

LONG-TERM EVALUATION AND DIVORCE STATISTICS FOR *MAKING MARRIAGE WORK*, A JEWISH MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROGRAM

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Over 86% of 854 Jewish couples were surveyed from 1 to 12 years after taking a 10-session marriage preparation program. 'Making Marriage Work.' This small group program, conducted by a marriage and family therapist and a rabbi, covers content issues and skill training in communication and problem-solving. The divorce rate of 8.9% and mean marital satisfaction of over 8 on a 10-point scale were higher than estimates for the general U.S. population.

The present study is a long-term evaluation of the program *Making Marriage Work (MMW)* designed in 1978 by the first author and Rabbi Aaron M. Wise to educate engaged and recently married couples in the Los Angeles community so that they may enter marriage with more realistic expectations and some relationship skills. In the intervening years almost a thousand couples have participated in MMW. Ongoing communication with graduates by newsletter and program announcements created the opportunity to maintain contact and thus to assess the status of a large sample of marriages. Although the post-hoc design of the study precluded comparisons to a control group, its value lies not only in its large sample size but also in the availability of divorce statistics that can be compared to those for a similar segment of the general population.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The MMW program is offered under the

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auspices of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, with classes held on its Los Angeles campus, as well as in Conservative and Reform synagogues in Southern California, and in Jewish Family Service facilities with JFS staff in Orange County, California and in Southfield, Michigan. Classes also have been held at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City for its students.

Classes meet for 10 weeks and are offered four times each year. Instructors are state-licensed psychotherapists, including marriage and family therapists, clinical social workers, and psychologists, who are trained on site to conduct classes following the developed format, but using their own individual styles. Out-of-town counselors who cannot come to Los Angeles for training are instructed and supervised through telephone sessions. Course materials and teacher-training are offered at a nominal fee to cover costs.

Each group is comprised of between eight to ten couples. Six sessions are led by a marriage counselor, three by a rabbi, and one (with a larger group of couples) by a financial planner. All couples take a "criss-cross" personality or marital preparedness inventory, and each couple has one individual session with the counselor to discuss the results in terms of areas of compatibility and potential conflict.

The group sessions begin with an examination of the potential impact of each participant's family background and personality on his or her relationships. The sessions then explore each participant's expectations of marriage and of their spouse. Two sessions are devoted to techniques of communication and conflict resolution. Areas critical in marriage are the focus of the other sessions and include sex, careers, roles (division of labor), decisions regarding children, and the impact of other people on the lives of a couple, including parents, siblings, and friends.

Individual participation and group interaction are of prime importance. Such group interaction has helped bond many of the couples into *Chavurot* or friendship groups, meeting together to study or socialize long after they have completed the course. Experiential exercises used during the course involve 1) the group as a whole, 2) men and women working separately to uncover gender differences and similarities, 3) subgroups of couples, and finally 4) individual couples to address their own highly personal issues.

In addition to the "basic" marriage preparation class that is the subject of this research, MMW offers an Interfaith Section, described in an accompanying article by Rabbi Allen Maller. Classes on "Success in Your Second Marriage" for couples where one or both have children from a previous marriage and on "Married Life: Challenge of Growth" for couples married 2-15 years are also offered regularly.

STUDY METHOD

Sample

Records were available for 854 couples who completed MMW between 1979 and mid-1990. The demographics of the sample are presented in detail in Table 1 and in the results section below. Keep in mind that these couples are all Jewish and are generally middle and upper-middle class. Because MMW offers other marriage enhance-

ment programs and because of the need for fund raising, an effort is made to keep an updated address file of the graduates of the program, including information on broken engagements and divorces.

When the present follow-up survey was constructed, it was the intention to gather the information by telephone with the help of volunteer assistants. After reaching approximately half of the graduates (with great effort and frustration due to the high mobility of this population), the decision was made to mail the survey to the remaining participants who had not been reached with phone calls made from mid-1990 to early 1992. With still another round of reminder phone calls after the mailing, it was possible by mid-1992 to gather marital status information on 736 couples, approximately 86% of the total. Table 2 summarizes the subsamples used to tabulate various aspects of the results.

Survey

The questionnaire consisted of 18 items. The first six items confirmed basic demographic information, e.g., date of marriage, type of dwelling, referral source for MMW, occupation, education, and ages of children. The next six items assessing Jewish identity (children's attendance at religious school and involvement in Jewish youth activities, family membership in a synagogue, estimated attendance at services, taking classes in Judaica, involvement in Jewish organizations) are not analyzed in this article. Finally, participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of MMW on a 1 - 10 scale, to indicate whether they had participated in other programs to strengthen their marriage since taking MMW, and to rate present satisfaction with their marriage on a 1 - 10 scale.

At the conclusion of the survey, participants were asked if they would complete a second questionnaire about their marriage, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS developed by Spanier, 1975). Almost all agreed to do so, but only 40% actually followed

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Mean age at the time of marriage		
Men	29.2 (S.D. 4.35)	
Women	27.2 (S.D. 4.11)	
Occupation	Men	Women
Professional	50.1%	40.8%
White collar/business	48.2%	37.4%
Homemaker	--	15.7%
Student	1.1%	5.4%
Mean education	Some graduate school	
Previous marriages	7.8%	8.8%

through. For them, results correlated highly with the rating scale that all respondents answered. As the rate of return on the DAS was so low, it was decided not to include it in this report.

STUDY RESULTS

Using a combination of telephone survey and mailings, the research team was able to obtain follow-up data on the marital status of 86.2% of the 854 couples who participated in the MMW program from 1979 – 1990. The nonsurvey couples consisted of two subsamples: 59 not located and 59 not responding.

As indicated in Table 2, 50 of the couples (6.8%) broke their engagements.

The staff of MMW views the Broken Engagement subsample as a successful group who recognized issues of incompatibility and were thereby helped by the program to avoid becoming part of the divorced subsample.

There were 61 (8.9%) known divorces among the couples known to have married. It is possible, perhaps likely, that the divorce rate would be increased if all 854 couples who had taken the program had been reached. However, even if one assumes double the divorce rate in these nonsurveyed couples, 18% of 118 would add 21 divorces to the total of 854 couples, still yielding only a 10.2% divorce rate. Thus, the high rate of return on the survey allows for a very stable estimate of the

Table 2. Study Subsamples

	No.	%
Total participants	854	100.0
Survey respondents	736	86.2
Not located	59	6.9
Nonrespondents	59	6.9
Total survey respondents	736	100.0
Never married, engagement broken	50	6.8
Known to have married	686	93.2
Of the 686 who married	686	100.0
Still married	625	91.1
Divorced	61	8.9

divorce rate for those taking MMW, with a follow-up period from 0 to 12 years after marriage.

The mean duration of marriage for the known divorced couples was 4.19 years. For the responding couples Table 3 summarizes the percentage divorced (by the present 1990-1991 survey) for each marriage year cohort from 1979 to 1988.

The known divorced couples did not differ significantly from the still-married subsample on the limited data points available. The mean age at the time of taking MMW of the men who divorced was 29.0 years compared to 29.2 for the still-married men. The mean age for the women who divorced was 26.8 years at course time compared to 27.2 for the still-married women. Of those divorced, 8.2% of the men and 9.8% of the women had had previous marriages, whereas for the still-married couples these figures were 7.8% and 8.8%.

The one significant difference between the two groups was whether the couple was married at the time of participating in MMW. Forty-two percent of the divorced sample had been married, whereas in the still-married group 27.2% had been married when they took the program. Table 4 summarizes marital status effects.

The temporal trend in these statistics should be noted. Overall, the percentage of couples married when they took MMW has declined in recent years. Since a higher percentage of the divorces were from the earlier years, this factor must be examined. However, it seems that, although the percentage of participants who were married at the time of the program declined overall, as well as in the still-married sample (31% in the 1979-1983 groups and 27% in the 1984-1988 groups), the divorced couples showed an increase in rates of being married before taking the program, from 37% to 45%. Since couples taking this marriage preparation program even a few months after their marriage evidenced a higher frequency of divorce, we might conclude either that they were motivated to take MMW by already

existing marital problems or that the program sensitizes couples to differences that might then lead to broken engagements in engaged couples or divorce in already married couples. These already married couples who later divorced might have been members of the broken-engagement group had they attended before getting married.

Characteristics of the Still-Married Group

The survey was completed by the wife in 59.4% of the cases. Demographically, the sample was middle to upper-class: 76.3% reported owning their own homes at the time of the follow-up.

Of those not married at the time of taking MMW, 62.3% appeared to be living together, i.e., same mailing addresses. The greatest percentage, 55.5% of the couples, heard about MMW from a friend or relative, 19.4% were referred by a rabbi, and 25.1% had other referral sources (University of Judaism bulletin, announcements, or news stories in local Jewish and secular newspapers) or did not respond to that item on the survey. For those married between 1979 and 1982, the median number of children (in the 1990-1991 survey) was two; for those married between 1983 and 1986 the median was one; and for those married later, the median was none.

Marital Satisfaction

The still-married couples generally reported themselves satisfied with their marriages at the time of the survey. On the simple 10-point rating scale, the mean was 8.72. Given the narrow range in marital satisfaction, it is not surprising that there were almost no significant predictors. Twenty-five percent of the couples reported having taken other marital improvement programs after MMW, most of them describing them as marriage counseling or marital therapy. Those who had taken such a program had a significantly lower (but still quite high) marital satisfaction rating on the 10-point scale than those who had not (8.29 vs. 8.88,

Table 3. Frequency of Known Divorced and Known Still Married (In 1990-1991) by Year of Marriage

Year Married	Number Married	Number Divorced	% Divorced
Before 1979 or year unknown	7	0	0
1979	19	3	13
1980	20	5	20
1981	37	7	15
1982	38	8	17
1983	42	8	16
1984	40	5	11
1985	48	8	14
1986	66	7	9
1987	55	4	6
1988	92	4	4
1989	99	2	2
1990	62	0	0
Total	625	61	

$t = 3.83, p = .001$. Age showed a significant but modest negative correlation with satisfaction ($r = .15, p < .05$), with younger respondents reporting higher satisfaction.

Although marital status at the time of taking MMW had a significant relationship to divorce status at the time of follow-up, it did not relate significantly to satisfaction or to any of the other variables in the survey. Living together for those not yet married at the time of taking MMW showed little relationship to other variables.

CONCLUSIONS

With a divorce rate of 8.9% assessed at 0 to 12 years after marriage and a mean rating of marital satisfaction of over 8 on a 10-point scale (for those still married), the over 800 graduates of MMW seem to constitute a highly successful group of marriages. No marital preparation outcome studies have been assessed with this large a sample over this long a time, and none could be found that reports divorce statistics, probably because of the brief follow-up period of other studies. In 1981, Bagarozzi and Rauen reviewed 13 programs and found some evidence of change on short-term communication measures, noting that none of the pro-

grams had adequate long-term follow-up. In a later, well-controlled study, Bagarozzi et al. (1984) found no significant effects of a marital preparation program when a 3-year follow-up study was conducted. More recent work by Howard Markman in Denver and David Olson in Minneapolis has reported successful results for marital communication programs with already married couples.

This study was not a controlled experimental design. Therefore, it is not possible to state with complete confidence that MMW causes reduced divorce rates and higher marital satisfaction. Couples self-selected into the program and were not randomly assigned. Further, it is difficult to compare the observed divorce statistics and marital satisfaction with a completely comparable sample from the general population. However, Glenn (1991) recently summarized data from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) surveys indicating that in a sample of 1386 ever-married persons surveyed from 1984 to 1988 who had been married 0 to 11 years (roughly comparable to the MMW sample), the weighted percentage of ever-divorced was 24.9%. Similarly, Glenn reports that in the range of

Table 4. Marital Status Effects

Marital Status at Time of Participation*	Couples	%
Not married at time of participation	538	100.0
Engagement broken	50	9.3
Subsequently married	488	100.0
Still married	454	93.0
Subsequently divorced	34	7.0
Married at time of participation	194	100.0
Still married	170	87.6
Subsequently divorced	24	12.4

Second marriages

	Currently still married	Divorced
Men	7.8%	8.2%
Women	8.8%	9.8%

*Marital status at time of participation unknown for one still-married couple and three divorced couples.

50 to 62% of married persons described their marriages as "very happy." Although it has been recognized that the divorce rate for Jewish samples is lower than in the general U.S. population, depending on synagogue affiliation (see Cherlin & Cabeluski, 1983), the estimated rates are still considerably higher than those reported in the present MMW sample.

The variations in divorce rate by year of marriage cohorts (Table 3) are probably based on samples too small to interpret with great confidence. However, it is important to note that the rate for the most recently married was quite low. Approximately 15% of the divorces of Jewish couples in California in 1971 were found to have occurred after only 2 years of marriage.¹ It seems very likely that the percentage would be even higher in 1991. In the present sample, only 10% (6/61) of the total divorces observed over the 12 yearly cohorts had been married

2 years or less. Future study of this sample could only reduce this percentage, i.e. any further divorces would be from a subsample married longer than 2 years. This result supports the intuitive clinical view that a marriage preparation program would have its greatest impact immediately after participation in the first years of marriage.

Thus, it seems justified to describe the MMW sample as having a lower-than-expected divorce rate and a marital satisfaction that is higher than evidenced in Glenn's summary of the national surveys. Although those taking MMW may be a nonrepresentative, self-selected subsample of married couples (being 100% Jewish certainly is a clear distinction), the findings are consistent over a relatively large sample over a relatively long period of time.

It is not possible to state the precise cost of MMW. Although the couples paid approximately \$250-\$300 (there are variations over time, and tuition at the time of this writing is \$360), the program is subsidized by a significant amount of charitable contributions and some volunteer time. Therefore, its cost effectiveness can only be evaluated in approximate terms. Nevertheless,

¹Thanks to Rabbi Allen Maller, MMW faculty member, for his help in interpreting these results and for making available the 1971 divorce statistics for Jewish couples in California, gleaned from the State of California Department of Public Health, Marriage Dissolution Records.

the authors' present assessment is that the apparent effectiveness relative to costs warrants continued study and support of marital preparation programs like MMW.

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