2, 75) = 5.91, p < .004$. Participants felt more dedication at postassessment ($M = 215.8$) than at preassessment ($M = 211.0$), $F(1, 77) = 10.83, p < .002$, but did not feel a difference in dedication between postassessment and follow-up ($M = 213.9$), $F(1, 77) = 1.07, p < .3$. The main effect must be qualified with a significant interaction, $F(2, 75) = 3.20, p < .05$. The assessment-feedback participants felt more dedication between pre- and postassessment, $F(1, 37) = 22.43, p < .0001$, but felt no difference in personal dedication between postassessment and follow-up, $F < 1$; the written-assessment-only participants felt no change in personal dedication over time.

Table 2
Mean Scale Cronbach's Alphas and Intercorrelations of Subscales of Dyadic Adjustment and Commitment at Three Times

Time/variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	Mean scale α
Preassessment							
1. Dyadic Consensus	—						.83
2. Affectional Expression	.34**	—					.68
3. Dyadic Satisfaction	.42**	.24	—				.75
4. Dyadic Cohesion	.06	.22	.19	—			.64
5. Constraint	-.03	.04	.12	.17	—		.71
6. Dedication	.37**	.17	.37**	.22	.41**	—	.89
Postassessment							
1. Dyadic Consensus	—						.79
2. Affectional Expression	.24	—					.74
3. Dyadic Satisfaction	.43**	.14	—				.68
4. Dyadic Cohesion	.12	.17	.12	—			.56
5. Constraint	.08	.01	.06	.21	—		.72
6. Dedication	.29**	.02	.40**	.13	.39**	—	.93
Follow-up							
1. Dyadic Consensus	—						.82
2. Affectional Expression	.45**	—					.59
3. Dyadic Satisfaction	.38**	.25**	—				.80
4. Dyadic Cohesion	.32**	.40**	.24	—			.59
5. Constraint	.24	.16	.10	.00	—		.78
6. Dedication	.34**	.11	.28	.07	.35**	—	.92

Note. Variables 1–4 are subscales of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). Variables 5 and 6 are scales on the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992).

** $p < .01$.

Variables Predicting Individuals' Ratings of the Assessor

An intercorrelation matrix among all predictor and criterion variables is presented in Table 3. Intercorrelations between individuals' ratings of their assessor's competence

Table 3
Intercorrelation Matrix Among Predictor Variables and Perceptions of Counselor's Competence and Control

Variable	2	3	4	5	6
1. Pre-DAS	-.29	-.26	-.58**	.13	.05
Experience					
2. Marriage	—	.75**	.09	-.32	-.40
3. Cases		—	.10	-.20	-.21
4. Change in DAS			—	.03	.01
5. Competence				—	.71**
6. Control					—

Note. Pre-DAS (Dyadic Adjustment Scale) is the participant's rating of dyadic adjustment prior to the first assessment session with the assessor. Experience gives experience of the counselor in number of marital therapy cases seen (i.e., Marriage) and number of therapy cases seen (including child, adolescent, individual counseling or psychotherapy, and family therapy). Change in DAS gives postassessment-and-feedback DAS minus preassessment-and-feedback DAS. Competence is a participant-rated evaluation of the assessor's competence after assessment and feedback (summing six 7-point ratings of assessor competence). Control is participant-rated evaluation of the assessor's control of the sessions (summing two 7-point ratings of assessor control). $df = 54$.

** $p < .01$.

(six items; $M = 36.7$, $SD = 4.5$; $\alpha = .92$) and control (two items; $M = 13.1$, $SD = 1.5$; $\alpha = .83$) are included. For the variables measuring assessor experience (which were also included in the intercorrelation matrix in Table 3), number of cases of adult individual therapy plus adolescent therapy plus family therapy ranged from 6 to 45, and number of couples counseled ranged from 0 to 11.

Results of the hierarchical multiple regression to predict individuals' ratings of their counselors' competence and assessor control are summarized in Table 4. At the first step, gender did not significantly predict ratings of either assessor competence or control. Likewise, at the second step, initial dyadic adjustment did not predict ratings of either assessor competence or control. At the third step, however, counseling experience of the assessor did not predict ratings of counselor competence but did predict ratings of assessor control. Semipartial correlations revealed that the effect was localized to number of previous couples counseled by the assessor ($p < .02$). More experience was related to less perceived control by the assessor. At the final step, change in couple functioning did not affect ratings of either assessor competence or control.

Discussion

Effects of Assessment and Feedback With Couples

The main finding of the present study is that individuals who participated in face-to-face couples assessment, which

Table 4
Results of Multiple Regression Analyses Using Variables That Predict Counselor's Competence and Use of Control

Variable	Competence						Control					
	B	SE B	β	sr	R ²	R ² _{inc}	B	SE B	β	sr	R ²	R ² _{inc}
Gender	2.06	1.58	.22	.22	.05	.05	.17	.57	.04	.03	.00	.00
Pre-DAS	.01	.07	.03	.03	.05	.00	.02	.03	.13	.02	.02	.02
Experience					.16	.11					.20*	.18*
Marriage	-.60	.36	-.45	-.27			-.30	.12	-.64*	-.39*		
Cases	.05	.10	.14	.09			.04	.03	.31	.19		
Change in DAS	.05	.13	.09	.00	.16	.00	.02	.05	.10	.07	.21*	.01

Note. Counselor's competence was assessed by summing six 7-point ratings of competence; counselor's control of the session was assessed by summing two 7-point ratings of control. *sr* = semi-partial correlation; *R*²_{inc} = increase in *R*² with each step of the hierarchical multiple regression. Gender is gender of participant; pre-DAS (Dyadic Adjustment Scale) = total DAS score at preassessment; marriage = number of couples counseled; cases = number of cases counseled (child, adolescent, adult individual, and family); change in DAS = change in total DAS score from preassessment to postassessment.

* *p* < .05.

involved two assessment interviews, completion of inventories, and receipt of written and oral feedback, had small positive effects on their dyadic satisfaction and commitment in relation to individuals who merely completed multiple inventories at three times, regardless of whether those individuals were promised interviews and feedback.

Assessment of well-functioning couples is often undertaken as part of, or as a precursor to, marital or relationship enhancement interventions. The present results suggest that assessment alone may be partly responsible for positive effects of enrichment interventions.

Estimating how much of the positive effects are attributable to assessment is difficult and is undertaken only with the caveat that replication is needed prior to drawing firm conclusions. It is possible tentatively to estimate the effect of assessment and feedback in relation to relationship enhancement interventions that include assessment and feedback among the interventions. Alexander et al. (1994) reviewed marital enrichment programs and found mean effect sizes from .27 (for programs in which fewer than 35% of the participants were maritally distressed) to .51 (for programs in which more than 35% of the participants were maritally distressed); nondistressed couples simply have less they can improve than do more distressed couples. Hahlweg and Markman (1988) reviewed seven premarital and marital enrichment programs and determined that the overall effect size was .79 for behavioral measures, but they acknowledged that the effect size for self-report measures, such as the ones we used in the present study, was less than that.

In the present research, our sample contained only 8 of 96 (8%) distressed individuals, using the criterion suggested by Spanier and Filsinger (1983) of DAS scores less than 100. Effect sizes for each of the subscales of dyadic adjustment and commitment are tabulated in Table 5 for changes from preassessment to postassessment and from preassessment to follow-up. It is important to note that if scores decreased over time, such as feelings of personal constraint did, the effect size is negative, which reduces the mean effect size, even though the reduction of feelings of constraint could be interpreted as a positively valued change. The mean effect size for all preassessment to postassessment scores was .09

for assessment and feedback and .07 for written assessment only. The mean effect size for all preassessment to follow-up scores was .07 for assessment and feedback and .16 for written assessment only. If we assume an average intervention effect size of .27, as determined by Alexander et al. (1994) for well-functioning couples, then assessment with feedback and written assessment only, when averaged together and pooled for the two time differences, accounted for 30% of the total intervention effect size. Such estimation is fraught with conceptual difficulties in that we used a single study to compare with an average effect size derived from several studies by different investigators under different circumstances. Nonetheless, the comparison tentatively suggests that assessment and feedback may provide a substantial proportion of change that accrues from relationship enrichment programs.

It is also appropriate to consider this study as an extension of an investigation of the effects of mere research participation. Our finding supports Bradbury's (1994) recent contention that marital research, in the form of completing mail surveys or discussing a conflict within a laboratory setting, has a positive effect for most couples. Bradbury (1994) reviewed the only other two past research studies on the

Table 5
Effect Sizes for Six Subscales of Dyadic Adjustment and Commitment for Assessment-Feedback (AF) Versus Written-Assessment-Only (WAO) Individuals

Subscale	Pre- to postassessment		Preassessment to follow-up	
	AF	WAO	AF	WAO
Dyadic Consensus	.29	.27	.26	.15
Affectional Expression	.00	.10	.05	.41
Dyadic Satisfaction	.28	.04	.42	.27
Dyadic Cohesion	-.18	.12	-.30	.16
Constraint	-.19	-.14	-.30	-.11
Dedication	.34	.03	.20	.08
<i>M</i>	.09	.07	.06	.16

Note. Effect sizes are calculated as difference in means divided by pooled standard deviation.

effects on relationships of research participation (Rubin & Mitchell, 1976; Veroff, Hatchett, & Douvan, 1992). Bradbury found from past studies that there was a possibility of a positive effect on relationships from research participation. In his studies, he found that most participants reported small positive effects from completing surveys about their marriage or discussing their conflicts, but a few (3%–5%) reported negative experiences. The present study documents that self-reported positive benefits of research participation were detectable using standardized marital instruments.

These foregoing tentative conclusions are speculative for several additional reasons. The participants in the present research are college students, not volunteers from the general community. That introduces two sources of concern. First, the demographics of the present sample may not be comparable to those of a general sample of people who might elect to attend couple-enrichment programs, and because demographics were not scrupulously collected, there is no way of discerning the similarity to different samples. Second, the students did not expect to receive relationship enrichment counseling. We might argue that the lack of expectation may have reduced the potential gains of assessment because students knew that they would not be accountable for using the information to better their relationship. Or we might argue that the lack of expectation of further treatment might have enhanced the effect of the assessment because students knew that they would not receive additional help.

The effect of attention to experimental participants—the Hawthorne effect—may have partly contributed to the beneficial outcomes for all participants. Clearly, however, mere experimental attention, which occurred through having the written-assessment-only participants complete questionnaires that stimulated partners to think about their relationship, was not the sole active therapeutic ingredient. Couples who received personal interviews and a structured feedback report (with discussion) benefitted beyond merely reflecting on their relationship.

Predictions of Individuals' Ratings of Their Assessors

Individuals who attended the assessment-feedback sessions formulated different evaluations of their assessors depending on the previous counseling experience of the assessor. In particular, partners thought that assessors who had less experience at couples counseling exerted more control over the sessions. This suggests that assessors who had not dealt with couples might have behaved more rigidly and thus given the impression of exerting more control over the proceedings.

In the present research, assessors were generally inexperienced. Their behavior may have been transparently controlling. Pulleyblank and Shapiro (1986) studied training in structural family therapy and found that trainees generally learned cognitive and conceptual skills before they developed practical counseling skills. Zaken-Greenberg and Neimeyer (1986) also found an effect of training on conceptual

skills for novice family therapists, but the effect was less noticeable on behavioral skills. Although Gurman and Kniskern (1981) found that family therapists who were effective generally controlled early therapy sessions more than did family therapists who were not effective, novice therapists might err through over- or undercontrol. In the present study, with assessors who had little-to-moderate experience, control was negatively related to experience with couples counseling.

Implications

Within previous studies of the effectiveness of marriage enrichment, assessment of the couple's relationship and communication may have accounted for a substantial proportion of the total power of interventions that help well-functioning marriages. In the present study, assessment of and feedback given to couples affected couples' relationships positively. The amount of assessment and feedback couples received affected the amount of impact. Counseling psychologists who strive to help couples improve their relationships through participating in relationship enrichment interventions should be aware that assessment and feedback is not a sterile procedure. Assessment interviews, questionnaires, and feedback may not only help couples understand their relationship better but may also stimulate couples to act to improve their relationship. Too often, counselors who are not conducting research ignore assessment and feedback, thinking of them as being part of scientific study but as having no relevance to actual practice. The present study suggests that such a view of relationship assessment may be unwarranted. In fact, assessment of the relationship may be an ideal, cost-effective way to stimulate the reflection of partners concerning their relationship.

We offer another caveat concerning the present research. The particular assessment and feedback procedure that couples underwent in the present research was modeled on cognitive-behavioral marital therapy (Baucom & Epstein, 1990) and thus focused on intimacy and communication more than on training in conflict management. Furthermore, the current assessment did not use personality assessment and attempt to evaluate the match (or mismatch) of partners' personalities, as do some enrichment programs. It is conceivable that assessment programs that assess couples' style of disagreement more extensively than in the present study, which used a 7-min videotaped role play, a discussion of conflict, and completion of various questionnaires about their conflicts, might provide more information about how couples handle differences. That could, at once, result in (a) decreased relationship satisfaction because of partners' heightened awareness of disagreements but (b) increased attention to dealing better with differences. Furthermore, the current research does not shed any light on the effects of assessment of partners' personalities. Additional research on other means of assessment could clarify these issues.

The present study examined the relatively short-term effects of assessment on relationships. Relationship enhance-

ment is generally aimed at longer term effects, and there is some indication that such enhancement can occur if the couples enrichment program focuses on actual couple communication (Hahlweg & Markman, 1988). The present study did not examine the long-term effects of assessment on relationships, and that needs to be done.

References

- Alexander, J. F., Holtzworth-Munroe, A., & Jameson, P. (1994). The process and outcome of marital and family therapy: Research review and evaluation. In A. E. Bergin & S. L. Garfield (Eds.), *Handbook of psychotherapy and behavior change* (4th ed., pp. 595–630). New York: Wiley.
- Austed, C. S., & Hoyt, M. F. (1992). The managed care movement and the future of psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy, 29*, 109–188.
- Baucom, D. H., & Epstein, N. (1990). *Cognitive-behavioral marital therapy*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Beutler, L. E., Machado, P. P. P., & Neufeldt, S. A. (1994). Therapist variables. In A. E. Bergin & S. L. Garfield (Eds.), *Handbook of psychotherapy and behavior change* (4th ed., pp. 229–269). New York: Wiley.
- Bradbury, T. N. (1994). Unintended effects of marital research on marital relationships. *Journal of Family Psychology, 8*, 187–201.
- Cohen, P. (1985). Locke Marital Adjustment Scale and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale. *American Journal of Family Therapy, 13*(3), 66–71.
- Cronbach, L. J. (1951). Coefficient alpha and internal structure of tests. *Psychometrika, 16*, 297–334.
- Dattilio, F. M., & Padesky, C. A. (1990). *Cognitive therapy with couples*. Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Exchange.
- deShazer, S. (1985). *Keys to solutions in brief therapy*. New York: Norton.
- deShazer, S., Berg, I., Lipchik, E., Nunnally, E., Molnar, A., Gingerich, W., & Weiner-Davis, M. (1986). Brief therapy: Focused solution development. *Family Process, 25*, 207–221.
- Doherty, W. J., McCabe, P., & Ryder, R. G. (1978). Marriage encounter: A critical appraisal. *Journal of Marriage and Family Counseling, 4*, 99–107.
- Fitzgerald, L., & Osipow, S. (1988). We have seen the future, but is it us? The vocational aspirations of graduate students in counseling psychology. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 19*, 575–583.
- Garfield, S. L. (1994). Client variables. In A. E. Bergin & S. L. Garfield (Eds.), *Handbook of psychotherapy and behavior change* (4th ed., pp. 190–228). New York: Wiley.
- Gelso, C. J., & Fretz, B. R. (1992). *Counseling psychology*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Guernsey, B. G., Jr. (Ed.). (1977). *Relationship enhancement*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gurman, A. S., & Kniskern, D. P. (1981). Family therapy outcome research: Knowns and unknowns. In A. S. Gurman & D. P. Kniskern (Eds.), *Handbook of family therapy* (pp. 742–775). New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Hahlweg, K., & Markman, H. J. (1988). Effectiveness of behavioral marital therapy: Empirical status of behavioral techniques in preventing and alleviating marital distress. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 56*, 440–447.
- Heppner, P. P., & Claiborn, C. D. (1989). Social influence research in counseling: A review and critique. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 36*, 365–387.
- Jacobson, N. S., & Margolin, G. (1979). *Marital therapy: Strategies based on social learning and behavior exchange principles*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Koss, M. P., & Shiang, J. (1994). Research in brief psychotherapy. In A. E. Bergin and S. L. Garfield (Eds.), *Handbook of psychotherapy and behavior change* (4th ed., pp. 664–700). New York: Wiley.
- L'Abate, L. (1985). Structured enrichment (SE) with couples and families. *Family Relations, 34*, 169–175.
- Lewis, R. A., & Spanier, G. B. (1979). Theorizing about the quality and stability of marriage. In W. R. Burr, R. Hill, F. I. Nye, and I. L. Reiss (Eds.), *Contemporary theories about the family* (Vol. 1, pp. 268–294). New York: Free Press.
- Lipchik, E. (1994). The rush to be brief. *Family Therapy Networker, 18*(2), 34–39.
- Locke, H., & Wallace, K. (1959). Short marital adjustment and prediction tests: Their validity and reliability. *Marriage and Family Living, 2*, 251–255.
- Mace, D. R., & Mace, V. C. (1975). Marriage enrichment—Wave of the future? *The Family Coordinator, 24*, 131–135.
- Markman, H. J., Floyd, F. J., Stanley, S. M., & Lewis, H. C. (1986). Prevention. In N. S. Jacobson & A. S. Gurman (Eds.), *Clinical handbook of marital therapy* (pp. 173–195). New York: Guilford.
- Miller, S., Wackman, D., Nunnally, E., & Miller, P. (1988). *Connecting with self and others*. Littleton, CO: Interpersonal Communications Programs.
- Pulleblank, E., & Shapiro, R. J. (1986). Evaluation of family therapy trainees: Acquisition of cognitive and therapeutic behavior skills. *Family Process, 25*, 591–598.
- Rubin, Z., & Mitchell, C. (1976). Couples research as couples counseling: Some unintended effects of studying close relationships. *American Psychologist, 31*, 17–25.
- Schaefer, M. T., & Olson, D. H. (1981). Assessing intimacy: The PAIR Inventory. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 7*, 47–60.
- Schneider, L., Watkins, C. E., Jr., & Gelso, C. J. (1988). Counseling psychology from 1971 to 1986: Perspective on and appraisal of current emphases. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 19*, 584–588.
- Spanier, G. B. (1976). Measuring dyadic adjustment: New scales for assessing the quality of marriage and similar dyads. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 38*, 15–28.
- Spanier, G. B., & Filsinger, E. E. (1983). The dyadic adjustment scale. In E. E. Filsinger (Ed.), *Marriage and family assessment: A sourcebook for family therapy* (pp. 155–168). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (1992). Assessing commitment in personal relationships. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 54*, 595–608.
- Stuart, R. B. (1983). *Couple's pre-counseling inventory: Counselor's guide*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Stuart, R. B., & Stuart, F. M. (1973). *Marital pre-counseling inventory*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Stuart, R. B., & Stuart, F. M. (1983). *Couple's pre-counseling inventory*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Veroff, J., Hatchett, S., & Douvan, E. (1992). Consequences of participating in a longitudinal study of marriage. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 56*, 315–327.
- Waring, E. M., & Reddon, J. (1983). The measurement of intimacy in marriage: The Waring questionnaire. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 39*, 53–57.

- Watkins, C. E., Jr., Lopez, F. G., Campbell, V. L., & Himmell, C. D. (1986). Contemporary counseling psychology: Results of a national survey. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 33*, 301-309.
- Weiner-Davis, M., deShazer, S., & Gingerich, W. (1987). Building on pretreatment change to construct the therapeutic solution: An exploratory study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 13*, 359-364.
- Wylie, M. S. (1990). Brief therapy on the couch. *Family Therapy Networker, 14*(2), 26-35.
- Wylie, M. S. (1994). Endangered species. *Family Therapy Networker, 18*(2), 20-33.
- Zaken-Greenberg, F., & Neimeyer, G. J. (1986). The impact of structural family therapy training on conceptual and executive therapy skills. *Family Process, 25*, 599-608.

Received January 30, 1995

Revision received March 28, 1995

Accepted April 18, 1995 ■

Instructions to Authors

Manuscripts submitted to the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* should be concisely written in simple, unambiguous language. They should present material in logical order, starting with a statement of purpose and progressing through an analysis of evidence to conclusions and implications, with the conclusions clearly related to the evidence presented.

Authors should prepare manuscripts according to the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (4th ed.). All manuscripts must include an abstract containing a maximum of 960 characters and spaces (which is approximately 120 words) typed on a separate sheet of paper. Typing instructions (all copy must be double-spaced) and instructions on preparing tables, figures, references, metrics, and abstracts appear in the *Publication Manual*. Also, all manuscripts are subject to editing for sexist language.

APA policy prohibits an author from submitting the same manuscript for concurrent consideration by two or more publications. In addition, it is a violation of APA Ethical Principles to publish "as original data, data that have been previously published" (Standard 6.24). As this journal is a primary journal that publishes original material only, APA policy prohibits as well publication of any manuscript that has already been published in whole or substantial part elsewhere. Authors have an obligation to consult journal editors concerning prior publication of any data upon which their article depends. In addition, APA Ethical Principles specify that "after research results are published, psychologists do not withhold the data on which their conclusions are based from other competent professionals who seek to verify the substantive claims through reanalysis and who intend to use such data only for that purpose, provided that the confidentiality of the participants can be protected and unless legal rights concerning proprietary data preclude their release" (Standard 6.25). APA expects authors submitting to this journal to adhere to these standards. Specifically, authors of manuscripts submitted to APA journals are expected to have available their data throughout the editorial review process and for at least 5 years after the date of publication.

Authors will be required to state in writing that they have complied with APA ethical standards in the treatment of their sample, human or animal, or to describe the details of treatment. A copy of the APA Ethical Principles may be obtained by writing the APA Ethics Office, 750 First Street, NE, Washington, DC 20002-4242.

Because reviewers have agreed to participate in a masked reviewing system, authors submitting manuscripts are requested to include with each copy of the manuscript a cover sheet, which shows the title of the manuscript, the authors' names and institutional affiliations, and the date the manuscript is submitted. The first page of text should omit the authors' names and affiliations but should include the title of the manuscript and the date it is submitted. Footnotes containing information pertaining to the authors' identity or affiliations should be on separate pages. Every effort should be made to see that the manuscript itself contains no clues to the authors' identity.

Five copies of each manuscript should be submitted. All copies should be clear, readable, and on paper of good quality. A dot matrix or unusual typeface is acceptable only if it is clear and legible. In addition to addresses and phone numbers, authors should supply electronic mail addresses and fax numbers, if available, for potential use by the editorial office and later by the production office. Authors should keep a copy of the manuscript to guard against loss. Mail manuscripts to the Editor, Clara E. Hill, Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742-4411.