

**(2004) Lane Powell, Ph.D., Sharon Powell, M.A, Preston Dyer, Ph.D., Genie Dyer, Ph.D. Charles Cole, Ph.D., and Anna Cole, M.S. *The MEG: Examining how a Marriage Enrichment Model can build and sustain positive interaction in relationships.* Published in Vision, National Council on Family Relations, 2204 edition: *What is the Future of Marriage?***

This article explains how current understanding of the necessary components in positive relationship interaction can be addressed in an ongoing ACME style marriage enrichment group (MEG). How the process of marriage enrichment differs from, and complements, marriage education is examined. The concept of marriage potential is discussed in light of the couple dialogue in a MEG meeting. The elements of social learning theory and Gottman's new Strong Relationship House theory are used to explain why this MEG approach can enhance and deepen the couple relationship and achieve the potential levels of relationship satisfaction that today's couples desire.

*“To Marriage!” Ten couples raise a toast, which has become a tradition during their regular Sunday evening dinners together. The couples, who have been meeting together monthly for more than four years in a couple-led Marriage Enrichment Group, (MEG), vary widely in age and years married. During the meal there's laughter and mutual sharing about the challenges of daily life. Many of the couples continue their discussion of the program topic, which was the focus of their (MEG) meeting, which preceded the dinner. This month's topic was Growing Old Together. A brief presentation by the leader couple set the stage for couples to share relationship experiences (not intellectual opinions) and think about the challenges of aging. Then the individual couples dialogued in private about their goals and dreams for the future. Finally, they were invited to share with the group (all participation is voluntary). For these couples the MEG is an important part of the ongoing enrichment of their lives together. Their monthly meeting is one that they prioritize and rarely miss.*

In the past 40 years, concern for the large numbers of divorcing couples and their families in the United States has led to the development of many forms of marriage education and enrichment. These new approaches constitute a prevention model as an alternative to remediation

(Berger & Hannah, 1999). As research on the positive relational impact of learning and using good communication and conflict management skills has emerged, more appreciation for prevention and enrichment programs has developed. Today, even state legislatures and the federal government are strongly encouraging marriage education for newlyweds and distressed couples.

Giblin, et al (1985) found in a meta-analysis of premarital, marital and family enrichment studies that persons who participated in enrichment programs are 67% better off than those who had not participated. They recommended that future research “. . . examine more learning theory principles to develop a hierarchy of enrichment outcome categories, ranging from lower order skills which appear to be easily influenced, to higher level skills, perceptions, attitudes and feelings that change more slowly (p. 267).” In a plenary session at the 2003 conference of the National Council on Family Relations, John Gottman presented a theoretical model based on his years of observing couples in satisfactory and unsatisfactory couple interchanges. Gottman’s “Sound Relationship House” theory addresses seven components of a quality couple relationship. (Gottman, 2000, pp. 31-50). The researcher posits that the first three components of the Sound Relationship House: Love Maps (internal complementary maps of partners’ relational world); a strong Fondness and Admiration System; and “Turning Toward” emotional connections are the foundational components upon which romantic affection and intimacy are built. In other words, even if a couple learns good communication and conflict management skills, they will not be effective in changing the level of positive interaction in the relationship if the other foundational components

are not present. A discussion of “best practice” in couple relationship education by Halford, et al (2003) also concluded that a stable, satisfying couple relationship involves much more than just being able to manage conflict. A best practice relationship education program should include a discussion of the natural tendency of couples to take their relationship for granted and should help couples develop strategies for making and keeping their relationship the top priority in their lives.

The discussion that follows is an analysis of these strategies, as they are implemented in one international marriage enrichment organization, the Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment (ACME). ACME sees ongoing marriage enrichment groups (MEGS) as the most effective way to increase interpersonal skills and positive couple interaction. In ACME-style marriage enrichment programs, couples learn from other couples who model skills and identify with each other in the growth process. Thus couples learn not only to improve communication skills and manage conflict but also to be intentional about relationship growth and the strengthening of companionship. They enhance their abilities to express fondness and affirmation, and to build honest friendships in a safe environment. A pilot study by Powell and Powell (2003) found that verbal and nonverbal skills were higher-- nonverbal significantly higher—for couples who had been regular participants in MEG groups, which had met regularly for at least a year.

While the ACME model of marriage enrichment includes a marriage education component, it is far broader than simply learning a set of established responses to address the issues. It is based on a process, which teaches couples how to support each other and nurture a healthy marriage. A major section of this paper addresses the components of the process as Dyer and Dyer (2003) has identified them.

Family specialists who study positive interaction in relationships also stress that healthy relationships are not static but alive and growing. The concept of marriage potential is a key component in the ACME model of marriage enrichment (Cole & Cole, 2003). Marriage potential represents the theoretical limits the couple is capable of when they use all the resources available to them to make all aspects of their relationship function at full capacity. A second section of this paper will address how marriage potential is encouraged through the marriage enrichment process and the MEG experience.

### **Marriage Enrichment as Process**

Skillful marriage enrichment leaders do more than present a program; they facilitate a process that stimulates relationship growth. Process refers to the underlying flow or direction that guides an enrichment activity from beginning to end. In highly structured models the process may be built into the design so that leaders can follow a step-by-step manual. In such models the designers take responsibility for the flow and direction of the event. In less structured models where participants have more input into the content of the event, individual leaders must take responsibility for the process. They must know where they are going and how to get there. Process is the "thinking, knowing" element that designers and leaders bring to the practice of enrichment. Theoretically, it should be possible to identify an underlying process in all enrichment activities. Such a process would be evident regardless of the structure of the event. The process would be similar whether it is a workshop for one hundred couples, a retreat for six couples, or an individual couple working to enrich their marriage in the privacy of their own home. Genie and Preston Dyer, ACME certified leaders and trainers, have identified a five-stage process model (Dyer & Dyer, 1999).

### Stages of the Marriage Enrichment Process

We see marriage enrichment events flowing through five stages: 1) Security and Community Building; 2) Developing Awareness; 3) Knowledge and Skill Development; 4) Planning for Growth; and 5) Celebration and Closure. In each stage there are specific tasks that must be accomplished before moving to the next stage if the event is to be successful in enriching relationships.

#### Stage One: *Security and Community Building*

The process begins with the recognition that people come to marriage enrichment activities with some degree of ambivalence, anxiety and resistance. Participants may also have unrealistic hopes and fears of what the experience might produce. Frequently the anxiety is increased by the discovery that the activity is experiential and that they cannot play a simple observer role. If the experience is to be positive, this anxiety and resistance must be reduced as early as possible. Only after people become comfortable with the situation can they become participants and begin to connect with their spouse and the other couples in the group.

Three tasks must be accomplished in this stage to move the attendee to a full participant: 1) provide a sense of structure to reduce anxiety and increase a sense of security; 2) connect with self, spouse and group; and 3) initiate a contract between spouses and among group members. These tasks do not follow in sequence and unfortunately seem to all need to be accomplished at once.

#### Stage Two: *Developing Awareness*

When couples feel some degree of security with the situation and a degree of connectedness with each other and with the group, they are then ready to move into the

*Developing Awareness* stage. In this stage couples are encouraged to evaluate how they are currently functioning in their relationships. This phase should help couples identify those areas in their relationship which produce satisfaction, and those in which some change could be more fulfilling. This stage is successful when it stimulates a positive attitude toward growth, recognition of the potential for change, and a desire for tools and new ideas with which to accomplish change.

The purpose of Stage Two is to increase couples' awareness of the strengths and growth areas of their relationship. The two tasks of this stage are: 1) to get participating couples to evaluate their relationship as it currently exists; and 2) to create a need for new ideas and for acquiring or sharpening relationship skills, i.e., to create a need for learning.

#### Stage Three: *Knowledge and Skill Development*

Once this readiness for learning exists, the process moves into the *Skill and Knowledge Development* stage. After identifying areas in which growth is desired in stage two, couples are more likely to be receptive to the introduction of relationship skills, different ways of thinking about old issues, and alternative ways of behaving. The three tasks of this stage are: 1) maintaining a positive attitude toward change; 2) developing competence in relationship skills; and 3) exploring new ways of thinking and behaving.

Relationship skills development is an essential factor in marriage enrichment; but marriage enrichment is much more than skills development. Skills are necessary tools for relationship building and maintenance; however, skills must be accompanied by commitment, positive attitudes toward change, mutual respect and a willingness to work together. Skills in at least three areas are necessary if couples are to enrich their marriage. First, they must have a communication system that works for them and leads to

understanding. Second, they must have skills that allow them to handle their anger and resolve conflict creatively. Finally, couples must know how to develop and maintain intimacy and sexual satisfaction.

#### Stage Four: *Planning for Growth*

In stage three couples identify potential means of enriching their marriage and in the fourth stage, *Planning for Growth*, they are encouraged to develop a specific plan of action for change in their marital interaction. The tasks of this stage are: 1) committing to intentional relationship growth; and 2) developing a specific plan for individual and relationship growth.

The focus of this stage is on intentionality. This concept asserts that married couples can assume responsibility for the outcomes of their relationship. They can do this by identifying together particular directions in which they want their marriage to move and by contracting together for the specific actions necessary for the desired change to occur.

#### Stage Five: *Celebration and Closure*

The final stage, *Celebration and Closure*, brings an end to the process. Its goal is to reinforce commitment, to celebrate relationship, affirm appreciation and affection, and close the process. The primary purpose of the last stage is to bring closure to an event in a way that will leave a lasting positive effect. The tasks of this stage are: 1) to reinforce commitment; and 2) to celebrate and affirm the enrichment experience, one's spouse, and the other couples who shared in the experience.

All five stages are present to a greater or lesser degree in every event regardless of the number of participants, degree of structure, or time frame. Awareness of these stages makes it easier to both design and evaluate events. Perhaps the most effective marriage

enrichment event is the one in which couples learn the process of enrichment, take it home with them, and use it on a continuing basis.

### **The Concept of Marriage Potential**

Marriage potential is a core concept in marriage enrichment theory. David and Vera Mace coined the term marriage potential to describe the relationship quality of couples (Mace and Mace, 1978). Lederer and Jackson (1968) noted that "...marriage is a continuous process involving constant growth..." (pp. 128-129). Marriage potential changes as expectations and experiences in the marriage either enhance or erode the relationship. Cole (2002) points out that couples capture higher levels of marital functioning when they use marital resources, which in turn leads couples to increase their expectations for greater marital functioning and exert more effort to achieve their marital goals. Conversely, when couples fail to access marital resources, they tend to try less and expect less from their relationship, which in turn decreases their marriage potential. Research by Cole, Cole, Fort, and Robertson (2004a) showed that couples' marriage potential increases as a result of active involvement in marriage enrichment. *Figures 1 and 2* present data on wives and husbands that show significant increases on 14 dimensions in marital functioning (marriage potential) after participation in ACME-style marriage enrichment. (*FIGURES 1 and 2* about here)

### **The Marital Growth Process**

*Figure 3* illustrates the process of marital growth. This model depicts the intended impacts of marriage enrichment on perception of marriage potential. It is in marriage enrichment that couples acquire skills, build affection and intentionality to increase their interpersonal relationship quality while being in a supportive environment with other couples who are mutually

committed to nurture and maintain marital growth. The center part illustrated in *Figure 3* is expanded and clarified in *Figure 4*, which depicts the marital growth process in concentric rings. (FIGURES 3 and 4 about here)

The growth process can be depicted as layers of resources that couples acquire through marriage enrichment. The outer ring represents the external support systems available through ACME and other marriage education programs. Central to the outer ring is the acquisition of new interpersonal competency skills (such as couples communication, anger and conflict management, problem solving). Other sources of external support may come from churches and other families.

Marriage enrichment groups (MEGS), depicted as the second ring, is the key support system in ACME-style marriage enrichment. It is in the MEG that the climate for growth is maintained, supported and skills learned are modeled by the leader couple and reinforced in the couple dialogue. MEGS nurture the couple dialogue process, the center of the concentric rings.

Couple dialogue is an essential component of any ACME sanctioned marriage enrichment event. The Dyers (1999) note that:

Couple dialogue achieves five purposes in enrichment groups: It is a representation of the 'social unit' structure of the group; it maintains the relationship emphasis; it maintains the experiential emphasis; it provides an atmosphere of support and restraint; and it fosters learning through cross-couple identification and modeling. (p. 40)

### **Intentionality and Relationship Depth**

To develop personal or relational potential, as well as relationship depth, one must have goals and steps to achieve the goals. Hof and Miller (1981) defined the concept of intentionality as the mutual commitment partners make to continue to work on the marriage relationship. Hunt, Hof, & DeMaria (1998) believed that intentionality involved a continual vigilance to make

adaptive responses to keep the marriage growing. The MEG concept encourages couples to intentionally set aside time together for “working on their relationship.” It is during the group meetings that relational issues are discussed and goals/expectations stated. Couples are urged to “operationalize” these goals to develop small achievable steps of satisfactory change.

As the couple works together to achieve their goals, the relationship will tend to deepen and be enriched, provided each partner has enough trust to explore issues without fear of rejection, retribution, or invalidating messages in the couple interaction. Relationship-in-depth experiences take a couple beyond the superficial and safe areas of marriage (Cole, et al, 2004b) so that the couple socially constructs marital meaning unique to them and their relationship (Cole, 2002). We are reminded again of Gottman’s three foundational components of the Sound Relationship House: the Love Map, the Fondness and Admiration system and the “Turning Toward” emotional component. Mace (1982) noted that relationship growth occurs when a couple is open and totally vulnerable. The more comfortable a couple is with sharing feelings and beliefs, the deeper the relationship experience. Stanley, Markman, & Whitton (2002) agree that safety is a key factor and essential before commitment is possible. They found that couples must feel safe before they can openly dialogue and discuss issues in depth.

Trust is crucial in a marriage enrichment group as well as with a marital dyad. A MEG provides safety and trust for couples seeking marital growth. Mace (1982) believed that marital depth is not possible without frequent marital growth exploration dialogues, privately and in a trusted group, to help a couple discover and enjoy each other.

More research is needed to further develop theoretically the concepts of marriage potential, intentionality, and relationship depth and their importance in marriage.

Preliminary evidence suggests that these three concepts are vital to understanding the marital growth process.

### **Conclusion**

The Marriage Enrichment Group (MEG) model, as it has been developed through the Association for Couples in Marriage, contains all of the elements which social learning theory and couple enrichment researchers have identified as necessary for attitudinal and behavioral change to occur. Couples *learn skills* through seeing them *modeled* by a leader couple. They *practice* the skills and focus on positive relationship interaction in individual and group couple dialogue in a safe environment of support. They *reinforce* the learning by intentionality of participation in an ongoing MEG, which meets regularly over an extended period of time. *Intentionality* is also stressed as couples choose issues for group discussion and share individual and couple dreams, which they are encouraged to turn into *achievable steps toward a goal*. Small accomplishments are shared and celebrated, which leads to *increased positive regard* and motivation to try harder.

Currently several thousand MEGS are functioning in communities in the United States and around the world. Two factors limit the rapid expansion of groups to many more communities and culture groups: one is trained leadership and the second is the hesitancy of couples to become part of a group. Since the basic requirement of MEG leaders is a willingness to open one's marriage to other couples, it is not necessary for leaders to have counselor or education backgrounds. Leader couples are required to complete the leader certification process of specific training and practice as a couple which ACME has carefully outlined. More information on training requirements and planned training events is available on the ACME website: [www.bettermarriages.org](http://www.bettermarriages.org). The second limiting factor, couple hesitancy to join a group,

is harder to overcome. Our own experiences as leader couples have shown that the best advertisement, as always is the satisfied customer. When couples are enjoying the experience, they tend to tell their friends, and the demand for MEGs grows. Recommendations from therapists and pastors can also influence couples to “take the plunge.”

## Figure Captions

*Figure 1. Wives' Marriage Potential Dimension Scores Before and After Marriage*

Enrichment (from Cole, Cole, Fort, & Robertson, 2004a)

*Figure 2. Husbands' Marriage Potential Dimension Scores Before and After Marriage*

Enrichment (from Cole, Cole, Fort, & Robertson, 2004a)

*Figure 3. Marriage Potential growth process in marriage enrichment (from Cole, Cole, Fort, & Robertson, 2004a)*

*Figure 4. Marriage enrichment growth core (from Cole, Cole, Fort, & Robertson, 2004a)*

*Note to editors: Please replace figure titles that are currently above the figures with the titles above.*

Figure 1

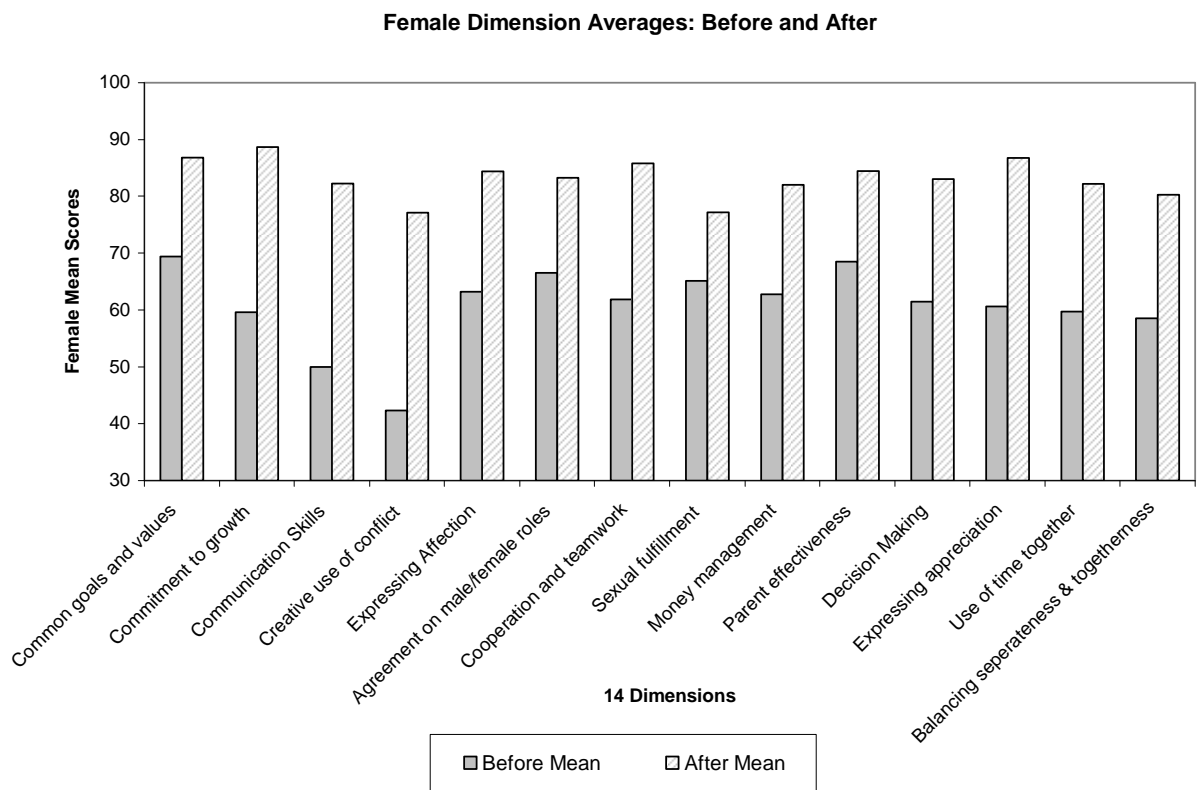


Figure 2

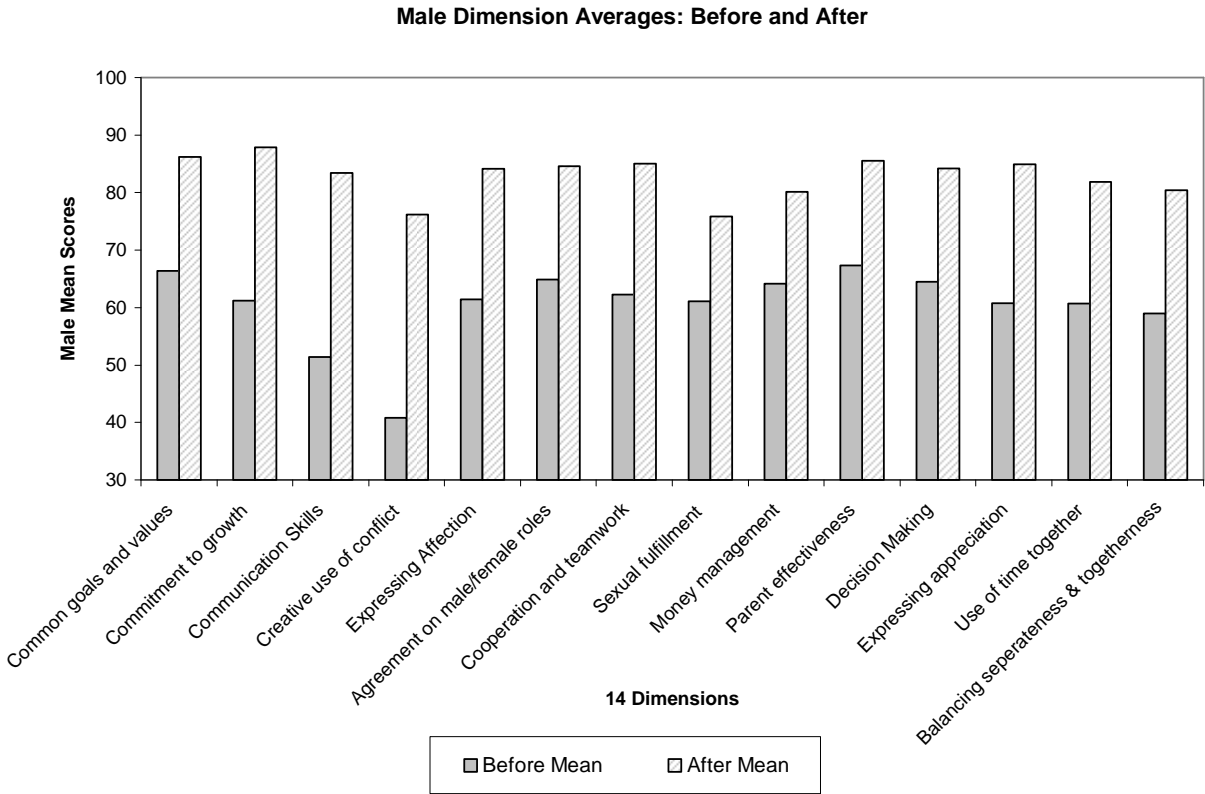


FIGURE 3

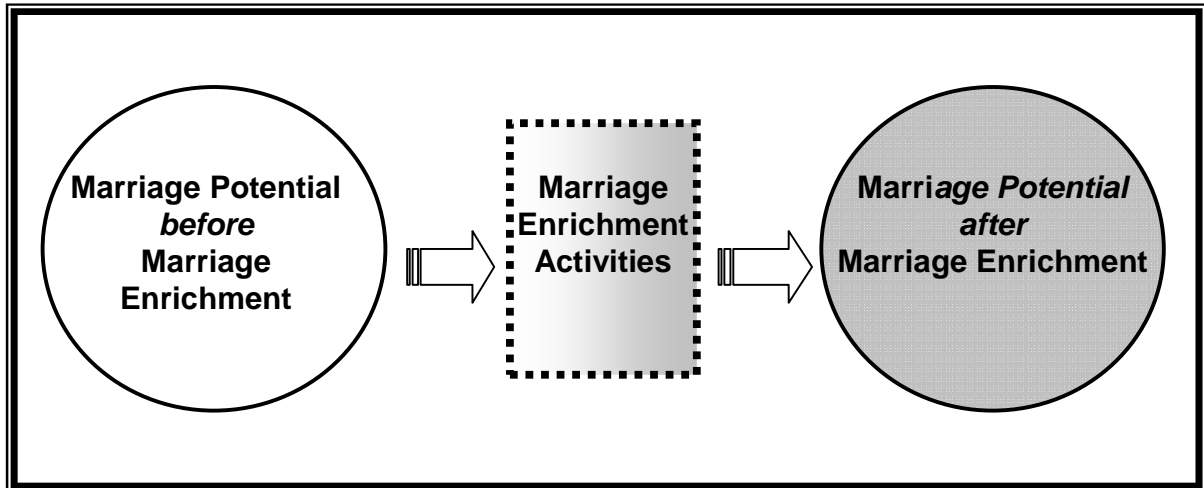
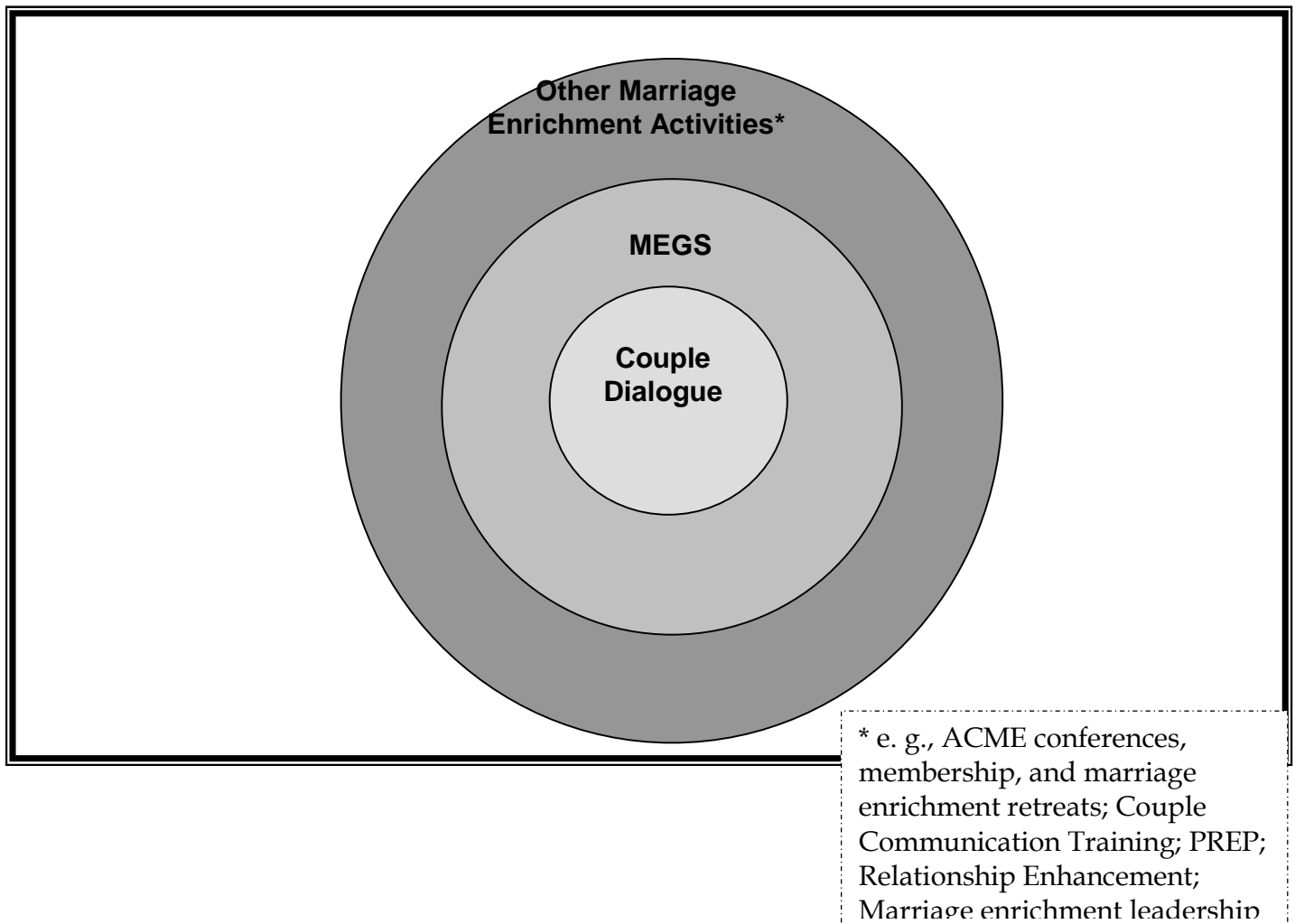


Figure 4



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